

## Research Article

# The equality agenda: a clear case of smoke and mirrors

Una Canning<sup>1</sup>

1. London Metropolitan University, United Kingdom

In his book *The madness of crowds: gender, race and identity* the author Douglas Murray (2020) suggests that much of contemporary society is obsessed with a particular idea of diversity and equality that is all-encompassing and all-consuming. He argues that this obsession is propagated: 'from the top of government and through almost every institution in our societies today' and is written into all employment law and employment policies. Embedded also in current social policy, it is a view, he argues, that propagates the belief that 'everybody is the same above the neck' and that: 'everybody is equal and [...] given the right encouragement and opportunity, everybody can be whatever they want; that life is entirely about environment, opportunity, and privilege.' In this work, I trace the broad outline of the emerging equality agenda as it occurred in America and the UK with a particular emphasis on Northern Ireland and argue that Murray (2020) is wrong in his assessment. The work highlights the differences between the two countries and claims that equality of opportunity, understood here as improved education, healthcare, childcare etc. and equality of outcome, are more rhetoric than reality.

## The equality agenda: a clear case of smoke and mirrors?

### Introduction

In his book *The madness of crowds: gender, race and identity* the author Douglas Murray (Murray, 2020;172) suggests that much of contemporary society is obsessed with a particular idea of diversity and equality that is all-encompassing and all-consuming. He argues that this obsession is propagated: 'from the top of government and through almost every institution in our societies today'

and is written into all employment law and employment policies. Embedded also in current social policy, it is a view, he argues, that propagates the belief that ‘everybody is the same above the neck’ and that: ‘everybody is equal and [...] given the right encouragement and opportunity, everybody can be whatever they want; that life is entirely about environment, opportunity, and privilege.’ For Murray (2020), the current debate on equality is circumscribed on the grounds that it fails to include any discussion of *intelligence quotient* (IQ) differentials because of the ethical and moral problems associated with such a debate. To advance his argument, Murray (2020) refers to the work of two American psychologists, Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray, whose book *The Bell Curve* (1994) focused on the subject of IQ and genetics, in American society. According to the authors, no less than 40 percent and no more than 80 per cent of cognitive ability is inherited (Herrnstein and Murray, 1994;47.) To investigate the link between what they called ‘cognitive classes and social behaviour’, Herrnstein and Murray (1994) used the *National Longitudinal Study of Youth* (NLSY) that began in 1979 in the USA and included participants aged between 14 and 22 years. Gathering data on a range of factors, including ‘childhood environment and parental socio-economic status and subsequent educational and occupational achievement’, the study also gathered data on detailed psychometric measures of cognitive skills. From an analysis of the data, Herrnstein and Murray (1994) identified a new kind of class structure in American society that consisted of a ‘cognitive elite’ that is ‘well-endowed with cognitive abilities.’ From their analysis of the cognitive skills data, the authors argued that proofs of human difference in the form of ‘cognitive classes’ has consequences for society and that, while the cognitive elite participate in socially desirable behaviours, those with low cognitive ability participate in socially undesirable ones (Herrnstein and Murray, 1994;150.)

Charting the emergence of the new class structure in America during the twentieth century, Herrnstein and Murray (1994,143) describe how, prior to this new structure, the world was segregated into social classes and defined in terms of money, power, and status, and also hereditary rank. But this changed with the development of mental measurement that came to be used as a means of identifying the brightest youths and then guiding them into fairly narrow educational and occupational channels. With time, these channels became increasingly lucrative and influential, leading to the development of a distinct stratum in the social hierarchy, that Herrnstein and Murray (1994) dubbed the ‘cognitive elite.’ This cognitive elite they say is increasingly isolated from the rest of society and, endowed with educational credentials and talent, is the decisive dividing force in today’s society.

## ***Mental measurement***

The idea of mental measurement was first proposed by Francis Galton, who set out to devise an intelligence test that could be graded objectively (Herrnstein and Murray, 1994;9.) Galton failed in his attempts but a successor to his ideas was the French psychologist Albert Binet, who developed questions that attempted to measure intelligence by measuring a person's ability to reason, draw analogies, and identify patterns. With time, the idea of intelligence testing began to gain momentum and by the end of the nineteenth century, such tests became commonplace 'throughout the British Commonwealth, the United States, much of continental Europe, and Japan' (Herrnstein and Murray, 1994;25.) As testing spread, intelligence quotient (IQ) became a more general way to express a person's intellectual performance relative to a given population and by 1917, soon after the concept of IQ was first defined, the U.S. Army began administering intelligence tests to classify and assign recruits for World War One. By using such tests, it was argued that it was possible to identify high and low intelligence, and that such testing offered a 'definition of intelligence [that] differed subtly from the more prevalent idea that intelligence is the ability to learn and to generalise what is learned' (Herrnstein and Murray, 1994;27.)

## ***Emergence of the cognitive elite in America***

In America, the new class structure emerged when the country opened the doors of its colleges to public school graduates, and not just private school graduates. In the past, elite colleges such as Harvard had previously rejected a third of its applicants, but was now rejecting more than two-thirds, with the quality of applicants increasing as well (Herrnstein and Murray, 1994;53.) Describing this process as the 'democratization of America's educational system', they attribute the change to the way the American population sorted and divided itself because of three successively efficient sorting processes (Herrnstein and Murray, 1994;57.) The first was that the college population grew, the second involved recruitment to college by cognitive ability, and the third involved further sifting among the colleges with those demonstrating the greatest cognitive ability attending elite colleges such as Yale or Harvard. By these three processes, Herrnstein and Murray (1994;54) claim that a mass population of young people of ability entered college 'regardless of race, colour, creed, gender and financial resources.' As a consequence, the nation's university system became more efficient in bringing the brightest to college, and was also more efficient at sorting 'the brightest of the bright'

into a handful of elite colleges that led to ‘a new elite developing even more rapidly within the system’ (Herrnstein and Murray, 1994;64.)

For Herrnstein and Murray (1994;27), the study of cognitive abilities in the early days of the twentieth century ‘was a success story, representing one of the rare instances in which the new soft sciences were able to do their work with a rigor not too far short of the standards of the traditional sciences.’ As a consequence of this success story, a new specialty within psychology was created – *psychometrics*, that in the early decades of the twentieth century gained momentum. But by the 1960s, a new controversy about intelligence tests opened up, that according to Herrnstein and Murray (1994;31) was the result of a new outlook on public policy that had its origins in the rise of powerful social democratic and socialist movements after World War One. Herrnstein and Murray (1994;31) argue that such movements led to a fundamental shift in the received wisdom of equality, that found full expression in 1960s America in the wake of the civil rights movement, and the debate about the nature of inequalities in American society. Whereas in the 1930s the new specialty of *psychometrics* had debated whether intelligence is almost entirely produced by genes or whether the environment also plays a role, by the 1960s and 1970s it had become controversial to claim, especially in public, that genes had any effect on intelligence, a view supported by the work of behavioural psychologists who held that human potential was malleable and shaped by the environment. For Herrnstein and Murray (1994), this latest outlook was at odds with the available evidence that in their view had been greatly strengthened in the preceding decades. The new outlook that emerged claimed that human deficiencies ‘in intelligence, or parenting, or social behaviour’ lay outside the individual and were caused by flaws in society that could be fixed by the right public policies such as ‘redistribution of wealth, better education, better housing and medical care’ (Herrnstein and Murray, 1994;32.) It was a view that was opposed by those who argued that individual differences could not be easily diminished by government intervention, and in 1971 Richard Herrnstein added to this debate when he wrote a controversial article for *Atlantic Monthly* in which he argued:

‘IQ is substantially heritable, [and] because economic success in life depends in part on the talents measured by IQ tests, and because social standing depends in part on economic success, it follows that social standing is bound to be based to some extent on inherited differences’ (Herrnstein and Murray, 1994;33.)

That same year, the U.S. Supreme Court outlawed the use of standardised ability tests by employers ‘unless they had a “manifest relationship” to the specific job in question’ because such tests ‘acted as

“built-in headwinds” for minority groups, even in the absence of discriminatory intent’ (Herrnstein and Murray, 1994;34.)

## ***The advent of meritocracy in Britain***

In the UK, similar trends were at work with the advent of the 1944 Education Act. By means of a selective, educational system, success and status in life were now dependent primarily on individual talents, abilities, and effort, and not as a result of birth. With the arrival of new technology and an impending skills shortage, Winston Churchill called for more education and claimed ‘that higher education was too limited and enjoyed by the wrong people’ (Young, 1958;28.) With the passing of the 1944 Education Act, selective, secondary education was made free, and ‘children were educated according to their age, ability and aptitude, [with] those with greater ability getting more education’ (Young, 1958.) In order to identify those with greater ability, an 11-plus exam was instigated in the final year of primary school, with those passing the exam gaining entry to a selective grammar school.

The British sociologist Michael Young wrote a book in the 1950s called *The rise of the meritocracy 1870–2033: an essay on education and equality*. The book is told from the point of view of the author and surveys the unfolding meritocratic landscape in the decades following the 1944 Act and the advent of universal, selective education. Set in the 2030s, the storyteller explains the moral logic of the meritocratic society that had its origins in post-war Britain, and describes a dystopian society in which those who suffered from the judgement of educational selection were now revolting against the meritocratic elites. In the book, Young (1958) suggests that, unlike the class-bound system of bygone days that at least had the desirable effect of tempering ‘the self-regard of the upper class and prevented the working class from viewing its subordinate status as personal failure’, the current system offered no such solace (Sandel, 2021;116.) Taking the stance of one who is perplexed by the unfolding events, the author complains that genetic inequality is a reality but unfortunately not everyone is willing to accept that fact. He continues by describing how failure to accept genetic inequality meant that the advancement of ‘equality by merit’ was being hindered by those who emphasised a different interpretation of equality. Those in favour of a different interpretation argued against selective education and believed that:

‘Those with talent and those without, should attend the same schools and receive the same basic education [and] that to segregate the clever from the stupid was to deepen

class divisions. They proposed that all children, irrespective of sex, race, creed, class [...] or ability, should be lumped together' (Young, 1958;33.)

But despite these protestations, selective education continued with IQ as the chief qualification for entry to the elite by means of the 11-plus exam, as Young describes:

'Competition was sharper; how were the winners to be picked? The value of intelligence tests as a guide to personnel selection in the Forces had been fully demonstrated during the war, and it was therefore natural to adopt the same kind of method for the peace-time purpose, especially in a stratified society prepared by habit of mind to recognise a hierarchy of intelligence as soon as it was pointed out. The results were remarkable: by 1950, merely a few years after the Act, most of the children in the country were taking these tests before they left their primary schools, and although older methods of examination were also used, high IQ was established as the chief qualification for entry to the elite. Educational psychology assumed a central place in pedagogy from which it was never later entirely dislodged' (Young, 1958;55.)

With the introduction of selective, free education came resistance to educational reform. Egalitarian reformers called for the abolition of grammar schools and vouched for the introduction of comprehensive schools but there was 'opposition from parents, teachers, and children - from the whole grammar stream' to the idea (Young, 1958;39.) Advocates of the comprehensive school pointed towards the US as an example but others saw such ideas as an 'altogether over-optimistic belief of the educability of the majority' (Young, 1958;40.) They further argued that the US had a fast-growing population whereas the UK:

'with relative stability of population' [did not need] many new grammar schools [...] built. What was the purpose of having many more when even the existing grammar schools could not get as many able children as they could accommodate?' (Young, 1958; 40.)

Despite an increase in demand for grammar school places in the UK, there was no corresponding expansion in supply, with the number of state grammar schools peaking at almost 1,300 in the mid-1960s, when around one-quarter of all pupils in state secondaries attended grammars (Bolton, 2016.) After this period, their number started falling with the fastest period of decline between 1971 and 1978, when 650 grammar schools closed.

## ***School populations versus grammar school places in Northern Ireland***

That the population of the UK was stable was not altogether true. In the northwest corner of Northern Ireland, in the city of Derry, the birth rate in 1964 was 31.8 per thousand, with data from the 1961 census revealing the natural annual increase in the city's population to be 21.2 per thousand. These figures were in stark contrast to Northern Ireland as a whole, where the figures stood at 11.5 and in the case of England and Wales 5.7 (McCann, 1980;24.) Reporting on the city's population statistics, Eammon McCann in his book *War in an Irish Town* writes:

‘The population pyramid for the area resembled that of a tropical third world rather than a western metropolitan country. It corresponded to that for Britain in the middle of the nineteenth not twentieth century’ (McCann, 1980;25.)

Eighty per cent of births in the city were Catholic, with a majority living in the south ward, in an area known as Bogside: two-fifths of Bogside residents were under the age of 15 years (McCann, 1980;25.) Because they were Catholic and therefore not eligible for housing outside of the south ward, the area bulged with people living in overcrowded, unfit accommodations who had been on the housing list for years. When land began to run short in the south ward, it was subsequently extended to include the area known as Creggan, an area with a large housing estate built on a hill overlooking the Bogside. Unwilling to house Catholics outside of the south ward, the Protestant-controlled Derry Corporation used the land to accommodate mainly Catholic families, as they sought to manipulate electoral boundaries through a process known as gerrymandering (McCann, 1980;24.)

In Northern Ireland, the church controlled the education of Catholic children and with the introduction of the 1947 (Northern Ireland) Education Act, it now became possible for Catholics to gain a grammar school education that in Derry had previously been the preserve of the Catholic middle class (McCann, 1980;14.) The only two Catholic grammar schools in the city were located outside of the south ward, on the outskirts of the city, and included St Columb's College, which catered for boys, and Thornhill Grammar, for girls. Passing the 11-plus exam in the 1950s, the writer and journalist Eammon McCann, who was born in the Bogside, describes his experience of attending St Columb's College and says ‘until the school got used to it, Bogsiders who arrived were made aware that they were intruding ’(McCann, 1980;15.)

With the passing of the 1947 Act, state grants for capital costs for Catholic (voluntary) schools increased to 65 per cent, with state-controlled secondary schools in Northern Ireland being Protestant

(ECSS, 2017.) This required the church to find the remaining money which presented a considerable problem for the local community:

‘The church’s insistence on controlling the education of Catholic children affected not only those at the receiving end. Through the parish Building Fund it involved the whole community. The price of opting out of the state system was that the church authorities had to find thirty-five per cent of the cost of the school building. In a depressed community with a high birth rate, and a thirst for education this was a considerable problem’ (McCann, 1980;18.)

In Derry, despite the atypical birth rate, no new Catholic grammar schools were built. Instead, the Catholic Church proceeded to build four secondary schools in the catholic enclave of Creggan, for those who failed the 11-plus. The four schools, two for girls and two for boys, were secondary moderns. Educating 70–75 per cent of the secondary school age population, secondary moderns had a predominately working-class intake of pupils whose parents were low or semi-skilled workers. According to an ECSS (2017) report on secondary moderns:

‘Many schools were housed in nineteenth-century elementary school buildings; resources were scarce and classes were large. There was so much variation in practice and experience between secondary moderns, and they carry so much retrospective and political baggage, that an historical assessment of this type of school and its impact on the people who passed through them represents a significant challenge.’

Lacking a precise definition, the ECSS (2017) report claims that the most defining characteristic of a secondary modern ‘was that it was not a grammar school, a technical school, or an independent school’ and that in many cases these schools were simply evolving the basic elementary curricula whereby cooking became domestic science and manual work became woodwork and metal work.

## ***Meritocracy in Northern Ireland – a reflection***

Unlike McCann, I failed the 11-plus, and in the early 1970s, at the end of year seven, was transferred to one of the four secondary schools in Creggan. Living on a street that overlooked the expansive playing fields of St Joseph’s secondary school for boys that was built in lower Creggan, the street was one of those used as an entry point during *Operation Motorman*. Forming part of the boundary line between Creggan and the area known as Rosemount, it was over these playing fields that British army tanks



lumbered, to take control of 'no-go' areas such as Creggan in 1972. The all-girl school was visible from where I lived and was run by a Catholic religious order with the head teacher a nun, and the deputy head, a lay person. The year I transferred the city's 'nineteenth-century population pyramid' was making itself felt. Not having enough classrooms to accommodate its latest intake, pupils were lodged in the school's gymnasium cum assembly hall that had been divided by sheets of plywood into three makeshift classrooms, with a fourth classroom housed on the stage with the curtains drawn. It was in these makeshift classrooms that pupils met with their Form teacher but once outside of Form the problem of finding an empty classroom prevailed. Having searched floor by floor and failed to find an empty classroom, pupils were forced to sit on the stairs or in corridors outside classrooms until the bell rang for the next lesson to begin. By the start of the second year, the school had got its act together, and newly constructed porta-cabins were installed in the grounds of the school. The availability of more classrooms did not, however, make sitting in corridors a thing of the past. With the conflict known colloquially as 'the Troubles' in Northern Ireland at its height, rioting was commonplace on the road outside the glass-fronted entrance to the school, and the danger of being hit by stone missiles, live bullets, rubber bullets or CS gas canisters was very real. And with British Army foot patrols routinely taking shortcuts through the school grounds via the school gymnasium, explosive traps were also a concern.

With the gymnasium restored to its proper functioning after the installation of the porta-cabins, morning assemblies led by the head teacher resumed. It was during these assemblies that pupils learnt what five years of secondary modern education meant. Standing in line and amongst the cycle of praying and hymn singing, the pupils were regularly informed by the head teacher that they were 'educationally subnormal' and though they were failures on this earth, they were 'not failures in the eyes of God.' It was a rhetoric repeated outside of school by peers attending grammar school, who were keen to point out that the CSE exams we sat were not worth the paper they were written on. Others in the community, including a well-known musician, describe how he was ordered by the local bishop to teach music at the school when it opened in the late 1950s and that:

'During those years he taught every class in the school. Frequently his music room was crowded to capacity with pupils who were judged to be uncontrollable in more academic subjects but were responsive to music and singing' (*James MacCafferty, 2015.*)

Under his guidance, the school won many a choir competition and it was noted: '[T]hese achievements are all the more noteworthy when it is recalled that many of these girls were considered

failures' (*James MacCafferty*, 2015.) Unfortunately for me, my failure was further compounded when I was asked to leave the school choir by his then-successor because I was unable to 'hold a note.' Our status as non-achievers was also confirmed through the regular visits made by staff from the local shirt and denim factories, who came to demonstrate how to machine sew a straight line in a pair of denim jeans – for those lucky enough to get a job.

But out of earshot and in the privacy of her classroom, the deputy head who taught history would often say to those fortunate enough to be one of her pupils: 'Girls, you are not to believe everything you hear in assembly. You are just as good if not better than those who go to grammar school and you are just as capable of passing exams as they are.' With our horizons set and encouragement stifled (except for the lone voice of the deputy head), those who needed money and could leave school when they were 15 did so, although there was no guarantee of getting a job. In interviews with women from Creggan, one woman describes her first job interview:

My first experience of discrimination was that very first job interview. I was with a local bridal and haberdashery shop, and I was fifteen at the time. The man in the shop was lovely and we got on really well, so he gave me the job and everything seemed to be brilliant. Then, on the way out, he said, "Sorry miss, I forgot to ask, what school you were at before this? I told him I went to St Mary's in Creggan, and that was it – suddenly he said the job was taken.' (*Campbell*, 2016; kindle location 1659.)

As for the rest of us, we just hung on in there passing time, our aspirations denied by the hubris of an unkind, narrow-minded and uninformed religious who had no business saying the things she did. Collectively, we had succumbed to the 'self-filling prophecy' that we were failures, a sociological concept identified by Robert K. Merton in 1948 defined as 'a false definition of the situation evoking a new behaviour which makes the originally false conception come true' (*Biggs*, 2011.)

Staying on until I was 16, it wasn't until I went to the local technical college that I had any dealings with the 'other side' so to speak and there I found a totally different, and altogether more positive attitude. An experience almost akin to being abroad, I enrolled on a pre-nursing course with one other girl from my old school. As part of the course, we were taught 'O' level English Language by a kindly Reverend, a member of the Reformed Presbyterian Church ('big Ian's' church) who, without any discussion, immediately enrolled both of us to do 'O' level English Literature and RSA stage one, two and three English Language and RSA stage one and two English Literature (we ran out of time for stage three.) These were additional exams that were not part of the pre-nursing course, and telling us to pay the exam fees (paid for from money earned from a Saturday job) he simply supplied the books

we needed to pass the English Literature exams: we both passed all seven English exams. I also gained an 'O' Level in history that I did at night class that same year.

## ***Class politics in the Northern Ireland context***

The role of class within Northern Ireland's recent political history is rarely acknowledged. Discrimination by Protestants against Catholics was very real, but the role played by class and the opportunities afforded those from working-class backgrounds, both Catholic and Protestant, is generally ignored. Writing on the influence of St Columb's Catholic grammar school in Derry, Eammon McCann (1980) describes how 'almost every Catholic teacher, Catholic doctor, Catholic solicitor, Catholic architect, accountant and businessman in the city was schooled there.' Back then, the Nationalist Party was regarded as the voice of Catholics in the city and was closely associated with the Catholic Church. McCann (1980) writes that, up until the 1960s, the only real opposition to the Nationalist Party came from ad hoc trade union groups, but, as such candidates were routinely accused by the local press and clergy of being communists, they garnered very little support.

That communism was seen as an international movement fanatically seeking to destroy the church, was a view also shared by the provisional wing of the Irish Republican Army (IRA.) Writing about the IRA split in the 1960s into the *Provisional* and *Official* wings of the IRA, Ed Moloney (2007) in his book *A secret history of the IRA* tells of how anti-communism became a recurring obsession of the Provisional IRA. On one occasion, the Provisionals' new leader Sean MacStiofain wrote: 'We opposed the extreme socialism of the revisionists [the Goulding Faction] because we believed that its aim was a Marxist dictatorship which would be no more acceptable to us than British imperialism or Free State capitalism' (Moloney, 2007;75.) According to Maloney, these views persisted well into the 1970s, when more and more IRA members found themselves in jail where debates on left-wing politics became more frequent and those espousing such views hounded. Maloney (2007) tells of how one IRA prisoner spotted reading a book by James Connolly was referred to a priest. Connolly, a leader of the 1916 Easter rising, was gravely wounded in the rebellion, and later executed by a British firing squad. A Marxist and a trade union leader, Connolly was revered by the Provisionals' rivals, the Official IRA (whose leader was Cathal Goulding) and 'any Provo Volunteer who showed an interest in his writings automatically came under suspicion' (Moloney, 2007;77.) For MacStiofain, the views of his rivals were a demonstration of 'godless atheists who were more interested in undermining the influence of the Catholic Church in Ireland than in ending British occupation in the North' (Moloney, 2007;77.) When a

letter published in the Sinn Féin paper the *United Irishman* criticised the practice of reciting the rosary at republican commemorations as 'sectarian', MacStiofain stopped the issue from being circulated and sold (Moloney, 2007;77.) With religion and politics rolled into one, bread and butter issues were usurped in place of the 'national ideal' of a united Ireland and, in a document written by Derry Labour leftists in the late 1960s, it was lamented that:

'The situation that confronts us is not promising. The great mass of the people, continue for historical reasons, to see religion, not class, as the basic divide in our society. This sectarian consciousness is reinforced week in, week out, by local Tory newspapers. [...] The end result is a working class which is unresponsive to socialist ideas' (McCann, 1980;30.)

More than fifty years later, this situation remains familiar, with class continuing to be subjugated to the politics of religion.

## ***Contemporary meritocracy in the UK and USA***

As the Northern Ireland *Troubles* continued, elsewhere in the UK, class politics was getting a fresh injection of meritocratic values. In the 1980s, Margaret Thatcher in the UK and Ronald Reagan in the US were 'moving their societies towards a greater reliance on markets' (Sandel, 2021;61.) Michael Sandel (2021;61) in his book *The Tyranny of Merit* identifies this period as that in which 'market faith' set 'the stage for the rise of meritocratic values and practices in the decades that followed.' He describes how a 'market triumphalism' emerged during this period prompting a meritocratic rationale which claimed that:

'Provided they operated within a fair system of equal opportunity, markets give people what they deserve. As long as everyone has an equal chance to compete, market outcomes reward merit' (Sandel, 2021;62.)

This free market conservatism of Thatcher and Reagan came to its fullest fruition, says Sandel (2021), in the centre-left figures who succeeded them. According to Sandel, (2021) rather than challenge the premise of Thatcher's and Reagan's market faith, political leaders such as Tony Blair and Bill Clinton accepted it, and only sought to soften its harshest features by wanting to eliminate discrimination and expand opportunities so as to make markets more fair. As Sandel (2021;62) writes, the type of softening envisaged was one in which:

‘All citizens whatever their race or class, religion or ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation, should be able to compete on equal terms for all the benefits that markets bestow. For the centre-left liberals, equality of opportunity required more than the absence of discrimination; it also required access to education, health care, childcare, and other services that enable people to compete effectively in the labour market.’

It was an approach subsequently endorsed by Barak Obama, who, throughout his term in office, regarded a college education as the primary vehicle of upward social mobility and pointed to his wife Michelle as an example:

“When it comes to higher education [what matters] is making sure that bright, motivated, young people [...] have the chance to go as far as their talents, and their work ethic and their dreams will take them.’ [...] Now as a nation we don’t promise equal outcomes but we were founded on the idea [that] everybody should have an equal opportunity to succeed. No matter who you are, what you look like, where you come from, you can make it. That’s an essential promise of America, where you start from should not determine where you end up. And so I am glad that everyone wants to go to college’ (Sandel, 2021;67.)

When Tony Blair came to power in Britain in 1997, he was also explicit about the meritocratic bent of his new politics: ‘New Labour is committed to meritocracy’, he wrote – ‘We believe that people should be able to rise by their talents, not by their birth or the advantages of privilege’ (Sandel, 2021;65.) This rhetoric of rising continued to inform British politics when, in 2016 shortly after becoming Prime Minister, Theresa May set out her vision for a truly meritocratic Britain. Speaking of ordinary working-class people, May declared:

‘They deserve a better deal. I want Britain to be the world’s great meritocracy, a country where everyone has a fair chance to go as far as their talent and hard work will allow [...] I want Britain to be a place where advantage is based on merit, not privilege. Where it’s your talent and hard work that matter, not where you were born, who your parents are, or what your accent sounds like’ (Sandel, 2021;70.)

Achieving this ‘great meritocracy’ included eliminating discrimination and expanding opportunity, with those on the left calling for ‘equality of outcome’, and those on the right advocating for ‘equality of opportunity.’

## *The equality agenda and affirmative action in America*

Affirmative action began in the early 1960s in America because of an urgently felt national desire to redress the plight of the black population. It arose in the workplace at the same time as it did in the universities, but in the case of the workplace, affirmative action has been driven by the government and the courts (Herrnstein and Murray, 1994;597:559.) Over time, it has been expanded to include other groups but the focal point of tension, intellectual and social, has been affirmative action for black people ever since. According to Herrnstein and Murray (1994;573), 'The political pressure (let alone the legal requirement) for some level of affirmative action in the universities has been irresistible', and they describe a similar trend within the workplace. In America, affirmative action is achieved mainly through the use of the 80 per cent rule, created as part of Federal guidelines in 1978 and which state:

'[T] hat people in the protected groups have to be hired or promoted at 80 per cent or more of the rate enjoyed by the group with the highest rate of success in being hired or promoted [...] With the 80 percent rule, [...] It makes no difference if the rejected male applicants [for example] had scores that were twice those of the successful women applicants: All that matters is the bottom line: the 80 percent criterion' (Herrnstein and Murry, 1994;598.)

According to Herrnstein and Murray (1994;595), the successes of affirmative action have been much more extensively studied than the costs, and in their view, affirmative action has generated resentment among the cognitive elite towards those who are given jobs because of their racial or ethnic characteristics, but are not able to perform such jobs to the necessary standard. Sandel (2021;72) writes that affirmative action has also caused resentment among white working-class Americans who see such policies as violating, rather than vindicating, meritocracy. For those on the right, affirmative action is a betrayal of a merits-based approach, while for those on the left, it represents a way of levelling the playing field between the privileged and the disadvantaged.

Regarded as a source of deep-seated resentment in American society, Herrnstein and Murray (1994, 559) have called for a return to the original aim of affirmative action, whereby potential candidates are no longer ascribed 'an edge' because of their group status:

‘It is time to return to the original intentions of affirmative action: to cast a wider net, to give preference to members of disadvantaged groups, whatever their skin color, when qualifications are similar.’

For Herrnstein and Murray (1994;618:624), equality of outcome (through affirmative action policies) is an inappropriate goal, whereas equality of opportunity is consistent with the vision that animated the American Constitution; they argue: ‘To the extent that the government has a role to play, it is to ensure equality of opportunity, not of outcome.’ To that end, they call for a dismantling of national policies and the employment legislation edifice that requires people to treat groups differently under the law, and argue for a return to the time-honoured American principle that all citizens are equal before the law.

### ***The equality agenda in the UK***

Affirmative action and the perceived disdain of the cognitive elite towards those without a college degree are creating deep divisions in American society, according to Sandel (2021;72) who sees similar tensions in the UK with Brexit and the levelling up agenda. In the UK, positive discrimination under existing employment legislation is unlawful and is described as:

‘Recruiting or promoting a person solely because they have a relevant protected characteristic. Setting quotas to recruit or promote a particular number or proportion of people with protected characteristics is also positive discrimination. Positive discrimination is unlawful in Great Britain’ (Jarret, 2011.)

Whereas positive discrimination is unlawful in the UK, positive action to improve outcomes in relation to the protected characteristics is allowed and can include:

‘Laws and policies that attempt to promote equal opportunity by taking into account gender, race, disability or other equality strands in order to positively improve outcomes for these groups. The focus of positive action might be to redress systemic, historical or institutional discrimination or to promote diversity in business and public sector organisations’ (Jarret, 2011.)

The laws of equality enshrined in the UK 2010 Equality Act identify nine protected characteristics that include: age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and

maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, and sexual orientation. In the UK, the hiring, firing, and promoting of employees is governed by statutory employment laws aimed at promoting equal outcomes and is an approach that is confirmed by the *Equality and Human Rights Commission, Employment Code of Practice*. Paragraph 3.23 of the Code says that for the purposes of the 2010 Equality Act:

‘[3.23] In comparing people for the purpose of direct discrimination, there must be no material difference between the circumstances relating to each case.’ (*Equality and Human Rights Commission. Employment Code of Practice.*)

This is further explained by Lord Nicholls in *Shamoon v Chief Constable of the Royal Ulster Constabulary* in a case concerning direct sex discrimination:

‘[4] Where the complained of consists of dismissal from employment, the statutory definition calls for a comparison between the way the employer treated the claimant woman (dismissal) and the way he treated or would have treated a man. [...] it is necessary to compare like with like. The situation being compared must be such that, gender apart, the situation of the man and the woman are in all material respects the same’ (*‘Shamoon v Chief Constable of the Royal Ulster Constabulary’*, 2003.)

Hence, a female astrophysicist who fancies a career change and pursues a claim for sex discrimination after being refused the position of a plumber because she lacked qualifications or experience in the area (or vice versa) would not have a very strong case because the statutory definition makes it necessary to ‘compare like with like.’ This approach is akin to what Herrnstein and Murray (1994) claim is the original intention of affirmative action which is: ‘to give preference to members of disadvantaged groups, [...] when qualifications are similar.’ And by comparing ‘like with like’ employment law and the courts in the UK are not, as Douglas Murray (2020) has suggested, ‘obsessed with a particular idea of diversity and equality’ but with a more narrowly defined equality that is focused on equality of outcome between individuals that in all material respects are the same apart from the protected characteristic.

## ***Education, class and the social determinants of health***

Advocates of the ‘social determinants of health’ theory argue that an individual’s socioeconomic position is the fundamental cause of health as: ‘It marks the point at which societal-level factors such



as the structure of the labour market and education system – enter and shape people’s lives, influencing the extent to which they are exposed to risk factors that directly affect their health, such as workplace hazards, damp housing and a poor diet’ (Graham and Kelly, 2004;3.) Morbidity and mortality rates also reveal that the risk of an early death is not evenly distributed across the population, and those most vulnerable to poor health are those with little education, those in manual or routine jobs and those who live in deprived areas. In recent years, the suicide rate among working-class Americans has caused alarm, with academics describing such tragedies as ‘deaths of despair’ (Sandel, 2021;199.) The dramatic increase in suicides is believed to be associated not with poverty but with the loss of a way of life for white, less educated, working-class [Americans] struggling to make their way in a meritocratic society (Sandel, 2021;201.) With college degrees regarded as the major source of social mobility, ‘look [ing] down with disdain on those [...] considered less accomplished’ is currently driving the fault lines in American society according to Sandel (2021;145) and awakening the dystopia envisaged by Young (1958.)

After America, Britain demonstrates some of the lowest levels of social mobility in the Western world (Meredith, 2020;2.) Northern Ireland is one of the poorest regions in the UK, and an increase in suicides has also been observed in the region since the signing of the Good Friday agreement in 1998, along with a high rate of mental ill health when compared to the devolved nations of England, Scotland and Wales. That there is ‘a very strong association between deprivation and suicide’ has been observed in the available statistics, with the average number of deaths by suicide from 2015 to 2017 over four times higher in the most deprived centile than in the least deprived centile (O’Neill and O’Connor, 2020;359.) With urbanicity and deprivation also linked, a study of suicide registrations in Northern Ireland reported a higher proportion of people who died by suicide living in urban compared to rural areas (O’Neill and O’Connor, 2020;359.)

There is evidence pointing to the high suicide rates in Northern Ireland being connected not only to the Troubles but also to the legacy of violence, including substance use and deprivation (O’Neill and O’Connor, 2020;544.) The association between conflict exposure and suicidal behaviour was the subject of a study by the *World Mental Health Survey Initiatives’ Northern Ireland study of Health and Stress* (O’Neill and O’Connor, 202;359.) The study, which reported data weighted for representativeness, found that rates of mental ill health in Northern Ireland were among the top three highest out of the countries in the survey, with rates of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) the highest of the countries involved in the initiative (O’Neill and O’Connor, 2020;359.) With ill health

playing a major role among some of the most disadvantaged members of society, evidence suggests that health and social problems are more common in countries with bigger income inequalities. In Northern Ireland, health and social problems are further compounded by the experience of transgenerational trauma (O'Neill and O'Connor, 2020;543.)

## ***The legacy of violence and transgenerational trauma***

The secondary school I attended had a predominately working-class intake and was a site of constant conflict. On my first day, a large crowd of girls congregated outside the school gates at the end of the day. Initially, I thought they were waiting for the toffee apple van parked in front of the gates but, like a swarm of bees, they began to move off in the opposite direction. Perplexed as to what was going on, I was told by one girl they were chasing after one of the older girls who had returned to school wearing a wig purchased by the nuns after she had been tied to a lamp post and tarred and feathered, for being a British Army 'soldier doll.' Ditsy teenage *Derry Girls* we were not.

Inside and outside of school, there was an atmosphere of constant menace with British Army foot patrols, jeeps, 'pigs\*<sup>1</sup>' and Saracen tanks constantly patrolling the streets. In the classroom, there were daily stories of dawn raids by the army, and of fathers, brothers, uncles arrested and interned, and in one instance, a mother suffering a heart attack and subsequently dying during one such raid: two weeks later there was news that the girl's father was also dead following a road traffic accident. A former pupil whose sister died while assembling a bomb (an IRA volunteer) describes her time at the school:

'I was a bit of a militant at school, I suppose. I was headstrong and would have organised walkouts and things like that – even before Ethel died. Maybe it was because our Jimmy was interned, but I just felt really strongly that you should be allowed to show some kind of support – no matter what age you were. I'd tell the teacher there was a protest and eight or so of us would get up and walk out. That was just in our class. I'm sure it happened in other classes too – I would say that maybe a third of the school would walk out' (Campbell, 2016; kindle location,1971.)

Each day was like walking a tightrope, and to survive one had to be deaf, blind, and mute. On one occasion, I was confronted by a girl just before our 'domestic science' class began. As we stood at our tables waiting for the prayer to be said, she called from the table behind and asked: 'Do you know what

they did to my brother?’ Alarmed by her question, and finding silence to be the best option, I quickly walked to the other side of the classroom pretending to check the oven, knowing full well that her brother had been captured, tortured and murdered after he returned home to see his family in Creggan while on leave from the British Army (Daly, 2000;214.) After five years of what can only be described as a living hell, the last time I walked out through the gates of that school was one of the best.

Today, Northern Ireland is relatively peaceful compared to its troubled past. But the past still plays havoc with its future, and in a society where issues of religious identity trump class interests, the majority of schools in Northern Ireland remain segregated by religion. A further striking feature of Northern Ireland’s educational system is its retention of the grammar school model. Whereas elsewhere in the UK grammar schools are closing, Northern Ireland has approximately 66 grammar and 127 non-grammar (*Education Department Northern Ireland*, 2018.) With IQ seen as the gateway qualification for entry into the elite, the futuristic dystopian society envisaged by Michael Young has long been alive and kicking in Northern Ireland. The philosopher Mary Midgley (2018) in her discussion of artificial intelligence (AI) argues that the word ‘intelligence’ does not have a single measurable property, and the idea of a single upward scale of cleverness is the result of having got used to intelligence tests. Furthermore, relying on IQ as a gateway conveniently ignores other relevant data, such as the number of highly sought-after grammar school places versus local population statistics and the link between education and deprivation.

## **Conclusion**

Despite the smoke and mirrors surrounding the equality agenda, all the available evidence points to the UK and America experiencing widening inequalities irrespective of the line taken (Pickett and Wilkinson, 2009.) The two-pronged approach to equality seeks to expand opportunity and eliminate discrimination through equality of outcomes. In America, Herrnstein and Murray (1994) have called for a return to the original intentions of affirmative action which is: ‘to give preference to members of disadvantaged groups, [...] when qualifications are similar.’ In the UK, in cases of direct discrimination, employment law specifies that only ‘like with like’ can be compared. This ‘like with like’ comparison dispels Douglas Murray’s claim that much of contemporary society is obsessed with a particular idea of diversity and equality ‘that is all-encompassing and all-consuming’ when in fact, according to UK law, an astrophysicist can only be compared with an astrophysicist and a refuse collector with a refuse collector.

In 1970s Derry, large swathes of Catholic girls and boys were denied the educational opportunities bestowed on their grammar school counterparts by an educational system that wallowed in its entrenchment of social class divisions. Looking down on those believed to be less accomplished is currently driving the fault lines in American society, according to Michael Sandel (2021.) This is nothing new: in Northern Ireland, those who failed the 11-plus exam suffered the same fate and were looked down upon by those on the same religious divide. To understand Northern Ireland's present and its troubling suicide and mental health statistics, the focus should not simply be on the legacy of violence generated by the Troubles but also on lost opportunities and unfulfilled talent, resulting from class divisions magnified by a mostly religiously segregated, selective, educational system that still persists to this day.

## Footnotes

<sup>i</sup>\* Armoured personnel carrier.

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