

## **The United Kingdom: A Class Society?**

I: I'm a Canadian and I must admit that I've always been a bit of an Anglophile. I like the culture. I like the music. I like the poetry. But I have sometimes been put off by this attitude of class that you have, in a sense that you sometimes feel you're being treated as whether or not you're somebody I should know or not, that there's quite a defined class system in your country. Would you agree, Linda?

L: I think there is still a class system in Great Britain. I would say it's less clear than it was in the past. I think the boundaries are not as solid, but I think that it's quite difficult for a foreigner to really appreciate where they go. I think the extremes you see on television, say like in Downton Abbey, are rare now. But you can... A person who's born in the U.K. picks up on accent, on the kind of background you've got, where you've come from, where you've been educated, the kind of words you use, and will place you. In Norway, people place you geographically, where you come from, do you know somebody from this place that I know. It's not what kind of job you have, who you know, what kind of school you went to. And in the U.K., you still have this feeling of class plays a role. But youngsters I think are less bothered by it than people of my generation.

I: Is that... Do you agree with that, Andrew?

A: I agree with most of what Linda said now. The Downton Abbey caricature of course doesn't exist anymore. It's rather interesting to think that there are still large houses with, in fact, families living in them, but they may well be the poorest people in society at the moment. They can't afford to keep up that standard of living. It's all a matter, I think, not so much of where you come from. It is what sort of school you went to. It's the people you know, a question of networking. There's still a little bit of snobbishness when it comes to that. If you want to have a job, say, in the foreign service or in banking, it's always said to be useful to have the right school tie, to have the right accent and to know the right people, so in that sense, there is still a question of class in Great Britain, in the United Kingdom.

L: Although I'd still say the contrast with Norway is immense in the sense that you will find professionals in the U.K. will have tended to have been to a certain number of universities, a huge number of Members of Parliament will have been to public schools and have gone to Oxbridge, which is Oxford and Cambridge. The same for people at the top of professions in architecture, in medicine, in the army, whereas I think in other kinds of jobs, that is being diluted.

I: Okay. If I go into YouTube, for example, I have seen, back in the '60s and '70s, films with, or interviews with Peter Sellers and Michael Caine, and they seem to be very angry about the class differences. Just a generation ago, their backgrounds seemed to place them, categorize them in a certain position in English society. Would you agree that it was like that back in the '60s and '70s?

L: Definitely. I mean, I actually went to Oxford University, but I did not come from a privileged background. I went to an ordinary state school, and when I got there, I really noticed the feel in conversations and the kind of assumptions people made, and the fear then was people who had been to public school had an automatic sense of entitlement. There was no question of them thinking, well should I or shouldn't I. It didn't even enter their minds. The whole time I was thinking, can I do this? Is this the right thing to do? Whereas they already... It was like you were starting a new game. They already knew the rules. In fact it was their families who made the rules up, while you were going in trying to learn a complete new game. It would be like a Norwegian trying to learn cricket.

I: Did you feel excluded then?

L: Some clubs at the university were definitely for people of a certain background. Some of it was also dependant on money, because these people had money to burn, and they would be driving around in fancy cars, provided by their rich daddy, whereas I'd be worried about I've got to make sure I a good mark so I can stay on. I didn't have money to burn. And I just didn't feel comfortable because I didn't know the dress code was slightly different. The kind of comments you made in small talk were slightly different. So I think in the end you gravitate towards people you feel comfortable with. And I did not fit in with that set at all.

I: So there was a class definition there. Even if it wasn't direct, it was at least indirect.

L: And I think probably it's even greater at universities like Oxford and Cambridge than elsewhere.

I: What about you, Andrew? Have you had any similar experiences?

A: Yes, but no. I'm not somebody I would regard as being from upper class society in Britain. I didn't go to university in Britain either. I do remember playing rugby for my grammar school. I was quite good at it, apparently. And we used to play public schools occasionally, like Winchester, Harrow. I remember that very well. And it was a fantastic feeling smashing them, beating them. These upper class snobs. That was the attitude we had. The boys that were not of that toffee-nosed, if you like, rich, privileged class. I've never had a problem with feeling, if you like, lower, poorer, of less value than an upper class person. Unless of course they tried to impress on me the fact that they are from a higher class, and then that just provokes me.

I: You get provoked and then you go back to being a rugby player.