

When you vote, or decide who you would vote for, you can choose the party you think is best for you, or you can try to choose the party you think is best for everyone – for the country as a whole.

But that's difficult, because you're not everyone. You're you. And you already know if you are from a family that is rich or poor, what sort of school you go to, whether you find school easy or need extra help, and whether your family has lived in the country for generations, or has arrived more recently, or a mix of the two.

Because you're you, it can be hard to be sure that what you think will be best for everyone isn't really what's best for you in disguise. So, if I asked a rich person and a poor person, "Should rich people pay higher taxes to help poor people more?", the rich person might say, "No, because nobody will work hard if the government takes most of their money", and the poor person might say, "Yes, because poor people need the money more than rich people."

Either of them could be right, but both could just be seeing the world from their point of view, and not being fair to those whose lives are different.

So we're going to do an experiment. In a while, your teacher is going to ask you some questions, and you're going to talk about them and decide what would be best for the country as a whole. But before you decide, you are going to try to forget everything about yourself, so that the decisions you make are not biased. Instead of a "you" you will become an "us" – a sort of floating soul in a time before you were born, able to talk and make decisions, but not yet knowing what body you are going to be born into.

The number that you have been given is your ticket for the Lottery of Life. When the experiment is over, your teacher will reveal what life your "us" is going to be born into, and you will be able to think how well your "us" would do from the decisions you took. Because it's an experiment in your imagination, the more you imagine, the more successful the experiment will be.

Close your eyes. Imagine you are floating on some sort of cloud. You are at a time before you were born. Somehow you can speak, and you know everything about the world that you know now. But you don't know anything about the person that you are going to be.

You don't know whether you are going to be a boy or a girl.

You don't know if your family are going to be rich or poor. Whether they work in jobs that pay lots of money, not a lot, or whether they have problems that stop them working at all.

You don't know if you find school easy or if you struggle. You might have some difficulties that mean you need special help, or you might train to be an astronaut, or both.

You don't know if you are black or white, if your family have been in the country for generations or have only just arrived, or whether you live in the city or the country.

You don't know if your family goes to church, or a mosque, or a temple, or whether anyone in your family believes in God at all.

You don't know if you have any disabilities or illnesses and/or will be the World's Strongest Man.

You don't know if you are a hard worker, if you are lazy, or how easy you find it to change.

You know that you are going to be someone, but you don't know who your ticket in the lottery of life is for. You are not a you anymore, but an "us". You and the other "usses", who just like you, don't know who they are going to be, have some decisions to make. Now open your eyes, and remembering to forget, find out what decisions they are.

The Us

This stimulus is an adaptation of John Rawls' thought experiment, "The Veil of Ignorance". He thought that a fair society would be one whose rules would be chosen by people who did not know which place they would occupy in that society.

He thought that people would not gamble on the off-chance that they were lucky enough to be very rich, but would choose a society where inequalities were set up to benefit the worst off, in case that's who they were – enough incentives to work hard and learn that society made progress, rather than everyone being equally poor, but not unlimited inequality. Many PhDs have been written about whether or not this is a reasonable conclusion.

Setting up The Lottery of Life

To set up the "lottery of life", I tend to use two packs of cheap playing cards, with one set of cards given out to the students and another set with the occupation/situation for which their "us" is destined written on the back of the matching cards. The occupations vary from Premiership footballer to part-time rubbish collector, sensitively avoiding any low status occupations that I know belong to parents of people in the group.

Or you can simply say, for example, that the lower the card is, the wealthier the family into which your "us" is born, with suit or particular card used to signal other characteristics. Red cards male, black cards female, sevens indicating asylum seekers recently arrived from a war-torn country, etc., tens being people who are very good at passing tests...

Questions for your "usses"

Which school system would they choose, if they didn't know which school they would end up in? (e.g. grammar schools or not, private schools allowed or not) Suggested by correspondent Claire Walsh, and tested yesterday at St John's College School, Cambridge. It was fascinating to see some of the children distancing themselves from their own, positive experience of private education to give reasons why their "us" thought everyone should go to the same sort of school.

Should big companies have to have a certain number of women on their board of directors, or should it be their decision even if few women get that opportunity?

Should you pay the same tax on money you inherit as on money you earn? Or more, or less?

Should people with higher incomes pay more tax than they do now, or less?

How much money should someone who is unable to work because of disability or ill health get compared to the average of what people earn?

Extended version

I use the Veil of Ignorance/Lottery of Life as the frame for a full day workshop on politics and political philosophy with teenagers, which explores various philosophers and ideologies and concludes with them setting a new budget for the UK, and then seeing the consequences that their decision has for their "us".