

Social mobility: radical reform urged to repair divided Britain ^[1]

Author: Sally Weale

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Social mobility policies have failed to significantly reduce inequality between rich and poor despite two decades of interventions by successive governments, according to a highly critical new report.

The study by the government's Social Mobility Commission warns that without radical and urgent reform, the social and economic divisions in British society will widen even further, threatening community cohesion and economic prosperity.

And it highlights new divides that have opened up in the UK, further fragmenting society - geographically, and between income groups and different generations.

Alan Milburn, chair of the commission, said that for two decades Labour and Conservative governments had not made enough progress in turning welcome political sentiments into positive social outcomes.

"What is so striking about this new analysis is how divided we have become as a nation," he said.

"A new geographical divide has opened up, a new income divide has opened up and a new generational divide has opened up."

The report highlights that:

- Child poverty has risen in the aftermath of the recession, with about 4 million - or 30% - of young people now classified as poor.
- The divide between the attainment of rich and poor children at the age of five has only just begun to shrink despite billions of pounds of investment, and in early years education and it will take 40 years before it is closed.
- It will take 120 years before disadvantaged teenagers are as likely as their better off counterparts to get equivalent qualifications.
- Graduate employment for disadvantaged students has "barely improved", though widening access to university is seen as a success for social mobility policies.
- Wages have stagnated in real terms - particularly among the young - with the poorest most affected by the resulting falling living standards. And, despite slow progress, the best-paid jobs remain "deeply elitist".

The report, *Time for Change*, assesses government policies on social mobility from 1997 to 2017, covering the governments of Labour's Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, as well as David Cameron and Theresa May for the Conservatives.

It concludes overall there has been "too little" progress. It says it will take decades before the divisions in education and employment narrow and cautions that many of the policies of the past are no longer fit for purpose.

Launching the report on Wednesday, Milburn warned that in the bleak post-election landscape there was a greater need than ever for improved social mobility.

"As the general election seems to demonstrate, the public mood is sour and whole tracts of Britain feel left behind.

"The growing sense that we have become an us-and-them society is deeply corrosive of our cohesion as a nation.

"These are volatile and uncertain times. When more and more people feel like they are losing out, social mobility matters more than ever before."

The new analysis assesses four broad life stages - early years, schools, young people and the world of work - awarding red, amber and green ratings depending on how successful governments have been in translating policy into positive social outcomes.

None achieve green, the highest rating; both early years and schools get amber, while young people and work both get red.

"Overall, it is undoubtedly the case that efforts to put social mobility higher on the public policy agenda have paid some dividends," the report says. "But the overall picture is far from positive."

Angela Rayner MP, the shadow education secretary said: "This report from the government's own Social Mobility Commission shows that their policies will not improve social mobility in Britain."

"School budgets are being slashed, Sure Start centres are being lost and there is nothing approaching a skills plan that will let us face the challenges of post-Brexit Britain."

Among the report's recommendations is a call on future governments to develop a strategic cross-departmental social mobility plan with 10-year targets.

It also says public policy should be subjected to a social mobility test and says future budgets should be required to identify how public spending will address geographical, wealth and generational inequalities.

It also recommends that government should build a national coalition with councils, communities and employers to improve social mobility.

Alison Garnham, chief executive of the Child Poverty Action Group, said the report read like "an indictment of successive governments' failure to back struggling families with policies that would help them build better prospects".

She added: "If we are to improve life chances, we have to stop child poverty from rising. A government in denial about child poverty is a government in denial about social mobility."

Kevin Watkins, chief executive of Save the Children, said: "We all know that unless we get education right in the early years of a child's life, so many of them - especially the poorest - will struggle right through to their GCSEs and beyond; into the world of work and even in their relationships."

"If we truly want to be a fair and prosperous society, we need to start at the beginning and give every child - no matter what their background - the very best start in life."

"This means making sure that every nursery has a qualified early years teacher to give them the confidence and education they need to prosper and excel."

Sarah Stevens, head of policy at the Russell Group of universities, said: "When disadvantaged students come to our universities, they receive a range of academic, pastoral and financial support to ease their transition to university, help them succeed in their studies and progress to work or further study."

"This combination of support is highly effective. The drop-out rate for disadvantaged students is, on average, half that of other universities."

"Russell Group university graduates also go on to earn about 10% more over their lifetime than other graduates, but we recognise that there is still more to do to tackle the root causes of under-representation as well as to address gaps in outcomes."

A Department for Education spokesperson said: "Tackling social mobility is at the heart of the government's ambition to make Britain a country that works for everyone."

"There are 1.8 million more pupils in good or outstanding schools than in 2010, and we are delivering 3 million apprenticeship places, opening up access to our higher education system and investing £500m a year into technical education."

"However, we know that more must be done, and that's why last year we launched our £72m Opportunity Areas programme."

"This is bringing together local businesses, schools and councils in 12 social mobility 'coldspots' to create better opportunities for young people."

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