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# **The Educational Backgrounds of Members of Parliament in 2010**

**May 2010**

## **Key Findings**

### ***School backgrounds of MPs***

- Over one third (35%) of MPs elected in the 2010 General Election attended independent schools, which educate just 7% of the school population. The proportion of MPs attending independent schools is 3 percentage points higher than in the previous 2005 Parliament – bucking a trend during recent decades that has seen the proportion of privately-schooled MPs gradually fall.
- A major factor behind the increase in the rise is the higher number of Conservative MPs - who are much more likely than their Labour peers to have been privately-schooled.
- Less than half (43%) of MPs were educated in comprehensive state schools, with the remainder having attended state grammar schools (22%).
- 54% of Conservative MPs attended fee paying schools, compared with 40% of Liberal Democrat MPs, and 15% of Labour MPs.
- There are 20 Etonians in the 2010 Parliament -- 5 more than those who served in the 2005 Parliament. Overall 13 schools (12 of which are fee-charging) produce a tenth of all MPs in the new Parliament.
- 35% of newly elected MPs for the 2010 Parliament attended independent schools, the same proportion as MPs who were re-elected.

### ***University backgrounds of MPs***

- Nine in ten MPs in 2010 attended university – by far the highest proportion of any Parliament to date. This includes just under three in ten who were educated at either Oxford or Cambridge universities. Oxford has produced 102 MPs serving in the 2010 Parliament.
- 38% of Conservative MPs were educated at Oxford or Cambridge compared with 20% of Labour MPs and 28% of Liberal Democrat MPs.
- Newly elected MPs were even more likely to be graduates – with 94% attending a university, including 69% who had attended a leading research university, and 28% who had attended Oxbridge.

## Introduction & Methodology

This note is the latest in a series of reports by the Sutton Trust on the school and university backgrounds of those in a number of leading professions and influential walks of life, including Members of Parliament<sup>1</sup>. The analysis of newly elected and re-elected MPs for the 2010 Parliament provides an initial update to the Trust's report on the 2005 Parliament<sup>2</sup>, which summarised the educational backgrounds of MPs, Lords, and members of the Government and shadow Cabinets<sup>3</sup>.

The surveys suggest that social mobility levels are low among the highest echelons of British society. The majority of those holding the most powerful and influential positions in modern Britain come from a small social elite, and are not reflective of the wider society which the professions are intended to serve. Independent schools make up 7% of the school population, yet constitute over half of leading news journalists, medics, chief executives, and 70% of barristers and judges. The problem is that these schools are effectively closed to the vast majority of parents unable to afford the fees, and so the majority of children are consequently unable to access the expertise and facilities available at such schools -- and stand a much lower chance of entering the professions.

The creation of the country's social elites is largely a result of educational inequalities exhibited in the school and university system. Children at leading independent and state schools dominate entry to the country's most highly academically selective universities, which in turn produce the lion's share of graduates in the professions.

These issues are particularly important for Parliament which is intended to represent the people's interests, and which will witness in 2010 the biggest change in its membership in decades. It is also Parliament that is ultimately responsible for our national education policy. And each MP would surely hope that talented children in the state schools in their own constituencies stand the same chances of becoming a future MP as those children from an elite cadre of schools largely serving the affluent.

The school and university backgrounds of MPs were obtained by using a number of publicly available sources, such as *Who's Who*, and MPs' websites, and by contacting prospective MPs directly. Using historical data gathered by the Trust over a number of years, schools were then categorised according to their status at the point at which the MP would have entered the school - often different to the current status of schools. Schools were classified as non-selective state, state grammar, or independent. Universities meanwhile were classified

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<sup>1</sup> For a summary, see: [http://www.suttontrust.com/reports/ST\\_MilburnSubmission.pdf](http://www.suttontrust.com/reports/ST_MilburnSubmission.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> See: [http://www.suttontrust.com/reports/PoliticiansBackgrounds\\_09-Dec-05.pdf](http://www.suttontrust.com/reports/PoliticiansBackgrounds_09-Dec-05.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> The Trust will subsequently publish a fuller update report considering the educational backgrounds of Lords and Parliamentarians holding offices within the three main parties in the 2010 Parliament.

into a number of acknowledged groupings: Oxbridge; and leading research universities, defined by membership of the Russell Group or the 1994 Group.

We are extremely grateful to the communications consultancy, the Madano Partnership, for providing a series of analyses on the new MPs for the new Parliament, which has enabled the Trust to produce this analysis immediately after the results of the Election <sup>4</sup>.

The analysis is based on the school and university backgrounds of all members of the House of Commons for whom sufficient data were available. School background information was collected on 620 (96%) of the 649 MPs, with 9 MPs educated abroad, one home-educated, and two who went to specialist schools. No data was available for the remaining MPs: information on schools was not listed in their *Who's Who* entry or alternative official sources; or MPs did not respond to inquiries sent by email.

Information on university attended was collected for 540 MPs, with another 62 MPs who did not go to university, and five who went to university outside the UK. There was no available data for the remaining MPs.

The figures compiled for the 2010 Parliament have been compared with those compiled by the Trust for the 2005 Parliament. In order to look at trends in the educational profile of the Commons over the last half-century, we have also used official data, and information provided in the series of books produced by Denis Kavanagh and David Butler after each General Election<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> See: <http://www.madano.com/view>

<sup>5</sup> *The British General Election of 1951, 55 ... 2005*, David Butler and Denis Kavanagh

## School attendance

### *School backgrounds of Members of the 2010 Parliament*

The following table documents the proportion of MPs in the newly created 2010 Parliament attending different types of school, broken down by the main political parties.

Table 1: School backgrounds of Members of the 2010 Parliament (educated in the UK)

	Total with known data	Ind	%	State Comp	%	State Sel	%
<b>ALL MPs<sup>6</sup></b>	<b>608</b>	<b>214</b>	<b>35%</b>	<b>250</b>	<b>41%</b>	<b>144</b>	<b>24%</b>
Labour	242	37	15%	139	57%	66	27%
Conservative	283	153	54%	75	27%	55	19%
Liberal Democrat	55	22	40%	21	38%	12	22%
<b>ALL MAIN PARTIES</b>	<b>582</b>	<b>212</b>	<b>37%</b>	<b>248</b>	<b>41%</b>	<b>122</b>	<b>23%</b>

Overall, over one third (35%) of MPs have been schooled in the private sector, which educates just 7% of school children in the country. This figure is 3 percentage points higher than that for the previous 2005 Parliament. Of those MPs who attended state maintained schools, over one third went to grammar schools. Just over four in ten (41%) of MPs were educated in comprehensive state schools, with the remainder having attended state grammar schools (24%) – partly a reflection of the selective system under which many were schooled.

Splitting the results by party shows that 54% of Conservative MPs attended a fee-paying school, compared with 15% of their Labour colleagues and 40% of Liberal Democrat MPs. Over four-fifths (85%) of Labour MPs went to state schools. Less than three in ten Conservative MPs went to a state comprehensive school which, today, educates just under nine in ten of our schoolchildren.

### ***Elite schools***

A small exclusive group of fee paying schools have produced several MPs in the 2010 Parliament. Of particular note is Eton, which accounts for 20 MPs - six of whom were newly elected in 2010. This represents a significant increase on the 15 Etonians who served in the

<sup>6</sup> Including the Scottish National Party, Plaid Cymru, Democratic Unionists and other minority parties

2005 Parliament. 19 of the 20 Etonians in 2010 are Conservative MPs, with one Liberal Democrat. Twelve of the MPs who attended Eton also went to Oxbridge.

Two independent schools - Highgate School and Millfield - account for five MPs each, while Westminster and Nottingham High have four MPs in the 2010 Parliament. Reading School, a selective state school, also has four former pupils who are now MPs. Overall 13 schools (12 of which are fee-charging) produce a tenth of all MPs in the new Parliament.

***School backgrounds of newly elected members of the 2010 Parliament***

There are also some differences in the educational profiles of the new intake of MPs for the 2010 Parliament, compared with incumbent MPs who have been re-elected again in 2010, as table 2 below shows. There is a decline in the numbers of new MPs educated at grammar schools – an expected trend as younger cohorts will have been educated after the majority of grammars were abolished. The proportion of independently educated MPs meanwhile shows no change.

Table 2: Comparing the school backgrounds of newly elected and re-elected MPs in the 2010 Parliament

	Newly-elected MPs	Re-elected MPs
Independent	35%	35%
Comprehensive	45%	39%
Selective	19%	26%

### ***School backgrounds of MPs in successive Parliaments***

Over the last fifty years the representation of privately-educated MPs among the three main parties has been following a gradual downward trend. The table below shows how the proportion of independently educated MPs for the three Main Parties has changed since the 1979 Election. A general downward trend is seen for all three Parties. However, the overall percentage of independently educated MPs has now increased for the 2005 and 2010 Parliaments. This partly reflects the changing balance of the different political Parties: a greater share of seats for the Conservatives is associated with an overall rise in privately educated MPs.

Table 3: How the proportion of independently educated MPs from the three main political parties has changed over recent Parliaments

	1979	1983	1987	1992	1997	2001	2005	2010
<b>MPs of the Main Parties</b>	<b>49%</b>	<b>51%</b>	<b>47%</b>	<b>41%</b>	<b>30%</b>	<b>31%</b>	<b>34%</b>	<b>37%</b>
Conservative	73%	70%	68%	62%	66%	64%	60%	54%
Liberal Democrat	55%	52%	45%	50%	41%	35%	39%	40%
Labour	18%	14%	14%	15%	16%	17%	18%	15%

*Figures compiled by the Trust combined with data from The British General Election of 1951, 55 ... 2005, David Butler and Denis Kavanagh.*

## University attendance

### *University, research-led university and Oxbridge attendance among MPs in 2010*

The following table documents the proportion of MPs elected in 2010, broken down by the main political parties, attending different types of university. Nine in ten MPs in 2010 attended university – by far the highest proportion to date (in 2005, the figure was 72%). This includes just under three in ten who were educated at either Oxford or Cambridge, and two thirds who attended one of the countries leading research universities (including Oxbridge).

Oxford University has produced 102 MPs serving in the 2010 Parliament<sup>7</sup>. Other universities producing high numbers of MPs include Cambridge (58), the London School of Economics (25), Edinburgh (15), Manchester (14), and Durham (12).

Table 4: Universities attended by MPs

	Total with known data	Not at Univ	%	Total Univ	%	Oxbri dge	%	Res Uni <sup>8</sup>	%
<b>All MPs</b>	<b>601</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>10%</b>	<b>540</b>	<b>90%</b>	<b>170</b>	<b>28%</b>	<b>381</b>	<b>63%</b>
Labour	245	34	14%	211	86%	49	20%	135	55%
Cons	275	13	5%	262	95%	104	38%	202	73%
Lib Dem	57	7	12%	50	88%	16	28%	36	63%
<b>TOTAL (main parties)</b>	<b>577</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>9%</b>	<b>523</b>	<b>91%</b>	<b>169</b>	<b>29%</b>	<b>373</b>	<b>65%</b>

Broken down by party, 95% of Conservative MPs have been to university, including 38% to Oxbridge. Meanwhile 86% of Labour MPs went to university, and 88% of Liberal Democrats.

Newly elected MPs were even more likely to be graduates – with 94% attending a university, 69% had attended a leading research university, and 28% had attended one of the Oxbridge universities. MPs have effectively become a graduate profession.

<sup>7</sup> This prominence of Oxford is also reflected in the backgrounds of Prime Ministers. Since 1940, all but three Prime Ministers (Winston Churchill, Jim Callaghan and John Major) have attended university. All of those who went to university were educated at Oxford, with the exception of Gordon Brown, who went to Edinburgh University.

<sup>8</sup> Defined by membership of the Russell Group or the 1994 Group



### ***Oxbridge attendance for successive Parliaments***

Across all three parties, the proportion of MPs who went to Oxford or Cambridge has fallen since 1951, having peaked in the late Sixties and Seventies, as shown by the following table. The representation of Oxbridge graduates on the Tory benches has fallen significantly, but Conservative MPs remain roughly twice as likely to have attended Oxford or Cambridge as their Labour colleagues.

Table 6: How the proportion of Oxbridge educated MPs from the three main political parties has changed for successive Parliaments

	1951	1966	Oct-74	1979	1992	1997	2001	2005	2010
Cons (Oxbridge)	52%	57%	56%	49%	45%	51%	48%	43%	38%
LD (Oxbridge)		50%	38%	27%	30%	33%	27%	31%	28%
Lab (Oxbridge)	19%	23%	25%	21%	16%	15%	16%	16%	20%

*Figures for previous years from The British General Election of 1951, 55 ... 2005, David Butler and Denis Kavanagh.*

## Conclusions

These results show clearly that the educational profile of our representatives in the 2010 Parliament does not reflect society at large. Newly elected and re-elected Members of Parliament educated at independent schools are disproportionately represented. And many of those MPs educated in the state system attended a small cadre of exclusive state schools.

Much of this imbalance may be attributed to political reasons: our analysis shows that educational background is closely linked to party affiliation and the larger number of Conservative MPs inevitably means an increased representation of the independent sector overall in Parliament, regardless of any other factors. Yet this is certainly not the whole story: the Parliament as a whole remains very much a social elite.

There are many factors which determine who ends up being elected in Parliament, but these findings are at least partly symptomatic of a wider issue – the profound educational inequalities which continue to blight our country. The chances of becoming an MP in later life are overwhelmingly greater for those children lucky enough to attend a small number of prestigious schools that dominate admissions to elite universities which in turn supply the majority of entrants to the country's most influential positions in professional and public life.

The Sutton Trust's latest report into education mobility, an indicator of future social mobility, found that children's levels of achievement are more closely linked to their parents' background in England than in many other developed nations. There are signs of some improvement over the period of the Labour Government, but stark inequalities remain<sup>9</sup>. The Trust believes that there are a number innovative and cost-effective schemes and policies, from the early years to university access, that could be piloted to help to narrow this achievement gap<sup>10</sup>.

Over and above educational inequalities the Trust remains concerned about systematic barriers to non-privileged youngsters during the early career phases of many professions including the world of politics. Other reviews have confirmed the growing proportion of 'career MPs' among new the new breed of MPs - those who have worked almost exclusively in other research or advisory roles in politics already, or alternatively come from other professional backgrounds. The concern is that those from non-privileged backgrounds are less likely to be able to exploit such opportunities due to a combination of factors - low job security and pay, the high costs of living in London, and the lack of social networks to get the crucial first foot in the door. The Trust has outlined a number of recommendations to address these issues in its submission to the recent Government commissioned report on access to the professions.

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<sup>9</sup> [http://www.suttontrust.com/reports/Education\\_mobility\\_in\\_england.pdf](http://www.suttontrust.com/reports/Education_mobility_in_england.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> [http://www.suttontrust.com/reports/20100312\\_mobility\\_manifesto.pdf](http://www.suttontrust.com/reports/20100312_mobility_manifesto.pdf)

However, a basic first step for all MPs would be to pay all interns and researchers in Parliament a minimum London wage<sup>11</sup>.

The issue of low education and social mobility should be of concern to every elected MP of the new 2010 Parliament - not least to improve the prospects of children growing up today in the constituencies they now represent.

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<sup>11</sup> See: [http://www.suttontrust.com/reports/ST\\_MilburnSubmission.pdf](http://www.suttontrust.com/reports/ST_MilburnSubmission.pdf)