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A publication of the Edmund Rice Centre for Justice and Community Education

Meritocracy – How fair is the 'Fair Go'?

'Meritocracy', first coined in 1958, is a social system where advancement in society is based on one's abilities and merits rather than on the basis of family, wealth or social background. Coupled with capitalism and egalitarian values, it has allowed people from low status groups to dream of improving their social status, economic class, and place in the hierarchy. The impression is that everyone can succeed if they develop the necessary abilities¹. Meritocracy and equality of opportunity are championed by all kinds of politicians to achieve a fair society². People want to believe they live in a 'fair' society where hard work can achieve anything, regardless of their social position at birth. This is simply not true.

Meritocracy is a myth. It is a lie. It is false. Many people are disadvantaged, often by their gender and ethnicity³. This myth has been used to justify policies that promote economic inequality and hinder the development of social movements. Inseparable from capitalism it served an agenda to perpetuate entrenched privilege and extend inequality⁴.

This narrative rationalises affluence and immense privileges of a small minority under the impression that they deserve their wealth because of hard work and individual effort. One could say that behind every fortune is a great crime⁵.

When confronted with the widening gap between the rich and everyone else, defenders of market justice invariably invoke the metaphor of the race fairly won. For them, all that justice requires is that everyone have an equal opportunity to run in the race⁶.

Meritocracy is ultimately based on the good or ill fortune of birth and circumstance: genetic potential; upbringing and environment that affects the expression of that potential; and the random element in the non-home environment (the chance meeting, the exceptional teacher, the prolonged childhood illness, a particular peer group) which can have such far-reaching consequences and which is so little acknowledged⁷.

Despite the claims of meritocracy, **it perpetuates inequalities**. It has been used as a 'weapon' to justify elitism and privilege and judge people living in poverty and depressed societies. Elitism evokes a sense of injustice



and hostility when a small percentage of people should lay claim to privilege and distinction based solely on who they are. It's 'legitimacy' derives from the assumption that rewards come through hard work, and that those who do not work hard are undeserving of such rewards. In Australia we have heard the slogan, 'A fair go for those who have a go'. Many have a go but still do not get a fair go! Economic havens for uber-rich are created⁸. But equality is not possible where the gap between the haves and have-nots grows wider. The injustice of extreme wealth and runaway inequality is increasingly central to global politics. We should not allow ourselves to forget its obscenity⁹.

We cannot talk about meritocracy without addressing the gap between rich and poor. We hear so much about upward social mobility, but little about downward social mobility. If society is to be fairer, those with the greatest advantages ought to be brought down a bit. Merit is largely due to luck and the fortuitous circumstances that figure in most success stories. Luck often enables people to turn their life around such as a step up from family in terms of financial help. Choices do not occur in a vacuum but are facilitated by money or contacts¹⁰.

Disadvantage is legitimised. Inequality is rationalised and legitimised as meritocracy disguises socio-economic privileges, as well as access to education. Long-standing inequalities and the gap between the rich and the

poor fail to be seen as due to inherent unequal social arrangements. Hard work is seen as 'essential' to getting ahead and people are rewarded for intelligence and skill, whereas external factors, such as luck and inheritance, are less important¹¹. Without denying the industry and talent of successful people, these views are false.

Belief in meritocracy, it is said, makes people more selfish, less self-critical and more prone to acting discriminatorily¹².

It promotes discriminatory behaviour where greater rewards go to male employees over female employees with identical performance evaluations. Women and minorities can be overlooked in job offers and pay rises¹³. Satisfied that they are just, managers become less inclined to examine their own behaviour for signs of prejudice¹⁴. Meritocracy convinces people of their own moral *bona fides*¹⁵. The winners tend to believe they earned their status while sympathising less with others¹⁶.

Meritocracy justifies the status quo as people like to believe the world is just, and thus it legitimises their virtue, worth and personal superiority. Worldly failures signify personal defects and a reason why those at the lowest rung deserve to stay there¹⁷.

Meritocracies are another form of aristocracy by propagating advantages from parent to child. If wealthy parents provide their children with a good education (a proxy for 'merit'), then merit is just as easy to inherit as money¹⁸. Meritocracy has not eliminated the old encrustations of inherited hierarchies along with the bigotries of sex, race, class and caste¹⁹.

Meritocracy increases inequality. The so-called 'fair' society where people can achieve anything with enough hard work, regardless of their social position at birth is a lie because many people are increasingly disadvantaged by gender, ethnicity, and financial wealth levels. It actually creates new forms of social division. People are encouraged to internalise the idea that if they fail to climb the ladder, it is their own fault. Social systems that reward through wealth, and increase inequality, do not aid social mobility²⁰. We hear so much about upward social mobility, but little about downward social mobility²¹. People pass on their privilege to their children. One can see why people find the idea of meritocracy appealing: it carries with it the idea of moving beyond where you start in life, of creative flourishing and fairness. But all the evidence shows it is a smokescreen for inequality²².

Challenging meritocracy

First, it's possible to argue that the world is not yet meritocratic enough. While merit plays a part in

determining income and wealth, other factors overwhelm it, and negate its value.

Second, though people will agree that merit includes intelligence, diligence, and social skills. Some argue that merit should include aspects of moral character such as honesty, compassion, and humility.

A third issue pushes us to the brink of modern psychology and philosophy. Research incontrovertibly shows that traits like talent and self-discipline depend not just on individual choices, but also on genes, childhood nutrition, and upbringing. Yet, society benefits by attributing merit to individuals. Even if my merit were only 1% up to me and as much as 99% up to other forces, it helps to believe that it's all me for three reasons: First, I'm the part of the world that I have the most control over. Second, it's circularly encouraging to think I'm in control. And third, even 1% every day accumulates like compound interest. Weber's 'Protestant' ethic is the belief that virtue manifests as success. And, that belief can only be sustained if we praise and reward individual merit. How can this difference be resolved?

A fourth issue is its tendency to self-propagate. We all want a system that de-emphasises luck or preordained status, but merit itself is increasingly determined by parental status. The benefits of a meritocracy without its flaws can only come about by ensuring everyone grows up in an environment that nurtures merit.

Also, there are exceptions. There are very few who rise from poverty without advantage or privilege to find great success through skills and luck. Rather than see this as exceptional, meritocracies say 'see anyone can do it'. No, because so few do and can, it proves exactly the opposite.

One solution is to provide a broadly defined, high-quality education for everyone. Countries such as Denmark and Finland that provide a strong public education for everyone outdo countries such as the United States in social mobility²³.

Policies and cultures are needed that prioritise care, common ownership and collective development of our shared natural, physical, cultural and psychological resources rather than fostering the lonely empowerment of individuals towards goals that will ultimately diminish and threaten us all. Neoliberal meritocracy should be challenged, dismantled and replaced with genuine egalitarianism: including economic redistribution, robust anti-discrimination policies and initiatives, and free education²⁴.

Full set of resources and references are on the ERC website www.erc.org.au



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