

Moving on

There's a lot more to the independent sector than Eton, Harrow and Roedean

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Will independent schools ever be sensibly discussed in the media, in politics or over the supper tables of the nation? It is a long-standing national habit to view all independent schools as aloof, expensive, exclusive and barred to almost everyone in the land. The impression is now gaining ground that the cost has become so great (the figure £40,000 a year crops up regularly) that soon only Russian oligarchs and other members of the world's super-rich elite will be able to afford them.

This takes to extreme lengths a misapprehension that all independent schools, of which there are 2,500, have been created in the image of a handful of famous public schools. Discussion revolves around the famous few as if they were typical representatives of the sector as a whole. The traditional refrain never alters. A fixation with a small number of 'faux-Gothic spires', as a new book rudely describes some of their cardinal features, means that the entire independent sector stands accused of playing a central role in creating and sustaining deep social division in our country.

The old stereotypes retain their hold. The famous picture taken before the Eton-Harrow cricket match in 1937 of two Harrovians in top hats being stared at derisively by three urchins is still used to illustrate articles in the press. When Michael Gove became the first former Conservative education secretary to call for VAT on all school fees in 2017 — incompatible with the Tory principle of enlarging choice — he resorted to the well-worn terms of abuse, justifying this move to 'soak the rich' on the grounds that 'the

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wealthiest in country' should be taxed on 'a prestige service that secures their children a permanent positional edge in society'.

Gove senses crude party political dividends in rounding opportunistically on independent schools. In this he is far from alone, though more brazen than most. His ludicrous identification of the entire independent sector with the rich is possible only because an imaginary uniformity is attributed to it, sustained by out-of-date images of the public school. Public school is itself an antiquated term, long since abandoned by all save their critics and newspaper headline writers. Convicted felons who were privately educated can expect to have their school and its current fees prominently reported, the implication being that these nurseries of the rich inculcate criminal intent.

In all this, the tremendous variety and diversity which are the chief features of today's independent sector have been lost in the never-ending debate about its role.

Its schools range in size from 50 to 1,700 pupils. More than half are not academically selective, a fact that would by itself do much to bring some realism to the incessant supper-time conversations about education in which parents with children at private schools can be made to feel like agents of social division. An independent school head in Theresa May's Maidenhead constituency describes academic selection as 'harmful to social mobility and the long-term development of all children'. Another head in Essex told me that, 'We educate many pupils who did not get