

Education Committee

Oral evidence: [Appointment of the Chair of the Social Mobility Commission](#), HC 1048

Wednesday 11 July 2018

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Members present: Robert Halfon (Chair); Lucy Allan; James Frith; Lucy Powell; Thelma Walker.

Questions 1 - 72

Witness

I: Dame Martina Milburn CBE, Government's preferred candidate for Chair of the Social Mobility Commission.

Examination of witness

Witness: Dame Martina Milburn CBE.

Q1 **Chair:** Thank you very much for coming. Could I ask why you want to be chair of the Social Mobility Commission? What is your vision?

Dame Martina Milburn: I would like to be chair because I feel very passionate about it. I guess my last 15 years at the Prince's Trust has been all about trying to help young people with social mobility. I have felt strongly about it all my life. It partly reflects my own background, too. So, that is why.

My vision is to grow the really good work that the previous Select Committee did. I have had a very good talk to Alan Milburn. I have been given permission to have up to 12 paid commissioners, which is a step in the right direction, and I would like to have three mini taskforces and, as well as the work as usual, have an overarching theme that each of the taskforces could look at in a bit more depth. I would also like to look particularly at where it is working and then be able to promote more of that and to come out with some very practical things that people could do to shift the agenda; for example, businesses and apprenticeships. We have all met business leaders who said, "I took on these apprentices and it was a complete disaster", and then you look at why and generally it is because the right support was not there. I would not like to say another toolkit because everybody will put their head in their hands, but an advice leaflet for how you could better support apprentices and things like that in the workplace is the kind of thing I would like to do.

Q2 **Chair:** You have set out how you see the structures of the Social Mobility Commission working. What about your vision for social mobility? What is that?

Dame Martina Milburn: In terms of how you change it?

Chair: The vision for the commission in terms of how you want to improve social mobility or social justice in our country.

Dame Martina Milburn: I think that is how you would improve it. In a way, we have to find the David Attenborough for social mobility. From what David Attenborough has done for the environment and plastics in particular in the oceans, we have to find that narrative for social mobility. At the moment—

Q3 **Chair:** What do you think the narrative should be?

Dame Martina Milburn: I think that it is about how you help people have a better life. I do not think it needs to be complicated. Outside of the wider Westminster village, the term is still not really understood or known. I have been doing lots of research just with normal people and two of them thought I was talking about mobility scooters. They just did not understand the term. If you want to change anything, you have to get people talking about it. You have to get people to understand. I want



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a piece on "The One Show" and things like that. That is my vision for how you change things.

- Q4 **Chair:** I have said before that often people think that social mobility is a Vodafone advert, and I have always preferred the term social justice. Do you think there is a difference between the terms social justice and social mobility? I understand the name is not going to be changed and it is going to be called the Social Mobility Commission, but do you see a difference? Do you see yourself as very much promoting social justice?

Dame Martina Milburn: I do see a difference. I personally think social justice is much wider. I think that social mobility is a part of social justice. We do not have that right yet, and for me social justice is right across society and how we want to live as a country and as a culture. It would include things like an old person's right to adequate care. That, in my head, is the difference. I think that social mobility is much narrower.

- Q5 **Chair:** Clearly, and my colleagues will come on to this in a bit, the previous Social Mobility Commission had a number of problems. You had the resignation of both Alan Milburn on the Labour side and Gillian Shephard, a very distinguished Conservative, on the Tory side. Their view was that it had no teeth and it was not being taken seriously. How will you ensure that you are not just in charge of a commission with no teeth, just another think tank presenting views about social mobility that get a few newspaper headlines or a few "One Show" TV appearances but do not make a difference in the long term?

Dame Martina Milburn: First, the fact that we can have up to 12 commissioners and that they can be paid through the public appointments system is a step in the right direction. I have read the recommendations from both yourselves and the previous commission, and I understand that we have not gone as far as all of you would have liked. I have also been this week to see the people at No. 10 and I have been given two key contacts there. I have said I want to do a quarterly report to the Secretary of State for Education and the Prime Minister on how things are going.

One of the key determining factors for me will be this framework document, which I have not yet seen. Crucially in that, it has to allow access to certain of the key Ministers. The kind of thing I would like to put in the quarterly report is if I am being blocked from seeing anybody. I think that those are the sorts of things that will make a difference. The other thing that has been agreed is the person running the secretariat will be at senior civil servant level.

- Q6 **Chair:** If I could just challenge you a little, if you take great think tanks like the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Sutton Trust and the Centre for Social Justice, they all have access to Ministers and to MPs and they produce incredible reports that get a lot of coverage. Sometimes they have an impact; sometimes not. What I am trying to understand is how the Social Mobility Commission will really make a difference and will



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impact on legislation and on domestic policy in terms of social justice and social mobility.

Dame Martina Milburn: I think that the only way you can ever do it is through communication. If I am allowed that communication with Ministers and if we are allowed to make the kind of noise I would like us to make, then hopefully you can make a difference. If ultimately we end up with the same experience that Alan and his commissioners had, then we will end up with the same result. It is about communication. It is about keeping those channels open and trying your best to influence the agenda.

Q7 **Chair:** You mentioned our report. I would like to know what you agreed with and what you did not.

Dame Martina Milburn: I agreed with most of it. I think that anyone who read the two would say, of course, it would be great to have something with more teeth, something that could legally hold Ministers and Government to account. It was very hard to disagree with it. I also think that we are where we are. There has been a bit of a shift, so let's give it a go. Let's give it a go with a more—

Q8 **Chair:** Do you think, as we have said in our report, that every major piece of domestic legislation should be assessed for its impact on social justice?

Dame Martina Milburn: Yes, I do.

Q9 **Chair:** Do you think that the Social Mobility Commission under your chairmanship would take a role looking at doing that?

Dame Martina Milburn: It would be very nice if we could. I think that we have to slightly manage expectations in that I have been told this is three days a month. The budget for the commission is £600,000. There is an awful lot to deliver on very small resources. We can do our best and I am not known for my shy and retiring personality, so it is about doing what we can with the resources we have. We have to acknowledge that it is not as far as people called for and people would have liked.

Q10 **Chair:** In terms of the communication again, why do you think this will be different given what has happened in the past?

Dame Martina Milburn: There is a lot of work going on in this area. You have pointed out two of the key leading players who do produce fantastic reports. There are also a lot of things that local authorities are doing that are good, and there are some local authorities that have not even started. I think that what the commission can do is play a role in bringing a lot of this together and promoting the things that are working. We all seem terribly good at innovation and then we all know examples of where it has just stayed in one place and it has never been able to reach scale. Reaching scale is a much more challenging thing to do. I think that it would be good, for example, if the local authority awards included one for social mobility. It would be even better if there was a bit of a cash



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incentive attached to that to say, "We could give you this to help you do X or Y". The commission can play a role in bringing together all the work that is going on.

- Q11 **Chair:** Finally, before I pass on to my colleagues, you have a distinguished, amazing career of various organisations and you are on a lot of boards of organisations. If I listed them all here, we would probably be here for a few months. Some might say you have more hats than Lock's hat shop, which I think has been around for about 400 years, since the 17th century. Given all that you do, how will you have the time to be able to do this because of all your other things? Looking at this, you just think, "How can you do this properly and seriously?"

Dame Martina Milburn: Because I am going to stop doing quite a lot of it. For me, this is, as I say, something I feel really strongly about. I want to give it my best shot and this will be the main thing I do apart from the Prince's Trust. I have already said to the chairs of the other boards that if I get through this morning I will be coming off with immediate effect.

- Q12 **Chair:** Are you able to say what you will give up or is it confidential at the moment?

Dame Martina Milburn: Certainly, I would come off from the FE college and I will come off from the National Citizen Service, which are the two other big ones I do. The others that are added to the list are more to do with the day job in any case, so they do not require me to do very much time.

- Q13 **Lucy Powell:** Thanks very much for coming in. I have a couple of questions to ask but before I do could I maybe take further some of the things that you have just answered to the Chair there? Clearly, you have a passion for this and a distinguished career. What do you see the role of the Social Mobility Commission as being? I would totally agree with you, I think scale is one of the biggest challenges we face when it comes to a whole range of public policy issues. That is not the same job as being a very focused research body within Government, putting pressure on the Government. What do you see as the balance of those different types of—

Dame Martina Milburn: We definitely will continue with all that research, but one of the remits of the commission is to also promote social mobility and promote it among business and university, FE colleges, and the general public. I think that is the bit that we can add to what the commission already does. Obviously, they should continue and we would continue to bring out the annual report and the employer index and do the bits of research, but on top of that we could really play a role with promotion. As I say, it is a relatively small commission with a very small budget, so you cannot do that yourself. The key is to find commissioners who have networks who could do it for them.

For example, as one of the commissioners I would like to see somebody from the HR world who is very well thought of within the HR world. A lot



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of the issues, as we know, with people applying for jobs are with the HR departments, and certainly from my experience in the trust, when we do work with business we often have to start with their HR departments, particularly getting Prince's Trust-type young people employed there. You would then ask that commissioner as one of their duties to do stuff with the HR world, again through practical examples of, "This is what we have done here, this is how it works, and if you take somebody with an offending background into your business it does not mean they are going to run off with all the cash", which I have heard on too many occasions in my life.

- Q14 **Lucy Powell:** As you say, it is £600,000 and it is a tiny organisation, nothing like the scale of the Prince's Trust. What you are describing is more programme delivery. Do you really think that that is realistic for the Social Mobility Commission? Is that where you can make most impact with such a tiny organisation?

Dame Martina Milburn: That will depend on the commissioners that you can attract, which I know was also an issue with the previous commission. I think that Alan Milburn called it farcical. If you can get the right people—and I will confess I am sickeningly optimistic in life always—I think that 12 people sitting round the table with the right quality and working together properly as a team with all the various other people who are doing bits, you can move mountains. I fundamentally believe that. You might tell me I am very naive.

- Q15 **Lucy Powell:** I have worked for similar organisations in the past and I think that on that kind of budget you have to be quite realistic about that. It takes me to one of the other points. You said a couple of times in answer to the chair, "If I am allowed". Some people might wonder whether you are willing and able enough to challenge Government as a real way of delivering the kinds of programmes you are talking about rather than trying to deliver them yourself. Would that be a fair thing for people to say?

Dame Martina Milburn: I think that people are going to have lots of different views before you start it. I suppose my leadership style is more like Gareth Southgate: keep your head down, put in a good team and then deliver results. I do not have any issues with challenging Government and where I think they are wrong I will certainly say so.

- Q16 **Lucy Powell:** In public?

Dame Martina Milburn: In public, yes, of course.

- Q17 **Lucy Powell:** Just on that, can I ask when you applied for this job and how your application came about?

Dame Martina Milburn: The Secretary of State called me and asked me if I had seen the ad, which I had not, and would it be something that I would consider. He was very clear that there was an open process to go through and he was also very clear that he was calling other people. I



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said I would go and think about it. I had a look at the ad. I spoke to a few people and thought I would put my hat in the ring.

Q18 **Lucy Powell:** When did he call you, do you know?

Dame Martina Milburn: I honestly cannot remember. Two months ago?

Q19 **Lucy Powell:** What are we, the beginning of July? The original closing date for this job was 25 February and then—

Dame Martina Milburn: I think they extended it.

Lucy Powell: Yes, so did he call you in between, do you think?

Dame Martina Milburn: Yes, it would have been in between.

Q20 **Lucy Powell:** So, after the closing date he called you?

Dame Martina Milburn: I honestly could not tell you what date it was, sorry.

Q21 **Lucy Powell:** Okay, that is fine. Who do you see as being your boss in this job? You have had meetings with No. 10. You have been called by Damian. You have had meetings with Damian, the Secretary of State. Who do you see as being your boss?

Dame Martina Milburn: I do not think there is one person who is my boss. Probably, ideally, it would be this Select Committee because I think I come back and answer to you on a regular basis on progress.

James Frith: A very shrewd answer.

Dame Martina Milburn: So, Robert actually—Mr Chairman.

James Frith: Even shrewder.

Chair: You should be in politics.

Dame Martina Milburn: I would be a very bad politician. The job of the commission is to influence across a whole range. I would say yes, you guys would be the boss.

Q22 **Chair:** Just before I pass on to Thelma, so far you have answered the questions very thoughtfully. When Alan Milburn and Gillian Shephard came to our Committee, something which really touched us all was their vision for social justice. He set out real things that he saw and he said social injustice is one of the biggest issues facing Britain today. I want to get a feeling from you that you have that same passion to address social injustice. I am sure that you do, all the incredible work that you have done on Prince's Trust and all sorts of things, but I just want to get a feeling from you of what you see as the burning injustices in our country and how the Social Mobility Commission could do something about it.

Dame Martina Milburn: For me, it comes back to the stories of the young people I meet on a daily basis. Often the relatively small amounts of support you are able to give them makes a phenomenal difference.



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Somehow at this moment in time we do not seem to be able to do that at scale. I think that you can pick all kinds of different things, different levers, and say if we change this and if we have contextualised admissions to university and grammar schools, life would change. If we put all our money into early years it would make a significant difference. If we ran a proper, good apprenticeship and vocational skills and training system, it would be great. The bottom line is you have to do it all.

For me, it has to make a difference to that personal story. I have to be able to look somebody in the eye and say, "I hope through my efforts and the efforts of the commission we have been able to make life better". It just breaks your heart when you hear the stories of people who have not. If you look at special educational needs, 43% of young people who are labelled as SEN will have an exclusion order. You then see that same pattern repeated in people who are in prison. We know, depending on which report you read, that 60% to 80% of people in prison have serious issues with literacy and numeracy, a lot of which I think comes back to things like dyslexia, how it is picked up, how it is taught, that real struggle. I have two sons who are dyslexic, so I saw the issues they faced at school, the way certainly my eldest son changed his behaviour because he was bored in class and he was frustrated. The bits he needed help and support with he did not get.

It is looking at what those real stats tell you and working out what are the things, for example—to go back to Lucy's question—the commission should do some research in that could lead to real differences in how certain things operate in schools or in FE colleges. The whole FE sector I think needs a complete overhaul. It is not just about money. It is about the leadership. It is about the courses they are doing. It is about the way they engage on a local level with local businesses. It is about finding where the jobs are.

The final thing—and again it comes back to the quality of the commissioners—is I would like at least two commissioners from the digital world to help understand these huge changes in work patterns that are coming down the track. How do we prepare for that in a way that makes sure the most disadvantaged young people are not cut out even more than they could be? How could you use digital and technology to make a significant difference? One very practical example, which I know is happening with the work that Coventry has done when they have opened their satellite college in Scarborough, is looking at courses that do not run Monday to Friday. It is the same kind of impact you see in rural areas. It is promoting that kind of working and showing the things that work as well as to keep tracking where we are not getting it right. Sorry, that was a very long rant.

Q23 Chair: If I could just pick you up on one thing on FE, people sometimes say this; they say it is the Cinderella sector, and I always say Cinderella became a member of the Royal Family and you should banish the ugly sisters of snobbery and intolerance. FE has an incredible burden. Despite



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the fact that a huge amount of students come from disadvantaged backgrounds, still nearly 66% or 67% of our colleges are good or outstanding and they have been starved of funding compared to other parts of the education sector. While I recognise it is not just about money, they are also burdened with the maths and English resits and told to fix the problems that have occurred in schools. There are incredible colleges up and down our country doing remarkable things. I would not necessarily say it is just the leadership that needs radical change. I think that there are many colleges that are good. I just think that a lot of them need more support and that we need to learn from the best leadership in order to help those colleges facing difficulties.

Dame Martina Milburn: I completely agree. Some years ago, I sat as a commissioner on something, I think it was called CAVTL, which was looking at adult learning. We did a lot of visits to a lot of FE colleges and saw some very good practice. You also see some things that are not so good. We have all spoken to the enlightened heads who have local businesses who sit on their boards, and then you talk to others and the business leaders say, "Yes, I sat on that board. It was a complete disaster and nobody would listen to me". We know that there are lots of good things. Again, if you can showcase those good things, you can tell those stories and say, "This is the way to make it all better". Funding is a big issue, I know from sitting on the board of Capital City College, and something we as governors talk about all the time, but I do not think just putting money in will make the difference. I think that it has to be both things.

Q24 **Thelma Walker:** Good morning, Dame Martina. I really like what you said about having 12 of the right people around a table—you can move mountains. I believe you are right, but I do believe that you have to have a Government commitment to this whole social justice and social mobility agenda.

Thinking about your previous work as an amazing campaigner and advocate, it is not just about that, though, is it? What you will need to do is give moral leadership in terms of carrying forward this social justice agenda. How are you going to model that moral leadership? How are you going to ask those challenging questions of the Government and what we are delivering in terms of social justice in England?

Dame Martina Milburn: First, you start with the facts at your disposal. I think that the work that the previous commission did and the reports they have done and some of the reports that I have seen are coming through the pipeline are very good. You can be armed with those facts and then you can go in and make your argument. I am personally a person who prefers to have the arguments behind closed doors, and I guess one of the things I will need to understand better in this role is how much of everything we do has to be published and has to be public. Sometimes when you challenge people publicly in the wrong way, they are just back against the wall and then you are just going like this, and you do not move anything along.



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- Q25 **Thelma Walker:** Could I just come in on that, though? In his letter of resignation, Alan Milburn said, "I have little hope of the current Government making the progress I believe is necessary to bring about a fairer Britain. It seems unable to commit to the future of the commission as an independent body or to give due priority to the social mobility challenge facing our nation". How are you different to Alan, who absolutely decided he could not move forward and resigned?

Dame Martina Milburn: When I spoke to Alan and asked him what would be his key tips for what I would need to do to make it a different experience from the one he had—and he was very happy for me to share this and to share our conversation—at the top of his list was, one, to get the right commissioners but, equally, to make sure you have a direct line into No. 10. He felt that without that you are not going to get anywhere.

- Q26 **Thelma Walker:** Just to come in on that, though, the fact is that there have been vacancies for over two years and the Government have done very little to fill those vacancies. Things have been said about getting the right commissioners, but obviously there has been no proactivity in terms of filling those vacancies, has there?

Dame Martina Milburn: No, there hasn't.

- Q27 **Thelma Walker:** How are you going to be different at making that happen? Are we talking pay? Are we literally talking about its being because we are going to pay them?

Dame Martina Milburn: They are going to be paid because I did say I thought it was a bit odd that you can only be a social mobility commissioner if you have a private income.

- Q28 **Thelma Walker:** If we are going to the moral leadership—

Dame Martina Milburn: Yes, so on the way we are going to get them, the ad is out for the commissioners. I have been using my networks to identify people. I have had a really, really encouraging response. There are a lot of very good people in this country who feel very strongly about it. Clearly, I think that it is important that you have a fair number who have had that social mobility journey. I have been looking at people who have had that journey and speaking to them and said, "Would you consider it?", again making it crystal clear it is an open and fair recruitment process. I have been asking people to use their networks to find people who are good commissioners. I am very optimistic with the response I have had just in the last couple of weeks that we can find those people to do it. I will be quite open with you and say we are struggling a bit for chaps at the moment. There is an awful lot of very good women coming forward.

Lucy Powell: I do not see a problem.

Dame Martina Milburn: It would be nice to get some good chaps or we might end up with all-female commission. On that bit, I think that will happen.



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To go back to the other bit, when I had my interview, it was the first question I was asked, “Why is it going to be any different?” I am obviously a very different personality to Alan. He is much cleverer than me; he is an academic. I am not, I am much more sort of Mrs Practical. I think therefore I would copy him in the way he had a deputy chair. I would like a deputy chair who is an academic, who understands all the differences around Government policy, the whole mechanisms of Government and all that more than I do. I think it will be about building that right team and finding people who have strengths that I do not. I think that will also help, but I go back to Alan’s key bit of advice, which was, “Make sure you have that route into No. 10”. He felt that at times he was blocked from that. I guess of the big advantages—

Q29 **Thelma Walker:** If you are blocked, what would you do?

Dame Martina Milburn: I will make a noise, but why would I be? Because with me, I am not a politician, so I do not represent any political party, I have never been a member of any political party. I think it would be harder—obviously not impossible—to be political with me than it would be with somebody who is a politician. I personally think a lot of people in this country are sick to death of the party politics just for the sake of being political. They want to see people making a real difference. At the end of the day, if all I get is blocked at every corner, then as I said to the Chair, you will get the same results as with the last commission, we will go because—

Q30 **Chair:** But you did say you think sometimes it is better to do things behind closed doors. While I recognise that that is important, you do not always want to make a big hullabaloo, sometimes that is a code for being an establishment stooge. I am not saying you are, but sometimes you do need to make a noise to change things if people are not listening. How can we be sure that you are not just going to be a kind of a mover and shaker behind Whitehall doors, doing some good things, but not really making waves, not really challenging the existing consensus, as you say, whether it is on the left or on the right, and not really making a difference?

Dame Martina Milburn: Ultimately you will only know through time. I am not a Government stooge at all.

Q31 **Chair:** No, I said “establishment stooge”. There is a difference.

Dame Martina Milburn: Oh, establishment stooge. Yes, there is a difference. I can see why, given my current job, somebody might ask me that, but I think to a certain extent—and this might be a very poor answer—you have to trust me when I say that I will not be. The quarterly reports are subject to freedom of information, so they will be published anyway, and I think if you have the conversation behind closed doors and it does not work, then you make the noise. You have to, in my experience generally, give people a chance and I guess, as Chair, one of my judgment calls will be when do you go public and when don’t you. But



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ultimately we have to be judged on how successful we are as a commission.

- Q32 **Lucy Allan:** I wonder if I could just pick up on that last point about the route into No. 10, because it is not as easy as it sounds. I think perhaps we do not want to underestimate what a challenge that might be. What does a route into No. 10 look like for you, given everything else that is on the radar at the moment? How are you going to make sure that what is a priority for your commission is going to get heard? I am not convinced yet by what you have said.

Dame Martina Milburn: The special advisers that I have spoken to, we have agreed that we will meet monthly. We also agreed, and I think it is a very good idea, that I will go on a regular basis and see the Chair of the Equality and Human Rights Commission, because there is overlap and there are things that the two of us could do together that would make a bigger noise than either of us on our own. We also agreed that we should look at the work that the Race Disparity Unit is doing. Again, it is different, but there are some overlaps. I think it is finding out where you can get your friends and where you can put two and two together and make six. I am told my quarterly report will go directly to the PM. Obviously I do not know whether she will read it or not, but it will go in. Since my meeting with them on Monday, they have both been in touch and we have already scheduled a series of meetings, subject to what happens today, over the next few months.

That is the route at the moment. It is meeting people, talking to people and basically seeing where we get to. I also had a very good meeting with Damian Hinds, who said that this is very critical for him, that this is very important. Obviously he might be moved to another Department but while he is there I am relatively hopeful that his voice will be added to it as well. I have not yet spoken to Justine Greening, who I know well, but I am also going to go and talk to her and get some advice from her. Then the Social Mobility Foundation, through Nick Clegg, Sir Nick, have also been in touch. Again, when Nick was Deputy PM, he and I had regular meetings on this very subject and I am going to take some advice from him. I would also be very grateful for any more tips that you can give me.

- Q33 **Lucy Allan:** I think that is absolutely the right way forward, to engage as many people as possible that have a knowledge and interest in this area and obviously our Committee is one of those stakeholders, as it were.

One year on, you have been in post for 12 months, you have been able to appoint your commissioners. What does evidence of success look like if, in a year's time, you come back to us to tell us about how you have achieved?

Dame Martina Milburn: I would like certainly like to see that we have obviously continued with all the research. I have asked for an 18-month media plan to come out, so I would like to see this being talked about



much more in the wider community. I would also like us to have done a few practical things. One of the suggestions is this toolkit for business, for how you support apprentices. For example, I know a business that takes in carpentry apprentices and every time they hit the wall at 18 months. Initially their retention rates were really poor, so what they did was hire a tutor who comes in at around 15 months to work with the three and helps them over that sort of academic hump. That is the kind of thing that business could do, which would make a significant difference.

I would also like to see that we had had a real look at vocational education and where that, either through research or again through some practical examples, could make a difference. I have asked for the budget to be upped to £1 million and for some of that additional money to be able to be used to disseminate best practice and things like that, so you are doing the research, but you also have some practical bits, because I think it is the practical bits and the storytelling that will get it known among the general public. People did not start to understand about the issues with plastic and plastic straws because they read a policy document. They began to see the issue because they could see a picture in their head and they understood the damage it was doing. That is what I would like to see in a shift in social mobility.

One of the biggest issues I think the commission faces, if we look at the early years work, is that we will not really know the results for 20 years. That is quite challenging, but let's hope in 20 years we are seeing a huge shift in this country's ability to help people at the bottom of the pile.

Q34 Lucy Allan: In your first year, I would have thought that you would be concerned about re-establishing the reputation of the commission as an effective body to facilitate change. Is that going to be a benchmark of success for you, that in that first year you have been able to get it up and running, people are taking it seriously? Given the back story that you are confronted with, is that going to be number one?

Dame Martina Milburn: I think people will only take you seriously if they see that you are delivering results. If you deliver results, then you should be taken seriously. You have to look at it through a different lens. I have spoken to a lot of heads who have gone into failing schools and turned them around. Nine times out of 10, they don't start with the academic, they start with all the other bits, the staff discipline, getting sport and stuff properly on the curriculum and they fix that bit. It is the broken windows theory, isn't it, from New York? You fix that bit and then the results start to come through. I would hope by doing the things I have suggested that changes the reputation and enables people to see that this group of 12 or 13 are serious and therefore it improves your reputation. I personally do not know any other way to do it.

Q35 James Frith: Good morning. Will you commit to your 12 disciples being country-wide?



Dame Martina Milburn: Yes.

Q36 **James Frith:** What will that look like?

Dame Martina Milburn: I do not know, because we have to wait and see the applications, but I have specifically spoken to people outside of London and the south-east, not just for them to apply but for their networks and for them to promote it through to their networks. I think it would be very important.

Q37 **James Frith:** Can you stipulate that or would you stipulate that if you feel it is, as it will be, skewed towards London-centric, metropolitan? It is great that you have an overwhelming number of women, I think that is terrific, but the problem will be cross-sector, cross-region representation. Will you reissue adverts and look at where you are advertising to ensure that the north-west, the north-east and at areas that were overlooked for Opportunity Areas? Will you make a concerted effort to ensure that? Will that be a commitment of yours?

Chair: Just to add to that—James is making a very important point—to make sure that they are not just the great and the good from all over the country, but people possibly from disadvantaged backgrounds or even considering having an apprentice as a commissioner. You have talked a lot about vocational education.

Dame Martina Milburn: Yes to all of it. We have deliberately worded the ad to say, “We are looking for a number”. I know what number I am allowed. If you do not find it, then it is the worst thing you could do, because it will completely go to the previous point: if you do not have the right people and you do not have the right spread, you are not going to be able to take people’s confidence with you. That is absolutely something we would look at and I completely agree. I have not gone out to the great and good. That is the last thing I would want.

Q38 **James Frith:** What sort of activity will happen in between the days where you sit around a table discussing the work of the commission? Give me a sense of what is going to happen in Harpurhey in Manchester or in East Ward in Bury or in an area just outside Ipswich, where social mobility is non-existent in some instances and the kind of social issues that people face are compounded to prevent them really ever moving out of their situation.

Dame Martina Milburn: It is almost easier to answer that in a negative. I think one of the things we all have to be very careful of is initiative overload, particularly in the Opportunity Areas, which is why I think it would be good to find areas of best practice that you know are working and then see what you can do to influence other people to perhaps adopt the same thing. One of the things that the commission or the secretariat could look at with the social mobility people in the DfE is, “Do you have town hall style meetings where you showcase what has worked in other areas?”



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One of the things I know, in particular in places like Ipswich with apprentices and people getting work, is that if you live outside of the town and the last bus goes at 4.00 pm and your job or your college course finishes at 5.30 pm, what are you supposed to do? Those are the kind of things that you need to look at, I think, in between. My idea for having the three taskforces is that that is some of the stuff they do in between meetings. Again, it goes back to the quality of the people you are able to attract and how you can do that.

Q39 James Frith: What do you expect to challenge the Government on first?

Dame Martina Milburn: That is a good question. Personally, I would like to really look at vocational education. That, for me, is a huge key to making a real difference in social mobility, but—

Q40 Chair: Why is it such a huge key, in your view?

Dame Martina Milburn: Because I think there are a lot of kids at the moment being forced down an academic route that doesn't suit them and doesn't play to their strengths. I do not think, as a country—this is my very personal opinion—we need everyone to have a degree from Oxford. I don't get it. If I am using a carpenter to build me a new cupboard, I want someone who loves wood and loves what they are doing and can do it. I do not care whether they have a degree or not. As I say, in my own personal family with my eldest and youngest sons and their struggles with dyslexia, they have both gone through a creative route. I think it would have been great, with hindsight, to have sat down with them and had a different conversation with them at 16.

That is why I think that would be a good thing to do, but I do also think it is a decision for the commission as a whole, with the secretariat. We might find that when we have appointed this group and we sit down with the secretariat that they come up with something different. That is just my personal view and something I feel quite strongly about and that is obviously is to do with the fact that I spent 14 years running the Prince's Trust, because that is kind of our space.

Q41 James Frith: Do you think it is important to join forces with the likes of the Children's Commissioner and other bodies or people who share a similar space, share a similar pursuit? What thought have given to what you might like to do with the Children's Commissioner or anyone else?

Dame Martina Milburn: Yes, I do, which is why we have already started talking about things like the Equality and Human Rights Commission, the other units within Government, but also I think with somebody like the Children's Commissioner and the kind of reports that they publish, again, the more friends you have, the more things you can do together and, in my personal view, the more you can achieve. This is a group of sort of volunteers with a small budget and a small secretariat. There is no way we can do it by ourselves. We have to be able to influence other people to come on the journey and help us and help us do our network. We can only do it by forming strong partnerships.



Q42 James Frith: What success at Prince's Trust would you apply to this role? I am a big fan of the Prince's Trust, I have worked with them in previous roles. What would you see as something that you have achieved there that you might even just lift straight into this role? You have talked about vocational education. You obviously do a lot of entry qualification work and putting people on better journeys or better pathways for training and skills. What are you essentially going to nick from your successes elsewhere and apply to this role?

Dame Martina Milburn: Three things. One is a programme we run called "Get Into", where you start with the employers and the employer needs and then match young people coming in. That goes to the whole issue around work placements and all that kind of stuff, so that is one thing we have run for 13 years that has worked very well and got a lot of young people into work.

The second thing the trust does very well is its evaluation. Again, we have had a conversation with a couple of the people at the secretariat to go and look at how the Prince's Trust evaluates its programmes and measurements and is there anything that they could use that might help the commission.

Then the third thing was a real learning curve for us at the trust. Through the recession we started a scheme where we employed young people, mostly from our programmes, to help us reach out to other young people. It is a great idea. They had a 12-month paid job, which we thought would then help them into work and they got some training with it. The results were very mixed. What we did not do well was give those young people enough support, which is why I gave you the example of the carpentry apprentices. I still think we underestimate how blimming hard it is to be socially mobile and how tough it is to make that journey. That is why I think if you give people the right support—and one of the hard things is different people need different levels of support—it makes the difference. The trust, as an organisation, we did not give those young people enough support, so we have completely changed how we did it. Those would be the three things.

Q43 James Frith: What are you intolerant of?

Dame Martina Milburn: Bigotry.

Q44 James Frith: One of the things I liked about your predecessor was he was fiery. I think thoughtfulness and forensic is the sort of sense I am getting from you, but what would make you hit the desk with your fist or get cross about this area of work? What fires you up about this area of work?

Dame Martina Milburn: I think it is the question that I was being asked earlier. It is if you were being blocked from something. I have very strong sense of fairness and if something feels unfair, I find that really hard to deal with.



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Q45 Lucy Powell: You are answering the questions really well, but I think what we are hearing from you this morning maybe is partly what I feared, if you don't mind me saying, in that I think that you maybe think this job is essentially a What Works centre. The Government have these What Works centres, the Education Endowment Foundation, the Early Intervention Foundation, Leicester, that have much, much bigger budgets that do the pilots, the scales, the evaluation and so on and that evidence then goes out to the sector. Am I right in saying that? Do you think that is a risk here?

Dame Martina Milburn: I think you are partly right. That is partly my style and my personality, definitely. I think somebody called me an agitator a few weeks ago. I assume, because I am at this point, that people were looking for a change in style.

Q46 Lucy Powell: It is not so much style, it is more substance, really. Personally, I think on the budget that you have, the remit of the commission, to try to establish yourself as a What Works centre would be a very grave mistake. For example, recently we had the Careers & Enterprise Company in here, who think that they are a What Works centre, but also think that they a research and policy centre and do neither very well. They have an annual budget of £15 million, you have £600,000, and we thought their impact was sort of negligible. Do you see that as a risk?

Dame Martina Milburn: I do not. We are very aware of what it is we have. As I say, there is no suggestion that the annual report and the research that is being done at the moment will stop or change. I think it is very important that that continues. But talking to the secretariat and the staff at the secretariat and the staff at the DfE, they felt that the bit that we needed to now do was that extra bit about what does work. But I do not think it is about us doing it, it is about us promoting where it works and using other organisations or other mechanisms to kind of do that promotion.

Q47 Lucy Powell: But that is exactly what the EEF does, predominantly in education, or the Early Intervention Foundation. The EEF's budget to do that is—I do not know what their budget is, but it is £20 million a year plus; the Early Intervention Foundation is £3 million to £4 million a year plus. You have £600,000. Maybe getting back to what Alan Milburn said to you about having that in into Downing Street and really being able to influence Government was because what he had understood was the way of maximising that resource and that voice was to get Government to do what you needed it to do, not try to get X business in Grimsby to do what you need it to do because you do not have the resource to do that, but to get Government to change its direction.

Dame Martina Milburn: I think that is right. The commission has three points, one of which is promoting social mobility to business, and they are more or less there with the toolkit. That has already been done. That was done under the previous regime to universities, to colleges, to the



wider public, so that is one of the remits. I don't think it is a more important remit than the other three.

- Q48 **Lucy Powell:** But challenging, for example, in the way that we challenge Oxford University to take more kids from my constituency who have A stars in A levels. As a Committee, we would not go to the sixth form college in my constituency and ask them to do more about that. We challenge them to do it and get them to come up with how they should do that rather than being a What Works centre. I just ask you to think about that, because I think you may find that you will get a bit lost in trying to do that in a way that you are used to doing it with a £15 million charity—or however big that is—on the kind of shoestring—

Dame Martina Milburn: £75 million.

Lucy Powell: A massive amount of money. You are used to programme delivery. This is not programme delivery. It is not even a What Works centre, because you just do not have that—

- Q49 **Chair:** It is about being a crusader for social justice and changing the weather, the intellectual climate, the political climate and challenging consensus, as I said, on both sides. I think underlying Lucy's questions and mine and those of other colleagues is are you a crusader or just a very good person who will create yet another social justice think tank replicating a lot of what goes on already?

Dame Martina Milburn: I don't think so, but I don't know how to explain to you without kind of starting it and seeing where we get to.

- Q50 **Lucy Powell:** No, I think for me, it is about having—and that is what I wanted to find out in this hearing—a really clear sense of where you can make impact. I think it relates to Lucy's point earlier as well and your answer, "I will make a judgment about when I go public and when I do not". I want you to always be public. That is not a trade-off. You should not see it as a trade-off, that, "If I am going to be on the news being critical of the Government, I am only doing that because No. 10 are being a bit difficult with me". No, you should be doing that all the time. It should not be a trade-off. On one level you say, "I am not a politician" but obviously being a politician helps you navigate the world that you are now entering, which I think, as Lucy was trying to explain to you, is a sort of dog eat dog, brutal, awful world. One has to be a hardened politician to some extent to navigate that world.

Dame Martina Milburn: But I think that is a judgment call for all of you. The worst thing I could do is sit here and be somebody I am not. I can only tell you who I am, I can only tell you the things I think will work and that the commission has the capability to be able to do, with the help of the commissioners, who are there to assist and help. I cannot do anything else. I am not a policy person, and if that is the kind of person that you want for the commission, then obviously your decision after I leave this hearing will take you in a particular direction. I know what I can do, I know my style, I know my vision for making the changes.



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Obviously I would like a chance to be able to do that, but ultimately if you want somebody who has a completely different style then I think that is your decision.

- Q51 **Lucy Powell:** Sure. As I say, I don't think it is a thing about style. I absolutely welcome your honesty and frankness about that. I really do not think it is about style, I think it is about what the job is and how one can best make an impact with what is a very, very small budget. If we were interviewing you today to be the new head of the Early Intervention Foundation—not that that is a vacancy—or a kind of What Works Centre, absolutely you would fit that mould.

Yesterday, for example, we had the Early Years Minister here, and we were really testing him out on whether what the Government is doing in the early years is going to widen the gap in the early years or narrow it, because so much of the resource is going to better-off families. That is the sort of thing I would like to see the Social Mobility Commission really challenging as well. Look at the figures, look at what is happening, and add to that conversation both internally and externally.

Dame Martina Milburn: That is what I said earlier about starting with your research and what the data is telling you. I agree with you; that is exactly the way to do it. You need to be told what the piece of research is that is coming out, what is that information it is giving you, and then go in and have the conversation about how things need to be done differently. That is what I would be expecting to do.

- Q52 **Thelma Walker:** I want to ask you about the findings of the commission's report, which described England, our country, as a divided nation, divided economically, geographically and generationally. Thinking specifically about the generational divide and the youngest children, the disadvantaged children, how do you see your role and your commissioners improving the life chances of that disadvantaged child living in my constituency in Yorkshire in Colne Valley. How will it change that child's life?

Dame Martina Milburn: You have the data and the research, and then you go into whatever Department it has to be and you show them where what they are doing is having, I suppose at the moment, a detrimental effect. One of the things I think the commission could look at, especially in the early years, is the fact that it is only available to parents who are working over 12 or 16 hours a week, I think, and not available to a single parent who might have really serious health issues and is living on benefits. That is the kind of thing I would expect the commission to get some data on or do some research.

- Q53 **Thelma Walker:** Drilling down to the actual—

Dame Martina Milburn: Exactly. I mentioned this at my interview. I think there is a judicial review on this or something at the moment, or a challenge, and I was asked did I think that the Department was wrong to be doing that, and I do. That is exactly the kind of thing you have to



change and you have to argue for that change. That would then, or could, make a significant difference to that child's life.

- Q54 **Thelma Walker:** What about your impact assessment? Lucy asked about 12 months from now. How will that be measured, your impact, and your work, and your commissioners?

Dame Martina Milburn: With most of the early years' stuff, as I understand it, looking at the research, you will not know for 20 years. If that young child is able to speak better and hold more conversations—there is a huge difference in the number of words that children from better-off families hear. It is something incredible, like 30 million words. If they have been put into a nursery environment where they have been able to learn, especially in the way Ofsted are now measuring some of the softer skills, you should be able to have the data that tells you the difference that has been made to that child.

- Q55 **Thelma Walker:** Working cross-departmentally in terms of the DWP and the figures on absolute poverty, will you be working with other Departments to look at the figures for the number of children and the number of families that are defined as being in absolute poverty and the support for them?

Dame Martina Milburn: You would have to. The DWP have to be one of the key departments for the Social Mobility Commission to engage with, along with BEIS, DfE, Transport, probably, and possibly Health. That might be spreading everything too thinly, but I think DWP, especially with the changes into Universal Credit, would be a key Department to look at.

- Q56 **Thelma Walker:** You will be holding them to account?

Dame Martina Milburn: Yes. One of the things we found invaluable at the Prince's Trust was to have a memorandum of understanding with the DWP that allowed young people on certain Prince's Trust programmes to continue to claim their benefits. It does not mean, even though we have all that there, that at a local level you do not get some kid who goes into his local Jobcentre and gets his credit cut off because he is on a Prince's Trust programme. My staff spend a lot of time in Jobcentres sorting things out.

You can have all the policies and you can have all the things you need, if you are not really influencing people and using the agenda—which is where I come back to the story-telling bit, which I think is one of the few things in life I am quite good at—you are not really going to be able to make the changes that you need to make, because there will always be somebody at a local level who says, "The computer says no".

- Q57 **Chair:** I just want to confirm again—we keep reiterating this point, but it is very important to us—that if you take on this role it will not end up with you thinking, "A few fireside chats with Sir Humphrey at the Reform Club over a nice glass of port and we will manage to change a little bit of policy here and there", and that you will not be one of those characters.



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We really think that the job of the Social Mobility Commissioner is incredibly important, which is why we have done a Bill on it and why we published our report on it. It should be there to make a difference and challenge views on all sides on social justice. Try to convince the Committee that you are not going to be one of those people. We know that the Secretary of State rang you up—and he rang up other people as well—but is it going to be very chummy, or are you really going to challenge publicly and be a voice for social justice in our country?

Dame Martina Milburn: I hope so. I do not belong to any clubs and I cannot stand port, so I do not think that will be an issue. That is not my style. That is not how I have done things before. I might say, “Robert, I have heard you speak very passionately about social justice. I have a piece of information here that says you are completely wrong”. It is not unreasonable for us to have that conversation between the two of us before I then publish that information to the world that says your fundamental belief in something, or in your Department, is wrong, and here is the evidence that supports it. I just would not do that. That is not my style. That is not how I do things.

Q58 **Chair:** You mentioned the adverts and the Secretary of State told you to look at the advert. Where was the advert?

Dame Martina Milburn: I found it on a link on the computer.

Q59 **Chair:** Where was it placed? Was it in a newspaper?

Dame Martina Milburn: I do not know. No, I think it was on the Public Appointments website.

Q60 **Chair:** The reason I ask the question is my colleague James asked you about the appointment of other commissioners. If you really want to get people from all kinds of backgrounds, and particularly it would be incredible to have commissioners from disadvantaged backgrounds who really know about what they have had to go through, these people are not going to be looking at the Public Appointments pages of *The Sunday Times*, necessarily. They do not wake up in the morning saying, “Oh, goody, let me turn on the Cabinet Office website”. How are you going to really reach out to get real people that are different and are not just, as I say, well known, the great and the good, other people who sit on hundreds of boards, and so on?

Dame Martina Milburn: I think that is probably more about using people’s networks. You could probably get further in that. We could certainly advertise it through the Prince’s Trust website, which reaches, I think, over 100,000 people now, mostly young people. There are all kinds of digital channels you can use to advertise. But for a commissioner you are probably going to get them through other people saying, “Do you know, this would be a really good thing”. I think a lot of people would look at it from the backgrounds I know and say, “No, I could not possibly do that”, but, as you say, they could.



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Q61 **Chair:** For example, as you know I have just huge admiration for the Prince's Trust, and many of the projects I have seen and the youngsters I have met have shaped my thinking over the past few years. You have introduced me to some incredible young people. I would like those kinds of people to be on this, rather than just Dame such and such; not that it is not great that you are a Dame, but you understand where I am coming from.

Dame Martina Milburn: I agree. I completely agree. Yes.

Q62 **Chair:** Why not make it counterintuitive and let the commission do what it says on the tin; have real people from those kinds of backgrounds? Not all of them, you do need experience. I understand that. But real people who really know about social mobility and social justice, and may have had to overcome significant obstacles in their lives. That would really create a powerful signal that you mean what you say, what you have said to us today.

Dame Martina Milburn: I have already asked six ex-Prince's Trust young people to think about it. I have also asked a couple of other people in the sector, who work with young people, the same thing.

Q63 **Chair:** As I say, having an apprentice, for example.

Dame Martina Milburn: Yes, I completely agree.

Q64 **Chair:** You have civil service help, I understand, so again that creates an important signal for the Social Mobility Commission to be employing apprentices to help with the work of their commissioners. I do not just mean the commissioners.

Dame Martina Milburn: Yes, for the secretariat. Yes. Absolutely we should. Correct.

Q65 **Chair:** Just to confirm, your reports that you want to publish quarterly, are they going to be published for everyone to read?

Dame Martina Milburn: I think so, yes. I am still getting to grips with what all the rules are about these things.

Q66 **Chair:** Shouldn't you decide that? Why did you not just say, "Yes, let's make it transparent"?

Dame Martina Milburn: Okay. Yes.

Q67 **Chair:** What about the minutes? When you have commissioner meetings why not publish the minutes too?

Dame Martina Milburn: I thought they already were, actually. I didn't know that they weren't, because minutes are all public.

Q68 **Chair:** We will take advice on that. My point is, you are happy for the commission to be as transparent as possible?

Dame Martina Milburn: 100%, yes, I am.



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Q69 **Chair:** You mentioned that your reports would be sent to the Prime Minister's box and you hoped that she would read it. What will you do if you find out she has not read it?

Dame Martina Milburn: Then I will ask for a meeting at least with her to ask her why she has not read it. I really do hope she reads it.

Q70 **Chair:** Surely she should.

Dame Martina Milburn: Yes, I completely agree.

Q71 **Chair:** This goes back to the fundamental role of the Social Mobility Commission. Is it going to be taken seriously by the Government? Is it going to have teeth? What will you do if you have a chat with No. 10 and they say, "She is a bit busy at the moment. Brexit is going on, and so on. Sorry, no can do. We will send you a letter or something"? What would you do in that kind of circumstance?

Dame Martina Milburn: You would protest quite loudly, and I think, as I have said, if you do not get anywhere then the commission will do exactly the same as the last commission did. As you said, it can be quite busy; I have a choice of other things to do, if it is not going to be taken seriously then why would I give up my time to do it? I am sure the other commissioners will feel exactly the same.

Q72 **Chair:** Okay. Thank you. One of our Committee's strategic aims is addressing social injustice in the education system, something we are quite proud of. We have an education ladder of opportunity looking at every stage, as well as addressing our skills deficit and productivity. We will keep a close eye on what happens with the Social Mobility Commission. It is something that is very important to us as a committee, so I do appreciate you coming here today. We are going to have a discussion with our colleagues and publish our report quite soon.

Dame Martina Milburn: Okay.

Chair: I very much appreciate it. Thank you.

Dame Martina Milburn: Thank you all very much. Thank you.