

Britain's ruling elite express fear of "class war"

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For several days, Britain's media was filled with discussion of the "class war" supposedly launched by Prime Minister Gordon Brown against David Cameron and the Conservatives. The occasion for the often heated and indignant press response was Brown's suggestion that Tory proposals for raising the threshold for inheritance tax to £1 million were "dreamed up on the playing fields of Eton." The Treasury estimated that the proposals would cost £1.2 billion a year, of which half would go to the wealthiest 3,000 estates.

Cameron fulminated that Brown's comments were "a petty, spiteful, stupid thing to do" and an effort to stir up "class war." Shadow chancellor George Osborne accused the Labour Party of a "lurch to the left," and the Tory press took up the cudgels in defence of Cameron's honour.

More significant was the response from the *Guardian*, Britain's leading nominally liberal and pro-Labour paper, which was deeply troubled by Brown's quip. Its main leader writer, Julian Glover, opined that "Even if Tory toffs are Labour fantasy, Cameron needs to skewer that myth...this is a highly distorted picture of most Tory candidates—and especially of the new, post-expenses intake.

"There are progressive reasons, as well as obvious Tory ones, to regret this lurch," he added.

Its Sunday sister paper, the *Observer*, urged, "Let's fight about fairness, not class," adding that "It is a sign of desperation when a political party resorts to the rhetoric of class war.... Mr Cameron is not responsible for the circumstances of his birth. It is choices, not luck, that make a political target."

The most trenchant defence of Cameron and the Tories came from the *Guardian*'s self-styled civil liberties defender Henry Porter, who threatened, "Those sneering about background in parliament

should take care. As a nation we've always been more interested in character...the better part of each one of us knows that class is an obstacle to understanding someone's character, and is certainly no way of assessing a potential leader."

The fulminations greeting Brown's comments are due to several interrelated factors.

On the part of the Conservatives, it points to an uncomfortable truth that Cameron has been trying his best to distance himself from: The Tories remain the party of inherited privilege and would, in government, defend their social interests to the hilt.

Cameron is only one of 17 members of the shadow cabinet educated privately—with a good number like him going to Eton—including London Mayor Boris Johnson, and Zac Goldsmith whose untaxed estimated wealth is £200 million. The Tory leader is a distant cousin to the Queen, a direct descendant of Queen Victoria's uncle and predecessor on the throne, King William IV and his mistress Dorothea Jordan. He attended Heatherdown Preparatory School, Eton and Brasenose College, Oxford. Newspapers can no longer publish a photograph of Cameron posing in coat tails with other members of the Bullingdon Club at Oxford, after permission was withdrawn by the company owning the copyright for "commercial reasons."

Cameron is married to Samantha Gwendoline Sheffield, the daughter of 8th Baronet Sir Reginald Adrian Berkeley Sheffield, and Annabel Lucy Veronica Jones, the Viscountess Astor. The *Daily Mail* estimates their wealth at well in excess of £30 million. In 2006, even Rupert Murdoch's *Times* was moved to comment that Cameron "has more Etonians around him" than any leader since Harold Macmillan was prime minister between 1958 and 1963, querying whether he could

“represent Britain from such a narrow base.”

As politically dangerous as it is to the Tories for their proper social base to be identified, a broad swathe of the Labour leadership, including Business Secretary Baron Mandelson of Foy, know that this could easily backfire. This is not merely because of the presence of privately educated individuals within Labour’s own leadership, such as ex-Loretto pupil Chancellor Alistair Darling who insisted on TV, “I don’t care whether David Cameron went to Eton or not,” or Harriet Harman, the niece of the Earl of Longford. More importantly, Labour is no less a party of the super-rich than the Conservatives, having devoted itself to their service ever since taking office.

However well some in Labour believe it will play electorally, the government can ill afford to make the Tory defence of wealth and privilege the central issue without highlighting its own record in office to similar ends and risking to lose the support of sections of the financial oligarchy on which it depends.

Brown’s reference to Eton speaks to a broad popular sentiment. There have been nearly three decades in which successive Tory and Labour governments insisted that “class” was no longer important. There is “no such thing as society” in the new world of “popular capitalism,” declared Margaret Thatcher. The “class struggle” is over in New Labour’s “meritocracy,” echoed Tony Blair. Yet despite all this, millions in Britain continue to understand that class is the essential organising principle of economic, social and political life. In findings it declared to be “remarkable,” for example, the National Centre for Social Research’s British Social Attitudes found that fully 57 percent of the population considers itself to be working class. Porter himself backhandedly acknowledges that “The drill doesn’t go down far before it finds the magma of class enmity in politics at the moment.... The class obsession in Britain persists despite the evidence that most people are either unhappy about the class they think they were born into or fervently wish to be thought of as classless.”

This would be a cause of great concern at any time. After all, both the major parties have been able to pursue their pro-business policies unhindered thanks not merely to the denial of class, but to the determined suppression of the class struggle by the trade union bureaucracy. It is more dangerous still when Labour

has raised the issue of class under conditions of the worst economic crisis to afflict British and world capitalism since the 1930s—and at a time when it and all the major parties are pledged to continuing multibillion-pound bailouts of the banks coupled with draconian austerity measures for working people.

The *Observer*’s editorial cautions that “Labour’s attacks are blunted by the iniquities in its own legacy. One in particular stands out: on Mr Brown’s watch, a small number of financiers built giant casino banks, speculating on assets whose nominal value dwarfed Britain’s national economic output. The rewards from that gamble went to the bankers; the cost landed on the taxpayer.”

In the *Daily Mail*, Melanie Phillips warns, “As recession bites, there is an extremely powerful current of resentment against fat cats of all stripes.” Mark Seddon, the former editor of the Labour journal *Tribune*, also writes in the *Mail*, “My real concern—and it is a concern, I suspect, that the public clearly understands—is that Gordon Brown should not be making cheap political capital out of a concocted class war when so many of the working class in Britain feel betrayed by his party.”

Under these conditions, raising the issue of class is seen by the representatives of Britain’s ruling elite as tantamount to an invitation to working people to join a class war that has—to date—been raging in an almost entirely one-sided fashion.



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