

A leadership crisis

The British educational system produces ambitious and pugnacious leaders who can't handle uncertainty and compromise: they have to win every argument.

by Erik Jones *



The British ruling class once governed the world; now they struggle to govern the United Kingdom. The political parties are splintered, the people are divided, the institutions are in conflict, and the gap between England, Scotland, and Northern Ireland continues to widen. Worse, the British government has once again failed to negotiate to secure a majority in parliament to exit the European Union or to come up with a convincing plan for how to leave without one.

This problem might be understandable if Great Britain were suddenly taken over by a new political class that lacked experience in government or in Europe. Instead, however, the most powerful players in British politics were educated at Eton and Oxford, they have made a life of politics, and they have connections that extend across the Continent (as well as across the Atlantic). If they are making a mess of British politics at home and abroad, it is not for lack of preparation.

The failings of the British ruling class stem from a mix of factors, none of which is unique to Great Britain. Their socialization as elites has taught them to compete in ways that are very different from the habits and aspirations of much of the rest of Britain. Their economic interests and cultural life are more global than local, despite their loud protests of fealty to the nation. Finally, and perhaps most important, the electoral system creates incentives for politicians to ignore the interests of the whole of the country and to focus on mobilizing a narrow group of supporters who can be trusted to win them the next election.

Elite socialization centers on Oxford University and, if *Financial Times* columnist Simon Kuper is correct, more specifically on the Oxford Union – which is the student debating society. Oxford University is arguably the world's leading educational institution. It is certainly one of the hardest for prospective students to gain admissions. Oxford also shares with Cambridge a unique pedagogical tradition of educating students through individual tutorials, where students meet with faculty on a weekly basis to read out their papers to professors who provide instant

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and continuous feedback both on their writing and on their skills in oral presentation. This system forces students to learn to think quickly and to express themselves concisely and persuasively. It also fosters a high degree of self-confidence. Students who pass through Oxford are not intimidated by intellectual authority; they are grown accustomed to supporting their opinions in the face of sustained scrutiny and even outright opposition.

The tutorial system at Oxford gives students opportunities to interact with faculty individually but it also leaves them to their own devices for much of the week. Students are encouraged to attend lectures, but they also take part in an array of other activities, many of which they manage for themselves. The Oxford Union is one of the most important. This is where students debate the issues of the day both with one-another and with politicians, intellectuals, or celebrities from outside the university. As a result, this is the venue where the already high level of self-confidence generated by the Oxford education reaches its extremes. It is unsurprising, therefore, that the student leadership of the Oxford Union is a natural training ground for Britain's national political leadership. As Kuper points out, many of the key players in the current British government started political life as officers in the Oxford Union.

This extreme level of self-confidence is excellent training for political competition, but it may be poor training for managing uncertainty. The more Britain's political elites focus on defending their personal views, the less they are able to admit to doubt or compromise. Margaret Thatcher used to refer to this as 'the politics of conviction.' And, where it is successful, that practice tends to spread well beyond the Oxford-educated elites and to the rest of Britain's ruling class. That is why 'Thatcher's Children', to borrow a phrase British journalist Simon Jenkins, can be found across the political spectrum.

Of course, in the real world, conviction is constrained by consequences. When politicians pursue their ambition without doubt or compromise, they must face up to

the costs of their actions — social, economic, and political. This is where it is useful to look at the economic and cultural life of Britain's political elites. It is also a good reason to look at the incentives created by their electoral institutions.

The economic and cultural life is distorted by two factors: the concentration of activity in London and the Southeast, and the prominence of the financial services industry and globalized capital markets. Life in and around London, where British elites tend to congregate, is very different from the agricultural southwest or the industrial north of the country. It is more cosmopolitan, more multicultural, and more mobile. Because it is so dependent upon finance, moreover, the regional economy that surrounds London operates according to a different business cycle or rhythm. This was immediately apparent during the British referendum on European Union membership, where Londoners voted overwhelming in favor of maintaining ties with the European Union and those outside voted against.

The too-easy presumption in this context is that British elites would overwhelmingly support British membership given their cosmopolitan upbringing and global economic interests. Such an assumption ignores, however, the willingness of those elites to stake out a strong, contrarian position. Boris Johnson famously wrote two editorials to announce his position in the referendum campaign — one for continued membership and the other against. In the end, he decided that leading the opposition to membership would attract the most attention and so create the best political opportunities. When his 'Leave' side won the referendum, Johnson was visibly staggered by the implications.

Johnson's hesitation after the referendum result was only momentary. Because they are rooted in the economy and culture of London and its surroundings, Britain's elites can maintain their self-confidence without being constrained by the consequences of their actions. They will continue to have a cosmopolitan existence whether or not Britain remains a European Union

Boris Johnson in Brussels. It's rumoured that the Tory leader prepared two editorials to announce his referendum campaign, one in favour and the other against Brexit, and chose Leave because he thought it would be to his advantage.

member state, and they will suffer fewer costs from Britain's exit than those people who are already more isolated from global markets. Most economic models show that the costs of Britain's exit will fall disproportionately on the regions to the southwest and to the north; London and the southeast will suffer as well, but the wealthiest members of the community — meaning most of the ruling class — will be least affected.

The only real constraints on Britain's elites are political and works through elections and party politics. Here it is worth noting two important factors. One is the country's first-past-the-post electoral system where parties capture single-member districts by winning a plurality of the votes. This element tends to polarize debates and hence to reinforce the advantages of self-confidence. The lion's share of British governments rests on outright majorities and not coalitions. That majoritarian tendency explains why Margaret Thatcher could so easily characterize compromise as a dirty word. British politics was not always so polarized, but once the divisions set in, they were very difficult to reverse.

The other political factor stems from the asymmetrical way that British politics is decentralized. Since 1997, Scotland has its own parliament while Wales and Northern Ireland have assemblies. Moreover, the representatives to these forums stand for election in multi-member districts under proportional electoral rules. Scottish, Welsh, and Northern Irish politicians have to compromise in order for these subnational governments to function. The current suspension of the Stormont Assembly in Northern Ireland shows what happens when they opt for bloody-mindedness. Politicians in the devolved parts of Britain also have to demonstrate their ties to the local community and economic interests. By impli- ➤



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Students at Oxford University. Most of the current leaders of the British government began their careers as members of the Oxford Union, a debating society where students and guest speakers from outside the university get to discuss many topical issues.

cation, what succeeds at the national level in Westminster, does not work in Holyrood (Scotland), Senedd (Wales), or Stormont.

The political elites in decentralized communities are distinctive; by implication, 'national' or British political elites are predominantly English. Moreover, their Englishness narrows their focus of attention on those constituencies where the national political parties are competitive and makes it easy for them to ignore the concerns of the devolved regions. The Conservative government elected in May 2017 was an exception insofar as it held onto a workable majority only through a confidence and supply agreement with the Northern Irish Democratic Unionist Party (DUP). Should the country head into new elections, however, it is easy to see how the leadership of the Conservative party could abandon the DUP – just as Boris Johnson has done with his last-minute agreement to leave the European Union. Without the DUP, that deal has little chance of succeeding. For Johnson, what matters more is how it sets his Conservative Party up for the upcoming elections that many expect to see.

Coming more than two and a half years since the start of negotiations, it is easy to question why Britain's elites have made such a mess at delivering on their promises to the electorate. Brexit may mean Brexit, as then Conservative Prime Minister Theresa May declared, but Britain remains in limbo as a member of the European Union. The answer is that those promises were made with an eye to win the argument and without much regard for the consequences. The British elites could do that because they have a lifetime of practice in this sort of debating, because they are armed with extraordinary self-confidence in the face of authority and opposition, and because they are largely insulated from the economic and social consequences.

Most important, perhaps, Britain's elites could go down this path because their focus is on winning the next national election in English constituencies and because they have limited affinity or involvement with political elites in other parts of the United Kingdom. This kind of insularity is not unique to British political elites. The elites of many other countries are similarly in-

ward looking. The difference in the British case lies in the consequences and not in the constitution of the British ruling class.

Should Britain's elites fail to find some way to leave the European Union without creating enormous disruptions outside the area around London, they may find that the politics in other parts of the country will turn decisively against them. This threat is particularly great in the devolved regions, where the political elite is different and where the institutions for exercising political authority already exist (at least in part). A British national elite that is predominantly English may face a Scottish or Northern Irish national elite that is not and does not wish to be governed the English way. This will not change the British ruling class, perhaps, but it will change Great Britain and hence what it means to be British. **e**

*** Erik Jones [BOLOGNA]** is director of European and Eurasian studies at the Johns Hopkins University. He has written for *The Financial Times*, *The New York Times*, *USA Today* and magazines across Europe.