

# Research Brief

## Parliamentary Privilege - The MPs in 2017

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### Introduction

The UK general election on June 8th has produced considerable changes to the party make-up of the House of Commons, coming only two years after the last election in 2015. There have also been changes in the educational backgrounds of those elected. The proportion of MPs who attended private schools and elite universities has always been and remains very different to the educational background of the population they represent. However, in the 2017 parliament the percentage of MPs in the three main parties who are privately educated is at a historical low. This research report gives an insight into the educational backgrounds of MPs in the 2017 parliament.

In the 2017 parliament, 29% of MPs were found to be educated privately, 18% attended grammar schools, and 51% state comprehensives. These figures exclude the small number (about 1%) of MPs who were educated abroad or home schooled. Most current MPs were educated from the 1960s onwards. In the UK, private school attendance

### Key findings

- 29% of UK educated MPs are educated privately in the new 2017 parliament, compared to about 7% of the population. 51% went to comprehensive schools, and 18% to grammar schools.
- The proportion of privately educated MPs is at a record low for years in which we have data.
- Over one in ten of the privately educated MPs for whom we had data went to Eton
- 86% of MPs are university graduates, 23% went to Oxford or Cambridge, 29% went to non-Oxbridge Russell Group universities and 33% went to other universities in the UK. Approximately 11% of MPs hold a postgraduate qualification.
- 45% of Conservative MPs were privately educated, down from 48% in 2015. 14% of 2017 Labour party MPs attended an independent school, down from 16% in 2015.

has been relatively stable at around 7% of the UK population since the 1960s.<sup>1</sup> Grammar school attendance has changed drastically during this period, with a peak of around 25% in the mid-1960s, followed by a fall to 5% in the 1970s. From the 1970s to today, grammar schools have remained at below 5% of total school attendance.<sup>2</sup>

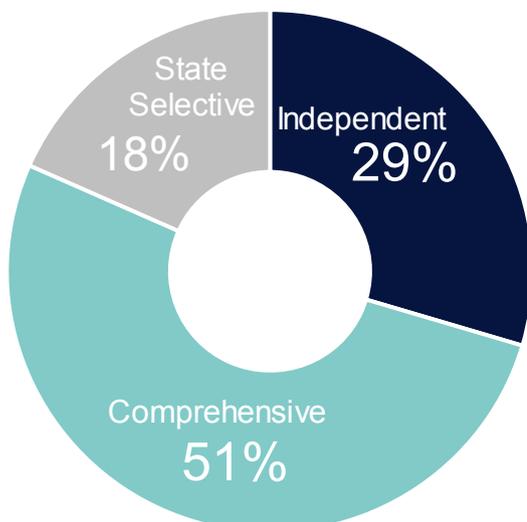
One in 10 of the privately educated MPs and 3% of all MPs we have data

for attended one private school, Eton College. All 20 MPs who attended Eton in the 2017 parliament are members of the Conservative Party. The level of MPs who attended Eton has remained relatively consistent over time. There were 20 in 2010, and a historic low of 15 Old Etonians in 2005.<sup>3</sup> No other school educated as large a proportion of the House of Commons, with the next largest attendance from one school a tie between the independent schools Winchester College and Millfield School, who each educated only five MPs in the 2017 parliament.

86% of the MPs we have data for attended university, with 11% also completing post-graduate qualifications. Out of those who completed higher education, 23% went to Oxford or Cambridge, 29% went to other Russell Group universities, whilst the remaining 33% went to other universities or higher educational institutions.

The new House of Commons is more representative than the Commons elected in 2015, when 32% of MPs were privately educated.<sup>4</sup> But even with this improvement, MPs are over four times more likely to have attended private school than the rest of the population.

Figure 1: School background of 2017 MPs. Source: Sutton trust data



However, the downward trend is likely to continue in future. Looking at the number of comprehensively educated MPs, of the 2017 new intake, 67% attended comprehensive schools, an increase on 64% of the 2015 intake.<sup>5</sup>

23% of MPs completed an undergraduate degree at Oxford or Cambridge, compared to less than 1% of the UK population.<sup>6</sup> Of the new MPs who are entering the Commons for the first time in 2017, 17% attended Oxbridge. Whilst it is not surprising that MPs are more likely to have attended top universities, private school pupils are still substantially more likely to gain entry to these institutions. The percentage of Oxbridge students from private schools has decreased, but it still stood at 44% of students at Oxford<sup>7</sup> and 38% at Cambridge<sup>8</sup> in 2015, compared to 7% of the UK population as a whole.

### Why does this matter?

By examining the educational backgrounds of leading figures in British public life, the Sutton Trust hopes to highlight the importance of social mobility and equal opportunities, especially in the top professions. MPs are the population's representatives; they make laws and scrutinise the work of government. Whilst the backgrounds of MPs are gradually becoming more like the population, the pace of change is slow. The social backgrounds of MPs are still vastly different to those of the

**Table 1: School background of 2017 MPs by political party. Source: Sutton trust data**

	Independent	Comprehensive	Selective
All MPs	29%	51%	18%
Conservatives	45%	38%	17%
Labour	14%	67%	18%
Lib Dem	27%	56%	11%
SNP	6%	88%	6%
Other	13%	35%	52%

general population, which may mean that the concerns and priorities of all parts of society are not adequately reflected in parliament. Additionally, MPs are ultimately responsible for national education policy, and it is therefore concerning if a large number of MPs do not have experience of the state education system.

Access to private and grammar schools is related to family income. Students in the top fifth of household incomes make up 50% of private school pupils, whereas those in the bottom 30% of household incomes take up only 8% of places at fee-paying schools in the UK.<sup>9</sup> Grammar schools also under-represent pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. Previous research by the Sutton Trust has found that a pupil attending a private prep school is ten times more likely to enter a grammar school than a pupil on free school meals.<sup>10</sup>

Access to the UK's top universities is also skewed towards the better-off. Students

who have attended an independent school are 22 times more likely than state school pupils on Free School Meals, and 6 times more likely than all other state school pupils to enter a highly selective university.<sup>11</sup>

Earlier work by the Sutton Trust has shown that pupils from independent schools are not only over-represented in parliament, but throughout the elite professions. In the UK, 74% of High Court judges, 61% of top doctors, 52% of senior bankers, 51% of leading journalists and 48% of civil servants are privately educated.<sup>6</sup> Dominance of the top professions by the privately educated highlights how important it is to prioritise policies which aid social mobility, such as those found in the Sutton Trust's Mobility Manifesto, published in early 2017.<sup>12</sup>

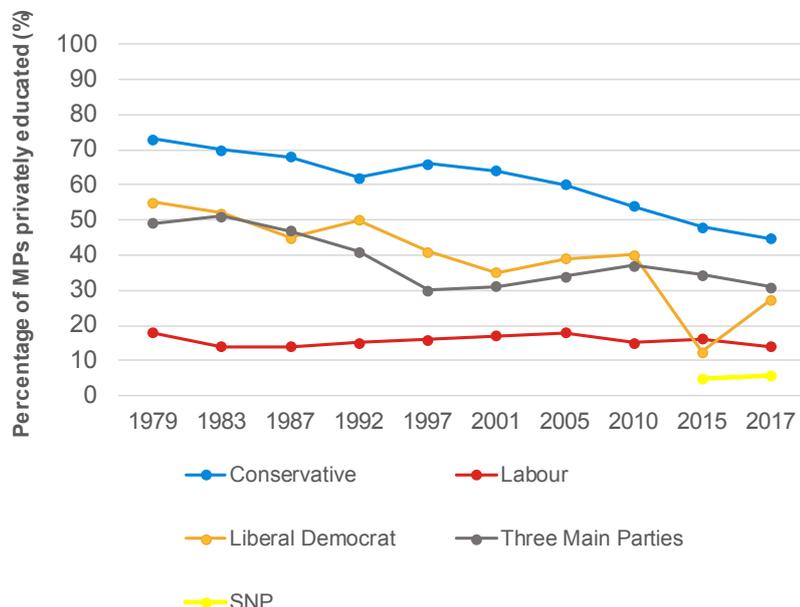
### Methodology and data

We searched for the educational backgrounds of all 650 MPs elected on Thursday 8th June 2017 to the House of Commons. We could find information on secondary school attendance for 96% of MPs, and university education for 98% of MPs. MPs who were educated overseas were not included in our analysis. The analysis was based on 649 declared results at the time of publication.

Information on MPs' educational backgrounds were found primarily from public sources, such as candidates' campaign pages, LinkedIn profiles, Who's Who and local newspaper reports. Where information was not publicly available, we contacted candidates' offices directly. Some of the candidates were happy to provide us with the information. However, several either did not reply, or stated they did not think the information needed to be publicly available.

Schools were classified as comprehensive, state grammar or independent. They were categorised

**Figure 2: Shows the percentage of privately educated in each political party from 1979 to 2017, with further information provided in Appendix 4. Sources: Kavanagh, Cowley et al, The British General Election of 2015 & previous editions**



by their type in the period when an MP attended the school, as many schools have changed category over time. Universities were categorised as either Oxbridge (Oxford and Cambridge Universities), Russell Group (a group of 24 research intensive Universities), Sutton Trust 30 (a group of highly selective Universities)<sup>13</sup> or other.

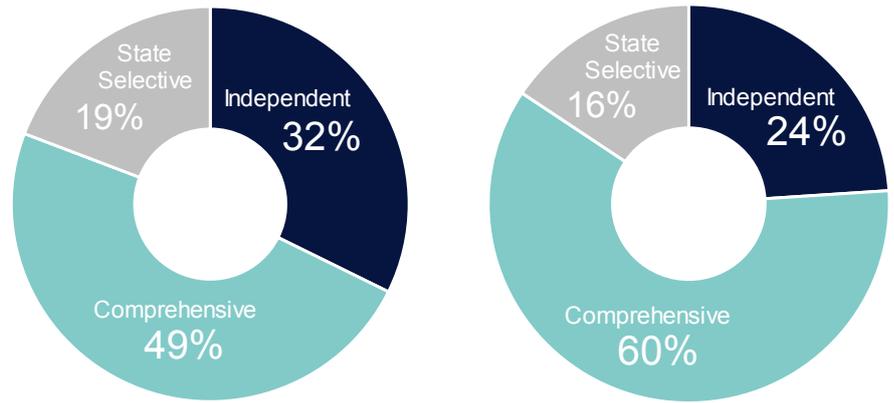
### Overall picture: School background

As shown in Figure 1, 29% of MPs attended independent schools, a drop from 32% in the 2015 parliament.<sup>4</sup> Whilst the number of privately educated MPs has not reduced at every consecutive election, the general trend has been towards a reduction in privately educated MPs over the last few decades.

18% of MPs went to selective state grammar schools, compared to 19% in 2015.<sup>14</sup> Grammar school attendance in England peaked in the 1960s before falling to 5% today. Therefore, the fall in MPs who were educated at grammar schools is likely to be due to the decrease in grammar school attendance among the general population during this period. However, it continues to be the case that a larger number of MPs have attended grammar schools than the population as a whole.

51% of MPs in the 2017 parliament were educated at comprehensive schools, compared to 49% in 2015.<sup>14</sup> The new intake is more likely to have been educated at comprehensive schools (67%) compared to those who were re-elected to their seat from the last parliament (50%).

Figure 3: School background of male and female MPs 2017



Male MPs  
Source: Sutton Trust data

Female MPs  
Source: Sutton Trust data

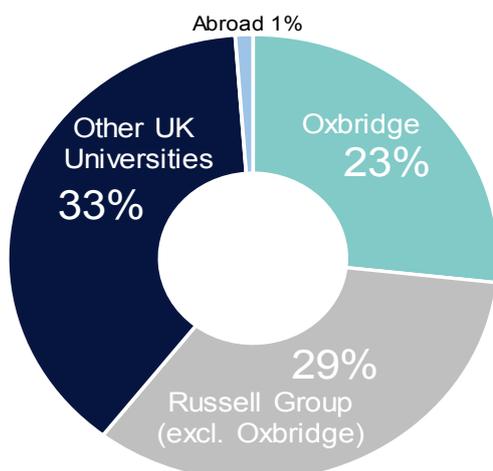
The percentage of privately educated MPs differs substantially between political parties. 45% of Conservative MPs were privately educated, continuing a downward trend in recent years and down from 48% in 2015. 14% of 2017 Labour party MPs attended an independent school, also down from 16% in 2015. In 2015, the number of privately educated Liberal Democrat MPs had just fallen from 40% in 2010 to 13%, most certainly due to the large reduction in their total numbers. This election, 27% of Liberal Democrat MPs had attended private school. However, the small number of Liberal Democrat MPs may explain the fluctuation between elections. 6% of SNP MPs were privately educated, compared to 5% in 2015, though their overall number of MPs have fallen significantly. In Scotland as a whole, 7% of MPs were privately educated.

Figure 2 shows the percentage of privately educated MPs in each political party from 1979 to 2017, with further

information provided in Appendix 4. As well as differences between political parties, this analysis also highlights the differences in educational backgrounds of male and female MPs (Figure 3). 32% of current male MPs are privately educated, compared to only 24% of female MPs. This is despite men and women in the UK attending private schools in roughly equal numbers.<sup>15</sup>

Previous research has found that women do not always benefit equally to men from a private education. Men who attend independent schools earn more than men with the same qualifications who did not attend a private school. However, the same is not true for privately educated women, who earn the same as their equally qualified comprehensively educated counterparts.<sup>15</sup> It may be that private school attendance benefits men going into politics in a way that it does not equally benefit privately educated women, for example through networks formed whilst at school.

Figure 4: University background of 2017 MPs. Source: Sutton Trust data



### Overall picture: Higher education

In the new House of Commons, 23% of MPs completed their undergraduate degree at Oxbridge, down from 26% in 2015 (Figure 4).<sup>4</sup> A further three MPs did not attend Oxbridge for their undergraduate degree, but completed a Masters or a PhD at one of the institutions. Therefore, 24% of MPs attended Oxbridge at some point in their education. In contrast, fewer than 1% of the general population is estimated to have attended Oxbridge.<sup>6</sup> This is a continuation of the trend seen over the last few parliaments, each of which have seen a reduction in the percentage of

Oxbridge educated MPs. A further 29% of MPs completed their undergraduate degrees at Russell Group universities. This is again in contrast to the general population of the UK, of whom only roughly 10% attended a Russell Group institution.<sup>6</sup> 56% of MPs for whom we had information on their educational background attended a highly selective university, either a Russell Group institution (including Oxbridge) or one of the Sutton Trust 30 universities.

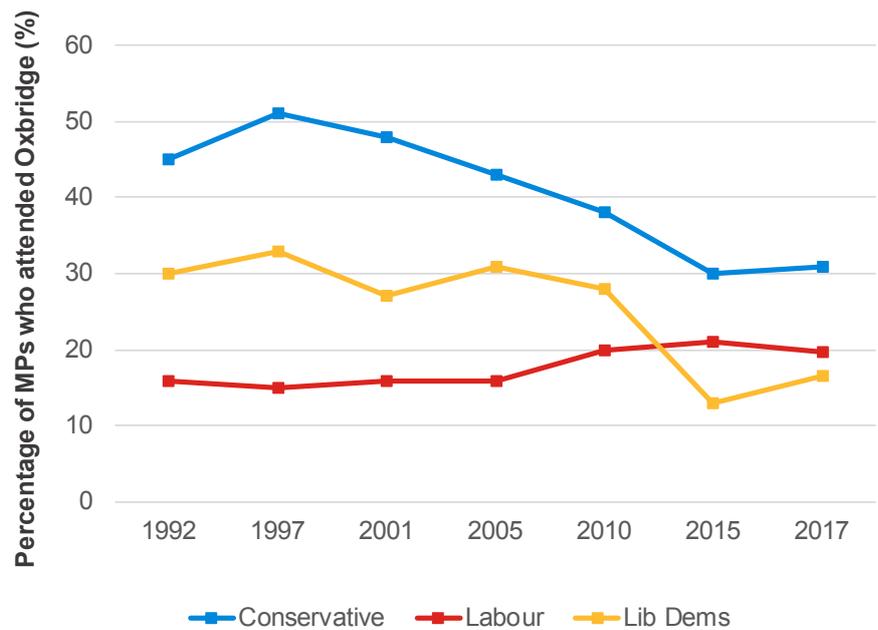
Broken down by political party, 31% of Conservative MPs attended Oxbridge for their undergraduate degree, compared to 20% for Labour and 17% for the Liberal Democrats. None of the SNP MPs we had data for attended Oxbridge. 31% of Labour MPs attended Russell Group universities, compared to 29% of Conservative, 42% of Liberal Democrat and 20% of SNP MPs. Breakdowns of MPs' higher education background for each political party are shown in Table 2, and Oxbridge attendance over time is shown in Figure 5.

### Changes over time

29% of MPs in the new House of Commons were privately educated. This means that the new House is more representative of the wider electorate than that elected in 2015, when 32% of MPs had been to a fee-paying school, and more representative than the 1997 parliament when Tony Blair was first elected as Prime Minister.

This election has seen the resurgence of two-party politics, and this reduction in privately educated MPs has not been driven by either party in particular, with both the Conservatives and Labour seeing a drop in the proportion of their MPs attending independent schools. Amongst the new intake of 98 MPs, 12% of newly elected Labour candidates were privately educated, alongside 29% of Conservatives. With Labour politicians more likely to be state educated than their Conservative counterparts, the

Figure 5: MP Oxbridge attendance over time



increase in Labour MPs will have contributed to the fall in privately educated MPs in this election.

### Conclusions

Over time, the number of privately educated MPs is gradually decreasing. However, MPs are still far more likely than their constituents to have been privately educated, and the pace of change is slow. At the current rate, it will take almost sixty years (if an election occurs every five years) before the percentage of MPs who are privately educated matches that of today's general population.

MPs are also more likely to have attended an elite university. Whilst it is not surprising that many MPs are well educated, these institutions are still disproportionately attended by the better-off.<sup>11</sup> Clearly, every young person in the UK does not have an equal opportunity to become an MP.

There are several possible reasons for the over representation of the privately educated in politics. One issue

is whether comprehensively educated pupils have equal access to learn about and become engaged in politics at school. Citizenship has been part of the national curriculum since 2002. The classes aim to improve political literacy, and teach pupils about democracy and government. However, in the last assessment by Ofsted on the subject's provision, teaching of citizenship was rated as not good enough in one quarter of the secondary schools visited.<sup>16</sup>

This is in stark contrast to many of the top independent schools, which often provide extensive opportunities to learn about politics. For example, Eton has a student run political society which hosts talks from MPs<sup>17</sup> and political journalists<sup>18</sup> for its students, and 3% of all MPs were educated there. Private schools also often offer a variety of other extracurricular activities which help to develop skills which are sought after in politics, such as self-confidence, public speaking and debating. Conversely, state school pupils have been found to be twice as likely as independent school pupils to report their school does not provide access to these activities.<sup>19</sup>

Another possible factor is whether those on low and middle incomes have equal opportunities to gain experience in politics. In the 2015 House of Commons, 25% of MPs had previously worked in politics before running for office.<sup>20</sup> Jobs in politics, such as working in an MP's office, can be vital for a potential candidate to gain experience and form contacts within a political party. There

Table 2: University Backgrounds of MPs 2017. Source: Sutton Trust data

	Oxbridge	Russell Group (excluding Oxbridge)	Other UK institutions
All MPs	23%	29%	33%
Conservatives	31%	29%	28%
Labour	20%	31%	37%
Lib Dem	17%	42%	0%
SNP	0%	20%	43%

are some important instances of good practice which have helped to open up these roles, such as the Speaker's Parliamentary Placement Scheme, which provides ten paid internships in parliament for those who would not have access to traditional routes of entry. However, in many other cases, the opportunity to work for an MP may not be open to all. For example, concerns have been raised over MPs' use of unpaid internships.<sup>21</sup> It may also be the case that opportunities which involve working in Westminster put off candidates from low and middle incomes, due to the high cost of living in London. Very little information is available on the backgrounds of the

people who work for MPs, so it is difficult to know how representative individuals in those roles are of the overall population.

The financial cost of running as an MP is another potential barrier for those on low and middle incomes hoping to join the House of Commons. Research on Conservative candidates from the 2005 election estimated the cost of becoming a candidate, running a campaign and lost earnings during the process stood at roughly £34,000 of personal expenses per candidate.<sup>22</sup> For those on lower and middle incomes, this cost may prevent them from standing for parliament. Again, more information is needed to

fully understand how financial costs affect the background of MPs.

Enabling those from less privileged backgrounds to fulfil their potential, in politics or in any other profession, should be a priority for all political parties. The Sutton Trust's Mobility Manifesto provides ten practical steps for the 2017 intake of MPs to reduce educational inequality and improve social mobility in the UK.<sup>12</sup> Specific steps which could be taken to help the House of Commons become more representative of the population it seeks to represent are outlined below.

## Recommendations

1. The provision of citizenship education should be improved in state schools, to create a better understanding of politics, democracy and government.
2. Opportunities to take part in extracurricular activities which help to develop skills which are valued in politics, including debating and public speaking, and e skills such as self-confidence should be expanded in state schools.
3. All internships, including those working for MPs or political parties, should pay at least the Minimum Wage (£7.05 for 21 to 24 year olds) and preferably the Living Wage (£9.75 in London, £8.45 in the rest of the UK) if longer than one month. All internships should also be advertised publicly, and recruitment practices should be fair, transparent and based on merit.
4. When employing staff, MPs should draw up shortlists which include candidates from the local area. This would help to combat issues around networking and would allow the makeup of the MPs' staff to reflect that of the local population.
5. The socio-economic backgrounds of staff working for MPs and political parties should be monitored and anonymously reported.

## Acknowledgements

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Note – Percentages are rounded, so may not add up to 100%

## Appendices

	Independent	Comprehensive	State Selective
All MPs	29%	51%	18%
Gender			
Female	24%	60%	16%
Male	32%	49%	19%
Date of entry to commons			
New in 2017	20%	67%	13%
Existing MPs	31%	51%	19%

**Appendix 1:** School Backgrounds by gender and date of entry to the House of Commons. Source: Sutton Trust data

	Oxbridge	Russell Group (excluding Oxbridge)	Other UK institution
All MPs	23%	29%	33%
Gender			
Female	23%	35%	42%
Male	29%	33%	37%
Date of entry to commons			
New in 2017	17%	31%	52%
Existing MPs	29%	35%	36%

**Appendix 2:** University attendance by gender and date of entry to the House of Commons. Source: Sutton Trust data

	Independent	Comprehensive	State Selective
England (Including London)	34%	48%	18%
England (Excluding London)	34%	48%	18%
London	35%	49%	16%
Scotland	7%	89%	4%
Wales	10%	75%	15%
Northern Ireland	6%	28%	67%

**Appendix 3:** School background of 2017 MPs, UK Nations and London. Source: Sutton Trust data

	1979	1983	1987	1992	1997	2001	2005	2010	2015	2017
Conservatives	73%	70%	68%	62%	66%	64%	60%	54%	50%	45%
Labour	18%	14%	14%	15%	16%	17%	18%	15%	16%	14%
Lib dems	55%	52%	45%	50%	41%	35%	39%	40%	13%	27%
Three main parties	49%	51%	47%	41%	30%	31%	34%	37%	33%	31%
SNP									5%	6%

**Appendix 4:** Proportion of privately educated MPs over time. Sources: 1979-2015, Kavanagh, Cowley et al, The British General Election of 2015 & previous editions, 2017, Sutton Trust data

	1992	1997	2001	2005	2010	2015	2017
Conservatives	45%	51%	48%	43%	38%	30%	30%
Labour	16%	15%	16%	16%	20%	21%	21%
Lid Dems	30%	33%	27%	31%	28%	13%	17%

**Appendix 5:** Proportion of Oxbridge educated MPs over time. Sources: 1979-2015, Kavanagh, Cowley et al, The British General Election of 2015 & previous editions, 2017, Sutton Trust data