

General Debate on Social Mobility and the Professions

11 June 2009

I am very grateful to the Government for making the time for this important debate. How we make a professional career genuinely open to as wide a pool of talent as possible goes to the heart of what a modern Britain should look like.

I am very proud to have served in a Government that has worked so consistently over many years to open up Britain to aspiration and endeavour. It's also welcome that all the political parties represented in this place have now come to realise that making Britain socially mobile has to a core objective for modern public policy. I am tempted to say there is a progressive consensus on the issue – but time will tell.

This debate also gives me the opportunity to place on record my thanks to the Prime Minister for asking me to chair the Panel on access to the professions and to my fellow Panel members and my excellent Cabinet Office secretariat for all their work. Many Rt Hon and Hon members in this place have taken an active interest in our work and I hope that when we report in July we do justice to their contributions and those made in the House today.

That report will be based upon evidence we have taken from young people themselves, from employers, trades unions, universities, schools, voluntary and professional bodies. We have just finished our call for evidence and I have been staggered by the response. We have received 13,000 pages of evidence from a rich variety of people and organisations. The issue seems to have touched a nerve. I think it has done so because people have come to recognise a number of things:

First, the growing importance of the professions – 1 in 3 jobs today are managerial or professional and millions more professionals may be needed by 2020 as our economy becomes ever more service-orientated and professionalised. 9 in 10 new jobs in future will be professional jobs. Some experts believe that once retirements are taken into account we will need up to 7 million new professionals in employment by 2020. At a time when the country is suffering from a deep and painful global recession it is easy to forget that Britain's legal, medical, armed service and cultural industry professions are world leaders and that we are well placed to take advantage of a huge global growth in middle class employment over the next few decades.

Second, that as demand for unskilled labour falls still more dramatically in the years to come those without skills will be left stranded economically and divorced from the mainstream socially – unless we can get mobility to take hold. Already today in London over half of the workforce are in professional or managerial jobs. In the North East it is only one third. The risk is that without appropriate action employment segregation widens rather than narrows in the years to come.

Third, that there is a great opportunity here as well as a great challenge. The generation of the late 1950s of which I'm part were the beneficiaries of a mobility in society that came about because of a change in the economy – the advent of a service economy and the professionalisation of jobs – so creating more room at the top. I grew up on a council estate and I was lucky enough to end up in the Cabinet. But a more fluid society did not just emerge by chance. It also came about because of a big policy choice. Government action was crucial to help people realise the new opportunities that economic and social change were producing. Having won a gruelling war in which so many had made such sacrifices, there was a shared determination to win the peace. That commitment found expression in the post war Labour government's towering achievements. Full employment. Universal education. And a new welfare state. Together they brought new opportunities to millions of people, me included. Likewise, providing we make the right policy choices Britain can look forward to a second great wave of social mobility from which this and future generations benefit.

But fourth, for all the progress that has taken place in recent years by government to tackle poverty and disadvantage and all the efforts that have been made by the professions to expand the pool of talent from which they recruit, two decades after Mrs Thatcher ended the closed shop in the workplace Britain remains too much a closed shop society. The glass ceiling has been raised but not yet broken. Amongst the evidence we have been given we now know:

- 3 in 4 of all our judges were privately educated. Half of all senior civil servants were too. Despite the fact that only 7% of the population attend an independent school two thirds of members of the House of Lords and one third of members in this House were privately educated
- And the professions have become more not less socially exclusive – the older generation of today's professionals who were born in 1958 grew up in families which had incomes 17% above that of the average family. For the younger generation of today's professionals born in 1970 the figure had risen to 27%. Today's doctors and lawyers typically were born into families with incomes two-thirds higher than that of the average family. And interestingly the profession that has shown the fastest growth in social exclusivity is journalism

This weight of evidence I think points to one thing. That there is a chasm between where we are and where we need to be if Britain is to realise the social benefits of a huge potential growth in professional employment in future decades. This is not just an issue for those at the very bottom of society. When too many able kids from average income and middle class families are losing out in the race for professional jobs it is an issue for the majority not the minority in our country. It matters to what President Clinton famously called the 'forgotten middle class'. If the aspirations that most hard-working families have for themselves, their children and their communities are thwarted, then social responsibility and individual endeavour are both undermined.

What has struck me so forcibly during the course of the Panel's work particularly when we have met with young people from a whole variety of backgrounds is the emergence of what I call the "not for the likes of me" syndrome. 1 in 2 children with parents who are professionals want to pursue a professional career. It is only 1 in 6 among children from average family income backgrounds. Of course not everyone can be a doctor or a lawyer – and not everyone will want to be – but those who have the ability and the aptitude need a fair crack of the whip to realise their aspirations.

It's not that young people do not have aspirations. It is that they are blocked. It is not that they do not have talent. To coin a phrase, Britain's got talent – lots of it. Of course there is no single lever that on its own can prize open the professions. And no single organisation can make it happen either. It is far too complex an issue for that. It's as much about family networks as it is careers advice, standards in schools as much as universities admission procedures, work experience as well career development opportunities. The Panel is looking at all these areas but I thought it might be helpful for the House to know that we are particularly focussing on a handful of issues where we believe most effort needs to be given and where we have got to in our consideration of them.

First, providing many more young people with practical exposure to the professions at an early enough stage in their education. There are no shortage of fantastic school outreach and mentoring schemes run by organisations like the Sutton and Brightside Trusts or the Citizenship or Social Mobility foundations. Exposure to what it means to be a doctor or a lawyer or a journalist or even a politician and hearing at first hand what it means to pursue such a career is particularly important for kids who do not have professional parents or relatives. These schemes often have a bigger impact than school work experience programmes which are crying out for a radical overhaul if they are to make a meaningful contribution to children's career development. But good though those initiatives are they are fragmented and ad hoc. Only 60 of the 260 combined cadet forces - from whom so many future armed service officers are drawn - are based in state schools for example. That needs to change.

So too does the way we provide advice and guidance so that young people can make an informed choice about the career that is right for them. This is the second area where the Panel is rightly focussing attention. Again a fundamental overhaul is needed. In a complex labour market good careers guidance is absolutely essential. One survey of students finds that 3 in 4 were unhappy with the quality of the advice they received. A further survey released today and commissioned by the Panel from the excellent careers website shows that 70% of under 14 year olds say they have had no careers advice at all while 45% of those over 14 say they have had no or very poor/limited advice. Girls rate the advice somewhat worse than boys. I have to say that during all our proceedings and meetings and hearings I rarely heard a good word about the careers work of the Connexions service. I'm sure other aspects of its work is excellent but I can only conclude that its

focus on the minority of vulnerable young people is distracting it from offering proper careers advice and guidance to the majority of young people. It is simply not good enough and requires a radical rethink. My Panel will be making recommendations on how we can do so.

Third, getting a professional job nowadays requires more than aptitude, ability and a qualification. You also have to demonstrate work experience. 4 out of 5 employers say they recruit interns. But all too often internships are handed out on the basis of who you know not what you know. They are part of an informal economy in which personal connection is often more important than open advertisement in getting on to the career ladder. Most internships in careers like law are based in London and because interns usually have to work for free many young people are simply priced out of the intern market altogether. Again this is an area where my Panel will be making recommendations for change.

Fourth, how employers and universities go about selecting their entrants determines the social profile of the professions. Some make a big effort to recruit widely. Others very narrowly. Of course it is for employers to decide how they go about recruiting their staff but whereas we collect and publish data on the gender and race make-up of organisations to ensure that those like the civil service are what they say on the tin - an equal opportunities employer - we do not do publish comparable data on social background. That is something we need to consider carefully. What we do know is that when universities for example broaden their base of recruitment that does not lower levels of achievement. Figures from HEFC show that students from state schools once they get in to university actually perform at the same level – or higher – than students who come from private schools with higher grades at A level. There is a lesson here for all universities and professions to learn. It is not ability that is unevenly distributed in our society. It is opportunity.

Fifth, entry to a professional job increasingly requires a university degree. In the old days a journalist could work their way up from a local paper to Fleet Street. Nowadays Fleet Street no longer exists and journalism has become a graduate-entry profession. Nursing and social care are both going the same way. Much of this is for understandable reasons but there is a danger of qualification inflation. In recent years some professions have begun to address this by devolving some of their functions. Teachers being helped by classroom assistants. Nurses by health care assistants. Police officers by PCSOs and so on. These new jobs are creating a new ladder of opportunity for many more people by making a professional career open to those without a degree. My Panel is looking at how such opportunities can now be extended.

Many of the Panel's recommendations will be for the professions to action. And I have seen a lot of willingness on their part to do so. The most progressive parts of the professions are opening their doors to a wider cohort of talent. I hope that when we report in the summer the panel's report will go with the grain of their efforts. Equally where there remains a closed shop mentality in the professions we should be fearless in exposing it. It is not just

in the country's interest for them to fish in a wider pool of talent. It is in the professions' interest too. If professions are to properly serve a Britain that is characterised by its rich diversity they need themselves to embrace the notion of becoming more diverse. Despite some commendable efforts that is not where they are today.

And it is not just a job for the professions. Of course they can do more to put their house in order. But they cannot instil in kids an aspiration to pursue a professional career. That has got to come from individuals themselves and from their families and communities. Nor can the professions do to create the framework within which there are many more opportunities for individuals to realise their aspirations to progress. That is a job for government.

There is a broader canvas here – and it is one which in my view – and I stress this is my view not that of my panel - public policy has to paint a new picture.

I said earlier that I am proud of what this Government has done in office to open up more opportunities to more people. I would have wanted progress to have been faster of course. But it is no mean achievement that the Sutton Trust can report that the decades-long decline in social mobility has now bottomed out. That is progress. So too is the fact that during the last ten years inequality in Britain has slowly begun to be reversed. And it is progress when primary schools in the poorest areas have improved almost twice as fast as those in the most affluent. Or when in secondary schools city academies are improving results at four times the national rate despite having twice the number of pupils on free school meals. And I believe it is progress that the Government has invested so heavily in early years education and in so doing has learned the lesson from the Scandinavian countries where universal childcare has enhanced mobility and narrowed inequality.

This is a fundamental point. The desire to increase social mobility can not be a substitute for the desire for a more equal society. It is no coincidence that countries like Sweden or Australia or the Netherlands are the most socially fluid in the world. They are also amongst the most fair. That is why the Government's efforts - despite the obvious challenges - to abolish child poverty are so crucial and why I hope all parties in this House will make similar firm commitments to achieve it.

Breaking the relationship between class origins and class destinations is a battle for the long term. And it requires an holistic approach. As Amartya Sen, the Nobel Prize winner for economics has noted, families and communities can suffer not only economic disadvantage, but social, educational and cultural disadvantage as well. So the policy agenda has to move beyond the focus of the traditional welfare state on correcting the outcomes of market-driven inequalities - such as low wages and family poverty - retrospectively towards an approach that pro-actively reduces inequality and advances mobility by tacking their roots not their symptoms. This is not a job for any one department of government. It is a job for the whole of government.

One example. We know that in a knowledge economy, education will become ever more the motor of mobility. But despite the good progress of recent years the attainment gap remains far too wide. A child not on free school meals is still much more likely to get five good GCSEs as one who is. Under half of black Afro-Caribbean boys get five good GCSEs but the national average is closer to two thirds.

I applaud the Government's efforts to break the cycle of educational disadvantage. City academies and trust schools, personalised learning and better discipline, a focus on early years development and softer social skills all make a difference. But I believe we need to do more still to ensure that good schools are just as accessible to poorer parents as better-off ones. The truth is that the more wealth you have the more choice you get - through indirect market mechanisms most notably the buying of homes near good schools. When affluence still buys attainment it restricts mobility. For some the answer lies in academic selection – and a return to grammar schools. But there is precious little evidence that schools selecting pupils does anything to close the attainment gap. The evidence from countries as diverse as Denmark, Sweden and the USA is that it is not schools selecting pupils but parents being able to choose schools that raises standards generally and helps the most disadvantaged particularly. That is why I believe parents with children in badly performing schools - invariably in the poorest areas - should be given a new right to choose an alternative state school. I have proposed that such parents could choose an Education Credit weighted to be worth perhaps 150% of the cost of educating the child in their current school so giving a positive incentive to the alternative school to take them and to expand their intake numbers. I know there will be objections and concerns about such a proposal but it is simply not right – and we should no longer tolerate – the fact that too many disadvantaged children are still let down by the schools system. Correcting that injustice means shifting the balance of power to put more choice in the hands of parents who the system currently disempowers.

And that brings me to my final point. Social mobility will not advance if we think it is only wealth that is unevenly distributed in our society. It is also power. When you are poor you have little power. The sense of hopelessness that clouds the poorest communities in our country grows out of disempowerment. If Britain is to get moving again socially, people need to be able not just to get a job or training or childcare but also to enjoy greater control and to have a bigger say in how they lead their lives. Of course beating crime, creating jobs, rebuilding estates can help. But I have long believed that this cloud of despondency can only be dispelled through a modern participatory politics which allows both local communities and individual citizens to more evenly and directly share in power.

So where individual citizens can exercise choice and control – such as over hospitals and schools – that should be the norm. And where it is less easy for individual citizens to exercise such direct control – most people are hardly in a position to choose their own police officers for instance – power should be located at the next level: in the local community. Where services are failing

communities should have the legal right to have them replaced. Where communities can directly run local services like children's centres, estates and parks they should be helped to do so. And in other services – most notably the local police and NHS – the community should be given a bigger say by making them subject to direct election at the ballot box. We need to move from a top down approach to governance towards a bottom up one that gives citizens and communities far more of a stake.

In my view these are some of the steps towards a Britain that is genuinely socially mobile. They are all about levelling up not down. They are all about not just beating poverty but unleashing aspiration. And in each case they all require not less State – as some mistakenly believe is what the modern world demands. Or a bigger State as others continue to advocate. But a different sort of State. One that empowers not controls. Unlocking our country so that it is open to aspiration and effort requires a new drive to fundamentally change how power is distributed in our society.

One thing is certain – modern Britain can't work if it harbours a closed shop mentality. Our economy won't prosper unless we harness the talent of all those who are able and aspire to make a contribution. And our society won't flourish unless people feel that effort and endeavour are rewarded. That is why I hope the work of my Panel will help renew our determination in this place to systematically unblock every obstacle that stands in the way of individuals being able to realise their own aspirations to progress. That for me is what modern government is all about.