

# Contrary to recent assertions, the British political class is not becoming more exclusive to public school and Oxbridge types, but there has still been a remarkable resilience in the presence of the privileged in the post-war period

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In *'Posh and Posher: Why Public School Boys Run Britain'*, Andrew Neil warned that public school boys and Oxbridge graduates are taking over politics once more – but is there any truth to the story? [Stephen Crone](#) argues that, in fact, politics is not becoming more socially exclusive, but neither is the traditional entrenchment of privilege on the wane and indeed it has proved to be remarkably resilient throughout the post-war period.

When it was broadcast in January, Andrew Neil's documentary, *Posh and Posher: Why Public School Boys Run Britain*, received an almost universally positive reception – both on the [left](#) and the [right](#). Many apparently agreed with its main proposition: that after a period of political meritocracy during which we enjoyed thirty-three consecutive years of state-educated prime ministers, Britain has now re-entered an age of elitism in which "old Etonians are ruling the country once more."

The documentary offered some unsettling facts and trends to support this theory, informing us that the number of MPs educated at public schools is on the rise, and that the upper echelons of the major political parties are now beholden to Oxbridge graduates; but its message was perhaps best captured by its indelicate yet effective imagery – with old footage of Harold Wilson and Edward Heath (set to T. Rex's *Children of the Revolution*) juxtaposed with an interview between Neil and that redoubtable [Etonian caricature](#), Jacob Rees-Mogg MP, in which the latter ironically declared "I'm a man of the people. *Vox populi, vox Dei.*"

Entertaining though it may have been, recent Democratic Audit research suggests, however, that the claims made in *Posh and Posher* were somewhat 'hit and miss'. Contrary to what Neil asserted, there is no compelling evidence of a public school or Oxbridge insurgency in the Commons, or the Cabinet. Indeed, the public school and Oxbridge contingent has always been considerable, and its fortunes, if anything, appear to be stable in some parties and declining in others.

We have based our conclusions on three key sources. To determine how the educational profile of MPs has changed over the past sixty years, we have used data from the long-running Nuffield general election series, written by David Butler and others. Information on the educational makeup of selected Cabinets, meanwhile, has been chiefly derived from Butler's *British Political Facts* – with supplementary information on the Blair, Brown and Cameron Cabinets added using recent editions of *Dod's Parliamentary Companion*.

Of course, whether or not it can be said that 'public school boys are back, dominating public life like they used to' depends to some extent on the measure we use. If we look at the figures in absolute terms, over a short period of time and without reference to variations between the parties, then it will invariably be seen that the number of MPs educated at public schools did rise slightly between the general elections of 2005 and 2010. However, this increase was almost entirely attributable to the improved performance of the Conservative Party in 2010.

For a more nuanced and slightly less facile analysis, we ought to look instead at the *proportion* of each parliamentary party educated at public schools, over a much longer period. This creates a rather different picture. Indeed, Figure 1 shows: that the percentage of public school educated

Conservative MPs is actually at an all time low of 54 per cent, and has been decreasing since 1997; that the percentage of Labour MPs educated at public schools has fluctuated at around 15 per cent for decades; and that the Liberal Democrats have managed a modest reduction in their public school contingent, from 50 per cent in 1992, to 39 per cent in 2010.

Clearly, these figures are still very high when one considers that the percentage of children that are privately-educated is reported to be around 7 per cent; but if Neil believes that they amount to 'domination' of Parliament by public school boys, then it is clearly a lessonerous form of domination than that experienced under Conservative governments during the 'golden age of meritocracy' which he eulogised in his documentary.

**Figure 1: MPs educated at Public Schools (1951-2010)**

[Edit](#)

Year	Conservative		Labour		Liberal / Alliance / Lib Dem	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
1951	240	74.8	60	20.3	-	-
1955	260	75.6	62	22.4	-	-
1959	263	72.1	47	18.2	4	66.7
1964	229	75.3	56	17.7	3	33.3
1966	204	80.6	66	18.2	7	58.3
1970	243	73.6	50	17.4	3	50
Feb-74	220	74.1	49	16.3	10	71.4
Oct-74	208	75.1	56	17.6	9	69.2
1979	246	72.6	46	17.1	6	54.5
1983	278	70	30	14.4	12	52.2
1987	256	68.1	32	14	10	45.5
1992	208	61.9	40	14.8	10	50
1997	109	66.1	67	16	19	41.3
2001	106	63.9	68	16.5	18	34.6
2005	118	59.6	63	17.7	24	38.7
2010	166	54.2	36	14	22	38.6

Neil also purported to demonstrate the grip which Oxford and Cambridge graduates have suddenly taken over the parties – showing, for example, that many of our leading politicians not only went to Oxford or Cambridge, but also studied the same course (PPE), and occasionally even attended the same college. However, the Nuffield studies again paint a slightly different picture. The Oxbridge parliamentary contingent – whilst still highly significant – is relatively stagnant among the ranks of Labour and Liberal Democrat MPs, and has diminished quite dramatically for the Tories, from 51 per cent in 1997, to 34 per cent in 2010.

Our data relating to the educational composition of post-war Cabinets (shown in Figure 2) broadly mirrors the trends which we have identified for the Commons. It shows that Cameron's Cabinet is more elitist, in educational terms, than any post-war Labour Cabinet, but has a lower proportion of Cabinet ministers educated at public schools than any Conservative Cabinet in the post-war period – as well as a lower proportion of Cabinet ministers educated at either Oxford or Cambridge than any other post-war Conservative Cabinet, bar that of Churchill in 1951.

Relatively speaking, Neil's notion that public school boys, and Etonians in particular, have taken over the country still therefore seems like hyperbole. Indeed, the more noticeable trend is again the extent to which those educated at public schools and Oxbridge have *consistently* won representation in Cabinet disproportionate to their numbers in Parliament (and among the population more generally), irrespective of the government's political hue.

In all Labour Cabinets, for example, the proportion of ministers educated at public schools has typically been around thirty per cent, whilst the proportion of Labour Cabinet ministers educated at either Oxford or Cambridge usually hovers at around forty per cent or so. Yet, the proportion of the Parliamentary Labour Party educated at public schools and Oxbridge has typically been at about half of these levels.

**Figure 2: Educational Composition of Post-War Cabinets**

[Edit](#)

PM	No. of Cabinet Ministers	Public School Eton Oxbridge		
		%	%	%
Attlee (Aug 1945)	20	25	10	25
Churchill (Oct 1951)	16	87.5	43.8	56.3
Eden (Apr 1955)	18	100	55.6	77.8
Macmillan (Jan 1957)	18	94.4	44.4	83.3
Home (Oct 1963)	24	87.5	45.8	70.8
Wilson (Oct 1964)	23	34.8	4.3	47.8
Heath (Jun 1970)	18	83.3	22.2	83.3
Wilson (Mar 1974)	21	33.3	0	52.4
Callaghan (Apr 1976)	22	31.8	0	45.5
Thatcher (May 1979)	22	90.9	27.3	77.3
Major (Nov 1990)	22	63.6	9.1	77.3
Blair (May 1997)	22	40.9	0	22.7
Brown (Jun 2007)	22	36.4	0	45.5
Cameron (May 2010)	23	52.2	4.3	65.2

Although there is an old Etonian in 10 Downing Street once more, it therefore seems that the ‘chief nurse of England’s statesmen’ does not have the hold on power that it once had. The proportion of Etonians in the Parliamentary Conservative Party has gone down, whilst the proportion of other former public school boys and Oxbridge graduates has also declined. Although some may find it understandably difficult to believe, Cameron is in fact the leader of the least public school and Oxbridge educated Conservative Party in modern times; and the prime minister in a Cabinet which – even if, formally speaking, that of a coalition government – is far less exclusive in its constitution than any other post-war Conservative Cabinet.

It should go without saying that a Parliament or Cabinet in which half, a third, or even a quarter of the membership been educated at public schools or Oxbridge can hardly be regarded as progressive. Neither can we assume that the proportion of public school and Oxbridge educated MPs and cabinet ministers is likely to decline significantly in the future. The point is simply that, at the very least, the proportion of public school and Oxbridge educated politicians does not appear to be increasing – a contention which formed the crux of Neil’s documentary. Indeed, what is striking about the data we have collated is not the way in which it supports – or in this case, fails to support – the theory that politics is becoming *more* exclusive; but rather the way in which it demonstrates the remarkable *resilience* of the privileged over almost the entire post-war period.