

## SOCIAL MOBILITY

*Barnaby Lenon\**

Social mobility has become the central focus of education policy amongst many politicians and commentators, egged on by the Sutton Trust and Social Mobility Commission. Much of what they say is based on a superficial understanding of the concept.

When I helped set up a free school in a low-income part of London, I was told I was trying to improve social mobility. When I worked for independent schools I was accused of educating my pupils well and so limiting social mobility. What did that mean?

‘Social mobility’ means people moving up or down the social classes – being better off or worse off than their parents. Social mobility matters, because if able children from poor backgrounds cannot do well we waste human potential. It is bad for the individuals concerned and it is bad for the country.

It also matters because if people feel that there is social immobility there will be understandable envy of those who have done well. It results in social tension and potential unrest.

It matters politically because meritocracy is today a central creed of all Britain’s main political parties. When the Labour peer Michael Young wrote *The Rise of the Meritocracy* in 1958<sup>1</sup> he defined it as ability plus effort. He was using the term pejoratively . . . but today meritocracy is certainly not regarded as anathema. In its more frequently heard formulation, ‘equality of opportunity’, it is something to which no one dare admit opposition.

On the day that Theresa May became the British Prime Minister in 2016, she addressed the country:

*When it comes to opportunity, we won’t entrench the advantages of the fortunate few, we will do everything we can to help anybody, whatever your background, to go as far as your talents will take you.*

That was a call for greater social mobility.

### IS THERE SOCIAL IMMOBILITY IN THE UK?

A tricky question. It depends a bit on how you measure it, and all definitions, such as ‘working class’ or ‘professional and management class’, are challengeable. And

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<sup>1</sup> Young, M. (1958) *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, Thames and Hudson.

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it depends on the timescale you look at: the average temperature may be going up if you look at the past 50 years but down if you just look at the past two years.

### SOCIOLOGISTS DON'T AGREE

There is some evidence that social mobility is lower now than in the 1950s, when the economy was changing in a way which produced more middle-class jobs. Jo Blanden and Stephen Machin at the London School of Economics<sup>2</sup> tracked the lives of children born in one week in 1958 and another cohort born in a week in 1970, and found the latter exhibited less social mobility. Abigail McKnight (2015)<sup>3</sup> studied 17,000 children born in 1970 whose intelligence was measured when they were five, finding that by age 42 those with low ability from higher-income families were earning more than high-ability children from low-income families.

This led to an academic debate as Blanden and Machin's findings were challenged by several subsequent studies. Goldthorpe and Jackson (2007)<sup>4</sup> found that relative mobility for both men and women remained 'essentially constant' in the post-war era, and when Goldthorpe and Mills (2008)<sup>5</sup> studied data from 1972 and 2005, they found that social mobility had not declined. So did Paterson and Iannelli (2007)<sup>6</sup>, Lambert *et al.* (2007)<sup>7</sup> and others. Some found that relative mobility had actually improved, including Heath and Payne (2000)<sup>8</sup> and Li and Devine (2011).<sup>9</sup> All these authors tend to agree with John Goldthorpe's summary

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<sup>2</sup> Blanden, J. & Machin, S., (2007), *Recent Changes in Intergenerational Mobility in Britain*, Sutton Trust.

<sup>3</sup> McKnight, A. (2015), *Downward mobility, opportunity hoarding and the glass floor*, Social Mobility Commission.

<sup>4</sup> Goldthorpe, J. & Jackson, M. (2007) *Intergenerational class mobility in contemporary Britain: political concerns and empirical findings*, *British Journal of Sociology*, 58.

<sup>5</sup> Goldthorpe, J. & Mills, C. (2008) 'Trends in Intergenerational Class Mobility in Modern Britain. Evidence from National Surveys, 1972–2005', *National Institute Economic Review*, 205(1).

<sup>6</sup> Paterson, L. & Iannelli, C. (2007) *Patterns of absolute and relative social mobility: a comparative study of England, Wales and Scotland*, *Sociological Research Online*, 12(6).

<sup>7</sup> Lambert, P., K. Prandy and W. Bottero, 2008, 'By slow degrees: two centuries of social reproduction and mobility in Britain', *Sociological Research Online*, 13(1)

<sup>8</sup> Heath, A. and C. Payne. (2000) 'Social Mobility', in A. H. Halsey with J. Webb (eds.) *Twentieth-Century British Social Trends*, Macmillan.

<sup>9</sup> Li, Y. & F. Devine. (2011) 'Is social mobility really declining? Intergenerational class mobility in Britain in the 1990s and the 2000s', *Sociological Research Online*, 16(3).

that ‘no decline in mobility, either absolute or relative, occurred in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century’ (Goldthorpe, 2012).<sup>10</sup>

Yet in October 2015 David Cameron could say: ‘Britain has the lowest social mobility in the developed world.’ No such conclusion can be derived from the evidence.

In his text *Social Mobility Myths* (2010), Peter Saunders,<sup>11</sup> former professor of sociology at Sussex University, claimed that social mobility in the UK was high. ‘Four out of five children who grow up in poor households escape poverty in adulthood. Social mobility is the norm in Britain, not the exception.’

There is plenty of evidence that many people do better than their parents, but few move from low to high income in the course of just one generation. So of those born in 1970, 63 per cent of those with parents in the poorest 25 per cent escaped low income as adults. However, most of this mobility was *short-range* and only one in seven reached the top 25 per cent as adults. This contrasts with those with parents in the richest 25 per cent, almost 45 per cent of whom remained there as adults.

In 2019 Peter Saunders published *Social Mobility Truths*.<sup>12</sup> According to the Office for National Statistics’ 2018 Labour Force Survey,<sup>13</sup> 26% were born into working-class families, half the number of those born in the 1940s, 37% were born into professional and managerial classes, 2.5 times as many as in the 1940s. 65% of those born into the working class had moved up in social class and 40% of those born into professional and managerial had moved down.

Of those born in the working class, 34% had leapfrogged the intermediate class and had gone into professional and managerial jobs.

So social mobility was high, even though upward mobility is becoming less common because so many are already middle class now. More people are dropping down than in the past, because more people are in positions from which it is possible to fall and fewer in positions from which it is possible to rise.

It is of course true that people born to middle-class parents are more likely than those born to working-class parents to end up in professional/managerial positions. But Saunders suggests it is not true that working-class children find it ‘very difficult’ to get access to these higher-level jobs: in 2018 more than one third of the people doing them had come from working-class backgrounds (Saunders, 2019).<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Goldthorpe, J. (2012) Understanding – and misunderstanding – social mobility in Britain: the entry of the economists, the confusion of politicians and the limits of educational policy, *Barnet Papers in Social Research*, Department of Social Policy and Intervention, Oxford.

<sup>11</sup> Saunders, P. (2010) *Social Mobility Myths*, Civitas.

<sup>12</sup> Saunders, P. (2019) *Social Mobility Truths*, Civitas.

<sup>13</sup> Office for National Statistics, (2018) *Labour Force Survey*.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*.

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Yet the Sutton Trust and the Social Mobility Commission continue to claim that social mobility is not only low but worse than it has ever been. And in 2012 Michael Gove could say: ‘Those who are born poor are more likely to stay poor, and those who inherit privilege are more likely to pass on privilege, in England than in any comparable country. For those of us who believe in social justice, this stratification and segregation are morally indefensible’ (Hurst, 2012).<sup>15</sup>

### **WHAT ABOUT ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE?**

Achievement in school is relevant because access to middle-class jobs is often dependent on educational qualifications.

PISA (the Programme for International Student Assessment) is funded by the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development). The programme started in 2000 with tests happening every three years. PISA tests are computer-based, administered to a sample of 15-year-olds in each country and cover reading, science and mathematics; 15-year-olds are chosen because at this age most children in most OECD countries are reaching the end of compulsory education.

The PISA 2018 tests<sup>16</sup> found that the UK schools were quite good for equity: disadvantaged pupils and the children of immigrants do better than in many countries. For example, 14% of disadvantaged students scored in the top quarter of performance in reading, indicating, as they said, that ‘disadvantage is not destiny’. Socio-economic status only explained 12% of the variation in mathematics performance in PISA 2018 in the United Kingdom (compared to 14% on average across OECD countries), and 11% of the variation in science performance (compared to the OECD average of 13% of the variation).

### **BUT WE KNOW THAT EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT GAPS REMAIN WIDE**

Poor children not only start school at a lower base, but also make less progress while they are there. The attainment of wealthier children accelerates during their school years, while it stalls for the poorest. This means that wealthier children exceed their educational potential, but some of the poorest do not get near to fulfilling theirs.

Having said all that, the link between poverty and academic outcomes is not as great as is often claimed. Of the bottom 20 per cent of pupils academically at age 16, only a quarter are on free school meals. Of those on free school meals only

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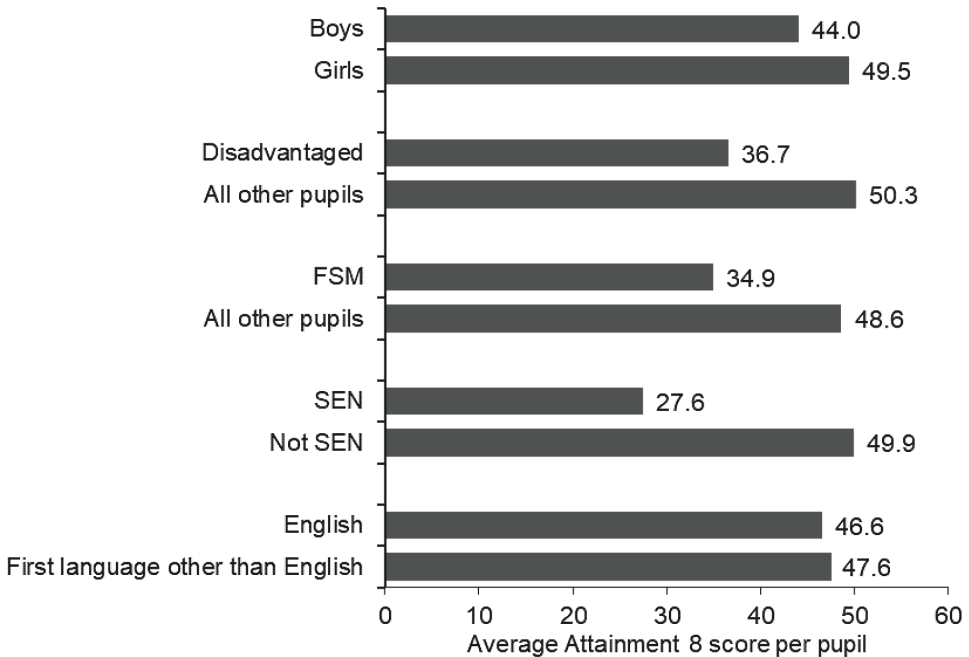
<sup>15</sup> Hurst, G. ‘Domination by private schools is indefensible, declares Gove’ The Times 11 May 2012.

<sup>16</sup> PISA, (2019), Results from PISA 2018 country report: United Kingdom.

a third are in the bottom 20 per cent. So the pupil premium, which is designed to raise the academic achievement of poorer pupils, misses two thirds of those in the bottom 20 per cent academically.

The data below shows the 2019 GCSE results in England. The biggest attainment gaps are between pupils with special needs and those without. Gaps between disadvantaged pupils/those on free school meals and those who are not are quite large. Girls do a bit better than boys. Incredibly, those whose first language is not English did better than those whose first language was English.

Average GCSE Attainment 8 score by pupil characteristics, 2019



Source: DfE Key stage 4 performance, 2019

## SOME DEFINITIONS

### Special Educational Needs (SEN)

*SEN indicates whether a pupil has learning difficulties or disabilities that make it harder for them to learn than most children of the same age. Pupils with special educational needs include those with SEN support, with statements of SEN or an education, health and care (EHC) plan. 14.2% of pupils at the end of Key Stage 4 had a special educational need in 2019.*

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### **Disadvantaged pupils**

*Pupils are defined as disadvantaged if they are known to have been eligible for free school meals in the past six years (from year 6 to year 11), if they are recorded as having been looked after for at least one day or if they are recorded as having been adopted from care. In 2019, 26.5% of pupils in state-funded schools at the end of Key Stage 4 were disadvantaged.*

### **Free School Meals**

*Parents do not have to pay for school lunches if they receive any of the following:*

*Income Support*

*Income-based Jobseekers Allowance*

*Income-related Employment and Support Allowance*

*Support under Part VI of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999*

*The guaranteed element of State Pension Credit*

*Child Tax Credit (provided they are not also entitled to Working Tax Credit and have an annual gross income of no more than £16,190)*

*Working Tax Credit run-on – paid for 4 weeks after a person stops qualifying for Working Tax Credit*

*Universal Credit – with household income of less than £7,400 a year (after tax and not including any benefits)*

### **The English Baccalaureate (EBacc)**

*This measures achievement in core academic subjects at Key Stage 4. The EBacc is made up of five pots: English, maths, science, a language and history or geography.*

### **Attainment 8**

*Attainment 8 measures the average achievement of pupils in up to 8 qualifications. This includes: English (double-weighted if both GCSEs in language and literature are taken); maths (double weighted); three further qualifications that count in the English Baccalaureate (EBacc); and three further qualifications that can be GCSE qualifications (including EBacc subjects) or any other non-GCSE qualifications on the DfE approved list. Points are allocated to the new GCSEs on a 9 to 1 score scale corresponding to the 9 to 1 grades, for example a grade 9 will get 9 points in the performance measures.*

## Progress 8

*Progress 8 measures the progress a pupil makes from the end of Key Stage 2 (KS2) to the end of KS4. It compares pupils' achievement – their Attainment 8 score – with the national average Attainment 8 score of all pupils who had a similar starting point (or 'prior attainment'), calculated using assessment results from the end of primary school. Progress 8 is a relative measure, therefore the national average Progress 8 score is very close to zero.*

## ETHNICITY

Over the years there has been great social mobility in terms of different ethnic groups, but with further to go.

Looking at individual ethnic groups in terms of GCSE results, since 2004:

- Indian and Chinese students have moved way ahead of white British.
- Bangladeshi students have moved from well below to above white British despite being amongst the most socio-economically deprived.
- Black African students have moved from below white British to being better.
- Black Caribbean and Pakistani students caught up and are now quite similar to white British, a bit below for those not on FSMs, a bit above for those on FSMs.

The GCSE scores for 2019 GCSEs show the pattern:

		White	Mixed	Asian	Black	Chinese
<b>End of key stage 4 cohort</b>						
	2018	396,680	24,646	55,737	28,949	1,875
	2019	406,708	27,018	58,111	31,175	2,006
<b>Progress 8<sup>22</sup></b>						
	2018	-0.10 (-0.11 to -0.10)	-0.02 (-0.03 to 0.00)	0.45 (0.44 to 0.46)	0.12 (0.11 to 0.14)	1.03 (0.97 to 1.09)
	2019	-0.11 (-0.12 to -0.11)	0.00 (-0.02 to 0.01)	0.47 (0.45 to 0.48)	0.13 (0.12 to 0.15)	0.86 (0.80 to 0.92)
<b>EBacc entry</b>						
	2018	36.0%	41.8%	48.5%	45.0%	63.6%
	2019	37.5%	44.3%	50.6%	46.5%	61.6%
<b>Achieving English and mathematics (at grades 9-5)</b>						
	2018	42.6%	43.7%	50.2%	38.8%	75.3%
	2019	42.4%	43.8%	51.9%	37.8%	76.3%
<b>Attainment 8</b>						
	2018	46.1	47.3	50.4	45.0	64.2
	2019	46.1	47.6	51.2	44.9	64.3
<b>EBacc average point score</b>						
	2018	3.98	4.14	4.48	3.93	6.01
	2019	4.00	4.19	4.57	3.94	5.99

Source: Key stage 4 attainment data

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**If you just look at pupils entitled to FSMs**, all ethnic groups do better than white British, and the gap is growing. This is true with both the Key Stage 2 results at age 11 and GCSE results at age 16:

### *Progress 8 score 2019 GCSEs, FSM pupils by ethnicity*

<i>Chinese</i> .....	<i>0.66</i>
<i>Indian</i> .....	<i>0.34</i>
<i>Pakistani</i> .....	<i>0.03</i>
<i>Black Caribbean</i> .....	<i>-0.54</i>
<i>White British</i> .....	<i>-0.78</i>

As for university entry, English state school pupils in the Chinese ethnic group have the highest entry rate to higher education (68.0%), while those from the White ethnic group have the lowest (30.3%) (*UCAS end of cycle report 2019*).<sup>17</sup>

There are substantial differences in workforce participation by ethnicity between and within genders. In 2017, white British working-age women were only 7 percentage points less likely to be employed than white British men (73% compared with 80%). But among Pakistanis and Bangladeshis, the employment rate of women was around half that of men (38% compared with 71% (Department for Work and Pensions, 2018)).<sup>18</sup> In 2014, Bangladeshi and Pakistani women earned £1–1.50 less per hour on average than white British women, and these gaps appear to have widened over the past decade (Longhi and Brynin, 2017).<sup>19</sup>

So, in Britain it is hard to disentangle class, ethnicity and gender.

## GENDER

The table below shows 2019 GCSE data for boys and girls in England:

2019 (revised)	Average Progress 8 score	% EBacc entry	% English and maths, grade 5 or above	Average Attainment 8 score per pupil	EBacc Average Point Score
<b>Girls</b>	0.22 <small>(0.22 to 0.23)</small>	45.9%	46.6%	49.5	4.32
<b>Boys</b>	-0.27 <small>(-0.28 to -0.27)</small>	34.3%	40.0%	44.0	3.84
<b>Difference</b>	<b>0.49</b>	<b>11.6 pp</b>	<b>6.6 pp</b>	<b>5.5 points</b>	<b>0.48 points</b>

<sup>17</sup> UCAS, (2019), End of cycle report.

<sup>18</sup> Race Disparity Audit, 2018, gov.uk website, Department of Work and Pensions.

<sup>19</sup> Longhi, S. and Brynin, M. (2017) The ethnicity pay gap. Equality and Human Rights.



Social mobility has improved for women due to the general rise in women in work, an increase in middle-class women returning to work following childbirth and more women attending university, unlocking senior jobs in areas like law and medicine.

Although the massive expansion in university places after 2000 was supposed to provide the ladder of opportunity for the working classes, most of these extra places have been taken by middle-class girls.

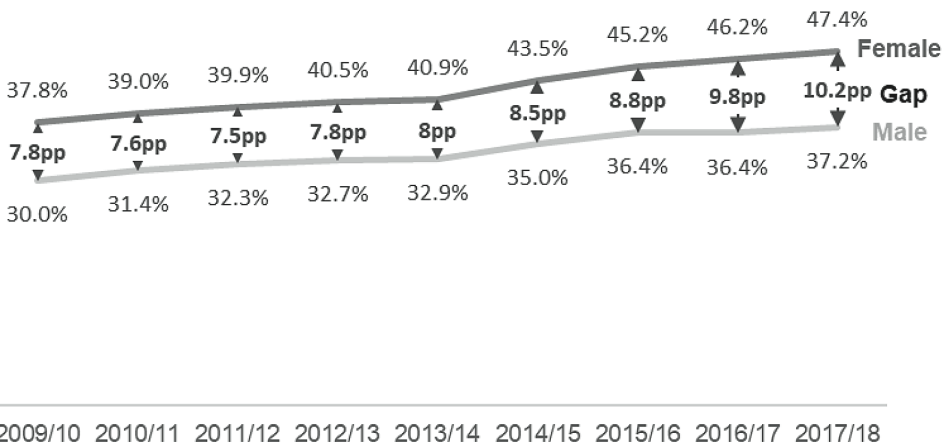
Applications to university from 18-year-olds for 2020 entry showed 46.4% per cent of young women applied but only 33% of young men, with the gap growing (UCAS, 2020).

The expansion of the universities is also part of the reason why the less able children from the higher-income families have not moved down socially, as a truly meritocratic model would suggest they should. Less able children of wealthier families go to university in a way they did not before 1997.

The expansion in the numbers of middle-class children going to university also increased assortative mating – the number of graduate women marrying graduate men. And assortative mating is one of the things which can reduce social mobility because the less educated are left to pair off with each other.

It is unlikely that we can return to earlier high levels of upward social mobility by boosting education and training. Increasing the number of people with paper qualifications does nothing to expand the number of middle-class positions available for them to fill. Education helps individuals become socially mobile, but does not in itself create more mobility. Only an increase in middle-class jobs does that (Saunders, 2019).

**Per cent of 15-year-old pupils who entered Higher Education by age 19 by gender, 2009–18**



Source: DfE, 2019, *Widening Participation in Higher Education, England*.

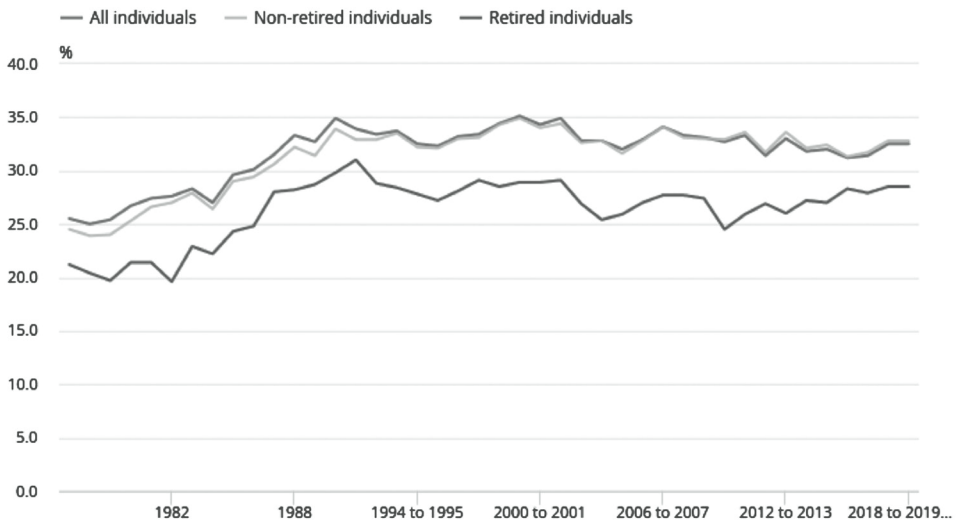
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### INCOME INEQUALITY

For much of the past 100 years the distribution of wealth has been getting more equal. In 1923 the top 1 per cent of the population owned 61 per cent of marketable assets. By 1976, this had dropped dramatically so they owned only 21 per cent (Snowden, 2015).<sup>20</sup>

The Office for National Statistics measures income inequality in the UK using the Gini coefficient, where 0 means total equality and 100 means total inequality (one person has all the income). The graph below shows that inequality rose in the 1980s, then fell back, with a small rise in the past ten years.

**Gini coefficients for equivalised disposable income of all individuals, 1977 to financial year ending 2019**



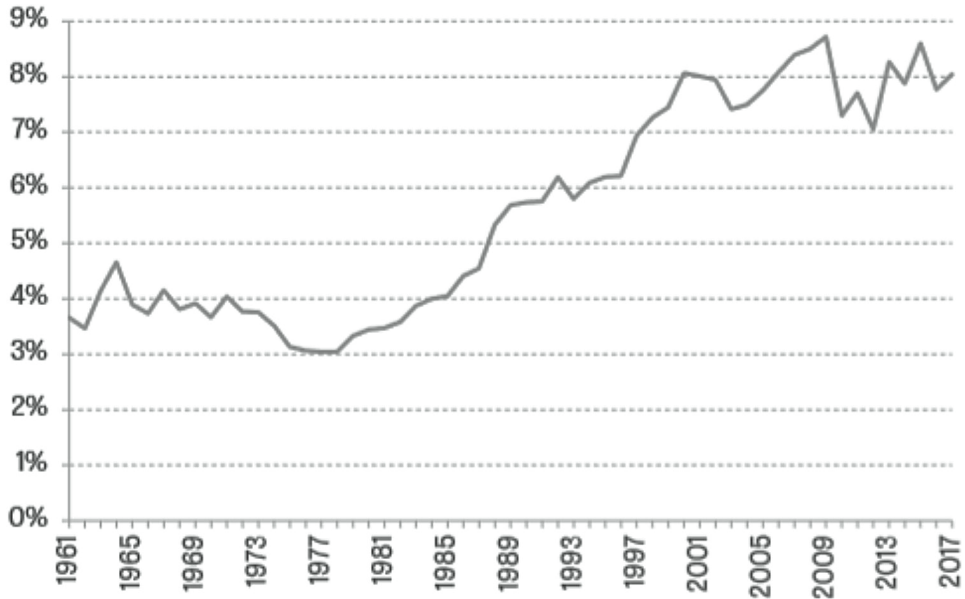
*Source: Office for National Statistics Statistical Bulletin*

But the share of income going to the 1% richest households has nearly tripled in the last four decades, from 3% in the late 1970s to around 8% today. International comparisons of a related measure – the top 1% share of individual gross incomes – suggest that top income shares have also risen in other English-speaking countries such as the US and Canada, but have remained more stable in continental European countries such as Denmark and the Netherlands (Roser and Ortiz-Ospina, 2016).<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Snowden, C. (2015) Income inequality: the facts, IEA.

<sup>21</sup> Roser, M. and Ortiz-Ospina, E. (2016) Income inequality, Our World in Data.

**Top 1% share of net household income, 1961–2017**



Source: *Inequalities in the Twenty-first Century: Introducing the IFS Deaton Review*, 2019, Robert Joyce and Xiaowei Xu, The Institute for Fiscal Studies

It is not true that the poor are getting poorer. The bottom 20 per cent of earners have a disposable income that is 86 per cent higher, adjusted for inflation, than in 1977 (ONS 2016).<sup>22</sup> The average real income in 2017 was twice what it was in 1977.

**There is a danger of governments prioritising inequality as an issue at the expense of economic growth or the relief of poverty. It is possible for inequality to fall as living standards for everyone drop – as happened in the UK in recent years. In China inequality has risen in the past two decades, but everyone is much better off than they were.**

## GEOGRAPHY

Another form of between-group inequality that has become increasingly salient in the public debate is geographic inequality. The Brexit vote focused attention on the growing divide between London and the rest of the country. Whilst the majority of people in all other English regions voted for Brexit, 60% of Londoners voted

<sup>22</sup> Office for National Statistics (2016) Families and Households in the UK.

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in favour of Remain. This political divide is likely to at least partly reflect growing economic divides between London – a global city with booming finance, media and professional services – and other parts of the UK.

Over the past few decades, London has pulled away from the rest of the country. Real economic output (measured by gross value added) grew by 3.1% a year in London on average between 1998 and 2017, compared with 1.9% in the UK as a whole (Office for National Statistics, 2018).<sup>23</sup> Average weekly earnings among full-time employees in London are a third higher than the UK average and nearly two-thirds higher than in the North East, though high living (especially housing) costs mean that Londoners' real living standards are not as high as raw income differentials suggest (Office for National Statistics, 2019).<sup>24</sup>

Recent research has found that opportunities for social mobility are also higher in the capital. A child growing up in London to parents in the bottom third of the occupation distribution (in terms of median wages) has a 30% chance of moving to the top third, compared with 22% nationally and only 17% in Yorkshire and the Humber (Bell, Blundell and Machin, 2018).<sup>25</sup>

There are also geographical variations in some of the patterns in family structure discussed below. Only 7% of children in affluent Windsor and Maidenhead are born to single mothers, compared with a third of children in Liverpool and Middlesbrough (Office for National Statistics, 2019).

The Social Mobility Commission (2016)<sup>26</sup> found that over one fifth of the children in failing schools in England live in ten local authority areas (Blackpool, Knowsley, Northumberland, Doncaster, Reading, Stoke-on-Trent, Oldham, Bradford, Telford and Wrekin and Central Bedfordshire).

In 2019 only 29.8 per cent of 18-year-olds in the south-west of England went to university, 30.2 per cent from the north-east, but 44.5 per cent from London (UCAS, 2019).<sup>27</sup>

London is a hotspot for social mobility in comparison to other parts of England. Inner London has the highest proportion of pupils eligible for Free School Meals (26%, twice the national average). Despite this, schools in Inner London had the

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<sup>23</sup> Office for National Statistics (2018).

<sup>24</sup> Office for National Statistics (2019).

<sup>25</sup> Bell, B. Blundell, J. and Machin, S. (2018), *The changing geography of intergenerational mobility*, CEP Discussion Papers, Centre for Economic Performance, London School of Economics and Political Science.

<sup>26</sup> Social Mobility Commission, (2019), *State of the Nation 2019 report*.

<sup>27</sup> UCAS, (2019).

highest performance in the country at GCSE, with the lowest attainment gap between advantaged and disadvantaged pupils.

There is a brain drain to London. Swinney and Williams (2016)<sup>28</sup> found that London accounts for around 19 per cent of UK jobs, but six months after graduation, of the graduates who moved city, London employed 22 per cent of all working new graduates, and 38 per cent of those working new graduates with a first or upper-second-class degree from a Russell Group university. This figure rises to 52 per cent for Oxbridge graduates with a first or 2:1. London also has by far the highest graduate retention and return rates, with 77 per cent of London students staying to work in the capital and 74 per cent of those who left to become undergraduates elsewhere returning.

### **THE PROBLEM OF TIME LAGS**

By definition you have to wait one generation to tell whether a group is experiencing social mobility. So even if improvement in state schools is creating good conditions for social mobility right now, we will not be able to prove it for some years.

Equally you cannot judge the prospects for social mobility of today's young people from the circumstances of those currently aged 40 or more, yet many of those who commentate on current conditions refer back to people born before 1960 (the number of privately educated judges etc.).

### **THE PROBLEM OF THE TOP 0.001 PER CENT**

The Social Mobility Commission keep reminding us that 71 per cent of senior judges and 62 per cent of senior Armed Forces officers went to private school.

But it could also be a mistake to measure social mobility by looking at the background of senior judges, senior Armed Forces officers, Oscar-winning actors or members of the Cabinet. Because what really matters is not only what happens to the top 0.001 per cent but what happens to the rest.

In the February 2020 Cabinet 69 per cent was privately educated compared to 7 per cent of population, 27 per cent were women as against 51 per cent of the population, 50 per cent had been to university at Oxford or Cambridge compared to 1 per cent of the population.

But what did that tell us about social mobility in the country *as a whole*?

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<sup>28</sup> Swinney, P. and Williams, M. (2016), *The Great British Brain Drain: where graduates move and why*, Centre for Cities.

## WHAT CAUSES SOCIAL IMMOBILITY?

One could write a book about the causes of social immobility and many people have. Here are just a few causes . . .

### 1. Upbringing

According to the annual Department for Education poll of parents (DfE, *Childcare and Early Years Survey of Parents in England, 2019*)<sup>29</sup> many parents feel schools and childcare providers are responsible for teaching their children to speak, rather than themselves.

Almost a quarter (23 per cent) of parents who earn under £20,000 a year felt that teaching children up to the age of five to speak was not their responsibility. This compared to 16 per cent of families earning up to £44,999 a year and just six per cent of those earning £45,000 and over.

In the UK a significant proportion of children (16% in 2017) are born into households with no fathers (Office for National Statistics, 2019), concentrated among those with less income and education.

Children of wealthier, more educated parents grow up in stable homes with parents who spend both time and money on them, whilst children from poorer backgrounds increasingly grow up in insecure homes.

In the UK, as in the US, low-income and lower-educated people are increasingly likely to live alone (without a spouse or cohabiting partner). Amongst the better-off the proportion of people who were either married or cohabiting increased between 1994 and 2015, but it declined by up to 20% among people in the bottom fifth of wages (Blundell *et al.*, 2018).<sup>30</sup> In 1993, graduates were no more likely to live in a couple at age 40–45 than those without degrees; the gap now stands at around 10 percentage points.

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<sup>29</sup> Department for Education, (2019), *Childcare and Early Years Survey of Parents in England, 2019*

<sup>30</sup> Blundell, R. Joyce, J. Norris, A. Keiller, J. Ziliak, P. (2018), *Income inequality and the labour market in Britain and the US*, *Journal of Public Economics*

Share of 40-to 45 year olds who are married or cohabiting by education 1993–2018



Source: *Inequalities in the Twenty-first Century: Introducing the IFS Deaton Review*, 2019, Robert Joyce and Xiaowei Xu, The Institute for Fiscal Studies

**2. Where you go to school?**

The quality of schools in England is variable. Schools that are apparently similar in terms of relative deprivation of area or disadvantage of intake can perform very differently. The large urban centres that were once the weakest performing are now among the strongest. Poorer children are more likely to attend worse schools, especially at secondary level, which doubles their disadvantage. Weak schools find it harder to attract good teachers, and this makes improvement much more difficult.

At the international level, PISA results suggest that segregation of schools by income tends to depress the scores of the already disadvantaged. Countries with lower segregation between schools, more egalitarian systems and low achievement gaps tend to have higher average attainment and also the highest percentage of very skilled students.

The existence of an independent or private sector in schooling increases segregation by family income. But the Sutton Trust investigation of this issue concluded that ‘most of the segregation of pupils by social class occurs within the state sector’. A recent Sutton Trust report (*Selective Comprehensives: Great*

*Britain*, 2019)<sup>31</sup> found that the top comprehensives across Britain take half the number of poorer pupils than the average school, and ‘while these schools are, by and large, not using forms of overt selection, they are, in effect, exercising covert selection’.

We know that most of the schools with the best exam results are in middle-class areas and tend to push up house prices, making access to such schools impossible for all but the most prosperous. In 2016 Lloyds Bank research looked at 30 state schools with good GCSE results and found that local houses had a price premium of up to £630,000 above the rest of the county. Similarly, research by Stirling Ackroyd found that house prices close to the excellent Queen Elizabeth’s School in Barnet were 34 per cent above the average for the area.

### 3. Genes

Professor Robert Plomin is a researcher at the Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology and Neuroscience, King’s College London. He has looked at the genes and life histories of 10,000 twin pairs born 1994–96, some of whom were identical, some not, some brought up by the same parents, some not. In 2018 he published a book, *Blueprint*,<sup>32</sup> which summarises his research findings so far.

In recent years we have seen large-scale availability of genomic data. Scientists now know that the genetic influence over our personalities arises from thousands of tiny variations in our DNA, rather than one or a few genes alone. So most traits are ‘polygenic’ – that is, influenced by many genes.

Plomin finds that school attainment is better forecast by a polygenic score than any other way of predicting it – it is better than knowing how the parents did at school, better than socio-economic status, better than knowing the type of school. Our families and schools account for less than 5% of differences between us in terms of mental health or how well we did at school once we control for the impact of genes.

Most measures of the ‘environment’ show substantial genetic influence because people adapt their environment better to suit their natures. For example, Plomin discovered that the amount of television adopted children watch correlates twice as well with the amount their biological parents watch rather than with the amount watched by their adoptive parents. Children respond differently to the opportunities presented by school, and this is in part genetic.

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<sup>31</sup> Sutton Trust, (2019), *Selective Comprehensives: Great Britain*.

<sup>32</sup> Plomin, R. (2018), *Blueprint: How DNA makes us who we are*, Allen Lane.



Incredibly, Plomin concludes that children growing up in the same family are no more similar than children growing up in different families, if you correct for their genetic similarities. If you were cloned and your clone was raised by another family and went to another school, the clone would still be very similar to you in terms of personality and academic ability.

What does this mean for social mobility? On average children from low-income backgrounds have lower academic ability as measured by IQ tests, so genes clearly act as a brake on social mobility. Talent is not evenly spread – there are more talented people in some parts of the country than others. But the ability range is quite wide within each social class, so there are clearly many bright but disadvantaged children who could do better at school with the right help. And in any case, for any individual genes are not destiny. If you are less intelligent than some of your friends you can still do better than them at school by working harder. If you are more prone to being overweight than your contemporaries you just need to eat less and exercise more than them.

#### **4. House prices**

House price inflation has clearly created intergenerational inequality, with young people much less able to afford to buy housing than their parents and grandparents were at a similar age. The fact that wealthier parents are able to pass some of their wealth down to their children so they *can* buy a house widens the gap between the social classes.

#### **5. Income**

Children from better off families tend to go to better schools because house prices are higher near better schools. Children from richer backgrounds are also more likely to have private tuition, even if they go to state schools. In the early years, children from poorer backgrounds are less likely to attend good quality childcare or early education, partly because there is less good quality childcare available in poorer areas.

Children and parents who live in poor quality or overcrowded housing have worse physical and mental health. They are more likely to move house frequently, which has a very negative impact on children's attainment. Educational resources such as a computer and a room of one's own are expensive. Poverty also affects families through stress and a higher risk of depression, making it much more difficult for parents to support their children's education.

In addition to financial and economic disadvantages, children from poorer backgrounds are also disadvantaged by a lack of cultural and social capital – they are less likely to visit museums, go abroad or read books.

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Families where both parents are educated spend an average of 110 minutes a day on educational activities with young children, compared to 71 minutes where parents have a low level of education.

By the time that students receive their GCSE results, around 32 per cent of the variation in performance can be predicted on the basis of indicators observed at or before age five (Washbrook, 2010).<sup>33</sup>

Nevertheless, Saunders (2019), in a review of the research evidence, concludes that the main reason that children from lower-income families do worse in exams is that they have lower academic ability on average. The effect of ability is at least three times greater than the impact of their home and parents.

### 6. Aspiration

There is some evidence that there is a general ‘culture of low aspirations’ among low-income families. The Millennium Cohort Study shows that the mothers of seven-year-olds have almost universally high aspirations for them – 97 per cent of both poorer and richer mothers say they want their child to go to university. However, children and parents from poorer backgrounds develop lower expectations as children grow older. They may still aspire to higher education and professional jobs, but their faith in their ability to achieve those ambitions is eroded.

This can arise from a combination of factors: lower achievement at school so far, a lack of social networks to provide knowledge and encouragement about how to achieve such goals, and a labour market with high numbers of low-skilled jobs and limited opportunities to use qualifications to progress from those to better work. In addition, where parents themselves have not had good experiences in education, and have few qualifications, they may have limited knowledge, confidence and skills in helping their children in education such as reading to them and helping with homework.

The Sutton Trust report, *Believing in Better*, June 2016,<sup>34</sup> showed that one reason so many more girls go to university than boys is that they are much more likely to believe in the importance of a university degree. Even in Year 9, 65 per cent of girls said it was important to go to university compared to 58 per cent of boys. 15- and 16-year-olds with similar GCSE results were twice as likely to go on to do three A-levels if they saw university as a likely goal for them. Disadvantaged students were less likely to think they would go on to university than their more

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<sup>33</sup> Washbrook, E. (2010) *Early Environments and Child Outcomes: An Analysis*, Commission for the Independent Review on Poverty and Life Chances.

<sup>34</sup> Sutton Trust, (2016), *Believing in Better*.

advantaged peers, with only 27 per cent having high aspirations compared with 39 per cent of their better-off peers.

University entry rates are particularly low for White British pupils who were eligible for free school meals, at 18.5% for females and 12.8% for males in 2018 (DfE, 2019, *Widening Participation in Higher Education, England*).<sup>35</sup> This is not only due to poverty – other ethnic groups with the same low incomes are much more likely to go to university. It is also poverty of aspiration.

## 7. Soft skills once in the workplace

The Social Mobility Commission has shown that bright children from poor homes do well but never reach the highest income levels of their peers from wealthier homes. This may be due to a relative lack of useful soft skills. This has been analysed by Ashley *et al.* (2015),<sup>36</sup> and the soft skills they identified included confidence, risk-taking, the ability to speak well, accent, team working, being organised and punctual.

## 8. Networks and fitting in

Mike Savage's analysis of the Great British Class Survey (Savage, 2015)<sup>37</sup> found that those whose parents work in professional occupations were much more likely to know other people in such occupations, and this gave them access to networks of influence, networks which made it more likely they would be able to access such jobs.

In 2016 the Social Mobility Commission<sup>38</sup> published research evidence that explained why young people from disadvantaged homes may struggle to become investment bankers. They find it harder to acquire work experience because they lack the necessary informal networks. They found that managers often selected candidates who fitted the traditional image of an investment banker and displayed polish in areas such as speech, accent and dress. They noted that this can disadvantage candidates whose upbringing and background means they are simply not aware of such things as City dress codes.

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<sup>35</sup> Department for Education, (2019), *Widening Participation in Higher Education, England*.

<sup>36</sup> Ashley, L., Duberley, J., Sommerlad, H. & Schlarios, D. (2015) *A qualitative evaluation of non-educational barriers to the elite professions*. London: Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission

<sup>37</sup> Savage, M. (2015), *Social class in the 21<sup>st</sup> century*, Pelican.

<sup>38</sup> Social Mobility Commission, (2016), *State of the Nation 2016: social mobility in Great Britain*.

## **WOULD ABOLISHING PRIVATE SCHOOLS IMPROVE SOCIAL MOBILITY?**

Not much. Most social segregation within the school system happens within the state sector, where there is selection by house price. State schools in England are rapidly improving and many now have exam results which match private schools.

In any case, education is not the key to unlocking social mobility. Social mobility can only happen if there are enough good jobs. As things stand, you can go to a good school and go to a good university but still find yourself doing a job that was typically done by non-graduates twenty years ago.

The only sustained period of social mobility in this country was in the 1950s to 1980s. The doyen of sociologists, Professor John Goldthorpe, is clear that this did not have much to do with education. Much more important was the national economy: the growth of white-collar jobs including far more jobs for women.

So what is needed is economic growth and investment in infrastructure, as the experience of China in the past 20 years has shown, where incidentally social mobility has been weak but almost everyone is much richer. The best thing for the white working class of coastal towns or NE England or Knowsley, places often cited as suffering from educational underachievement, is not in fact just improving schools, which at best will mean the out-migration of ambitious and intelligent young people – like Justine Greening, who often cited her success at school as the thing which allowed her to ‘escape’ Rotherham and come to London.

No, we don’t want a system which drives successful people out of depressed areas. We need jobs *in* those places, and that means we need investment and even the sort of state intervention that attracted car plants from Japan to the north-east of England under Margaret Thatcher, providing thousands of jobs, tens of thousands through the multiplier, providing training for local people, improving regional incomes and stemming out-migration. Nothing much to do with schools.

Any objective review of the state of education in England today must conclude that the main issue is not the unfairly good A-level results of a few thousand pupils from wealthier homes, a good proportion of whom would in fact get very good results wherever they went to school. No, the problem is the long tail of underachievement, especially amongst boys, who seemly learn little in the five years they are in secondary school. Every inter-country comparison shows that this is the main issue we have. White working-class boys will not be helped a jot by the abolition of private schools. What their schools need is strong heads and effective teachers who stay. And to get that we need a system which pays the teachers in struggling areas more than teachers elsewhere, something which governments have been reluctant to consider but which is entirely in their hands.

**In terms of social mobility, what really matters is the 50% who don't go to university.** These are the half of the population who now matter most, but you don't read about them in the newspapers because, they tell me, 'these things don't interest our readers'.

We must stop talking about social mobility as if it was all about the top 1%. What the 50% who don't go to university want is to earn a good living. What drives incomes is productivity – how much we produce per person per hour. Productivity in the UK has been static and low since 2007, one of the longest periods of stagnation in history.

To improve productivity we need to invest in training and technology. Training of this sort does not happen in schools, it happens in firms and FE colleges. We have been struggling to get this sort of training right since the 1867 Paris Exhibition.

The number one issue is the coming dominance of Asia in the world in terms of population and economy, education and innovation. The idea that eradicating a few dozen well-known schools will enable us to compete with East Asia is nonsense.

And if your main concern is the wealth gap in England, surely the answer is changes to income tax, not fiddling around with schools?

## **A BIT OF AN OBSESSION**

Many politicians today seem to believe that education is no longer only about helping individual children learn as much as possible of those things that adults deem important, but is equally about social justice, social mobility, equity and equality of opportunity. That is what the comprehensive system, that is what the EBacc and that is what the Office for Students are all about. A belief which now encourages many system leaders to say that *the main purpose* of education is to get children from poorer homes up to the academic standards achieved by middle-income children. It is as much about equity as national standards. So the Education Select Committee Chair, Robert Halfon MP, could say: 'Tackling social injustice is the central objective of the Education Committee.' Not *an* objective, note. This is what many politicians and education leaders believe.

## **ARE THERE ARGUMENTS AGAINST TRYING TO IMPROVE SOCIAL MOBILITY?**

Even the poorest people in Britain today are far better off than middle-income people 50 years ago, and the best way to help those at the bottom is to generate more jobs and more higher-paid jobs. Focusing on inequality is dangerous, because

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you are focusing on the wrong thing and risk compromising the main task – improving the economy.

In education a concern about performance gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged children may be diverting energy from a more important consideration – raising the education level of all children in England in the face of growing international competition. Social mobility policies can have other damaging side-effects. For example, dilution of academic standards to allow more candidates to pass exams, as happened with the GCSE, led to less stretch for the top 50% of the ability range.

There is growing evidence that the increase in numbers of students from low-income homes going to low-tariff universities has not improved their employment prospects while leaving them with debt.

All parents want is a good school locally. Not choice. Not social mobility. Just a good school with effective discipline and great teachers. Yet Dominic Cummings could write, albeit a bit unfairly: ‘Most of those with power in the English education system are much more interested in appearing to be “on the side of the poor and less able” than they are in raising standards.’

In 2016 Theresa May talked about the need to create a meritocracy. She said that the only thing which should ‘count’ in terms of success in life was innate ability and capacity for hard work.

But Michael Young, when he wrote *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, was fearful of the concept, because if society is organised as a meritocracy then there is a danger that those at the top will feel they deserve their status and by the same token those at the bottom deserve theirs. Sympathy for the poor evaporates: they are poor because their lowly intelligence made them that way.

So there are those who think that a more meritocratic society will not result in social mobility, far from it, because meritocracy entrenches the privileges of the cognitive elite.

## FINALLY

Social mobility is at the heart of every debate about education, most recently the Office for Students consultation on university admissions reform (2019).<sup>39</sup> Yet this is a very particular, middle-class Londoner way of looking at the world. Quite apart from anything, not everyone wants to be socially mobile, especially if it means leaving home and family for some distant city. What most people want is a

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<sup>39</sup> Office for Students, (2019), Consultation on the higher education admissions system in England.

decent income and good health. I do not especially aspire to be better than my parents.

Notwithstanding the rhetoric about social mobility, half the population will always have below-average academic ability and school exam results. But if we are to overcome the divisions in society revealed by recent political events, all need to feel valued. That is why we must get back to a more balanced appreciation of those who perform essential jobs, albeit jobs of the hand or heart rather than academic intellect. We should stop talking about social mobility as simply a way of ‘rescuing’ people from working-class backgrounds and place more emphasis on valuing the full range of worthwhile occupations. Arguments about social mobility are too often based on exam results or incomes, not the value to society of different occupations.

In any case, by many measures social mobility in the UK is better than most commentators like to suggest. The upward mobility of women and almost all ethnic groups since 1970 has been remarkable. The problem today is that to get on young people often have to get out – they have to fly south.

Improving education is not enough. Education helps individuals become socially mobile but does not overall create more mobility: only an increase in middle-class jobs does that.

So the best way to improve social mobility is by expanding the economy, to use infrastructure projects and financial incentives to spread growth outside the south-east of England, allied to a massive expansion of high-quality technical and vocational training for the 50% who do not go to university. If you want social mobility, that is how you will get it.