



Moving on up...

After teaming up with Community to produce a thought-provoking document on social mobility in 21st-century Britain, David Blunkett talks to us about how people can be helped to move onwards and upwards.

You're passionate about social mobility - enabling people to get better jobs, pay and prospects? Why?

Because of my own experience. In my youth if you were a working-class youngster you would have the expectation of a job with some status and the likelihood of a pension. The workplace was a ladder - you could go from shop steward to manager, and the managerial ladder would then take you higher. There was a culture of gradual improvement. All that died with mass unemployment and the Thatcher era.

Although there was this social mobility, you had a tough time, didn't you?

Yes. Having not gone to the only single grammar school for blind boys, at the age of 16 I ended up with no qualifications and was told the only jobs for me would be either as a piano tuner or a Braille shorthand typist. I chose shorthand typing as I thought it would give me a way into further education - and it certainly did!

You became a teacher, Leader of Sheffield Council, an MP and held some of the most powerful offices in the Government. Was this due to your own drive and determination?

In part, but I had a teacher who went out of his way to help, giving me guidance and mentoring outside the classroom. There was also a group of us who were determined to succeed so there was a kind of peer pressure.

Facts on social mobility

- Social mobility is usually defined as ‘...the movement or opportunities for movement between different social classes or occupational groups.’
- Social mobility tends to be measured simply by income or occupational status but the factors that affect it are complex.
- In a comparison of eight European and North American countries, Britain and the United States have the lowest social mobility.
- Opportunities to experience social mobility in the UK are no greater now than they were 50 years ago.

What happened to social mobility in the UK after the collapse of manufacturing and the Thatcher years?

It went into decline and we've seen the development of an underclass.

What do you mean by an 'underclass'?

The large number of people who are outside the system. They don't have a job, other family members don't have jobs – it's inter-generational. They're not only poor financially but there is a poverty of aspiration. We're talking about alienation from the norms of society that people take for granted like having something to get up for in the morning. There is a critical core of families and young people who have yet to be touched by all the things we in the Government have done.

In the last 10 years the Labour Government has introduced a lot of initiatives to restore social mobility. What's worked best?

Changes in the education system that allow youngsters to get to a point where their aspirations look achievable and, with that, the introduction of Education Maintenance Allowances. One difficulty has been the poor careers service with lack of guidance and information programmes that have simply not been up to it. Other programmes like SureStart have been excellent.

But in your document you make it clear that government initiatives alone can't increase social mobility.

Yes, targeting individual needs is good but it isn't enough because the culture that inspires and encourages people to move up the ladder has to be there.

But in meeting the challenge of what you describe as 'the underclass' there seems to be lots of help and few penalties. What's the penalty if you want to stay on benefits for 20 years?

When we set up New Deal in 1998 there were very clear penalties and we talked tough. Gradually, because we were successful with the economy and in reducing unemployment, we became complacent and we still haven't tackled that underclass of people who play the system.

We still are, as a Labour Party, very jumpy about it. We don't see it as theft or as undermining the work ethic and taking from those who are working hard.

But the public see it as that, don't they?

The public are overwhelmingly against those people who free-ride. That's why we have to be very clear that there are three categories: those who can't work because they are severely disabled, those who could work if they had their confidence and wherewithal restored, and those who could work if they were simply kicked out of bed in the morning.

In the document it's obvious you're passionate about the need for lifelong learning.

Yes, partly because I benefited from it. I'm very impressed with the Community union's work to make lifelong learning available to its members, their families, and the community. This has to be the union agenda of the future. There is no doubt that lifelong learning speeds up social mobility. Community is helping people get a leg up at work, giving them confidence to move jobs and helping those who have lost their jobs. Community and its training arm Communitas are doing a great job.

Your document is full of new ideas. Do you want there to be a wide debate on social mobility?

Yes, that's the purpose of my document and I'm very grateful to Community for its support. There are other ideas too, like expanding Gift Aid which could encourage a workers' levy across the whole of the country. If workers gave £1 it would raise millions for adult learning in their communities'.

What else can ordinary union members do to help improve social mobility?

They can become champions in the community with the challenge of saying to people 'What about taking a short course or returning to learning?' Community champions like these can change the world around them.

For more information, you can obtain an e-version of the pamphlet, *The Inclusive Society? 'Social Mobility in 21st Century Britain'* by emailing Jessica@progressives.org.uk or calling **020 3008 8180**.