

# The Lottery of Life

By Jason Buckley

This dialogue is a piece of Readers' Theatre designed to illustrate John Rawls' thought experiment, 'The Veil of Ignorance'. In his Theory of Justice, John Rawls discusses a problem that besets attempts to decide on what a fair society would look like. If you're rich, it may be a place where you get to keep more of your hard-earned cash. If you're poor, it may be a place where the wealthy enjoy fewer advantages and society's resources are more evenly spread.

To counter the self-interest that sets in when you know how the political and economic arrangements in society will affect you, he proposed that a fair society would be one chosen by rational participants behind the 'veil of ignorance' that ensured people would not know what position they would occupy in society.

In the dialogue, some anonymous individuals wake to find that they are part of an experiment in which, not knowing the position they will occupy in society, they have to decide on a fair way forward. You can put a class into the position of the experimentees by using two cheap packs of cards. On one pack, which you keep back, you write on the back of each card an occupation or station in society, from Premiership footballer to homeless asylum seeker. You then distribute the cards from the unmarked pack, explaining that each card is a ticket for 'the lottery of life'.

They then discuss what they think a fair society would look like. How high would taxes be to fund public services? Would people be left to themselves to provide privately for health, education and pensions? Would education funding target the poorest, or would extra spending on private education be encouraged in the name of 'excellence'?

As the discussion progresses, like minded pupils can split into groups to elaborate on the sort of society they think would be fair. Once each group has summarised its' position, you can do the 'reveal' - showing which occupation is written on the corresponding card, so that they can find out if they have done better or worse in the society they preferred than under existing arrangements.

You can use the 'Lottery of Life' script to bookend a series of enquiries about justice and fair distributions. I use it to set up and finish a full day workshop that includes using 'The World's Shortest Political Quiz' and looking at government spending and the budget deficit, but you might look at global issues, a more local focus or broad principles of income distribution.

*[http://www.mockelection.org/k12/shortest\\_political\\_quiz.pdf](http://www.mockelection.org/k12/shortest_political_quiz.pdf)*