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Posh Is Back in Britain (No, This Isn't About Spice Girls)

Revolt Against Labour Party Heralds New Era of Old-School Ties, Plummy Accents

By ALISTAIR MACDONALD

LONDON—For many years, James Fergusson hid a secret: He was educated at Eton College, the elite private school for boys he attended with Britain's new prime minister, David Cameron, in the early 1980s.

Like many Etonians of his generation, Mr. Fergusson, a freelance journalist and novelist, had grown self-conscious about his status as a man of status.

In modern Britain, it had become uncool to be posh, as private schools lost their grip on the country's top jobs and cultural tastemakers sneered at privilege.

Mr. Fergusson sometimes dropped Eton from his résumé and sought to tone down his upper-crust pronunciation.

Among old boys, as the private-school alumni are known, "there was an assumption that the days of Etonians in high office were over," Mr. Fergusson said. "And then bang, along comes David Cameron."

This week, the old boys are back in town. Mr. Cameron on Tuesday became the 19th British prime minister to have been educated by the famous boarding school west of London near Windsor—but the first since the mid-1960s.

The situation is shedding new light on social mobility, or the lack thereof, in this famously class-obsessed country.

In Britain's new coalition government—run by Mr. Cameron's Tories and Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg's Liberal Democrats—old-school ties are everywhere. Two top officials of Mr. Cameron's cabinet—Sir George Young and Oliver Letwin—and two senior members of his back-office staff are also Etonians.

Meanwhile, Mr. Cameron's right-hand man, new Treasury chief George Osborne, attended St. Paul's School. Mr. Clegg and environment minister Chris Huhne, from the Liberal Democrat Party, were educated at Westminster School.

The shift reflects the fact that officials elected under the Tory and Lib Dem banners are much more likely to come from privileged educational backgrounds than those from traditionally working-class Labour Party, which just ended a 13-year run in power.

After their private prep schools, top officials in the new government moved on, en masse, to the country's best universities.

Sutton Trust, a charity that provides educational opportunities for students from low-income families, says nearly three quarters of the cabinet, including Messrs. Clegg and Cameron, went to Britain's top universities—Oxford and Cambridge, long seen as the incubators of Britain's governing class. Oxford has a special stranglehold on the top job: Of U.K. prime ministers since 1940 who attended university, only one—Gordon Brown—didn't go to Oxford.

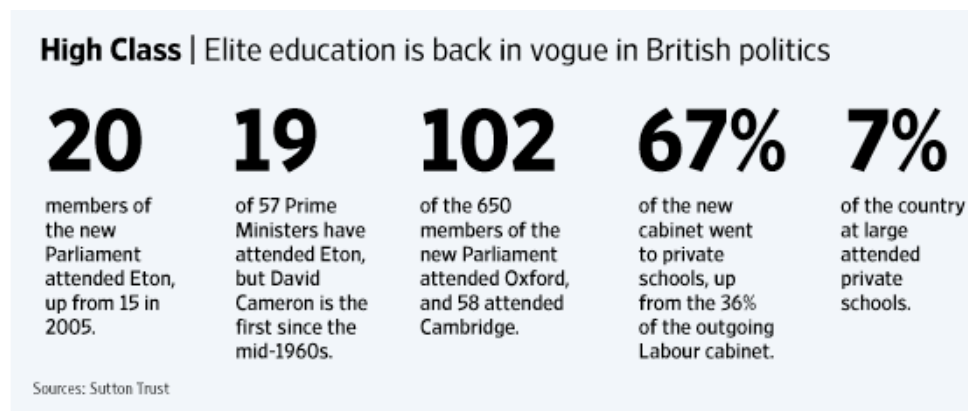
Of course, privately educated politicians didn't disappear from British cabinets after the U.K.'s previous Etonian Prime Minister, Alec Douglas-Home, left Downing Street in 1964.

Former Labour leader Tony Blair was educated at top Scottish school Fettes, for example.

But the Eton class has, to some degree, been in hiding in British society in recent years.

When asked where he was educated, management consultant Simon Radford, who attended Eton, habitually offered a vague reply that he attended a school just outside of Windsor. Later on, he sweated for six months on a job in blue-collar North Tyneside, worried that his background would come out.

"I was dealing with refuse collectors and manual workers, the last thing I wanted was for them to think Little Lord Fauntleroy had come to tell them what to do," says Mr. Radford, now in graduate school at the University of Southern California. When the truth came out, he was forced to admit that he had taken English classes with Prince William, heir to Britain's throne.



Some admit to a bit of reverse snobbery. In 2000, Labour lawmaker Chris Mullin voted for Michael Martin against Etonian Sir George Young as Speaker of the House.

"I should have voted for George, but faced with a choice between an Etonian baronet and a lad from the slums of Glasgow, my heart overruled my head," he said.

By contrast, little was made of Mr. Cameron's education in the latest national election.

"Class consciousness is becoming weaker, it doesn't seem to be a significant social identifier in the way it used to be," said Anthony Heath, a professor of sociology at Oxford University.

This is particularly so in the young and in Britain's increasingly large ethnic population, he said.

Still, Eton has held a particular mystique in British politics and culture. Jacob Rees-Mogg, a newly elected Conservative member of Parliament, remembers how, as a pupil, he would see Eton head up two lists: the highest number of old boys as MPs and the highest number in jail, compared with other schools.

He attributes both to Eton's encouragement of individuality. Unlike other top boarding schools, pupils are given their own room.

"They always encouraged you to be your own person, and that gives you a great base, great confidence in your own abilities," he said.



Not everybody is enamored. Etonians "as a ruling elite are utterly inbred as they prize each other above ordinary mortals, and don't know the worries and needs of those subordinate citizens who didn't go to Eton," said Denis MacShane, a Labour MP.

Left-wing conspiracy theorists point out that the political editors and writers of some of Britain's top newspapers and broadcasters, including the Sun, Times of London and BBC, are also Etonians. Ahead of the election, a poster of Mr. Cameron was defaced in North London with the words "Eton Scum."

Mr. Cameron has sometimes attempted to deflect the implications of his background. He once declared his affection for "Eton Rifles," a song about class warfare by the seminal 1970s British mod band the Jam that asks, "What chance have you got against a tie and a crest?"

In response to Mr. Cameron's comments, former Jam leader Paul Weller in March 2008 was quoted in the

Guardian newspaper asking: "Which bit didn't he get?"

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