

Is the Social Mobility Commission catching up with recent Conservative politics? Katharine Birbalsingh's comments on 'small steps up the ladder'



The Chair of the Social Mobility Commission has set out a new approach to the problem of social mobility. Improving access to the professions for people from disadvantaged backgrounds has been the dominant theme over the past 20 years, but this approach is now described as 'not enough', writes [Joseph Maslen](#). He explains why the Commission seems to have changed tack, and what its new 'broader view of social mobility' really means.

The new Chair of the Social Mobility Commission, Katharine Birbalsingh, has attempted to change the debate on social mobility. She has said in [her inaugural speech](#) that it is necessary to stop fixating on poor children getting to university and start celebrating 'small steps up the ladder'. In Birbalsingh's view, there is an overwhelming focus on the 'Hollywood romantic vision' of the poor child who gets a place at Oxbridge (and stereotypically goes on to a career in law or medicine), instead of more everyday stories such as those who become 'a manager at Sainsbury's'. Such 'small step' ambitions, Birbalsingh stresses, matter and should be valued.

Bubbling under the surface of Birbalsingh's comments, there is a broader paradigm-shift at play, centred in a redirection of Conservative education policy. To decode what this might mean, we have to start by looking at what the problem is represented to be. And what the problem is represented to be is an overproduction of graduates resulting from a mismatch between the 'demand side' of the economy – the jobs that need to be done – and what individuals want (or demand) to do with their lives. The vision of graduating in cap and gown, maybe at Oxbridge but more usually/realistically at a different, less prestigious institution, is represented as a [siren call](#) that lures people in, even if it may not be best for them or the country. Changing what people want to do – [exploding the pull of university](#) – is therefore represented to be the solution, to re-align people's wants with the nation's needs.

Delving into the underpinnings of this shift, we find David Goodhart, a policy leader at the Conservative-aligned Policy Exchange think tank, and specifically his books *The Road to Somewhere* (2017) and *Head, Hand, Heart* (2020). There are other works in the Conservative sphere that propose the same shift – notably David Skelton's *The New Snobbery* (2021), and *Remaking One Nation* (2020) by Theresa May's former advisor Nick Timothy – but Goodhart is key. (It was telling that the headquarters of Policy Exchange was the venue for Birbalsingh's speech.) [Goodhart's call](#) is that we should move away from the credentialist outlook where those who are most highly-qualified are the 'top' people. The push is to alter people's perceptual map of what counts as 'dignity and status' in British society. In that conventional common sense, academic qualifications are a measure of a person's quality. Altering that map, by assigning greater prestige to those without such credentials, is a way to dampen the demand for higher education and propel the desired re-alignment between personal and national requirements.

When we look more deeply into this shift, an important ideological circle is having to be squared. We are all, in modern society, subscribers in some sense to the capitalist work ethic: and this applies especially to the uni-sceptics, who often come from the right or centre of the political spectrum. They do not want working-class people to throw the baby out with the bathwater and give up on self-improvement altogether. If the question is whether people should limit their ambitions and stop reaching for the stars, the answer is no. Hence, emphasis is placed on technical education and FAVE (further and vocational education) paths towards self-improvement. The technical-FAVE route is about skills, and getting straight into work, bypassing the overcrowded graduate labour market.

We should pay attention to the strategic reframing that takes place in this shift, [from 'social' to 'economic' mobility](#). The implicit drive is for working-class people to see their career success in terms of earnings, not necessarily certificates. People want to succeed, but what that really means – or could be made to mean, by shifting public attitudes – is that people want to become richer, not necessarily more educated. (And they do not necessarily want to be geographically mobile, which is often implied by professional-level qualifications.) The problem of education is therefore represented to be a problem of earnings-related 'outcomes': education may for some people be a means to becoming richer, but for many others it [may not work out that way](#). What we might call the 'consciousness-raising' element of this discourse is getting people to understand that going to university (a) is not a magic ticket to getting a better (more lucrative) job, due to graduate over-supply, and (b), to return to Birbalsingh's arguments, that there are viable roads towards greater earnings that bypass academic credentialism.

Investment in the 'economic' version of mobility is a policy that has a powerful cultural politics behind it. The big socio-cultural idea, that first came to prominence in *The Road to Somewhere*, is about reinforcing local identities, halting the brain drain away from (often northern) towns such as Rotherham to (often southern) university cities such as Southampton. (Justine Greening, who described that precise journey in [her speech](#) to the Social Mobility Commission in 2017, is held up in the literature as a classic negative example of this 'escape ideology'.) The recent [Restitch](#) event in Halifax, held by the next-gen Conservative (though not officially Party-aligned) think tank [Onward](#), focused on that goal; and featured Birbalsingh as a guest speaker, as well as the American critic of 'merit', Michael Sandel.

The political urgency, [mentioned](#) most notably by Matthew Goodwin, is that the main divide in voting intentions is now educational. Graduate populations, amassed in university towns and cities such as traditionally-Tory-held Canterbury, are flocking to the left and posing a long-term threat to the electoral future of Conservatism. Seen in this light, Conservative-aligned commentators seeking to decentre university education are turkeys attempting to delay the left's Christmas.

If we listen closely, then, Birbalsingh's comments are the sound of the Commission catching up with recent Conservative politics. Social mobility has to be redefined, because of the redefined end-goals of a particular brand of Conservative social thought. Superficially, Birbalsingh poses a simple problem that needs to be solved: we tend to demean short-hop social mobility, and should be valuing it more. Deep-dive into the context of her speech, though, and we see a deeper, more complex Conservative problem-solving: working-class self-improvement leads, at the moment, towards academic qualifications, and needs to be redirected to serve the type of functioning, well-ordered, stable (but still ambitious) cultural ecosystem that might, in the long run, sustain Tory England.

Note: the above draws on the author's [published work](#) in The Political Quarterly.

About the Author



[Joseph Maslen](#) is Senior Lecturer in the Centre for Education & Policy Analysis at Liverpool Hope University.

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