

# Oxbridge--the British Establishment's essential club

A correspondent  
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*The following article deals with the political and social role played within British society by the elite universities, Oxford and Cambridge. Such is the predominance of graduates from these two bodies within the highest echelons of business and politics that they are often referred to by the conflated term "Oxbridge". The article was sent to the World Socialist Web Site by a reader. We welcome all such serious efforts to comment on social, political, economic, artistic and scientific issues.*

In 1950s and early 1960s the British Establishment was shocked to discover that four of its own, Guy Burgess, Kim Philby, Anthony Blunt, and Donald Maclean, were spying for the Soviet Union.

Burgess had left Eton in 1930 and gone on to Trinity College, Cambridge, where he fell into the company of his co-conspirators. They formed a fashionable, leftwing clique, much the same as those found in most British universities at the time—the offspring of wealthy men with no comprehension of the working class they claimed to champion. Yet unlike similar groups in universities such as Glasgow, Birmingham, Bristol, and Leeds, these four young men were sought out and recruited by Moscow's security services. The reasons behind their recruitment make a telling example of how the top levels of British society work, a model understood well by the KGB, if not by the majority of British citizens.

Had the KGB recruited four similar undergraduates from any other university, it is unlikely that even one of them would have progressed to a position of particular use, let alone national importance. Yet all four of these recruits did, gaining influential jobs in the BBC, the Foreign Office, MI6, and even Buckingham Palace. To this day, attendance at Oxbridge provides the essential qualification for progress through the British Establishment—the collection of financiers, aristocrats, land owners, mainstream politicians and civil servants that has maintained such a firm grip on power in the UK. Of the 42 British prime ministers who attended university, 40 went to either Oxford or Cambridge.

Establishment sources promote Oxbridge as the repository of Britain's finest minds, where the brightest and the best gather to be educated in the rarefied atmosphere of the two university towns. According to conventional wisdom, this is why graduating students tend to succeed. Yet until the mid-60s, alumni of the seven elite English boarding schools (Eton, Harrow, Westminster, Rugby, Winchester, Charterhouse, and Shrewsbury) were not even required to pass exams to gain admission. The headmaster of

Harrow even lodged a complaint when he discovered that his pupil's would finally be assessed on their A-level results.

Establishment sources are also inclined to claim that the system of patronage and class distinction has now disappeared, replaced with the supposed "meritocracy" of the Thatcher years. Yet given the fact that so many of the admissions tutors are themselves Oxbridge alumni from the age of overt discrimination by background, this claim seems as false as any of the other various means of obfuscation used by the Establishment to hide its unaccountable and undemocratic power from the British electorate. Several well-documented cases of admissions tutors refusing entrance to well-qualified working-class pupils have appeared in the British media, the most famous being that of Laura Spence, the bright schoolgirl from the Northeast who was unfairly denied a place at Oxford.

Despite claiming to be the voice of an undoubtedly enraged British public, the professedly "serious" national press generally takes the side of the universities in these matters. This is hardly surprising. Charles Moore, editor of the Conservative Party's house-organ, the *Daily Telegraph*, attended Eton and Trinity College, Cambridge (incidentally the same combination that produced Burgess). Peter Stothard, editor of the *Times*, is an honorary fellow of Trinity. "I have never particularly liked the idea of the *Times* as an establishment paper. I don't think it is correct historically," he disingenuously asserts in an interview with *Cherwell*, the Oxford University newspaper. Max Hastings, patrician editor of the London *Evening Standard*, went to Charterhouse and Oxford. Even Alan Rusbridger, editor of the supposedly liberal *Guardian*, is an alumnus of Cambridge.

Loyalty to their respective *alma maters* resulted in them focusing attention away from a condemnation of the universities' admission procedures towards an attack on Chancellor Gordon Brown, who had been the most high-profile of those to complain about the treatment meted out to Laura Spence. In parliament, a five-man committee of MPs condemned Brown for his stance against Cambridge. Any pretence at democratic debate was undermined by the fact that the three panel members who supported the committee's resolution were Oxbridge alumni. The two Labour MPs who voted against it later complained of an "Oxbridge mafia" and disassociated themselves from its findings. Quite why a panel without any compromising connections to the university in question was not selected is open to question.

Statistically neither university can defend its policy of

discrimination against working-class state-school applicants. They currently make up less than 50 percent of Oxford's intake (despite accounting for almost three quarters of all university applicants). Despite this, more than two thirds of first-class degrees awarded by the university, the highest award for academic excellence, are bestowed on graduates from state-schools. Figures from Cambridge tell a similar story. This obviously contradicts the insistence of Establishment apologists that they merely select the best applicants.

When such facts are laid before them, the defenders of social privilege try a different tack. One foolish Cambridge don left his notes at a radio station after he had been attempting to defend the university in the wake of the Laura Spence affair. These stated that Spence, "like all state-school pupils," lacked sufficient confidence to do well in the Cambridge interview. Apart from being a frankly extraordinary and unsustainable generalisation, the don offers a telling insight into the selection procedure. Firstly, "confidence" is not a faculty of intellect, and thus it is hard to see the justification for a supposedly academic institution declaring it to be an essential criterion for acceptance. Secondly, the question must be asked, who is likely to be more comfortable, and therefore confident, in an Oxbridge interview situation? A working-class girl from the heavily-industrial Northeast with no family background of university acceptance, or a Southern public-school boy unfazed by received-pronunciation accents, crusty dons, or ancient buildings? In addition, the number of educational advantages enjoyed by privately educated school pupils are too numerous to mention here, but neither university has ever seriously attempted to take these factors into account in their enrolment procedures.

This correspondent has had the dubious privilege of socializing with the British Establishment at various stages of his life. One particularly revealing interview undertaken was with a wealthy publisher—the son of a Nazi sympathizer and follower of the British fascist leader Oswald Moseley, and also an advisor to Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain—with wide-reaching connections within the Establishment. His insight into life at Balliol College, Oxford ran as follows: "The state school guys were effectively confined to their own JCRs [junior common rooms], because they didn't know anybody in other colleges. We [attendees of public schools] knew guys in the other colleges, so we could network and get to know more people". This networking resulted in a large number of acquaintances that would go on to either manage large amounts of inherited capital or use their connections to achieve positions of influence.

On another occasion, a recent graduate of Eton and Emmanuel College, Cambridge proudly informed this writer that he was the fifth successive generation of his family to attend that particular college. He now works in the City for a venture-capital company, despite his degree in English Literature seeming to confer upon him no discernable qualification for such a position. The level of public-school bias varies from one Oxbridge college to another. Some like to recruit from particular schools to maintain their "character", hence the number of Etonians at Christchurch College, Oxford—in 1998 around a third of the 258 Eton school leavers were accepted into Oxbridge.

Perhaps the most outrageous case of discrimination occurred in

1998, when an admissions tutor, Dr Eric Griffiths, humiliated a working-class interviewee called Tracy Playle (again at Trinity College, Cambridge). After accusing her of not being able to recognise some "squiggly lines" as Greek script, he went on to mimic her Essex accent until she left the interview in tears. The fact that this exchange took place, demonstrates that far from shedding their preference for rich, well-spoken public-school applicants, such prejudice is alive and kicking in Britain's two most prestigious universities. In a PR exercise, Griffiths was removed from his admissions role by the college after widespread media coverage, despite the protestations of the Establishment press who put forward the astonishing contention that these (publicly-funded) universities should be able to accept whoever they like by whatever criteria. Playle was not offered a place at Trinity, but went on to obtain a first-class degree from Warwick University.

The use of Oxbridge as a finishing school for the British Establishment has other benefits than allowing students from ruling-class backgrounds to enjoy the company of their peers and to network. An Oxbridge education allows an individual in British society to claim an intellectual superiority over anybody who does not share his or her particular point of view.

While the products of Oxford and Cambridge Universities, with their sinister vetting procedures, continue to hold the vast bulk of influential posts within British public life, it will require a seismic shift in popular awareness to dislodge them. It is therefore more vital than ever that democratic control is wrested back from the network of vested interests and back-scratchers that constitute the British Establishment. No one can reasonably expect change to occur within the current political club—the capacity to obtain positions of influence within our society is severely limited without the Oxbridge stamp of approval, a fact that was recognised by the KGB when they recruited Burgess, Blunt, Maclean, and Philby. Given that the popular media is beholden to the very same Establishment which continues to control the wealth of the country generated by the working class, given the pro-business character of the Labour government of Prime Minister Tony Blair (who studied at Fettes and Oxford), the best hope of changing popular awareness is through an independent media that can speak outside the grasp of multinational corporations and their capitalist agenda.



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