

# **The Limits of ‘Opportunity’: is there a clear Labour or Conservative view of social mobility?**

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## **Abstract**

This article considers the relationship between views of social mobility in British politics, identifying four competing views in government statements, political news stories and opinion pieces. The two established views are the Blairite liberal view, which seeks to widen entry into the ‘playing field’ of educational ‘opportunity’, and its companion bourgeois view, protecting the acclaim given to elite educational experiences. Against these established views are two insurgent views: a (politically ignored) socialist view and a ‘postliberal’ view introduced into the Social Mobility Commission under the chairship of the loosely Conservative-aligned Katharine Birbalsingh. On the right, the postliberal and bourgeois views explicitly clash. On the left, with the socialist view dormant, the postliberal view is assimilated by Labour almost as a socialism substitute, appearing in turn with the Blairite liberal view in Labour rhetoric. The result is, respectively on right and left, disharmony and incoherence in the meaning of social mobility.

## **Keywords**

Aspiration; Class; Conservative Party; Education; Labour Party; Social mobility

## Introduction

A constant disappointment in recent British politics has been the stagnation of social mobility. There have been numerous reports expressing this frustration in the past fifteen years, especially those produced by the Social Mobility Commission (SMC) under its long serving first chair, Alan Milburn. These complained of slow progress (and even regression) in this area. To give another example, the Institute for Fiscal Studies' Deaton Review of Inequalities has found that upward progress for those from disadvantaged backgrounds is more difficult compared with forty years ago.<sup>1</sup>

Under the surface, this common complaint about the lack of social mobility is accompanied by a deeper conceptual debate. Aside from assertions that social mobility must be increased, a running ideological battle is taking place about the concept's meaning. A particular difficulty is in finding reconciliation between, on one hand, reward for society's deserving 'winners', and, alternately, recognition and support for all in society's varied walks of life.

Tracing the views that exist in the debate, this article considers recent attempts to redefine social mobility and the opposing resistances that these attempts face. The established views of social mobility rest on a sense of optimism and confidence that existing mechanisms of social mobility need only to be conserved and further refined. Alternate, dissenting views question whether these established views of 'opportunity' and achievement are truly productive in conceptualising social mobility.

Overall, it seems that insurgent views on left and right have struggled to negotiate past the established views. These established views are the Blairite liberal view, which seeks to widen entry into the 'playing field' of educational 'opportunity', and its companion bourgeois view, protecting the acclaim given to elite educational experiences. The insurgent views are a (politically ignored) socialist view and a 'postliberal' view which was introduced

into the SMC under the chairship of the loosely Conservative-aligned Katharine Birbalsingh. On the right, the postliberal and bourgeois views have explicitly clashed. On the left, with the socialist view dormant, the postliberal view has been assimilated by Labour almost as a socialism substitute, appearing in turn with the Blairite liberal view in Labour rhetoric.

The result of this confusion (on the left) and contestation (on the right) is the continuation of established views of ‘opportunity’ and achievement. The wrench away from the status quo that is urged by more radical voices on the topic has not quite come to a halt. However, the pre-existing modes of thought remain strong and have an ongoing currency in the discussion around social mobility.

### **The Birbalsingh insurgency, 2021–23**

A trenchant voice in challenging the established views of social mobility has been Katharine Birbalsingh. An educationalist known for her successful headship of Michaela Community School in a low-income area of London, Birbalsingh was appointed to lead the SMC (the arm’s length body responsible for developing new ideas and holding the government to account on the issue) in late 2021. In appointing Birbalsingh, equalities minister Liz Truss and Birbalsingh herself intoned traditional social mobility rhetoric around improving ‘equality of opportunity’.<sup>2</sup> However, in a short period as chair (influenced by her deputy chair, the FE college principal Alun Francis), Birbalsingh signalled an intention to change profoundly the discussion around social mobility.

Birbalsingh’s message was that social mobility required a ‘fresh approach’. Her June 2022 inaugural speech, titled ‘Bucking the Trend’, declared it to be ‘not enough’ to focus on ‘the elite pathway’ in which a person’s ‘brilliant educational credentials’ might lead to a career in ‘an elite profession’. The concept of ‘stepping from one rung to another’ was a good one, she agreed; yet she argued that it should be applied beyond university and the

professions. In Birbalsingh's words, it was important 'to promote a broader view of social mobility, for a wider range of people, who want to improve their lives, sometimes in smaller steps.'<sup>3</sup>

Birbalsingh's apparent purpose was simply to state that we place an insufficient value on 'smaller steps' upwards. Actually, her stance represented a profound political shift in social mobility messaging. The SMC had previously, in its arms-length capacity, been a critical (and, at times, very critical) friend of government initiatives around fair access to the professions. To follow the analysis provided by Bukodi and Goldthorpe, Birbalsingh was instead here a messenger for Boris Johnson's government and its more industrial focus.<sup>4</sup> Johnson's agenda was to consolidate his 2019 electoral success of turning 'Redcar [a northern industrial constituency] into bluecar' by providing new industrial opportunities.<sup>5</sup> Birbalsingh's pitch of 'a broader view of social mobility, for a wider range of people' was therefore playing directly into Johnson's strategy for wooing and 'blue-ing' places such as Redcar.

However, when presented by the media to Tory middle England, Birbalsingh's 'smaller steps' message was given a negative and hostile press. For this reason, she felt pressured to stand down as chair. In so doing, in January 2023, she reflected ruefully on press coverage of her inaugural speech, especially by the *Telegraph*, Tory middle England's quintessential newspaper. The *Telegraph* had reported the speech in a way that seemed, to Birbalsingh, to have sensationalised it as a blanket recommendation that children from poorer backgrounds should forego cleverness and 'high-paying jobs'.<sup>6</sup> The newspaper eventually backtracked; but, commenting on the controversy upon her resignation, Birbalsingh revealed that she felt unsupported by this Tory conduit of public opinion: 'A tiny apology was published days later, but the damage had already been done. I am still to this day attacked for my apparently abhorrent views on social mobility.'<sup>7</sup>

These events, dramatic in themselves, sit above a conceptual substructure that requires examination. There are four distinct views of social mobility that are relevant to the current conceptual debate. Labelling these as the 'liberal view', the 'socialist view', the 'postliberal view' and the 'bourgeois view', the purpose now is to explore them in depth. Doing so will show how the limits of 'opportunity' were challenged in the discussion around social mobility, but in ways muddled by contestation and confusion.

### **The liberal view**

In the established liberal view of social mobility, the goal is to provide a 'level playing field' in academic education and into the professions. This view is heavily process-centred, championing the competitive process of personal advancement. Stefan Collini wittily noted its emphasis on making competition fairer, describing it as cultivating 'the Great Ladder-Climbing Championships'. The competition is to 'escape from the working class to the middle class', and not everyone can succeed: 'if a few are to move up, then many must be left behind'.<sup>8</sup>

This goal has its origins in New Labour's dream of an 'opportunity society'. The New Labour era was when 'social mobility' first began to be articulated as a policy priority. The term itself, as distinct from the idea of people moving upwards socially, had previously barely featured in the political lexicon. However, beginning with a speech on the 'opportunity society' delivered to the Institute for Public Policy Research in October 2004, Tony Blair cited improving 'social mobility' as a centrepiece of New Labour's vision. Characteristically, while promising to 'put as much energy into vocational education as university education', the core of the speech was 'to put middle-class aspirations in the hands of working class families and their children'.<sup>9</sup> The hopeful anticipation was that such people would join the competitive fray of academic education.

The liberal view, shaped by New Labour's dream of (competitive) 'opportunity' in academic education, has not disappeared from Labour policy; a theme that will be revisited later. For now, we can note its presence in Labour reaction to cuts to 'low-value' university courses. A Labour spokesperson criticised these in July 2023 as an attack on social mobility:

After 13 years of failure in education, all the Conservatives and this out-of-touch prime minister have to offer are yet more barriers to young people's aspirations—rather than working to raise standards and outcomes. The difference between our parties couldn't be clearer: Labour wants to smash the class ceiling while the Conservatives simply want to reinforce it.<sup>10</sup>

Visualised around individuals being able to fight for their graduate-level 'aspirations', this concept of removing barriers to educational competition was an echo of the established liberal view.

### **The socialist view**

The socialist view is that the established liberal view's emphasis on competitive 'opportunity' in academic education leads to unfairness. In this view the problem is that, by centring on the free flow of 'young people's aspirations', the liberal view ignores how equality of opportunity has an inherent inequality of outcome. Some are inevitably going to lose and these are likely to be people suffering underlying social disadvantages for which they are not personally at fault. Meanwhile, in the liberal view's 'escape ideology', those who 'succeed' in escaping their modest origins are accorded an esteem denied to those who 'fail' to do so.

The socialist view therefore puts its emphasis on the equal and inclusive collective mobility of 'the people'. Instead of the competing mobilities of rival individuals, it represents a

commitment to the idea of gaining and moving upwards together. In a phrase used by the early twentieth century Scottish socialist John Maclean, the socialist ideal is for working people to rise as a class.<sup>11</sup> This is the socialist alternative to rising out of one's class and leaving others behind.

The cornerstone of this view, instead of the 'level playing field' of competitive 'opportunity' for access to the elite, is the levelling of material and structural disadvantage. One such disadvantage is poverty. For example, writing in the *New Statesman's* online edition following Birbalsingh's resignation in 2023, one voice called for 'government intervention to alleviate the pressures on working-class families', thereby 'protecting the economic powers of working-class people'.<sup>12</sup> Another disadvantage—selective education, both grammar schools and private independent schools—was similarly subjected to sustained critique by the former far-left activist James Bloodworth in his 2016 book *The Myth of Meritocracy*.

The socialist view therefore exposes the liberal view's inattention to society's underpinning inequalities. Its 'Lennonist' (John Lennon-esque) prospectus offers something less cutthroat than the liberal view. At the same time, however, for bourgeois society its requirement for high levels of collectivism is profoundly threatening. In 2016, the conservative exponent of free schools Toby Young warned of the potential 'encroachment on human rights', arguing that 'to bring about equality of outcome, you need to set yourself at odds with human nature'.<sup>13</sup> This brings us to the postliberal view, which agrees with the socialist view's questioning of competition, but not its collectivism. Birbalsingh's tenure as SMC chair comes to the fore here.

### **The postliberal view**

Naming the next view 'postliberal' makes sense as, unlike the socialist view, it attempts to reframe, not discard, the liberal view's concept of 'opportunity'. The postliberal view's main

point is that the liberal view's concept of opportunity is limited. Articulating the postliberal view, Birbalsingh's inaugural speech hypothesised about the rise of someone within the working class: 'If a child of parents who were long term unemployed, or who never worked, gets a job in their local area, isn't that a success worth celebrating?'<sup>14</sup> What Birbalsingh did here was, as she put it, to contemplate social mobility in relative terms. This involved making two forms of recognition. One was towards the honour found in less academic types of education and career success. The second was towards the importance of community, the 'local area'.

The liberal view's concept of 'opportunity' was particularly re-shaped in the postliberal view's promotion of geographically local social mobility. In the postliberal view, it is not necessarily the case that long-distance travel, either physically or intellectually (or both, for example, leaving home to study at a distant university), leads to personal progress. The argument instead is that someone's upwards mobility is often better situated within a community where they feel more at home and have a strong sense of belonging.<sup>15</sup> Weight is placed therefore on geographically proximate (and intellectually proximal) opportunities being made available that will enable career success locally.

This theme, epitomised by the phrase 'stay local, go far', has been shaped by the Policy Exchange's David Goodhart, especially his books *The Road to Somewhere* (2017) and *Head, Hand, Heart* (2020). (It was telling that the Policy Exchange's base in London was the venue for Birbalsingh's speech.) The call of those influenced by Goodhart (including Tony Blair's entrepreneur son Euan, founder of the vocational education startup Multiverse) is to move away from privileging the interests, values and self-importance of the 'anywhere class': the cosmopolitan white-collar elites of the 'merchant right' (financial sector) and the 'Brahmin left' (universities). Integral to this perspective is a historical analysis of what Goodhart terms 'peak head', the anticipated point in historical time when artificial



intelligence starts to erode the relative availability of professional and managerial ('head' or brain) work. This point in time, Goodhart and his disciples argue, is fast approaching, if not already here: and vocational, local types of aspiration should take primacy, for societal morale as well as for the needs of the economy.

Superficially, in 2023 there were signs of Labour appropriating 'stay local'-style rhetoric. In particular, in his July 2023 speech on 'opportunity', Keir Starmer stated his opposition to 'the sheep and goats mentality that's always been there in English education'. In this speech, delivered in industrial Kent (adjacent to smalltown Surrey where Starmer grew up), he outlined his background as a son of a 'toolmaker' and his own access to the professions ('from an ordinary working class background to leading the Crown Prosecution Service and now the Labour Party'). Starmer also, meanwhile, reflected critically on the 'disrespect' given to vocational pathways, his toolmaker father's lack of 'self-esteem' owing to this prejudice, and the 'sharp elbows' and 'fear of failure' that were part of the single-track competition for professional jobs. Starmer argued in the speech that 'the "academic for my kids; vocational for your kids" snobbery—has no place in modern society, no connection to the jobs of the future.'<sup>16</sup>

Truly, however, Labour's rhetoric in 2023 was a bifocal fusion, pairing the postliberal ('stay local') and liberal ('opportunity') views. Situated in broader Labour policy ('breaking down the barriers to opportunity at every stage'), the speech was coded in homage to Blair's 'opportunity society' and reprised the New Labour script of unleashing white collar aspiration among the underprivileged. Therefore, like a radio flipping between frequencies, it tried to demolish prestige hierarchies in one breath and, in the next, silently accepted them as it championed working-class children with 'ambitions' rising upwards to join the professions. When voicing the latter liberal view, Starmer attacked the 'pervasive idea, a

barrier in our collective minds, that narrows our ambitions for working class children and says, sometimes with subtlety, sometimes to your face: this isn't for you.'<sup>17</sup>

What differentiates Labour's stay-local/go-distant (con)fusion from the Goodhartian postliberal view is the latter's singlemindedness and intensity of focus. Most boldly, this postliberal view even starts to mutate the concept by erasing the word 'social' (which suggests becoming middle class) from the concept of 'mobility'. Birbalsingh herself, upon her resignation, retrospectively described her inaugural speech as a call to replace our 'too narrow a view of social mobility' with 'so many other mobilities we could and should celebrate'.<sup>18</sup> More directly, the postliberal view has introduced 'economic mobility' as a seeming alternative to social mobility.<sup>19</sup> Ed West, writing from within this school of thought, even suggested lowering the school leaving age. His argument was that what most young people really want to do is earn money as soon as possible, not follow an academic-professional pathway to attain higher social status.<sup>20</sup>

### **The bourgeois view**

Whereas the socialist and postliberal views challenge the liberal view's inegalitarianism, the bourgeois view is the liberal view's 'establishment' companion. Liberalism and the bourgeoisie go hand-in-hand in modern history; the former as modernity's ideological electric current, the latter as modernity's triumphant social grouping. Accordingly, the liberal and bourgeois views look at social mobility in the same way, paying regard to different parts of the mechanism. The liberal view speaks of 'outcomes', but is primarily process-centred, excited by the competitive game of 'ladder-climbing'. The bourgeois view's attention is to 'product': specifically, maintaining the traditional hierarchy of what counts as the highest-status end-goals of social mobility.

The intricate difference between the liberal and bourgeois views is that whereas the former is primarily about renovating the established 'playing field', the latter centres on defending the established trophies. Thus, to advocates of the bourgeois view, the postliberal view's questioning of the value of the established trophies is a deadly threat. Let us return here to the *Telegraph's* report on Birbalsingh's message. To fend off the postliberal view, the bourgeois view emphasises how it leaves the aspirational working class trophyless:

People from poor backgrounds should take "smaller steps" rather than aiming for Oxbridge, the Government's social mobility tsar will say today. In her first speech as chair of the Social Mobility Commission, Katharine Birbalsingh will argue that there is too much focus on those from deprived backgrounds getting into the top universities or high-paying jobs.<sup>21</sup>

The *Telegraph's* concern, taken at face value, is that Birbalsingh is undermining the entire process of working-class aspiration. (Note the clever way she is associated with questioning working-class access to 'high-paying jobs', rather than specifically jobs that are 'elite' or 'professional'.)

Established social mobility trophies such as Oxbridge and 'top' universities are therefore used within the bourgeois view as dog whistles for Tory middle England. The inventive use of those terms in the *Telegraph's* report on Birbalsingh's speech (terms not mentioned in the speech itself) calls the newspaper's readers to angry reaction. Oxbridge, in particular, beyond its literal reference, is a broader trigger for cherished memories of elite higher education. More pointedly, it represents the 'post-experience good' of such education: the 'wine cellar' trappings of the polite upper middle-class society in which Tory middle England shares.<sup>22</sup>

The postliberal view's real challenge to the bourgeois view is that it offers, to the rest of the populace, not 'smaller steps', but a version of egalitarianism: different steps. This challenge was put directly by Birbalsingh in a piece she wrote for *Schools Week* four days after the inaugural speech. There, in the immediate aftermath of the *Telegraph* controversy, she explained what the speech had 'really said' about social mobility. Her message, effectively, is that the speech was not necessarily about 'smaller steps'. (The speech's precise wording had referred to those 'who want to improve their lives, sometimes in smaller steps'.) Rather, Birbalsingh now explained, it was the idea of different steps that was paramount:

We want [people] to be the very best they can be ... You will all have your own views about social mobility and what it means ... Having high expectations should not mean we judge everyone by the same measures. We want to encourage and inspire everyone to be their best, but we also need to avoid prejudiced views ... There are different social mobility narratives for different people, and we shouldn't be putting them in hierarchies which implies that some are inferior to the others. We need them all.<sup>23</sup>

Here, Birbalsingh directly challenged the bourgeois view of social mobility. She sketched a multipolarity of different 'bests' for 'different people', arguing that 'we shouldn't be putting them in hierarchies'. In this postliberal view, superior esteem no longer rests upon the established social mobility trophies. The cherished status hierarchy explodes.

## **Conclusion**

The limits of opportunity have been challenged in the discussion around social mobility, but in a way marked by Conservative contestation and Labour confusion. Notably, the

Conservative *Telegraph* contested Birbalsingh's challenge to the status of Oxbridge and top universities as objects of social mobility. Birbalsingh had questioned whether academic-professional achievement should be the uppermost social mobility trophy. In response, the *Telegraph* in effect silenced Birbalsingh as someone attempting to foreclose popular access to self-betterment in general.

The Tory contestation of Birbalsingh's reframing of opportunity was a battle between the bourgeois and postliberal views. The postliberal view articulated by Birbalsingh advocated a multipolarity of opportunities, including the concept that someone could 'stay local, go far'. The bourgeois view, as a single-track, hierarchical vision, was threatened by this challenge. This resulted in 'dog whistle' tactics designed to puncture the threat.

Meanwhile, and especially after Birbalsingh's reframing of opportunity, Labour also took inspiration from the postliberal view. Labour's new rhetoric included an anti-snobbery message that vocational pathways should be acceptable for children of middle-class parents. Starmer's family history was used to evoke the value of blue-collar Britain, visualised in Labour's traditionally masculine terms as the stigmatised toolmaker. There was a sense here of the postliberal view's stylings being used by Labour as a substitute for the socialist view. If a truly socialist view of social mobility were advocated, rejecting individual 'opportunity' entirely, it would be considerably more abrasive to bourgeois society.

Mirroring how the postliberal view was contested by the bourgeois view in the Conservative *Telegraph*, Labour's rhetoric (con) fused the postliberal view with the liberal view. Labour's reference to the value of different steps was coupled with a familiar rhetoric around (competitive) opportunity in academic education. The dominant refrain, 'breaking down barriers to opportunity', reflected the higher value given to white collar work, because it made such work synonymous with 'opportunity'.

Labour confusion and Conservative contestation both reflect a state of unfinished business in the politics of social mobility. The established views of social mobility are clinging on, despite the articulation of views that suggest a discursive shift. Whether aimed at discrediting the postliberal view or assimilating it (incoherently), there are counter strategies at play.

## Notes

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<sup>3</sup> K. Birbalsingh, 'Bucking the trend: a fresh approach to social mobility', speech at Policy Exchange, London, 9 June 2022; <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/bucking-the-trend-a-fresh-approach-to-social-mobility>

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<sup>6</sup> H. Dixon, ‘Social mobility should celebrate “small steps up the ladder”’, *Telegraph*, 9 June 2022; <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2022/06/09/social-mobility-should-celebrate-small-steps-up-ladder>

<sup>7</sup> K. Birbalsingh, ‘Why I’m leaving the Social Mobility Commission’, *Schools Week*, 6 January 2023; <https://schoolsweek.co.uk/why-im-leaving-the-social-mobility-commission>

<sup>8</sup> S. Collini, ‘Snakes and ladders’, *London Review of Books*, vol. 43, no. 7, 1 April 2021, pp. 15–16.

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<sup>10</sup> R. Adams and A. Allegretti, ‘Sunak to force English universities to cap numbers of students on “low-value” degrees’, *The Guardian*, 14 July 2023; <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2023/jul/14/rishi-sunak-force-english-universities-cap-low-value-degrees>

<sup>11</sup> D. Reay, ‘Social mobility, a panacea for austere times: tales of emperors, frogs, and tadpoles’, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, vol. 34, nos. 5–6, 2013, p. 671.

<sup>12</sup> C. Kinsella, 'What right-wing advocates for social mobility get wrong', *New Statesman*, 12 January 2023; <https://www.newstatesman.com/thestaggers/2023/01/conservative-social-mobility-advocates-michaela>

<sup>13</sup> T. Young, quoted in S. Hattenstone, 'Is the new meritocracy a sham?', *The Guardian*, 10 August 2016; <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2016/aug/10/is-the-new-meritocracy-a-sham>

<sup>14</sup> Birbalsingh, 'Bucking the trend'.

<sup>15</sup> D. Goodhart, 'Welcome to the post-liberal majority', *Financial Times*, 11 May 2012; <https://www.ft.com/content/a992778e-9aa4-11e1-9c98-00144feabdc0>

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<sup>18</sup> Birbalsingh, 'Why I'm leaving the Social Mobility Commission'.

<sup>19</sup> D. Skelton, 'Yes, social mobility is important. But jobs in the professions aren't the only ones that matter', *ConservativeHome*, 4 May 2021; <https://conservativehome.com/2021/05/04/david-skelton-yes-social-mobility-is-important-but-jobs-in-the-professions-arent-the-only-ones-that-matter>



<sup>20</sup> E. West, 'Why child labour beats school', *UnHerd*, 15 November 2019;

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<sup>21</sup> Dixon, 'Social mobility should celebrate "small steps up the ladder"'.

<sup>22</sup> A. Brennan, 'Why the wine cellar is the new #bourgeoisgoals', *Evening Standard*, 28 July

2020; <https://www.standard.co.uk/reveller/foodanddrink/where-to-buy-wine-cellar-london-a4510381.html>

<sup>23</sup> K. Birbalsingh, 'This is what I really said about social mobility', *Schools Week*, 13 June 2022;

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