

Social mobility: missing an opportunity?

Steven Kennedy

Trends in social mobility are unclear, but life chances remain closely linked to background

'Social mobility' - or the lack of it - has been identified across the political spectrum as a problem to be addressed. All parties espouse 'equality of opportunity', but obstacles to moving up (and down) the social ladder can also stifle productivity and economic growth. But what does the evidence actually tell us about how people's life chances are influenced by their background? And what can governments do about it?

Evidence to support claims that social mobility has *declined* is far from clear cut. One study found that earnings for those born in 1970 were more closely linked to their parents' incomes than for those born

in 1958, suggesting a fall in social mobility, but this is disputed. Studies looking at social class suggest that, after taking into account changes in occupational structure, rates of social mobility changed little over the postwar period.

Measuring social mobility presents fundamental problems. Since outcomes for individuals cannot be known for sure until they have reached middle age, we know more about what *has* happened to social mobility, rather than what *is* happening. Studies analysing 'intermediate' outcomes (e.g. test scores) suggest that for children born more recently social mobility may not have worsened, and some indicators suggest a weakening influence of family background, but as regards the overall impact of Government policy since 1997, the jury is still out, and likely to remain so for some time.

The full impact of policies such as Sure Start will not be known for many years

Whatever the picture over time, evidence suggests that rates of social mobility are lower in the UK than in many other developed countries.

INCREASING SOCIAL MOBILITY

What drives social mobility, and what policies might increase it? The OECD concluded that while factors such as individual ability, family and social environments, networks and

attitudes all have an influence, government action, particularly in education, can help children achieve a higher income and social status than their parents. In the UK the National Equality Panel chaired by John Hills, while highlighting how economic advantage and disadvantage are reinforced across the life cycle and between generations, also rejected the idea that policy can't make a difference, and suggested various areas - including schooling and education, tackling labour market disadvantage and neighbourhood renewal - where government action could help.

Moving up the ladder is harder if its rungs are further apart

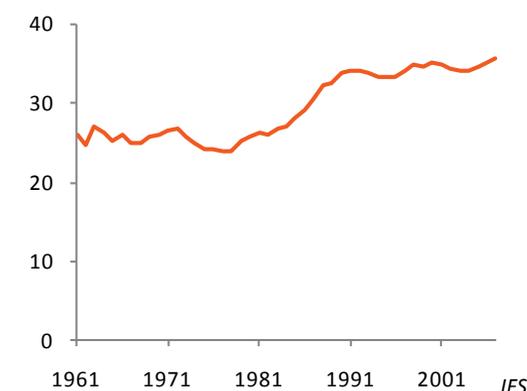
However, studies also suggest that intergenerational mobility is lower in more unequal societies. Inequality may reinforce immobility in a number of ways. The greater the rewards from top jobs, the more likely it is that parents who can afford it will seek to ensure their children secure them. As the Hills report noted, those near the top will fight to ensure their children don't slip down. The link between house prices and proximity to good state schools is well documented.

INCOME INEQUALITY

Income inequality in the UK increased dramatically in the 1980s - a change unparalleled in scale in comparable countries in recent history - and has remained high

Inequality rose quickly in the 1980s and has not fallen since

GB gini coefficients (before housing costs)



since, with inequality on some measures now at its highest level for at least 60 years. The IFS has shown that without Labour's redistributive tax and benefit policies since 1997, inequality would have risen even more sharply.

Increased inequality has not, in the UK at least, translated into pressure for government action; surveys suggest support for redistribution has declined since the 1990s, most markedly among Labour supporters. But if high levels of inequality are here to stay, attempts to increase social mobility - however well focused - may achieve less than is hoped.

Britain is less socially mobile than other countries

Strength of link between sons' and fathers' earnings. Lower numbers suggest more intergenerational mobility

