

# Wherever we begin - in privilege or in struggle - success should be earned despite it, not granted because of it

Adam Tugwell | 1 May 2026



We are living through a moment where the meaning of meritocracy has become confused. What was once a principle designed to ensure fairness - that people rise according to their ability, character, and contribution - has been reshaped into something far more superficial.

Today, success is often granted not because someone has demonstrated competence, but because their story fits a narrative the culture wants to tell.

This shift is not progress. It is misalignment. And it is taking us in a dangerous direction - one where people are placed in roles for the wrong reasons, where organisations are weakened by symbolic appointments, and where society as a whole becomes less stable, less effective, and less fair.

## Beginnings are not merit

Where someone begins in life - in privilege or in struggle - is a matter of circumstance, not achievement. Yet modern society has developed a habit of treating beginnings as qualifications in themselves.

On one side, privilege still acts as a silent elevator, lifting people into positions they have not earned simply because they were born into the right networks.

On the other side, hardship has become a symbolic credential. A difficult backstory is treated as evidence of capability, even when capability has not been demonstrated.

Both distortions replace merit with something else. Both undermine fairness. And both ultimately harm the very people they claim to help.

## The misuse of social mobility

**Social mobility was meant to remove barriers, not erase standards.**

It was designed to ensure that those with talent, drive, and potential could rise - not to guarantee that everyone would.

But somewhere along the way, the concept was repurposed into a banner under which almost any elevation can be justified. The assumption seems to be that if someone from a disadvantaged background is not succeeding, prejudice must be the reason. And if prejudice is the reason, then the solution is to elevate them - regardless of whether the role fits their abilities, temperament, or aspirations.

This is not equality. It is overcorrection. And overcorrection is simply bias in the opposite direction.

But these distortions are symptoms, not causes.

To understand why this keeps happening, we need to look deeper.

## The system values the wrong things - and conditions us to do the same

We have built a society that is not designed around people, communities, or human flourishing. It is designed around money, power, centralisation, and control. And because the system values these things, it conditions us to value them too.

People are encouraged to believe that their worth depends on having high-status, high-paid, influential jobs. The cultural narrative suggests that unless you are climbing toward prestige, you are falling behind. The extractive nature of the system reinforces this: it rewards visibility, not contribution; status, not service.

Yet the truth is very different.

The person who empties the bins each morning, the barista who hands us a coffee, the mechanic who keeps us on the road - these people support our daily lives in ways that are immediate, essential, and irreplaceable. Their contribution is not less important than that of a doctor or a CEO. In many ways, it is more constant, more tangible, and more foundational.

A humane meritocracy would recognise this. It would value contribution, not status. It would understand that importance is not measured by salary or spotlight, but by the role a person plays in the wellbeing of others.

## Potential is real - but timing is uneven

If meritocracy is to mean anything, it must recognise that potential cannot flourish without stability.

Some young people face circumstances that consume their emotional capacity simply to survive:

- chaotic home lives
- caring responsibilities
- trauma
- instability
- poverty
- violence
- neglect
- mental health struggles

In those conditions, emotional capacity is not available for self-development. Their potential is not absent - it is deferred.

Yet our system mistakes delayed readiness for lack of ability, and punishes those who cannot perform on schedule.

This is not a failure of the individual. It is a failure of a system that expects everyone to mature at the same pace, in the same way, under the same conditions.

Recognising delayed readiness is not lowering standards. It is understanding that merit develops through time, support, and opportunity.

## The academic myth: a prejudice disguised as aspiration

One of the most damaging assumptions in modern culture is that academic achievement is the only legitimate route to success.

We funnel young people - *especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds* - into A-levels and university, regardless of whether these paths suit their strengths or their stage of development.

**This is not equality of opportunity. It is a failure of imagination.**

Some young people are practically minded. Some are gifted with their hands. Some are natural problem-solvers, builders, makers, technicians, creators. Some simply need more time before academic study becomes meaningful.

But instead of offering an equally respected vocational route from 14 to 21 - one that is rigorous, structured, and valued - we push everyone through the same narrow gate.

And when they struggle, we blame prejudice rather than the system that forced them into the wrong shape.

This is how we fail the disadvantaged:

**Not by denying them opportunity, but by denying them the right opportunity.**

## The jigsaw puzzle of human worth

Recognising the equal worth of every person does not mean pretending we are all the same. We are not.

We bring different strengths, different temperaments, different capacities.

We are the pieces of a vast jigsaw puzzle - each shaped differently, each fulfilling a role no other piece can fill.

A healthy society does not force every piece into the same space, nor does it elevate one shape above another.

It values each for what it contributes. It understands that the picture only appears when the pieces fit together.

Equality is not sameness. It is belonging.

And merit is not about ranking human worth - it is about placing people where their abilities allow them to serve the whole.

## Why leadership matters most

Leadership is one piece of the puzzle - not more valuable, but more consequential.

It requires a specific shape: competence, clarity, courage, and the ability to act for the good of others.

These qualities do not come from privilege, nor from hardship. They come from character and capability.

*We do not honour people by placing them in roles they cannot fulfil.*

*We do not help society by elevating individuals because their story is inspiring.*

*And we do not strengthen institutions by choosing leaders for symbolic reasons.*

A leader should rise because they can carry the weight of responsibility - not because their background makes for a compelling narrative.

## The cost of abandoning merit

When we abandon merit, we do not create fairness.

**We create fragility.**

Institutions weaken.

Public trust erodes.

Progress stalls.

And the people who most need competent leadership - the vulnerable, the marginalised, the unheard - suffer the most.

A society that elevates people for the wrong reasons is not compassionate.

**It is negligent.**

## A call to return to what works

If we want a society that is fair, functional, and genuinely equal, we must return to a simple principle:

**Wherever you begin - in privilege or in struggle - success should be earned despite it, not granted because of it.**

This is not harsh. It is humane.

It recognises the dignity of every person, the diversity of human strengths, and the necessity of placing people where they can truly contribute.

Merit is not elitism. It is responsibility.

It is the recognition that a complex world requires competence.

It is the belief that every person has value - but not every person has the same role.

Rebuilding meritocracy begins not with systems, but with how we choose to see one another.

And it is the only foundation on which a fair and flourishing society can stand.

## Further Information

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