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Pocket Watch – Education and social mobility

Introduction

The last week has seen renewed concerns raised about social mobility with particular interest expressed in the role that education can play in this. Notable talking points have been the President of the Girls' Schools Association urging parents not be "sniffy" about apprenticeships, the Sutton Trust hosting an important event on access and admissions to leading universities and David Cameron acknowledging that "we need a far more socially mobile country." All of this comes of course after Sir John Major raised concerns about what he considered to be the "truly shocking" state of social mobility still evident in this country. For him, education has a key role: "our education system should help children out of the circumstances in which they were born, not lock them into the circumstances in which they were born." Many would agree.

Why the latest interest?

Partly because it has policy implications for the general election and the momentum for that is already under way. Partly because as the economy shows some signs of recovery, the question of how far benefits and opportunities can be extended becomes more pertinent but partly also because in its recent **Annual State of the Nation Report**, the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission pointed to three "profound changes" that are creating new challenges. First the growing difficulties being faced by average-income families, the squeezed middle perhaps, where high levels of youth unemployment, increased university fees and rising housing costs are causing great anxieties. Second, and evident in the employment figures released recently, the labour market has become increasingly polarised between those with full-time jobs and inflation proof salaries and those without. The importance of securing 'good' qualifications and 'good' jobs in other words has never been greater. And third, recovery or not, public spending continues to look very tight for the foreseeable future so the prospect of any more funding being applied remains remote. School funding and pupil premium money may be protected but older learners and employers are being asked to contribute more and tuition fees are here to stay. Access and participation in learning therefore remain core concerns.

So where does education come in?

The Government would claim that many of its education reforms have been intended to improve opportunities for disadvantaged families. David Cameron for instance cited free childcare for toddlers, the free school movement and the rising numbers of university students from deprived areas as examples of this while the Education Secretary has sold many of his reforms on the basis of closing the gap. Current recommendations are set out in the Social Mobility Commission and include for education at least:

- Ensuring all reforms support the dual aims of raising standards/closing attainment gaps
- Introducing new area-based approaches such as the London Challenge
- Incentivising the best teachers to teach in the worst schools
- Encouraging schools to appoint a 'business relationship' manager
- Strengthening vocational provision by adopting a simpler UCAS style admissions process, incorporating payment by results in FE and aligning programmes to market needs
- Integrating youth work and education programmes to help tackle high rates of NEETs
- Encouraging 50% of firms to offer apprenticeships and work experience



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