



Written by [Ralph R. Reiland](#) on July 11, 2012

Defining “Fairness” as Equality

There’s a good reminder in April’s issue of *The American Spectator* about the warning Kurt Vonnegut delivered in his 1961 short story “Harrison Bergeron.”

The article, [“The Poverty of Equality: Fairness requires that President Obama read up on his Kurt Vonnegut,”](#) by Stephen Moore and Peter Ferrara, begins by quoting how Vonnegut began his story: “The year was 2081, and everybody was finally equal. They weren’t only equal before God and the law. They were equal every which way. Nobody was smarter than anybody else. Nobody was better looking than anybody else. Nobody was stronger or quicker than anybody else. All this equality was due to the 211, 212 and 213 Amendments to the Constitution, and to the unceasing vigilance of agents of the United States Handicapper General.”



To create and enforce a society in which everyone was thoroughly equal, the government in Vonnegut’s story required each individual to bear the burden of assigned and mandated “handicaps” that would offset any advantages he or she had.

“Beautiful people had to wear ugly masks to hide their good looks,” explain Moore and Ferrara. “The strong had to wear compensating weights to slow them down. Graceful dancers were burdened with bags of bird shot. Those with above-average intelligence had to wear government transmitters in their ears that would emit sharp noises every 20 seconds, shattering their thoughts ‘to keep them ... from taking unfair advantage of their brains.’”

So how would we today implement more “fairness” if it’s defined as more equality? With the Pittsburgh Pirates now in first place, should they be required by equity enforcers to keep their best guys on the bench or, even better, to trade their best off to the lousiest teams? With already too many Oscar nominations and wins, should Meryl Streep be required to sit things out for a few years in order to give lesser stars a chance? Should too-dominant Apple be required to fund the research of its potential competitors?

Do we increase the productivity, output, and overall standard of living in society by treating the most successful as undeserving and overly compensated winners in the “lottery of life”?

Would we have better movies, better technology, more freedom, more excellence, more jobs, less poverty, and more global competitiveness if the government had forced Steve Jobs and Meryl Streep to step aside in order to produce more mandated equality or in order to benefit their competitors?

Would we be worse off or better off if we denied ourselves the performance and output of the smartest,



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the luckiest, and the most talented?

Moore and Ferrara aren't saying that everyone should be on their own. "Social safety nets that provide basic help for the needy to prevent human suffering are easily justifiable on moral grounds," they write, "especially in modern and wealthy societies like ours."

There are clear societal obligations, both ethical and financial, they assert, to help those who are disadvantaged, disabled or "even just temporarily down on their luck."

More pointedly, the "down on their luck" hardships in today's globalized economy are often due more to top level planning by both government and business rather than due to anything that's self-inflicted or a chance occurrence.

Still, what works, especially in an increasingly competitive and globalized economy, is a system that's designed to increase liberty and reward productivity.

Applied to tax policy, Moore and Ferrara offer a succinct prescription: "A good and just tax system should be designed to make the poor rich, not the rich poor."

Ralph R. Reiland is an associate professor of economics and the B. Kenneth Simon professor of free enterprise at Robert Morris University in Pittsburgh.



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