

Getting people out of poverty

The ambition of improving people's living standards is shared across the UK political spectrum. Our debates are not about what we are trying to achieve. All sensible people want their neighbours, friends and relatives to do well, to find worthwhile jobs, and to earn a decent living. The arguments are in practice all about how we achieve that, though some seek to misrepresent the views of others by implying some do not want people to succeed.

The good news is it is not a zero sum game. Someone doing well should not make it more difficult for someone else. As more people set up businesses they create more jobs. As more large companies sell more product and pay higher bonuses, so there is more money to spend on other things, in turn creating more employment.

Nor is the world of school and university a zero sum game. We have expanded educational opportunity substantially, by effectively raising the school leaving age and increasing the number of university places on offer. There is no ceiling on how well any individual can do, no firm limit on how many good degrees are awarded.

Today we read that some places appear better than others at assisting and mentoring people from low income backgrounds so they can succeed in education and go on to well paid jobs. We need to study what has worked best and what has not worked so well, and spread best practice from place to place. Schools need to be properly funded and good teachers valued and supported. It is also a task for the wider community and for the families concerned. Individuals are motivated and assisted by different things. It may only take one comment or expression of support to make the difference for a young person, but as we can never be sure what that is so those in the local community need to try what they can to show more people that there is opportunity for all and effort can be rewarded.