

Why admission to college should be decided by lottery, not points

Philosopher **Michael Sandel** wants to eradicate elitism, starting with education.

Joe Humphreys. *Irish Times*, 1 September, 2020.

Preparing for the new academic term, political theorist Michael Sandel has a shock in store for his employers. The bestselling author and oft-labelled “rock star philosopher” has penned a manifesto excoriating Harvard and other elite universities for propagating a poisonous ideology. Not just that: Sandel calls for an end to the competitive college admissions process. Instead of using the traditional “sorting machine”, which can be found in various guises in the US, Britain, Ireland and elsewhere, he recommends students be admitted to higher education by lottery.

Speaking from the well-appointed study of his Massachusetts home, with bookshelves – as you’d expect from the legal scholar – running from floor to ceiling, Sandel admits his views will come as “a bit of a surprise” to his peers at Harvard. “I’m waiting to see how it lands, especially among my colleagues and the authorities. I hope they take notice and we can have a vigorous debate.”

The lottery proposal has been given added credence by the debacle over calculated grades in the UK, an episode which has exposed long hushed-up discrimination in the education system. A fundamental question can be asked in Ireland too: given some students start out with more advantages than others, is individual competition for college places any fairer than Sandel’s idea of “setting a threshold of qualification and letting chance decide the rest”?

He says the measure “is not a panacea”. And, while he would like to see it adopted, more than that “I’m hoping even those who disagree with it will be forced to confront questions about meritocratic hubris and the role of universities as arbiters of opportunity throughout society, which I think has gone much too far”.

Sandel speaks with calm authority – a characteristic of his many online broadcasts and lectures, which have been viewed by millions of people globally. He made his name academically by critiquing the liberal icon John Rawls and reclaiming the notion of the “common good” in political theory. Since then he has developed his role as a populariser of complex ideas. Focusing on the influence of market economics on morality and public life, Sandel has become adept at articulating what we know, deep down, to be true yet struggle as a society to act upon.

His 2012 critique of globalisation, *What Money Can’t Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets*, was like a warning shot to liberal governments that went unheeded. His new work, *The Tyranny of Merit: What’s Become of the Common Good?*, hammers the message home: by defaulting to market values in a winner-takes-all society, western elites are storing up resentment from those who feel like “losers”.

One book was born from the other, he acknowledges. The first explored “the relentless marketisation of life – how everything is up for sale . . . but as I thought about it, and as I looked for the sources of this market faith, I increasingly began to notice that it had developed these deep moral underpinnings in the idea of merit – merit tied to market success. This is a more insidious obstacle to the common good because the more we believe that we succeed as a result of our own doing, the less likely we are to look at those less fortunate than us and say: ‘That could have been me. There but for the accident of birth, the grace of God, or the luck of the draw, go I.’”

Sandel reserves particular scorn for left-of-centre governments that held power in recent decades. Meritocracy, he points out, was initially coined as a loathsome term in 1958 by Michael Young, a British sociologist affiliated with the Labour Party. Young wrote about the upheaval then facing Britain’s class-based system and foresaw it not disappearing but being replaced over time with a new type of inequality based on disproportionately rewarding certain “talents”.

Four decades later, Tony Blair would declare “New Labour is committed to meritocracy”, while successive US Democratic Party leaders including the Clintons – but especially Barack Obama – embraced the gospel of merit, or what Sandel calls “the rhetoric of rising”. Obama was particularly fond of peppering his speeches with the phrase “you can make it if you try” – a slogan which neatly avoids addressing messy issues such as structural injustice or institutional discrimination. While meritocratic thinking has spread worldwide, it has particularly deep roots in the US imagination.

A few years ago Sandel went with his wife to the hit Broadway musical *Hamilton* – dramatising the life of one of America’s founding fathers – and “we loved it; we thought it was wonderful entertainment”, he recalls. But viewing

it again during the Covid-19 shutdown, having just finished his book, “the thing that struck me immediately from the opening songs was that this was the celebration of meritocracy and the rhetoric of rising, and I hadn’t seen that when I saw the play originally. It struck me that here is a musical – far and away the most popular Broadway musical of its time – for the age of meritocracy.”

Credentialism

For the source of the rot, Sandel points to education and the stacking of rewards in favour of those who emerge with the best qualifications. He notes that students in the US are encouraged to earn “credentials”, or start their CV-building, from a young age – a practice that induces feelings of failure in those who don’t make the cut, and hardens the hearts of those who do.

Sandel observes in the book that, over his 40 years teaching at Harvard, he has seen different moral and political views drift in and out of fashion. “I have not noticed any decisive trend, with one exception,” he writes. “Beginning in the 1990s and continuing to the present, more and more of my students seem drawn to the conviction that their success is their own doing, a product of their effort, something they have earned.”

This intensification of meritocratic faith has coincided an “epidemic of overbearing, helicopter parenting”, Sandel says. The latter is “an anxious but understandable response to rising inequality”, and he admits that when his two sons were going through schooling he felt “pressure” to compete with other parents.

But, he says, “I want to help parents to resist this urge while they can’t unilaterally disarm – because, unless the system changes, unilateral disarmament in meritocratic combat would disadvantage their children. . . I understand that. But I think universities have a responsibility to ratchet down the pressure that puts parents in this condition.” Also, “I would try to make parents aware of what they already know to some extent – that this is not good for their kids. Because I see the students who win this meritocratic competition – the ones who get in – and while there are many gifted and wonderful students, increasingly the winners arrive wounded, injured by the hyper-anxiety, stress and pressure that is loaded upon them for quite a number of years as they face this meritocratic gauntlet.”

From a policy perspective, credentialism – or the use of qualifications to regulate who climbs the social ladder – should be outed as “an insidious prejudice against those who have not been to college”. If certain students happen to be better equipped at doing tests, or to have “lucky genes” that give them an edge over their classmates, how deserving are they, he asks, of the rewards which follow?

Sandel highlights that only about one in three American adults has graduated from third-level education – which leaves the remainder largely shut out of the American dream. Donald Trump was acutely aware of this and “won office by articulating the resentment against meritocratic elites”, Sandel says. At the same time, the US president repeatedly inflates his own qualifications. “He is always talking about IQ. It shows you the grip that meritocratic judgment has even on those who are rebelling against it.”

A great political challenge of our time, Sandel argues, is to “figure out how to make success in life less dependent on having a four-year college degree”. It starts with investing much more heavily in training and apprenticeships – something that normally attracts only a fraction of university budgets. It means no longer valorising “brains” at the expense of physical labour; allowing everyone to experience “the dignity of work”; and supporting people in precarious employment with wage subsidies – as has happened as an emergency measure in some countries during the pandemic. “I think there is a hopeful possibility that we can use this moment, this glimpse of who really is an essential worker, to revalue work and the rewards of work,” he adds.

Further upheaval awaits, but any political reformer would be well served by keeping a copy of *The Tyranny of Merit* close at hand. That includes Taoiseach Micheál Martin – if he is to stick by his sworn philosophy “An Ireland for all” – and US presidential wannabe Joe Biden. “His ideological views are less clearly etched and developed in respect of meritocracy than were those of Hillary Clinton, Obama and Bill Clinton. And that could be a strength for him,” says Sandel. But reverting to the “mainstream Democratic ideology of markets, meritocracy, upward mobility and a somewhat more decent safety net than the Republicans have on offer . . . will not address the resentments which animate so many working people”.

Sandel might be accused of being overly idealistic. But ask yourself: Why can’t we have a society where everyone feels like a winner?