

Meritocracy Assembly

Last week there was an interesting headline in the Times newspaper. The headline read: Nine elite schools provide path to power.

The text began: “A group of only nine public schools are still producing a large share of the country’s most powerful people, with their former pupils 94 times more likely to reach the top than anyone else.” This is heady stuff – the reader cannot help but wonder who these privileged few are.

It went on: “Analysis of the past 125 years of *Who’s Who*, which lists the most prominent politicians, lawyers, business leaders and civil servants in the UK, found that one in eight entrants in recent editions comes from one of the nine schools. The group, known as Clarendon Schools, are Charterhouse, Eton, Harrow, Merchant Taylors’, Rugby, Shrewsbury, St Paul’s, Westminster and Winchester.” There it is. The cat’s out of the bag. Merchant Taylors’ – us – are the elite. The privileged few. The fat cats at the top table, stopping anyone else getting their paws on the cream.

Dr Sam Friedman, sociologist at the London School of Economics and co-author of the report, is quoted as stating: “This is a stark warning about the lack of social mobility in the UK. We are continually told that everyone has the same opportunities, irrespective of the school they attended. This research offers a corrective to that lofty ideal. It puts in some sort of context as to how far away from that equality of opportunity we really are.”

The paper notes of the 54 prime ministers elected to the office in the UK, 36 were educated at one of the nine schools. Oxbridge graduates have consistently made up about 30 to 40 per cent of *Who’s Who* entrants. The authors found that those who attended these nine schools and then Oxbridge were twice as likely to reach the professional elite as the rest of Oxbridge graduates.

When I read this, I felt something of a dilemma. On the one hand, if it is true that you are all on the fast track to power, influence and success then I can’t think of a better group of young men to give it to. On the other hand, who amongst us would wish to be the undeserved beneficiaries of a broken and corrupt system that holds back deserving people.

One of the great themes of our time is social mobility, or rather the lack of it. We are told that privilege is tightly held by a small number, and that too few from other social groups are able to rise to the top. What this country needs, we are told, is more meritocracy.

A meritocracy is a government or administration in which appointments or responsibilities are allocated according to merit – namely the intelligence, abilities or qualifications of those applying. Sounds good doesn’t it? Some societies are far from being meritocracies – in them advancement depends upon whose son you happen to be. Certainly, our culture is not immune from that charge. We have heard the

statistics quoted in the Times newspaper article. And when the Queen dies, the throne will pass to Charles, her son. There is no chance that another, better suited or qualified candidate will be selected for kingship. Ours is a society in which the class system is apparently alive and well.

In other societies it isn't class that prevents advancement – the socialist societies of communist Russia or China did not allow advancement by merit, preferring to keep everyone equal – equally poor and discriminated against that is.

So meritocracy and social mobility seem to have a great deal going for them. It is a surprisingly new word – having been invented in 1958 by Michael Young, who defined it as a system where "merit is defined as intelligence-plus-effort, its possessors are identified at an early age and selected for appropriate intensive education, and there is an obsession with quantification, test-scoring, and qualifications." That sounds a little like our school system.

So given that the alternatives are less fair, you might think that it is an obviously good thing. Well, not so fast. Michael Young's 1958 book - *The Rise of the Meritocracy* - was meant to be a warning, showing a meritocratic world as wicked and destructive as that in Orwell's *1984* or Huxley's *Brave New World*.

This seems hard to understand. How could the allocation of power and success to those who deserve it be seen as a bad thing? In the novel, the ruling elite selected itself for success as it is better educated and brighter than everyone else. Their children are better educated and so continue to hold on to power. Thus life is as unfair as under any other system, but with the added problem that those in power feel justified that they are in control and that they deserve it. Similarly, those not in power feel that it is their fault they have not succeeded.

Even worse, if a meritocracy were to successfully identify those who have the greatest talent, work ethic and ability and promote them, then an underclass is created of those that don't make the grade. Under the old, non-meritocratic system, every class had a wide selection of rolemodels, people of ability and substance, who could hold that element of society together and prevent social breakdown. If we create an underclass without anyone of talent, then they will degenerate and their children will be even worse than their parents were. Society fractures. Further, in the old feudal system, the elite felt they had a duty to look after those less well off – in a true meritocracy, why would the elite make any effort for those less successful, since it is their fault they are in the position they are in.

There are other questions about whether a meritocratic system is fair. After all, a meritocracy is a system which rewards luck. The people who are luckiest in their health and genetic endowment; the luckiest in terms of family support, encouragement and, income; the luckiest in their educational and career opportunities.

Intelligence is largely inherited through your genes. A nurturing home life gives the best start in life and parents that care about success often ensure that their children

have the best opportunities to find it. So to succeed in a meritocratic society you have got to have been lucky enough to have those things.

It seems that fairness is very hard to build into a system of government. If you stick with the class system, then you exclude a significant proportion of the population from any chance of bettering themselves and their lot. However, the benefit is the sense of 'noblesse oblige' – the requirement that the upper classes look after and serve their less privileged fellows. If you take the communist approach, then all share a sense of injustice and poverty as all are equal, but equal in their deprivation. A meritocracy allows some to better themselves, but benefits those lucky enough to have the genes or the upbringing that allows them to take advantage of the opportunity. Further, it would create a society where a subclass lives in misery that they and everyone else agrees is their own fault.

But add to the benefits of a meritocracy a sense of service and you have the best of both worlds. The only way for a meritocracy to hope to pass ethical muster, to be considered fair, is if those who are luckiest in all of these respects also have the greatest responsibility to work hard, to contribute to the betterment of the world, and to share their luck with others.

And that, gentlemen, is you. You are all here in one of those nine elite schools the Times identified. Because of that, you have great prospects for a bright future. You didn't choose your privilege. You didn't choose your luck. You were born into it. Now - here's the payback: use your talents and your advantages for the benefit of all; choose a life of service over self-advancement; don't forget to pull some others up the ladder of success with you.