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Elite Conviviality and the British Political Class
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Since the Coalition government assumed power in 2010 charges of advantage and narrowness have been laid against it. The Conservative MP [Sarah Woolaston](#), [Dame Helen Ghosh](#), Chair of the National Trust and, until her retirement, one of Britain's leading civil servants, and [Shaun Bailey](#), Conservative PPC in 2010 and an aide to the Prime Minister, have all been reported as expressing concern that David Cameron is surrounded by an exclusive Etonian clique.

Ironically, the the narrative of elite exclusion has taken over from another view, most forcefully put in the Spectator by [Peter Osborne](#), that a socially homogeneous, cross party 'political class' has replaced an older establishment rooted in Britain's traditional institutions. Despite agreement that who leads matters, each view gives a social description of the British elite that contradicts the other. Is it riven by narrow, mutually exclusive cliques based on education and gender, or do publically political clashes mask a socially unified, consensual elite?

Arbitrating between these claims is difficult because most evidence presented in favour of one or other of the views is usually too anecdotal to base confident judgements on; however, [research](#) which I undertook into the club affiliations of members of the House of Lords can shed some systematic empirical light on the structure of elite sociability in Britain. I collected data from Who's Who and De Bretts on the club memberships of all members of the House of Lords in 2010. As a political sociologist I was interested in the extent to which social characteristics such as education and gender determined the 'political class's' informal social interaction.

I focused my attention on peers rather than MPs because most, although certainly not all, peers had successful careers prior to entering the House of Lords. This feature allowed me to make broader statements about the British elite and to draw comparisons between peers who were previously elected politicians and those who made their names in business, the professions, or had inherited their place. The research had two analytic foci: 1) the likelihood of different types of Lords joining a club in the first place and 2) the extent to which they joined clubs that other, socially similar Lords joined as measured by statistically based social network models. The models permitted me to disentangle the relative effects of different statuses that intersect in concrete elite individuals (social types intersect in individuals).

Of course, caveats need to be entered about what the data can tell us: they do not include sitting MPs (although they do include cabinet members and recently retired MPs); club membership is a particular type of affiliation that represents a more traditional form of sociability; Lords are older than most other elites. While keeping the caveats in mind it is worth remembering that if narrow cliques based on gender and education can be found in

Factual – Measured - Critical

the pressure cooker environment of the cabinet or the Prime Minister's office then they should also be visible in the leisurely, convivial environment of clubs. If social patterns are not found there then the claim they are affecting the way we are governed should attract doubt.

Let's start by examining the view that party antagonisms disguise a socially unified political class with shared interests in feathering its collective nest rather than waging ideological struggles. Lords who had a career in politics were relatively less likely to be club members than their colleagues who came from better remunerated occupations in the professions and business. More importantly, unlike Lords who are famed medics, clerics and lawyers, there is no evidence that career politicians seek each other out by joining the same clubs—they show none of the clannishness associated with the established professions. To the extent that career politicians have developed a corporate identity it doesn't translate into cliquish sociability, instead they behaved most like peers with business backgrounds by showing no bias toward seeking out others from similar occupations.

While politicians failed to act as a unified social group, party acted as a force dividing Lords from all backgrounds. Sharp differences by party in the proportions of Lords joining clubs were apparent. Approximately two-thirds of Tory peers were club members, followed by around two-fifths of Liberal Democrat peers and little more than a quarter of Labour peers. Party differences extended beyond rates of membership. While there are some clubs, such as the Garrick, where Labour peers like Roy Hattersley and Sir Robert Winston rub shoulders with Tory peers like Norman Lamont and Nigel Lawson, more often Lords joined clubs that their fellow party members had joined. Part of this can be put down to the existence of party based clubs like the Carlton or the National Liberal, but other very traditional clubs without explicit party affiliation like White's have no Labour members. The evidence suggests that many Lords don't leave their partisanship at the door of the House of Lords but carry it with them into their leisure activities where they seek others with similar ideological predilections.

If the evidence from clubs is not consistent with a cross party 'political class,' what does it say about the existence of narrow cliques based on educational experience rooted in 'establishment' status groupings? Ideally, I would have liked to test whether all educational experiences affect club membership patterns but only Eton (77 peers) and Oxbridge (268) had concentrations of alumni among peers large enough to make their inclusion in the analysis meaningful. Seventy per cent of Old Etonians were club members contrasted with just over half of the distinct but overlapping status of being an Oxbridge graduate (Less than half of Oxbridge graduates who were not Old Etonians were club members). Of all categories I looked at Old Etonian sociability was only bettered by peers who had made their name in the military.

Although Old Etonians could be found in most clubs they showed a propensity to seek each other out greater than the independent tendency of being an Oxbridge graduate, or an

Factual – Measured - Critical

aristocrat, but still smaller than the tendency associated with profession or party. If Etonians are less clannish than professions and parties why is so much attention focussed on their role in forming narrow cliques instead of, for example, lawyers?

First, there are lots of them. If you are an Old Etonian you simply have, by chance, a much greater opportunity to bump into another. Second, they are sociable. They seek others to bump into. Third, they are mostly on the right. Social segregation by party does not divide them so much as it does other statuses which are more ideologically divided. Fourth, they clan. Their status as Old Etonians may make them seek each other out less than professional status or party affiliation do, but their social interest in others like them is still greater than many other statuses. The cumulative effect of these conditions makes it easy for cliques of Etonians to form even if their preference for their own kind is modest.

When expressing her concerns about Etonian cliques, Dame Helen Ghosh said that women don't politically network. Is this true of club networks as well? Women do network as measured by club membership, but they do so much less than men. While it is not known whether the lack of female sociability results from preference or exclusion (many big clubs in the sample simply don't permit female members) the proportion of female lords who are club members is only just over half that of men. Low rates of membership in tandem with their underrepresentation mean there are very few women in the club community.

As well as being scarce, women showed little propensity to seek each other out. Visible signs of female clustering at some clubs are assignable to other variables such as lack of choice of clubs to join due to institutionalised gender exclusion and party segregation. Female status in the club community bestows a mirror image of the Etonian; women are under-represented in the Lords, they are less sociable in the club community, they are highly ideologically divided and they don't seek each other out. For all these reasons the formation of female group identity in the club community, and perhaps in wider elite circles as well, is necessarily hampered.

Leisure structures grant us a view of elites' social preferences in a world less fettered by the social, economic and political demands of modern societies. If the preferences are strong enough to bend the wills of leaders in the competitive arena of the British state then they should be observable in an environment more conducive to their expression. The social structure of the Lords club community conforms little to monolithic representations of united elites as drawn by commentators as diverse as C Wright Mills or Peter Osborne. Clubs ostensibly offer British elites neutral sites where cordial relations can flourish but multiple forces rooted in party, gender, education, hedonism and occupation contribute to a differentiated and divided social structure of convivial relations.

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