

Barnardo's lecture series

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children



Barnardo's

Social Mobility: Will Hutton, Chief Executive, The Work Foundation

13 October 2008

Introduction

This was the first in a series of high profile lectures hosted by Barnardo's to facilitate debate with policy and decision makers, opinion formers, journalists and children's professionals.

Barnardo's works directly with over 100,000 children, young people and their families every year, in almost 400 projects across the UK. We use the knowledge gained from our direct work with children to campaign for better policy and to champion the rights of every child. With the right help, committed support and a little belief, even the most vulnerable children can turn their lives around.

These notes were taken by Barnardo's during the lecture delivered by Will Hutton on 13 October 2008, but are not a transcript of his speech.

Summary

Will Hutton spoke about moving away from the traditional view of social mobility that is measured by entrance to the top universities and top jobs, in favour of a definition that meant the opportunity to live a life that someone would have reason to value. Mr Hutton posited that we are now living in a knowledge economy where technologies are increasing rapidly and this is spurred on by skilled workers, yet it is not distributed equally. Geographical inequalities in the knowledge economy prevent social mobility, especially in large council estates. In order to improve social mobility we should break up council housing, build more places of education in these areas and create opportunities for employment. Companies should invest in local communities and train local workers. We should place value on a wider variety of jobs and lifestyles so that more people have the opportunity to live a life that they have reason to value.

Lecture Notes

Martin Narey:

Martin Narey welcomed everyone to the lecture and introduced Will Hutton whose career has included a period as a stockbroker, editor-in-chief of the Observer, author of 'The World We're in' and 'The State We're in', and 1993 political journalist of the year.

Martin posed the question of what would happen to the poorest people coming out of the current economic calamity. Britain is the fifth richest country in the world, yet one third of its children live in poverty. After housing costs 3.9million children live in poverty, with half having one working parent. How will these families cope with rising fuel and supermarket bills?

There is a belief that social mobility is fluid, and that being born into poverty does not mean a lifetime of the same. More than half of the men born in the 1950s have improved on their father's social position. The question is now whether this social mobility has slowed. Is it now harder to get out of poverty?

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Will Hutton:

Will started by saying that there is some good news on the financial crisis today; perhaps this is an opportunity to re-work British capitalism. We need to put pressure on the government to change lending and change the priorities of companies. For example, in the New Deal initiative companies should not just take people on for financial reasons, but train them up as everyone has obligations to the communities in which they trade.

Most societies do not grow fast enough for people to move up the social hierarchy without a significant proportion moving downwards to allow for this. Social classes need to be open, and we need to look at what proportions are needed to move down to allow people to be upwardly socially mobile.

A person's sense of wellbeing increases with their increasing position on the social hierarchy and their status.

Will Hutton stated that he was a promoter of social mobility. He defines this as every member of society having the opportunity to live a life they have reason to value. This could mean increasing their position in the social hierarchy, simply getting out of misery, or staying in the same place. The opportunity to make these choices should be available to everyone. Currently there is disproportionate access to private education and to Russell Group Universities.

He said that he has been a critic of the middle-class monopoly on going to private schools, getting all the university places and high-powered jobs. However, he would dispute the use of Oxbridge entrance as a measurement of ideal in society. FE Colleges can be equally valuable – they are just living life in another way. The same can be said for former polytechnics and current metropolitan universities. Therefore it is your lifestyle you value rather than social mobility. But to talk of social mobility is easier than talking of a life that other people may value. It requires measuring living standards, having clothes and food, civil participation, liberties protected in law, property rights, having the option to die in a hospice and the opportunity for mobility etc. It is a challenge to say one wants social mobility and to go through a process that would allow us to live a life we value.

Studies show that social mobility is deteriorating, but statistics cannot really show change until long after it happens. The slowing of mobility we are experiencing now is the legacy of Tory initiatives. Labour initiatives such as Sure Start, the introduction of a minimum wage and investment in primary schools have kept mobility stable or even narrowed the social divide. There is not much change recently between the top 20% of the population and the bottom 20%, but the difference is that the top 1% has changed – these people are earning much more now. 350,000 taxpayers make more than £0.5million per year, and 50,000 taxpayers make £1million per year.

There are two things that must be considered when examining social mobility today. These are new economic structures and a spatial image of inequality.

He said that we are living in a knowledge society. In a survey of 3000 workers, 30% of workers spent most of the week on cognitive or managerial tasks. 40% spent part of the week on these tasks, and only 30% said they did not spend any time on these tasks. Ten years ago the results would have been very different – the majority of workers would not have been “knowledge workers”. This is for two reasons:

- Firstly, scientific and technological change is increasing in rapidity. More and more major changes are occurring each century, and in the 21st century we can expect 15-20 more major changes (e.g. google, nokia, wi-fi).
- Secondly, there are more people capable of moving these technologies on. They have the human capital, the soft skills (i.e. leadership and management skills) and ICT to progress.

However, the people with this human capital are geographically segregated. In East London with three million residents the knowledge economy is not so apparent, with some pockets where it is virtually non-existent. Yet in West London four million people have about 80% involvement in the knowledge economy. Unequal patterns of distribution occur throughout the country.

He cited John Hills' (a professor at LSE) work on social housing for Ruth Kelly. There are four million adults in council housing, yet the numbers who move house are in their 100s – people basically do not

move. The cost of housing is increasing. If costs go down (by half as some people have suggested they may) people still will not be able to afford to move as unemployment will increase – they are inter-dependent variables.

Can these people living in council housing get jobs in the knowledge economy? They need soft skills such as teamwork and managerial skills. Can/do we want to stop the knowledge economy? No. We need to ensure that the development of our economy and society opens up opportunities to live a life that we can value.

Ideas for improvement:

Social housing - there exists the idea that council housed people are resigned to a second class life through a lack of ambition. Many boys and girls who have had an early trauma in their lives struggle to find worth. However, there are ways to live a life of worth even if university is not an option. People should work somewhere they are respected and that they value. It is through lack of power and respect that acts of violence occur in these areas as people assert power in other ways.

He suggested that we must find ways to break up estates. Local FE colleges can be built within these spatial traps to open the door to the knowledge economy, even if this is just part of the supply chain. He said that we must break up the patterns and spread the knowledge economy. For example, bringing back post offices in rural areas will bring the social back to the countryside.

We should build housing in places intertwined with education and employment opportunities, such as the opportunity to work in a knowledge economy job. Art and design colleges will provide opportunities for culture to spread. Local businesses should invest in the local community; for example football clubs should recruit local children to their academies. At present there are 350 full-time players in the premiership yet only 100 of them are English.

There is a systemic bias when it comes to Oxbridge admissions. Mr Hutton stated that he wanted to write an article about the fact that there were more students achieving four A's at 'A' Level in some of the FE colleges than there were at Eton, yet there were more admissions to Oxbridge from Eton than there were from the FE colleges. In researching this he spoke to principals in FE colleges who informed him that these young people were making the active choice to attend other universities. In fact there is a totality of ways to open up social mobility, and it is not simply about Oxbridge entrance. Instead of focussing on Oxford and Cambridge we should value other universities. The universities that accept those non-private educated students that do not make it into elite universities but are still achieving good 'A' Level grades actually benefit from an increased standard of students.

He concluded that our aim should be to create processes and structures to allow people to live lives that they have reason to value.