

# The Changing Social Structure in Britain

Shuzaburo Hironaga

## I Metamorphosis

It was during the Industrial Revolution that the British class system as we know it, first came into existence. British society was then split into three broad groups, upper class, middle class and lower class.

Now, two centuries after the Industrial Revolution, this class system is undergoing a gradual change. As Robert Millar<sup>1)</sup> says in his book *The New Classes*, Britain is now in a state of transformation from a stratification based on birth to one based on money and achievement. He attributes the change to the following six main factors:

1. The growing assumption that it is the right of every individual, whatever his background, capabilities and potential, to feel that he is the equal in all respects of his fellow-men. Much of the post-war legislation — the health service and legal aid, for instance — has been based on this belief and has set out to give it practical expression.

2. The impact of full employment. As long as there were millions of able-bodied men and women out of work an artificial price was placed on the value of labour. Now that there is fierce competition for workers, the labourer is truly worthy of his hire.

3. The transformation of the occupational hierarchy. For historical reasons, certain types of work always carried with them a much higher social status than others. But the technical changes in industry have

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1) a journalist and author of *The Affluent Sheep*.

smashed this artificial status hierarchy. The former apprentice who becomes an industrial tycoon is held in higher esteem, and has much greater economic power, than a member of the hereditary aristocracy.

4. The new-found mobility of the British people. The most rigid class system is found where people are born, grow up and die in the same geographical area. Over the past two decades, however, the British people have moved in their millions from the country to the great city conurbations, from the cities to the suburbs, from the suburbs to the countryside, from the country back to the cities.

5. The change taking place in the educational system. The belief in equality of opportunity has found its fullest expression in education. The trend is toward a multi-class education system, both in the State and the private sector.

6. The change taking place in the power structure. The upper class no longer controls the political machinery of government. Its grip on the financial and industrial life of Britain is no longer tight and firm. Entry to the upper reaches of the civil service is more open than ever before.

Millar's view is endorsed by David Frost<sup>2)</sup> and Antony Jay<sup>3)</sup> who say in their *To England With Love* as follows:

"It was a happy day for England when she began to dismantle her old class system. The divisions into upper, middle and lower classes had, for many decades, been the cause of enmity and bitterness inimical to the health of the nation and the individuals who comprised it. Snobbery was rife and inequality rampant. The insolence of the upper to the middle class; the vicious indifference of the middle to the lower; the obsequiousness of the lower to both, all in their turn made mock everywhere of ease and good fellowship.

"Long after all other sensible people had abandoned tiresome notions about good breeding and aristocracy, the English cherished their class structure. But these are nobler times. The English at last have ac-

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2) an author, producer and columnist.

3) an author, television editor, producer and free-lance.

knoiwledged the futility of these ancient partitions and swept them away. Mr. Edward Heath takes over from the fourteenth Earl of Home; the clubs of St. James's yield to the coffee houses of Chelsea; Carnaby Street usurps Savile Row; Liverpoolian pop stars weekend at ducal castles; dukes go out to work; ancient universities welcome upstart sons of hobnailed workmen. The bad old system is smashed. The archaic pyramid, upper-middle-lower, an unholy trinity of Jealousy, malevolence and frustration, cracks and crumbles and those at the top—the people who said looking-glass for mirror, writing paper for notepaper, chimneypiece for mantelpiece; the people who never said "Cheers" when they drank; the peers and courtiers and country squires—no longer signify. The three great classes melt and mingle. And a new Britain is born.

"Classlessness, or the illusion of it, has been created by the process of continuous assimilation through which for centuries England has avoided bloody revolutions and civil disorder and preserved intact its Royal Family and institutions of privilege, while almost everywhere else in the world they succumbed. While upper-class foreigners fought their class war in one sharp pitched battle, throwing everything they possessed into a contest they were bound to lose—a demonstration of narrow-minded stupidity and, worse, vulgarity, which indicates to us that they never really qualified for the epithet upper-class at all, and accounts in large measure for our disdain of foreigners—the English upper class very wisely avoided trench warfare. Instead, whenever pressure from below grew too strong, they made a tactical withdrawal. Of course, as they withdrew they took with them everything of value which stood upon the territory in dispute, but the territory itself they conceded with good grace and without bloodshed or tears."

## II Monarchy

The most typical example of self-preservation through concession is

the Sovereign, who reigns but does not rule.

The British monarchy was originally sustained by the almost mystical devotion of the people and made no claims to interfere with their right to govern themselves. The notion of autocratic power was imported late into the conception of kingship. After the vicissitudes of the centuries the monarchy has now returned to something like the remote origins from which it sprang.

The Queen is the Head of the State. She summons, prorogues and dissolves Parliament. She opens the new session of Parliament with a speech from the Throne which outlines her Government's program. Before a bill which has passed all its stages in both Houses of Parliament it must receive the Royal Assent.

As the fountain of honour the Queen confers peerages, knighthoods and other honours. She appoints all her Ministers, judges, officers in the armed forces, governors, diplomats, etc.

An important function of the Queen which involves personal discretion is the appointment of a Prime Minister. Frequently the appointment is almost automatic since it is a convention of the constitution that the Sovereign must invite the leader of the party commanding a majority in the House of Commons to form a Government.

Another important function of the Queen is to promote Britain's friendly relations with other members of the British Commonwealth of which she is the head. Queen Elizabeth II has visited various countries of the Commonwealth together with her consort, the Duke of Edinburgh.

At home the Queen has taken active steps to break down the class barrier which separated her from her subjects. The debutante presentations, which had anyway become a subject of ridicule, have been abolished. Instead, she now holds regular lunches and dinners at Buckingham Palace, at which trade union officials, sportsmen, pop singers, actors and actresses, craftsmen, industrialists, civil servants, local government officials and aristocrats may meet informally. Many

of the other customs which separated the Royal Family from lesser mortals have been quietly shelved. Once all applicants for the Royal Enclosure at Ascot had to be vetted by the Lord Chamberlain and were approved only after a thorough scrutiny. All the old regulations have been now relaxed. And, perhaps, a sign of the changing times, in 1964 an advertisement appeared in the *Evening Standard* actually inviting applications for Royal Enclosure vouchers.<sup>4)</sup>

There are many other examples of the democratization of the monarchy. The Royal children go to schools where they can mix with a far more representative cross-section of the population than can be found at the usual nurseries of privilege. Prince Charles, the Heir Apparent, was sent to the preparatory school of Cheam and the rather off-beat public school of Gordonstoun, at which his father had been so happy. He studied also at Timbertop in Australia before joining Trinity College, Cambridge.

Prince Charles has been given full opportunity to develop his own individual gifts and interests in a way which would have been unthinkable even a generation ago. No English prince in history has been in such close contact with members of his own generation from all walks of life as Prince Charles. It is well known that he clowned as a dustman in a revue at Cambridge.

Probably because of the good impression the Royal Family has given the British people, a public opinion poll taken in Britain in 1960 showed 84 per cent in favour of the monarchy.<sup>5)</sup> In another poll no fewer than 30 per cent of those asked thought that the Queen had been "especially chosen by God."<sup>6)</sup>

When Prince Charles was invested as the 21st Prince of Wales in the ancient castle of Caernarvon, Wales, in July 1969, *Newsweek* interviewed Rohan McCullough, a 21-year-old actress in *Hair*, who said :

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4) Robert Millar, *The New Classes*, pp. 40—41.

5) *U. S. News & World Report*, Nov. 24, 1969.

6) Leonard M. Harris, *Long To Reign Over Us*, London, 1966.

"I would be sad if the monarchy ended. There's something glamorous about it that appeals to me. You know, in a sense England is its tradition and its monarchy. We've lost all the empire stuff, but we still have the monarchy. If we didn't England would be just a miserable little island. The monarchy reminds the world that England was once a far more powerful country. It's in all of us and it is one of the first things we learn. I remember the Coronation. We had flags. We got Coronation mugs and we had the day off from school properly. We were brought up with it and it's now a part of us. We don't even think about it. But if you took it away, some of us would feel like we lost an old friend."<sup>7)</sup>

### III Aristocracy

"I was surprised to observe the very small attendance usually in the House of Lords. Out of five hundred and seventy-three peers, on ordinary days only twenty or thirty."

So said Ralph Waldo Emerson in his *English Traits* in 1856. Should he revive today he would surely be surprised again at the tenacity with which Britain's Upper House has stuck to its tradition. Of the 1,000-odd members of the House of Lords only 10 per cent attend its sittings on the average. The business of the House is conducted actually by about 140. Strange to say, only three persons are needed for a quorum.

The House of Lords consists of the Lords Temporal and the Lords Spiritual. The Lords Temporal may be sub-divided into (1) all hereditary peers and peeresses of England, Scotland, Great Britain and the United Kingdom, (2) all life peers and peeresses created by the Crown under the Life Peerage Act 1958, and (3) nine Lords of Appeal in Ordinary. The Lords Spiritual are the Archbishops of Canterbury and York, the Bishops of London, Durham and Winchester

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7) *Newsweek*, July 14, 1969.

and 21 other bishops of the Church of England.

At the annual opening of Parliament the nobility robed in scarlet are placed in the seats of honour, while the Cabinet and the House of Commons are allotted, and accept, an apparently humble walking-on part. But politically their relative positions are reversed. The most that the Lords can do now is to delay a bill passed by the House of Commons by one year. Any "money bill" they can delay only for a month.

Yet the British aristocracy is holding its own as the only real aristocracy left in the world today. It has survived partly because it has never been exclusive, unlike that of France and some other countries, and has always been ready to admit outsider sons-in-law, provided they were rich.

Among other reasons given for the ability of the peerage to keep going, whatever the political climate, is the English law of primogeniture. Only the elder son inherits a title, a fact which helps to maintain its rarity value and esteem. The estate is inherited all in one piece, and not split up among the family as in France and Germany.

There has also been a moderately fluid interchange between classes, increasingly from the nineteenth century on, as self-made men struggled to the top and acquired their titles. At the same time the untitled younger sons of the nobility continued to leave the ancestral home to earn their own living in the law, the armed forces, in business, and so on. These movements have certainly demonstrated that the aristocracy is by no means a separate clique.

#### IV Education

In no country has education been so overtly used as a tool for the maintenance of the class system as in Britain. In his book *The New Classes* Robert Millar describes the role of the British education in this way:

"Most educational systems in the world have been constructed on the assumption that all children, whatever their background, should be educated to the limits of their ability. However imperfect they may have turned out to be in practice, at least they paid lip service to the principle that merit should be rewarded and to the belief that equality of opportunity was morally, as well as economically, desirable.

"The British have never been so hypocritical. They have never pretended that their educational system was based on such altruistic tenets. Certainly it was not deliberately fashioned to provide the best possible education for all children. Its purpose was uncompromisingly different. Society was composed of an upper, a middle and a lower class. It was the system's primary task, by perpetuating the divisions between them, to reproduce this class structure in succeeding generations. Few institutions have been so successful in achieving their objectives.

"A few dozen public schools have provided all the advantages which social status and money could buy—small classes, excellent teachers, salubrious surroundings and the right social *milieu*. The grammar schools, founded to do for the middle class what the great public schools were doing for the wealthy and professional classes, creamed off the socially superior children from the remainder of the population by charging fees and discriminating against the offspring of the lower social orders. The State schools, providing a free education, had to make do with the remainder of Britain's children.

"Thus the three-tier educational system reflected and perpetuated the class system. A good public school and university education, at Oxford and Cambridge of course, fitted children for an upper-class style of living and a high-status profession; a grammar school education, with perhaps attendance at a provincial university to follow, set the pattern for middle-class life and a managerial or a professional occupation; a secondary modern school was the proper training ground for a manual job and a working-class standard of living.



"Despite the massive social changes during the past two decades, the system has changed astonishingly little so far. Apart from the 1944 Education Act, which brought most of the grammar schools into the State system and abolished fee-paying, the system is still as class-ridden as ever. Educational segregation is still almost as rigid and debilitating as racial apartheid in South Africa. Thus, of all fourteen-year-olds, six per cent go to public schools and direct grant schools, twenty-four per cent are in the grammar school and comprehensive school stream, sixty-six per cent are in the secondary modern schools."

Compulsory education is given children between the ages of five and fifteen. (The school-leaving age is to be raised to sixteen in 1972-73.)

In England and Wales there were about 7.6 million children in publicly maintained schools in 1968 besides some 128,500 others at schools receiving direct grants from the Department of Education and Science. There were also about 429,500 children of all ages at some 3,000 independent schools.<sup>8)</sup>

The Education Act of 1944 provided for the eleven-plus examination which all primary school children were to take at the age of eleven. According to its results the children were to be sent either to a grammar, a technical or a secondary modern school.

The eleven-plus caused much parental anxiety because it decided whether a child should remain lower class or have a chance of becoming upper class at too early an age. Therefore the Department of Education and Science under the Labour Government issued a circular in July 1965 stating, "It is the government's declared objective to end selection at eleven-plus and to eliminate separation in secondary education." Local education authorities were requested to prepare plans for reorganizing secondary education on a comprehensive basis and to submit them to the department.

In 1969 there were in England and Wales 771,117 comprehensive

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8) *Britain 1970, An Official Handbook*, p. 151.

school pupils, or 26.1 per cent of all pupils in maintained secondary schools; 128 out of 163 local education authorities had schemes for comprehensive education either implemented or approved.<sup>9)</sup>

As soon as the Conservative party regained power in June 1970, however, the new Secretary of State for Education and Science Mrs. Margaret Thatcher declared that the Government would withdraw the 1965 circular and that there would be no imposition of comprehensive education. Her statement was made in answer to a demand of the National Union of Teachers for the completion of the movement towards universal comprehensive education.

Playing a far greater role for the maintenance of class distinction are the public schools, which are not public at all in spite of their name. They are boarding schools for boys of 13 to about 18 in age, which are probably richly endowed, probably of considerable age and run with the help of a Board of Governors who are generally men of distinction in public life.

There are about two hundred schools which are officially stamped as public schools by being on the list of Headmasters' Conference Schools. But when the average Englishman thinks of a public school it is generally of one of the dozen or so world-famous ones which head the ranks.

Listed below are the nine schools singled out by the Clarendon Commission of 1861-4 as "significant of the position that a few schools had gained in the public eye":<sup>10)</sup>

(December 1964)	Fees	No. of boys	Date of foundation
Charterhouse	£ 537	650	1611
Eton	535	1, 190	1440
Harrow	534	650	1571
Merchant Taylors	381	600	1561
Rugby	504	730	1567
St. Paul's	395	660	1509
Shrewsbury	501	544	1552

9) *Britain 1970, An Official Handbook*, p. 148.

10) Anthony Sampson, *Anatomy Of Britain Today*, p. 203.

Westminster	528	442	1561
Winchester	537	525	1394

The public schools are a uniquely British institution which has provided a large number of Prime Ministers for the Conservative Party. Eton, which alone numbers 19 Prime Ministers among its alumni, has links with the aristocracy outshining those of all other public schools put together.

Two-thirds of the dukes and an average of fifty-five per cent of the other ranks of the peerage were educated at Eton. About half its 1,200 pupils in any year are from families who possess coats of arms. Seventy-five per cent of Etonians have Old Etonian fathers. Many of them were registered at birth.<sup>11)</sup>

Resistant to change, Etonians still wear striped trousers, black tailcoats and white ties—a stuffy outfit their predecessors first donned in the nineteenth century. Even some of its own students concede that the net impact of Eton is to “perpetuate social isolation and class prejudice.”<sup>12)</sup>

A reform of the public schools was recommended by the Fleming Committee of 1944, which proposed that a minimum of 25 per cent of public schoolboys, in the first place, should be chosen from primary schools and educated free of charge. With the 1944 Education Act, giving greater opportunities for clever boys to go to grammar school and thence to university, many people assumed that the expensive public schools would wither away from lack of funds from overtaxed parents. But the revolution never happened.

The Fleming proposals were quietly abandoned—partly because responsibility for financing them was shifted from the central government to local councils; partly because public schools took boys at a later age (13) and insisted on Latin or Greek; and partly because of heavy opposition from grammar schools. The public schools, many of which before the war had been close to bankruptcy, emerged stronger

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11) *The Aristocrats*, p. 88.

12) *Time*, April 28, 1967.

than ever before, with over 20 per cent more pupils.

After the Labour took over the Government in 1964 a Government-appointed commission conducted a plan to integrate the public schools within the State system of education by putting working class children from broken homes among the rich elite. The plan was so widely attacked, however, that even the commission chairman, Sir John Newsom, said he thought it very unlikely it ever can be carried out. With the Tories resuming the helm of state in 1970, the prospects have become even gloomier for any reform worthy of the name.

Among the higher institutions of learning Oxford and Cambridge, which together are often called Oxbridge, are outstanding in prestige and influence. Oxford and Cambridge in 1961 provided 87 per cent of members of Parliament, and 71 per cent of vice-chancellors of other universities. In 1964 Oxbridge provided 76 successful candidates (by examination and interview) for the senior civil service and foreign service, while other universities provided 17.<sup>13)</sup>

The present Conservative Cabinet has 11 Oxford and four Cambridge graduates among its 18 members. Less than one per cent of Britain's population go to Oxbridge but, once there, they are wooed by industry and government.

There has been a growing trend in recent years, however, toward undermining the supremacy of public schools and Oxbridge. Both Prime Minister Edward Heath and Leader of the Opposition Harold Wilson are Oxford graduates but both are former grammar school boys coming from the lower-middle class. Heath is a carpenter's son. Wilson is a works chemist's. They seem to symbolize the shift of power from the aristocracy to the meritocracy which characterizes the British society in the latter half of the twentieth century.

There are now 44 universities in Britain, compared with 17 in 1945. Over this period the number of students has increased fourfold to more than 218,000 and annual government expenditures on univer-

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13) *Anatomy of Britain Today*, p. 222.

sities in Great Britain has risen from £4 million to nearly £250 million.

As the 42 universities other than Oxbridge have gradually acquired an aura of their own, chances are that the Heaths and Wilsons of 30 years ahead may be the products of the so-called Redbrick or Plate-glass universities. A survey of six-formers in spring 1970 revealed that 40 per cent preferred a "well-established Redbrick university" to Oxbridge.<sup>14)</sup> Cynics may retort that this is because the students knew they could have little alternative. Yet all the signs show that today's students in Britain are looking less and less for the "class advantages" of a university and more for qualification.

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14) *Mainichi Daily News*, June 14, 1970.

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