‘Posh boys’: how independent schools still run Britain

Stephen Lambert

‘Imagine a world where leaders are able to pass power directly to their children. These kids are plucked from nurseries and sent to beautiful compounds far away from all other children. They are provided with all the teachers they need, the best facilities, doctors and food. Every day they are told this is because they are the brightest and most important children in the world. Years later they are presented with the best jobs, the grandest homes and most of the money. Through their networks of friends and family they control the government, the army, the police and the nation’s finances. They claim everyone is equal, that each individual has a chance to become a leader. But this isn’t true. If such a world existed today, wouldn’t we say it was unfair, even corrupt?’

Robert Verkaik in his new book *Posh Boys: How the English Public Schools Ruin Britain* presents a damning critique of the nation’s private school system and outlines, through bold, radical reform, how we can make society ‘fairer for all’.

Private schools, popularly known as independent schools in contemporary discourse, are fee-paying educational institutions outside the state sector. 2000 independent schools exist throughout the UK, including 200-odd ‘public schools’ such as Eton, Winchester and Westminster. Most are single sex, but the trend is towards co-educational.

There’s been a sharp increase in the number of youngsters going to a private school - seven per cent nationally, with over a third attending an independent school of one form or another in London. Even in Newcastle-Upon-Tyne over twelve per cent are privately educated. Most are upper or professional middle class, partly down to tradition and fees.

In England there’s been a long tradition of private education with the establishment of public schools. For some writers the name public school refers to the existence of ‘Gentleman’s Factories’ designed to prepare the wealthy for top roles in public service.

For the author Robert Verkaik this is simply not true. ‘The public schools were founded to educate the poor and ended up serving the interests of the rich’, he writes. Certainly private education began with the church and private tutors for the well-to-do which filtered down to the middle classes by the 19th century.

The UK spends more on private education than any other society in the developed world. £9b comes through fees, over £1b from endowment and donations, and a further £200m from central government through indirect tax subsidies. According to Verkaik there are now more kids being schooled privately than at any time since records began. Five million people in England alone have attended an independent school. In the last decade the private sector has become a key player in the international educational market place, with growing numbers of students coming from overseas, mainly Russia and Saudi Arabia.

In the last year, educationalists from both sides of the political spectrum have started to re-focus their attention on the role of private schools in the context of the UK’s educational landscape.

For the political right, largely defenders of private schools, the system offers parental choice and status in a free society. They emphasise smaller class sizes and better facilities than those found in state comprehensive schools, meaning children have a better chance of getting into the top Russell Group universities like Oxbridge, Bristol or Durham. And getting a top job at the end of it.

Yet Verkaik, and others like Melissa Benn in *Life Chances* (2018), fundamentally disagree. For Verkaik our society has an 'apartheid education system' that perpetuates and reproduces social and economic inequality in post-modern Britain. In short, private - and especially public - schools are elitist and socially divisive, and undermine the liberal-democratic principle of equality of opportunity.

For these writers most people don't have the resources to buy a private education for their children. It's ethically unjust that the offspring of the rich and influential should be afforded more advantages in education than the disadvantaged. Despite the private sector catering for the upper middle classes, they are treated as charities by national government with tax exemptions. To justify their charitable status, worth up to £2.5b per year, independent schools are legally obliged to do a modest amount of community-based outreach work for 'the public benefit'. Few do. More so, the prestigious public schools like Eton have assets estimated at £162m!

Also, the taxpayer funds the cost of training teachers for these schools, as all have attended state-run PGCE programmes.

The educational writer Melissa Benn questions whether the quality of teaching in private schools is any better than in state-run comprehensive schools or academies. An Edinburgh University study found that there's little tangible difference in exam passes between middle-class comprehensive pupils and those in the independent sector. And when it comes to graduation, state educated students, along with adult returners on Access to HE courses, achieve more first and upper second class degrees than their privately educated peers.

Despite this, those educated privately still get the top jobs in society. As Owen Jones notes in his book *The Establishment*, an 'old boys network' still exists in 21st century Britain. A private school education remains the key passport to the 'elite jobs' - that tiny number of positions in society that carry prestige, power and privilege.

Many of the top jobs in the senior civil service, law, medicine, national media and business are held by ex-public schoolboys. According to research conducted by the social mobility organisation the Sutton Trust in 2017, 68 per cent of top barristers, 74 per cent of senior judges, 71 per cent of senior officers in the armed forces, 50 per cent of members of the House of Lords and 54 per cent of lead company directors were educated privately.

Alarmingly, in several cases, even well qualified candidates from state schools stand little chance of gaining a foothold in these lucrative careers when competing with privately educated pupils. As Verkaik points out, the route map into the elite jobs is primarily through a public school and Oxbridge (where 48 per cent of students come from public schools).

This is a very good book. It's well structured and well written. Verkaik spends a lot of time on 'posh boys' but barely mentions 'posh girls'. There's an abundance of private girls schools and it would have been helpful to have some analysis of female destinations, even if many do end up following History of Art degree courses at high tariff universities or becoming highly paid nannies to families of the British 'establishment'.

Verkaik is quite right to point out that over 70,000 kids are currently educated in UK private boarding schools. Until recently these were in decline but are undergoing a revival, partly due to the popularity of Harry Potter films. As Alex Renton points out in his 2017 book *Stiff Upper Lip: Secrets, Crimes and the Schooling of a Ruling Class*, wealthy families from the far east, China, Hong Kong, Russia, Germany and Saudi Arabia are sending their offspring in huge numbers to these schools to boost family status and make the right connections and meet 'the right people'.

What is to be done? For Verkaik the solutions are bold and radical - 'a slow and painless euthanasia whereby the privileges of the private sector are slowly whittled away'. No government, even a left-leaning one like Labour led by Jeremy Corbyn, is likely to countenance this.

Corbyn's 2017 manifesto went no further than proposing to abolish the VAT exemption on school fees. And the Conservative broadcaster Jeremy Paxman, himself privately educated, believes that the status quo can't continue. Perhaps one pragmatic way forward is to adopt Melissa Benn's policy prescription of removing charitable status from private schools altogether, in an attempt to facilitate a genuine integrated National Education Service along the lines of the NHS (still seen as 'the jewel in the crown of the Welfare State').