

Church of England bishops are more elitist than David Cameron's cabinet

Posted: Tue, 5th Apr 2016 by [Ed Moore](#)

A small, almost entirely Oxbridge-educated elite are given automatic seats in Parliament. How do we allow this to continue, asks Ed Moore.

In 2015 a widely debated report from the [Sutton Trust](#) pointed out just how many of David Cameron's new Conservative cabinet went to elite schools and universities and how unrepresentative this was of the general population of the country.

The [Guardian](#) calculated of the 32 people attending cabinet meetings:

- 50% went to Oxbridge
- 34% attended a Russell Group university other than Oxbridge
- 53% attended an independent school
- 7% attended grammar schools

If we do the same analysis on the current 40 enthroned or acting diocesan bishops how does it compare? Interestingly:

- 85% studied at Oxford or Cambridge
- 12.5% attended a Russell Group university other than Oxbridge
- 32.5% attended an independent school
- 32.5% attended a grammar school

Just one Bishop failed to attend an elite university and 5% more bishops attended a selective or fee-paying school than the perceived establishment Conservatives.

I've been reading *Secularization and Moral Change* by Alasdair MacIntyre and he includes a passage that helps explain the situation:

"The upper classes integrated religion into their recognized status system. Being an Archdeacon or a Dean, let alone a Bishop, confers, and always has conferred, social status in the same way as certain ranks in the armed forces do. This is scarcely surprising since so large a number of the higher clergy went to public schools and to Oxford or Cambridge and come from precisely the same families which produce Colonels and Rear-Admirals."

It would be interesting to get a viewpoint from the Church of England as to why the bishops come from so privileged a position and what the church is doing to promote priests from poorer backgrounds to redress the balance. This would be their own internal problem, save for the fact that twenty-six of their bishops (including two archbishops) have a very privileged position in parliament.

These clerics have votes and seats (as of right) in the House of Lords, wield significant political influence, particularly over publicly funded education, yet come from a very particular social, economic and educational class.

Their backgrounds lend them to a religiosity, affiliated with their class and educational background, which is not shared by most of the population.

There is much angst about the Government being unrepresentative - and if you share that view you can vote them out of office. But for the bishops there is no democratic recourse whatsoever.

Alasdair MacIntyre's lecture was from 1967, in fifty years not much seems to have changed.

Ed Moore

Ed Moore is the treasurer of the National Secular Society. The views expressed in our blogs are those of the author and may not represent the views of the NSS.

- [Share on What's App](#)
- [Share on Facebook](#)
- [Share on Twitter](#)
- [Share on Email](#)
- [Subscribe to RSS Feed](#)

Tags: [Disestablishment](#)

Related Campaigns

-

[Disestablish the Church of England](#)

A state religion has no place in a 21st century democracy.

[Read More](#)

Related Articles

[NSS announces major conference on protecting liberal values](#)

Kenan Malik, Joan Smith and more speaking at NSS Secularism 2024 conference in London. [Read More »](#)

New extremism definition may put free speech at risk, NSS warns

Proposed definition could 'label secularists as extremists'. [Read More »](#)

A state Church is no bulwark against extremism – but secularism is

With its commitment to the separation of religion and state and safeguarding the rights of all individuals, secularism can provide an effective defence against the spread of extremism, says Stephen Evans. [Read More »](#)

Report: CofE safeguarding “below standards” of secular institutions

Most victims and survivors unsatisfied with safeguarding approaches, while safeguarding 'weaponised' to remove those "seen as a nuisance", report finds. [Read More »](#)

Resist calls for £50m a year for churches, NSS urges minister

Churches trust also calls for churches to host NHS services. [Read More »](#)