

## **One has a moral responsibility ...**

I must start by confessing that when I decided upon this topic I was totally unsure of how to approach it. The idea of justice is when you begin to ponder upon it, an incredibly abstract concept. But during my musing it became quite obvious to me that while I could easily argue the point that one must simply obey the laws of the land as they have been set in stone, you cannot apply this argument to the countless injustices people have faced today and in the past. Groups that have been subjected to laws they had no part in making. In addition, progress cannot be made through mindless obedience. In the words of the Dalai Lama, 'understand the rules so you can break them effectively'.

Now would be a good time to clarify that I do not believe that anyone can disobey the law simply because it is their personal view that it is, 'unjust'. Breaking the law is never legally defensible, that would defeat the point in a legal system; however, breaking the law can in some cases be morally defensible. Such is the case of the civil rights movement that Martin Luther King wrote these words in reference to. When an entire people is excluded from the process of making laws and become victims of hatred and discrimination, then yes: we have a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws.

We are fortunate enough to live in a democratic country: our laws are subjected to scrutiny and debate. MPs and the Lords are elected to scour through each motion ensuring that they represent the people who choose them to represent their views. Because of this we can hopefully remain safe in the thought that the laws passed in this country do not unreasonably silence or limit minority groups or individuals. It follows then that people cannot simply disregard a democratically passed law. That law has been subjected to the democratic system to ensure it is a just one. If the law has been passed in a democratic way, people must respect that. For example, in 1967 Colin Jordan was sentenced to 18 months for circulating material likely to stir up racial hatred, which was in direct violation of the Race Relations Act of 1965. My father remembers the case being publicised and described him as, 'a right Nazi thug'. I'm sure that gives you a clear enough image of the man. Jordan argued that his imprisonment was a direct infringement of his freedom of speech, but his case was dismissed on the grounds that the courts had no power to question the validity of an Act of Parliament. Jordan believed it was his moral right to disobey a law despite it being passed in a just and legal way and he suffered the consequences for putting himself above the law.

Because of the importance of democracy in ensuring the justice of our laws, it cannot be emphasised enough the need to ensure that our government is truly representative of our country. Regardless of political view, parliament is failing in being the embodiment of our country. Only 34% of MPs are women despite women making up 51% of the population, only 10% are from non-white backgrounds and over 40% of conservative MPs went to fee-paying schools in contrast to the 7% of children who currently attend private schools. To ensure that our laws are just and do not begin to diminish the voices of the unrepresented, we must increase accessibility to government positions. Our democracy has to be constantly updated to keep with the changing times and the changes in which laws must go through. I cannot speak for other countries but when you look at the complete disregard for democracy in Myanmar, you can begin to see how Martin Luther King's words remain relevant 60 years on. The path to peace unfortunately is rarely passive. Suppression is often enforced through violence and fear, limiting the spectrums of acceptable opinions and

preventing discussion. We are blessed with a country that condemns repressors and encourages the powerless and so when we still remain in a world where this cannot be true of every country, we must take it upon ourselves to ensure that the implementation of justice still occurs, that the guilty do not walk free and the bigoted are condemned.

Noam Chomsky said that 'Passivity may be the easy course, but it is never the honourable one'. So along with Martin Luther King's call to react to injustice, I would indeed argue that, yes, if a law is unjust, you do have a moral responsibility to disobey it and to ensure that justice prevails.