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Social Mobility Delusions

Why so much of what
politicians say about social
mobility in Britain is wrong,
misleading or unreliable

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Executive Summary

1. Politicians in Britain have become preoccupied with social mobility. In the last five years there have been six major governmental or parliamentary reports on the subject. All of them say Britain has a serious and worsening social mobility problem.
2. This claim is echoed by politicians across all parties. The government's social mobility 'Tsar', former Labour cabinet minister Alan Milburn, describes Britain as 'a closed shop society' and claims that 'if you're born poor you die poor.' Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg says patterns of inequality 'are imprinted from one generation to the next.' Education Secretary Michael Gove describes our social mobility rate as 'morally indefensible.' None of these statements is justified by the evidence.
3. There is extensive social mobility in Britain. If we divide the working population into three main social classes, more than half of us are in a different class from the one we were born into. Almost one-third of men born to semi-routine and routine worker parents end up in professional-managerial positions, and about the same proportion who are born to professional-managerial parents are downwardly mobile out of that class. Four out of five children who grow up in poor households do not end up poor themselves. Social mobility is the norm in Britain, not the exception, and it covers the range from top to bottom.
4. Politicians say our social mobility rate is one of the lowest in the western world, but studies of class mobility by sociologists put Britain around the middle of the international rankings. The chances of moving into a different class from than the one you were born into are better in the UK than in Germany, France or Italy, but less than in Sweden, the USA and Australia. Research by the OECD confirms the reliability of these rankings.
5. Politicians rarely refer to this research on movement between *classes*. Instead they cite research published by economists working for the Sutton Trust who say that Britain compares badly with other countries when social mobility is assessed by the similarity between parents' and children's *incomes*.
6. There is a lot of statistical error in these international comparisons of 'income persistence', and even the Sutton Trust admits it is impossible to say with any confidence whether Britain ranks above or below countries like Sweden, the USA, Australia or France. The OECD similarly warns that 'lack of comparable cross-country data' means 'these comparisons can be invalid because different studies use different variable definitions, samples, estimation methods and time periods.'
7. Statistics on educational mobility do not back up the Sutton Trust's insistence that Britain is at the bottom of the international league table (even though it says they do). The OECD ranks Britain 9th out of 30 on one measure (the extent to which children's educational attainment is independent of their parents' socio-economic status), 2nd out of 17 on another (how far years of schooling of parents and children differ), in the middle of the rankings on a third (the probability of a child attending university if their parents are not graduates), and 5th out of 14 on a fourth (the risk of early school leaving, comparing parents and children). A

child's educational performance is no more predictable from its socio-economic background in England than in the OECD as a whole.

8. Politicians frequently claim that social mobility in Britain has been falling, but again, sociological research on class mobility does not support this. Several different studies find that, if anything, 'relative class mobility' (the probability of a working class child getting into the middle class, and of a middle class child ending up in the working class) has been rising slightly since the 1950s. Politicians rarely if ever refer to this work.
9. The claim that mobility has been falling is again based on research on income persistence by the Sutton Trust, which finds a stronger association between parental and children's incomes in a 1970 birth cohort than in one born twelve years earlier. However, this finding has not been reproduced by researchers using other samples – there is no indication from the British Household Panel Survey, for example, that income mobility is getting worse – and there is an ongoing debate among scholars about whether or not it is reliable.
10. Politicians say they want Britain to be a 'meritocracy' where your class origins are unimportant and talent rises to the top, but they are reluctant to ask how far social classes are currently recruited on the basis of ability. In a meritocracy, there will always be some association between class origins and destinations because talented people filling the top positions will tend to have above-average ability children who can also compete for these positions. Most recent official reports fail to acknowledge this, assuming that any association between origins and destinations must be the result of unfair social advantages or disadvantages.
11. The 2012 all-party interim report does accept that ability is likely to be important and is to some extent innate. It nevertheless insists that 'we don't know' how much of the variation in occupational recruitment is down to innate ability differences and how much is due to the advantages and disadvantages of people's social origins. In fact, we have known for a long time that innate intelligence explains about half of the variance in cognitive test scores. My research shows that cognitive ability is about three times stronger than class origins as a predictor of people's eventual social class destinations in Britain. When politicians say we don't know these things, what they really mean is they don't want to know them.
12. Politicians who believe there is a large pool of 'wasted working class talent' in Britain commonly point to a famous graph which seems to show that cognitive development of working class children born with high ability slows down after age 3, and that lower ability middle class children start to overtake them. But this pattern is the result of what statisticians call 'regression to the mean' caused by statistical error in the earliest test. When the graph is re-run controlling for this problem, there is no sign of the ability scores of bright children from poor homes declining over time, nor of less intelligent children from more affluent homes overtaking them. Both groups' scores stay more-or-less level across several tests taken between the ages of 3 to 7. Politicians have been resting their arguments on illusory evidence.

13. Britain does not have a serious 'social mobility problem', but it does have a serious 'underclass problem.' Underclass children growing up in welfare-dependent households are frequently abandoned by their fathers and brought up by young mothers who cannot cope. They may be exposed to substance abuse in the home, have no structure in their lives, and no positive adult role models. Social mobility research has rarely looked specifically at these children, but their life chances are almost certainly blighted. Research for the Sutton Trust suggests a key problem for them is the quality of parenting they receive. Government early years interventions may help improve this if properly targeted, as will other recent initiatives including those by the Education Endowment Foundation.

14. The government's 'social mobility strategy' aims to increase social mobility by breaking down 'barriers' at the top (e.g. by forcing universities to accept some children on lower grades). Such policies have little relevance to the problems faced by children in the underclass, for their problem is not absence of opportunity, it is neglect. These policies are unlikely to have any significant effect on social mobility rates, which have hardly varied despite fifty years of radical educational upheavals. But they do threaten to do lasting damage to our higher education system, by preventing top universities from recruiting the best students on purely meritocratic principles.

15. It suits politicians in both main parties to believe we have a social mobility problem, even though we don't. It fits Labour's egalitarian conviction to believe that rich kids get unfair advantages and working class children are prevented from improving themselves, and for the Cameron 'modernisers', attacking the private schools and the elite universities is a way of showing that the party has changed its spots, and that they now care about 'ordinary people'. The debate is being driven more by ideology and preconceived beliefs than by facts.

Introduction: Whistling into the wind¹

Until recently, nobody in Britain outside a small band of academic sociologists took much interest in social mobility. But in recent years, politicians have become increasingly concerned about what they believe is evidence of entrenched social class barriers limiting people's opportunities for advancement, and this has prompted a surge of official reports and policy initiatives aimed at increasing social mobility rates. In the last five years there have been no fewer than six major government or parliamentary reports on the subject:

- In 2008, Gordon Brown commissioned the Cabinet Office to produce a report, *Getting On, Getting Ahead*, which concluded that the social mobility rate was flat-lining despite policies aimed at widening opportunity.² It set out a range of new proposals designed to increase opportunities;
- In 2009, former Cabinet Minister Alan Milburn published his report on fair access into the professions, *Unleashing Aspiration*.³ In the preface to the report, Milburn wrote that 'birth, not worth, has become more and more a determinant of people's life chances,' and he argued that Britain had become a 'closed-shop society';
- In 2010, the National Equality Panel, set up by Labour's Deputy Leader Harriet Harman, published *An Anatomy of Economic Inequality in the UK*.⁴ It claimed that intergenerational mobility in Britain is 'low' and that growing economic inequalities are making it increasingly difficult for people from poorer backgrounds to improve their situations;
- In 2011, Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg launched the Coalition government's 'social mobility strategy', *Opening Doors and Breaking Barriers*. It claimed that 'the income and social class of parents continue to have a huge bearing on a child's chances', and Clegg identified the Coalition's 'principal social policy goal' as 'improving social mobility.'⁵ The strategy was updated in 2012 when a suite of 'social mobility indicators' was identified to guide and evaluate future policy;
- In May 2012, an all-party parliamentary group looking into social mobility in Britain published its Interim Report, *7 Key Truths About Social Mobility*. It repeated that 'UK mobility is low relative to other OECD countries' and that 'today's 40-somethings have

¹ I am very grateful to Stephen Gorard, John Jerrim, Geoff Payne and Nigel Williams for helpful comments, criticisms and suggestions on an earlier draft of this paper. It is important to emphasise that the views expressed and responsibility for claims made in the paper are entirely mine.

² Cabinet Office Strategy Unit, *Getting On, Getting Ahead* November 2008

³ *Unleashing Aspiration: The final report of the panel on fair access to the professions* (the Milburn Report), 2009

⁴ John Hills and others, *An Anatomy of Economic Inequality in the UK* London, Government Equalities Office, 2010

⁵ HM Government, *Opening Doors, Breaking Barriers: A strategy for social mobility*, April 2011, pp.3 and 5. The first annual update of the strategy, subtitled *Update on progress since April 2011*, was published by the Cabinet Office in May 2012

shown less mobility than their elders.⁶ The group intends to publish its final report at the end of 2012;

- Also in May 2012, Alan Milburn (now the government's 'Independent Reviewer on Social Mobility') issued his first progress report since being appointed. His report, *Fair Access to Professional Careers*, complained that 'professions close their doors to a wider social spectrum of talent instead of opening them.'⁷ A follow-up report on access to the universities is in the pipeline.

In 2010, after the first three of these reports had appeared, I wrote a short book called *Social Mobility Myths*.⁸ In it, I showed that that much of what was being stated in these reports was wrong. It is true that our social origins do have some influence on our destinies in life, but the evidence shows that ability and hard work are much more important. Far from being the 'closed shop society' the politicians say it is, Britain looks quite meritocratic.⁹

I set out evidence showing that children born to working class parents generally rise in the social structure if they are bright and motivated, and dull or lazy children born to middle class families commonly fall. Performance on an IQ test at the age of ten predicts a child's eventual social class destination about three times better than their parents' social class does. Class origins do have some effect on academic and occupational outcomes, but it is quite small. Ability trumps class background. On the strength of this evidence, I concluded that Britain does not fall a long way short of the 'meritocratic ideal' (the principle that people should get to their positions on the basis of talent and hard work, and that their class origins should be unimportant).

Most politicians say they believe in this meritocratic ideal, but they too often forget that, even in a perfect meritocracy, there would still be a modest statistical association between people's social origins and the class they end up in. This is because, after being recruited into the top positions, the brightest people often have bright children who themselves do well at school and go on to successful careers.¹⁰ Just because children born to middle class parents often get middle class jobs does not necessarily mean that there is a social mobility problem, although many politicians assume that it does.

This is not the only problem I detected in the flurry of recent official concern about social mobility in Britain. In my book, I identified four key areas where our politicians' statements and actions about social mobility appeared seriously flawed. I called them the four social mobility myths:

⁶ Interim Report of the all-party parliamentary group on social mobility, *7 Key Truths about Social Mobility*, 1 May 2012, p.6

⁷ Alan Milburn, 'Foreword and summary' to *Fair Access to Professional Careers* (Cabinet Office, May 2012), p.3

⁸ Peter Saunders *Social Mobility Myths*, Civitas 2010

⁹ Michael Young coined the term 'meritocracy' in his dystopian novel, *The Rise of the Meritocracy* (London, Thames and Hudson, 1958). There he defined it as 'intelligence and effort together' (p.94). As we shall see, I do not claim that Britain is wholly meritocratic, but the evidence shows that ability and effort are the two most important factors shaping where individuals end up in life.

¹⁰ Michael Young understood this, which is why, as an egalitarian, he was critical of meritocracy. He worried that a self-perpetuating intellectual elite would come to dominate society. Charles Murray understands it too, which is why he talks of a process of 'cognitive stratification' in modern societies and worries about the widening social divisions it is creating (Charles Murray, *Coming Apart*, Crown Forum, New York 2012).

- The belief that opportunities in Britain are tightly limited by the circumstance of one's birth, when the evidence shows that social mobility is actually widespread and common;
- The belief that social mobility in Britain is declining, and that opportunities for working class children are deteriorating, even though there is evidence that, if anything, fluidity has slightly increased over the years;
- The failure to recognise that intelligence differences are a major factor driving social class recruitment, and that correlations between parents' and children's class positions do not necessarily point to the operation of unfair social advantages;
- The faith that social mobility rates can be increased by more government tinkering with the education system, even though fifty years of radical reform have had almost no impact on these rates.

I hoped that my book might 'convince our political masters that much of what they believe (or say they believe) about social mobility in this country is either false or more complicated than they think.'¹¹ After the book was published, I did my best to publicise its core findings in radio and television interviews, documentaries and through the press.¹² But two years on, it is depressingly clear that none of this has had any impact at all on the people who shape public policy.

The reports, policies and speeches of our politicians since 2010 show that the political agenda is still being driven by these same, entrenched social mobility myths. Indeed, in the last two years these myths have begun to acquire the status of unchallengeable 'facts.' They have been cemented into the foundations of the government's new 'social mobility strategy' and they are increasingly taken for-granted by journalists. The four social mobility myths I identified in my book are evolving into fixed social mobility delusions.

In this research paper, I therefore make another attempt to undermine these myths and shake these delusions. I shall not repeat the evidence I presented in *Social Mobility Myths*, but I shall discuss new material that has been published since my book came out. I shall refer to the three main official reports which have appeared since 2010: the Coalition government's 2011 social mobility strategy (and its update in 2012), the all-party parliamentary group's 2012 interim report, and Alan Milburn's 2012 progress report on access to the professions. I shall also pay special attention to the findings published by a group of LSE economists working for the Sutton Trust, for their work has informed most of the claims made in official government reports on social mobility since 2008. We shall see that politicians have often adopted their findings uncritically, and have ended up making claims and developing policies based on partial – and often inaccurate – interpretations of the evidence.

I conclude by trying to explain why politicians seem so resolutely blind to evidence which flies in the face of the claims they are making and undermines the case for the policies they are pursuing. I shall suggest that their tunnel vision is leading us into some huge policy mistakes which at best will be

¹¹ *Social Mobility Myths* p.7

¹² Television interviews included Sky News, BBC News 24 and the BBC-2 documentary 'Who gets the best jobs?' Radio included LBC, BBC Five Live and BBC Radio 4 'Today'. All these can be accessed via my web site, www.petersaunders.org.uk, which also has a link to articles on social mobility I published in *The Sunday Times* and *The Daily Telegraph*.

costly failures, and at worst are likely to wreck some of our finest institutions of higher learning. This juggernaut needs to be stopped, before it inflicts lasting and serious damage.

The first delusion: A 'closed shop society'

The phrase, 'a closed shop society', was used to describe social mobility in Britain by former Labour cabinet minister Alan Milburn in his 2009 report on entry into the professions. It suggests Britain is a country where it is impossible to break out of a social class once you are in it. The truth, however, is very different.

If we divide the working population into three main social classes – a professional-managerial class at the top, a semi- and unskilled working class at the bottom, and a range of intermediate positions in-between – we find that more than half of the UK population occupies a different class position from the one their parents belonged to.¹³ A recent study based on the 2005 General Household Survey reports that 32% of British men born to semi-routine and routine worker parents had by that year reached the professional-managerial class, and 30% of men born to professional-managerial parents had been downwardly mobile out of that class.¹⁴ Research on two cohorts of children born in 1958 and 1970 similarly finds that more than 40% of them were upwardly mobile by their early thirties, while more than a quarter moved down.¹⁵ Social mobility is, in other words, the norm in Britain, not the exception, and it occurs in both directions across the entire range of the occupational class structure.

The Prime Minister has appointed Alan Milburn as the Coalition government's 'Independent Reviewer on Social Mobility', and has made him the interim head of a new Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission. One would hope that a man in this position would be aware of these basic mobility statistics, but he has continued to insist that Britain is a closed society. On the very day he was appointed to his new post, Milburn told BBC Radio 4: 'We still live in a country where, invariably, if you're born poor, you die poor.'¹⁶

After I heard this interview, I checked the latest research. It shows that *eighty-one per cent* of British men who grew up in families below the poverty line end up in adulthood with incomes *above* the poverty line.¹⁷ Milburn's suggestion that people who grow up in poverty are 'invariably' destined to

¹³ Data from various surveys, reported in *Social Mobility Myths*, chapter 1

¹⁴ Yaojun Li and Fiona Devine, 'Is social mobility really declining?' *Sociological Research Online*, vol.16, August 2011, Table IV, www.socresonline.org.uk/16/3/4.html

¹⁵ In the 1958 birth cohort, 45% of men and 39% of women moved up by age 33 and 27% of men and 37% of women moved down. In the 1970 cohort, 42% of men and 41% of women moved up while 30% of men and 35% of women moved down. John Goldthorpe and Michelle Jackson, 'Intergenerational class mobility in contemporary Britain' *British Journal of Sociology*, vol.58, 2007

¹⁶ BBC Radio 4, *Today*, 5 April 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-12962487>.

¹⁷ Jo Blanden and Steve Gibbons, *The persistence of poverty across generations*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2006, Table 2. The probability of a boy living with poor parents in the 1970s being in poverty when he reached his thirties was 19%, as compared with a 10% probability for those whose parents were not poor. Growing up in poverty thus doubles your risk of ending up poor yourself, but more than 4 in 5 still escape this fate.

remain poor in adulthood is therefore appallingly, irresponsibly wrong. Nevertheless, the comment went unchallenged, Milburn remains in charge of the government's social mobility strategy, and in his latest report, he has even repeated this claim.¹⁸

Milburn is not alone in asserting that children growing up in poorer households have little or no opportunity to improve themselves. In his foreword to the 2011 report, *Opening Doors, Breaking Barriers*, Nick Clegg wrote: 'In Britain today, life chances are narrowed for too many by the circumstances of their birth... Patterns of inequality are imprinted from one generation to the next.'¹⁹ But with more than half the population ending up in a different class from their parents, how can it possibly make any sense for a senior politician to say that inequalities are 'imprinted' by the 'circumstances of birth' from one generation to the next?

Politicians who come out with statements like these often justify their claims by suggesting that Britain performs badly in international social mobility league tables. In a widely-reported speech in May 2012, for example, Education Minister Michael Gove declared:

'Those who are born poor are more likely to stay poor and those who inherit privilege are more likely to pass on privilege in England than in any comparable country. For those of us who believe in social justice, this stratification and segregation are morally indefensible.'²⁰

This belief that Britain performs worse than other countries can be found in all the recent government reports, including the latest publications. The 2011 *Opening Doors...* report says: 'We currently have relatively low levels of social mobility... the available evidence suggests that we are less socially mobile than other countries.'²¹ And launching the 2012 all-party parliamentary report, *7 Key Truths About Social Mobility*, the group's chairman, Conservative MP Damien Hinds, stated: 'There are plenty of other countries that have much more mobility than us... the UK is always almost in the worst position.'²²

There is something very odd about these claims, for sociological research over many years has shown that movement between classes in Britain is about average when compared with other developed countries. In their 1992 study, for example, Goldthorpe and Erikson found that England ranked 8th out of 15 countries on a measure of 'relative mobility', with more fluidity than in Germany, France, Italy and the Netherlands, but less than in Sweden, the USA, Japan and Australia.²³

¹⁸ '...the correlation between demography and destiny that so poisons British society – between being born poor and, in all likelihood, dying poor' Alan Milburn, Foreword and summary to *Fair Access to Professional Careers*, p.7

¹⁹ *Opening Doors, Breaking Barriers* p.3

²⁰ Quoted in Greg Hurst, 'Domination by private schools is indefensible, declares Gove' *The Times* 11 May 2012

²¹ *Opening Doors, Breaking Barriers* p.16

²² Launch of *7 Key Truths About Social Mobility*, Policy Exchange, 1 May 2012, available at: http://www.policyexchange.org.uk/events/past-events/item/seven-key-truths-about-social-mobility?category_id=37

²³ John Goldthorpe and Robert Erikson, *The Constant Flux*, Clarendon Press, 1992. Scotland and Northern Ireland performed rather worse than England. Relative mobility controls for the change in the size of classes over time and refers to the probability that people starting out from different class positions will achieve similar outcomes.

When he updated this analysis in 2004, Breen again found that Britain stood in the middle of the international rankings, still ahead of Germany and Denmark, but behind Sweden and the USA.²⁴

In 2007, the OECD reviewed the research literature on class mobility and it came to the same conclusion. All industrialized countries showed high rates of 'absolute mobility',²⁵ partly because they have all experienced an expansion in middle class jobs which has created more 'room at the top.' Britain is no exception. 'Relative mobility' (a measure of fluidity which looks at the chances of people from different class backgrounds ending up in the same class) has varied rather more between countries, but Britain does not stand out on this measure either: 'Relative mobility is rather stable over time and it differs across countries: the United States is at the median between the more fluid countries (Sweden, Canada and Norway) and the most rigid nations (such as West Germany, Ireland, Italy and France).'²⁶ Britain lay somewhere between these two extremes.

Given all this evidence, how is the 2011 *Opening Doors...* report able to claim that 'we are less socially mobile than other countries'? How can the chairman of the 2012 all-party group maintain that 'the UK is always almost in the worst position'? And what leads the Education Secretary to assert that mobility is lower in Britain than 'in any comparable country'? Judging by research on class recruitment, we are somewhere in the middle of the relative social mobility league table, and there isn't a lot of difference between any developed countries as regards their absolute mobility rates.

Politicians, however, have largely ignored all this evidence on *class* mobility. Instead, they have emphasised research on *income* mobility which compares people's earnings with what their parents earned. This focus reflects the strong influence over the social mobility debate achieved in recent years by Sir Peter Lampl's Sutton Trust.

Employing economists from the LSE, the Sutton Trust has published a series of high-profile research papers which have measured the degree to which parents' incomes are similar to those later achieved by their children. It argues that this is a more appropriate way of measuring social mobility than looking at movement between social class positions. On this income measure, Britain appears to perform quite badly in comparison with other north European nations (although as one critic of the Sutton Trust work has pointed out, the amount of income mobility in Britain is still 'staggeringly high').²⁷

²⁴ Richard Breen, *Social Mobility in Europe*, Oxford University Press, 2004

²⁵ Absolute mobility refers to change between class positions, up or down. Given that the number of professional-managerial jobs has been expanding in all developed countries, while the manual working class has been shrinking, some degree of movement has been inevitable, with more movement up than down comparing one generation with the next. .

²⁶ Anna d'Addio, 'Intergenerational transmission of disadvantage' OECD Social, Employment and Migration *Working Paper*, no, 52, Paris, 2007, p.65. Relative mobility is unaffected by changes in the size of different classes over time, for it measures the way people from different classes perform relative to each other.

²⁷ The key Sutton Trust findings are in Jo Blanden, Paul Gregg, Stephen Machin, 'Intergenerational mobility in Europe and North America' *Centre for Economic Performance*, London School of Economics, 2005. This paper has subsequently been revised several times to respond to critics. One of these critics is Stephen Gorard, who notes that about 17% of those born to the poorest 25% of families end up in the richest income quartile, and

One member of the Sutton Trust team, Jo Blanden, has reviewed international evidence on income mobility and compared it with the results reported by studies using other indicators, including class mobility.²⁸ She concludes that comparisons of international mobility rates based on class measures seem to be out of line with other approaches. For example, Germany comes out as relatively fluid as regards income mobility, but as relatively rigid on class mobility. For the United States, the reverse is true. Blanden speculates that this may reflect a higher degree of variation of incomes within each class in the USA than in Germany.

Blanden reports that Britain is like the USA in that income mobility is much less marked than class mobility. On a scale of 0 (no association between parents' and children's incomes) to 1 (parents' incomes exactly predict what their children will later earn), she estimates an elasticity coefficient in Britain of 0.37, which is a weaker association than that reported for the USA (0.41), but is considerably stronger than in Italy, France, Norway, Australia, Germany, Sweden, Canada, Finland or Denmark.²⁹ This suggests that income mobility is less marked in Britain than in all these other countries, and it is this finding that has repeatedly been cited in government reports complaining of our 'low' rate of social mobility. It seems that British children are less likely than those in other countries to achieve an income very different from that enjoyed by their parents.

There are, however, a number of serious problems with this conclusion. First, as Blanden herself recognises, these coefficients are estimates with large standard errors. Every country's score is only an estimate and has to be bracketed within a certain margin of error. But this makes comparisons hazardous whenever the range of estimates for two countries overlap, for it is then difficult to know for sure which really has the higher or lower figure.

Blanden admits this herself: 'While it is tempting to immediately form the estimates into a league table, we must pay attention to the size of the standard errors... it is impossible to statistically distinguish the estimates for Sweden and the USA. The appropriate ranking at the top end is difficult with large standard errors on the Australian, French, British and US estimates making it unclear how these countries should be ranked.'³⁰ But if it is 'unclear how these countries should be ranked', how can our politicians say with any confidence that these statistics show we are at the bottom of the international league table?

There is also a lot of guesswork going on in the estimation of parental incomes in many of these countries, especially those which lack the long-term panel surveys that Britain and the USA have

vice versa. This is a remarkably high figure: 'If there were no financial inheritance, no inheritance of talent, no nepotism and perfect social mobility, then the maximum this figure could be is 25%. The difference from the ideal of perfect mobility in these tables containing 2000 cases is represented by only about 25 cases in each of the 'wrong' extreme cells. Taken at face value, a key policy message could be that Britain has a quite staggering level of social mobility.' (Stephen Gorard, 'A reconsideration of rates of social mobility in Britain' *British Journal of Sociology of Education* vol.29, 2008, p.323).

²⁸ Jo Blanden, 'How much can we learn from international comparisons of social mobility?' *Centre for the Economics of Education* Departmental Paper no.111, November 2009, London School of Economics

²⁹ 'How much can we learn from international comparisons of social mobility?', Table 1. The other country studied was Brazil, with a coefficient of 0.52. 53 of the original 65 countries were omitted from the analysis due to inadequate data.

³⁰ 'How much can we learn from international comparisons of social mobility?' p.15

been running for many years. It is impossible to know what respondents' parents were earning thirty or forty years ago if they were not actually interviewed back then. And even if they were interviewed (as they were in Britain's 1958 birth cohort study), it often turns out that their incomes were not recorded very precisely or reliably, or that their income on the day they were interviewed does not provide a reliable guide to what they normally earned in an average week.

To get around these problems, economists have often resorted to using what they call 'instrumental variables' to guess what parents might have earned based on other things that we know about them, such as their education or their occupation. However, these guesses tend to inflate the strength of association between parents' and children's estimated incomes. Blanden's response to this is to deflate estimates based on instrumental variables by 25%.

When she comes to apply this procedure to the British data, however, she hits yet another problem, for two different surveys covering the same generation of parents have produced very different estimates of income persistence. One, using the 1958 birth cohort data, gives us a coefficient of 0.44 (even after being 'scaled down' from 0.58 to take account of its use of instrumental variables), suggesting a comparatively low social mobility rate in Britain. But a second study using the British Household Panel Study comes up with a much lower figure of just 0.29, suggesting much more fluidity. Which is correct? Blanden has no idea, so she simply averages the two, to produce her estimate for Britain of 0.37. It is on this figure that Britain stands condemned as having a much worse rate of social mobility than other countries.

Given (a) the size of the standard errors in the various country estimates, (b) the use of indirect measures to estimate parental incomes, (c) the arbitrary 25% 'scale-down' to make the estimates appear more plausible, and (d) the huge divergence between two different British studies estimating income data from the same generation of parents, it is not unreasonable to question the reliability of the international rankings which British politicians have largely accepted on trust.

There are other concerns too. Stephen Gorard points out that parental incomes are measured in some countries on the basis of the father's income alone, but in others are averaged across both fathers and mothers. He believes that inter-generational correlations may be more favourable in countries using only the father's income (Norway, Denmark, Finland, Sweden) than in those using both (including Britain and the USA).³¹

Gorard also draws attention to the possible impact on country rankings of variations in the ages at which the incomes of parents and/or their children were measured. This is important, for incomes tend to change as we get older (so-called '*intra-generational mobility*'), and measuring children's incomes early in their working lives may therefore fail to take account of later career mobility. In a commonly-cited Sutton Trust research paper, the US and UK data are based on sons' incomes at the age of 30, while sons' incomes in Nordic countries like Norway and Finland were measured when they were around 40.³² A significant amount of *intra-generational mobility* in Britain and America is therefore likely to have been overlooked, in which case it would not be surprising that these

³¹ Stephen Gorard, 'A reconsideration of rates of social mobility in Britain'

³² Data taken from Jo Blanden, Paul Gregg, Stephen Machin, *Intergenerational mobility in Europe and North America*, Table 2. The UK data are taken from the 1970 British Cohort Study.

countries appear to be less mobile than the Scandinavians. However, the Sutton Trust researchers claim in a subsequent re-analysis that cross-national differences still remain, even when the ages of fathers and sons in different countries are brought more into line.³³

Gorard expresses 'considerable doubt over the claims to credibility' for much of this research.³⁴ He is not alone, for the Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) is also wary. In one report, it says: 'Comparing cross-country estimates of intergenerational income mobility requires a great deal of caution.'³⁵ In another, it points to the 'lack of comparable cross-country data' on parental incomes and warns that 'these comparisons can be invalid because different studies use different variable definitions, samples, estimation methods and time periods.'³⁶ Even the Sutton Trust researchers accept there are problems: 'There is a great deal of uncertainty about comparisons made on the basis of income mobility,' admits Jo Blanden.³⁷

Nevertheless, Blanden and her colleagues continue to insist that Britain really does perform poorly on international mobility comparisons. They justify this by arguing that other measures of social mobility point in the same direction as their income mobility data. 'The UK tends to be towards the immobile end of the spectrum on *all* measures,' Blanden tells us.³⁸

But careful inspection of her evidence shows this is not the case. Britain seems to perform relatively badly on the (unreliable) income persistence measure, but we have already seen that it ranks about average on measures of class mobility. The other two kinds of measures Blanden looks at are:

- Comparisons of the 'socio-economic status' of parents and their children (SES is based on a 'socio-economic index' which combines people's incomes and education levels into a single indicator);
- Correlations between the educational achievements of parents and children (e.g. the level of qualifications they achieve, or the years they spent in school) to gauge educational mobility chances across different countries.

But in neither of these cases does Britain appear 'at the immobile end of the spectrum,' as Blanden claims.

Socio-economic status is based partly on people's incomes, so it is no surprise that this measure generates mobility estimates which are broadly consistent with those achieved using income measures alone.³⁹ Blanden discusses the results from a 33-country comparison of status persistence which finds countries like Japan, Canada, Norway and the Netherlands have relatively high fluidity,

³³ *Intergenerational mobility in Europe and North America*, Appendix, Tables A1 and A2

³⁴ 'A reconsideration of rates of social mobility in Britain' p.322

³⁵ Anna d'Addio, 'Intergenerational transmission of disadvantage', p.29

³⁶ Osetta Causa and Asa Johansson, 'Intergenerational social mobility in OECD countries' *OECD Journal: Economic Studies*, OECD 2010, pp.2 and 9

³⁷ 'How much can we learn from international comparisons of social mobility?' p.1

³⁸ 'How much can we learn from international comparisons of social mobility?' p.20, emphasis added

³⁹ By the same logic, it is also partly a measure of education, so measures of mobility based on SES of parents and children would also be expected to correlate with measures based on education. Clearly, SES-based measures cannot be an independent check on the validity of measures based on either income or education.

and those like France, Ireland, Portugal and Belgium do worse. However, we search in vain in this study for any mention of Britain, for the UK was not included in the sample.⁴⁰ Clearly, then, this research cannot throw any new light on Britain's international mobility ranking.

In her review of research on education mobility, Blanden finds that Britain ranks as one of the most fluid countries on one measure (the UK correlation between parents' and children's years of education makes the country the 6th most open out of 42), and comes 14th out of 20 on another.⁴¹ A more comprehensive review of educational indicators by the OECD ranks Britain 9th out of 30 on one measure (how far children's educational attainment is independent of their parents' socio-economic status), 2nd out of 17 on another (the extent to which years of schooling of parents and children differ), in the middle of the rankings on a third (the probability of a child attending university if their parents are not graduates), and 5th out of 14 on a fourth (the risk of early school leaving, comparing parents and children).⁴²

A very recent analysis of children's reading scores by the UK Department for Education concludes that, while the impact of socio-economic status is somewhat greater in England than in the average OECD country (i.e. reading scores increase more as you move up the SES scale in England), the strength of this association is slightly below the OECD average (i.e. knowing the parents' SES does not predict their child's reading score any better in England than in the average country). Across the OECD, socio-economic background explains 14% of the variance in children's reading scores; in England it explains 13.8%. The report concludes: 'Student attainment is no more closely related to socio-economic background than on average across the OECD.'⁴³

It is difficult to see from all this how Blanden can conclude that Britain struggles on *all* indicators. In this country, our chances of ending up in a different *class* from the one we were born into are in line with most other developed countries. There is some evidence that our *incomes* may not diverge from those of our parents as much as occurs in other countries, but it is difficult to establish clear international rankings on this measure. The UK is not included in the analysis of *socio-economic persistence* to which Blanden refers, and the country ranks around the average – and sometimes better – on a number of different measures of *educational mobility*. As the OECD concludes: 'These

⁴⁰ It is a 2007 study of 'intergenerational status correlation' across 33 countries by Ganzeboom and Treiman. Britain does not figure either in the other comparative study of income mobility reviewed by Blanden – a 2008 study of income elasticities in 16 countries by Andrews and Leigh.

⁴¹ Tables 2 and 3. Britain's apparently favourable ranking on correlations based on years of education is, according to Blanden, due to the low variation in years of education of parents, and is therefore statistically misleading. This may be so, but it certainly doesn't place Britain at the 'immobile end' of the continuum.

⁴² Osetta Causa and Asa Johansson, 'Intergenerational social mobility in OECD countries'

⁴³ Emily Knowles and Helen Evans, 'PISA 2009: How does the social attainment gap in England compare with countries internationally?' Department for Education *Research Report* No.206, April 2012, p.2. Plotting SES on the X axis of a graph, and reading scores on the Y axis, the impact of SES is measured by the slope of the line (β), while the strength of the association is measured by how well the line fits the scatter of data points (R^2). In England, a 1 unit increase in SES raises the predicted reading score by 44 points, compared with an OECD average of 38 (in Finland, Canada and Korea this impact is in the low thirties, while in New Zealand, Belgium and Australia it is in the high forties or fifties). The strength of the association between SES and reading scores in England (the R^2) is 0.138 (i.e. SES predicts 13.8% of the variance in reading scores), compared with an OECD average of 0.14..

indicators do not necessarily provide the same picture of persistence across countries. For instance, the United Kingdom seems to be less mobile in terms of wage persistence...than in terms of education persistence.⁴⁴ This conclusion directly contradicts Blanden's claim.

We should therefore be very cautious about accepting the claim that Britain is lagging significantly behind other countries in social mobility. There is certainly no justification in these statistics for Alan Milburn's claim that we are a 'closed shop society', nor for Michael Gove's charge that our mobility rate is 'morally indefensible.' Nor does this evidence suggest a pressing need for the government to rescue social mobility.

The second delusion: Things are getting worse

The Sutton Trust and its team of LSE economists is also responsible for the claim that social mobility rates in Britain have been declining over time.

Most observers agree that the total amount of movement of people between class positions ('absolute mobility') appears to be slowing down, but this isn't what the Sutton Trust or the politicians are talking about when they complain of growing unfairness. Through the twentieth century, as a result of the growth of public sector employment and technological and economic innovation, the middle class grew larger in each generation and the manual working class shrank. A century ago, three-quarters of the jobs in Britain were in the manual working class and only a quarter involved 'white-collar' work, and today these proportions have been turned almost on their head.⁴⁵ But this structural transition is now slowing, and eventually it must come to a halt, for we cannot all have middle class jobs. People will still have to be employed in the future to clean the offices, serve in the restaurants and empty the wheelie-bins.

The one-off expansion of the professional-managerial middle class over the last hundred years contributed to a high absolute rate of social mobility in all developed countries, and Britain was no exception. In each generation, there were more 'top jobs' to fill, so people born into lower class positions had to be recruited in order to fill them. But this expansion in the absolute rate of upward social mobility had no necessary implications for 'relative mobility' rates (the chances of people born into different classes arriving at similar class destinations). Everybody benefited from the expansion of the middle class: middle class children improved their statistical chances of staying in that class, and working class children improved their chances of joining them there.

Clearly, the more the middle class grows, the less scope there is for it to expand even further in the future. Notwithstanding Alan Milburn's curious claim in his latest report that continued expansion of professional occupations could deliver a 'social mobility dividend' in the next ten years, we must

⁴⁴ 'Intergenerational social mobility in OECD countries' p.24

⁴⁵ Trevor Noble, 'The mobility transition' *Sociology* vol.34, 2000

soon be approaching saturation point in the size of the middle class.⁴⁶ This does not mean that our children will have less chance than we did to gain middle class employment, for the middle class is going to remain at least as large for them as it was for us. But it does mean that, unless downward mobility rates increase, fewer people are likely to change class positions in the future than has happened in the past. With a smaller working class, fewer people will be available to be upwardly mobile, so absolute rates of upward mobility are going to have to fall. Indeed, for men (though not for women), they are falling already.⁴⁷

There is probably little that politicians can (or should) do to change this. There have been vague policy commitments in various official reports to increasing the number of 'good jobs' (with no recognition that we will always need people to perform menial tasks in the economy), and to raising the level of qualifications of school leavers (as if giving more students more certificates will somehow swell the number of professional and managerial vacancies for them to fill). But much of this discussion is hopelessly confused, and none of it is relevant to the key question of 'fairness' which is what the politicians say they are concerned about when they worry about declining social mobility.

The fairness question is, as it has always been, whether children from different classes or income groups with the same ability and motivation share the same opportunities to succeed and to fail. This is quite distinct from the question of how many places are available for them in the middle class if they make good.

Sociological research on this key question of fluidity finds that, if anything, it has actually increased slightly in Britain over the long-term. One study by Heath and Payne finds that relative social mobility rates for men born in Britain since World War II are significantly higher than for those born before the war. In other words, the probability of working class boys ending up in middle class jobs, and of middle class boys ending up in working class jobs, is a bit higher now than it was in the past.⁴⁸ This finding has been confirmed by Gershuny using the British Household Panel Survey who reports slightly increased fluidity for generations born after 1940.⁴⁹ Comparing data from the 1991 British

⁴⁶ *Fair Access to Professional Careers* estimates that 83% of new jobs created in the next decade will be professional. The report says this could 'produce a social mobility dividend for our country' (p.1) and could 'speed up social mobility' (p.15).

⁴⁷ Geoff Payne, 'Labouring under a misapprehension: Politicians' perceptions and the realities of structural social mobility in Britain 1995-2010' In Paul Lambert et al., *Social Stratification: Trends and Processes*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2012. Li and Devine find that male absolute mobility rates were unchanged overall between 1991 and 2005, but downward mobility increased while upward mobility decreased. For women, there was no change. Yaojun Li and Fiona Devine, 'Is social mobility really declining?' *Sociological Research Online* vol.16, 2011

⁴⁸ Adrian Heath and Clive Payne, 'Twentieth century trends in social mobility in Britain' Centre for Research into Elections and Social Trends, *Working Paper*, no.70, 1999, University of Oxford. No statistically significant change was found for girls. The research was based on responses to various general election surveys where respondents were asked for their own, and their parents', occupations.

⁴⁹ Jonathon Gershuny, 'Beating the odds' Institute for Social and Economic Research *Working Paper*, no.17, 2002, University of Essex.

Household Panel Survey and the 2005 General Household Survey, Li and Devine similarly report ‘a slight but significant increase in fluidity.’⁵⁰

You would never know any of this research existed, listening to our politicians and journalists. In the face of sociological research showing that relative mobility chances in this country have been rising slightly, our politicians continue to assert that they have fallen, and this remains true of the latest reports. Referring to income mobility, the 2011 *Opening Doors...* report says that ‘social mobility for children born in Great Britain in 1970 got slightly worse than for children born in 1958.’⁵¹ Similarly, the 2012 *7 Truths...* report states that, ‘Today’s 40-somethings have shown less mobility than their elders.’⁵²

These claims are deeply damaging, for they invariably get re-hashed and amplified in the media, helping to embed the myth of declining mobility firmly in the public consciousness.⁵³ Following the *7 Truths...* report, for example:

- Eleanor Mills in *The Sunday Times* said it was ‘depressing’ that ‘forty-somethings have shown less social mobility than those born in the 1950s.’ She then added (quite erroneously) that ‘the socioeconomic circumstances of the family at a child’s birth are the biggest factor in the baby’s life trajectory’;⁵⁴
- In *The Observer*, Tracy McVeigh wrote that ‘today’s 40-somethings have *even* less mobility than those who were born in the 1950s’, thereby implying that an already terrible situation had just got worse;⁵⁵
- Condemning the UK’s record as ‘really appalling’, Rafael Behr in the *New Statesman* wrote: ‘The situation appears to be getting worse. Today’s 40-somethings have progressed, as a cohort, less than the generation that preceded them. The life chances of children born today look substantially pre-determined by the circumstances of their birth... the pattern is soul-sapping immobility’;⁵⁶

⁵⁰ Li and Devine, ‘Is social mobility really declining?’ para 5.3

⁵¹ *Opening Doors, Breaking Barriers* p.20. The report does, however, acknowledge that research on class mobility finds no such change between these two cohorts.

⁵² *7 Key Truths About Social Mobility*, p.6

⁵³ There were fewer than 5 social mobility stories per year in the English broadsheets before 2003. This average rose to 18 in 2005 and had reached 71 by 2008-9. According to Payne, media coverage has generally been ‘inaccurate, inconsistent, misleading.’ Geoff Payne, ‘A new social mobility?’ *Contemporary Social Science* vol.7, 2012, p.60

⁵⁴ Eleanor Mills, ‘The five-a-day way to oil our rusted social mobility’ *Sunday Times* 6 May 2012. The claim that socioeconomic circumstances are the ‘biggest factor’ is flatly contradicted by my own research showing that cognitive ability outweighs social class advantages and disadvantages by a factor of at least 2:1.

⁵⁵ Tracy McVeigh, ‘Schooldays rule your destiny long before first job interview, say MPs’ *The Observer* 29 April 2012, emphasis added

⁵⁶ Rafael Behr, ‘Inching towards consensus on social mobility’ *New Statesman* 2 May 2012. The claim that life chances are ‘substantially pre-determined’ at birth is breathtakingly inaccurate, and is reminiscent of some of the wilder comments made by Alan Milburn.

- In *The Daily Mail*, Dominic Sandbrook said the ‘devastating report’ had ‘exposed the sad death of opportunity in an increasingly class-bound Britain’, and he noted that ‘Britain is actually going backwards thanks to the wreckage of opportunity in the past few decades.’⁵⁷

Once again, it is the Sutton Trust’s research on income mobility which lies behind all this hysteria. Its team of LSE economists found a few years ago that intergenerational income persistence appears to be higher for people born in 1970 than for those born in 1958. They concluded from this that social mobility has been declining. All the political concern about falling social mobility rates rests on this one finding.

Dividing the population into four income quartiles, Blanden and her colleagues found that 42% of sons born into the richest quartile of families in 1970 achieved incomes this high themselves when they grew up, while just 11% ended up with incomes in the bottom quartile. But for men born just twelve years earlier, the corresponding figures were 35% and 17%. They concluded from this that affluent parents must have got better at transmitting their privileged financial situation to their children. This is summarised by the change in the ‘coefficient of elasticity’, a measure of the extent to which parents’ incomes predict the incomes of their children. It rose from 0.21 for the 1958 cohort to 0.29 for those born in 1970.⁵⁸

As with the statistics comparing Britain with other countries, so too with these findings comparing the 1958 and 1970 birth cohorts, the Sutton Trust’s results have been uncritically accepted by politicians and the press. But there are grounds here too for believing that these findings should be regarded with extreme caution.

One cause for concern is that other research finds no evidence of declining income mobility in these years. It is not just that studies of class mobility find no such pattern; research on income persistence using the British Household Panel Survey doesn’t find it either. Comparing cohorts of men in this survey who were born in the crucial period between 1950 and 1972, Ermisch and Nicoletti find no change in their income mobility rates. They state explicitly: ‘There are no strong changes in intergenerational mobility across cohorts from 1950 to 1972.’⁵⁹

How could there appear to have been a strengthening of the association between parents’ and children’s incomes comparing the 1958 and 1970 birth cohort studies, when no such pattern is found in the Household Panel Study for the same period? It has been suggested that this might reflect an unrealistically low estimate of the strength of this association in the 1958 panel survey. In other words, intergenerational income persistence did not change in these twelve years, but was under-estimated for the 1958 cohort, creating the appearance of strengthening by the time the 1970 sample was analysed.

⁵⁷ Dominic Sandbrook, ‘How a complacent elite and years of school failure have dimmed the bright lights of opportunity’ *Daily Mail* 2 May 2012

⁵⁸ Jo Blanden, Paul Gregg & Lindsey Macmillan, ‘Accounting for intergenerational income persistence’ *The Economic Journal* vol.117, 2007, C45-C60. Also Blanden & Machin, ‘Up and down the generational income ladder in Britain’ *National Institute Economic Review*, No.205, 2008, 101-116

⁵⁹ John Ermisch and Cheti Nicoletti, ‘Intergenerational earnings mobility: Changes across cohorts in Britain’ University of Essex, Institute for Social & Economic Research *Working Paper* No.19, 2005, p.27

Erikson and Goldthorpe are pretty sure this is the explanation. They point out that, not only is there is no significant difference between the 1958 and 1970 cohorts in the strength of association between father's class and child's class, but there is also no change in the association between father's class and child's earnings (so middle class children didn't get into the top income quartile in any greater numbers in the 1970 than the 1958 cohort). Nor did the association between child's class and child's earnings change between the two studies (so those entering higher classes were no more likely to earn an income putting them in the top earnings group in the later cohort than in the earlier one). All of this suggests that the apparent strengthening of the association between parents' earnings and child's earnings between these two cohorts is likely to reflect statistical error in the estimate of parental earnings in 1958, and is not a 'real' finding.⁶⁰

The Sutton Trust researchers strongly deny this. They accept that the income data in both panel studies have 'clear limitations', and that there are substantial differences in the way incomes were recorded in the two studies, but they nevertheless insist that the 1958 income statistics are no more unreliable than the 1970 ones.⁶¹ They do accept that parental incomes in the earlier panel may have fluctuated more, making it more difficult to estimate 'permanent incomes', but they believe that this difference explains no more than one-tenth of the change they document in the strength of parent-child income persistence between the two cohorts. Much more important, in their view, was the increase that occurred in the variations of permanent parental incomes *within* each social class.⁶² They think that, as income inequalities grew during the 1980s, income differences between people in the same social classes widened. Because income became less predictable by social class, it was possible for income persistence to strengthen, even though relative class mobility did not change.

This debate between the Sutton Trust researchers and their critics is becoming increasingly technical and convoluted (a further response from Goldthorpe is expected later this year). But two points are not contested. First, all parties agree that relative *class* mobility did not fall during the period under review. Secondly, there remains the awkward problem that research on the British Household Panel Survey fails to support the claim that *income* mobility fell in these years either.

⁶⁰ Robert Erikson and John Goldthorpe 'Has social mobility in Britain decreased?' *British Journal of Sociology* vol.61, 2010, 211-30. 'The apparent cross-cohort decrease in mobility is...in some important part the result of the family income variable for the later cohort providing a better measure of permanent income than that for the earlier cohort' (p.226).

⁶¹ Jo Blanden, Paul Gregg, Lindsey Macmillan, 'Intergenerational Persistence in Income and Social Class: The Impact of Within-Group Inequality' Centre for Market and Public Organisation *Working Paper* 11/277 (update of paper 10/230), University of Bristol, December 2011, p.41 (Appendix B). The earlier survey collected separate information on mother's, father's and other income, but the 1970 survey asked only for total household income, and the authors acknowledge that women often have only a sketchy idea of their partner's earnings (90% of respondents were female). Other differences were that the first survey collected after-tax income while the second asked for gross income, and child benefit was explicitly included in the first but excluded in the second. The authors have had to adjust their estimates for all these differences and admit that 'Despite our best efforts, the resulting variables are still not completely comparable' (p.45).

⁶² 'Around 43% of the increased rise in intergenerational persistence is associated with within-class permanent income' Intergenerational Persistence in Income and Social Class, p.26. This paper also rejects other explanations which have been offered for the strengthening of the association, including the impact of the three-day week in 1974 (when parents' incomes for the 1958 cohort were measured), and the growing importance of mothers' earnings in the overall income of the family.

The jury is still out on whether or not the apparent increase in income persistence between the 1958 and 1970 birth cohorts reported by the Sutton Trust is a statistical artefact, but even if it isn't, it is astonishing that this one finding should have had such a huge influence on politicians in this country, eclipsing all the research that points the other way. As *Prospect* editor David Goodhart complains: 'This slender analysis has, arguably, had more influence on public policy debate than any other academic paper of the last 20 years...the lazy consensus which has decreed the end of social mobility is both wrong and damaging.'⁶³

The third delusion: A huge pool of wasted talent

Academic research on social mobility has repeatedly ignored the distribution of ability across social classes, and this is reflected in government reports which have rarely even mentioned intelligence as a driver of social class recruitment, still less taken it into account when assessing statistics on intergenerational class or income persistence.

The government's new social mobility strategy overlooks the distribution of ability entirely. Introducing a suite of key indicators which are to be used to assess 'progress' in tackling our 'social mobility problem', the 2012 update states: 'Those with parents in managerial or professional occupations are almost twice as likely as others to end up in those occupations as adults. This is one of the indicators that we will use to measure progress'⁶⁴. But the government has no idea whether a gap this size is consistent or inconsistent with meritocracy because it has made no attempt to factor in average ability differences between children from different classes.

I noted earlier that bright people who succeed in life are quite likely to produce bright children who do likewise, so even in the most perfectly meritocratic and open society we should expect to find some sort of 'gap' in the occupational achievements of children from different class backgrounds. In *Social Mobility Myths* I showed that the sort of gap you would expect to find in a perfect meritocracy looks very much like the one the government now says it is so concerned to close. I showed that, if parents were recruited to social class positions entirely on the basis of their cognitive ability, then almost 60% of middle class children would inherit the ability required to enter middle class jobs themselves, compared with fewer than 20% of the children born to semi- and unskilled manual workers.⁶⁵

Considerations like these are entirely absent from the government's thinking. Politicians from all parties say they favour 'meritocracy', and the government's social mobility strategy explicitly commits itself to rewarding talent and hard work.⁶⁶ But nobody bothers to investigate how ability is distributed across the population, and therefore how much social mobility we believe should occur. IQ has long been the ghost at the social mobility policy feast.

⁶³ David Goodhart, 'More mobile than we think' *Prospect* 20 December 2008

⁶⁴ *Opening Doors* Update, 2012, p.11

⁶⁵ *Social Mobility Myths*, Table 7

⁶⁶ 'What ought to count is how hard you work and the skills and talents you possess, not the school you went to or the jobs your parents did' *Opening Doors* update 2012, p.5

The all-party committee's 2012 interim report does contain one faint glimmer of light. It states: 'Distribution of innate ability is clearly a strong factor in test scores at any age.' This is the most explicit acknowledgement of the importance of 'innate ability' in any government or parliamentary report on this topic in the last decade. Unfortunately, it is immediately followed by the qualifier: 'But we don't know how much. And therefore how much of the difference in opportunity is really there to 'go after.'⁶⁷

I would suggest that we do know 'how much', or at least we have a pretty good idea. In *Social Mobility Myths* I reviewed a range of evidence built up by psychologists and others over many years which demonstrates that innate ability explains at least half the variance in cognitive test scores. People's IQ scores are remarkably stable over long periods of time, from childhood through to post-retirement, which suggests a strong, innate component. IQ scores are also strongly associated with physical indicators of brain functioning which can be measured accurately and independently – things like the evoked potentials of brainwaves and positron emission topography. Added to this, we know from studies which compare the IQ scores of identical twins who have been reared separately and non-identical twins who have been reared together that cognitive ability test scores are at least 50% governed by our genes.⁶⁸ Geneticist Robert Plomin believes intelligence, like height, is shaped by a network of thousands of genes, and his team has so far identified more than 200 which appear to be associated with cognitive performance.⁶⁹

For the all-party committee to say that we do not know how much cognitive ability is shaped by innate ability is therefore disingenuous. We do know it. It's just that researchers and politicians writing about social mobility generally prefer not to acknowledge it.

This reticence is easy to understand, for once we accept that ability is partly genetic, we have also to accept that it is to some extent transmitted biologically from parents to children – which means that in an open society, middle class children born to successful, talented parents will on average have higher ability than children born to less successful working class parents. This transmission of ability will never be 1:1, for the estimated strength of the correlation between parents' and children's IQ scores is only around 0.5. This means that in every generation, some bright middle class parents will produce dull children, and some dull working class parents will produce bright ones. But the possibility of significantly raising social mobility rates by enhancing the opportunities available to those at the bottom is clearly limited by the extent to which the most able people were recruited to the top classes in the previous generation. It is deeply disturbing that the government's new social mobility indicators take no account of this.

In *Social Mobility Myths* I showed that ability is well over twice as important as class origins in influencing people's class destinations in modern Britain. Half of the explained variance in class

⁶⁷ 7 *Key Truths about social mobility*, p.33

⁶⁸ All this research is discussed in pp.54-58 of *Social Mobility Myths*. Since the book came out, another analysis of twins has again reported that genes determine about 50% of cognitive performance. See Claire Haworth, Katherine Asbury, Philip Dale and Robert Plomin, 'Added Value Measures in Education Show Genetic as Well as Environmental Influence' *PLoS ONE*, vol. 6, 2011

<http://www.plosone.org/article/info:doi/10.1371/journal.pone.0016006>

⁶⁹ Jonathon Leake, 'Check...Science closes in on intelligence gene test' *The Sunday Times* 19 September 2010

destinations is predicted by ability alone, and class origins account at most for a quarter of it.⁷⁰ This does not mean there is no scope for improving the mobility chances of working class children, for class does still play some part in shaping outcomes, but it does suggest this scope is much more limited than many politicians appear to appreciate, and that some of the government's new social mobility indicators are therefore seriously flawed. Even sociologists who refuse to accept that ability levels might vary among children of different classes accept that about six in seven of us probably already end up in the class to which our ability best suits us.⁷¹

Politicians want to believe that there is a large pool of 'wasted talent' waiting to be released into upward social mobility by improving the opportunities available to working class children.⁷² They do not want to have to confront awkward and embarrassing questions about the distribution of average ability levels across the population, preferring instead to assume that all differences in social outcomes must be the result of unfair advantages and disadvantages encountered by children growing up in different kinds of backgrounds. Until recently, there appeared to be one startling, compelling piece of research that seemed to support them in thinking this way.

In a very influential study of early cognition, Leon Feinstein appears to show that many working class children are born with high ability, but then experience a slow-down in their cognitive development as social disadvantages start to hold them back. Meanwhile, less bright children born to more affluent parents catch up, and then overtake them. As Feinstein, explains: 'Social inequalities appear to dominate the apparent early positive signs of academic ability for most of those low SES children who do well early on.'⁷³

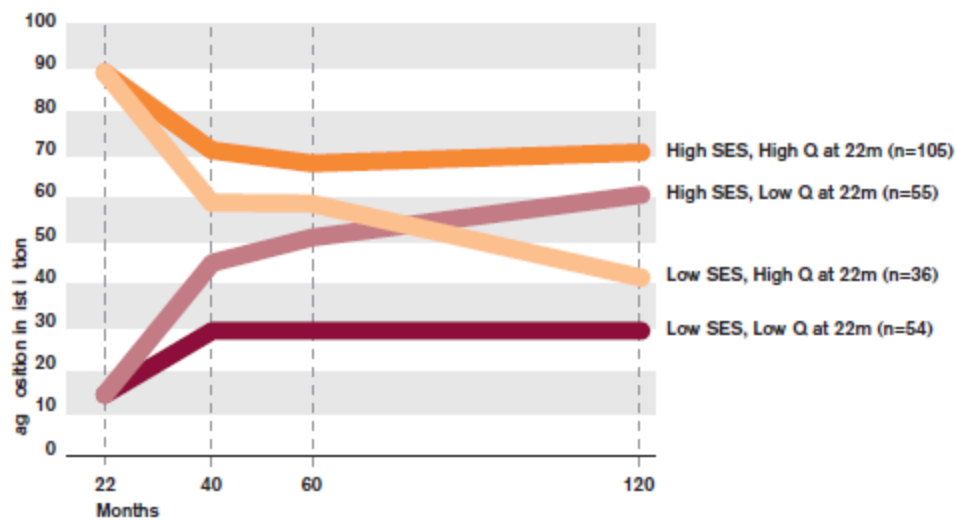
⁷⁰ *Social Mobility Myths* 121-2

⁷¹ Sociologist Geoff Payne is a self-described 'egalitarian' who refuses to accept that bright parents in higher classes are likely to produce brighter children, but he does accept that not everybody is born with the talent needed to perform professional-managerial class jobs. Noting that for forty or fifty years, around 40% of children born to professional-managerial class parents have been downwardly mobile despite the advantages available to them, he reasons that no more than 60% of middle class children are born with the ability required to gain middle class jobs. From this, he assumes a maximum of 60% of working class children will also be born with the talent needed to get into the middle class, although fewer than 30% actually make it. This means, even if ability did not vary by class, there would be a maximum of 1 in 7 people stuck in the 'wrong' class. If average ability levels do vary across the classes, the real figure will of course be much smaller than this. Geoff Payne, *Labouring under a misapprehension*

⁷² Politicians like to talk of the 'efficiency gains' for the economy which will follow from an increase in social mobility. In the preface to the 2012 update of the government's social mobility strategy, Nick Clegg states: 'Breaking the barriers so that talent can rise is intrinsic to a more dynamic economy. If we want a more dynamic economy, we need a more dynamic society' (*Opening Doors* update, 2012, p.3). The 2012 *Fair Access to Professional Careers* report similarly suggests that, 'If the professions can genuinely open their doors to the most talented people, then the UK can improve its competitive position in the global economy' (p.15). And Sutton Trust chairman Peter Lampl claims that improved social mobility would add 4% to Britain's GDP (Chairman's Message, Sutton Trust *Annual Report* 2011, p.5). I have set out my reasons for distrusting estimates like these in Peter Saunders, *The Rise of the Equalities Industry* Civitas 2011.

⁷³ Leon Feinstein, 'Very early evidence' *Centre for Economic Performance Paper* No.146, June 2003, London School of Economics, p.30

Fig 1: Average rank of test scores at 22, 42, 60 and 120 months by SES of parents and early rank position (1970 cohort analysed by Feinstein)



Feinstein’s evidence is summarised in a famous graph, reproduced here as Figure 1. It plots test scores for a small sample of children in the 1970 birth cohort when they were 22, 40, 60 and 120 months old. It suggests that initially bright working class children (the ‘Low SES, High Q’ trend line) tend to fall back in the early years of life, while initially dull middle class children (‘High SES, Low Q’) make up ground. Before long, they change places in the cognitive pecking order, and this divergence in their ability levels is then likely to shape the rest of their lives. This seems to provide strong evidence that schooling and the home environment in the early years have a major influence on later ability levels, in which case the scope for early intervention to raise cognitive scores and to increase upward mobility chances of working class children appears huge and compelling.

Not surprisingly, the graph reproduced in Figure 1 has become one of the principal exhibits in recent political discussions of social mobility in Britain (*The Guardian* simply refers to it as ‘The Graph’).⁷⁴ It is reproduced twice in the 2011 *Opening Doors...* report which uses it to show that ‘Gaps in development between children from different backgrounds can be detected even at birth and widen rapidly during the first few years of life.’⁷⁵ The Deputy Prime Minister referred to it in a House of Commons debate in 2011 where he told MPs: ‘By the age of five, bright children from poorer backgrounds have been overtaken by less bright children from richer ones – and from this point on, the gaps tend to widen even further.’⁷⁶ And Education Secretary Michael Gove appealed to it when

⁷⁴ ‘Inside government, a man called Leon Feinstein is feted. A civil servant at the Treasury, he is a well-liked, diligent academic – brown suits and unwittingly trendy stubble with a “shed-load of integrity”. Universities minister David Willetts is a fan, and all introduce him almost as if introducing his namesake minus the F. Feinstein is the man who created the Graph: it shows that poor bright kids fall behind rich but not so bright kids by the age of 10. It was pride of place in Clegg’s social mobility strategy’ (Allegra Stratton, ‘David Davis takes up challenge to prepare next round of Tory policies’ *The Guardian*, 14 April 2011).

⁷⁵ *Opening Doors, Breaking Barriers* p.26

⁷⁶ Quoted in John Jerrim and Anna Vignoles, ‘The use and misuse of statistics in understanding social mobility: Regression to the mean and the cognitive development of high ability children from disadvantaged homes’ *Department of Quantitative Social Science Working Paper* no.11-01, April 2011, Institute of Education, p.5.

he told a Commons Education Select Committee in 2010: 'In effect, rich thick kids do better than poor clever children when they arrive at school, and the situation as they go through gets worse.'⁷⁷

The graph is derived from scores on cognitive tests at the ages of 22, 42, 60 and 120 months. Of course, young children at 22 months cannot complete IQ tests, so different kinds of exercises were set at different ages. At 22 months, they were asked to put on their shoes, stack cubes and point to their eyes. At 42 months, they were tested on counting and speaking skills and were asked to draw assorted shapes. Copying and vocabulary tests were also given at age 5, and reading and maths were tested at 10.

It was no surprise to find that even the earliest scores at 22 months varied by occupational status. When all the children's scores were ranked, those whose parents were in professional-managerial occupations achieved an average ranking at the 55th percentile while those with parents in semi- or unskilled manual occupations ranked on average at the 42nd. What was much more disturbing, however, was the way the former then seemed to get stronger over time while the latter's scores deteriorated.

Figure 1 tracks what happened to children from higher and lower class backgrounds who initially scored in the top and bottom quartiles of the ability distribution at 22 months. It seems to show that the initially high scoring working class children were overtaken by initially low scoring middle class children at some point between 5 and 10 years of age. It is this that led Gove to his comment that 'thick rich kids' are overtaking 'poor bright kids' as a result of social advantages and disadvantages. Yet again, however, politicians have jumped to conclusions that are not as robust as they think they are.

For a start, a divergence in scores over time would be consistent with either a genetic or sociological explanation. It is possible, as Gove and others assume, that innately bright working class children are falling back as duller middle class children absorb all the financial and cultural advantages their parents can offer them. But as Feinstein notes, we know from twins studies that the genetic component of test performance only comes to the fore as children grow older.⁷⁸ Like height, cognitive ability is governed partly by our genes, but this only begins to show up as we mature. It is therefore quite possible that children who are innately bright will perform badly on early tests, and vice versa, and this might then result in the sort of pattern observed in Fig.1.

What is difficult to explain, though, is the rapidity of the changes between 22 and 42 months, for we would expect the genetic component of ability to make its increasing influence felt gradually over the whole of the first 15 years. Focusing on this remarkable shift in performance between the first and second tests leads us to consider some other, statistical issues raised by this research, and these turn out to be crucial.

This paper has been revised for publication and is currently under review by the *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society (Series A)*. In citations here, I refer to page numbers in the typescript of the revised version.

⁷⁷ Graeme Paton, "'Rich thick kids do better at school' says Gove" *Daily Telegraph* 28 July 2010

⁷⁸ Feinstein notes research showing that at 24 months, test scores for identical twins correlate at 0.81, compared with 0.73 for non-identical twins. But by age 15, while the correlation for identical twins remains very high (a slight rise, to 0.88), that for non-identical twins has fallen to 0.54. Clearly genetic influence on cognitive performance kicks in as children mature.

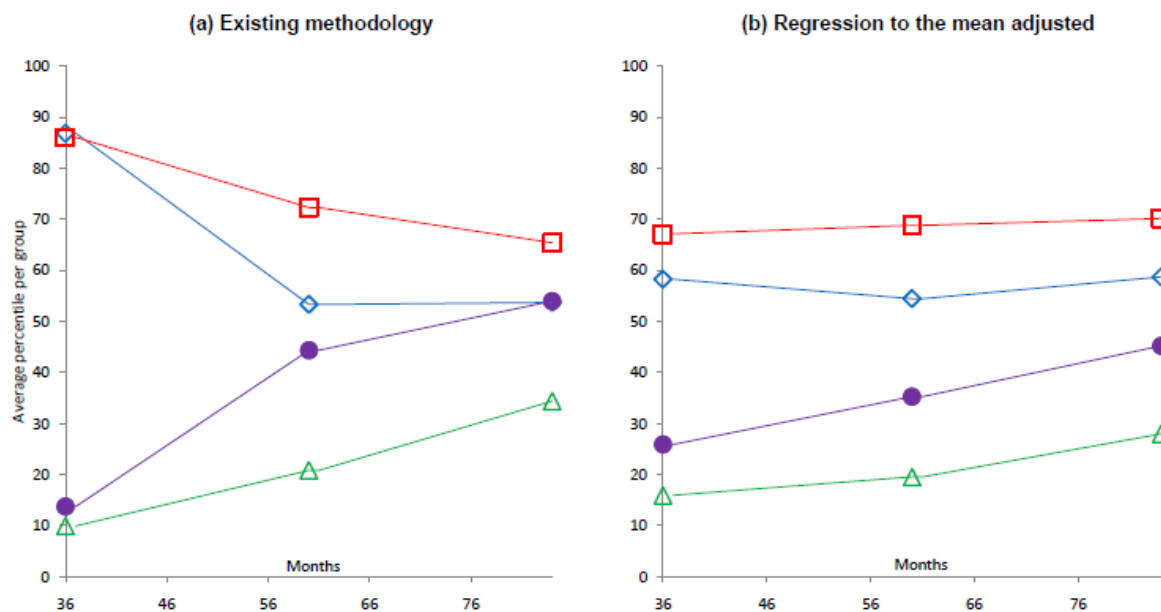
The findings obviously stand or fall on the reliability of the earliest test scores at 22 months, for these provide the baseline with which later test scores are compared. But there are two related problems with using these scores as an indicator of cognitive ability at a young age:

- One is that tests at different ages may not be measuring the same thing. Is the ability to put your shoes on at 22 months the same sort of cognitive ability that later will enable you to solve arithmetic problems? If it isn't, then we are not measuring change in a common ability potential when we track test scores over time. Feinstein warns of the low correlations between the early and later tests, which suggests they may not be measuring the same things.
- Even if all the tests were measuring the same thing, every test result will offer only an approximate estimate of a child's true ability (i.e. every score includes an element of 'statistical error'). On a one-off test, some children will score much higher or lower than they 'should,' and they will then appear in the top and bottom bands of the test results. The highest and lowest ability quartiles at 22 months will therefore contain some children who have scored much higher or lower than they would have done on another day or on another test, and whose actual ability level does not really qualify them for either the top or bottom bands. In later tests, these children are less likely to record the extreme scores they registered first time around (other children will over and under-achieve on other tests). Some initial high scorers will therefore appear to 'lose ability' in later tests, and some initial low scorers will appear to 'gain' it, but all that has really happened is that they have not repeated their exceptional scores next time around. This is a familiar problem to statisticians who refer to it as 'regression to the mean,' because very high and very low scores tend to fall back towards the average in later measurements. A recent paper by Jerrim and Vignoles suggests this is precisely what has happened in Fig.1.⁷⁹

Jerrim and Vignoles first show, using a simulation, that with a high degree of statistical error in individual test results, it is quite possible to reproduce the pattern in Fig.1 on a sample where there is actually no change in the ability of the children over time. The apparent cross-over of bright lower class children and dull higher class children is generated entirely by regression to the mean. It is a statistical artefact created by the high degree of error in each test.

⁷⁹ Jerrim and Vignoles, 'The use and misuse of statistics in understanding social mobility'

Fig.2: Average rank of test scores of children in the Millennium Cohort Study (a) based on a single test score at 22 months and (b) correcting for regression to the mean by substituting a second set of test results to classify high and low ability groups (Jerrim and Vignoles)



The same authors then demonstrate this on real data using a series of test results taken by a sample of children in the Millennium survey (a cohort of children born in 2000). The advantage of the Millennium survey is that at the age of 3, children were given two different ability tests: The British Ability Scale (based on a literacy test) and the Bracken School Readiness Test (an assessment used to identify gifted and talented children). When the results from the first of these tests are plotted on a graph together with test results taken at later ages, we get the same pattern as in Feinstein’s research on the 1970 cohort (Fig 2a). Indeed, on this occasion, low scoring children from affluent homes (designated by the circle symbol) appear to overtake high scoring children from poor homes (the diamond symbol) by the age of 7.

But then Jerrim and Vignoles re-run this same analysis, this time correcting for regression to the mean by allocating children to high or low ability groups using their second set of ability scores (the school readiness test), rather than their first. The age 3 ability scores entered on the graph are still those from the first test (the British Ability Scale), but these are no longer also used to allocate them to high and low ability groups in the first place.

As can be seen in Fig.2b, the familiar pattern now disappears. There is no sign of the ability scores of bright children from poor homes declining over time. Their initial scores are on average much lower than before (the average ranking near the 90th percentile has fallen to 60th as a result of the over-achievers doing less well second time around), and their scores stay more-or-less at that level from age 3 to 5 to 7. What Jerrim and Vignoles have shown, in other words, is that the famous cross-over of bright working class and dull middle class children is the result of regression to the mean caused by statistical error in the earliest recorded observation of ability.

This does not mean that initial social class advantages and disadvantages count for nothing – there is clear evidence in Feinstein’s work that children from high SES backgrounds tend to strengthen their performance on cognitive tests over time, whether they scored high or low initially, and this presumably reflects the support and encouragement they receive from their academically-successful parents as they are growing up. But it does mean that politicians are mistaken when they claim that bright children from poorer backgrounds start to fall behind less gifted children from more affluent backgrounds. As Jerrim and Vignoles conclude: ‘There is currently an overwhelming view amongst academics and policymakers that highly able children from poor homes get overtaken by their affluent (but less able) peers before the end of primary school. Although this empirical finding is treated as a stylised fact, the methodology used to reach this conclusion is seriously flawed. After attempting to correct for the aforementioned problem, we find little evidence that this is actually the case in current data.’⁸⁰

Yet again, therefore, the core evidence on which politicians have been basing their social mobility claims and interventions turns out to be just plain wrong. It will be interesting to see how and whether politicians and journalists take this on board, but early signs are not hopeful. When the *Guardian* reported the re-analysis of Feinstein’s data by Jerrim and Vignoles, it was under the headline “Poor children’s life chances face a new assault from the right.”⁸¹

The fourth delusion: Helping the underclass by attacking Oxbridge

Two logically distinct issues have become hopelessly muddled and entwined in the Coalition’s social policy since 2010.

On the one hand, there is a determination to increase the amount of movement between classes or income groups by making it more difficult for the children of the affluent middle class to follow in their parents’ footsteps. On the other, there is a concern to tackle the inter-generational transmission of disadvantage, or what sociologists used to call the ‘culture of poverty’, at the very bottom of our society. So entangled have these two different objectives become that they have been combined in the hands of a single agency – the new Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission.

The second of these objectives is necessary and pressing, but the first is based on a misunderstanding of the evidence on social mobility and threatens to become very destructive.

It is a noble aspiration for government to come to the aid of children suffering deprivation and neglect, and this is what the Coalition is trying to do in its welfare reforms (designed to break welfare dependency and reduce the number of jobless families) and its revised anti-poverty strategy (which is shifting the focus of intervention from income transfers aimed at meeting simplistic monetary targets to tackling some of the underlying social causes of entrenched deprivation). But it

⁸⁰ ‘The use and misuse of statistics in understanding social mobility’ p.22

⁸¹ Fiona Millar ‘Poor children’s life chances face a new assault from the right’ *The Guardian* 14 June 2011. See the postscript to Peter Saunders, *When Prophecy Fails* (Sydney, Centre for Independent Studies, 2011) for a similar example of how The Guardian handles social scientific rebuttals of its cherished positions.

is not an appropriate role for government to try to weaken our top schools and universities, nor to undermine ambitious and supportive parents by deliberately engineering downward mobility for their children. Yet this is what now appears to be happening as a result of the government's commitment to forcing an increase in social mobility. That this onslaught is being orchestrated by a Conservative-led government is an indication of how deeply the social mobility delusions we have been discussing in this paper have embedded themselves inside the political establishment of this country.

There can be little doubt that Britain does have a major social problem which urgently needs addressing, but it is not a social mobility problem. It is an underclass problem. It is not going to be solved by policies like forcing Oxford and Cambridge to accept fewer children from private schools, requiring employers to pay a minimum wage for internships, or insisting that the professions recruit graduates from the weaker universities, for the problem has not been created by an absence of opportunity. It has come about as a consequence of social and cultural changes over the last fifty years – the decline in traditional male manufacturing jobs, the growth of long-term welfare dependency, the rise in criminality, the erosion of marriage and the traditional family, the spread of drug and alcohol abuse, the fraying of respect for authority. These changes have together produced a stratum of fatalistic, disaffected and largely dysfunctional people at the bottom of our society whose lives are empty, meaningless and distressingly chaotic.⁸² Their problem is not lack of money, nor lack of opportunity. It is personal and social disorganisation, or what sociologists call 'anomie.'

The future life chances of children born into these households are almost certainly blighted, although it is a supreme irony of the mass of research that has been carried out on social mobility in Britain that we don't really know much about them. Sociological studies of class mobility have generally ignored people whose parents had no jobs, or who themselves are jobless, for it is difficult to classify people to a social class if they have no current or recent occupation. Similarly, although economists' models of income mobility can in principle include those living on welfare benefits, in practice income has often been measured by earnings,⁸³ so those whose parents were long-term benefit recipients again tend to disappear out of the tables.⁸⁴

We therefore know little of the mobility chances of children born to underclass parents. Nevertheless, it seems unlikely that, even if they have the ability, they are able to take much advantage of the opportunities for upward mobility which exist for bright children from less

⁸² This was first identified more than 20 years ago by Charles Murray. As he predicted then, the problem has been getting steadily worse ever since. Charles Murray, *The Emerging British Underclass* Institute of Economic Affairs, London 1990

⁸³ 'Economic mobility can be measured either through income or earnings: in reality, the literature is dominated by estimates of the elasticity of sons' earnings with respect to fathers' earnings. This means that the importance of non-labour income is not acknowledged, those without paid employment are dropped and that the experience of women as both mothers and daughters has been frequently neglected' (Jo Blanden, 'How much can we learn from international comparisons of social mobility?' p.11

⁸⁴ The Sutton Trust's income mobility data refer to only about two thousand people in each of the 1958 and 1970 cohorts, which means about seven-eighths of the original panel members have disappeared. One reason is that most of those whose fathers were economically inactive and had no earnings have been excluded from the analysis. See Gorard 'A reconsideration of rates of social mobility in Britain', p.320

troubled, working class homes. Underclass children are often starved of affection. They are frequently abandoned by their fathers and brought up by young mothers who cannot cope. They may be exposed to drunkenness and drug abuse in the home, or left for hours on their own in front of the television with no structure in their lives, no clear bedtimes, no calls to get up for school in the morning, no requirement to complete their homework. For children like these, the possibility of achieving sustained educational success, or even a modicum of occupational stability, seems remote.

Research for the Sutton Trust on the Millennium cohort (a sample of children born in 2000) offers a few tantalising insights into the problems they face. At age 5, only a third of the poorest children in this study were living with both biological parents, compared with 88% in the middle income group. One in five of them had been born to teenage mothers, and over a third had parents who had failed to get one good GCSE between them. Two-thirds lived in social housing, and they were more likely to live in unsafe neighbourhoods. There was an 11 month gap between the average verbal test scores of children from low and middle income families, and 40% of it could be explained by home environment and parental factors.⁸⁵

The most important social factor associated with low test scores was the quality of the parenting these children received – things like clear rule-setting and the expression of warmth and sensitivity, as well intellectual stimulation. The poor children with the lowest scores were more likely to spend long hours parked in front of the television or playing computer games, and they were less likely to have regular routines around bed time and meal time. As one of the members of the all-party committee looking at social mobility points out, it is possible to improve parenting in the early years in these most deprived families, although it is not easy.⁸⁶ There is a strong case for trying. We need a coherent strategy for tackling the underclass.

Some of the policy innovations introduced by this and the previous government do offer some prospect of enhancing the life chances of underclass children by improving parenting skills and raising parental employment participation. The original intention behind Sure Start, before it got diluted by extending the programme, was to target positive help and support on families at greatest risk, and Frank Field's 2010 report, *The Foundation Years*, recommended refocusing Children's Centres on the most disadvantaged families in an attempt to improve the quality of parenting and provide better quality childcare.⁸⁷ The 2012 update to the government's social mobility strategy promises fifteen free weekly hours of early education to 40% of 2 year-olds by 2014, and although

⁸⁵ Jane Waldfogel and Elizabeth Washbrook, *Low income and early cognitive development in the UK* Sutton Trust Research Report, February 2010. There is no measure of parental IQ, which would probably have accounted for some of this unexplained gap as well as mopping up a lot of the variance attributed in this study to other variables. Waldfogel and Washbrook note 'the role of inherited characteristics' could be significant but they say 'we can't quantify it' (p.23-4). Interestingly, though, mother's education correlates quite strongly with the level of the child's cognitive development, and this is probably a crude indicator of maternal intellectual ability. So does maternal unemployment before the birth, and the authors suggest this too may point to 'maternal abilities more generally' (p.34).

⁸⁶ Comments by Baroness Tyler at Policy Exchange launch of *7 Key Truths About Social Mobility*, 1 May 2012, http://www.policyexchange.org.uk/events/past-events/item/seven-key-truths-about-social-mobility?category_id=37

⁸⁷ Frank Field, *The Foundation Years* 2010

this looks more like the start of another universal provision than a tightly targeted intervention aimed at the most deprived children, it might help.

The government's proposed parenting interventions look less promising. The social mobility strategy flags up three trials of parenting classes as a precursor to universal provision of classes, together with an £11 million program of telephone and internet parenting advice, but for as long as participation remains voluntary and untargeted, the people most in need of classes and advice are almost certainly the ones least likely to avail themselves of such services. More hopefully, the government has given £125 million to the new Education Endowment Foundation (run by the Sutton Trust), which funds projects designed to overcome educational disadvantage, and one of the Foundation's early projects is focusing on improving parenting.⁸⁸ The all-party *7 Key Truths...* report also recognises that 'the point of greatest leverage is at 0-3, primarily at home,' and it emphasises the importance for children's development of early emotional attachments and a predictable, structured, supportive home environment.⁸⁹

All of this is positive, but when Alan Milburn was appointed as the government's new Independent Reviewer on Social Mobility, he chose to identify a very different 'problem' as his first priority for action. Rather than focusing on the disadvantages of children at the bottom, he focused on the advantages enjoyed by those at the top, identifying as his first priority the 'problem' that top universities admit a disproportionate number of students who have been educated in private schools.⁹⁰

Milburn is not alone in this preoccupation with the advantages of a private education. It has become a prominent policy concern for several ministers in the Cameron government. The Education Secretary, for example, recently complained in a speech of the number of people recruited into key positions in politics, the arts, sport, business and the professions after attending private schools.⁹¹

The government intends to 'rectify' this 'bias' by using its Office of Fair Access to change the way universities recruit their students. This body was given the job of monitoring the social composition of universities' admissions following the fees rises, and those (including Oxbridge) which fail to meet their targets of 'wider access' will be prevented from raising their tuition fees beyond £6,000. This means financial sanctions will be applied against universities which fail to cut back on their number

⁸⁸ The 'campaign for learning' project - <http://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/projects/campaign-for-learning>

⁸⁹ Page 10. At the launch of the report, committee member Baroness Tyler emphasised the importance of building 'emotional wellbeing and resilience'

⁹⁰ 'Alan Milburn [says] today in a major speech... he will make fair access to universities his first priority' Patrick Wintour, 'Universities must do more to end middle class bias says Alan Milburn' *The Guardian* 25 January 2011

⁹¹ Greg Hurst, 'Domination by private schools is indefensible, declares Gove' *The Times* 11 May 2012. The politicians who seem most intent on attacking the private schools and the elite universities are often those – Cameron, Clegg, Gove – who attended and benefited from them.

of private school entrants.⁹² The way they will have to achieve this is by forcing applicants from private schools to jump over higher hurdles than competitors from state schools.

The Coalition's 'special advocate for access to higher education', Simon Hughes, has suggested that universities should recruit no more than 7% of their intake from private schools, since only 7% of children are educated in the private sector: 'Every university should...recruit on the basis of no more people coming from the private sector than there are in the public as a whole'.⁹³ Universities Minister David Willetts is less prescriptive, but says universities should meet their fair access targets by reducing their admissions requirements for applicants from poorer backgrounds.⁹⁴ And Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg has now made it part of the government's 'social mobility strategy' to force our top universities to offer places to poorer students with lower A-level grades.⁹⁵

None of this makes any sense, for there is no evidence of class bias in existing university recruitment procedures. Research at the Institute of Fiscal Studies which is reproduced in the *7 Key Truths...* report demonstrates that social class differences in university enrolments are entirely explained by gaps in applicants' prior educational attainments.⁹⁶ Universities' selection procedures are, in other words, completely meritocratic – they select the best-qualified applicants. More middle class and private school-educated youngsters get to top universities because they tend to have stronger A-level grades.

If there is any unfairness going on, it is happening well before youngsters start applying to university. But in a classic example of shutting the gate long after the horse has bolted, the government is pushing university admissions tutors to favour less-qualified candidates from poorer backgrounds over better-qualified candidates from richer ones. Bizarrely, it wants to increase the appearance of meritocracy by introducing anti-meritocratic selection procedures into a perfectly fair higher education selection system.⁹⁷

⁹² The government White Paper, *Students at the Heart of the System*, requires that, 'All institutions that intend to charge more than the basic £6,000 annual tuition charge have to demonstrate to the satisfaction of the independent Director of Fair Access what more they will do to attract students from under-represented and disadvantaged groups' (para 5.21, Dept for Business Innovation and Skills, June 2011)

⁹³ Quoted in Simon Heffer, 'University is for the brightest, whichever school they went to' *Daily Telegraph*, 12 January 2011. This reasoning echoes the fallacious assumption in sociological research down the years that there should be no difference in the success rates of children from different class origins.

⁹⁴ Graeme Paton, 'Universities need quota of poor students' *Daily Telegraph* 22 August 2010

⁹⁵ Tim Ross, 'We'll push more state pupils into university, says Clegg' *Daily Telegraph* 22 May 2012. I have discussed this policy in Peter Saunders, *The Rise of the Equalities Industry*.

⁹⁶ Data reproduced in *7 Key Truths...*, p.25

⁹⁷ Those who support such positive discrimination justify it by saying that students from state schools may be brighter than students from private schools with the same qualifications. Once they get to university, it is claimed that lower class students with worse A-level grades tend often to out-perform private school students with higher entry grades. This has, however, been challenged by research at Cambridge University which finds no significant difference in the average performance of students with similar grades who had been educated at state or private schools. It concludes that A-level grades are 'overwhelmingly' the best guide to the class of degree undergraduates go on to achieve (Stephen Exley, 'Study contradicts previous findings and concludes A-level grades are best indicator' *Times Education Supplement*, 15 April 2011)

When we also factor in the evidence reviewed earlier, which suggests that Britain is performing reasonably well by international standards when it comes to educational mobility, all this political emphasis on changing the pattern of recruitment to our top universities seems oddly misplaced. One thing we know for sure is that Britain does not have a meritocracy problem in its selection procedures for higher education, so this looks the least appropriate place for ministers to start trying to expand social mobility.

To make matters worse, Alan Milburn also now wants to prioritise the career claims of graduates from weaker universities over those from stronger ones. He complains in his latest report that professions like medicine and journalism have been recruiting too many people from the country's top twenty universities.⁹⁸ This, he says, is prejudicing the career chances of students (many from poorer backgrounds) who do degree courses at lower-ranking institutions, and he recommends that 'the government should do more to pressurise the professions' into recruiting more people from these inferior institutions.⁹⁹ Again, the appearance of meritocracy is to be engineered by imposing anti-meritocratic selection procedures on organisations which need no prompting from government to recruit the most talented people.

For most of my adult life, governments have been trying to tap into 'pools of wasted working class talent' by fiddling with the education system. In the sixties, they created Education Priority Areas for primary schools, and they turned secondary education upside down by replacing nearly all the country's grammar schools with comprehensives. There then followed the attack on streaming, the raising of the school leaving age to 16, the abolition of the direct grant schools, the introduction of 'progressive' teaching methods, the move to an all-graduate teaching profession, the amalgamation of the universities and polytechnics in the eighties, the introduction of the core curriculum, the doubling of schools expenditure by Blair, the commitment to re-build every secondary school in the country, the huge expansion of higher education numbers, the extension of free pre-schooling to the under-fives, the thirty year inflation of GCSE and A-level grades, the introduction of academies, and the replacement of school catchment areas by ballots and other contrivances. Now we are about to embark on an extension of compulsory education or training to the age of 18, and 'fair access' rules are to be imposed on our universities. Yet throughout this period, relative social mobility rates have hardly shifted. This should give our reforming politicians pause for thought.

The latest policy fads will do little or nothing to increase social mobility. But they may well do a lot of harm, for they threaten to undermine the quality of our best universities. Just as the old 'O' and 'A' levels were devalued by insisting that ever-increasing numbers of students should be given qualifications, so our undergraduate degrees from top universities will be devalued by pressures to

⁹⁸ 'Too many professional employers still recruit from too small a cohort of universities. Since those universities are the most socially exclusive in the country, these recruitment practices merely reinforce the social exclusivity of the professions' *Fair Access to Professional Careers* p.24

⁹⁹ *Fair Access to Professional Careers* p.29. How recruiting less able people from worse universities will increase the country's economic competitiveness (see note 72) is never explained. The report also recommends that recruitment procedures into professional jobs should be made less formal and intimidating, that recruiters should be denied information on applicants' school and university background, that less reliance should be placed on academic qualifications, and that employers should monitor the socio-economic backgrounds of all their recruits (p.26).

admit – and pass – an increasingly wide spectrum of applicants. Many degrees from lower-ranking universities have arguably already been devalued by creeping grade inflation and dilution of academic standards, which is precisely why professional employers tend to ignore them when they go in search of talented new recruits. Now it is the turn of Oxbridge.

There will be other damage too. As I argued in *Social Mobility Myths*, the pressure to lower entry standards and extend access will result in more unsuitable people enrolling on courses for which they have little aptitude. It will also produce a growing pool of disillusioned, over-qualified, under-employed people who have been led to believe that their qualifications should entitle them to jobs which either do not exist or have already been filled by more talented applicants.¹⁰⁰

None so blind...

Why is it so difficult to prise our politicians away from their faith in the four social mobility delusions? I can offer six possible explanations.

The first is that the evidence is not always easy to understand. All this talk of standard errors, instrumental variables, elasticity coefficients and regression to the mean is enough to send most politicians (and journalists) scurrying to the headline findings and leaving the irksome details to the academics. But we have seen that the devil, very often, is in the detail.

Second, once an idea like this has taken hold, it is very difficult to dislodge it. Academics who have built reputations researching the ‘social mobility deficit’ will be loathe to admit they may have got things wrong, and politicians who have invested huge amounts of political capital (not to mention taxpayer money) will never welcome evidence that their policies may be misguided or that their strategies are built on sand.¹⁰¹

Thirdly, politicians feel uncomfortable talking about ability differences. We have seen that the meritocratic ideal to which they say they subscribe has ability differences at its very core, yet they contrive to ignore them. There are no votes to be won telling your constituents that the competition has been broadly fair, and that if their children have failed it may be because they aren’t good enough. Votes are gained by feeding people’s grievances, not confronting them.

Fourthly, as I noted in *Social Mobility Myths*, the belief that Britain is an unfair, class-ridden country chimes with a long tradition of cultural and intellectual prejudice among opinion leaders. The national consciousness has been shaped by generations of films, TV dramas, plays and novels which routinely portray this country, now and in the past, as rigidly class divided. When somebody comes

¹⁰⁰ The two Milburn reports on access to the professions both put a lot of emphasis on raising the aspirations of lower class children. This is clearly desirable up to a point, for my own research shows that aspiration and motivation are second only to ability in driving occupational outcomes. But while it is important to encourage bright children to aim for the highest jobs, neither of these reports considers what might happen if children who lack the ability to enter these positions are also encouraged to believe that they can and should be aspiring to them. Again, we encounter here the refusal of the politicians to take ability seriously.

¹⁰¹ On this intellectual selectiveness, see also Geoff Payne, ‘A new social mobility?’

along with evidence suggesting that we are actually a remarkably open country, many of us simply cannot accept it could be true.

Fifthly, it has suited politicians in both main parties to sign up to these myths. For Labour, the idea that rich people pass on their privileges at the cost of working class children who are prevented from improving themselves accords exactly with old, egalitarian instincts and helps justify the heavy dose of social engineering which people on the left want to implement. For the Conservatives, the claim that social mobility is low and getting even worse provided a useful stick with which to beat the Blair and Brown governments when in opposition, and now they are in power, it still provides a valuable symbolic crutch for the Cameron 'modernisers.' Attacking the private schools, the elite universities and the established professions looks like a good way to demonstrate that the party has changed its spots.

Finally, there is the influence of the Sutton Trust. Sir Peter Lampl, its chairman, is a self-made businessman who attended a direct grant Grammar School in the sixties, and then went on to Oxford. When he returned to Britain in the nineties after accumulating his fortune in the USA, he found his old school (and others like it) was now wholly fee-paying as a result of the attack on the grammar and direct grant schools. He became concerned that 'most of the children who were there when I was there, including me, would now be excluded on financial grounds.' He goes on: 'It was apparent to me that opportunities for bright children from non-privileged backgrounds were poor and had got worse, so I thought I wanted to do something. So I set up the Sutton Trust out of a sense of outrage at the waste of talent in this country.'¹⁰²

The Trust has done some excellent things, sponsoring bright children from poorer homes to attend a top independent day school, helping youngsters experience university at summer schools, and now running the new Education Endowment Foundation which aims to improve the life chances of poorer children through practical parenting support and other interventions. But the influence the Trust has achieved with politicians has also distorted the debate over social mobility in this country. Its research is uncritically absorbed by politicians and the media,¹⁰³ and other studies which come to different conclusions are routinely ignored or overlooked.

It is never healthy when competing arguments get closed down or marginalised in this way, and it is worrying that public policy is effectively being driven by just one team of researchers wedded to one perspective. Our politicians need to step back and take a critical fresh look at what other evidence from other sources is telling them before ploughing on with a social mobility strategy which is in many respects badly ill-conceived.

¹⁰² 'Sir Peter Lampl on education and social mobility, Policy Exchange, 25 April 2012. A video of the talk is available at <http://www.policyexchange.org.uk/modevents/item/sir-peter-lampl-on-education-and-social-mobility>

¹⁰³ The Sutton Trust was mentioned 171 times in the UK national press in 2010 – Sutton Trust *Annual Report*, p.35