

Britain: The fraud of Brown's "crusade" for social mobility

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21 March 2009

Prime Minister Gordon Brown has proclaimed a "national crusade" to encourage upward social mobility from the working class into the middle class. Former Minister Alan Milburn is to head a governmental commission on the issue, with a view to push ideas and policies they believe will encourage upwards mobility.

The right wing press have tried ridiculously to paint such measures as a return to "class politics" by Labour. In reality the promotion of the idea of a meritocracy is not designed to create equality, but to legitimise a society based on grotesque and growing levels of inequality.

Britain's ruling class have long been aware of the necessity to promote the idea that those with talent can get on. In the midst of an economic crisis whose magnitude has revolutionary implications, these efforts to legitimise the profit system must be restated. However, it has become increasingly obvious that the children of workers will, almost certainly, live and die in the same social class to which they are born, regardless of their effort and intellect.

The government White Paper, "New Opportunities, Fair Chances" has an introduction by Brown and advances "equal opportunities" in education as the path towards greater social mobility. This will supposedly be achieved by such meagre initiatives as paying teachers at inner city schools more to remain there.

In reality social mobility, never pronounced, has been in decline since social inequality started to widen during the 1970s. What the government paper is actually about is preparing working class school pupils for working class employment, not creating conduits into professional employment. The paper's purpose is to update the long term emphasis Labour has placed on creating a low waged workforce to tempt transnational

corporations to locate parts of their production process within the UK.

The paper claims that the world economy will create two billion skilled jobs over the next two decades, and hence more jobs for the UK. In reality economies across the world economy are shrinking not expanding. Demand for goods and services is falling at record rates, in both the developed and less developed economies and transnational corporations are drastically drawing back production, closing and mothballing international production facilities.

Even without the onset of economic recession, generally wherever modern technology is utilised within the production process living labour is expunged. Most jobs created by globalised production methods in both services and manufacturing now involve mostly routine semi-skilled tasks, together with a declining number of highly skilled jobs. What the new globalised economy requires is not more skilled workers, but employees who can follow instructions.

In terms of support for further educational reform to encourage social mobility, the White Paper relies on a Cabinet Office discussion paper, "Getting on, Getting Ahead" released late last year. The discussion paper stated that it had found "positive changes" since 2000, based on a key finding that family background was becoming less central to the academic success of 15-year-olds than it was for the same age group born in 1970.

Professor David Byrne of sociology and social policy at Durham University rejected such claims. Writing to the *Guardian*, he said that what the authors had found was only "a weakening of the strength of the relationship between parental income and GCSE achievement at age 16 for children born in 1990, as compared with a cohort born in 1970."

It is simply not possible to infer that such a shift in educational achievement translates into upward social mobility. Rather Byrne maintains that the most important shift since the late 1960's is the "massive decline in the proportion of the population engaged in skilled manual work," together with the decline of "the relative earnings of many occupations which require higher levels of education... to the extent that occupations which could be accessed with five O'levels in the 1960's now require a degree."

"The net effect is that it is increasingly difficult for children from middle income households to achieve the relative, and even absolute, living standard of their parents," he concluded.

Thus the contemporary trend within social mobility for both the working class and the majority of the middle class is downward, not upward. Living standards have fallen and are now falling precipitously for the overwhelming majority of the population, not rising. The availability of skilled manual work is declining, while many jobs previously seen as middle class pay much less than in the past.

Finally, competition for work is such that jobs that do not require degree level education are dominated by degree holders who cannot find employment that requires their skills.

Last summer Brown described himself as a "child of the first great wave of post-war social mobility". He admitted that during the 1970's and 1980's these trends stalled and created a "lost generation" of "Thatcher's children".

This comes from someone who invited Thatcher herself to Number 10 as a guest of honour when he first became prime minister and who has repeatedly declared his fulsome support for her economic nostrums.

But there is no possibility of repeating the experience of the post war pre-1970s generation. As the British and world economy emerged from World War II, international economic expansion, high-tech production and the expansion of welfare provision made necessary to ensure social cohesion created employment opportunities that could not be adequately filled by the existing middle class. A relatively small number of working class pupils who attended Grammar schools benefitted from this situation. But the end of the post-war boom saw class divisions polarising once again.

The state's role in running the economy was greatly reduced and transnational corporations came to dominate economic life, relocating production to the less developed countries with cheaper labour.

Working class employment has become increasingly insecure and wages have stagnated or fallen. Not only has upward social mobility from the working class into the middle class slowed to a trickle, but the prevailing movement is from the middle class down to the working class. The extension of higher education has not expanded the middle class, but rather led to a more educated working class whose own experiences will make them more receptive to socialism.



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