

# A PRIVATE EDUCATION

The UK private, or 'independent' school system remains, to quote one critic, "most unusual feature of the educational landscape of Britain" (i). Unlike countries with similar or higher percentages of pupils in these institutions, the main difference isn't about religious schooling (as in Finland or Denmark) but simply about providing education to those who can afford it. It's also a big business. In total, the UK houses 2,300 private schools, with 600,000 students, around seven per cent of the nation's children. All told, they bring in about £3.2 billion per year from fees (ii).

Despite their formal 'independent' status, a large chunk of their income comes from government subsidies that pay the fees for the children of Ministry of Defence and Foreign Office officials. In the last three years, this came to a remarkable £500 million (iii). Furthermore, the tax-exemptions that the schools obtain from having 'charitable status' (because they provide education) are, according to Stephen Twigg, a Labour MP campaigning to have charitable status revoked, "...worth at least £100m a year" (iv).

By comparison, state schools have suffered successive public spending cuts, forcing them to make redundancies and increase class size. This has meant, in turn, a siphoning-off of the more affluent children to local independent schools, which increases class isolation and removes children who could potentially raise standards. This is particularly acute in London, where the percentage of children in private schooling is closer to 12 per cent (v). Further, as the teachers who are hired by these schools are principally trained at public expense, these work out as another subsidy to the schools which remain blissfully tax free.

## Scotland

In Scotland, the 'independent' school sector is smaller, but still involves big figures. There are 76 such schools with total number of pupils at

31,425, around 4.5 per cent of the population. The tax savings made here are estimated at around £10 million per year. This includes an 80 per cent discount on non-domestic rates, a tax paid by state schools. This meant that, last year, Fettes avoided £167,311 in charges, whereas Wester Hailes, where 40 per cent of the students receive free school lunches, was charged £261,873 (vi).

Calculating the costs involving available figures for day pupils and boarders at Fettes indicates that the school nets £13 million per year from fees alone. The average fees for Scottish private school are around £10,000 per pupil per year, although top schools obviously charge more. This results, on average, in a cost of £130,000 per pupil educated solely in the independent sector, putting this out of reach of all but the uppermost end of the middle class and, naturally, the ruling class for whom these schools were originally built.

## Social immobility

The first and most obvious problem with these schools is they obstruct social mobility. Britain, as documented in *The Spirit Level*, is a very unequal place with all of the attendant social problems like relatively high crime and poor mental/physical health. Wealth gaps, according to the National Equality Panel, grew massively in the period between the 1970s and 1990s, and have yet to be recovered (vii). Unsurprisingly, this polarisation has an effect on the raising of children. The same study demonstrates that:

"Children with higher social class background who start with a low assessment of relative cognitive ability when young eventually overtake those with a lower social class background who were initially assessed as having high ability. Looking from age three to age 14, differences in assessment related to family income, father's occupation and mothers education widen at each stage..." (viii)

Private education is one massive lever in this process. Within four years of education, men who went to private schools earn, on average, eight per cent more than one would expect given every other variable. Private schools provide a massive dividend for those that can afford them. Here's Nick Davies of the Guardian discussing the social imbalance. All told, privately schooled children account for "...seven out of nine senior generals; 33 out of 39 of the most senior judges; more than 120 of the 180 officers graduating from Sandhurst; half of the 18 permanent secretaries running Whitehall; and just under half of the 94 Grade Three civil servants then aged under 50 (most of the rest went to grammar schools, some of which have since been privatised)." (ix)

The Economic and Social Research Council also found that 75 per cent of private school pupils went on to take professional or managerial jobs, compared to 40 per cent from the state sector. The Sutton Trust, similarly, found in 2005 that 75 per cent of the top legal positions were held by those who had attended private school. In Scotland, specifically, one study found that, in the civil service: "...in 2004, 33 per cent of the senior management (mostly heads of department) and 21 per cent of heads of group were educated privately." (x)

## Power and control

If we can maintain that these schools produce an unfair society, this is one thing. The fact that the rich can get an unfair advantage for their children with their income is certainly objectionable, although it's doubtlessly the case that social class goes far beyond this in influencing the lives of the privileged. We should also note that, however fair an oligarchy is, it remains an oligarchy.

This is where the evidence for private schools fostering a concentration of power which, given the shared interests and obliviousness to the state sector, will make for an aloof and lethargic ruling class. As Chris Holligan wrote in the Scottish Left Review "Over time, complex and socially ingrained networks have developed... Favours done and loyalties gained are forms of social capital that can be cashed in later for helping in the advancement of the offspring of such networks of power."

John Scott also discusses the concentration of power in the traditional networks that, despite

their attempts to take over the state, the Labour Party "...has governed...it has not ruled." (xi) Social and class segregation also tends to make the other side less understanding of the day-to-day lives of those socially beneath them, something borne out in Britain's financial institutions (xii) and the 'political class' that govern us (xiii).

## Impact on children

Finally, there is the question of the harm done to the children themselves. Research by Nick Duffell found that the private schools and particularly boarding schools had many harmful effects on the pupils. Endemic, structured bullying and emotional detachment results in children either coming with a degree of sadism or severe emotional scars (xiv). Here, Duffell also discusses the reverberations of this on the culture of power, discussing Thatcher's government as contemptuous of weakness and compassion. George Monbiot, another public school pupil, has discussed the emotional abuse and bullying that pervades the schools and tends to push children to the extremes mentioned above (xv). Indeed, we might find something similar in Downing Street today; with repercussions we are all feeling.

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### References

- [i] <http://www.nickdavies.net/2000/03/01/what-s-wrong-with-private-schools/>
- [ii] <http://www.nickdavies.net/2000/03/01/what-s-wrong-with-private-schools/>
- [iii] <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/500m-in-three-years-what-you-paid-to-send-diplomats-children-to-school-8135806.html>
- [iv] <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2012/jul/19/twigg-private-schools-lose-charitable-status>
- [v] Ibid. n. 1
- [vi] <http://www.deadlinenews.co.uk/2012/07/22/private-schools-in-scotland-enjoy-10m-subsidy-on-tax-bills/>
- [vii] An Anatomy of Economic Inequality in the UK, Report of the National Equality Panel.
- [viii] Ibid. n. vi, pp. 393
- [ix] Ibid n. 1
- [x] Keating, Michael and Cairney, Paul A New Elite? Politicians and Civil Servants in Scotland After Devolution (2006) Parliamentary Affairs Vol 59, No. 1
- [xi] Scott, John Who Rules Britain (1991)
- [xii] See, for example, Polly Toynbee's Unjust Rewards: Exposing Greed and Inequality in Britain Today (2008) Granta Books
- [xiii] Here, I'd look at Peter Osborne's The Triumph of the Political Class (2008) Pocket Books
- [xiv] Duffell, Nick, The Making of Them: The British Attitude to Children and the Boarding School System (2000) Lone Arrow Press
- [xv] <http://www.monbiot.com/2008/01/22/unsentimental-education/>