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The Meritocracy Fairy Tale

Once upon a time, Australia thought everyone deserved housing and it built a lot of publicly subsidised housing to make sure that even low-income families and individuals had a home to live in. That was a long time ago, before the neo-liberal wizards cast a spell that made us all believe that poverty and homelessness was always the result of personal inadequacy.

What is the Opposite of a Meritocracy?

If we believe we live in a meritocracy, what is the logical belief that sits on the reverse side of that concept? What is the opposite of a meritocracy? Interestingly, in the English language 'meritocracy' does not actually have a particularly useful antonym. Apparently 'kakistocracy' is the closest we get and it isn't quite right. Kakistocracy means 'rule of the worst'. I do not think this is actually the opposite of a meritocracy, as we now commonly use the word — to describe people who have succeeded financially in our community — not just those who hold political power. In

fact, 'community' is not quite the right word either, as sadly we are now all living in an economy rather than a community.

Pathologising People in Poverty

I think that the opposite of meritocracy can be seen in our 21st century attitudes toward people living in poverty and people experiencing homelessness. Our attitudes towards people in these situations have become increasingly 'individualised'. People in poverty require better financial management skills; people who are homeless need living skills training, a case manager or 24 hour support in crisis accommodation. I could give many more examples of the responses to poverty and homelessness that clearly define it as a problem of the individual, rather than a problem with or consequence of our system, policies and structures.

Homelessness is rarely presented as a structural or systemic problem of a random or unfair system and more about an individual's inadequacy at managing various life skills. Even recent national debates about housing affordability are not actually about people in poverty or those experiencing homelessness — that debate mostly focusses on people who have some means but cannot afford to purchase housing.

Meritocracy vs Inadequateocracy

So, perhaps the natural consequence of believing that people get ahead in life because of their merits, because of their hard work, because of their commitment — is that those who don't get ahead in life, who experience poverty and homelessness, is that this is also a natural consequence; of their lack of hard work, their lack of commitment,

their lack of merit. Perhaps the right word for the opposite of a 'meritocracy' is 'inadequateocracy'.

In our meritocracy and in our inadequateocracy we can only see individuals. We are blind to policies, systems and structures that continue to either benefit or to punish some people over others. We reward individuals with money, status, positions and power. We punish individuals who are poor with homelessness and then make assumptions about their lack of living and financial management skills. As Rutger Bregman has said 'Poverty isn't a lack of character; it's a lack of cash'.

How our Meritocracy Punishes People in Poverty

Over the past few years, I have been collecting examples of how our society punishes people in poverty. Because our society has quite successfully re-framed poverty and homelessness as a problem inherent to an individual rather than a problem with our policy settings and systems, it is easy to find examples that punish people rather than challenge systems.

I do not think I need list the ways by which we reward people of supposed merit — they are shown to us regularly on TV, the internet, magazines and newspapers. Here is just a brief list of the ways we continue to punish people in poverty who experience homelessness:

- We withhold affordable, safe, secure, permanent housing (that's the most obvious one)
- We require people do 'living skills' courses before they might be offered public housing.
- We peddle or do not challenge the myth that homelessness is a 'lifestyle choice' (don't you think it odd that only people in poverty make that 'lifestyle choice'?)

- We ask people to complete a 'rental diary' before they might be offered public housing. This is a particularly invidious punishment. It involves homeless people visiting real estate agents to look at private rental properties that they can't afford to rent and for which they will be rejected — just to prove to a government department that they have tried and failed to find alternative housing. Needless to say, insisting that people experience multiple rejections does not come without personal impact and shame.
- 'Transitional housing' continues to be a thing. Keeping people uncertain and unclear about their future housing and the community in which they will live.
- If you are charged with a crime and are poor and homeless it is likely you will not get bail, unlike housed people charged with the same crime. We imprison people in poverty.
- We complain that some people's poverty and homelessness has been created by their own drug or alcohol addiction (in many cases, correctly). However, we also do not provide anywhere near enough detox or rehabilitation options for people with addictions.
- As service providers, we insist people tell us their 'story', their often traumatic story of fleeing violence or trying for years to make ends meet or of being made unemployed or evicted. Not only do we insist they tell us their story, their reason for seeking help, their personal details — we often make them repeat it to multiple workers and multiple organisations. Privacy can no longer be taken for granted — it is a reward only for people of means. Whenever I stay at a short-term accommodation option — such as a hotel, I simply give them my name and my credit card.
- Worse still, after some people have been given food or help with a bill or assisted into short or long-term accommodation by one of our many charities, their story then sometimes becomes public property and a method by which charities advertise the work they do in order to seek further donations. The media is complicit in this. Whenever journalists cover issues of poverty and homelessness they

always ask for a 'personal story'. Those personal stories may make for compelling reading, but they also reduce a person's anonymity and might serve to re-traumatise the owners of those stories — and in the age of the internet, those stories never go away.

No Structural Analysis and No Structural Solutions

The issues that are not challenged are the growing gap between rich and poor; the increased casualisation of the workforce and lack of job security; the complete inadequacy of unemployment benefit for renting any type of housing in our major cities and; the 'bad luck' experienced by some people — be it an injury or physical or mental illness or other personal trauma which prevents them from working full-time or part-time.

Worse still, some well-meaning advocates in the social welfare sector spend way too much time advocating for people's 'right to sleep on the street'. As much as I do not want to see human beings punished for being forced to sleep on our streets, these efforts overlook the more essential right. The right to housing. Spending our time arguing that people should

be able to sleep on a street is time we are not spending arguing for everyone's right to adequate and affordable housing.

So, the reverse side of our 'meritocracy' is an ugly place. It is a place where human dignity is ignored, traumatic stories exploited and the structural problems that create and sustain poverty go largely unchallenged. It is a place where the success that others have supposedly worked very hard to obtain ignores the hard work that many other people may have also undertaken but which has not resulted in financial success.

There is even a body of research in psychology that has looked at the impact of randomly assigned 'merit'. Although some of the research participants were simply randomly assigned money or status — those participants actually came to believe that somehow they deserved it more than those to whom it was not randomly assigned. We humans seem to always require an explanation for outcomes, be they randomly assigned or not.

The Randomness of Misfortune
Homelessness is a result of poverty. That said, there are many reasons that someone may be poor. Our focus needs to be on challenging the stereotype that poverty is a result of indolence or inadequate living or financial skills. I've now had over two decades working in and thinking about homelessness, poverty and housing policy and it continues to sadden me that most homeless people remain firmly in the category of the 'undeserving poor'. Unlike victims of other misfortunes who somehow 'didn't cause their own problems' (the deserving poor), homeless people in Australia continue to be blamed for their predicament. The most effective and lethal way in which this is perpetuated is by us all continuing to ignore the randomness of misfortune, whilst continuing to believe in the fairy tale of meritocracy.

The number of people experiencing homelessness in Australia is not overwhelming. It is possible to end it — we just need to discard the idea that we exist in a meritocracy along with our prejudices about people who experience poverty and homelessness.

