

Moving Britain to Go

[My last article](#) looked at Gordon Brown's dismal record as he translates from Sherriff of Nottingham to King of Inequality. Under Brown's Treasury, the wealth gap is as great as ever, the poorest are proportionately paying more in tax and getting less in benefits than under the Conservatives, social mobility has fallen and the country as a whole has not had a real pay rise since 2001. Not good.

So what are we going to do about it? In the game Monopoly, there is this wonderful Chance card that moves you past Jail, past Super Tax, past that dreadful hotel on Mayfair and straight to Go. What could a Conservative Government do to move Britain to Go - making our country rich, vibrant and exciting?

More social mobility

First, social mobility is oiled by growth. Real growth. We need to pursue greater prosperity for the nation. From an economic point of view, it seems obvious that we should aim to increase trade with the higher growth territories of India, China, the US and the Far East since when they grow, we are more likely to grow. The flipside is that our links with slower growth countries - most of the EU for example - should be less of a national priority. Imagine how much more successful we could be if we concentrated on the whole global village rather than a single street.

More success and prosperity

Second, the hard evidence of what countries need to do to ensure success is becoming difficult to ignore. Studies by the OECD show time and again that faster growth results from better transport infrastructure, greater success at research and development, a more flexible job market, lower taxes, and critically better education and greater skills. Just looking down this list, you can see why we have not done as well as we should have done in the last ten years. Transport is a complete mess, R&D is not as impressive as it should be, New Labour has meant new labour laws which have been bad for the economy and as for taxes - they have not exactly fallen!

Better education means better paid jobs

But it is the field of education and skills where the Blair-Brown years have really sabotaged our country's future. Education is the third, key factor for a Conservative growth plan. It really is the golden flower in the money garden. A person with qualifications is much more likely to have a job. OECD figures show a 89% employment rate in the UK for a person with a higher education qualification, 79% for upper secondary education but only 53% for those below these levels. And a more qualified person in modern Britain gets more pay too – in relative terms, higher education means £158, upper secondary means £100 and below upper secondary £67.

We do well as a country, yet our achievements – nationally and individually - have not been helped by the level of the skills and knowledge we have. Britain lies in the middle of the OECD

tables for educational qualifications. 30% of our population have few or no qualifications. Another 40% have some qualifications, yet could benefit from higher and stronger qualifications.

In this, of course, our schools have an important role to play. The subject of schools and the form they take has been discussed to death in recent weeks. Yet in some ways this ignores a bigger scandal. The real need for reform lies in the vocational sector. Vocational education can be about learning for its own sake - yet the focus of this arm of the education system is to provide the skills required to get a well paid job. We need to have a revolution in vocational education.

We need to consider how we can better cater for different types of education and the differing needs of different ages. It doesn't matter how many good schools you have in your town if you are a 22 year old drop out let down by your wild teenage years, your folks or your local sink school. It does matter that you are able to seize the day later on. It matters that everyone should have the chance to climb ladders throughout life. We hear a lot about making sure that everyone has a chance in life. Shouldn't we also make sure that everyone has a second chance? For that further improves the likelihood of getting a well paid job.

That means a revolution in apprenticeships, making diplomas work, increasing autonomy of colleges and setting vocational qualifications with employers in the driving seat. When it comes to skills training, that training must be aimed at what employers want, or the training will be ineffective. Scholarships for all students in vocational education will enable more flexibility and equalise opportunity. These scholarships would be for fully accredited courses and carefully designed to avoid the problems of the Individual Learning Accounts fiasco. This is especially important where financial circumstances would otherwise make it extremely unlikely that a skill would be developed to realise maximum potential.

This way, there would be a real incentive for courses to be organised for what students need, around when they can fit courses in. For many have to be able to keep down a job while raising skills. The current system is based on what Government thinks should be provided which is just not good enough in a fast changing world. There needs to be a greater emphasis on education when students want it – in evenings, at weekends, by computer, correspondence or whatever. And in many cases, courses could be made shorter and more concentrated.

Why this matters

Some would say that we are rich enough already. That none of this is needed. That we should concentrate on healing our broken society. Why are these things discussed as though they are mutually exclusive? For me, greater prosperity for the nation will help strengthen our society. We have a real problem with inequality. We have a real problem with stagnating wages. And we have a real problem with the amount of tax paid by those who can least afford to pay.

We are not going to solve this by bashing the well off with more taxes and less public services. We can solve it by seeking to level up the least well off, to accelerate the growth and prosperity of the nation. For me this means the agenda I have described. It means increasing real opportunity and prioritising tax reductions for the least well off. It means greater chances for those passed by through lack of opportunity or bad luck. It means a country where it is possible

for anyone to be anything. Where ladders are available throughout life for those who reach to climb them. If we can make more chance work and follow the path to greater prosperity, together we can move Britain to Go.