



Research Brief

Parliamentary Privilege

3: February 2015

The candidates

The fast approaching General Election on 7 May is likely to see a large influx of new MPs into the House of Commons. Will this new intake reduce or increase the preponderance in government of those from more socially advantaged backgrounds? To answer this question we have analysed the educational and professional backgrounds of 260 Parliamentary candidates for the 2015 election.

This research report follows [our previous work after the 2010 election and](#) last year's Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission [Elitist Britain](#) report on the social backgrounds of people in the UK's top professions, including Members of Parliament. They showed that, despite only [7% of children attending private schools](#), 33% of current MPs have been privately educated. This pattern varies across the political parties, with only 10% of Labour MPs having attended private schools compared with 41% of Liberal Democrats and 52% of Conservatives.

The *Elitist Britain* report also examined university backgrounds and found that a quarter (24%) of current MPs had attended Oxford or Cambridge universities, compared with less than 1% of the general population.

Key facts

- 31% of Parliamentary candidates have attended private school – compared with 7% of the UK population
- 19% of candidates graduated from Oxford or Cambridge universities – compared with less than 1% of the general population
- 55% of candidates attended Russell Group universities – compared with around 10% of the general population
- 40% of candidates have come from primarily political careers

Methodology

Only those Prospective Parliamentary Candidates (PPCs) with a reasonable possibility of victory were included in this study (those standing in marginal seats), assessed through an examination of parties' published lists of target seats, long term trends in opinion polls and those seats where MPs are standing down or have been deselected. We have, however, made some allowance for the volatility of the electorate by including a significant group of candidates from UKIP and other parties in their key target seats.

These criteria mean that the majority of the PPCs are from the Labour party (134 of 260). The second largest block of PPCs (64), are from the Conservatives, followed by UKIP (38), the Liberal Democrats (16), the Green Party (3), Plaid Cymru (2), Sinn Féin (2) and Independents (1). At the time the data was compiled, the Scottish National Party (SNP) had not yet selected any candidates. With opinion polls

having consistently suggested a net loss of seats for the Liberal Democrats for a number of months, there were relatively few Lib Dem candidates (16) considered by our research. As with the Green Party, Plaid Cymru and other smaller parties, the numbers of candidates considered are too small to draw meaningful conclusions regarding trends. Consequently they do not feature separately in this study. Information on PPCs' education and career histories was taken primarily from public sources, such as candidates' campaign web pages. Where this information was not publicly available, we contacted candidates or their offices directly. 119 candidates were contacted, and 48 responded with the relevant details.

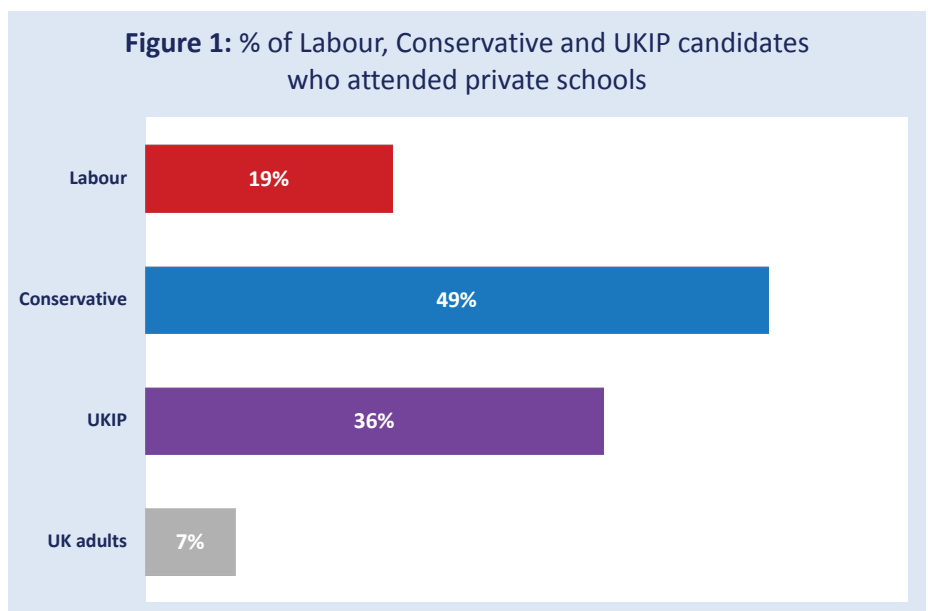
Ultimately we were able to recover information on schooling for 191 of the 260 PPCs (73%), on university education for 209 (80%), and on career history for 260 (100%). We examined four primary features of their educational and professional

backgrounds:

- Whether they had attended private, fee-paying schools
- Whether they attended university, and if so, whether they studied their first degree at Oxford or Cambridge, another [Russell Group](#) university, or a non-Russell Group university
- Those candidates who have direct experience of working in politics either as a former MP, current or former MEP/regional Assembly Member, Special Advisers to Ministers or Shadow Ministers, MP/Peer or MEP researcher, political think-tank, political party, a political campaign organisation or as full-time councillors.
- Whether their careers had featured full-time employment by a trade union

Results

The headline results are shown above. Based upon those candidates whose educational background is known, these suggest that the 2015 election will not see a dramatic change in the social composition of the House of Commons. At 31%, the proportion of parliamentary candidates from private school backgrounds is remarkably similar to the proportion in the current Parliament. Figure 1 shows that the figure for the Conservative Party is also very similar, with around half (49%) of Conservative candidates having been to private schools (with five having attended Eton, Harrow or Winchester). Labour's figure of 19% represents an increase over the present



Parliament.

We have considered a significant number of UKIP candidates, due to the volatility of the current polling results for the party. Our examination showed that 8 of the 25 UKIP candidates (36%) attended private schools – a higher proportion than among Labour candidates. Nevertheless, compared with the two main parties a substantially higher proportion of the UKIP PPCs did not attend university (35%) and a significantly higher proportion (34%) appear to have had non-professional careers – compared to 12% of the Labour candidates and only 6% of the Conservatives.

Our results show that, along with private school graduates, alumni from the country's most elite universities are also strongly over-represented among Parliamentary candidates (see sidebar and Figure 2). More than half of the candidates we examined studied their first degree at a Russell Group University, and around one fifth (19%) had studied at Oxford or Cambridge. Here there is a smaller difference between the two main parties, with majorities of both Labour and Conservative PPCs having attended a Russell Group university. As with their

career backgrounds, UKIP candidates are the outlier in this regard, with only one of the 32 candidates for whom we had university information having graduated from Oxford or Cambridge, less than a third having attended a university in the Russell Group, and almost half who had not been to university at all.

In terms of their career history, our figures show that four in 10 of our sample of PPCs have had direct political experience either as an elected political representative or by virtue of employment. Figure 3 shows that this figure is considerably higher among Labour than among Conservative candidates. As might be expected, a route to politics through Union participation was exclusive to Labour candidates, with 19 of 134 Labour PPCs (14%) having previously worked for a Trade Union.

Another interesting finding from the data is that a large number of candidates were previously employed in professional occupations, such as lawyers (29 candidates have previously worked as barristers or solicitors), journalists (19 candidates) or consultants (47 candidates),

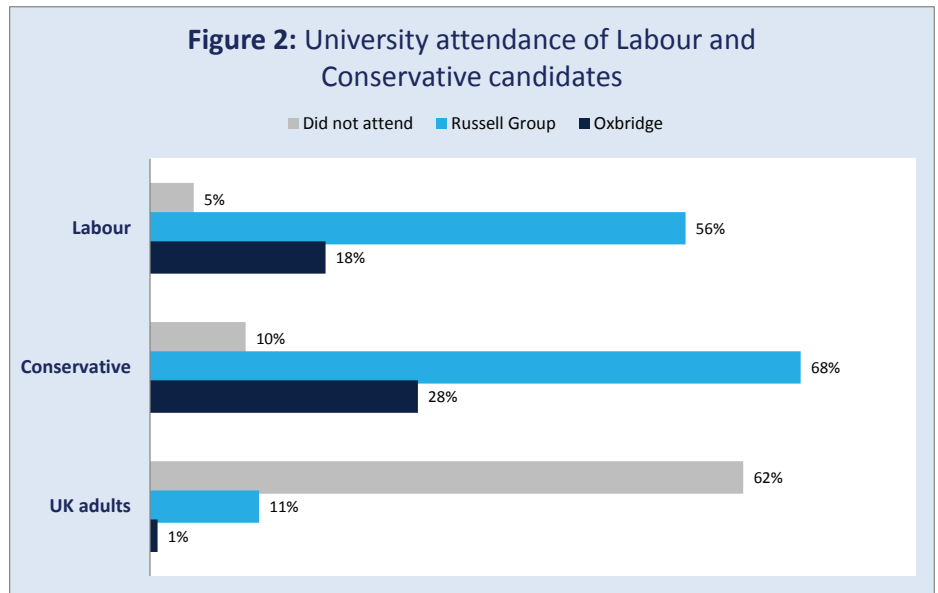
often in the areas of media and public relations. Many of these candidates operated as freelancers or owned their own consultancy businesses.

Conclusions

The figures show that, with respect to private school attendance and graduation from the most elite universities, the next crop of potential MPs could be remarkably similar to the current parliament with a continuity in some of the recent trends in the background of MPs.

As previously, the chances of being in a position to be elected to government are much higher for those few people fortunate enough to have attended fee-paying independent schools. This is problematic both in that it is symptomatic of low levels of social mobility in Britain, and in its implications for the diversity of experience within parliament.

The preponderance of Russell Group graduates is perhaps less of a concern. Although the most selective universities in the Russell Group are [much more likely to be attended by young people from more advantaged backgrounds](#), many of the universities in the 24-strong group (such as Liverpool, Leeds and Manchester) accept [reasonable proportions of less privileged students](#). It is also reasonable



to expect political leaders to be generally more highly educated than the average.

However, there is undoubtedly value in Parliament being able to draw on a wide body of life experience. If the majority of MPs all share the same experience of education at an elite university, this considerably narrows the diversity of perspectives within government. This is particularly applicable to the high proportion of Oxbridge alumni. Oxford and Cambridge accept relatively few students from disadvantaged backgrounds. These universities, as [our recent report on graduate outcomes has shown](#), confer particularly strong career advantages on graduates.

Similar diversity concerns apply with respect to Parliamentary

candidates' career experiences. Many commentators have raised concerns about [the rise of the 'political class'](#), politicians whose path to Parliament runs through only think-tanks and work as a researcher for an MP or a peer. Our analysis shows that this career trajectory is not quite as dominant as some might fear, but is nevertheless prevalent among current PPCs, particularly Labour candidates. Professional politics may genuinely be a more common route to Parliament for members of the Labour party, as opposed to the routes through business and law more common among Conservatives. It should also be noted that our definition of political careers does not solely reflect think-tankers and MPs' researchers (though these exist in large numbers), but also includes those who have risen through local government.

Taken together, these results suggest that social mobility into the highest echelons of government has not improved. As is the case with the current Parliament, the selection of the public's future representatives in government is strongly tilted toward a narrow slice of privately educated elite university graduates.

Figure 3: % of Labour and Conservative candidates with political career backgrounds

