no matter how well the two can be made to complement each other on paper. Tackling structural inequality often goes against the grain of the politics of restraint.

That is the lesson of the other possible remedy for rising inequality: democratic populism. The countries that have made the biggest strides in reducing the gap between the very rich and the very poor have also ridden roughshod over many liberal democratic safeguards. Venezuela under Hugo Chávez had, on his death in 2012, the lowest measure for inequality anywhere in Latin America. At the same time, his years in power had been marked by ruthless power grabs, regular abuses of constitutional propriety and naked appeals to popular anger. Many individuals, particularly among the propertied classes, found themselves squeezed with no way out. Chávez held elections and he won them, by hook or by crook. His country had oil, and he spent the proceeds. Venezuela became a more equal society and a more arbitrary state under his rule. He offered one sort of justice – the redistributive kind – at the expense of the other sort – the procedural kind. Democratic populism Chávez-style indicates that they don't go easily together.

Contemporary India suggests a similar lesson in reverse. Indian democracy has survived more or less intact since its birth in 1947 (minus a brief autocratic interlude under Indira Gandhi in the mid-1970s). Its constitution, inspired by Western models, was designed to protect the state from rampant populism. It is complex, intricate and rife with overlapping jurisdictions. Local politics competes with national politics, politicians with bureaucrats, populist democracy with the rule of law. The result has been a massive, clumsy, inefficient yet lasting politics of restraint. India continues to function as a constitutional democracy, which has brought many benefits (including the end of famine). But it has failed to solve the problem of inequality. India's recent economic growth has been very unevenly distributed. The middle class has rapidly expanded, and there has been a vast accumulation of wealth among the super-rich elite. Meanwhile the majority of Indians still live in poverty. Although almost no one starves to death, millions of Indian children continue to suffer from malnutrition and many of them die as a result. Indian democracy has not redressed the balance of structural injustice.

Amartya Sen, in conjunction with the American philosopher Martha Nussbaum, argues that it does not have to be like this. Conventional liberal democracy on their account is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for political justice. You can't bypass it and expect the results to be anything but unjust in the long run. But nor can you rely on it. Instead, you have to expand it to include a wide range of political functions (or, as they call them, 'capabilities'), which include access to education, to healthcare and to equal opportunities for women, along with respect for emotional well-being. The negative politics of restraint needs to be extended until it becomes a positive politics of fulfilment. That's the aim. As Sen and Nussbaum are the first to admit, it hasn't happened yet.

How to turn a negative into a positive remains the unresolved moral challenge of modern politics. So far, the best answers – from neo-republicanism to Sen and Nussbaum's capabilities theory –