

Editorial: The Equality Lottery

Politicians of all stripes are committed to equality of opportunity. At least almost all of them put it in their statements of fundamental principle. It sounds like something we should all in fairness support, and it is supposed to be free of the radically redistributive and tyrannical implications of attempting to ensure equalities of outcome.

It was partly in order to secure equality of opportunity that there has been an assault in Britain on selective education over the past three or four decades, one again supported to a greater or lesser extent by all the major political parties. The impetus for the abolition of grammar schools for the academically able came when it was discovered that though entry to the grammar schools was by examinations which were taken by all children at the age of 10 or 11, children from the middle classes did very much better in them than the rest of the population. This was no doubt partly because of the various home and educational advantages middle class children had by virtue of their birth and upbringing. So in the name of equality of opportunity grammar schools were abolished in most parts of Britain, and comprehensive schools, to which all children would go, were set up in their place.

However, three of four decades on, the goal of equality of opportunity remains maddeningly elusive. Not all comprehensive schools are equal, it seems. In particular those in middle class areas tend to be better than those in the inner cities, and it has been noted that many parents are spending large amounts of money to buy houses close to good schools. The reason for this is that once selection by ability had been removed from the educational agenda, proximity to the school had become the dominant criterion for entry to popular and over-subscribed schools.

But if examination success was not a fair method of selection, basing it on price of property seems an even greater assault on equality of opportunity. This problem has long exercised the minds of the brightest and best in the land, but a solution has now been found by the town councillors of Brighton. Henceforth all children in Brighton who want to go to over-subscribed schools will have to enter a lottery, and places will be given to the winners of the lottery. As a spokeswoman for Brighton put it, lotteries are by ballot and ballots are fair, and, she might have added, democratic.

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Whether this particular sophistry commands general support, selection by lottery is now permitted by the national government in its latest instruction on school admission; and other local educational authorities are said, in the jargon, to be studying the outcome of the Brighton experiment 'with interest'.

The egalitarian objection to advantages gained by birth, upbringing and character is that one's birth, upbringing and character are lotteries, which we do nothing ourselves to influence or bring about, and in which for random reasons some gain advantages over others. Even one's ability to work hard at competitions of various sorts is said to derive from dispositions or opportunities one did nothing to merit.

So the Brighton—and British—way is henceforth to replace one set of lotteries with another. Not that the education lottery will actually achieve equality of opportunity, for some schools will no doubt obstinately prove to be better than others, affording their pupils unequal opportunities in the future. Will lotteries be introduced at further stages, for example, when it comes to awarding examination grades or places at prestigious universities, to overcome the unequal results of good schooling? Or will there be a time when it is simply admitted that equality of opportunity is no more desirable or possible as a political goal than equality of outcome, but simply the same thing under another name?