



---

# **The Educational Backgrounds of Members of the House of Commons and House of Lords**

**December 2005**

# Key Findings

## House of Commons

- Overall, almost one third (32%) of current MPs attended independent schools, which educate just 7% of the population. Seventy-two percent went to university, including 43% who attended one of 13 leading universities<sup>1</sup> and over a quarter (27%) who went to Oxbridge.
- Broken down by party, Conservative MPs were most likely to have attended private schools (59% having done so) while Labour MPs were the least likely (18%).
- Conservative MPs were also more likely to have been educated at a leading university: almost two-thirds (63%) attended one of the 'Sutton 13', including 46% at Oxford or Cambridge. This compares with one-third (33%) of Labour MPs from the Sutton 13, half of whom graduated from Oxbridge.
- Those MPs holding offices within the three main parties<sup>2</sup> are more likely to have been to independent schools (42%) than MPs on the backbenches (29%), and are also more likely to have attended Oxbridge (34% compared to 24%).
- In particular, Labour MPs who serve as members of the Government are more likely to have been to private school (25%) than Labour backbenchers (16%), and are more likely to have been to Oxbridge (23% compared to 15%). Sixty-two percent of office-holders within the Conservative Opposition were from independent schools, and 46% were Oxbridge graduates.
- Less than half (42%) of MPs were educated in comprehensive schools, with the remainder having attended either state grammar schools (25%) or independent schools (32%), many of which are also academically selective.

---

<sup>1</sup> These are the 13 leading universities identified as having the highest average rankings in surveys published by *The Times*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Sunday Times* and *Financial Times* in 2000, and which have been used for previous Sutton Trust Research. The universities are: Birmingham, Bristol, Cambridge, Durham, Edinburgh, Imperial, London School of Economics, Nottingham, Oxford, St Andrews, University College London, Warwick and York. These are referred to as the 'Sutton 13' throughout this report.

<sup>2</sup> Including all Ministers, Parliamentary Under Secretaries, Under Secretaries of State and Whips in Government and their equivalents in the Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties (as of June 2005).

- The rate of attendance at selective state schools is highest on the Labour benches (29%) and lowest on the Liberal Democrat (20%). The representation of selective state schools has fallen amongst younger MPs, who were educated in a principally comprehensive system.

## **House of Lords**

- The Lords were almost twice as likely as their Commons counterparts to have been to independent school (62% compared to 32%), and the private school attendance was more pronounced on the Conservative (79%) than the Labour (34%) benches.
- Ninety-eight percent of the remaining hereditary Lords were privately-educated, compared to 56% of appointed peers.
- As might be expected given their age, of the Lords educated in the state sector more than half (55%) had been to state grammar schools, compared to just over a third (37%) of the state-educated members of the Commons. Grammar schools were represented most among appointed peers, and Labour and Liberal Democrat Lords.
- Lords were as likely as MPs to have been to university, but 56% had attended one of the 'Sutton 13' universities, compared to 43% of MPs.
- Overall university attendance levels were similar across all three parties, and between Appointed and Hereditary Peers. As in the case of MPs, Conservative Peers were the most likely to have been to Oxbridge, and Labour Peers the least.

# Introduction & Methodology

Earlier in the year, the Sutton Trust conducted an analysis of the educational backgrounds of top lawyers to consider the extent to which opportunities in elite professions are available to young people from a variety of backgrounds<sup>3</sup>. This study follows up that work by examining the educational backgrounds of our representatives in Parliament.

We have analysed the school and university backgrounds of all members of the Houses of Lords and Commons for whom sufficient data were available. School background information was collected on 587 (91%) of the 646 MPs elected in May 2005, and university data on 625 (97%). Of the 59 MPs excluded from the school sample, information was unavailable for 48 and a further 11 were educated abroad. At university level, 11 MPs attended institutions outside the UK and data were missing for the remaining 10.

For the House of Lords, school data was found for 631 of the 723 Peers (87%) and university information for 656 (91%). At school level, of those Lords excluded from the analysis 34 were educated abroad and we were missing data for 58. Of the 67 Lords excluded from the university analysis, 42 attended institutions abroad and information was missing for the remaining 25.

In order to look at trends in the educational profile of the Commons over the last half-century, we have also used data from the series of books produced by Denis Kavanagh and David Butler after each General Election<sup>4</sup>. This information can be found in tables three and five of the report. We have also cross referenced our own findings with those included in the latest edition of Kavanagh and Butler, released in November 2005. There is close agreement between both analyses with the majority of figures tallying absolutely; where there are differences these are no more than three percentage points.

The other sources of information used in this analysis are listed at the back of the report.

---

<sup>3</sup> 'The Educational Backgrounds of Top Lawyers' at [www.suttontrust.com](http://www.suttontrust.com)

<sup>4</sup> *The British General Election of 1951, 55 ... 2005*, David Butler and Denis Kavanagh

# Educational Background of MPs

## School attendance

Table 1: School backgrounds of Members of the House of Commons

	Total with known data	Indp	%	State Comp	%	State Sel	%
<b>ALL MPs<sup>5</sup></b>	<b>587</b>	<b>190</b>	<b>32%</b>	<b>248</b>	<b>42%</b>	<b>149</b>	<b>25%</b>
Lab office holders	89	22	25%	48	54%	19	21%
Cons office holders	82	51	62%	12	15%	19	23%
Lib office holders	35	13	37%	14	40%	8	23%
<b>All office holders<sup>6</sup> (main parties)</b>	<b>206</b>	<b>86</b>	<b>42%</b>	<b>74</b>	<b>36%</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>22%</b>
Lab backbenchers	230	36	16%	122	53%	72	31%
Cons backbenchers	101	57	56%	25	25%	19	19%
Lib backbenchers	21	9	43%	9	43%	3	14%
<b>All backbenchers (main parties)</b>	<b>352</b>	<b>102</b>	<b>29%</b>	<b>156</b>	<b>44%</b>	<b>94</b>	<b>27%</b>
Labour	319	58	18%	170	53%	91	29%
Conservative	183	108	59%	37	20%	38	21%
Liberal Democrat	56	22	39%	23	41%	11	20%
<b>ALL MAIN PARTIES</b>	<b>558</b>	<b>188</b>	<b>34%</b>	<b>230</b>	<b>41%</b>	<b>140</b>	<b>25%</b>

<sup>5</sup> Including the Scottish National Party, Plaid Cymru, Democratic Unionists and other minority parties

<sup>6</sup> Including all Ministers, Parliamentary Under Secretaries, Under Secretaries of State and Whips in Government and equivalent posts in the Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties (as of June 2005).

Overall, nearly one third (32%) of MPs have been schooled in the private sector, which educates just 7% of young people and accounts for around 17% of university entrants. Of those MPs who attended maintained schools, over one third (37%) went to grammar schools.

Splitting the results by party shows that 59% of Conservative MPs attended a fee-paying school, compared to 18% of their Labour colleagues and 39% of Liberal MPs. Over four-fifths (82%) of Labour MPs went to state schools, with 65% of those going to comprehensives. Only 20% of Conservative MPs went to a comprehensive school which, today, educates 88% of schoolchildren.

If we look more closely, we see that those at the 'top' of the political profession – those holding offices in the Labour Government or in the Conservative or Liberal Democrat opposition teams – are more likely to have been privately educated than their colleagues on the backbenches. Whereas 29% of backbenchers have been to private schools, 42% of office holders have been independently educated - a difference of some 13 percentage points.

The gap is particularly marked in the Labour party: 25% of those in Government positions went to independent schools compared to 16% of Labour backbenchers. The highest representation of privately educated MPs is among Conservative office holders, 62% of whom have been to independent schools. Those holding office within the Liberal Democrats are less likely to have been to private schools (37%) than the rest of their party (43%), but more likely to have attended a selective state schools (23% compared to 14%). Of particular note, 13 of the 15 Etonians in the Commons are on the Conservative benches, with one each on the Labour and Liberal Democrat sides. Eight of the 13 Tory MPs from Eton hold positions within the party.

Table 2: School type attended by MPs' age

	Total with known data	Indp	%	State Comp	%	State Sel	%
All MPs aged 40 plus	511	166	32%	201	39%	144	28%
All MPs aged under 40	76	24	32%	46	61%	6	8%
Office holders of three main parties (40 plus)	175	73	42%	58	33%	44	25%
Office holders of three main parties (under 40)	31	13	42%	16	52%	2	6%
Backbenchers of three main parties (40 plus)	311	91	29%	130	42%	90	29%
Backbenchers of three main parties (under 40)	41	11	27%	26	63%	4	10%

To gauge the impact of the abolition of the grammar school system on the educational makeup of the Commons, we have also distinguished MPs aged 40 and over – who would have been largely unaffected by the reforms of the Sixties and Seventies – from those born after 1965, who would have experienced a principally comprehensive system. As one would expect, overall, a far smaller percentage of younger MPs attended grammar schools (down from 28% to 8%), and this is equally the case for MPs holding offices within the three main parties and those on the backbenches.

The decline in the representation of grammar schools among younger MPs has been mainly offset by a proportional increase in the representation of non-selective maintained schools (from 39% to 61%), rather than an increase in the percentage of those from the fee-paying sector, which remains steady at 32% for both cohorts.

Table 3: Trend in the proportion of independently educated MPs from the three main political parties<sup>7</sup>

	1951	1955	1959	1964	1966	1970	Feb-74	Oct-74	1979	1983	1987	1992	1997	2001	2005
Conservative	75%	76%	72%	75%	81%	74%	74%	75%	73%	70%	68%	62%	66%	64%	60%
Liberal Democrat			67%	33%	58%	50%	71%	69%	55%	52%	45%	50%	41%	35%	39%
Labour	20%	22%	18%	18%	18%	17%	16%	18%	18%	14%	14%	15%	16%	17%	18%

Source: *The British General Election of 1951, 55 ... 2005, David Butler and Denis Kavanagh*

Over the last fifty years the representation of privately-educated MPs among the three main parties has been following a gradual downward trend. The overall proportion of MPs from independent schools was 52% as late as 1983, having now fallen to around one third (32%). The smallest fall in the proportion of private school students is amongst Labour MPs, down from a high of 22% in 1955 to the current rate of 18%, which is the highest since the 1979 election. The unevenness of the Liberal Democrat statistics reflect the fact that the party has held relatively few seats in this period.

<sup>7</sup> The figures in the final column are taken from the 2005 edition of Butler and Kavanagh, These agree with our own analysis, with the exception that our data shows 59% of Conservatives having attended independent schools rather than 60%.



## University attendance

Table 4: Universities attended by all MPs

	Total with known univ data	No Univ	%	Total Univ	%	Oxbri dge	%	Sutton 13	%
<b>All MPs</b>	<b>625</b>	<b>173</b>	<b>28%</b>	<b>452</b>	<b>72%</b>	<b>166</b>	<b>27%</b>	<b>103</b>	<b>16%</b>
Lab office holders 2005	87	25	29%	62	71%	20	23%	12	14%
Cons office holders	81	14	17%	67	83%	37	46%	15	19%
Lib Dem office holders	35	5	14%	30	86%	12	34%	7	20%
<b>All office holders (main parties)</b>	<b>203</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>22%</b>	<b>159</b>	<b>78%</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>34%</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>17%</b>
Labour backbenchers	254	89	35%	165	65%	37	15%	44	17%
Cons backbenchers	111	19	17%	92	83%	51	46%	17	15%
Lib Dem backbenchers	27	7	26%	20	74%	7	26%	7	26%
<b>All backbenchers (main parties)</b>	<b>392</b>	<b>115</b>	<b>29%</b>	<b>277</b>	<b>71%</b>	<b>95</b>	<b>24%</b>	<b>68</b>	<b>17%</b>
Labour	341	114	33%	227	67%	57	17%	56	16%
Cons	192	33	17%	159	83%	88	46%	32	17%
Lib Dem	62	12	19%	50	81%	19	31%	14	23%
<b>TOTAL (main parties)</b>	<b>595</b>	<b>159</b>	<b>27%</b>	<b>436</b>	<b>73%</b>	<b>164</b>	<b>28%</b>	<b>102</b>	<b>17%</b>

Seventy-two percent of members of the Commons attended university, including 27% who were educated at either Oxford or Cambridge and a further 16% who attended one of the other 'Sutton 13' universities. In other words, 60% of those MPs who went to university graduated from one of just 13 institutions.

Broken down by party, over 80% of Conservative MPs have been to university, including 46% to Oxbridge and a further 17% to one of the other 'Sutton 13' institutions. By contrast two thirds of Labour MPs went to university, but they were just as likely to have been to an institution outside the 'Sutton 13' as within it, and just under one fifth (17%) attended Oxford or Cambridge. The representation of university graduates within the Liberal Democrats was almost as high as on the Conservative benches (at 81%).

Just as office holders within the three main parties are more likely to have attended independent schools, so those at the 'top' of the profession are also more likely to have been to university than their backbench colleagues (78% compared to 71%). This difference is primarily due to a significantly higher representation of graduates of Oxford and Cambridge: whereas the representation of other universities remains the same across the two samples, the proportion of MPs holding office who attended Oxbridge is just over one third (34%) compared to one quarter (24%) on the backbenches.

Notably Conservative office holders and backbenchers were equally likely to have attended university (83%), including Oxford and Cambridge (46%). By contrast, Labour MPs holding Government positions were significantly more likely to have been to university (71%) than Labour backbenchers (65%), particularly as graduates of Oxbridge (23% compared to 15%). A similar situation is evident on the Liberal Democrat benches: 86% of Liberal office holders (the highest in any of the sub-categories) had been to university, compared to three-quarters of backbench Liberal MPs, and 34% of those at the top of the party had been to Oxbridge, compared to one quarter (26%) of the remainder.

Since 1940, all but three Prime Ministers have attended university, and all those were educated at Oxford<sup>8</sup>. This trend is reflected in the make-up of the current House: of the 164 MPs of the three main parties who had been to Oxbridge, the majority (100 or 61%) were Oxford graduates.

---

<sup>8</sup> The three being Winston Churchill, Jim Callaghan and John Major.

Table 5: Trend in university and Oxbridge attendance of MPs by party<sup>9</sup>

	1951	1955	1959	1964	1966	1970	Feb-74	Oct-74	1979	1983	1987	1992	1997	2001	2005
Cons (HE)	65%	63%	60%	63%	67%	63%	67%	69%	68%	71%	70%	73%	81%	83%	81%
Lib Dem (HE)			100%	78%	83%	100%	71%	62%	45%	65%	73%	75%	70%	69%	79%
Labour (HE)	41%	40%	39%	42%	51%	54%	53%	57%	59%	53%	56%	61%	66%	67%	64%
Cons (Oxbridge)	52%	53%	50%	52%	57%	52%	54%	56%	49%	48%	44%	45%	51%	48%	43%
LD (Oxbridge)			83%	44%	50%	50%	43%	38%	27%	30%	27%	30%	33%	27%	31%
Lab (Oxbridge)	19%	17%	18%	19%	23%	25%	20%	25%	21%	15%	15%	16%	15%	16%	16%

Source: *The British General Election of 1951, 55 ... 2005*, David Butler and Denis Kavanagh

The percentage of MPs who have been educated at university has gradually risen since the Second World War in all three main parties. In 1951, just over 40% of Labour MPs had been to university, but this figure has now risen to 64% (or 67% using our analysis). In the same period, the percentage of Conservative MPs who have attended university has increased from 52% to 81% (or 83% using our data).

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. The proportion of Labour MPs from Oxbridge, for instance, was one quarter after the 1970 and 74 elections, but since 1983 has levelled off at around 16%. Although the representation of Oxbridge graduates on the Tory benches has fallen by almost 10 percentage points, Conservative MPs have consistently been over twice as likely to have attended Oxford or Cambridge as their Labour colleagues.

<sup>9</sup> Again, the figures in the final column are taken from the 2005 edition of Kavanagh and Butler, rather than our own analysis. These figures are however within three percentage points of our own in all cases.

# Educational Background of Members of the House of Lords

## School attendance

Table 6: Type of school attended by members of the House of Lords

	Total with known data	Indp	%	State Comp	%	State Sel	%
Lab	176	60	34%	60	34%	56	32%
Cons	193	153	79%	14	7%	26	13%
Lib Dem	65	35	54%	10	15%	20	31%
Crossbenchers	160	122	76%	16	10%	22	14%
Others (inc. Bishops)	37	21	57%	6	16%	10	27%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>631</b>	<b>391</b>	<b>62%</b>	<b>106</b>	<b>17%</b>	<b>134</b>	<b>21%</b>

Almost two thirds (62%) of members of the House of Lords attended independent schools. Of these 43% attended 12 institutions<sup>10</sup>, including Eton which educated 88 Lords (or 13% of the total), the majority of whom (45) were hereditary peers. Of the Lords educated in the maintained sector, over half went to state grammar schools<sup>11</sup>, compared to just over one third (38%) of MPs.

Analysed by party, Lords who sit on the Conservative benches are the most likely to have attended a private school, with over three-quarters (79%) having done so, compared to just over a third (34%) of Labour peers. Seventy-six percent of Crossbench peers were educated in the private sector, second only to the Conservatives.

Labour Lords were the most likely to be state educated (two thirds compared to one fifth of Tories), with an almost equal split between selective and non-selective schools. Among non-Labour Peers educated in the state sector, however, grammar schools dominate: twice as many Conservative and Liberal peers went to state grammars than state comprehensives, and there is a marked difference on the crossbenches too (10% compared to 14%).

<sup>10</sup> The 12 schools and the number of pupils who attended each are as follows: Eton College (82 former pupils); Winchester College (11); Harrow School (10); Stowe School (10); Westminster School (10); Shrewsbury School (9); Rugby School (8); Charterhouse (7); St Paul's School (7); Ampleforth College (6); Marlborough College (6); Radley College (6).

<sup>11</sup> As only one member of the Lords in our sample is young enough to have been educated since the grammar school closures of the mid-Seventies, the impact of this change is minimal.

Table 7: Type of school attended by hereditary peers, appointed peers and bishops

	Total with known data	Indp	%	State Comp	%	State Sel	%
Hereditary	88	86	98%	1	1%	1	1%
Appointed	518	290	56%	104	20%	124	24%
Bishops	25	15	60%	1	4%	9	36%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>631</b>	<b>391</b>	<b>62%</b>	<b>106</b>	<b>17%</b>	<b>134</b>	<b>21%</b>

The constitutional changes introduced in 1999 removed the automatic right of hereditary peers to sit in the House of Lords, and saw only 92 of the 700 or so hereditary peers elected to the reformed chamber. Of the 88 remaining hereditary peers educated within the UK all but two attended independent schools<sup>12</sup>. Among the appointed peers, over half were educated privately, although one quarter (24%) attended maintained grammar schools and a fifth (20%) had been to state comprehensive schools. Grammar schools are well represented within the contingent of Bishops too, accounting for 9 out of 10 of those educated in the state system.

---

<sup>12</sup> The remainder of the 92 were educated abroad and have not been included in the sample.

## University attendance

Table 8: Universities attended by members of the House of Lords (June 2005)

	Total with known data	No Univ	%	Total Univ	%	Oxbridge	%	Other Sutton 13	%
Lab	194	56	29%	138	71%	51	26%	35	18%
Cons	186	54	29%	132	71%	92	49%	21	11%
Lib Dem	70	16	23%	54	77%	29	41%	8	11%
Crossbenchers	170	41	24%	129	76%	85	50%	21	12%
Others (inc Bishops)	36	6	17%	30	83%	18	50%	4	11%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>656</b>	<b>173</b>	<b>26%</b>	<b>483</b>	<b>74%</b>	<b>275</b>	<b>42%</b>	<b>89</b>	<b>14%</b>

Overall, just under three quarters (74%) of members of the House of Lords attended university, a similar proportion to the Commons (72%). However, 56% attended one of the 'Sutton 13' universities, compared to 44% of MPs; and 42% went to either Oxford or Cambridge, compared to 28% of the Commons.

Across all party affiliations the spread of university graduates is more even amongst the Lords than the Commons, with between 71% and 77% of peers having been to university. As with MPs, however, Conservative Lords are the most likely - and Labour Lords the least likely - to be graduates of Oxbridge, and the representation of universities outside the 'Sutton 13' is highest on the Labour benches and lowest amongst Conservatives. Liberal Democrat and Crossbench Lords are the most likely to have been to university (77% and 76% respectively having done so), and half of Crossbenchers – or two thirds of those who had been to university – went to either Oxford or Cambridge.

Table 9: Universities attended by Hereditary Peers, Life Peers and Bishops

	Total with known data	No Univ	%	Total Univ	%	Oxbri dge	%	Other Sutto n 13	%
Hereditary	76	24	32%	52	68%	40	53%	8	11%
Appointed	556	149	27%	407	73%	222	40%	78	14%
Bishops	24	0	0%	24	100%	13	54%	3	13%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>656</b>	<b>173</b>	<b>26%</b>	<b>483</b>	<b>74%</b>	<b>275</b>	<b>42%</b>	<b>89</b>	<b>14%</b>

Looking at the data by method of appointment shows that while around 70% of both hereditary and appointed peers attended university, the proportion of Oxbridge graduates is notably higher among hereditary members of the Lords (53%) than their appointed colleagues (40%). All the Bishops sitting in the Lords are university educated, and the representation of Oxbridge and other 'Sutton 13' graduates is highest amongst their number.

# Conclusion

These results show clearly that the educational profile of our representatives in Parliament does not reflect society at large. Private schools are disproportionately represented, as are the top universities, particularly Oxford and Cambridge. Much of this imbalance may be attributed to political reasons: our analysis shows that educational background is closely linked to party affiliation and so, for instance, a larger Conservative representation in either House will result in an increased representation of the independent sector, regardless of any other factors.

But it is also the case that these findings are symptomatic of a wider issue – the educational apartheid which blights our system. As was revealed by our earlier research into the legal profession, those educated in the private sector generally enjoy better life chances than their state educated peers, and – for a range of reasons – are more likely to reach the highest strata of our society. Amongst the current crop of MPs, for example, one in three have been to a private school, compared to one in 14 in the wider population, and this rises to over one in two of those in the Conservative party.

The study also underlines the importance of continuing with the move towards fair access to the country's leading universities. Forty-three percent of MPs have attended one of the thirteen universities positioned highest in an average ranking of newspaper league tables, and it is therefore important to ensure the opportunity to attend these universities is open equally to all young people on the basis of merit. Previous work undertaken by the Trust has suggested that this is not the case at present, and that - relative to their A level achievements - those from state schools, poorer neighbourhoods and lower social classes are underrepresented.<sup>13</sup>

The Sutton Trust was founded in order to promote social mobility by providing educational opportunities to those from non-privileged backgrounds. This report underlines that this aim is still relevant and its urgency remains.

---

<sup>13</sup> See 'Entry to our Leading Universities', 'The Missing 3000', and 'An Update to the Missing 3000' at [www.suttontrust.com](http://www.suttontrust.com)



# Sources

*Who's Who 2005*

*The British General Election of 1951, 55...2005*, David Butler and Denis Kavanagh

## Websites:

Guardian Online

Times Online

KnowUK – online reference library

Political Party websites

Constituency websites

Good Schools Guide Online

Independent Schools Council Online

Individual Schools' website and related internet sites

Dod's Online Parliamentary Companion

United Kingdom Parliament website

House of Commons Information Office

House of Lords Information Office