

Kevin Brennan MP

How to combat Social Exclusion

We used to think social mobility would no longer be a problem providing everyone had equal access to education, public services and jobs. If you looked at our Commons Cabinet Office front bench team you might believe Labour had cracked the problem of social mobility.

My colleagues Tom Watson, Liam Byrne and myself all came from modest backgrounds. Both my parents left school at 14, and all three of us attended state school. Liam, Tom and I all went on to university – Oxford, Harvard and Manchester – and in one generation have gone from working-class to working at the top of Government.

Whilst it is true to say that we no longer live in a Britain that prizes the benediction of birth over the sanctity of merit, it is clear that poverty of aspiration in some communities is a real barrier to progress.

Social mobility remains one of the big issues of British politics, and Labour in government has been accused of not doing enough to overcome the problem.

This January, we published our White Paper on social mobility, ‘Getting On, Getting Ahead’. It examined the trajectory of social mobility in Britain and identified some of the barriers that still exist. It did not, as some inaccurately implied, conclude that social mobility had retreated in the past thirty-odd years; but it did indicate that social mobility had stagnated from the 1970s until recently, when it has started again to rise. This rise is the result of a decade’s investment in public services, and a concentrated agenda of fairness for all, in contrast to the impact of 18 years of Tory government which professed that there was no such thing as society. But there is more to be done to tackle an issue as deeply rooted as the barriers to social mobility.

Social mobility is complicated. In the pugilistic political arena, issues are often condensed to pithy soundbites, rather than undergoing a thoughtful examination of their complexities. It is extremely rare that any issue stands in isolation. Social mobility is hampered by many barriers which do not come from one single cause. Education, cultural attitudes, access to advice and guidance, access to training and education funding, fair selection processes, clear and flexible entry routes to the professions and lack of aspiration are all contributory factors.

This last one is particularly important. Our research has shown that poverty of aspiration is, in and of itself, one of the most intractable stumbling blocks toward more fluid social mobility.

There is an assumption that aspirations are low in deprived areas, but it's important to recognise that 'deprived areas' are not homogenous. In fact in many lower-income communities, particularly those that are ethnically diverse, mobile and urban, young people tend to have high aspirations for the future. Working-class communities in former areas of heavy industry are particularly prone to the low aspirations that can prevent young people from achieving their potential.

Sometimes these communities have a strong sense of identity, as in the South Wales Valleys, or housing estates on the edge of cities like Cardiff. In the jargon they have strong 'bonding' social capital.

What they sometimes lack is "bridging" social capital i.e. the networks and experiences which allows them to look beyond the immediate community to the opportunities the wider world offers. The old saying 'it's not what you know, it's who you know' is as true as ever. Helping communities that are isolated from wider opportunities to broaden their young people's horizons is vital.

Locating a problem helps us to address it head-on; we know we must invest in creating access to education and the professions for all deprived and low-income areas, and place particular focus on raising aspirations. And because of the wide range of factors that affect social mobility, we must treat the problem more broadly; investing in institutions, families and communities, during every stage of life.

So extending the free childcare has been part of Labour's mission both in Westminster and Cardiff Bay. Other approaches must include allocating resources for schools with the highest proportions of disadvantaged children, providing greater incentives to teachers to enter and stay in challenging schools, and expanding vocational and work-based learning. We also need to make sure we continue to support access to university for high-potential young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

But we must also address the particular needs of individuals, families and communities. Attitudes toward achievement start early in life, are heavily influenced throughout childhood, and are informed not just by peers and families, but communities as a whole. By making these groups stronger, by helping them to help themselves, we create a more solid foundation on which to build a culture not just of aspiration, but of expectation.

When one Labour minister visited a primary school last year she was struck by the contrast between the answers children and parents gave when asked what the kids would be doing when they grew up.

The younger children talked about becoming doctors, scientists and lawyers, but their parents had much lower expectations. As the children got older, so their own expectations were lowered.

Over the past decade, the Labour has made fairness for parents and families a central policy priority – introducing the right to flexible working for parents with young children, Child and Working Tax Credits, Sure Start and Parenting Programmes.

As a natural extension of this principle, we need to encourage confident parents and young people; expanding Family Nurse Partnerships, offering extended home visits to vulnerable, young first-time parents. We need employment support programmes for young people leaving care and apprenticeship places for every qualified care-leaver.

Communities play a crucial role as well – they provide networks and support, and play a principal role in forming attitudes towards success.

We need to strengthen communities by working in partnership with local groups, funding community bodies and devolving power to local government and third sector organisations. Developing policies to alleviate material poverty, is necessary but not sufficient. Policies must focus on poverty of aspiration too.

We must invest in community interventions to raise young people's aspirations and make a concentrated effort to tackle deprivation on the worst estates, support regeneration work, and to encourage young people to volunteer.

This kind of approach is absolutely crucial to creating a fairer stronger Britain.

We need a continuing commitment to services that help people achieve their full potential, but also look at the best way to deliver them. To fully address the many issues at hand, communities and government must work hand-in-hand, using expert partners – particularly the third sector – to deliver real solutions tailored to the unique needs of communities, families and individuals.

One encouraging development is the growth of social enterprise as a way to empower communities. In my role as Third Sector Minister I have seen

inspiring examples of committed people combining the energy of business with a commitment to social justice making a real difference in deprived communities, from Livity in Brixton who give media opportunities to young people from deprived backgrounds, to Pack-It in Cardiff who generate real jobs for people with disabilities. Government at every level needs to hand over the reins to communities, trusting them to know what's best for their areas. Wales with its strong roots in the mutual and co-operative movements has always understood the power of community action.

There has been an increase in local government using the third sector as service providers. I recently read the opinion that it might be cheaper for Local Authorities to only look in-house for service delivery, particularly given the economic downturn. That would be a mistake – we should be encouraging effective partnerships between local government and the Third Sector to provide flexible local services for deprived communities.

And as Labour elected representatives we should regard ourselves as social entrepreneurs, building the partnerships that will help our communities. In that regard the work of Chris Bryant MP and Leighton Andrews AM in the Rhondda over the Burberry closure is exemplary. Out of the misfortune of business closure they helped generate community benefit.

At the heart of the social mobility agenda is the fundamental belief that everyone should have an equal opportunity to succeed. That is the essence of democratic socialism and the foundation of a good society.

But social mobility is also a practical issue: to deprive anyone of a chance is to deprive us all of the benefit of their potential. We need everyone, from all walks of life, to have access to the education and training that will make best use of their talent; but we also need to help communities to support aspiration from within.

For Wales and Britain to continue to make our mark on the world, for us to come through the recession and emerge even stronger, we need all hands on deck. We all have a stake in social mobility, both individually and collectively; we reap the rewards of success and we will suffer if we allow anyone's potential to go unfulfilled. We are all culpable if we have ever contributed to the idea that there are some who, by merit of birth or class, shouldn't succeed, if we've ever bought into stereotypes, or practiced the cultural condescension of low expectations.

The philosopher John Rawls asked us to picture the rules of a perfect society, but to do it without knowing our place in it, our age, race, gender, class, level of education or profession; this is 'the veil of

**ignorance'. Then he said act accordingly to build the kind of society
which would be fair. That remains our mission.**