

Overview of The Work Foundation Annual Debate

Are we heading for a fairer workplace?

All six panellists provided intriguing and contrasting perspectives on the topic ***Are we heading for a fairer workplace?*** Through thought-provoking and carefully timed interventions, [Faisal Islam](#), economics editor of Channel 4 News, expertly chaired the debate, weaving in targeted questions to panellists and taking contributions from the floor. In his introduction to Will Hutton, he casually dropped in that while Editor of *The Observer*, Will had given him his first break in the media but that he had not been paid a wage while he conducted his two-week work experience at the paper. Musing on whether this could be perceived of as unfair exploitation, Faisal insisted that he felt thrilled to have been given the chance to demonstrate that he had the skills required to thrive in the industry. He talked about how his fellow students had all received work placements but that he had seen this as his lucky break after struggling to find a way in to the industry.

[Karen Jennings](#) opened the debate with a passionate and empathetic portrait of what lies ahead for those working in the public sector. Her main message was that the public sector is bracing itself to face a storm with job insecurity, intensification of work, higher levels of stress and a lowering of safety thresholds. She talked of how, for a while now, union membership had been soaring with over a thousand applications to UNISON per month, and those at management grades were included in those seeking a collective voice. She foresees the rise of gagging clauses, falling standards of care and seeing colleagues treated badly with a rise in bullying and harassment. She fears that the achievements of the past decade, like striving for gender pay equality, will be eroded in the current climate. She cited some excellent examples of cooperation which avoided the adversarial relationship so often found between management and other staff, including the Blackpool Health Trust. In response to the benchmark the Public Sector Fair Review has deemed appropriate for pay differentials (that no one in an organisation should have a salary of more than 20 times of that received by the lowest paid employee), she also had a warning. Some organisations were finding a way around this by contracting out jobs at the lower end of the payscale to look as though they fall within the guidelines.

[Debbie Scott](#) demonstrated the powerful impact of unfairness for those in work as well as for those excluded from the workplace. Her charity, [Tomorrow's People](#) helps some of society's most disadvantaged people find and keep work. The charity continues to support clients for up to a year after they start a new job. This helps them secure a track record of more than twice the national average of sustainably placing people in jobs (staying in the same job for over a year). Fairness, she argued, is being able to hold down a job so that you have the dignity, wellbeing and respect that comes with being a wage earner. To her, it is undeniably unfair to have a social welfare system that financially penalises those who want to get into the job market. She is convinced more people would take and keep new jobs if they did not lose access to financial support as soon as they started working. She flagged up how some people would not get paid for up to six weeks after starting work and the problems this caused for those with absolutely no financial reserves. In the current climate, she pointed out how pressure on those without jobs is mounting at a time when vacancies are at an all-time low and fewer new jobs are being created. She talked of how, if everyone in a family was claiming benefit and one member got a job, the benefits of all would be affected. She wanted to scrap the term "benefits" and all it represented in discriminatory or restricting attitudes, and found public stereotyping of all benefit claimants as lazy, cheats or drug addicts particularly unfair. In a powerful personal testimony, she read out a letter from a 17-year-old client desperate to get a job who felt that the system was acutely unfair to those who want to work, including for those who could only find or manage part-time work.

[Franny Armstrong](#) broadened the context saying that without urgent action to save the planet, there would be no workplace in the future, let alone a fairer one. Her position was that we had to play fair with the environment or else face an environmental nightmare with catastrophic consequences. Businesses must use 90% less energy in the next ten to 20 years before the climate tilts and the runaway warming starts. She used her film, [The Age of Stupid](#) to illustrate her ideas on fairness in the workplace. For example, all involved in the production were paid the minimum wage equally and shared in the spoils of the film proportionally (she also talked about how she used the 'crowd funding' tactic to use a high number of individual low-level funders to raise £450k for the film). She also talked about fairness for the planet and explained how the film has 1% of the carbon footprint of *The Day After Tomorrow*. Faisal posed the question of whether the green agenda was any fairer than 'red-bloodied capitalism.' Her response was that a green future gave us the opportunity to redistribute jobs and that all carbon intensive activities will have to be substituted with human labour as we rebuild an environmentally sustainable infrastructure. Rebuilding this environmentally sustainable infrastructure will create lots of jobs, she claimed, asking, "What could be fairer?"

[Rory Bremner](#) brought many new facets to the debate, including personal anecdotes and well-informed insights into the inherent unfairness of the television industry. Due to the nature of entry pathways into television careers, it has become a choice only for those who can afford to work free for prolonged periods. Nepotism is rife and diversity of recruits low. He talked about the capital's television industry having just 9% of people with ethnic minority backgrounds compared to London's ethnic minority population of 25%. Between 2006 and 2009, the percentage of women fell from 38% to 27% (mainly losing out in interactive media, pop and animation fields). He painted a bleak picture of the creative industries workplace where economic constraints are causing significantly reduced training and professional development (leading to more exploitation) and a harsh commissioning environment with reduced wages as production budgets are slashed. Awareness of how high salaries are for top media heads, even in tough economic times, was increasing strong reactions to the unfair structure of the industry.

Given the last word of the debate, he used his slot to tell the story of what had happened to his father thirty years ago. Having given over 20 years of dedicated hard work to raising millions of pounds for a cancer charity, he himself developed cancer. The day after major surgery, his mother had received a call from his father's employer. After asking after his health and how the operation had gone, his mother was told that they would not be keeping his job open for him.

While much of the debate offered a rather bleak view of whether we were heading for a fairer workplace, Rory's sharing of the unfair way his father was treated 30 years ago demonstrates that while there is great need and scope to make workplaces fairer, at least some progress had been made in many key areas.

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