

Fair is a bag of Maltesers

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My grandchildren's rows over sweets show that equality is not a state but an everlasting argument

Peter Preston

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Fair needs cool assessment. Fair needs facts. They turn out to be a little misty in this case. Yesterday some kindly visitor left GD7 with a large, red bag of Maltesers. GD7, an often kindly person herself, offered two or three to her nine-year-old brother, GS9. But then he delved his hand into the bag and came out holding what GD7 considers "a lot", as in: "Look, he's got lots grandpa and I've only got a few left. It's not, not, not fair."

But how does she know she isn't supposed to share the whole bag? GS9 inquires indignantly. Wasn't something so large actually intended for sharing? She'd be sick if she ate them all. (He can roll his eyes with the best of them.) And the last time somebody gave him sweets, he shared them with his sisters, he somehow remembers. Why isn't she doing that now? Two can play the fairness card.

Yes, sisters ... There's a third party here. Enter GD6, a force of nature never knowingly under bid. She, it transpires, doesn't much like Maltesers. But whoever bought them to divide between three clearly didn't know that - and it's absolutely not possible that she should miss out because of a stranger's ignorance. "You must give me money to buy some sweets I like, grandpa ... otherwise it's just not fair."

What began as a lone protest, built around a single, sugary concept of justice, is now proffered in triplicate as the decibel count mounts. It's bailout time. Call for the supreme court ... or maybe some Washington extrapolation of a Junior Sweetmeat Divisional Authority? Let there be free candies for all by the tonne. Or exit, pursued by migraine?

Almost nothing in life - especially young life - is fair when you (or rather they) think about it. Not the last crisp in the bag, the only bike that wouldn't fit in the boot, the ball she kicked over the wall, the clock that tolls bedtime halfway through the X Factor. And one day, perhaps, when his own non-props are a little older, Father Brown will come to understand that, too - to discover that a "fair society" doesn't mean constant fair weather. Absolutely the opposite.

How do you bring egalitarian doctrine to bear on this Malteser crisis? No, not using a great clunking fist. And only a novice would simply snarl and say: don't be absurd, you silly, squalling bunch. Even ancient writ, loftily asserted, doesn't hack it here. Your tools of the peacemaking trade are detail, boredom, eventual exhaustion.

What did the kindly visitor say exactly when she handed over the bag? When, precisely, did GS9 share his alleged sweets with his indignant sisters? Why, if she liked them last month, has GD6 changed her mind about Maltesers now? Should we give what's left to granny to keep safe until they can agree? And slowly, wearily, GD7 divides the rest of the spoils and curls one final lip. Nobody wins, nobody loses. The old Capitol Hill shuffle.

For fair isn't some universal sunny state: fair is an everlasting argument in progress, wending a thin, red-faced line between barely satisfactory and completely out of order. Fair is one person's pay packet, and another's indexed pension. Fair is a 38-hour week or a 74-hour one. Fair is spending more time at home with the kids, or hitting the commuter train with a grin. Fair is waiting in line at a Swedish health clinic or moving your Wimbledon winnings to Monaco. Fair is a million-dollar pay-off you've paid good lawyers to write in the contract, or a wan trip to Starbucks with a cardboard box. Fair is a parking fine if your own drive is blocked. Fair is the lottery ticket of life. Fair starts with you, the individual, counting blessings and grumps; it doesn't survive as a slogan.

Back at a different domestic ranch, two more grandsons - 10 and 12 - are wrangling over the remote again. One wants

The Simpsons, the other some suitably educational documentary on the Discovery Channel. One thinks the other ought to go to bed - but why should he go upstairs half an hour earlier when GD9 (on his last visit) let it be known that he went to bed half an hour later? "I'm older than him ... it's just not fair".

Time, perhaps, to press Sky Plus and watch Gordon in Manchester again. Oh, now they've all gone to bed. Fair enough. Peter Preston was editor of the Guardian for 20 years, from 1975 to 1995, and now writes columns for the paper and for the Observer. He has written two books, Bess (1999) and The 51st State (1998).