DISTURBING FINDING FROM LSE STUDY - SOCIAL MOBILITY IN BRITAIN LOWER THAN OTHER ADVANCED COUNTRIES AND DECLINING

- In a comparison of eight European and North American countries Britain and the United States have the lowest social mobility
- Social mobility in Britain has declined whereas in the US it is stable
- Part of the reason for Britain’s decline has been that the better off have benefited disproportionately from increased educational opportunity

In a study sponsored by the Sutton Trust, researchers from Centre for Economic Performance at the London School of Economics have compared the life chances of British children with those in other advanced countries, and the results are disturbing.

They have found that social mobility in Britain – the way in which someone’s adult outcomes are related to their circumstances as a child – is lower than in Canada, Germany, Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Finland. And while the gap in opportunities between the rich and poor is similar in Britain and the US, in the US it is at least static, while in Britain it is getting wider.

A careful comparison reveals that the USA and Britain are at the bottom with the lowest social mobility. Norway has the greatest social mobility, followed by Denmark, Sweden and Finland. Germany is around the middle of the two extremes, and Canada was found to be much more mobile than the UK.

Comparing surveys of children born in the 1950s and the 1970s the researchers went on to examine the reason for Britain’s low, and declining, mobility. They found that it is in part due to the strong and increasing relationship between family income and educational attainment. For these children, additional opportunities to stay in education at age 16 and age 18 disproportionately benefited those from better off backgrounds. For a more recent cohort born in the early 1980s the gap between those staying on in education at age 16 narrowed, but inequality of access to higher education has widened further: while the proportion of people from the poorest fifth of families obtaining a degree has increased from 6% to 9%, the graduation rates for the richest fifth have risen from 20% to 47%.

The researchers concluded, “The strength of the relationship between educational attainment and family income, especially for access to higher education, is at the heart of Britain’s low mobility culture and what sets us apart from other European and North American countries.”

Sir Peter Lampl, Chairman of the Sutton Trust said “These findings are truly shocking. The results show that social mobility in Britain is much lower than in other advanced countries and is declining – those from less privileged backgrounds are more likely to continue facing disadvantage into adulthood, and the affluent continue
to benefit disproportionately from educational opportunities. I established the Sutton Trust to help address this issue, and to ensure that all young people, regardless of their background, have access to the most appropriate educational opportunities, right from early years care through to university."

1The research was conducted by Jo Blanden, Paul Gregg and Steve Machin at the Centre for Economic Performance, London School of Economics.

2The Sutton Trust was set up in 1997 to improve social mobility through influencing education policy. The Trust funds research and projects from early years and parenting through primary and secondary education to access to higher education and the professions.

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