

Hello and thanks so much to John, Selina and the SEA for inviting me to speak to you today about social mobility and social justice, about class and its barriers And- just so you know, I want to ask for your help.

When I was appointed to this job early last year, I had the challenge of working out what the job would entail

Like most people would, I turned to my own life experiences. So if you'll forgive me, I'm going to spend a bit of my speech today talking about me. Hopefully you will bear with it

I grew up in Newham, in Silvertown, close to the dying docks. Mum and dad both worked in factories. We had a council flat on the fifth floor of a block now adjacent to City Airport. I moved there when I was two, during the slum clearances.

I certainly didn't realise it at the time, but when I see what's happening in my community today, I realise that I was so very lucky in so many ways. That tiny flat provided my sister and me with the security to thrive and strive, learn and do as well as we could. it's such a stark contrast with the situation of my constituents today, given the housing crisis.

My parents couldn't afford to buy me loads of books, and frankly when I was growing up, mum didn't really know what to buy. I have a box in my attic with 70 Enid Blyton books I just can't throw away.

Once I'd got through those, mum didn't know where I should go next, and the local library wasn't much use. It had me reading Barbara Cartland novels at the age of 12.

Textbooks were a rare commodity at school as well. There were teacher shortages and strikes that disrupted my education and to cap it all, I was terrible at exams as well.

But a secure home at a social rent, and my parents in steady jobs until I was in my twenties, gave me a base to work from, and my mum was just bloody amazing.

Both my sister and I went to University. Had there been tuition fees in my day – this working class girl simply would not have gone. Her parents would have been completely against it

I ended up at what is now Roehampton University because my school sent me there on a day trip, and it seemed fine. I studied a joint honours in literature and religion because I loved reading and I was going to marry a vicar

My sister was sent by her school to Birmingham, and so that's where she went to study law. She was always clear about the career she wanted to follow and went for it. Mum and dad might have supported Janice, despite tuition fees, because there was a clear career goal ahead, but religion and literature? Not a chance! Way too risky Too much debt. My parents never had a mortgage – the concept was alien

I graduated, and the first job I got was as a care assistant

I knew I was overqualified but had no idea what jobs to apply for or how to write a basic application form. And we didn't have the knowledge in my family either.

These are barriers that our education system still has to overcome. But our ability to do this has obviously been massively weakened by the cuts to public services, and a lack of recognition that there's even an issue.

Eventually, clearly, my sister and I managed somehow to get through the system.

Some people obviously had it easier than us. But I feel they might have missed essential lessons, not picked up the skills and developed less empathy. I see it in the attitudes of some MPs in Parliament, with a complete lack of understanding of what our society actually looks

like and feels like from within working class communities.

I think there are two main lessons to learn from my experience. University, education in general, can be a hugely positive, life changing experience. But there are major barriers to that opportunity, whether class, family income, gender, whatever, that precede and outlast your time in University. And I know that I don't have to tell you that!

Those barriers are based on who you are and where you come from, they mean, frankly, talent gets wasted. It isn't just. It isn't fair.

The chance to help tackle these injustices is why I was so excited to be given my role last year by John and Jeremy.

For me, the most urgent and most devastating form of social injustice is child poverty. It destroys life chances for so many.

The facts are horribly familiar:

4.5 million children in poverty in total.

70% of children in poverty have at least one parent in work, with working poverty increasing faster than employment.

It makes my blood boil every time the Government respond to the points we make about this by pretending child poverty is about unemployment. Somehow it's about feckless parents who don't care about their children.

But I see the appalling impact poverty has week in and week out. In Newham more than half our children live in poverty. It affects their health, physical and mental, their ability to study, their opportunity to continue education, the chance to widen horizons, and so much more.

Even when families aren't in poverty, more and more of us from every background now feel understandably insecure.

64% of our children don't believe they'll have a better life than their parents. Tragically, unless we change things, they'll be right.

The housing crisis is making life chances so much worse – 30 year olds are 4 times more likely to have to pay an expensive private rent as their parents were, and half as likely to own their own home.

The sense that there's no opportunity out there is a big psychological barrier. It weighs on working class young people, and that's before they even think about the stress of not knowing when your next meal is, of

studying in an ill equipped school, or not having a safe, quiet and secure home.

I mentioned earlier how important it was for me to have a secure council flat growing up. Today, and especially in constituencies like mine, that's just rare.

In Newham, rents have risen so fast that local working class people simply can't afford to keep their homes. 30,000 families are on the housing register.

The rent on the cheapest quarter of two bed flats is 1300 pounds a month. Lower quartile earnings are only 1168 pounds a month. Do the math.

If you're a single mum with two children and all the extra costs that involves, how are you supposed to deal with that imbalance – especially since that number is for full-time earnings and you may well not be able to be in full time work?

Local housing allowances have been cut and cut, and the benefit cap also bites hard in London and other areas where living costs are high.

Child homelessness has risen 80% since 2010, with more than 120,000 children without a secure home¹.

¹ <https://metro.co.uk/2019/05/24/child-homelessness-increases-shameful-80-within-decade-9681898/>

The Tories are able to get away with lies about poverty and inequality, which they couldn't do if they talked in the same way about inflation or employment.

I worry the language we use enables that, because it lets the right present tiny little projects like their Opportunity Areas that benefit almost no-one, and divisive grammar schools that leave so many behind, as if they're solutions to massive social problems. They claim to be the party of opportunity and social mobility

Social mobility isn't a clear or simple concept. It means different things to different people

There have been increasing calls to reframe the argument and therefore as I'm sure you've heard, two weeks ago today Jeremy announced that we intend to talk more in terms of social justice than social mobility.

I'm strongly supportive of the move and I'm curious to know your thoughts.

What I think it comes down to is this. We don't want what I call a grammar school society.

We don't want a society engineered to ensure that only a few get on and the rest are left behind.

Where those few who get on are lauded and applauded as if they're so much better than the rest,

when in truth it's likely that they've just been lucky. I was lucky.

I want to fix that, I don't want to continue to live in a society as horribly unequal as ours is now. I want more children to get the opportunity to fulfil their potential, I don't want them held back or left behind. That means we need to deal with poverty and provide opportunities. And something else.

I want to talk about class today, if you don't mind, however difficult that conversation can be.

Research shows if your parent was a bus driver or a care worker, you will earn 24% less than if your parent was a teacher or a nurse. You're far less likely to get a professional job, and if you do, you won't earn the same amount as your colleagues whose parents were middle class. You'll still earn 17% less on average.

These class pay gaps overlap with the pay gaps for gender, ethnicity and disability. So if you're both a woman and working class, you'll earn 40% less than a middle class man. If you're black and working class, you'll earn 25% less than a white middle class person. If you were black AND working class AND a woman AND disabled, this suggests you'd have an even larger pay gap, but as I understand it the data isn't rich enough to put a number on that yet.

So, look at the person next to you. Imagine one of you came from a working class family and the other middle class. You went to the same schools, you got the same qualifications, you've got the same job. But the one of you who's from the working class will earn 17% less on average, simply because of the class you were born into.

Unsurprisingly, these gaps haven't been getting better at all over recent years, because absolutely no action has been taken to remedy them.

This has to change. Class inequality and the barriers it creates are massive, and tangled up with the other inequalities in our society.

We need to identify actions we can take to make our country massively fairer for working class people. To me, tackling class is no different to how we seek to tackle race, gender, disability, and other inequalities. All of these are interconnected and overlaid.

We can't undo the racial wealth gap in our society without addressing classism alongside racism. We can't defeat the forces that perpetuate racism without offering a loud and proud alternative to false divisive rhetoric about the 'white working class'.

And we can't build lasting solidarity without building an understanding of the interests that we have in

common – how our economy preserves and increases the power of the elite, the few, and not the many.

We've already committed to building on the example of the women in finance charter to include action on class alongside race, disability, and sexuality.

We've committed to expand these sectoral charters throughout the economy. In my view this is going to be more effective than the voluntary programmes of the past because we'll be introducing sectoral bargaining structures and looking at ways to involve unions more strongly at the sectoral level at the same time.

I think we need to find a way to ensure that these 'Diversity Charters' are about equality of opportunity, equal representation and first and foremost, issues of social justice.

I think we should be linking all these different parts of our policy agenda up, and building a narrative around them.

I hope most of you will have heard about our plans to reform the Social Mobility Commission into a Social Justice Commission.

We'll give it a remit to analyse inequalities and perform impact assessments across different Government Departments, not just Education. And we'll match that

with a new Minister for Social Justice, based in a Labour Treasury with a mandate to work across Government.

I've been thinking a lot about two further steps that have been suggested.

I've been urged to look at what it would mean to bring the Socioeconomic Duty within the Equality Act into force –

We could potentially do this immediately when we get into Government. It would force Whitehall Departments, councils, health and education authorities – basically all the different levels of government – to account for their actions, or inaction, on class inequality.

Bringing the Duty into force on its own might not do much. We'd have to integrate it into strategies, including our child poverty strategy, and think about how we'd marry the two.

A duty like that would have impacts for the education sector, and I want to hear what you think about it. It could shape the design of admissions and inclusion policies, or make a higher priority in budgets for programmes that fight the effects of disadvantage.

The second idea I'm exploring is about reframing Govt budgets to emphasise our progress towards our social justice goals, including the defeat of poverty - strongly contrasting with the way the Tories do it.

We could also look at non-departmental bodies like the Office for Budget Responsibility. How can the OBR's analysis contribute to a social justice agenda?

What the OBR says and does sets the tone for the Budget, something that we know cuts through to people, even people who aren't interested in politics.

Over the last 9 years, the Tories have managed to turn their budgets into festivals of austerity, celebrating their cuts and constantly reinforcing their false, but successful – message that these cuts have been necessary.

I want to see us using the same tactics in support of our social justice agenda in Government – there may be different ways of doing that, but I want to hear your thoughts. And we are very clear we want to see more trust in politics, and that means we can't mark our own homework.

Finally I'd like to recognise that social justice is about the elite and the rest of us, about massive inequality that means the fruits of all of our collective labour benefit a tiny few.

I think the biggest reason some Labour people avoid talking about class is they fear it's divisive. But it doesn't have to be this way.

Most of us depend on work for a living

Almost all of us need and use our NHS.

Almost all of us know we might need help at some point in our future from social security: if we have to cut our hours, if we lose our jobs, if we become disabled.

Almost all of us don't have family money or trust funds to fall back on.

93% of us get a state education and know we'll get a state pension that we'll need when we retire.

The basis of our solidarity is there, cradle to grave, despite austerity. We can rebuild Britain on that basis.

But I can't pretend our job is going to be easy when we get into Government. Under Thatcher, our country became massively unequal, and that inequality has stayed appallingly high ever since.

The benefits of what little sustainable growth there's been over recent decades has gone to a very small number. The share of our national income going to the wealthiest top 1 percent has almost tripled since 1980.

Our economy works for the few, and it will take years and years and years of focused work to change that.

We know the Tories won't do it. They'll never ensure the elite pay their fair share; they won't bite the hand that feeds them.

But Labour will make those commitments and we'll work consistently to realise them, it's who we are, it's in our DNA.

So the reason I'm here today, to be honest, is to listen to you, hear your ideas about how we can effectively and permanently transform our society to make it fairer than ever before.

You are the experts.

What I would ask is that you give us your thoughts, experiences, ideas, research, help me to take the knowledge that you have and use it to transform our country for the better.

Basically, my goal is to steal your ideas with pride.

So please don't spend the Q&A session asking me detailed questions about existing Education policy.

I'm not going to spend my time undermining or second guessing Angela Rayner because frankly I'm not that brave.

Let's have a conversation instead. Give me suggestions about how we build our agenda to give opportunity to all.

I want to hear what you'd like to teach me today.