

'Social Mobility' is now nonsense

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Socially mobile?

I wonder if the words 'social mobility' should join @johnrentoul's list of banned phrases? I think it has now reached the point [George Orwell's described](#) where 'political writing becomes bad writing'.

Social mobility is now a meaningless phrase, or rather, it has a different meaning according to your political position and vision. And this matters because your definition of the language dictates your policy, too.

Real social mobility – all other things being equal – must surely mean that some people will rise over their lives and others will fall. If we all rise

then that is simply economic growth. If only a lower social group rise relative to a higher group, then that is egalitarianism, not social mobility. If just a few people rise, then that's just tokenism. Of course, you might have all of this at the same time. And West Ham might win the Champions League. It's possible, but extremely unlikely.

This is a presentational problem for all the political parties. If the Tories really advocate genuine social mobility then they will be threatening the security of core middle class supporters who have fought so hard to preserve their children's life-chances. One of the great social changes in the last few decades has been the professional classes successful protection of their economic status over generations.

David Willetts rightly pointed out recently that middle class women have taken up virtually all of the places in the UK's expanded Higher Education sector. But what's he going to do about it? Reduce the size of the sector? Reverse the celebrated gains of gender equality? Offering a few paid internships in the civil service to working class teenagers is not going to change the structural dynamic of poor schooling and unsupportive parenting, for example,.

If Labour abandons real social mobility in favour of structural income redistribution then it is sending a negative message to the many aspirational working and middle-class voters who hope that they or their family can rise through greater opportunity. Gordon Brown did achieve some income redistribution during Labour's government, but even [Ed Miliband has recognised](#) the political and economic limits of using tax and benefit systems to bring about social change.

As for the Lib Dems. They are at least trying to come up with specific policies. In classic fashion they have created a quango that will oversee Universities. It is supposed to ensure Universities adopt policies that increase access for working class people, while pocketing the £9,000 fees. It may make some difference. But I am willing to bet my son's student loan that the social make-up of Russell Group students will not have changed by more than 2% in the next five-ten years.

Of course, all this is being played out against a background of income reduction and public spending cuts. These may be absolutely necessary. However, I can't see how they won't reduce both real social mobility and egalitarianism. The effects may also be much longer-term than the period of deficit reduction, as a whole generation has its life chances reduced. That may be a price we have to pay, but it makes the confused talk about social mobility sound even more like empty rhetoric.

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