

A We're pleased to welcome Patrick Jones in our programme on social mobility in Britain. Patrick, there's little doubt which subject defines Theresa May's government, but the prime minister made it clear that during whatever time isn't gobbled up by Brexit negotiations, she wants to turn Britain into a country that works for everyone".

B Such talk's hardly new. Social mobility is the kind of thing all politicians can sign up to: it's the idea that it doesn't matter where you come from, you should have the same chances to progress. In 1990 John Major spoke of his desire to forge a "genuinely classless society". Every prime minister has made similar noises.

A Yet few have placed such emphasis on social mobility as Theresa May.

B True. This focus is inspired by many measures. Britain isn't a socially mobile place. Many also sense that things have taken a turn for the worse. After the second world war, there was a big increase in the number of well-paid white collar jobs in Britain and as a result, the proportion of people born to parents in professional or managerial jobs tripled between the generation of 1946 and the one born in 1980 to 1984. Poor children won places in the civil service or in the City of London and earned far more than their parents.

A I don't see your point here. You said Britain is not a socially mobile place?

B As the creation of professional jobs slowed, the scope for children to make dramatic leaps up the social ladder narrowed. In this sense the Britain of today is less upwardly mobile than that of Theresa May's youth.

A But isn't the overall picture more complicated than that? Mobility isn't measured only by how well people fare compared with their parents, but also how well they do compared with their peers.

B Exactly. Academics who study mobility based not on income but social class detect even less change. Thirty-one per cent of men born in the poorest income quartile in 1958, remained there as adults. Among the generation born in 1970, the figure increased to thirty-eight per cent. By this reckoning, mobility has changed little during the past century and there's little prospect of an increase in mobility in the years to come.

A But everything's certainly not so gloomy. The gap in exam performances between rich and poor children is falling. There's also been a similar narrowing of the difference in university participation rates.

B That's true, but the slowing down of the economy from its post-war rate means that while the proportion of well-qualified youngsters has increased, there has been no corresponding increase in good jobs. In the past, there was plenty of room at the top. Now it's painfully clear that social mobility must mean not only people going up but people going down as well.

A Well-off parents have many weapons which enable them to defend their children from this fate. The bluntest is by passing on wealth. Actually, last year, the government announced plans to shield inheritances of up to one million pounds from tax. And money definitely helps youngsters to maintain an educational edge.

B In 1996 just four per cent of Britain's workforce had postgraduate qualifications, today eleven per cent do. But the relative scarcity of funding for postgraduate study means such qualifications are more open to wealthy students. Moreover, the graduate wage premium is highest for those having graduated from the most prestigious universities, where the gap between rich and poor pupils has remained wide.

A But we should bear in mind that access to good jobs is increasingly gained through internships.

B The problem is that internships are often unpaid and given out informally. A report

from MPs and peers published this year warns that such internships without a salary, used as stepping stones into jobs, are a financial block to those who cannot afford to work unpaid. This means that even among children with identical educational qualifications, the privately schooled are more likely to get the best jobs and earn more.

A Chipping away at these privileges won't be easy.

B It won't. In a period of limited growth, improving social mobility doesn't simply

mean pulling poor children up from the bottom, it also involves dismantling the barriers that keep wealthy children at the top.

Outline

Social mobility in Britain apparently ranks second on Theresa May's agenda, after Brexit. Social mobility seemed to have become a real possibility in the country after World War Two, but when the economy slowed down from its post-war rate, fewer professional jobs were created and the scope for children to make dramatic leaps up the social ladder narrowed. The Britain of today is a less upwardly-mobile place than that of Theresa May's youth. Well-off parents have many weapons which enable them to defend their children from going down in the world. It is clear that in a period of limited growth, social mobility must mean not only people going up but people going down as well.

Questions

1. In which countries do you consider social mobility is a reality?
2. Is the idea of social mobility totally utopian?
3. What is 'a country that works for everyone'?
4. Is the situation similar in the USA?