



Private Schools & Politics

14th September 2021, Hamilton House, London

Here below is a selection of the best and most intriguing quotes from the public evening run by Private Education Policy Forum. The panel was discussing the relationship between private schools and politics in the UK.

An accompanying audio record of the event is available at www.pepf.co.uk/events

Robert Verkaik – journalist and author of *Posh Boys: How Public Schools Ruin Britain*

On private school culture & public life:

- [07:00] *“Is it not almost corrupt to be able to say [...] ‘I have bought the right to make my child’s life better than yours’?”*

On state schools in the hands of the privately educated:

- [19:08] *“This question would be really easy to answer if Gavin Williamson had been to a private school, given the dire state of our state schools at the moment – but he didn’t, so it’s a bit tricky...If you end up taking a responsible role in the social policy of education in this country and you send your own children to a private school then I think that says a bit more about you, actually...that’s a fundamental kick in the teeth to our state schools.”*

On possible reform options:

- [44:32] *“I would abolish charitable status because I don’t see much charity in educating extremely privileged wealthy people and then giving these institutions tax breaks. So if we impose VAT on schools fees we’d have one and half billion pounds to plough into the state system.”*

Lord Ralph Lucas – Conservative peer, vice-chair of the APPG for Independent Education and owner/publisher of *The Good Schools Guide*

On private school culture & public life:

- [08:45] *“I don’t recognise now a ‘private school culture’ – I very much recognise it in people my age and a bit younger, but in the pupils at school now, no.”*

Would the same people still rise to the top without private schools?

- [33:18] *“If you have been raised in a family that believes in public service, if you are comfortable enough off to be able to afford the uncertainties and risks of a political career then politics is going to be something that attracts you and I don’t think that flow is going to be vastly affected by whether people go to private schools or not.”*

On possible reform options:

- [43:00] *“Two things – at election time, market political parties as a ‘team’ and not as a set of individuals so we can see what their overall makeup is like. Secondly, allow state schools to offer parents what they want; very few parents would want to pay fees at the level they’re at*

now if state schools would offer a few things that really make the difference, like discipline, ambition and attitude, consistently across the board."

Ash Sarkar – Activist, academic and journalist (senior editor at Novara Media)

On state schools in the hands of the privately educated:

- [14:22] *"A comprehensive school can be the best of a society in microcosm...I don't buy this argument that you have to have direct experience [...] but I do think that politics would be better if it wasn't so dominated by those who went to private schools"*

Would the same people still rise to the top without private schools?

- [26:25] *"Those people with that head start in life will behave better, will be kinder, will be more empathetic, will be more understanding if they're educated alongside people who are less privileged than them, and will raise the attainment of those people."*

On reform options:

- [42:25] *"Why not have a cap – 7% of places in parliament, government departments, at the BBC – can be for privately educated people. Then let's see how quickly the private education system falls apart, because if private education didn't confer unfair advantage, no one would pay for it."*

James Tooley – Low-cost private education specialist and professor of educational entrepreneurship and of education policy and Vice-Chancellor at the University of Buckingham

On private school culture & public life:

- [11:30] *"Private schools are doing something right, which is why people are attracted to them. For me, the issue is...is state school culture corrosive to public life? I would probably say that it is."*

On state schools in the hands of the privately educated:

- [15:45] *"I totally disagree with Ash - I think it's a crying shame if those politicians who are looking after the state school sector haven't been to state schools, I think it's absolutely essential that they should go to state schools and if you haven't, you shouldn't be in charge of them...I [also] disagree with her characterisation of what it was like to be in a state school. She describes a true melting pot of all different classes and so on – well, the comprehensive I went to in East Bristol was in a working class area and it was full of working class boys and girls and I certainly didn't meet any middle classes in the school that I went to."*

On charitable status:

- [54:55] *"Private schools are in this arms race to improve their facilities to compete with each other [...] that is a nonsense. If their charitable status was abolished, and if they were forced to think about price then they would stop competing in that way in my view and would start looking at what is essential to education instead of these frivolous things to attract the rich from Russia and China and this country."*

...and at [45:55] – *"I do agree [with Robert Verkaik] about charity status, it is gross."*