

The Dreaded Fairness Doctrine



By Gail Collins

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Researchers recently announced the results of a study about dogs and fairness that sheds new light on the auto industry bailout debate.

Trust me. There's going to be a connection. But first, the scientific news: Folks at the University of Vienna conducted a test in which dogs were asked to shake hands over and over and over again. If you have any experience with dogs, you will not be surprised to hear that they were absolutely delighted. And they didn't care about being paid! The opportunity to perform the same trick endlessly with a stranger in a white coat was reward enough.

Then the researchers brought in new dogs that were given a piece of bread as a reward for every handshake. The uncompensated dogs watched, lost their innate love of mindless repetition and grew sullen.

"They get so mad that they look at you and just don't give you the paw anymore," said Friederike Range, one of the scientists.

So O.K. Dogs are secretly obsessed with fairness. (And bread. Who knew?)

Now, let's turn our attention to the U.S. Senate where a plan to bail out the auto industry went down the drain Thursday night. It was a stopgap measure, not necessarily the best bill in the world — although it did pass my own personal quality-control test, which is to find out what Senator Richard Shelby of Alabama thinks and go the other way.

But its defeat doesn't bode well for our prospects in coming up with a sensible response to the current economic unpleasantness. And the debate had an unnerving number of complaints about who was getting more than whom.

"We're going to have riots. There are already people rioting because they're losing their jobs when everybody else is being bailed out," said Senator Jim DeMint of South Carolina.

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Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Some Democrats denounced the bill because they said that it was unfair that the union workers were getting dumped on while a lot of the Wall Street fat cats got to keep their golden parachutes. Republicans complained that it was unfair that General Motors paid its workers more than Toyota or Honda does. Many senators took the DeMint line and wanted to know what made the autoworkers' jobs more important than the home builders or waitresses who were getting laid off, too.

There were so many fairness arguments that you really did expect Harry Reid to start walking down the aisle dropping pieces of toast in peoples' mouths.

Senator Claire McCaskill of Missouri threatened to vote against the bill because somebody had stuck in a provision giving federal judges a cost-of-living raise while other Americans were going without Christmas presents. "And my phone is ringing off the hook, Mr. President," she said, "from people who want to be federal judges." (Funny. My phone is ringing off the hook from people who want to be the U.S. senator from Illinois.)

If you took the long view of the pay raise for judges, you'd have to say that: 1) they deserve it; 2) now isn't the best time; and 3) making a statement on the timing is not quite as important as saving several hundred thousand auto-related jobs. But in the end, the judge provision was dropped, the bill died anyway and the Bush administration will have to do something to keep the automakers afloat until Barack Obama becomes president. Which, although I know it's hard to believe, is eventually going to happen.

The really hard lifting still lies ahead, and we cannot possibly do it if we're going to dwell too much on the fairness thing. It's just too easy for lawmakers to dodge the tough vote by reminding their constituents that somebody else is getting more breaks than they are.

Which somebody always is. If Senator DeMint's constituents are going to riot over a bailout for the auto industry, they'll wind up being met by tool-and-die makers waving torches and yelling about soybean subsidies. If the lawmakers from Alabama say their constituents do not want their tax money going to bail out Michigan, the people in Michigan are going to say that they never really enjoyed paying more taxes to the federal government than their state received in aid, while Alabama got a return of \$1.61 on the dollar. And anytime a representative from the Great Plains opens his mouth, the people from New York are going to point out that while every state gets the same number of senators, there are more people waiting for a subway in Brooklyn in rush hour than inhabit all of Wyoming.

We can really get tiresome on the subject. You don't want to go there.

Any mammal can obsess about fairness. (Did I mention how ticked off monkeys get if they find out they're getting cucumbers while somebody in the next cage has a grape?) The real human trick is to get past the quid pro quo and try to focus on the common good.

Set a better example, guys. It's two years until the next election.