

Why the '£30K threshold' is insulting to people like me

By Bethan Tolley, Communications Officer at Centre for Brexit Studies

Last week, Jess Phillips, MP for Birmingham Yardley, stood up in the House of Commons and made a speech. However, this wasn't just any speech and the next day, news outlets were praising the MP for talking, well, sense. She touched upon the news that the £30,000-a-year minimum salary threshold that is already imposed on non-EU workers may also apply to migrants from the EU27 once the UK leaves the EU, saying: "The idea that my constituents are not skilled because they don't earn over £30,000 is frankly insulting. It is insulting on every level that our care workers, our nurses, our teachers, there's so many people who don't earn over £30,000 so I really think this will need to be revisited."

She continued saying: "I thought I'd met posh people before I came here but actually I'd just met people who eat olives. I have met lots of people who earn way more than £30,000, who have literally no discernible skills – not even one – since I have been in politics. Not necessarily in this place, although there's a smattering, but I have definitely met some very rich people who earn huge amounts of money who I wouldn't let hold my pint if I had to go and vote while in the bar."

I was taken aback by this speech which for me, I actually felt like I could connect with. Of course I love politics, but I also love straight-talking, to the point speeches that for me, just make perfect sense. Barely anyone in my 'circle' of family and friends earn more than £30,000 – and we are all hardworking individuals. The news that the £30,000 a year salary threshold may apply to migrants from the EU27 is, in my eyes, absurd. Is this how someone's skills and what they can bring to a career, a community, and a country based on? Who can you really trust with your pint?!

I am from a working class background, and although I have a huge amount of love and respect for my parents and family, growing up there were a lot of things, like activities and hobbies, that I couldn't do.

I didn't have new clothes 24/7, I didn't own all the coolest gadgets, because the money was not available for me. I accepted at a young age that I'm not rich, and I probably won't ever be. I am incredibly privileged in many ways, and I've been lucky in lots of ways too. But I'm not middle-class, and I don't think I ever will be.

At times growing up, I was incredibly frustrated that my middle-class peers around me just seemed to be able to do so much more. But I kept myself entertained and never felt angry towards my parents; I saw them working hard day in, day out. Both with working class jobs, no degrees, at times money struggles, but they got through the days the best they could. When it comes to politics, my dad doesn't vote. He says 'They all say the same thing and nothing ever changes'. I know a lot of working class people who also think this way. Many of them think the world of politics isn't for them to understand. It's not a world that they can associate themselves with. If it hadn't have been for my fascination with the news from a young age, I'd be the same. Whether you like it or not, there is a certain privilege when it comes to politics.

When it came to me applying for university, I remember being very much under the impression that a Russell Group would be a bit too...posh for me. I lived in a terraced house near a main road and the closest green space was a park a few streets away. I also didn't feel smart enough and imagined myself sticking out like a sore thumb. So I didn't apply. I went for a University which I thought would suit me and my working class background; Liverpool John Moores. A previous Polytechnic, I can safely say that although there were plenty of middle-class students, I fitted in. No one was really posh and I felt like we were on the same wavelength about most things.

Where I did pick up on a stark difference between us, and those at University of Liverpool was that A) there was a huge competition between us for no apparent reason and B) they had a debating society. Don't get me wrong, the debating society was open for all the Uni's in the area, so I could have gone along. But I didn't want to risk it. I knew full well that the society would be 90% students from the University of Liverpool and quite frankly, I didn't want to go along and feel completely annihilated by 'posh' students and worst of all, I didn't feel smart enough. I assumed that they would know their stuff and working-class me, from a little town in the West Midlands, with my

Black Country accent, wouldn't feel welcomed. Looking back, I wish I'd have plucked up the courage to go along, but back then, the thought of being around those much better off than me genuinely frightened me.

Where are those students now? Well they're just in jobs like me. Back in university, it felt like a class war and divide. Nowadays, I'm friends with those who went to Russell Group universities and its fine. Yes we're from different backgrounds, but we've all got a different story. But my point here is that although they went to a good university and had more money than me growing up, many of them have the same salary as me now. I have a good set of skills and I'm hardworking, but I'm no better than a nurse, a social worker, a teacher.

When we leave the EU, I'll be safe because I was born and raised in England. What happens to the huge amount of EU migrants that could be leaving us because they don't earn over £30K? Where do those jobs go to? If our salary is what defines us, rather than our skills, who will we be left? When will our skills and what we can bring to the table ever be classed as more important than our income?