It is widely recognised that a lack of social mobility and elite recruitment are damaging to society. John Williams looks at a new report on the social make-up of those in charge of the UK.

Predicting your income

Elitist Britain? (2014) is a new official report produced by the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission. The report examines in some detail the social make-up of those people who are in charge of the UK and it explores patterns of social mobility. It comes up with some interesting findings. For example, the relationship between income of parents and children is stronger in Britain than in most comparable countries. So one of the best predictors available today of your likely income is the income of your parents (Figure 1).

Researchers also analysed the backgrounds of 4,000 UK leaders in politics, business, the media and other important areas of public life. The report highlights what it calls a ‘dramatic over-representation of those educated at independent schools and Oxbridge across the institutions that have such a profound influence on what happens in our country’. In short, it suggests that Britain is ‘deeply elitist’. Although only 7% of people in the UK attend independent schools, a much higher percentage than this is ‘deeply elitist’. Although only 7% of people in the UK attend independent schools, a much higher percentage than this (i.e. everyone equally likely to reach highest income quartile) remains high, though it is slowly falling (Figure 3).

Male, Oxbridge-educated MPs

We might reasonably ask here: why have the question mark in the report’s title? After all, this is hardly news to most sociologists. There has been much sociological work on the problems faced by those in state education, women, people from black and minority ethnic (BME) backgrounds and working-class people in making it into the very top positions in key sectors. But new post-structuralist and post-modern accounts in sociology might suggest that these perceived barriers are no longer so important: that opportunities and choices are now available to everyone, irrespective of education, ‘race’, gender or class. Not so — the percentage of male, Oxbridge-educated MPs (in a population in which only 0.8% of all adults went to Oxbridge) remains high, though it is slowly falling (Figure 3).

What is new here is an official public statement that a profound lack of social mobility and elite recruitment are important and are damaging to society. There are recommendations to improve school outreach work, for industry and business to offer more work experience and internships to people outside the usual groups, for employers to broaden their selection of candidates, and for companies to offer a fast track to non-graduates. Will it work? Will we see more state-educated women and people from working-class backgrounds rising up through the ranks? We can hope, but it seems unlikely in a society in which the educational background of the few continues to be such an influential and defining feature.

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