

'Social Mobility' is now nonsense – especially in a time of cuts and income reduction

<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/2011/04/05/social-mobility-now-nonsense/?pfstyle=w p>

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In recent decades, political parties have championed the concept of social mobility – but what does it really mean? [Charlie Beckett](#) finds recent discussions around the concept by the government and Labour to be confusing and unhelpful, and suggests that the term itself no longer has any meaning, especially in the current economic climate.

I wonder if the words 'social mobility' should join [@johnrentoul](#)'s list of banned phrases? I think it has now reached the point [George Orwell's described](#) where 'political writing becomes bad writing'.

Social mobility is now a meaningless phrase, or rather, it has a different meaning according to your political position and vision. And this matters because your definition of the language dictates your policy, too.

Real social mobility – all other things being equal – must surely mean that some people will rise over their lives and others will fall. If we all rise then that is simply economic growth. If only a lower social group rise relative to a higher group, then that is egalitarianism, not social mobility. If just a few people rise, then that's just tokenism. Of course, you might have all of this at the same time. And West Ham might win the Champions League. It's possible but extremely unlikely.

This is a presentational problem for all the political parties. If the Tories really advocate genuine social mobility then they will be attacking core middle class supporters who have fought so hard to preserve their children's life-chances. One of the great social changes in the last few decades has been the professional classes successful protection of their economic status over generations.

David Willetts rightly pointed out recently that middle class women have taken up virtually all of the places in the UK's expanded Higher Education sector. But what's he going to do about? Reduce the size of the sector? Reverse the celebrated gains of gender equality? Offering a few paid internships in the civil service to working class teenagers is not going to change the structural dynamic of, for example, poor schooling and unsupportive parenting.

If Labour abandons real social mobility in favour of structural income redistribution then it is sending a negative message to the many aspirational voters who hope that they or their family can rise through greater opportunity. Gordon Brown did achieve some income redistribution during Labour's government, but even [Ed Miliband has recognised](#) the political and economic limits of using tax and benefit systems to bring about social change.

As for the Liberal Democrats. They are at least trying to come up with specific policies. In classic fashion they have created a quango that will oversee Universities. It is supposed to ensure they adopt policies that increase access for working class people, while pocketing the £9,000 fees. It may make some difference. But I am willing to bet my son's student loan that the social make-up of Russell Group students will not have changed by more than 2% in the next five-ten years.

Of course, all this is being played out against a background of income reduction and public spending cuts. These may be absolutely necessary. However, I can't see how they won't reduce social mobility and egalitarianism. The effects may be much longer-term than the period of deficit reduction as a whole generation has its life chances reduced. That may be a price we have to pay, but it makes the confused talk about social mobility sound even more like empty rhetoric.

This article [first appeared on Charlie Beckett's blog](#) on 5 April.

