

# Study of British journalists confirms entrenchment of class privilege

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Recent research has shown that at least half of Britain's leading news journalists were educated at private schools. This compares to just seven percent of British children attending private schools.

The research by the Sutton Trust into the "Educational Backgrounds of Leading Journalists" also reveals that the number of private school attendees amongst newspaper editors and commentators has increased in recent years.

Some 54 percent of the top 100 newspaper editors, columnists, broadcasters and executives were educated privately. They include such diverse figures as Rebekah Wade, editor of Rupert Murdoch's *Sun* newspaper, and Channel 4 news anchor Jon Snow.

This is up from 49 percent in 1986, the last time similar research was conducted. Only 14 percent of the top 100 attended a state comprehensive, as compared to nine in ten of all British school children. The research also reveals that of the 81 percent of the leading journalists who attended university, at least half went to Oxford or Cambridge.

Reflecting on the findings, Lee Elliott Major of the *Times Higher Education Supplement*, who led the research for the Sutton Trust, concludes that the informal nature of recruitment into the field encourages the educationally privileged. The privately educated frequently arrive at recruitment with all the attributes that a private education inculcates: confidence, good presentation and networking skills, and often a prior knowledge of how the industry operates.

Young people from wealthy backgrounds are also more likely to advance furthest in the field because junior level employment in journalism subjects the trainee to notoriously low pay and insecurity. Parental assistance, be it financial, residential or both, is crucial in the early years. In London it would be almost impossible to survive without such assistance.

The Sutton Trust was founded by Sir Peter Lampl, a

multi-millionaire. It provides educational opportunities to young people from disadvantaged backgrounds so as to facilitate the creation of a "meritocratic" society. But its own research underscores how the UK has become ever more polarised between a narrow elite and the broad mass of the population.

Previous research by the Sutton Trust found that 70 percent of barristers in the top chambers had attended private schools. One-third of MPs have done the same, and this figure increases to 42 percent when surveying the leadership of the official parties. The leaders of Britain's major parties were educated at the UK's top private schools—Prime Minister Tony Blair at Fettes and the Conservative's David Cameron at Eton.

One would have to go back to the Edwardian period to find a time when class privilege was so entrenched.

Another study sponsored by the Sutton Trust, conducted by researchers from the London School of Economics in 2005, revealed that amongst Western industrialised nations social mobility was the lowest in Britain, and was declining further.

The research concluded that wealth was more clearly connected to educational attainment in the UK than in other Western countries. The expansion of higher education in Britain overwhelmingly benefited the children of the upper- and middle-classes. Undergraduate study amongst the top 20 percent of society has more than doubled since the late 1980s from 20 percent to 47 percent. But over the same period, the numbers attending university from the bottom 20 percent rose from six percent to only nine percent.

The generation of British children born in 1970 has a far poorer chance of becoming upwardly mobile than those born in 1958.

Several factors are involved here. The opportunities that emerged as a result of the economic boom and the expansion of the public sector in the aftermath of World

War Two benefited a section of working class children who, for the first time, were recruited into the civil service, education and the service sector.

Privatisation and the slashing of public spending over the last 20 years have served to shut off such possibilities. At the same time, these economic imperatives—which are now enshrined in the programmes of all the official parties—have enabled an unprecedented redistribution of wealth from the working class to a super-rich elite.

The improvements in the conditions of working people during the post-war period were not simply the by-product of economic boom, however. They were also the result of militant class struggles, in which socialist ideology was a crucial component. These struggles forced social and political concessions from the ruling class—including the establishment of the comprehensive education system and university grants—that opened up the prospect of a higher education, at least to some of the more academically gifted working class children.

Reversing these gains required the political beheading of the working class, with the Labour Party playing a leading part. It is no accident that some of the sharpest increases in social inequality have taken place under Blair’s “New Labour” government.

The Sutton Trust’s research underscores the social factors that lie behind the growing tendency of the news media to accept uncritically what governments and big business tell them.

Responsibility for determining, selecting and interpreting what constitutes “the news” is dominated by a small, privileged layer of society. Popular opposition to the Iraq war, for example, found only minimal expression in the news media, which for the most part parroted the official justifications emanating from Number 10. The willingness of so many leading journalists to act as political mouthpieces for the government reflects the interests of a layer that has a vested interest in perpetuating a social set-up that benefits the rich and powerful.



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