

# Elitism in Britain, 2019

Britain's most influential people are over 5 times more likely to have been to a fee-paying school than the general population. Just 7% of British people are privately educated, compared to two-fifths (39%) of those in top positions.

The findings are presented in [Elitist Britain 2019](#), a new report by the Sutton Trust and the Social Mobility Commission. The report maps the educational backgrounds of leading figures across 9 broad areas:

- politics
- business
- the media
- Whitehall
- public bodies
- public servants
- local government
- the creative industries
- women and sport

Today's report suggests that there has been some increase in the diversity of educational backgrounds at the top since *Elitist Britain 2014* was published, but change is happening slowly. For the first time the research looks at the backgrounds of tech CEOs, entrepreneurs and women's sport. Even among newer categories, such as leading tech CEOs, there is a disproportionate number of privately educated people at 26%.

The research finds that power rests with a narrow section of the population – the 7% who attend private schools and 1% who graduate from Oxford and Cambridge. The report reveals a 'pipeline' from fee-paying schools through to Oxbridge and into top jobs. 52% of leading figures in some professions, for example, senior judges, came through this pathway, with an average of 17% across all top jobs. 39% of cabinet ministers, at the time of the analysis in Spring 2019, were independently educated. This is in contrast with the shadow cabinet, of which just 9% attended a private school.

Interestingly, the education make-up of the shadow cabinet has changed markedly since 2014 when 22% of the then Labour leader Ed Miliband's shadow cabinet were privately educated. Overall 29% of current Members of Parliament come from a private school background, 4 times higher than the electorate they represent.

There is a majority of private schools alumni across various public bodies:

- Senior judges – 65%
- Civil Service permanent secretaries – 59%
- The House of Lords – 57%
- Foreign and Commonwealth Office diplomats – 52%

The media also has some of the highest numbers of privately educated people. Of the 100 most influential news editors and broadcasters, 43% went to fee-paying schools. Similarly, 44% of newspaper columnists were privately educated, with a third – 33% – attending both an independent school and Oxbridge.

The report found big differences in the educational backgrounds of men and women at the top of sporting life. For example, 5% of male international football players attended independent schools. This is in stark contrast to 37% of international rugby players and 43% of England's cricket team.

Women's teams showed similar patterns to their male counterparts in terms of school background but about 80% female international players across football, cricket and rugby attended university compared to a very small number of men.

Women are under-represented at the top of all top professions but their journey to the top does not always look the same as their male peers. While women in top roles are still much more likely to have attended a private school than the population at large, they are less likely than their male counterparts to have attended Oxbridge.

Amongst the wealthiest members of the TV, film and music industries, a substantial number – 38% – attended independent schools with our best selling popstars at 30% and top actors at 44%.

Across the 37 categories of the 9 broad areas surveyed in the report, it was only amongst men and women footballers that the privately educated were under-represented.

The reasons why some groups continue to be over-represented in certain professions are complex and include access to education opportunities, financial barriers and the accumulation of social and cultural capital. But there are benefits to opening up the UK's top professions to a more diverse talent pool. Many firms and industries have recognised this and there has been a welcome focus on diversity and professional access in recent years.

The Sutton Trust and Social Mobility Commission would like social diversity adopted as a key mission to ensure that the talents of people from all backgrounds are utilised. The report includes several recommendations to improve social diversity through the education system and employment practices including:

- tackling financial barriers to specific industries and professions, especially by paying internships lasting a significant length of time
- adopting contextual recruitment and admissions practices to enter top universities and industries
- tackling social segregation in schools through fairer admissions practices in comprehensive and grammar schools and opening up private schools.

Sir Peter Lampl, founder and executive chairman of the Sutton Trust and chairman of the Education Endowment Foundation said:

Britain is an increasingly divided society. Divided by politics, by class, by geography. Social mobility, the potential for those to achieve success regardless of their background, remains low. As our report shows, the most influential people across sport, politics, the media, film and TV, are five times as likely to have attended a fee-paying school.

As well as academic achievement an independent education tends to develop essential skills such as confidence, articulacy and team work which are vital to career success. The key to improving social mobility at the top is to tackle financial barriers, adopt contextual recruitment and admissions practices and tackle social segregation in schools. In addition, we should open up independent day schools to all pupils based on merit not money as demonstrated by our success Open Access Scheme.

Dame Martina Milburn, chair of the Social Mobility Commission, said:

Politicians, employers and educators all need to work together to ensure that Britain's elite becomes more diverse in gender, ethnicity and social background. It is time to close the power gap and ensure that those at the top can relate to and represent ordinary people.

The Sutton Trust is committed to improving social mobility from birth to the workplace. Founded by Sir Peter Lampl in 1997, the Trust has supported over 30,000 young people through evidence-led programmes and published over 200 pieces of agenda-setting research, many of which have influenced government policy.

The Social Mobility Commission is an advisory non-departmental public body established under the Life Chances Act 2010 as modified by the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016. It has a duty to assess progress in improving social mobility in the UK and to promote social mobility in England.

## **Methodology**

- Past school and university attendance data were collected for approximately 5,000 individuals occupying high ranking positions in 37 different categories of professions. Publicly available sources were used including 'Who's Who', media interviews, local newspaper reports and LinkedIn profiles. In some cases individuals provided their information confidentially and as a consequence, it is not possible to provide further disaggregated data from the report.
- School category was defined as where the individual spent most of their secondary school years, and university as where individuals completed their first undergraduate degree.
- Further details on how the lists were created can be found in the

'Methodology' section of the report.

## **Contact**

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