

**Social Mobility debate**, House of Lords October 27, 2016

My Lords, I would like in these few minutes to set the concern and aspirations for social mobility, already so well introduced by the noble lord, Lord Holmes and by other noble Lords, in the context of the challenges faced by many people – some in my own diocese - who face the daily grind and challenge of simply getting by for the day or at best the week. The Prime Minister has referred to the need to focus on “just managing” families and I agree with her.

The task, surely, is to help make it possible for them to do better than just manage and to enable their energy to be taken up not by the everyday challenges but in improving life chances for themselves and their families, including social mobility.

The policies inherited by the Prime Minister and her new government can be expected to have a significant impact on those towards the bottom of the income and privilege ladder whom we surely want and ought, to introduce a note of morality, most to support and encourage. Those on benefits, whom none of us wish to keep reliant on them, will see income reductions in the years ahead. I'm thinking most of those in work and on benefits. There will indeed be modest compensation for cuts on working age benefits from income tax changes and the introduction of what the last Chancellor styled the ‘national living wage’ but the bottom 30% will nevertheless see a reduction of some 3 percent. The same suite of policies, including tax threshold rises is expected to raise incomes for us in the top half of the distribution. If higher inflation occurs and if even a temporary contraction of the economy were to follow Brexit then the poorest in society are likely to be hit the hardest. For too many already, low paid work or insecure jobs fail to offer a way out of poverty and retard social mobility. These people will need extra support to manage, not less.

It's against that background of existing policy that we engage in a debate about doing more than managing, improving opportunity for social mobility. It's hard, sometimes impossible, to seek a new or better job, to support your children in their education if your daily preoccupation has to be in getting by. We enter a period now where there will be a freeze on universal credit awards, when the two child limit will take an increasing toll on some families' income, and when there will be reduced disregards in assessment. Entrenching and worsening economic inequality worsen the base from which mobility can come. Trapping people on lower income undermines social mobility, making it more difficult to access other welcome initiatives to address intergenerational mobility.

I accept that social mobility is not only about income, but it is a major determinant and influence on people's ability to access other opportunities. Having to struggle to get by and, for instance, working very long hours on low pay, reduces time and energy for parental engagement with children in developmental activity, for instance. An advantageous home environment is so important in a child's early years' development; enough parental and adult time, energy, and money is essential for children to access the sport, the non-statutory educational opportunities, the community engagement which all should begin at an early age if mobility is to be possible.

A key finding from the Social Mobility Commission highlights areas of the country which have become social mobility coldspots, particularly coastal areas. Some are in the diocese I serve, covering the mainland coastal areas of Gosport and Portsmouth, along with the Isle of Wight. Many of these areas perform badly on both educational measures and adulthood outcomes, giving people from less advantaged backgrounds limited opportunities to get on. Regional disparities require focussed attention and I trust that our grand aspirations lead to resourcing for hard to reach regions and communities and the people who live there.

My Lords, I draw my comments to an end, delighted to make way for the much anticipated maiden speech of the noble baroness, Baroness Couttie. In our ambition to enhance social mobility we must, must recognise the realities – those just managing are those which ought to be our special focus.