

Politics

"Down with meritocracy"

Michael Young

Thu 28 Jun 2001 21.59 EDTFirst published on Thu 28 Jun 2001 21.59 EDT

I have been sadly disappointed by my 1958 book, *The Rise of the Meritocracy*. I coined a word which has gone into general circulation, especially in the United States, and most recently found a prominent place in the speeches of Mr Blair.

The book was a satire meant to be a warning (which needless to say has not been heeded) against what might happen to Britain between 1958 and the imagined final revolt against the meritocracy in 2033.

Much that was predicted has already come about. It is highly unlikely the prime minister has read the book, but he has caught on to the word without realising the dangers of what he is advocating.

Underpinning my argument was a non-controversial historical analysis of what had been happening to society for more than a century before 1958, and most emphatically since the 1870s, when schooling was made compulsory and competitive entry to the civil service became the rule.

Until that time status was generally ascribed by birth. But irrespective of people's birth, status has gradually become more achievable.

It is good sense to appoint individual people to jobs on their merit. It is the opposite when those who are judged to have merit of a particular kind harden into a new social class without room in it for others.

Ability of a conventional kind, which used to be distributed between the classes more or less at random, has become much more highly concentrated by the engine of education.

A social revolution has been accomplished by harnessing schools and universities to the task of sieving people according to education's narrow band of values.

With an amazing battery of certificates and degrees at its disposal, education has put its seal of approval on a minority, and its seal of disapproval on the many who fail to shine from the time they are relegated to the bottom streams at the age of seven or before.

The new class has the means at hand, and largely under its control, by which it reproduces itself.

The more controversial prediction and the warning followed from the historical analysis. I expected that the poor and the disadvantaged would be done down, and in fact they have been. If branded at school they are more vulnerable for later unemployment.

They can easily become demoralised by being looked down on so woundingly by people who have done well for themselves.

It is hard indeed in a society that makes so much of merit to be judged as having none. No underclass has ever been left as morally naked as that.

They have been deprived by educational selection of many of those who would have been their natural leaders, the able spokesmen and spokeswomen from the working class who continued to identify with the class from which they came.

Their leaders were a standing opposition to the rich and the powerful in the never-ending competition in parliament and industry between the haves and the have-nots.

With the coming of the meritocracy, the now leaderless masses were partially disfranchised; as time has gone by, more and more of them have been disengaged, and disaffected to the extent of not even bothering to vote. They no longer have their own people to represent them.

To make the point it is worth comparing the Attlee and Blair cabinets. The two most influential members of the 1945 cabinet were Ernest Bevin, acclaimed as foreign secretary, and Herbert Morrison, acclaimed as lord president of the council and deputy prime minister.

Bevin left school at 11 to take a job as a farm boy, and was subsequently a kitchen boy, a grocer's errand boy, a van boy, a tram conductor and a drayman before, at the age of 29, he became active locally in Bristol in the Dock Wharf, Riverside and General Labourers' union.

Herbert Morrison was in many ways an even more significant figure, whose rise to prominence was not so much through the unions as through local government.

His first job was also as an errand boy and assistant in a grocer's shop, from which he moved on to be a junior shop assistant and an early switchboard operator. He later became so influential as leader of the London county council partly because of his previous success as minister of transport in the 1929 Labour government.

He triumphed in the way Livingstone and Kiley hope to do now, by bringing all London's fragmented tube service, buses and trams under one unified management and ownership in his London passenger transport board.

It made London's public transport the best in the world for another 30-40 years and the LPTB was also the model for all the nationalised industries after 1945.

Quite a few other members of the Attlee cabinet, like Bevan and Griffiths (miners both), had similar lowly origins and so were also a source of pride for many ordinary people who could identify with them.

It is a sharp contrast with the Blair cabinet, largely filled as it is with members of the meritocracy.

In the new social environment, the rich and the powerful have been doing mighty well for themselves. They have been freed from the old kinds of criticism from people who had to be listened to. This once helped keep them in check - it has been the opposite under the Blair government.

The business meritocracy is in vogue. If meritocrats believe, as more and more of them are encouraged to, that their advancement comes from their own merits, they can feel they deserve whatever they can get.

They can be insufferably smug, much more so than the people who knew they had achieved advancement not on their own merit but because they were, as somebody's son or daughter, the beneficiaries of nepotism. The newcomers can actually believe they have morality on their side.

So assured have the elite become that there is almost no block on the rewards they arrogate to themselves. The old restraints of the business world have been lifted and, as the book also predicted, all manner of new ways for people to feather their own nests have been invented and exploited.

Salaries and fees have shot up. Generous share option schemes have proliferated. Top bonuses and golden handshakes have multiplied.

As a result, general inequality has been becoming more grievous with every year that passes, and without a bleat from the leaders of the party who once spoke up so trenchantly and characteristically for greater equality.

Can anything be done about this more polarised meritocratic society? It would help if Mr Blair would drop the word from his public vocabulary, or at least admit to the downside. It would help still more if he and Mr Brown would mark their distance from the new meritocracy by increasing income taxes on the rich, and also by reviving more powerful local government as a way of involving local people and giving them a training for national politics.

There was also a prediction in the book that wholesale educational selection would be reintroduced, going further even than what we have already. My imaginary author, an ardent apostle of meritocracy, said shortly before the revolution, that "No longer is it so necessary to debase standards by attempting to extend a higher civilisation to the children of the lower classes".

At least the fullness of that can still be avoided. I hope.

□ Michael Young, when secretary of the policy committee of the Labour party, was responsible for drafting Let Us Face the Future, Labour's manifesto for the 1945 general election

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