

SHARE-CUT OF COUNCIL HOUSES UNFAIR?

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Afro-Caribbeans and Asians in Birmingham have not received their fair share of council houses and flats. This was revealed in a report prepared by the City Housing Officer, Derek Waddington and presented to the local Community Relations Council. The extent of the unfairness is shown in the diagram. In particular, it shows that Asians have been severely discriminated against.

The figures for the report were based on an analysis of the lettings for the period July 1983 and June 1984. Some of the details in the report reveal even greater unfairness. For example, more than 3 out of 4 three-bedroomed houses went to 'Europeans' even though they only accounted for half of those wanting houses in that category. Before rushing to condemn this bias in allocation of council houses, we should consider the positive aspects of this report. First, Birmingham City Councillors should be praised for their courage in bringing this situation to light. It would have been politically so much easier to sweep the whole thing under the carpet, Secondly, I do not believe that Birmingham is the worst offender; no doubt readers of MS can think of Councils which have a far worse record.

The immediate response to cases of unfairness is invariably a call to "Do Something!". Sure enough the CRC recommends that further analysis is necessary, that racism-awareness training be given, and that more ethnic-minority staff be employed in the council offices concerned. This conventional response may seem to be doing the right things for the right reason, but am I alone in feeling uneasy about this? In order to be fair to ethnic groups, it is necessary first to identify them, and then proceed to take affirmative action based on racial classification. This is not racial prejudice, but it does involve racial identification. Is this not a small step closer to a South African-style Racial Re-Classification Board?

And is the Black/Asian/European division the only axis of discrimination? What about the other classifications based on religion, sexual preference, left- or right-handedness, or even bodily height? As I walk around Council estates, I see precious few six-footed gay lefthanders!

The notion that fairness can be achieved by administrative means arose in the 1970's, and gave birth to the so-called 'race relations industry'. A great deal of success has been achieved in removing impediments to equality, and in raising the general level of consciousness about the subject. But faced with the evidence of unfairness, as discovered by Birmingham's Housing Department, affirmative action may not be the most effective method of dealing with the problem. Adding a costly layer of bureaucracy may cope in part with one type of unfairness, but many more remain to be discovered.

The attempt to achieve complete fairness by procedural means is doomed to failure. It will be ineffective, because it can never fully anticipate all possible categories which might be discriminated against. It will be costly, because elaborate procedures will be needed. The price of achieving this may be an unwarranted intrusion into the private circumstances of the individual. I would go further and assert:

THAT THE NOTION THAT RACIAL OR OTHER EQUALITY CAN BE ACHIEVED BY AFFIRMATIVE ACTION IS A DANGEROUS CHIMERA.

The problem is likely to get much worse, as council houses become scarcer, due to government cuts, and demand increases, for the same reason. Unless a workable, yet fair method of allocating council houses is devised, local politicians could face an explosion of anger based on perceived unfairness.

In the place of selection by procedural bureaucracy, I would offer Random Allocation. To non-statisticians, 'random' is often taken as the epitome of unfairness. We speak in horror of 'random terror'; selection procedures (for headteachers, university places) are criticised because they produce results which are no better than if the candidates had been chosen 'at random'. Randomness has certainly had a very bad press! However, to a statistician, randomness has a very clear definition: The outcome of an event is random if every member of the population has an EQUAL CHANCE of being chosen. Deviations from proper randomness are termed BIAS, and give rise to systematically unrepresentative results. In randomness there is a mechanism for choosing which is demonstrably fair (not to mention quick, cheap and incorruptible). How would Random Allocation work in practice? Details could vary, but imagine the following procedure:

The council house waiting list is maintained as before. This usually includes an entry qualification and a points count. You cannot even get on the list unless you are over 18, and not already a home owner. Points are awarded according to your circumstances, extra points being given for large family, disabilities, length of time on the waiting list.

For the Random Allocation procedure, a draw could be held each month. Tickets for the draw could be based on point count - one ticket for every ten points say. There could be a preliminary round, with an automatic 'bye' for those with high point counts.

To add spice to the whole procedure,, the draw could be carried out in a ceremonial way, with television cameras present, with a group of little children (of suitably mixed racial composition) selected from those 'in care'.

The result of this procedure will not be fair at each draw. Indeed, for a number of months some surprising allocations may arise. What can be guaranteed, with complete confidence, is that OVER TIME the allocation of council houses will fairly represent each and every category on the waiting list. The Councillors may decide, via the points scheme what your CHANCES of getting a council house ought to be; it will then be the luck of the draw when you get your desired property.

But is Random Allocation politically acceptable? It is all very well for a statistician to tell you that it is objectively fair; unless the will to implement can be found it is only

an academic pursuit. To understand why Random Allocation is politically unacceptable at present, we need to examine the motives of two groups - the people on the waiting list and the local politicians.

One can imagine the outrage that might be registered if in one month's draw a Black, diabetic single mother of four children was not allocated a house, while an 18 year old was given a flat in order to leave his parents home. Will the sensationalist newspapers explain that the mother will almost certainly get a house soon, that giving a boy a flat is an extremely rare occurrence? I doubt it. Relentless pressure of facts will help counter these stories, but the chief support for random allocation will come from consideration of the alternative. The extent of bureaucratic prying that would be needed to sustain an alternative system should be enough to frighten most complainers. Think of the questions to the mother? "Are you really Black, or is that just a suntan? Is your diabetes severe or just an excuse to jump the queue? Where is the father(s) of these children?". Compared to this the 'indignity' of random selection is trivial indeed.

Politicians will not welcome random allocation, but their motivation is very suspect. Allocation of council houses is one of the few areas where the individual councillor can do something. Pressure from elected representatives can help a lot in getting a house; it does the re-election prospects of the councillor a power of good as well. This is of course Corruption, if on a small scale. There have been recorded instances where the corruption has been both systematic and large scale. Relying on the basic honesty of the British public servant need not be our only protection. With Random Allocation, the element of human discretion, is largely removed, and there is almost no potential for corruption.

Randomness is not such an alien notion in our Constitution either. A bulwark of democracy is Trial by Jury. The jurors are 'pricked out' - randomly selected from the electorate at large. Long tradition has hallowed this process. Further afield, the rulers of the tiny state of San Marino are selected by drawing lots. San Marino is the eldest surviving republic in the world today.

Random Allocation is not without historical precedent. It is undoubtedly a quick and cheap method of distributing society's largesse to the lucky few. As has been shown above it is fair in a way which none of the alternatives can ever claim to be. If we continue with the present system, then as waiting lists lengthen, as fewer council houses are built, more and more 'deserving' cases (ie people) are going to be told "With your points count, you will have to wait 20 years to get a council house". With Random Allocation you have always got a chance of success. Random Allocation keeps HOPE alive.