

The Sylvans

Detailed summary powered by AI

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Motion: equality is a myth.

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Analysis of the outcome

The motion was carried 10 to 3 because the two sides spent the evening answering different questions. One talked about how people are treated. The other talked about what people are worth. Both are defensible readings of a three-word motion, and a room asked to choose between them will tend to pick the one it can see out of the window.

The proposition's case: experience, hierarchy, history

The opening speech for the motion was built almost entirely from first-hand experience, which gave it a quality the opposition never matched. It was unfalsifiable in the room. Nobody present could tell the proposer that strangers do not reach for their bags, or that the question about Covent Garden was not asked.

The speech ranged wider than it settled, moving through race, sex, age and religion without finishing any of them. What held it together was a single claim: every category the proposer named comes with a ranking attached, and rankings are precisely what equality is supposed to abolish.

The floor then supplied the historical half of the case. Two speakers argued independently that no society has yet reached equality, that the post-war decades were an interval rather than a trend, and that periods of progress are followed by retreat. That is a stronger argument for the motion than anything in the opening speech, and it arrived from the floor, which is how these evenings usually work.

The opposition's case: definition, dignity, progress

The opposition made the more interesting philosophical move and the weaker debating one. Redefining a myth as a truth in story form is elegant, and it dissolves the motion rather than opposing it: on that reading the proposition is agreeing with them. A room voting on three plain words was never likely to reward the manoeuvre, and nobody from the floor picked it up.

Firmer ground was dignity. Equality as persons, tested by the willingness of a room to hear anyone who stands up, is a real thing that the club practises weekly, and the closing speech made the point better than the opening one did by measuring it against the world's richest man.

Two further planks came from the floor: that discrimination law and 70 years of change have made this the most equal society Britain has been, and that equality is provable in mathematics and in exchange rates. The first is a serious argument about direction. The second answers a question nobody had asked, since the motion is about people rather than about arithmetic.

The ebb and flow of the floor debate

Thirteen contributions followed the openers, and they did not line up behind either of them. Three battlegrounds opened. The second decided the vote, and it turned on a question the club has circled before, most recently when it asked whether individual rights cause social isolation.

This is the shape a rapid debate takes when it works. Two members pick the motion up on the night, frame the territory, and hand it to a room that then does the reasoning in public. On this evening the room found the distinction the motion turns on, tested it from four directions, and voted on the version it had built rather than on either opening speech.

The best argument for each side arrived from the floor, several contributions in, which is worth saying because it is the most interesting thing about these Mondays.

First battleground: opportunity against outcome

The formulation that equality of opportunity is justice while equality of outcome is tyranny arrived early and dominated the middle of the evening. It is a strong argument, well made, with a grade-averaging anecdote and a list of regimes to close it, and several later speakers argued with it rather than with the motion.

It also had no purchase on what was being voted. The economist on the floor said so directly: no Western government is attempting equality of outcome, so an argument against outcome-levelling defeats a position nobody in the room held. The president made the same observation from the other direction, noting that the motion says equality and not equality of outcome. Both interventions left the tyranny argument intact and beside the point, which is a hard combination to vote for.

Second battleground: description or aim

Once the room stopped arguing about outcomes it converged quickly, and it converged on a distinction nobody had drawn at the start. Equality as a description of present conditions is false. Equality as an aim is worth holding.

Speaker after speaker made some version of that split: the one who found it a myth biologically and economically but not socially, the one who called it a myth while wanting the safety net strengthened, the speaker from outside Europe who called it a myth and not a bad thing, the president who called less inequality a direction rather than a fantasy, and the chair who separated being equal from aiming at equality.

Read literally, the motion is a claim about description. Once the room had the distinction in hand it could support the motion without conceding anything about the aim, and the proposer's closing said exactly that.

Third battleground: what welfare is for

The best argument against the motion came from the floor rather than from the opening speech, and it came late. The economist's point was that inequality is predictable: postcode, skin colour and gender forecast outcomes with an accuracy that random variation in talent cannot produce. Welfare, on that account, is unfinished engineering rather than a failed attempt at levelling.

It did not carry the room, and the reason is instructive. Predictability is evidence that inequality is real and structural, which is what the proposition had been arguing all evening. Offered as a refutation, it read to much of the room as corroboration. A later speaker took the same premises and reached the opposite conclusion, agreeing that welfare is the safety net worth building while doubting it would ever be built.

What drove the result in the equality is a myth debate

Three things, and none of them was the opening speeches. The proposition owned the observable: bags on a street, a question about a postcode, a classroom teaching to the slowest. The opposition owned the abstract, and abstractions lose rooms. And the strongest opposition argument, the one about predictability, described the world in terms the proposition could accept without amendment.

The movement itself was small, and the room was not the same room at both ends. Two votes in a house of 16 is arithmetic rather than persuasion. The more telling number is the abstentions, which rose from two to three in an evening where one speaker announced from the floor that the motion could not be answered as put, and where the president spent his contribution asking what it meant.

Conclusion

The two sides ended closer than the vote suggests. Nobody argued that equality is a bad aim. Nobody argued that Britain has arrived. What the room was really asked was whether to call the gap between the two a myth, and it decided that it would. The proposition did not persuade the room that equality is worth less than it thought. It persuaded the room that it has not seen it yet, and that saying so out loud is not the same as giving up on it.

Detailed transcript

The motion and the opening show of hands

The chair read the motion: equality is a myth. Opening speakers would have five minutes each, floor speakers three, and the opposition would summarise before the proposition. The chair asked the room to declare a position before the speeches began. Eight declared for the proposition, four against, and two abstained.

The opening speech: equality is a myth in daily life

I am treating equality Jamaican style. I believe that equality is not a myth. Oh, I was dreaming. Of course equality is not a myth, but we are living in reality.

I was supposed to be set up to play some words from a film, and it says we judge people when we first look at them. Equality covers so many different subjects in our lives: sex, gender, race, religion, clothes, class, friendship, the television shows that you like, and everything else. Now, I would like to feel that I was equal to everyone in this room, and also that this club is equal to other clubs. But when I come here, on the whole, I am the only person of colour, and I have been the one constant Black person for nearly 16 years. This room is very mainstream. It does have a mix of nationalities in here, but if I talk about something that concerns everyone, I am mainly classed as talking about Black issues.

I live in Covent Garden. If I tell white people I live in Covent Garden: oh, how come you live there? If I was a white person saying I live in Covent Garden, that person would not be questioned. And I really am sorry. I did want to be prepared for this, and mentally I did prepare, but it was more of a 15 minute speech, and I tried to reduce 15 minutes down to five and make it be coherent. Plus I was not 100 per cent certain that it was actually going to be chosen as a topic. To be perfectly honest, I am actually shaking, and that is not me.

Now, men and women. I like to feel that I fought for equality. Maybe I was not old enough for the bra burning brigade, but I remember when we came to Ms and everything else, and I wanted to be Ms. After a while of me saying Ms, I realised everyone still thought I was single. They never actually ever thought I was married. Admittedly I was not wearing a ring on my finger. So I stopped. I just want to be known as Ms.

But even though I feel I am equal to a man, I still want a man to open the door for me. And I know that if I walk down the road, especially where I live in Covent Garden, from Holborn to my station to my home, at least 10 people will grab their bags when they see me, because they think I am actually going to pinch their wallet.

But it is also the other thing, as I said, about me expecting a man to open the door for me. Why should I do that? It is equal rights. Maybe I should be opening the door for him.

The other thing I want to talk about is ageism, because you are a certain age. I said something to a young man yesterday and he cracked up, because I cannot stand drop down trousers. I really hate them. I think I allow it if you are up to 25, and over that it seems too much. If the young man goes to pull his trousers up, I go, all the way. He looks at me, and I say, let me just say something to you. Are you a bust man or a leg man? I have said this to my nephew as well. And this young man was actually quite respectful of women, because he said, I normally look on the ground, I am a face man. I thought that is really nice. I said, well, I am a bum woman. Pull your pants up.

The reason I am saying that is because it is not expected for a woman to actually say that they are looking at men's bums. I think the first time I might have said it was actually in the 90s. But why should I try and make people change in how they dress, just because this is what I think? That is one aspect of age. But there are also the jobs that you want to go for, or can do, or what people expect of you.

One of the things I wanted to talk about was religion. Different religions think they are better. Even within Christianity, Protestants think they are better than Catholics. And then you have got the Jewish religion, you have got the Muslim religion, and you have got Christianity, and they are all mixed. But my time is finished. Five minutes. Apologies.

The opening speech for the opposition

Chair, Sylvans, and anybody else who does not come into that category and would like to be equal to start with. As ever we choose a somewhat abstract motion that can have different interpretations. What do we mean by equality? Are we talking about equality of opportunity, equality before the law? I suppose physically we are not all equal, in the sense that our bodies are different shapes and sizes. We all have DNA, but it is individual to each person.

And then, myth. What is a myth? My understanding of a myth is a truth in story form. That is what a myth is. The proposer very kindly mentions reality. I suspect there are nearly 20 people here. We all have a different perception of what reality is, but it is not unequal. If one was to step out on the street there, and some of us witnessed, say, a car crash, say 10 of us, we would probably have 10 different versions of that car crash, but we are all equal there, in a sense. We all witnessed it.

So I am not quite sure that in reality there may be a myth around that. We are not equal in terms of how wealth is distributed. There are some people in this country who have 10 houses or 100 houses, and there are many other people who are on the streets of London or on the housing list. In that sense there is not equality in terms of equity, in terms of economic reality. But as a person, despite some eloquent public speakers here, without naming anybody, I feel equal to you. I can say hand on heart that another speaker here is an equally good public speaker to myself, and that goes to all of you, and I hope to prove that tonight when you come up, all 20 of you, to put in your five pennies or one euro, or however you want to express yourself.

So I think we can both be right, in the sense that it depends on the definition of what you mean by equality and also what you mean by a myth. A myth is a truth, but it is in story form, in a fantasy. Fiction can be as true as fact. Science fiction might even be truer than science fact, because it takes the imagination and a leap, not of faith, but of conviction. And the proposer kindly let me in by talking about religion. Now we have got to talk about religion, of course. There is only one truth, and that is the Unitarian truth. And I rest my case there. Thank you very much.

From the floor: equality is a myth against the arithmetic

I am standing over here because I guess I am opposing. Equality is not a myth. The shortest distance between two points is a straight line. That is maths, that is observable reality. True equals true, true or false equals true. This is industrialised computing and boolean values, and there is nothing lucky or mythical about that. This is tested scientific advancement.

The third case I was going to make was economics. The British pound equals 1.12 dollars. Is that a myth, or is that what influential people are prepared to sell something for? That is the economic law of supply and demand. It may be a deception, but it is not a myth. It is in some way provable.

Maybe that is the weakest of my three cases. But I think the scientific and the mathematical proof of equality, and the fact that proving something equal to something is the bedrock of objective fact, shows that equality is not in all cases a myth. Thank you.

From the floor: the classroom and the shooting team

Mr Chairman, equality is one of these ideas that has no practical application where people are concerned, but it is an idea that just will not die, because it is a comforting idea when you feel that life is conspiring against you. If you imagine a classroom of children, you will find that some are bright and some are not so bright. Some learn quickly, some learn slowly, some are good at mathematics, some are good at art. How do you teach such a diverse classroom? If you try to do that, then you have got to go to the lowest common denominator, those who are slow to learn, and then of course you will find that the ones who are bright get bored and their interest goes off somewhere else. So there is no equality there.

I will give you an example from my own experience. When I was 13 I was sent away to boarding school, where I stayed for five years, and this school was absolutely mad on games: rugby in the winter and cricket in the summer. If you did not live and breathe rugby and cricket in the appropriate season, you were nothing, you were not worth bothering about. Well, I was not good at rugby, and I was not good at cricket, but I did not really see why I should be not worth bothering about. So I had to find an alternative. They had a shooting team in the summer, so I decided to join the shooting team, and that got me out of cricket.

The shooting team competed against other schools and occasionally won a trophy. We were the outcasts. We used to go up to the hills firing 303 rifles at 500 yards, and we were thumbing our noses at the cricketing crowd. So that was something that I enjoyed, and dare I say it, something I was good at.

In the winter it was a bit more difficult getting out of rugby, but there was a swimming pool nearby, and I could not swim, so I managed to convince the appropriate master that it would be a better use of my time if I went to the swimming pool to learn how to swim, with a view to getting a qualification for life saving. Finally he agreed to that argument, and I went off swimming every day instead of running around on a rugby pitch, which suited me fine. I was much happier doing that.

The point is, people are not born equal. Not everybody is a good rugby player, not everybody is a good cricketer. You look for what you are good at and what you enjoy, and you go for that, and that is the way. So people are not equal in that respect. Equality is a myth. It is just one of these ideas that will not die.

From the floor: the balance sheet and equal opportunity

I am an accountant, so I just want to give that perspective. We have a balance sheet and things are equal. Every debit has a credit. But we also have a profit and loss account, where it is not equal ever. So I just wanted to give that sort of perspective on things.

I also believe that, yes, we are not all born equal. Some have more opportunities than others. Some people are born with disabilities. I always believe that we should have equal opportunity to enable, because people might just assume that those people cannot do much, but with their disabilities that might have made them strive to do much more. There is a part of society where people, through their own loss of opportunity or their own limited abilities, have actually strived to do much more and become stronger, and they can provide much more. So I do believe that if we

provide equal opportunities, whether it is by policy or otherwise, we can all benefit.

A question from the floor: do you think we should strive for more equality? Is equality a good thing?

I think that it depends. Sometimes if everything is equal, I think it can have a bad effect on motivation, but at the same time I do believe in competition. I think in some circumstances equality is a motivator, so I think it depends on each unique situation, on whatever optimises the situation. Sometimes there is too much inequality and that is a demotivator, and sometimes there is not enough, and that can be a demotivator too.

From the floor: opportunity, outcome and force

Mr Chairman, Sylvens. Equality of opportunity is justice. Equality of outcome is a tyranny. As several speakers have said, we are all different. We all have different passions, we all have different talents, different bodies, different desires. So equality of outcome can only be achieved by force, and that I do not think is a good thing.

The proposer talked to us about social inequality and people being judgemental, and we absolutely, I think all of us, recognise that that does happen. I would like to think that we are the most progressive, the most equal society that we have ever been, and I have no doubt that in 10 years we will be more equal in that regard. But what has happened is that people have taken the concept of equality and stolen it to try to impose uniformity of outcome. We all make choices, and we have an outcome from that. If you try to tabulate the outcomes and say that somehow that is the cause and it is inequality, that makes no sense to me.

At Stanford University some years ago, many students were arguing that there should be more equality, and so their professor said we will have equal outcomes as you wish, and everyone got the average grade. What happened? Well, the less capable students were as happy as Larry, but the capable students stopped working. What is the point? So the grades went down and down and down until the students recognised that that is not the path to achieving anything. So I would say equality of outcome, or equity, as it is now referred to, is only achievable by force. The only places we have ever seen equality of outcome: pick your tyrant, Mao, Stalin, the Khmer Rouge, any of them.

From the floor: the trillionaire and the postcode

Where do we start? Well, maybe because this week the very first trillionaire in human history came to be: Elon Musk. Economics does not pay that much, and one has to wonder, if we lived in a world of ideal outcomes, especially in a hyper capitalist market like the USA, surely the most intelligent, the most capable person in the United States of America would be the first trillionaire. As it happens, clearly not. If you all think Elon Musk is the most intelligent human being on the planet, I do not know what is wrong with you.

The other problem is that we have a society where clearly people who do not deserve to have that amount of wealth have it, yet people who maybe are actually geniuses just languish because they do not have the opportunities to achieve them. Now, this idea that we should strive for equality of opportunity and that equality of outcome is tyranny. Well, aside from a certain number of societies during the communist era, no Western government right now is looking, as a deliberate policy, to achieve equality of outcome. None of them.

If you think welfare's purpose is to achieve equality of outcome, you do not know what welfare is. Welfare is basically a social safety net to ensure that people do not fall under a minimum baseline. It is not about equalling income, it is not about equalling social benefits. It is simply providing a minimum, which in many countries, including Britain, is not enough for people on welfare to live in a dignified way.

And I think that even if we agree that talent is not distributed in an egalitarian way in any way, IQ, athletic ability and so on, it is true. No two people are born the same, and some people are much more talented than others. And we should have societies where talented people thrive. What we should not have is a society where the rest are just left to languish, and that is what welfare is. So equality does exist. It is not a myth, because we can actively work towards a society, not one that is equal in every fundamental measure, but one in which no one is left behind, no one falls through the cracks.

That is the purpose of understanding that equality is a real thing, and I should know, as an economist. It is one of the most studied concepts in economics, and I can tell you, in many countries, including this one, merely by knowing the postcode someone lives in, you can almost know what someone is going to die of. That is how accurate these things are. We know how the life opportunities of people are based on something so simple as the postcode, and we can do this in many other ways. We can do it on the basis of skin colour, we can do it on the basis of gender. We have all these predictive capabilities of how someone's life is going to be just by these metrics.

So in an ideal society this would all be random, but it is not, and random would mean that yes, some people do better than others, but not that specifically men do better than women, white people do better than black people, straight people do better than gay people. We know this is real, and that is why we know that we need to address equality, and we need to do it through welfare. There is no other way.

From the floor: three ways equality is a myth

I think there is a bit of a problem with the motion. How do you interpret the motion? Because I look at it and see three different things that I can be looking at. I can look at biological equality. I am an atheist and a great believer in, and have an interest in, Charles Darwin and Richard Dawkins and the selfish gene: that we are all genetically programmed to survive in a certain way, or to look after ourselves. Our genes control who we are. We are altruistic to a point, but only to a point. We understand as humans that it is better to be part of a group, to increase the likelihood of our genes surviving, than just being totally selfish. So in that respect I would say equality is a myth.

Economically, we are in a situation where we have got the first trillionaire, which is seen as a disgraceful thing, when you have got billions of people starving and you have got one man with sickening amounts of money. But once again, that is the system that we live in, and really it is up to governments, perhaps, to start introducing laws or taxes. Nobody needs a trillion dollars. Nobody needs a trillion dollars. So how do we address that situation? It is a question for brighter people than me. So in that respect too I would say economically equality is a myth.

But then we come to societal equality. Is that a myth? I do not think it is a myth, because I think over centuries, and particularly more recently, a lot has been done to try and improve equality in society. We have laws which say that you cannot discriminate against people. I am not stupid enough to say that there is not discrimination, but we do progress as a society. We are progressing. We are not perfect, but we are progressing. I would like to think we are much better

off than we were in the 1950s and 60s. I would like to think that in another 20, 30, 40 years we would be better off than we are today. But it is hard work. So that is why I think I will abstain.

From the floor: boldness, welfare and the limits of progress

I think equality is a myth. I really like what you just mentioned. You broke down the issue between social inequality and financial inequality. When I look at financial inequality, to be honest with me, that is not a major issue. Someone said before that it is not true that the smartest needs to be the richest. That is not true. The boldest needs to be the richest. If someone is good enough, even though it is the dumbest person on earth, at identifying a specific opportunity that rewards enough, that person deserves to be rewarded. I am no one to judge whether or not that person deserves that much money. I do not think he needs that amount of money, but I know that historically society has always progressed because of someone who was trying something that other people would not be able to achieve.

When I come to the societal part and I look through history, there has never been a point in time where equality was ever achieved. I liked what you mentioned before, that historically we have been progressing, and equality is at a much lower scale compared to what was before, but I do not think things will get much better from here. We have been living in a world that, after the Second World War, was a very peculiar world. It was a very appealing time that had never happened before and probably is never going to happen anymore, where there was relative stability globally that led to a deeper human consciousness and understanding of human rights.

I believe that every time there has been progress, there has always been a drop after that, which I believe we may be heading towards. I am probably too pessimistic, but this makes me think that we are never going to be able to keep up that level of progression in terms of equality, of discrimination against gender, and all kinds of discrimination. So I really believe that equality, from a societal perspective, is also a myth. There will always be someone who is better off. And I agree, welfare is the safety net we need, and that is what we need to work towards, to make it possible that the safety net is strong enough. But I do not think we will ever get there. Thank you.

From the floor: why equality is a myth under meritocracy

Just very briefly. I think one has to vote for the motion, that equality is a myth, because unless you think that everything is perfect, that we live in a kind of utopian society in which there is no inequality, then you have to vote that way. And of course it is true that huge efforts have been made in certain areas. You can legislate against inequality, you can legislate against incitement, against religious hatred, against racism, but it does not take it away. So in that area alone, on race and religion, we do not live in an equal society.

And yes, to your point, things have improved. I think for black people in this country things are arguably better than they were when the Windrush generation started to arrive, or when the Ugandan Asians came over in the 70s. But nevertheless, as a black person in this country, you are still very likely to be discriminated against, even in subtle ways.

Then the other area of our lives is that we live in a sort of liberal democracy. We live in free market economies, particularly in the Western world, and that in itself implies a degree of meritocracy.

So people who are more intelligent, or get the better university degrees, who have more capabilities, more talent than others, they will earn more money eventually, mostly. And if you earn more money, it gives you more wealth, it gives you more power. Even if there are some politicians

who have fiddled with the economy in order to redistribute wealth, like Gordon Brown did, for example, you are still not entirely eradicating inequality. If you think about George Orwell's Animal Farm, that was really extracting the essence of the idea of communism, where everybody was supposed to be equal. As we know from that book, some animals are more equal than others. So I am voting for the motion.

From the floor: which equality is a myth here

Chair, just a couple of points, and fairly simple points. We have had a bit of a woolly motion here, but we have had some very interesting contributions, and this is typical when we get a motion that is conceptual, or is not very well defined. As you go through the floor speeches, the definition starts to become a little bit clearer, but I think there is still some way to go. So I am going to pose one or two questions to the main speakers, and hopefully they can stick to the motion and help us to find what it is, and then that will help all of us vote.

What are we talking about here with equality? Is this about the myth of equality, that equality is good? Is it the myth that we should try to have equality of opportunity? Is it the myth that we should have equality of outcome? I think there is a quite broad consensus that equality of outcome is a myth, but the motion does not say equality of outcome. The motion says equality. On the other end of the spectrum, not everyone agrees, but it seems a lot of people are saying more equality would be a good thing. I believe that generally: less inequality across the social, economic and financial lenses of equality. I am struggling to think of one where becoming a bit more equal, not in extremis, not enforcing complete equality, but from where we are today, would not be a positive thing.

So the question for me is what type of equality are we talking about tonight? For me, I am thinking of this positively: more equality is going to be better given where we are today, and so if I think about it that way, I do not think of it as a myth. But I think we need to hear from the main speakers, and everyone can vote based on their own definition. We can all vote our own way, but let us see where we get to.

A question from the floor: do you think more equality would result in peace?

That is a really good question. I think on average, yes. That does not mean it will stop warfare. If you had enforced equality, that could lead to more war. But if you had less inequality in general, would that mean fewer wars? Probably. And so there would be all kinds of benefits. A previous speaker talked about living with dignity, and why we have a trillionaire in the US, and there is an underclass of tens of millions of people who barely have access to healthy food, and even if they could, they could not afford it. It is disastrous.

Another speaker brought up the point about resources: we are genetically programmed to propagate our DNA, and part of that is husbanding resources and making sure that we have resources, as opposed to other people. So if there is more equality and resources are spread more broadly, look at developing countries, many wars have been fought over resources. So I think that would likely be the case.

A second question: how much do you think Elon Musk should be worth, given what he has created?

That is not relevant to this debate. We are not saying that he should have x amount of money, we are not saying that no one should have a trillion dollars. That is not what it is about. You can have one Elon Musk, if the rest of the world is relatively equal, as long as he does not have undue

control. There is no harm in that. He is a straw man being put up to poke holes in. That is not the point of this debate.

Equality is measured. The Gini coefficient is a measure of inequality. If Elon Musk owns all the resources, the Gini coefficient is one. If everyone has exactly the same, it is zero. So we are somewhere in the middle of that. I am not saying it should be zero or it should be one, but if we make it a little bit more equal, for me that is a positive.

From the floor: a view from outside Europe

I will be brief, but I would just like to touch on a few points. A few of the points that have been made so far have focused a lot on financial or economic equality, and have also been very Eurocentric. So the only point I want to make is that equality is very different depending on where you are from. If you are a white person in the UK, equality is very different to you than for a black person in the UK, because you are majority versus minority. I am from Gabon, Central Africa. At home I am in the majority. Therefore equality to me is very different, because my experience is very different.

I also want to point out that equality, as was pointed out earlier, does not mean uniformity, and as all the speakers have pointed out, you can look at it in different metrics, but equality inherently to me is equal value. Value is not always financial. One of the big examples of whether equality is real or not is simply metrics on physical attraction. There have been studies to show that for most people, if you are of average intelligence, it is better to be physically attractive, or considered physically attractive by your peers, than it is to be intelligent. You would get further in life. And also, if you have social skills.

There was a study years ago about chief executives of large companies. Almost all of them are men, but they are also all tall, almost exclusively over six foot two. So if you are a man, it is not actually quite good enough to be a man. You have to be seen as charismatic, and probably over six feet, otherwise the ladder gets hard. It is not impossible, but there are all these other metrics, which are sometimes much more basic, because they are much more related to the fact that, as was pointed out by one of the speakers, we live better in groups, we survive better in groups. However, there is still a hierarchy, because fundamentally what we see as important differs from group to group, from peer to peer.

Now, how does that relate back to equality? Personally I do think equality is a myth, but I do not think it is necessarily a bad thing. It is something that we strive towards, and that makes us better as a society.

Different societies buy these different things. So if you are in a wealthy developed country, you can focus on welfare, you can focus on overall redistribution of wealth in one way or another. If you are not from a wealthy country, your first point is redressing development at whatever cost that may be, and therefore equality to you is more akin to equality among your peer nations rather than equality among your citizens, even if that means that you then end up with a high degree of inequality within your country overall. You do better if most of the country is doing better, even if you have poverty in your country. So, all that to say that I will be voting against the motion.

The chair's own contribution

It is a bit of an ambiguous motion. I think we do have to define what equality means, and where you are on that spectrum of definitions is going to bring you to a conclusion. I do not think we are all born equal. We are obviously all born with different traits. Some of us are good at some things,

others not so good. If anybody has had children, we will see that in their own kids. And then, obviously, there are structural inequalities, so that is a function of society, not just this society. In China, the Han Chinese are dominant. In India you have got the caste system, where you have got the Brahmins on top.

I think the aim, however, of aiming towards equality of certain things, equality of education, equality of access to health care, helps all of society. Otherwise you are repressing the disadvantaged, and you are not allowing their talents to contribute to society. So my impression of this debate has been, are we equal, in which case I would then have to go with the proposition that it is a myth. But I think the goal of equality allows all of us to contribute equally to society, and does not repress us and diminish us and then exacerbate inequalities, be those structural or otherwise. Those would be my thoughts. Thank you for your time.

The closing speech for the opposition

Thank you, Chair. As ever, this has been an outstanding debate, and I am speaking of over 100 years of history, and I have not heard such a good debate for a long time. And we had revelations. One speaker would admit that he was not perfect. Another admitted that he went to school. Who would have thought it?

But I want to come back. Most people know my style of speaking. I speak from the heart, from the emotion, and I think the emotion is about how you feel as a person, not the economics, not the sociology, not any other imposed system, but how you feel as a person. And I can stand here tonight and say that I am equal to even Elon Musk, because he could not stand here and speak like I am speaking tonight. So I am saying that each and every one of you is equal to me.

We had a reference to George Orwell. I do not think we need any lessons from George Orwell, Tony Blair's grandfather. And what else? IQ tests. Well, we know IQ tests are culturally manipulated, so intelligence, well, they are the evidence, manipulated on a cultural basis. So psychology is a version of the truth. Yeah, it is a version of the truth, a bit like religion. So we are not going to put great store by IQ tests.

Let me quote something from City University some years ago. Somebody did an MBA on entrepreneurs, and 40 per cent of those entrepreneurs left school without qualifications. They happened to be dyslexic. So they are quite capable, and you know all the famous dyslexics: Einstein, certainly Churchill, Lloyd George, Susan Hampshire, Tom Cruise, Muhammad Ali, all these gifted people. And indeed, let us come to David Hockney. He was a working class lad from Yorkshire, and he was one of the most outstanding artists. And footballers. Let us get on to football. How many working class people have achieved what the Lionesses have, from humble backgrounds?

So it is a question of individuality and not what society imposes on you. School is about social control, and yet we still have 3 million adult illiterates, and 30 per cent of the prison population have literacy problems, and yet they carve a living in dubious ways, of course, but so do politicians. And let us not get on to the royal family. A member of one of the Scandinavian royal families has just been sentenced to four years in prison, and who knows, the Windsors might actually follow suit. Thank you very much.

The closing speech: equality is a myth at the present moment

I would like to apologise for putting myself forward as the speaker for this. Another speaker here would have been better. So now, how I am going to deal with this is, I do not normally like doing closings. I feel that what everyone has had to say is correct, because to them, what is equality? It means differently to me.

Everyone, this motion is not woolly. And I am a little bit tired of it, when we do have motions, of people standing up and saying so. This motion was very simple. It was three words. And I just want to say something: in modern usage, myth frequently refers to a widely held but factually incorrect idea or belief.

All right. I want equality. I want to be able to walk down the road and not feel that somebody grabs their bag. I want, as a female, to walk down the road, and when I have been on a bus, I have had to stop a man from going up and doing something to a woman, and to feel comfortable that I could actually say it out loud and get him off the bus, because I know if I had, it would have been an embarrassing situation. So that is what I would like to be able to feel. But we live in the reality.

There was a film, something happened in 1971, and a Jewish man said to a black man, both of them were detectives, that racism is not going to end. Twenty years ago I felt that racism would end in my lifetime. I am 69 this year. I now do not think that. Think about the world we live in. There is an area, either in India or Pakistan or some country in South Asia, where everyone gets paid the same, whether you are a doctor or a dustman or a barman. They have less crime, and the less crime they have is of burglary and theft, because everyone has got enough to be able to get whatever they want, and they live much happier.

Now, one of the things I hate is when people say this about people on benefits. They are not underdogs. Sometimes they are the most talented people amongst their peers. J K Rowling was on benefits when she wrote the first Harry Potter.

From an economic point of view, I studied economics. Unfortunately I did not really like it. I understand supply and demand and the rest of it. And I am actually going to ask you something. Your suit, is it Italian? British. Okay, fine. So I got that wrong. But sometimes I can tell, because I like fashion. If somebody has got Church's shoes on, I know, and I like to tell the men, you have got Church's shoes on. So sometimes we do judge. We cannot help it.

I have been told to finish, but you know what, tonight I would like to win this debate. But you know what, it is not about winning. It is about being able to give your views, and everyone who has given their views and those who have listened equally. But it would be good to know that we can reach equality. That is the goal. But the motion is, and I feel it is in the present, it is a myth at the present moment.

The vote

The chair invited the room to vote again. Two very powerful closing speeches, and now we come to the votes. Have you changed your mind, or do you believe what you believed at the beginning? For the proposition, who believes that equality is a myth: 10. For the opposition, who believes equality is not a myth: three. And three abstentions. So the proposition has it.