

Speech: Justine Greening speaks at Social Mobility Employer Index launch

Speaking on Wednesday 21 June 2017 at the Guildhall, London, alongside David Johnston, Chief Executive of the Social Mobility Foundation, and Alan Milburn, Chair of the Social Mobility Commission, at an event marking the publication of Social Mobility Employer Index, Secretary of State for Education Justine Greening said:

Thank you very much Alan [Milburn – Chair of the Social Mobility Commission] and to both of you for doing what I think is a very important piece of work.

Clearly our country does face many challenges but we will meet them by building up our people together.

I grew up in a working class family, I was one of those working-class kids.

There were two things I really believed in from the word go.

One was a fundamental fairness in the link between effort and reward and wanting to understand that if I was willing to put that time in, put the persistence in, that I would be able to see some results for that.

The other thing I believed in was a meritocracy.

Because I think talent is spread evenly throughout our country, throughout our communities; and fundamentally our country would be better the more we can unlock all of that.

When you put those things together, a strong link between effort and reward, a real meritocracy, then you have empowered people.

And when you have empowered people you have an empowered country.

And I think when you've got empowered people you have stronger productivity and that's something that all of the organisations that are part of this Index today have fundamentally understood.

It's a virtuous circle in the end.

I happen to think, as well, that this isn't just the smart thing to do.

It's not just about a business case for companies or for organisations.

It is the right thing to do.

A more socially mobile Britain will be a happier place. Communities will be stronger when we achieve that.

I think we can change the internal plumbing of our country to make it more socially mobile.

We don't have to accept where our country has come from and where it is today and see that as the only course that we can take in the future.

But that's going to be up to all of us to make the future different from the past and from where we are now.

We do need to recognise that there are a myriad of barriers – some of them big but some of them small – that stack up against people who are starting perhaps from further behind.

People who, when we talk about a level playing field, are the ones furthest away from having it.

I certainly remember from my own childhood growing up in Rotherham it was a very difficult time, actually.

Many of the children growing up in that town, including myself, saw our parents lose their jobs and you felt like you were a long way from seeing opportunity on your doorstep.

This steady realisation as quite a young child for me, that to get opportunity I was going to have to work a long time, and very hard, just to get myself into a position to be able to start to have some opportunities.

I knew also that the beginning of that was education and probably being able to go university.

Which is why the fact that so many more disadvantaged children are now getting into university for the first time, why people like me back in the 80s and 90s are no longer the norm and actually it's pretty normal for people from those backgrounds to get to university now, why that's so important.

But it's clear that it's not just government, it's not just education that plays a role in driving social mobility.

I like to think that I've got the best job in government and I think that it's the most important job because it's the one that helps people develop our country's human capital.

But what we want to see are companies and organisations in our country using and developing that further when those people become adults and get into the workplace.

We don't want people to just be going into jobs.

We want them to be going into careers where they can continue to develop themselves and their ideas and their potential throughout their whole life, not just at the beginning of it.

That's where business comes in.

That's also where communities and civil society comes in.

The launch of this Index today is about starting to put some numbers and evidence around how we can do that systematically and at scale.

I'd like to congratulate all of the organisations that are in this first Index and achieving a score.

Because you are showcasing what some of that best practice, that can take very different forms, can look like.

It will be the evidence that you are gathering that helps other organisations get further and faster over the coming months and years.

Some of you are doing blind recruitment on CVs.

Some of you are looking at different ways of assessing candidates when they present for job interviews.

I think that some of the work that's been done in my own profession of accountancy in widening the routes of people into that profession in particular have really helped open it up to a brand new generation of different sorts of people – and all for the better.

Alan talked about how it's not just about some of these crunchy changes we can make on process, it's all about changing attitudes.

Again, I can draw on my own experience of being confronted with receiving the sharp end of unconscious bias.

I remember interviewing to go into an investment bank after I became qualified at PwC – and it's fantastic to see PwC in this Index.

Part of that time spent at that company was being taken out to lunch.

I did the interview and the interview was fine and I got taken out to lunch by 2 of the junior managers in this investment bank.

We sat down in a little Italian restaurant and they handed out the menu and the waitress came to take our order.

I remember trying to work out whether I should order the meal in Italian, which was the prime name in this menu alongside each meal, or whether I should read the English translation underneath.

In a split second I decided that I'm not a pompous person, I thought I'd just read the English.

And I could tell with the body language that I'd just failed a test, because I was meant to have had the confidence, apparently, to have just said it in Italian.

Now it wasn't that I didn't have confidence, I absolutely had lots of confidence as a person but I just had a different attitude to how I felt it was appropriate to behave.

And frankly, did it really matter either way?

Probably not, anyway.

But the point is you had a sense of it being part of a test.

And I had a sense of it being a test I failed not because I wasn't going to do a great job at that company but just because I came from a different place and had a different attitude to that situation.

These are the small things that add up to big differences in terms of whether or not, in the end, people get opportunities.

I should say the great news is that company is also in this Index today, so again I think that's fantastic progress.

There are real benefits for all of the organisations in today's Index. I think they will simply do better.

There is evidence that says that companies that are more diverse, that crack these issues of social mobility, do better.

Because when they are taking decisions they are having broader discussions, they consider a variety of different things from different angles, and the decisions they take are better, the outcomes they achieve will be better.

And, actually Alan is right that doing this isn't always easy but there are some things that companies did that scored in this Index that are straightforward and that can actually be done tomorrow, if organisations and businesses want to do that.

That's what we want to see.

We want to see people getting on with change that removes the barriers that are holding some of our most talented youngsters back.

It doesn't always cost a penny.

It's just about changing how we approach these issues, changing how you approach processes, changing how you then develop people when they're in your companies.

It's also about changing hearts and minds.

I think if all organisations were able to do this, if they were all able to have that business case that social mobility brings, the advantages from it, it would be one of the biggest rocket boosters that we could put under the UK economy in coming years.

And it would be one of the biggest advantages the UK could have globally as an economy in the coming years, if we were to systematically make more out of our human capital than other countries around the world.

That's why it's so important.

This Index also matters not just because it starts to give us the evidence – and I love the evidence to help us develop policy – it gives us the transparency as well to see who's doing what.

And I want to increasingly use these sorts of evidence bases to help us drive government policy.

We looked very closely at the work that the Social Mobility Commission did in relation to place; the communities and parts of our country where things were most stacked against young people doing the best for themselves.

We fundamentally took that as our starting point for where we would set up our Opportunity Areas.

I want us to look equally hard across Government and how we can see these companies as exemplars and how we can work to help make sure that what they are learning and what they are demonstrating is spread far more broadly, far more widely and far faster across our whole country.

I know that all of this means working in partnership, and I really do hope that, as Alan said, we can start to achieve a true, meaningful cross-party consensus on driving forward on social mobility.

Not just a debate where we recognise where we agree on this, but a debate that goes beyond that to say 'well what are we going to do about it?'

A debate that focuses on the 80% that we can agree on, rather than the 20% that we don't agree on, that we seem to spend our time dysfunctionally arguing about instead of getting on with things that we can make progress on instead.

That's what I want to see happen as a change in Parliament.

We all need to realise that we will only move forward on social mobility and only make a change on it if we can set aside some of the areas where we don't quite see eye-to-eye but instead focus on the areas where we absolutely have common ground and then work together, tirelessly and persistently, on that – whether it's the government, in politics, or whether in our communities, whether in schools, in businesses, in civil society.

I think we can change things in our country but it is going to take a mammoth effort of people coming together and working together and making this a true movement, as Alan said.

The path to success isn't going to be glamorous.

No one thing is going to be that silver bullet that changes everything overnight.

It's going to be thousands, probably hundreds of thousands, possibly even millions of people doing things differently in their own lives, in the sphere of influence that they've got in their own organisations, day to day.

It's as much as anything a change of heart in our country that we need to really drive social mobility.

We need people who recognise that they already have opportunity to understand that they too absolutely have to play a role in making sure that those who do not now get it as well.

That's our task, and I think that's the task also of British business, the ultimate opportunity-giver in our country.

It may not be glamorous but if we can make progress on this it will be transformational.

Because I believe that using all of the talents of people in our country is no longer an optional extra in Brexit Britain. It's absolutely essential.

And I think the sooner that we can win this argument to put social mobility right at the heart of everyone's agenda – including in government, in Parliament – the better.

And I think the more united, fundamentally, our country will be.

We do want a positive movement for change on social mobility. And it should be hope and social mobility that is the real antidote to today's 'day of rage'.

Thank you.