The Social Mobility Commission, State of the Nation 2022: A Fresh Approach to Social Mobility. A Commentary

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Abstract
The Social Mobility Commission's most recent annual report is entitled State of the Nation 2022: A Fresh Approach to Social Mobility. We examine what in the report is new, whether explicitly or implicitly, and how far the newness serves to enhance our understanding of social mobility in Britain today and is of relevance to problems and policy issues that arise. We find that the supposed greater attention to the findings of academic research is selective and, overall, quite limited; that the proposed new focus on 'small steps upwards' shifts attention away from what are the most serious and enduring instances of inequality of opportunity in British society; that the emphasis on individual agency as a means of overcoming disadvantaged social origins neglects the role of agency in maintaining inequality in mobility chances; and that the determinedly upbeat tone of the report raises questions of the independence of the Social Mobility Commission, under its present leadership, as a body charged with holding governments to account in their efforts to ensure that 'the circumstances of birth do not determine outcomes in life'.

Keywords: social mobility, equality of opportunity, Social Mobility Commission

Introduction

GIVEN THE subtitle of this latest annual report of the Social Mobility Commission (SMC), an obvious basis for commentary is suggested, that is, an examination of what in the report is new, whether explicitly or implicitly, and what follows. In developing a commentary, we also take into account the speech by Katherine Birbalsingh, appointed in 2021 as Chair of the SMC, which served to introduce the report.[1] Over the period the report covers, the SMC in fact consisted only of Birbalsingh and the Deputy Chair, Alun Francis, the principal of a college of further education. Further commissioners were appointed some weeks after the appearance of the report, as referred to in our concluding section.

We identify four ways in which the report claims to take a fresh approach, or in effect does so, at least in contrast with the annual reports previously produced by the SMC. We then go on to consider what the newness consists of, how far it serves to enhance our understanding of social mobility in Britain today and is of relevance to problems and policy issues that arise.

First, the report claims to innovate in giving greater attention to the findings of academic research into social mobility: 'Previous versions of our annual report … did not include the social mobility outcomes that are most common in the academic literature.'[2] Thus, in

[1]K. Birbalsingh, *Bucking the Trend: A Fresh Approach to Social Mobility*, Speech, Social Mobility Commission, 27 June 2022; https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/bucking-the-trend-a-fresh-approach-to-social-mobility

[2]*State of the Nation 2022: A Fresh Approach to Social Mobility*, Social Mobility Commission, 23 June 2022, p. 25; https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/state-of-the-nation-2022-a-fresh-approach-to-social-mobility Contributions to the report are acknowledged from Anthony Heath, Oxford University, Yaojun Li, Manchester University and Jo Blanden, Surrey University, as members of a Policy and Evidence Advisory Panel set up in March 2022.

Chapter 2, devoted to 'Mobility Outcomes', the crucial distinction between absolute and relative mobility is made and applied and, on this basis, the report is able to dispel some widespread misunderstandings in public discussion of mobility. If intergenerational mobility is treated in terms of social class—and here the report chiefly cites our own work—there is no basis for supposing that absolute mobility is in decline, or that relative mobility chances are becoming more unequal, or that, in comparative perspective, Britain is a low mobility country.[3] If mobility is treated in terms of income, the report recognises that the position is less clear. This is mainly because the data are not of the highest quality and the need is emphasised for better data to be made available—for example, through the linking of parent and child income tax records. However, what is in general maintained is that, in the light of academic research, the 'popular narrative' that social mobility is 'getting worse' can be discounted.

The second—and perhaps the most prominent—claim to newness that is made is in regard to where the main focus of mobility research and policy should lie. In the past, it is argued, a too exclusive emphasis has been placed on what Birbalsingh calls the 'Dick Whittington model' of social mobility—of long-range ascent from disadvantaged social origins to the highest levels of the class structure—and on what can be done to increase opportunities for such mobility. More attention, the report urges, should now be given to facilitating 'smaller steps upwards', through which larger numbers of disadvantaged people can enhance their lives—starting by improving basic literacy and numeracy, enabling them to increase their skills and thus their employability, their grades of employment and their earnings, while remaining within their communities. The need 'to leave to achieve' has to be minimised. Questions of access to university, which has not in fact 'brought the dividends many hoped for', should not be given priority over those of access to appropriate, locally provided vocational and further education.[4]

Third, the report can be seen as having a novel feature in that it ventures into theoretical issues—with normative implications—concerning the role of individual agency in social mobility. It is accepted that individuals are born into circumstances that are not of their own choosing and that some start life better placed than others. But this, it is maintained, should not be taken to mean that individuals are the 'prisoners' of the circumstances of their birth. Rather, it is important to recognise that individuals have agency and that they can, through their own will and effort, shape the lives that they are to lead: 'Crucially, we are passionate in our belief that although some people may face more obstacles than others, they can still change their stars.'[5] This view then leads on to an insistence that there is no fixed relationship between inequality and mobility and that they should not be conflated. It would be possible for inequality to be reduced without increasing mobility, or for mobility to be increased without reducing inequality.[6]

Fourth, the way in which the report contrasts most strikingly with previous ones is in its tone, which can only be described as determinedly upbeat. It is at one point recognised that the designated task of the SMC is 'to hold the government to account on the effectiveness of their policy interventions for driving social mobility across all parts of the UK.'[7] In this regard, past SMC reports have been consistently critical. A special report in 2017 concluded that of thirty-seven policies that were evaluated—most being in the field of education—only seven could be rated as successful.[8] And shortly after the publication of their annual report for that year, the then SMC members collectively resigned because

[3]E. Bukodi and J. H. Goldthorpe, *Social Mobility and Education in Britain: Research, Politics and Policy*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2019. In this article, we refer mainly to this book and to some of our papers on mobility. This is not because we believe that our work is of any exclusive importance but because the items in question contain discussion of most other work that is of relevance. In this way, we avoid overloading the present text with citations.

[4]*State of the Nation 2022*, p. 3.

[5]Birbalsingh, *Bucking the Trend*, p. 4; *State of the Nation 2022*, p. 5.

[6]*State of the Nation 2022*, p. 4.

[7]Ibid., p. 19.

[8]Social Mobility Commission, *Time for Change: An Assessment of Government Policies on Social Mobility 1997–2017*, London, HMSO, 2017.

of the government's reluctance to take more decisive action. As the outgoing chair, Alan Milburn, put it, they saw no point in continuing in their efforts 'to push water uphill'. However, in the present report, criticism of the direction or effectiveness of government policy is virtually absent. All that is suggested is that in achieving the targets of the government's levelling-up statement of missions, social mobility policy will be critical.[9] Moreover, a 'good news' theme runs through the report. As well as existing evidence on mobility being 'not as gloomy as the popular narrative', it is also the case that '[t]rends in the drivers of social mobility in the UK look broadly positive.'[10] The summary boxes at the end of sections of the report are almost all aimed at emphasising such points. Furthermore, the report includes a series of individual case studies, all of which are striking success stories of upward mobility from disadvantaged origins—Dick Whittington mobility, no less—in which the importance of agency, of individual character, is brought out.

How far, then, are these claims to a new approach sustainable? And, to the extent that they are, in what ways do they advance, or promise to advance, our knowledge of levels and patterns of social mobility in Britain and our insight into the factors that promote or impede mobility, so that an improved basis for policy formation can be provided?

Greater attention to academic research

As noted, attention to the findings of academic research is most evident in regard to mobility outcomes—where they mostly fit in well with the report's good news theme. So far at least as social class mobility is concerned, there has been no decline, and Britain is not a low mobility country. However, one closely related finding—of an equally important, though less congenial kind—is, if not ignored, interpreted in a very strange fashion. While the total absolute mobility rate, that is, the proportion of people found in different class positions to those of their families of origin, has remained stable, a marked change can be traced in the balance of upward and downward mobility. For cohorts born up to the 1950s, upward mobility was a far more common experience than downward, as a result of the rapid growth of professional and managerial occupations. But for later cohorts, as this growth has slackened off, downward mobility has become increasingly common. The report recognises this and indeed quotes one of us to the effect that 'younger generations of men and women now face less favourable mobility prospects than did their parents.'[11] Yet, there is no consideration of what might be done to check or reverse this trend, nor of its possible social and political consequences. Rather, it is somewhat desperately suggested that it 'could be seen not as a failure but rather as a sign of success'—as a reflection of the past upgrading of the class structure.[12]

A concern to maintain an upbeat narrative is also apparent in regard to relative rates of class mobility. Academic researchers are in general agreement, it is stressed, that these rates have not become more unequal and, it is added, some even believe that there may have been a slight equalisation.[13] A graph then appears, Figure 2.4, purporting to show that such an equalisation has in fact occurred. However, no academic research is here cited. The graph derives, it is said, from 'internal estimates' based on data for the period 1972 to 2020 from the General Household Survey, the British Household Panel Survey, the UK Household Longitudinal Study, the Taking Part Survey and the Labour Force Survey. This may sound impressive but, unfortunately, the analysis as presented falls well short of academic standards. What is crucially lacking is any information on how the data from these several surveys, of differing design, were harmonised

[9] *State of the Nation 2022*, p. 6.
[10] Ibid., pp. 25, 134.
[11] Ibid., p. 49. The reference, not given in the report, is to J. H. Goldthorpe, 'Social class mobility in modern Britain: changing structure, constant process', *Journal of the British Academy*, vol. 4, 2016, p. 96. The sentence actually continues '…or their grandparents'. For supporting evidence, see N. A. Trinh and E. Bukodi, 'Intergenerational class mobility of labour market entrants in Germany and the UK since the 1950s', *European Sociological Review*, vol. 38, 2022, pp. 37–53.
[12] *State of the Nation 2022*, p. 49.
[13] Ibid., p. 41.

and combined.[14] Further, the figure appears to relate to all respondents to the surveys aged 35–54 years, with no distinction being made by gender. In our own work, we have shown that while across birth cohorts covering the second half of the twentieth century, no tendency emerges for relative rates of class mobility to become more equal among men, such a tendency does show up among those women who have worked part-time.[15] Treating the two genders together could therefore be quite misleading.

Moreover, this shift away from academic to in-house research continues and indeed becomes quite dominant in Chapter 3 of the report on what are called 'Intermediate Outcomes'. These are various outcomes—taken to be positive or negative for mobility chances—experienced by individuals over successive life stages: for children over the years of their primary and secondary schooling; for young persons over their tertiary education or early years in the labour market; and for adults over the whole course of their working lives. A long series of figures is presented showing how differences in these outcomes as between individuals from more or less advantaged backgrounds have changed over recent years. The analyses are very crude. In part, this is because of limitations in the mainly official data that are used. For example, with educational data, often the only indicator of disadvantage that is available is children's eligibility for free school meals and this, as the report in fact recognises, is a very poor, and indeed worsening, indicator of family economic circumstances.[16] There are, however, other shortcomings in the analyses themselves that, taken together, call into serious doubt the narrative that is pursued of generally diminishing inequalities in outcomes in relation to social origins.

To begin with, the differences in outcomes that are shown are often, and especially with educational outcomes, quite small. Yet, as is acknowledged, tests of statistical significance have not in the majority of analyses been carried out.[17] The differences could well be the result simply of chance shifts in the data. Again, the time-points between which a narrowing in 'class gaps' is reported seem often to be chosen for best effect. For example, in Figure 3.14, showing the chances of men of differing class origins ending up in professional and managerial positions, a reduced class gap is claimed; but while a reduction can be seen between 2018 and 2021, there is none between 2015 and 2021. The only sensible interpretation of the figure is one of trendless fluctuation in the size of the gaps—and a number of other figures could be cited throughout Chapter 3 where the same would apply (for example, most of the series of graphs on pp. 67–8). Finally, in some crucial respects, evidence of over time change is simply not provided. Thus, in the case of career progression it is recognised that individuals of more advantaged class origins who start their working lives in lower class positions have better chances of upward career mobility—in their case, 'counter-mobility'—than those from less advantaged origins, but nothing on change is said. Academic research is available to show that such counter-mobility, leading to intergenerational *im*mobility, is in fact on the increase.[18]

The conclusion reached at the end of Chapter 3—and one anticipated in Birbalsingh's speech—is that 'the gaps [in outcomes] associated with social background … have generally

[14]From further information we have obtained, it appears that the figure is in some way an extension of analyses reported in Y. Li and A. Heath, 'Class matters: a study of minority and majority social mobility in Britain, 1982–2011', *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 122, 2016, pp. 162–200. But how this extension was made remains unclear. For later work based on the UK Household Longitudinal Study that confirms and extends our cohort-based findings of no change in relative mobility rates among men, see N. A. Trinh, *Patterns and Drivers of Over-Time Changes in the Intergenerational Transmission of Inequality in Germany and the UK*, University of Oxford D.Phil. thesis, 2022, Paper 2, Fig. 1; https://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:cbfb603b-ce55-49e2-87b6-011e7e39bd3f The question of whether or not relative rates of mobility have become more equal over the recent past has to be regarded as an unsettled one, and serious technical issues arise.

[15]Bukodi and Goldthorpe, *Social Mobility and Education in Britain*, ch. 3.

[16]*State of the Nation 2022*, pp. 54–5.

[17]Ibid., p. 57.

[18]N. A. Trinh, 'Why do trends in social fluidity at labour market entry and occupational maturity differ? Evidence for Germany and the UK', *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility*, forthcoming.

narrowed for young people in recent years. This is good news for social mobility in the UK.'[19] However, given the limitations of both the data and the analyses in question, a less obviously slanted summing up would be that the gaps appear sometimes to narrow and sometimes to widen but, on a general view, show no clear directional change.[20]

One further point may be made. If, consistently with the supposed fresh approach, a reliance on academic rather than in-house research had been maintained, not only could more reliable findings have been reported, but also the results of analyses of how far these outcomes are in fact 'intermediate'—that is, linked to mobility. This is a crucial matter, on which the report has nothing to say. There is a large academic literature that is of relevance, although one that Birbalsingh might not find very happy reading. For example, it is questionable how far any equalisation in educational attainment among children of different social origins actually translates into more equal mobility chances, and there is little indication that the intergenerational transmission of advantage and disadvantage in ways that simply bypass education has been at all reduced.[21] In short, the supposed greater reliance on the findings of academic research turns out to be selective and, overall, very limited.

A new focus for mobility research and policy

As regards the proposed change in the focus of mobility research and policy away from Dick Whittington mobility to 'smaller steps upwards', the newness of this can certainly be accepted. But the questions that then follow are those of how far the new focus falls on what are the most serious problems of social mobility in present-day Britain and of how far the fresh approach that is envisaged is likely to lead to policies that will increase mobility.

The motivation to change focus arises from the view—and this emerges very clearly from Birbalsingh's speech—that most current mobility research, as she puts it, 'drops into a model which separates the disadvantaged on one side and everyone else on the other … It reduces social mobility to a contest between these two groups. This then stops us from thinking about social mobility for everyone.'[22] However, to say that such a two-class model prevails in mobility research is simply wrong and, coming from the Chair of the SMC, disturbingly so. To the contrary, most British research is based on the National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (NS-SEC) and usually on its seven-class version.[23] Moreover, what then emerges as regards long-range and short-range mobility points to serious weaknesses in the new focus that Birbalsingh and the report propose.

It is with long-range mobility that the most striking disparities in mobility chances are shown up—not between the disadvantaged and 'the rest', but between the disadvantaged as represented by NS-SEC Class 7, routine wage-workers, and NS-SEC Class 1, higher-level professionals and managers. At one point, the report does actually note that a man—and much the same could be said for a woman—who is of Class 1 origins has around

[19] *State of the Nation 2022*, p. 100; Birbalsingh, *Bucking the Trend*, p. 4.

[20] As regards inequalities in educational attainment, a very different view to that presented in the report emerges from research undertaken as part of the Institute of Fiscal Studies Deaton Review of Inequality. See C. Farquharson, S. McNally and I. Tahir, *Education Inequalities*, London, IFS, 2022; and for a more rounded sociological commentary, R. Breen, *The Stubborn Persistence of Educational Inequality*, London, IFS, 2022.

[21] For references to the literature in question and further findings for Britain, see Bukodi and Goldthorpe, *Social Mobility and Education in Britain*, chs. 5–8; and E. Bukodi and J. H. Goldthorpe, 'Intergenerational class mobility in industrial and post-industrial societies: towards a general theory', *Rationality and Society*, 2022, doi: 10.1177/10434631221093791.

[22] Birbalsingh, *Bucking the Trend*, p. 4. *State of the Nation 2022*, pp. 4–5.

[23] Office for National Statistics, *The National Statistics Socio-economic Classification: User Manual*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. *State of the Nation 2022* gives details of this classification, but, rather oddly given Birbalsingh's criticism of crude two-class models, then uses in its own analyses only a three-class rather than the seven-class version.

a twenty times better chance of also reaching a Class 1 rather than a Class 7 position than does a man who is of Class 7 origins.[24] And it could have been added that such a disparity is one that has been present over decades. It might be thought that extreme and persisting inequality of opportunity of the kind here indicated—and the wastage of talent that is implied—would figure centrally in the concerns of a body charged with monitoring mobility levels and trends and the effectiveness of policy. But, again, an uncomfortable fact is passed over with little comment other than that attention has now 'to move away from a narrow focus on "long" upward mobility'.[25]

In contrast, short-range mobility between adjacent classes in the NS-SEC hierarchy or within the 'intermediate' classes—Classes 3, 4 and 5—is, on all the evidence, quite frequent. It is indeed often at a level not far removed from 'perfect mobility'—that is, where no association exists between individuals' classes of origin and destination. Sequence analysis of individuals' work histories reveals that men and women move rather readily between more skilled manual, supervisory, technical and lower-level non-manual occupations, and in this case what might be regarded as upward mobility remains more common than downward.[26] In other words, it would scarcely seem that the limited possibility of 'smaller steps upwards' is at all central to Britain's mobility problems.

What has also to be recognised is that the emphasis that Birbalsingh and the report wish to place on 'other routes' to upward mobility than through university as, say, through apprenticeships or further—that is, adult—education, may be less straightforward in its consequences than is supposed.[27] Vocational training in the UK is certainly in a poor state and its extension and improvement could do much to improve long-depressed levels of productivity. But the relation of vocational training to social mobility is problematic. Germany, as is noted in the report, has a highly developed apprenticeship system and benefits economically from it. But there is less fluidity within the German class structure than within the British, and one reason for this is that moving up from manual work to supervisory or technical positions—smaller steps upwards—is more or less precluded without the appropriate *Berufsausbildung* (vocational training). Strengthening and systematising qualifications, vocational or otherwise, always runs the risk of mobility becoming restricted by 'credentialism'.

Moreover, in the case of further education, there is now strong evidence that insofar as this is of a vocational character, then, at least for men, it does little to raise their chances of upward class mobility. Further education that leads to an *academic* qualification does have such an effect; but it is most often pursued by men and women of relatively advantaged social origins who—perhaps because of poor school performance—were downwardly mobile on entry into the labour market. In other words, it serves as a means of countermobility and thus contributes more to intergenerational stability in class positions than to change.[28]

The role of agency

As regards the stress that is placed in the report on individual agency in the achievement of upward mobility, newness again is evident, at least so far as SMC reports go. But, again, the full implications of the position that is taken up do not appear to have been thought through. For young people to 'change their stars', it is argued, not only do cognitive ability and skills matter, but also attributes such as aspiration, ambition, conscientiousness and a readiness for hard work.[29] The importance of the active support of parents is also underlined. All this may have some force. However, if agency is thus to be

[24] *State of the Nation 2022*, p. 41. See also, Bukodi and Goldthorpe, *Social Mobility and Education in Britain*, ch. 4.
[25] *State of the Nation 2022*, p. 4.
[26] Bukodi and Goldthorpe, *Social Mobility and Education in Britain*, chs. 4, 7.
[27] Birbalsingh, *Bucking the Trend*, p. 5.
[28] Bukodi and Goldthorpe, *Social Mobility and Education in Britain*, ch. 9. Note might also have been taken in *State of the Nation 2022* of an earlier official publication, A. Tuckett and J. Field, *Factors and Motivations Affecting Attitudes Towards and Propensity to Learn Through the Life Course*, London, Government Office for Science, 2016.
[29] *State of the Nation 2022*, p. 103.

emphasised in relation to individuals being upwardly mobile from disadvantaged class origins, it would seem no less relevant to recognise its role in enabling those born into more advantaged class positions to remain there. Agency would seem very prominent on the part of parents with superior economic and other resources seeking 'to do the best they can' for their children, and in particular to guard against the possibility of their *déclassement*. They can—as the report does indeed note—pay for private schooling or tutoring or buy, at a premium, houses in the catchment areas of high performing state schools, and they can then see their children through higher education without them having to incur serious debt.[30] But the report has nothing further to say on such 'opportunity hoarding', even though it would seem evident that it is a primary factor underlying the stability—the powerful resistance to change—that the pattern of relative rates of class mobility displays.[31]

Moreover, what is further brought out in this connection is the very uneasy position taken up in the report on the relation between inequality and mobility. As noted above, it is insisted that inequality and mobility should not be 'conflated'. But while this is obviously true conceptually, all the relevant evidence, including that presented in the report itself, points to the fact that, empirically, a strong, if often complex, relation does exist between them—and is generally of an inverse kind. The wider the inequality, the more restricted the mobility.[32] The report's emphasis on agency appears as an attempt to minimise the significance of this inverse relation in suggesting that, through their personal qualities, individuals of disadvantaged origins can nonetheless succeed. But, to repeat, agency is just as important in ensuring immobility at the higher levels of the class structure as in achieving mobility to these levels—and backed by greater resources. It is notable that while the report sees social mobility as being critical to the achievement of the targets of the government's levelling-up programme—whatever this may amount to—little is said about the importance of levelling up, in the sense of reducing prevailing, and extreme, economic and social inequality, to the achievement of mobility targets.

The upbeat tone

As observed at the outset, it is the upbeat tone of the report that throws it into most striking contrast with previous reports by the SMC. A fresh approach is indeed evident. But concern arises in two different respects.

First, as regards the understanding of current levels and drivers of social mobility in the UK, the attempt to provide an apparent grounding for the good news theme results in academic research not in fact being drawn on in a decisive way. As noted, such research is drawn on quite selectively and then replaced by in-house research of generally lower quality, to which 'positive' interpretations are, often very questionably, attached. It is one thing to seek to correct unduly pessimistic, even alarmist, narratives of social mobility—as were indeed sometimes echoed in earlier SMC reports—but it is quite another to suggest that all the indications are of mobility being, if anything, on the increase and of drivers of mobility moving in ways that promise still better times ahead. It could, moreover, be thought unfitting that a report from what is an independent statutory body, charged with holding governments to account, frequently reads—and looks—like some kind of promotional brochure.

Second, questions arise of how, in the light of the tone of the report, the role of the SMC is now to be understood. The report does recognise that in various respects there is more to be done to bring about a situation in which, to quote the SMC's website, 'the circumstances of birth do not determine outcomes in life'. However, no new policies directed to this end are proposed. Even 'early thinking' about 'policy solutions' will, it appears, have to wait until results become available from a new 'mobility index'—or what would in fact appear to be a whole series of indices—

[30]Ibid., p. 107.
[31]See Bukodi and Goldthorpe, 'Intergenerational class mobility'.
[32]See E. Bukodi and J. H. Goldthorpe, 'Desigualdad social y movilidad social:¿Una relación inversa?', in O. Salido and S. Fachelli, eds., *Perspectivas y fronteras en el estudio de la desigualdad social: movilidad social y clases sociales en tiempos de cambio*, Madrid, Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas, 2020.

presently under construction.[33] This might appear a defensible position from the standpoint of evidence-based policy. But if, as the report insists, all current trends are in a favourable direction, few grounds would appear to exist for any radical form of intervention; and it is notable that such interventions that have previously been envisaged, even within the SMC, receive no consideration in the report, critical or otherwise. For example, in the educational field, no mention is made of placing VAT on the fees charged by private schools or removing their charitable status; of providing vouchers for low-income families to pay for private tuition for their children; of requiring admission to state schools to be on the basis of ability bands or by lot; or of using lots to determine admission to over-subscribed university courses for all qualified applicants. Is the good news theme intended to imply that there are no grounds for any longer entertaining proposals of this kind? Or is it, rather, that they are now seen as politically unacceptable?

Conclusions

In the light of the above, it is then almost inevitable that doubts should emerge on one rather crucial point, that is, how far does this first SMC report with Birbalsingh as Chair—and clearly written under her dominant influence—manifest the SMC's independence or, rather, reflect the growing inclination of Conservative administrations to head up public bodies by persons thought to be sympathetic to their political and policy orientations? The playing down of disparities in chances of access to the most rewarding and advantageous class positions and of the way in which inequality of condition thus systematically compromises equality of opportunity, along with the emphasis placed on individual agency as a counter to the accidents of birth, would seem to be all of an ideological piece. The widening of opportunities can then be centred on giving the socially disadvantaged better chances of increasing their skills and thus their earnings—though without necessarily changing their class positions. And for those achieving mobility of this kind, less need is likely to arise than with Dick Whittington mobility for them to leave the communities in which they grew up. Birbalsingh could scarcely complain if the fresh approach to mobility that she proposes is characterised as one encouraging the working class to keep to their place, both socially and geographically.

It is moreover of interest, though disconcerting, that in a recent paper, Joseph Maslen has documented how thinking about mobility on the lines that are evident in *State of the Nation 2022* is not in fact all that fresh; it has been current in Conservative Party circles for some time. And Maslen has gone on to suggest that the report itself is designed to underpin emerging lines of Conservative policy.[34] The slowing growth of professional and managerial positions, together with rapid university expansion, threaten to create an economically problematic over-supply of graduates. A need is therefore seen to dampen down the attraction of, and demand for, university education and to highlight other routes to economic advancement—in particular for those of less favoured origins—through vocational education and training and then early entry into the labour market in relatively well-paid jobs. And what may be added is that it is not hard to see how, apart from any economic rationale that may be claimed for it, such a policy approach also has attractions from an electoral standpoint. Shifting attention away from extreme inequalities in relative mobility chances reduces pressure for measures aimed at limiting opportunity hoarding on the part of more advantaged families—measures which could erode their Conservative support. Again, some check would, hopefully, be placed on the growing numbers of—perhaps disappointed—graduates who now appear increasingly inclined to vote in any other way than Conservative. And a case could be made that in educational policy, priority is being given to improving the life chances of the main body of working class men and women, including those behind the former 'red wall', whose Labour allegiance has become strained.

[33] *State of the Nation 2022*, p. 5.

[34] J. Maslen, 'Do the Conservatives believe in social mobility?', *The Political Quarterly*, vol. 93, no. 1, 2022, pp. 104–111; and J. Maslen, 'Is the Social Mobility Commission catching up with recent Conservative politics?', LSE Politics & Policy blog, 21 June 2022; https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/small-steps-up-the-ladder/

Doubts and suspicions of the kind in question can, moreover, only be reinforced by the appointments of the new commissioners that followed on the report—three of the seven, Resham Kotecha, Ryan Henson and Rob Wilson, having direct Conservative Party affiliations. The next annual report of the SMC will indeed be an interesting document. Any difficulty in continuing the good news story might be attributed to the effects of Covid and the Ukraine war. But what will be of main significance is how far government policies—or the of absence of policies—of relevance to social mobility are subject to critical examination, what lines of policy the SMC itself is led to propose on the basis of its new mobility indices and, above all, what indications there are of the readiness of the SMC to remain a body with a commitment to objective fact-finding and analysis rather than being the underwriter of a party political programme.

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