

How to improve social mobility



Talking social mobility is easy; addressing it is hard. In our book, [Social Mobility and Its Enemies](#), we argued that the prospects for social mobility in Britain are bleak. Declining real wages signal shrinking opportunities. Inequalities in income, wealth, housing and education are biting. Problems of social justice and social mobility are two sides of the same coin. We fear Brexit will further fracture society.

But what can we do to improve social mobility? When the debate turns to solutions it too often gets mired in detail, the tinkering and tweaking of policies unlikely to transform society. If the study of intergenerational persistence tells us one thing it is that failure to make major change now will store up even greater problems for the future. Here we offer four potential game-changers – the ABCD of social mobility and social justice reform.

Admissions: reforming education through random justice

Admissions to schools and universities are tilted in countless ways to the already advantaged. Significant numbers of parents admit to cheating to get their children into the most desirable schools – renting houses nearby, for example. The boom in private tutors meanwhile means A-levels are as much a signal of how much support prospective students have had as their academic potential.

The fairest way to allocate places to equally deserving candidates is to pick them randomly. In schools, that means giving equal chance to all children living in a catchment area, rather than selecting ones living nearest to the school. Pupils would still be guaranteed a place at one of their local schools. In universities, it means picking students as long as they have achieved a basic threshold of academic grades. Universities could develop a ballot system that suited their needs. Dutch medical schools, for example, select the very highest academic performers on academic grades, and then enter lower achievers into a lottery. You might compensate losers – guaranteeing a place at another university. It is the only way to equalise education's uneven playing field.

Behaviour: from 'me' culture to 'we' culture

We need to challenge the winner-takes-all culture that prioritises individual gain over collective success. We've bought into the American Dream big time – an individualistic notion of success, that anyone can make it with enough graft. This powerful narrative is all around us and forces on us a very narrow view of what it means to be successful. It makes most of us feel that we have failed.

Social mobility is lower in countries like the USA and the UK that have embraced the American Dream. And it is higher in the Scandinavian countries that promote a more collective spirit. There they talk about the Law of Jante – putting society before yourself. The Law states that you should put others ahead of the individual, not boast about your accomplishments or be jealous of others.

A collective mindset means progressive taxation. It cannot be fair that a teacher on £30,000 a year will pay a higher percentage of their income than a billionaire gaining £300 million a year from global investments. We need to close the tax loopholes allowing the super-wealthy to entrench their privilege. The extra revenues generated could be used to pay key public sector workers more.

Community: restoring local prospects and pride

Where you are born in Britain matters as much as who you are born to. Education cold spots litter the country from the Midlands to the North of England, including coastal towns, former industrial centres, and rural constituencies, brutalised by ineffective education, deprivation, and unemployment over successive generations. Children are growing up in families of multi-generational unemployment where parents, grandparents, and even great-grandparents had never worked. It's unsurprising they were more likely to vote for Brexit – even though it is likely to exacerbate our geographical divides.

We need to restore pride in local community. In the past you could get a job with a good employer in your town, even if you were not a college graduate, and it would lead to a long-term (and often unionized) job with good benefits. Supportive family life is fracturing among poorer and less educated families. Society's divide is not just economic but social.

It is no longer a case of the North versus the South, but London versus the rest. London is the UK's economic, political, and cultural powerhouse. Its gain is the rest of the country's loss. The escalating costs of the global metropolis are making it increasingly inaccessible to all but the privileged few. And people living outside London reject the assumption that everyone should up sticks to progress in life. They want decent jobs, and rewarding lives, in their own communities. We should redouble efforts to relocate major employers outside London to create opportunities elsewhere.

Decent work: the need for skills to pay the bills

Britain's booming gig economy has created jobs lacking security, progression, and rights. Some of the work practices at the Ubers, Sports Directs and Deliveroos of the world are reminiscent of the work conditions in Victorian times. In 2017, an estimated 1.3 million people were 'employed' in the gig economy – mostly young, poorly educated, and on short-term and temporary contracts. Zero-hour contracts are increasingly used by employers with little regulation.

It is time for a rethink: not just because pay gaps are unfair, but because they do not make economic sense. We need to tackle low earnings: a reasonable ask in a world of rising corporate profits and a falling share of national income spent on wages. This is not only about the national minimum wage, but the salaries expected for those contributing an essential public good, and for workers even higher up the wage distribution.

We also need a frank discussion about the continuing failure to provide the most basic functional skills, particularly in numeracy and literacy, to 100,000s of school leavers. This is vital. For them, the academic approach is not working. Children should be assessed against a basic threshold of key skills required to get on in life, taught as part of a practical, meaningful jobs-focused curriculum.



Notes:

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