

Event Summary

Delivering on Social Mobility: In Conversation with Rt Hon. Alan Milburn, and James Kirkup

Tuesday 19th of December, 17:00-19:00
Palace of Westminster

Context

The Social Mobility Commission (SMC) published their 'State of the Nation' report this Autumn. The report challenged the assumption that opportunities are determined by which side of the north-south divide you are born in. Instead a postcode lottery predicts the likelihood of a child from a poor background succeeding or not. Soon after the publication of their report, the entire board of the Commission resigned in protest of the Government's lack of progress 'towards a fairer Britain'. A new ambitious plan to improve social mobility has been unveiled by the Government, where a range of measures have been announced designed to boost outcomes for disadvantaged children.

Policy Connect met in the run up to Christmas to hear a conversation between two individuals with a passion for, but distinct views about, the nature of politics. James Kirkup is Director of the Social Market Foundation and former Executive Editor in Politics at The Telegraph. He interviewed Alan Milburn, the former chair of the Government's Social Mobility Commission and Britain's foremost expert on social mobility. The topic was what more can be done to deliver on the social mobility agenda.

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Kirkup began the conversation by questioning how we get mainstream political parties to deal with the issue of social mobility. Milburn said that progress has been made, explaining how social mobility is now part of the Government's lexicon and that all the major political parties agree we need less elitism and more equality. Yet skeptics often charge the intention behind the Government's social mobility agenda as political posturing. Although Milburn did praise passionate reformers within Government who "get social mobility" such as Justine Greening the Education Secretary.

Kirkup then argued that Theresa May chose social mobility as the leading domestic issue in her first statement as Prime Minister. This may be true, said Milburn, yet there is a gap between the public policy needed to drive the social mobility agenda and the levers that are currently being used. Part of the problem, he said, is that a significant amount of the Government's capacity is tied to the issue of Brexit. This has meant that the Government does not have the necessary bandwidth to match their rhetoric of healing social divisions with the resources needed to tackle the problem.

Milburn was keen to assert that achieving social mobility will not be solved by progressive education policies alone. He emphasised that a successful plan demands the effort of more than one Government Department and needs to encompass partnerships with and between different actors in civil society. This is because, Milburn articulated, there are a range of factors that prevent social

mobility. Problems associated with housing, the labour market and geographical inequalities were mentioned.

Similarly, Kirkup has also written about the need to examine social mobility through a wider lens, “social mobility isn’t really about schools, or even education” (Kirkup, 2017). An obvious question is how you get to this point? Milburn outlined his frustration as chair of the SMC. He wanted a direct line to the then Prime Minister David Cameron. This is because “I wanted David to own it” (the social mobility agenda).

Kirkup agreed that better schools or teaching couldn’t by themselves solve deeper and wider structural problems that limit social mobility, such as parental support and the employer’s willingness to look beyond a narrow CV. But, he argued, the Conservative and the Labour Party both have different problems preventing them setting an effective social mobility strategy. In the case of the Conservatives, Kirkup pointed out that Theresa May’s ex-chief of staff Nick Timothy has criticised the Government’s Social Mobility Action Plan. Timothy didn’t mince his words, stating that the plan is “Full of jargon, but short on meaningful policies”. On the Labour Party, Kirkup said that Jeremy Corbyn’s failure to understand the importance of ambition could harm the social justice election platform that he ran on.

Kirkup wanted to explore periods where social mobility thrived in Britain. Milburn suggested the 1950’s. This idea may come from recent British birth cohort studies conducted by researchers at Oxford University (Bukodi, 2016). Milburn suggested three reasons that made the late 1950s a period of high social mobility. They were: an economy that was producing more high quality white-collar jobs, an increase in female participation in the workforce, and better access to universal healthcare with the introduction of the National Health Service. He contrasted the ingredients that produced this seeming heyday of social mobility with the lack of access modern British Governments have to the levers that can help improve equality of opportunity. He said the opportunity areas designed by the Department for Education are a positive attempt to address some place-based factors of inequality. Yet are not sufficient enough to address outcomes from the market that result in inequality.

Kirkup wanted to know what Milburn thought could be done for social mobility to take off. Milburn suggested actions around three topics. Education, parenting and infrastructure. For education, he highlighted that some state schools could learn how some private schools provide a better balance between character development and academia. The benefits, said Milburn, include improved confidence, better interpersonal skills and a deeper understanding of navigating through the interview process. Also, he pointed out that some UK state schools receive an unfair fund weighting of £1,000 per pupil less than some schools in London.

The second topic was parenting. Milburn framed this the “taboo subject” but said “we need to recognise the important role that parenting plays in a child’s life”. He specifically pointed to the differences between the ways a child from a disadvantaged background is raised compared to a wealthier peer. Milburn said this is exemplified in literacy rates where two in five children from less-well-off families are read to regularly. In contrast four out of five children from better off families are read to. Milburn and Kirkup agreed that parents owe an obligation to help their children have a good starting point in life but also came to the conclusion that the pressures such as place and income generation play a huge role – Milburn even suggested the Government should step in to allow parents more time teaching their children.

Finally Milburn stated that the worst places to grow up in, in terms of a lack of social mobility and access to jobs, suffer from a peripherality problem. Commuting times are one problem, the SMC

report found people in coastal, rural and former industrial areas are burdened with commuting times nearly four times than those in cities. Millburn was adamant that these problems could be combatted by Governments using investment in a nuanced, proactive way.

A range of thought provoking questions ended the discussion. Our very own Sarah Tustin asked whether the social mobility agenda asks people to assimilate middle class values and shed their background values. One audience member raised the notion of entrenched wealth limiting downward mobility, or that upwardly mobile people might not want others to do the same.

We learned two important nuggets of wisdom. Firstly there is no single driver of social mobility. So we need to understand that public policy will be messy. Secondly to deal with the topics described, different actors within civil society need to work together. Yet this is only a starting point as in many cases market outcomes mean the differences in opportunity between a child born from a poor and rich background are profound. So it is clear that to make inroads into achieving social mobility requires an active Government that instead of dividing the country by geographical regions only sees its work within, and is responsive to, the factors that make up place based inequality.

For further information, please contact Simon Kelleher, Head of Education and Skills at Policy Connect.