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**‘Of course we do’: inequality, the family, and the spell of social mobility**  
**Gideon Calder**

A striking feature of the recent rekindling of debates about grammar schools is how readily the priority of social mobility is pushed, across the political spectrum. Left and right will disagree about whether grammar schools promote it, but the notion itself seems scarcely up for dispute. This raises a number of questions. If people from different political directions are so united in their keenness to achieve it, why has social mobility been stagnating for decades? Why do the life chances of rich and poor still differ in such stark respects? Part of the answer, I’ll suggest in this article, lies in a widely shared set of ‘common sense’ beliefs about the family that severely limit the political scope for achieving anything like fairness for generations of children born into a society with stark class divisions. We talk a lot about social mobility while at the same time avoiding some of the uncomfortable places to which we would need to travel in any genuine attempt to realise it.

***Everyone loves social mobility...***

Theresa May, for one, is a fan of social mobility. Or, as she put it on 31 August 2016, she wants a Britain where, when it comes to where you end up in life, ‘it’s the talent that you have and how hard you’re prepared to work that determines how you get on, rather than your background’.<sup>i</sup> In a way, this counts as news: it tells us something about how the incoming prime minister wants to stake out her defining aims. And it’s a reminder of the seemingly compulsory move among incoming Conservative leaders to go all ‘classless society’ on us, and to sound more inclusive than they’d previously let on. Yet, as pitches go, it’s hardly novel. Similar notes have been struck so often by post-war UK governments that what is really arresting is the fact that it still seems vital to strike them. It’s rather a giveaway. Whatever social mobility is, we clearly haven’t been achieving it.

John Major, Tony Blair, David Cameron - all, as prime ministers, sought to define themselves as breakers of sedimented unearned privilege. Cameron went as far as setting up the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, chaired since its 2012 inception by former Labour Health Secretary Alan Milburn. (Recently, with the reframing and downgrading of child poverty as a priority, it was renamed simply as the Social Mobility Commission.) Yet perhaps Gordon Brown went furthest in his fervency, in words at least. In 2010, he wrote that ‘social mobility is not an alternative to social justice - it *is* modern social justice’.<sup>ii</sup> So that’s it. The single requirement for a just society is that people end up in different circumstances from those in which they’re born. Social mobility, all by itself, will deliver it. Nothing further is necessary, by way of radical shifts in the economic and social structures of society - or rather, if social mobility is achieved, it will be as a result of those structures already being arranged aright. This claim has a beautiful simplicity about it. But that might be part of the problem. To see social mobility as the only indicator we need poses grave hurdles for the tackling of social injustice.<sup>iii</sup>

***... perhaps all the more because we’ve been losing it***

That’s not, for a moment, to deny that there is a problem. It is not that social *immobility*, or inter-generational inequality - or what John Goldthorpe, doyen of social mobility analysis, has called ‘class fate’ - isn’t itself an urgent thing to tackle. In contemporary Britain, in dismally familiar ways, background seems to matter as

much as ever. In terms of state school achievements, the initially highest attaining among the most disadvantaged children are, on average, overtaken by the moderately attaining most advantaged children somewhere between the ages of five and sixteen.<sup>iv</sup> In other words, though they start out achieving higher grades, the 'smart' poor kids are overtaken by the 'average' rich kids by the time they do their GCSEs. They are then eight times less likely to attend an elite university than their privileged peers. On average they will also earn less, feel less healthy, and die younger. Meanwhile 71 per cent of senior judges, 43 per cent of newspaper columnists, 33 per cent of MPs and 22 per cent of pop stars were privately educated (compared to 7 per cent of the population as a whole).<sup>v</sup>

These numbers are hardly receding; in some areas (as in the case of pop stars) they are creeping steadily up. The post-war 'golden age' of social mobility is over - and in any case the golden age had nothing to do with the effects of grammar schools: it was economic shifts (in particular the growth of professional jobs) that propelled upward mobility during the long post-war economic boom that ended in the 1970s.<sup>vi</sup> Since then, under any plausible narrative, social mobility has slowed. The correlation between parental and child income, for example, is stronger for those born in 1970 than those born in 1958 - the poorest of whom were considerably more likely than the generation that followed to be earning more than their parents by the time they were forty.

These points may shock, but they are hardly a surprise. They correspond to our everyday experiences of the architecture of twenty-first century society - and are not so dissimilar to those of the nineteenth century. The contours of class fate have shifted since then, and the gaps are often smaller. Compulsory education and the welfare state have made hefty, and precious, impacts. But contemporary Britain remains defined by inequality of life chances - even as it seems that everyone whose job it is to pronounce on these things talks as if there could barely be a higher priority than equalising them. There is a basic kind of unfairness at stake - invoked unfailingly but ineffectively each time a cabinet member runs social mobility rhetoric up the flagpole. The children of the advantaged and the disadvantaged can hardly be said, in some general way, to have *earned* their different destinations. Given that life chances are shaped by patterns of educational achievement that reflect the class background of parents rather than the 'talents' of their children, it is the most basic sociological mistake to see intergenerational inequality as a reflection of merit. Even ardent monarchists will grant that (for non-royals, anyway) class fate is as unfair as it is stubborn.

So why isn't promoting social mobility, just by itself, the answer? A clue lies in the fact that it seems so costless a goal to promote - it is a vanilla solution, to which nobody reasonable would object. But it is just this feature of social mobility talk which should set us to work. We need to look at what social mobility talk is a substitute for - what other considerations it obscures or distracts us from. One of these is a proper discussion of economic inequality. Another (though it is related) is a confrontation with the social impacts of the family. So we find a stark reluctance in the contemporary political mainstream to acknowledge - on the first point - that inequality of outcome is a problem in itself, and - on the second point - that tackling intergenerational inequality means doing something about family privilege. And that kind of talk, now as much as ever, is taken to be political kryptonite.

The rest of this article aims to give a sense of just how urgent it is to reverse current orthodoxies about equality and the family. Urgent, that is, if we are to be spared the spectacle of a string of May's successors across the decades to come, seeking a headline as they make themselves comfortable in office by making lofty declamations that it's high time we did something about social mobility. First, it is worth spending some time looking a little longer at the nature of the orthodoxies themselves. If we don't talk well about class fate, it's helpful to consider why.

### **Families, life chances and 'common sense'**

A helpful line of approach is offered by Stuart Hall and Alan O'Shea's version of 'common sense': 'popular, easily-available knowledge ... customary beliefs, wise sayings, popular nostrums and prejudices'.<sup>vii</sup> Viewed this way, common sense is the apparatus of 'everyday thinking' we rest on when we feel safe to say 'of course!'. So one reason that it is politically difficult to confront class fate in a lucid or coherent way is the resilience of common sense attitudes, and in particular the uneasy relationship between three specific items of common sense that underpin ideas about social mobility.

The first of these is the value of mobility as a virtue, which is - of course - taken as a given. As we have seen, social mobility has a kind of mystical power that can unify the *Daily Mail* and the *Guardian* through the shared assumption that it is something we need more of. Its thwarting is thus a defeat for a 'common sense' vision of fairness, in which it is merit rather than unearned privilege that accounts for our social station. But the notion of talent or merit is, of course, itself part of a common sense understanding of how society functions; and it is a shifting construction - a prime example of an attribute that is, in vital respects, relative to the society in which one lives and works. Are high-earning City analysts super-talented? Are their skills, the hours they work or the contributions they make worthy of wages so far distant from those of a teaching assistant? And what does 'doing well' mean? Whether it is measured in terms of wages or exam results or status or health, there is always plenty of room for questioning the potential noxiousness of any ideology of 'success', 'getting ahead', or 'bettering oneself'.

Meanwhile the vision of a society efficiently rewarding merit is not an entirely coherent and appealing one, as critics from Michael Young to, recently, Jo Littler and James Bloodworth have sought to tease out.<sup>viii</sup> A world where people are apparently judged on their 'talent', and how hard they have worked, is a world where the less 'talented', or the less able to work, are seen as deserving of their low status, and the stigma it brings. And in fact many of those professedly keenest to promote meritocracy - the famously 'sharp-elbowed' among the middle classes, for example - are also those most likely to seek to disrupt it through pulling whatever social levers are available to them in the promotion of their own child's life chances, regardless of their 'talents'. Still, for all this, an appeal to the value of social mobility has the feel of a risk-free button. This presumably accounts for the enthusiasm it inspires in so many - like Theresa May - when seeking a reliable 'one nation' motif.

The second common sense idea in the mix under consideration here is the value of the family: in political terms it is prohibitively hard to tamper with received ideas on the family. We can hardly move for references to 'hard-working families'; and there is a constant linking of family ties and the domestic sphere to what is primary, secure and

enduring in a world of flux. ‘What could be more natural’, asked David Cameron in 2015, ‘than the urge to pass down to one’s children what one has worked hard to achieve?’. This point is designed for cross-class appeal. It carries no suggestion that family matters more to the posh than the poor, or vice versa, or that the ‘urge’ is contingent on holding particular beliefs. The ‘naturalness’ of the family coming first is presented as a kind of social unifier, cutting across other kinds of more divisive allegiance. It’s ‘*the* family’ which matters, not this or that family, in these or those circumstances. Individual families are invoked as exemplars of this wider social institution. They are, this suggests, equal stakeholders in it. *We all* win when families win, or are strong, or are supported in ‘doing their job’.

It is worth noting the specific policy proposal that Cameron was setting out in making this pitch. It was a raising of the threshold for inheritance tax. So a momentous and regressive tweak of fiscal policy - one which will benefit only those already best-placed to advantage their own children over others - is defended on the deflationary, matter-of-fact basis that the desire to privilege one’s own is only natural. So those singing loudly of social mobility are also the keenest to promote family privilege. Of course, the *Daily Mail* is full of both these ideas - forever busily trying to mount two horses that are departing in different directions. But though the *Mail* is especially noisy as it does so, it is hardly alone in the attempt.

Thirdly, we hold conflicted views on the appropriate scope and purchase of the idea of equality. It is safe to say that the idea that every child matters equally, or deserves an equally ‘fair go’ in life, is genuinely held by most. Of *course* they do. To say otherwise is generally regarded as speaking in the terms of a pre-modern endorsement of a hierarchy of birth, or as treading too closely to racism, or other kinds of outright chauvinism which, even if felt, it is not OK to voice. Support for equality of life chances has various potential ingredients including intuitions about meritocracy; assumptions of childhood innocence; the view that people should be judged according to their deeds and not where they’re from, or their accent, or the jobs their parents do. It chimes as resonantly with the American dream as it does with Marx’s depictions of the achievement of communism. Yet at the same time, most of us - of course - behave in ways intended to undermine it.

For one thing, many of the most routine decisions that parents make, in the humdrum flow of family life, make a mess of that notion that kids might have an equal start - with this often being *precisely their point* (though in an unequal society, where educational achievement is a positional good, it is in fact impossible to promote one’s own children’s educational attainment without securing for them an advantage over another child). Each of the following practices promotes the life chances of some kids over others, in unearned ways. Paying for their education. Moving house to the catchment area of a better state school. Bequeathing money. Arranging internships via personal contacts. Helping with homework. Having shared mealtimes. Discussing current affairs at shared mealtimes. Using words in the home in ways that have the effect of expanding children’s vocabulary. Paying for dance lessons. Reading bedtime stories. All of these stand to accelerate unearned privilege - bedtime stories no less than the things that require far greater outlay or cultural capital. Some will think all of these are equally permissible; others will quibble over one or other. But everyone, including the hardest-core egalitarian, thinks that at least *some* of these things are OK. What’s ‘common sense’ about all this is not the experience of the gap between a

**Comment [SD1]:** I put this in as the implication otherwise is that it is wrong to try to develop your child’s growth etc in any way

**Comment [GJ2]:** Quite happy with this – thanks.

genuine belief in equality of life chances and routine practices of parenting which promote some kids' life chances over others, but the sense that - of course - we're entitled to do those things.

More than that: we may see it as our *job*, as parents, as family members, as relatives, to prioritise our own. To many it would seem downright remiss *not* to have tried to boost the social mobility of our children, or (if they have started out privileged) to have preserved their place on the ladder, to bequeath to them as much as we legally can. In a world of 'tiger mums' and sharp-elbowed dads there is an inflation in the expectations of what 'good' parents should be doing for their kids - of what is 'only natural'. This is cashed out largely in terms of economic advantage. As Megan Erickson puts it, 'The nurturing and raising of children, once seen as deserving of fierce protection from market forces, has now become intertwined with economic pressures: It is never too early to start equipping a child with the skills and personality traits that will ensure productivity and success in the global economy'.<sup>ix</sup> It's what any right-thinking citizen would seek to do with their 'natural urges'.

But this is where our three items of 'common sense' come apart. Even if each stands up by itself, these parallel endorsements of social mobility, the family and equality of life chances can't be made to stick coherently together. A world where parents are entitled to do whatever they can for their kids means the kids of the privileged stay privileged and the kids of the disadvantaged stay disadvantaged. It means a world where children do not have equal life chances. The stakes are rigged. The playing field is quite definitively unlevel. Common sense doesn't square with itself. If it's really true that we want social mobility, it seems, then its price must be an unsanctifying of the family, or a limiting of parents' entitlements to 'do the best for their kids'.

### **Either redistribute ...**

Our three points of 'common sense' say nothing about the redistribution of wealth. It's not just that I happen to have left that out. It is because the need for strong redistribution is not - of course - current political common sense. Social mobility talk drowns it out. Typically, 'equal life chances' are invoked without any kind of nod to equality of outcome: to narrowing the gap between those with more and those with less. In fact, the kind of equality at stake in discussions of social mobility is one which would be entirely compatible with that gap growing larger - as indeed it has in the UK since the late 1970s and the neoliberal turn.

Take these two statements by Nick Clegg, who as Deputy Prime Minister in the 2010-15 Coalition put regular stress on just how unfair inequality of life chances is, and how urgent a priority tackling it should be:

In Britain today, life chances are narrowed for too many by the circumstances of their birth: the home they're born into, the neighbourhood they grow up in or the jobs their parents do.<sup>x</sup>

Social mobility is what characterises a fair society, rather than a particular level of income equality. Inequalities become injustices when they are fixed; passed on, generation to generation.<sup>xi</sup>

The first statement offers a tableau of unfair advantage - confirmed by the final sentence of the second. But for Clegg inequality within a generation has always yet to become an injustice: inequality only becomes unjust when it is visited, unearned, on following generations. So the key to a fair solution is the first sentence of point two. We're back with a Brown-style invocation of social mobility as definitive of social justice - and with, quite explicitly, a denial that income inequality has anything to do with all this.

Isolating these points isn't to pick on Clegg, or make a special example of him. His is not a special stance at all. It's more or less the opposite of an outlier. These quotes make a neat summary of a position to which, in the years of neoliberal orthodoxy, the UK's political mainstream has cheerfully and persistently signed up. This is an idea of fairness made safe for common sense. But it simply ignores the fact that in societies with drastic income inequality, the starting-points of the lives of children, who will inevitably be born into different levels of wealth advantage, will simply be unlevel. No amount of 'equal opportunities' talk will somehow undo this staggered start. The kids of the best-off start out with conditions of advantage which ultimately issue in those better GCSE results. There is every sociological reason to recognise that one generation's class position is already in the process of being transmitted to the next - even as political orthodoxy insists that strong economic redistribution is off-limits. For one thing, redistribution would involve asking the anxious, vocal, voting middle classes to accept the prospect of their kids dropping down the social ladder. It would mean facing up to the fact that, in resettling the patterns of advantage and disadvantage, we would need substantial downward mobility for some, as well as plenty of others moving up. It would mean taking seriously precisely the need to narrow the gap between 'up' and 'down'.

### **... or disrupt family privilege**

There is a further nettle to grasp here. Redistribution would involve concertedly neutralising, or at least scaling down, the maldistributive effects of family influence on the life chances of children. One option would be to ramp up inheritance tax, or replace it with an accessions tax, so that inherited income is taxed progressively like other income. Another would be to intervene in the property market, to block another of the main channels through which family wealth is transmitted unearned from one generation to the next. We could also shore up and reform Sure Start, a prime casualty of the post-2010 austerity agenda. Although its founding aims were crassly instrumental in some respects, its targeting of parents in areas of deprivation was a roughly joined-up response to the differing levels of parental power to advantage their kids in their early years. We could also identify childcare as a key good to be redistributed according to a metric of social justice, so that its benefits (and costs) are shared more equitably - perhaps via the kind of universal childcare model proposed by Labour in the 2015 election. We could also take seriously the ways in which the education system - and the rhetoric of 'choice' and 'merit' so pivotal to the familiar case for the return of grammar schools - serves to favour those better-off families already best positioned to exploit the unevenness of current provision. We could also - of course - abolish private schools, though admittedly, that idea might need a longer run-up.

These are all moves that would promote social mobility by recognising the crucial role played by families in the maintenance of class fate and seeking to counteract it.

Such moves are also based on the recognition that the scale of class divisions is not a given, but can itself be reduced; that class fate is a side-effect not of lack of choice, but of long-established structural unfairness. Will any of this form part of the May agenda? Of course it won't. It's highly unlikely even to be gestured at. But that just goes to show how hollow and unrealistic social mobility talk has become.

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<sup>i</sup> Theresa May, 'Cabinet meeting at Chequers, 31 August 2016: PM statement', at <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/cabinet-meeting-at-chequers-31-august-2016-pm-statement>

<sup>ii</sup> Gordon Brown, 'We can break the glass ceiling', *The Guardian*, 15 January, 2010.

<sup>iii</sup> I make this case at greater length in my book *How Inequality Runs in Families: Unfair Advantage and the Limits of Social Mobility*, Policy Press, 2016.

<sup>iv</sup> Claire Crawford, Macmillan, L. and Anna Vignoles, *Progress Made by High-Attaining Children from Disadvantaged Backgrounds*, Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, 2014.

<sup>v</sup> Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, *Elitist Britain?*, Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, 2015.

<sup>vi</sup> For more on how little many of the conventional narratives of post-war social mobility reflects the way things are, see Vikki Boliver and David Byrne, 'Social mobility: the politics, the reality, the alternative', *Soundings* 55, 2013; also Peter Mandler, 'Educating the Nation: III. Social Mobility', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6<sup>th</sup> series, 26, 2016.

<sup>vii</sup> Stuart Hall and Alan O'Shea, 'Common-sense neoliberalism', in Stuart Hall, Doreen Massey and Michael Rustin (eds) *After Neoliberalism? The Kilburn Manifesto*, Lawrence & Wishart, 2015, pp52-3.

<sup>viii</sup> See Michael Young, *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, Thames and Hudson, 2958; Jo Little, 'Meritocracy as Plutocracy: The Marketising of "Equality" within Neoliberalism', *New Formations* 80-81, 2013; James Bloodworth, *The Myth of Meritocracy*, Biteback, 2016.

<sup>ix</sup> Megan Erickson, *Class War: The Privatization of Childhood*, Verso, 2015, pp7-8.

<sup>x</sup> Nick Clegg, 'Foreword', in HM Government, *Opening Doors, Breaking Barriers - A Strategy for Social Mobility*, Cabinet Office, 2011.

<sup>xi</sup> Nick Clegg, 'Inequality becomes injustice when it is passed on, generation to generation', *The Guardian*, 23 November 2015.