# Quotes relevant for ‘A life less Ordinary’

## Elite ambivalence

PARTICIPANT 1: I would not describe myself as part of any elite. But the reason for that, I think, is that I'm retired, therefore, I'm not in an active professional role, and I don't think my role in society puts me into an elite position. But if you said, if you changed it and said, social elite, by which you meant rich people? Well, obviously, I've got more money than most of the people who live around here, apart from people in the street, because there are loads of people in the street have got more money than I have. But that, for me, therefore, it sort of displays what I think is a problem, which is that I find the term elite too nebulous. I need to be told, in what context, are you using the term? And what YOU say it is supposed to mean in that context?

INTERVIEWER: I’m struck you’ve always had that alternative source of education source of knowledge and how important that is so this is going in a different direction but you know you’re in the Who’s Who and some might say that’s a quintessential marker of the British elite.

PARTICIPANT: I know I know did I tell you why I agreed to that though? I didn’t really because if I’m honest with you it wasn’t really for me it was more for my mum and dad it was so that my mum and dad’s name could be in something like that.

P: So I wasn’t really bothered about me because frankly if someone wants to know what I’m doing or whatever you know most—you know you can just find out these days can’t you or it was you know, I’m not saying I’m not proud of what I’ve done because I am and it’s more because of the roles rather than me personally on a personal level it was for my mum and dad it was recognition of them really and that was the only way in my opinion, I mean obviously we do and family do but it was like formal recognition so that was the reason why I why it’s in there really.

INTERVIEWER: Oh that’s lovely and for you how does the word elite land?

PARTICIPANT: Yeah, see I wouldn’t I… yeah [laughs]. I don’t consider myself to be elite I consider myself to be… I mean a decision maker in some important roles that’s how I see myself. I’m always wary of, because I’ve seen so-called what other people would call elite in some of these organisations and they’re just normal people like you and me.

P: Maybe some of them can be a bit pretentious [laughs] and some of them like their role a bit too much, but at the end of the day, you know, some of them have got there because of their hard work, in the past some of them have got there because of who they know and also because their previous roles have sort of—one of the issues is for example about honours you know the honours system for me personally, I think you should only, there are lots of roles there are lots of roles where you automatically get a gong, OK, or a you know, an honour in the past—they’re gradually decreasing, but in the past for example if you were President of the Law Society you got a gong.

INTERVIEWER: -[Missed] [01:13:09] maybe, you know, a marker of joining a British elite. How does that word elite land with you? Do you consider yourself part of the elite?

PARTICIPANT: I mean there is a great [Missed] [01:13:19] in terms of being in Who’s Who, because I’m in Who’s Who for one reason really, and that’s because my grandfather was made a baronet in 19 [Missed] [01:13:28] or whatever it was. And so my father was, then inherited when my grandfather died, and when my father died in 1996 I inherited it from him. And literally, literally on his deathbed, because he died as a result of an operation, not that it, you know, he was, he couldn’t be [Missed] [01:13:49]. So, and on his deathbed I remember when my mother went out from the hospital room my father said to me please accept the baronetcy that he’d got from his father. He said ‘you don’t have to use it, but’, he says, ‘don’t kick up about it. Don’t say no, because then it’ll be inherited after you die by your brother and he’s keen[?] [01:14:11] on it’. And it’s true. So I, you know, I said ‘yeah don’t worry you’re not going to die, and yes I will’, you know? And so you can’t now, you know, I’d never use it, and it’s quite interesting because somebody wrote to me the other day and said Sir Tom Shakespeare, and I hate that, absolutely hate it. And I said ‘please never call me that’, and I’ve never, ever used it, and I’m proud of that, that I’ve never, ever called myself that.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah.

PARTICIPANT: Because I don’t agree with inherited, you know, inherited titles. I think they’re daft, I think it’s wrong. I think it’s one thing giving somebody an honour for what they’ve achieved, and I have achieved a lot of things, but why would you give that to their son? It just seems, or daughter, most likely the son, I thought it was mad. So yeah, so, but yeah I look like a member of the elite. I went to private school, I went to Cambridge and I have a title and an honour. So you can’t get much more elite than that, but I don’t necessarily feel like a member of the elite, in my friends, in my career choices, in my lifestyle, it doesn’t feel like that. But, you know, who am I kidding? Maybe I am.

INTERVIEWER: Oh that’s interesting. It kind of reminds me of what you talked about earlier, that sense of almost contradiction between the background you’ve had and the life that you [Missed] [01:15:31]-

PARTICIPANT: Yeah, no it’s, yeah.

INTERVIEWER: -for yourself. Yeah.

PARTICIPANT: And it, you know, it’s like well Wikipedia says, you know, ‘Tom Shakespeare, baronet, prefers to be called Prof’, or whatever it is, and yeah, and yeah I can’t pretend it doesn’t exist but it doesn’t define me.

INTERVIEWER: Now, okay, yes, that all takes part within your network [?]. The last question I had is, do you think, is there anything else that you think we should consider? Is there anything else we should consider as important in relation to a British elite and how that operates, or circulates or reproduces itself?

PARTICIPANT 1: Well, you're the one who bought the elite up again. I didn't think it was important. Practices, healthy, unhealthy, I don't know. But since one tends to mix with one's own groups, peers and so forth, except when I go to the pub on a Friday evening, I don't really regard it as that. If I go to the Athenaeum they're all, many of them, much more distinguished than I am. Right. So.

INTERVIEWER: OK, so you don't consider yourself part of that elite although you do go to the Athenaeum, and mix in those circles?

PARTICIPANT 1: I don't consider myself – I mean – I suppose some people do consider them as elite, right – does a Member of Parliament? No, but perhaps he does. The headmaster, headmistress conference – do they? Yes, perhaps they do. You know, there are things one could have achieved which one didn't. Perhaps if I hadn't been in – had so many fingers in so many pies and joined so many things, I could have achieved more. But I enjoyed it.

PARTICIPANT 1: Oh, I don't see myself as elite, not at all. And the funny thing is, in the Who's Who that I've got, which is the 2012 one, my cousin the judge is in it, she's just above me, she's Kali Kaul [?] [01:20:38], and her father was the first ever Asian ever in this country to get an OBE. As I recall, for services to television. He was a presenter. And I only agreed to my name going in there because I wanted to see my father's name in print. Because you have to say who your father and mother are. But I'm not elite. I'm not elite at all. And I don't actually use my title, Dame. I thought it would open all sorts of doors for me at restaurants, but when I booked, when I tried to book a table and I said Dame Rena Keele, and they'd say, "is that Jane?", so I usually just say Rena, or doctor. Doctor's much easier, people understand doctor. But if I'm with academics, I'll use my doctor title.

INTERVIEWER 1: Yeah, absolutely.

PARTICIPANT 1: But if I was in a different environment, where people know what dame is, I might use the word "dame". But I don't see myself as elite at all. So, I was quite curious to have this interview, to see what questions you were going to ask me.

INTERVIEWER: So my last big question – I'm really throwing them at you at the end – some people would consider reaching Who’s Who as the quintessential marker of joining a British elite. How does that word “elite” land with you? Would you consider yourself part of it, or if not, why not?

PARTICIPANT 1: No thanks. I mean, it goes back to what I said at the beginning, I watched my medical student mates and I was supposed to be part of their hoi polloi, you know, we’re really a special breed, aren’t we? And I felt very uncomfortable with that, and I’m uncomfortable with the Who’s Who thing.

And you’ve already seen from me that I generally don’t regard myself as sort of anything but having had some strange knife-edged switches in my life, which are purely accidental – so why is it those people have done anything else but got there through accident, isn’t it? We do things through 80% accident, maybe long hard work, but I don’t like this phrase, this “elite” thing.

And I don’t see myself part of it. You can say that it’s a recognition, an output measure of something I may have done, but OK, that’s all right, so what? I have a sort of “so what?” about it. And I think to me it feels when you meet some of these great, real, seriously well-known dignitaries, a lot of them are quite nice and ordinary, there’s no pretentions about them, they’re not an elite, they’re just people who happened to do stuff.

I’m not sure I qualify. But I don’t like the term “elite” because it has connotations which are financial, which are political, which are, you know, it’s a whole mix of things. So which is the elite compartment that we’re talking about?

INTERVIEWER: I was thinking when you were speaking, because you didn’t go through elite schools initially. How do you position yourself in that?

PARTICIPANT 1: So I don’t think I fit that particularly well. Obviously much more of an outsider, but having managed to establish myself – well, I managed to get into Who’s Who – otherwise we wouldn’t be having this interview. And I managed to get into it some years ago. I don’t know how many years ago it was. I think it’s because I got an MBE. And I got an MBE, I think, because I was a member of a commission, a national commission – Bhikhu Parekh was the chair, and as you know, I already had this close relationship with him – and as you also know, I said I had quite a good relationship with New Labour.

So I think he must have recommended to the New Labour government – through the Civil Service, you fill in a form and so on – he must have recommended a number of us who sat on the commission because when I got my MBE, so did a friend who also was on the commission. So I got it in the year 2001, so this is very much Tony Blair’s first term. So that’s really how I got into Who’s Who.

I think if there was an academic Who’s Who, I’d get into that as well. So I obviously think my position in academia is more of an elite position than my position in British society. I don’t think my position in society is particularly elite. Though as I said, I managed to get into Who’s Who. But yeah, I’ve been elected to the British Academy. I get a lot of recognition for my work. So my effect is all, if you like, very, very work-based. But not narrowly ivory tower work-based.

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So it’s not like I have a laboratory and I work hard at it and one day I discover penicillin. I am quite publicly visible. I engage, less now because I don’t find the Conservatives people I want to engage with, but certainly when New Labour was forming and rising into power, from the mid-1990s, I would say roughly from the mid-1990s to the later years of Gordon Brown, so just over a decade.

I think people did read me and take me seriously. I met people who’d say they knew me who I hadn’t met before. So yes, insofar as I could think of myself as belonging to an elite, it’s really very much an academic elite. I don’t think I'm part of the elite that I described. But luckily academia has some prominence in British society, even though it’s not like owning a hedge fund, or anything like that, but it has some profile and status, so that if you achieve a certain degree of eminence in your discipline, then if you like you join the elite.

Because you get elected to the Royal Society or the British Academy. So I’m part of the elite in that limited way, not in that larger socio-economic status way that I was talking about.

So, my younger daughter, for example, great friends with, I can't remember which Lord he is. But with his daughter, and spends time over there, enormous pile in Norfolk, goes up to parties in Scotland, various castles just because of the children she's met at school, which would never, I would never have done because I didn't go to school with people from those kinds of backgrounds.

INTERVIEWER: Okay, that's very impressive. I mean, so the next question I was going to ask is, some people would consider reaching “Who's Who” amongst all of your other honours and awards, as a quintessential marker of joining a British elite, or decision maker. How does the word elite land with you?

PARTICIPANT: I don’t know, I don’t want to be called the elite. They just think that I should be a dame. So, I said I don't need to be a dame, thank you very much. It’s bad enough being a CBE.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, and as you say, encountering friction on both sides and trying to build a collaborative model within that, yeah, absolutely, so final question, thank you, some people would consider, I mean, you’ve had many honours, but the Who’s Who is one example. I think it’s 0.05% of the UK are in it. And some people might see that as a quintessential marker of joining a kind of British elite. How does the word ‘elite’ land with you? I can see that made you laugh.

PARTICIPANT: [laughs] Do you know what, I have a very thick skin now with all of this nonsense and what people come out with, I just, the people who are being critical are doing absolutely nothing, I find, to break down barriers. I’m very happy to have a conversation with someone who actually is campaigning for something worthwhile, but the criticism never comes from them. It’s people who are on the sidelines doing nothing! So I just say, “Well, until you are also in the fight with me, whichever side you’re on, there’s nothing for us to discuss!”

P: And the thing is, people have an issue with me, I mean there’s any number of reasons why they might have an issue, right. You know, I don’t look my age, that annoys some people, people think I’m my son’s older sister, you know, there’s all sorts, there could be any number of things, the way I speak, the way I walk, the clothes I wear. You get to the point where, you know, I’m 50 next year, I don’t look it, I know, but you know, you get to the point where you think, “You know what, I’ve been on this planet for almost 50 years, I really don’t care!” I don’t care, I can’t control your opinion anyway, so I’m just going to live my life the way I want to live it, so that’s where I am at the moment. And if people call me elite then so be it. [laughs]

INTERVIEWER: Yeah! And also, I think interesting in itself that that would be interpreted as potentially a criticism? Because in some ways, it’s a loose term isn’t it, it could mean excellence, it could mean all kinds of things, but yeah-

PARTICIPANT: -In a classist society like ours, saying elite is not a positive thing. I mean think about it, Rishi Sunak, others, if you say elite, generally speaking, it’s not associated with excellence. It’s immediately associated with wealth and privilege and lauding it over others. That’s been my experience anyway.

PARTICIPANT: I don’t particularly feel elite, like a part of the elite, I can sometimes when I object—so like when you say things like that you know, like it’s 0.05% of the population are in the Who’s Who, I kind of feel a wee bit of a fraud, being in Who’s Who, I kind of think, well, it comes with the job rather than—I don't know, although, I sort of feel, “Yes, ok, I’ve personally achieved and that’s why I’ve got that job and that’s why I’m in Who’s Who, but I kind of think, oh well, it’s not really a proper entry.” You know.

P: So I do, I don't know, I don’t feel part of the elite, partly because I think, I’m aware of such a hierarchy above me within my world. Within my world I am still relatively near the bottom. So I think that's probably why I don’t feel particularly part of the elite. But there are other times when I think, you know, oh yeah actually, I am part of quite a small bit of the population, quite a small, quite a niche sort of tranche of society.

P: But I never really think about it very much. And also, because you know I’ve friends who are judges, retired judges and current judges, and the people I’m friends with are all sort of very, we just sort of get on with it and we’re quite ordinary in lots of ways, so I don’t really think about it as terribly elite, in that sense.

P: And that’s part of making sure the children have their feet on the ground and don’t feel that they’re part of something particularly special.

INTERVIEWER: And you mentioned you have this feeling sometimes that you're part of this particular tranche, like of society, when, could you give an example of that?

PARTICIPANT: It’s normally when somebody asks me what I do who’s not in the law, and I generally, this is a really silly example, but for years, my hairdresser didn’t know what I did, He would always say to me, “So what do you do?”

P: And I’d say, “Oh, I’m in the law.” And I’d just sort of leave it at that vaguely, and it was only really when I felt comfortable enough to say, “You know, actually, I’m a judge”, because I don’t want people to have a, have a preconception about me. So yeah. So when I do kind of feel like that is when I feel part of an elite is when I meet people I don’t know, or if I’m at something, a sort of social gathering at a certain level, and people say, “What do you do?” and I say, “Well, I’m a judge” and then, yes.

P: But it’s not very often to be honest. [laughs] Generally speaking I kind of think, “Yeah, I’m a judge.” And my general thing is, my general perception is, “Yes I’m a judge, but.” You know, I am, I just, I’m quite normal, is probably the way I’d try and describe it.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, the potential of that platform. Thank you, and final question from me, you’ve achieved significant professional success. Would you consider yourself an elite, is that a word that resonates with you, or if not, why not?

PARTICIPANT: So I think those words make me really nervous [0:54:05.1?]. Just make me really uncomfortable, because I just see, we all have two legs, two arms, one head and we all [0:54:15.0] [missed]. At the point, the whole thing is about doing what you [0:54:17.8] [missed].

P: Those things I do not consider myself an elite, because I don’t know what it [missed] [0:54:23.3]. I don’t know who’s an elite, actually. Maybe [missed] [0:54:27.4] actually. I would not call anybody an elite, because I think we’re all humans. Some have been more fortunate than others.

P: If you said, “Would you say they say they are fortunate”, yes unfortunate. Elite, I don’t think—very dangerous word to use, actually. Very dangerous word.

P: Because it means I’m better. But fortunate is a very different word than elite.

INTERVIEWER: That’s interesting. So that word elite comes with a sense of superiority, and you prefer a word that’ speaks to the fortune you’ve experienced instead.

PARTICIPANT: Exactly.

## Deflecting privilege

PARTICIPANT 1: Well a slight fish out of water, because it was quite clear that for a lot of the activities that were around they – [coughs] sporting activities in particular. I'm not really much of a sportsman, but you know, I might have considered rowing. But actually, it became quite evident that the various societies were only interested in people who had already done that activity at school. And I had been at a school that didn't offer anything other than the basics, like football and rugby, and that was about it, or cricket. And I wasn't really interested in those. So I think that part of the problem was that there was quite a strong kind of expectation or implication that undergraduates came from schools at the kind of the posher end of what was on offer. And I think that the contemporaries that I knew – not all of them actually came from public schools – grammar schools, yes. But it was either grammar schools or public schools, but the kind of the people I knew, it more grammar school than public school. On the other hand, there were other elements, groups, which were so public school that it was beyond belief.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, that's interesting. Okay. So that – you felt some distinction or some differences in terms of class, perhaps in terms of your peers?

PARTICIPANT 1: Yes. Well, social background. It depends on what you mean by an understanding of class. But anyway, but it was definitely differences in social background. Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. I mean, maybe – you just mentioned, it depends what you mean by social class? Is that – what class did you understand yourself to be when you arrived at university?

PARTICIPANT 1: I can't – I would probably have said that I was middle class. I think yes. You see, at the time, I was interested in politics. So I would have asked myself the question. And I think that I would come up with the answer that I was middle class. Definitely so.

…

PARTICIPANT 1: They went to the local Catholic primary school – a state school – and the local Catholic primary school is actually a good school. But we felt that apart from the fact that it was convenient and local and a good school, it also meant that they would rub along with people from different backgrounds. The primary school has, I think still, about maybe 50% of the children are from immigrant families. And, again, about 50% is non-white. It's not middle class. But I think that the alternative was to send them to a private school. And that's what virtually everybody in our street did. But we weren't really too happy about that, because it's a form of social segregation that I don't think is, is really a good thing.

PARTICIPANT 1: On the other hand, when it came to secondary school, they both ended up at my wife's old boarding school. And that was largely because the eldest daughter expressed an interest in going to boarding school, I don't quite know why. But we ended – and therefore, as she was at that school, the younger one also was quite interested in going to that school. So they therefore, left the public sector went to the private sector. The boarding school in question was not a particularly prestigious school, and therefore it was used to dealing with children of varying abilities. And that meant that it was actually quite a friendly school. So they did our – both of our daughters quite well.

…

PARTICIPANT 1: Well, we live in Islington. And the street we live in is – has houses that are sort of mid-Victorian houses, well, mid-Victorian, 1850, 1860. Now, they're almost all owned by very well-heeled people. In the middle of one side of the street are still some council owned flats. But everybody, apart from a few people, everybody in the street is middle class, and well-heeled. I mean, this is sort of banker territory, and lawyers and architects and stuff like that. Around the corner, and actually, from where I'm sitting, I can see it, you pass into a different world. And you pass into the world of people who are leading more of a marginal existence. And again, an indication is the primary school that the children went to. So you've – it's a classical, Islington thing, because the thing about Islington is that you have these huge extremes between very wealthy people and very poor people. So you've got that around here.

INTERVIEWER: Interesting. And it sounds like, I mean I suppose I’ll move onto your career and how that fed into it in a moment. You talked about how there was some continuity between boarding school and university. Were there any fish out of water moments for you, or did you feel quite at home starting at that institution?

PARTICIPANT: Well I think I felt, I felt, I mean as I said it was, yeah like having women there was the different thing, and I remember, you know, so for most of my adolescence I would’ve, you know, thought, oh will I ever have a girlfriend? Well my dad had a girlfriend. And why, you know, all those sorts of thoughts. And then as soon as I got to Cambridge, I think at the end of the first term I started a relationship with a woman in the year above, and therefore I thought, oh, you know, that’s good, that’s great. She’s lovely. And so that’s the, and that felt like normality, and I remember, you know, that lasted for about a year, and I remember that ended and I thought, oh well that’s it, I’ll never have another girlfriend, and then I did, and, you know, and throughout my life I think I’ve felt, oh that’s, it’s not being disabled that’s the problem, you know, that’s fine. I suppose, you know, fish out of water, there’s that sense in which you’re a left-wing student and you espouse left-wing ideas and yet you went to private school. So, you know, that’s, that was an embarrassment, or a, yeah it’s obviously privilege but it’s something to disown or something to be aware of or, yeah.

PARTICIPANT 1: Okay, so I suppose the caste system in India. My father was of the highest caste, after [00:14:40] [Missed], which are the priests. But my mother, because she wasn't a Hindu, the children, my brothers and I, we were of the lowest caste. Because my mother wasn't of the same religion as my dad. So, I would say that in India, we were extremely wealthy. Because in those days, you were either very rich or very poor. There was no middle class in India then. So, I suppose, according to the British way, we'd have been upper class.

PARTICIPANT 1:When we came here, to England, I would say we had to start from scratch again, I would say that we were middle class, lower middle class. And I would probably say that if I was being pushed, I would say middle class, whereas my husband who's English, his father is what I'd call a toff. And he spoke like that, and whenever you saw him, he had a bottle of wine in one hand, and a cigarette in his mouth, be it 10 o'clock in the morning or 10 o'clock at night. He was a major in the army, lived in a great big house in Tunbridge Wells with 30 bedrooms. Upstairs, downstairs kind of existence. So very, very different lifestyles.

INTERVIEWER: Not a problem at all. So, the first question I have is purposefully very open. Could you describe the neighbourhood where you grew up?

PARTICIPANT: Yeah, the East Sheen, which is southwest London. So, it's the affluent middle-class neighbourhood in southwest London. Very kind of London posh, which is a bit different to kind of countryside posh. I guess we'll come on to schooling because I went to a private day school in London, which again, is a posh school, so to speak, but not kind of countryside levels.

…

So, even though we grew up in this wealthy bubble, in middle class, I went to a posh day school, we never really had the financial capital. But you kind of, I never really felt it. I mean, I guess I was around people who are obviously much richer than me, but I was given the privilege of living in that world, if that makes sense.

I realised I was living in an affluent world, even though we were not, you know, judging by our bank balances and affluent family, if that makes sense.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. That's an interesting trajectory. And can I ask about your grandparents as well and their occupations?

PARTICIPANT: Yeah. So, I should also say that, I mean, this is a funny thing. So, my grandfather was a general and very wealthy. And he moved to, and so, my mum's family are extremely wealthy; were extremely wealthy.

He moved, he bought some properties in X in the 50s, because he saw a future in London. And so, he bought big detached houses, and they bought a flat in X; the house costed £8,000 and the flat costs £2,000. They've got the deeds, which is that yeah, it's incredible, because the house now is about, what, we sold in the 70s.

But the house now is about £30 million because it's a huge detached house, just off X high street. And the flat, where my grandmother lived until she passed away in 2014, was a five-bedroom flat in X, which they bought for £2,000 which the family sold. But the problem is that let the lease run down, so, in terms of what should have been a £6-7 million job, with the lease rundown all the way to sort of six years, and the broader family have no money to renew the lease.

Plus, for what it's worth, my uncle is, it’s gonna sound badly, is kind of communist at heart; he was quite happy for there not to be wealth passing down because it wouldn't have fit within his principles. And he's head of the family. So, he happily paid the 40% inheritance tax and didn't want to renew the lease because he has principled position on that level of wealth not passing through generations, and rather give it to state.

So, point being is from a very wealthy, and my mother grew up in X and I spent lots of years in X because I lived with my grandparents. Again, it was in this kind of elite bubble that we ourselves and my grandparents never invested the money.

So, from the 50s and 60s when I moved to the UK, they slowly sold properties, and the money basically sat in the accounts, and never really reinvested. So, as that often happens, the money didn't pass down generations.

But I say all of that not because there's any begrudging this on my part, because I was very lucky, I had a wonderful family, I had a stable home, so the money side of it really never bothers me. But I say it because I think if you look at it from the exterior, I came up through a very privileged, but it wasn't quite manifested in in actual capital.

P: So, we had the perfect environment for studying at home, studying was given a very significant status, but we also had sports. It was not the case that my parents put any pressure on us, but they, we knew that we were expected to study, so, if I didn’t do my homework my mother would be absolutely appalled.

P: She wouldn’t have understood why I would not have done my homework, it would make no sense to her, and we were encouraged to do other things, pretty much we were given what we wanted so, it was a very… I never felt any deprivation growing up, although you know, I’m sure there were people who were wealthier than us, but I never felt any deprivation, about doing sports, going riding, going on trips, all schools materials, any books I wanted were bought, so there was no sense of lacking money on that, that said I never went abroad as on holidays as a child [0:10:42.3]. That wasn’t something I even noticed. So, we didn’t go abroad on holidays.

INTERVIEWER: Right, so real academic emphasis and in terms of the hobbies that you wanted to pursue, that was all encouraged, and could you talk a bit more about that, in terms of extracurricular activities? What did you take part in?

PARTICIPANT: Well, I played tennis, largely because my brother played tennis and my parents had played tennis and they liked tennis, I didn’t really like it that much but I was really into horse riding and I rode horses from about the age of four and eventually had my own pony and then I had another pony after that, again, in Wales having a pony is… It’s just not that posh [laughs].

P: It’s just so much cheaper, or it was at the time, quite a lot of people whose wealth was minimal would have a pony, and the pony would live out in a field and they would pop along to pony club and it was all just not, not the way in which horse-riding is now, and I had riding lessons twice a week. It wasn’t that costly, and my mother would drive there. My mother and my father both had cars, my mum did a part time job, she went back to working as a medical secretary.

PARTICIPANT 1: Socially, mentally, I feel classless to be honest. I feel classless. I'm not working class, because working class is like white people, middle class are white people, upper class are white people. That's how I see it. I feel as though I don't have a class. But it's not a negative. I don't feel bad about it. I just don't have a class.

INTERVIEWER: And you mentioned growing up in a middle class Jamaican neighbourhood. Do you feel like you’ve experienced social mobility in relation to your parents, or do you feel like you’ve had roughly a similar career trajectory?

PARTICIPANT: Oh no no no no, I mean as soon as you’re Black in the UK you’re working class, and it was automatically assumed that’s what I would be. And I think in terms of finances and earning, I think that’s basically where I’ve landed up.

P: You know, I’m not, I have a little flat in London but I only own a little bit of it, it’s, I don’t have, I look around at my contemporaries from university and they have financially very very different lives, and I don’t think I’ve done badly, but I certainly haven’t done, you know, I’m certainly not part, if I’d stayed or if I’d worked all the way through here and probably married somebody here, I would have had a very different life, I think. But I’m, yeah, I’m so socially, culturally, maybe mentally I’m part of a sort of artistic lower middle class kind of thing, but my actual situation and the way I’m seen by an awful lot of people is essentially as working class.

P: Although I was told off once when I went to write for something called X with the BBC, that I wasn’t working class enough, so it’s a strange, you come into this society as Black and you don’t have the money to buy your way into, you’re automatically seen as working class?

P: But then I open my mouth and I’m at Cambridge, so I’m, I love that word ‘liminal’? I’m sort of, not quite anything, which is discombobulating but it also gives you a freedom to move between things, so, to move between the British Museum and a tiny flat in London, so. Yeah.

P: It’s, I’m not, I bobble about. [laughs] That’s what it is. I bobble about.

## Narratives of opening up

PARTICIPANT 1:

I'm not good at networking, partly because I'm too busy. I was too busy. But things have changed tremendously at the bar. When I became a barrister towards the end of the 1970s – and I think here you need to make a distinction between information and contacts. Information is, you know, what you know, or don't know about different aspects of the profession. Contacts can be sources of information, but contacts can also be people who put you in touch with other people. Now, at the bar in the late 1970s, as had been the case, probably historically, there was virtually no information about what sets did what, who did what, where you might have the best chances of getting on, who was a good person to go to, who was not a good person.

PARTICIPANT 1: So that if you were in the situation I was in, you were completely adrift. And to some extent, that meant that contacts were indispensable because it was the contacts that enabled you to get to the right people. And it was also the case that recruitment was heavily biased by reference to contacts. And if you did not have contacts, then you really were at a disadvantage. Now my father, although he was a professor of law, he didn't actually have contacts in that sense. He knew one person and through that, that connection, I managed to get pupillage in for the first time. And after that, basically I made my own way. Now, things these days are completely different. And they've been completely different for at least the last 20 years and possibly more, because now there is much more information going around. And now, the importance of contacts is very, very diminished. I can't speak for all sets of chambers.

PARTICIPANT 1: But the set of chambers that I ran for about the last 15 years before I retired was one in which we made a determined and serious effort to eliminate the influence of contacts. I was the chair of the pupillage committee for donkey's years. And we moved to a completely transparent system that was based solely on merit. And we shut off all possibilities of knowing people as potential ways of getting recruited both to do the period of traineeship known as pupillage, but also as a kind of backdoor means of getting taken on as a tenant. And that was part of a wider move at the bar that was taking place in a number of other sets, I would have said most other sets but I can't speak for all sets, I suspect that there are still areas at the bar today where you need contacts. But generally speaking, and as I say, for at least the last 20, 25 years, access to the bar for people from all kinds of different walks of life is much easier than it was at the time when I was trying to get on.

INTERVIEWER: And that's fascinating and also so interesting that you've played a role in that as part of shaping institutions to be more open. More meritocratic. Yeah.

PARTICIPANT 1: Yeah, but only in my set of chambers. I wasn't the only person doing this. There was – it was quite interesting because it was just a feeling, it was almost unspoken, that this is what we wanted to do and to a great extent I think it was the result of a kind of generational change, in a change in the type, a gradual change in the type of people who were going to the bar. Even so, you could find, surprisingly, people who were still enamoured of a system based on contacts. But you did have to stamp on it. In some respects it was, it was a protection for people because it's all too easy for people to be sort of harassed by friends and neighbours who say, can you do something for my son or daughter? And then it becomes a bit embarrassing, it becomes all the more embarrassing if the organisation that you're working with, the set of chambers is actually one that is operating on a more meritocratic basis. So you just say to them, "Look, the message is: they want to, they make an application, and that will be considered fairly."

…

INTERVIEWER: Right? Yeah. So kind of creative intellectual across the boards thing. So the last few questions now, thank you so much for your time. This has been absolutely fascinating – these are more general, kind of big questions rather than – but hopefully drawing on your lived experience. So the first one, do you think it has become harder or easier for people from disadvantaged backgrounds to succeed in British society in terms of your observation? And has that changed over your lifetime?

PARTICIPANT 1:

Well, in my experience, it's much easier now. But that is certainly the case, in the legal profession. Because it's much easier. If you come from a disadvantaged background, as long as you've got the ability. You have many more women, many more more non-white people, many more people from different social backgrounds at the bar than was the case. But that is a development over maybe the last 30 years.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, and you were part of some of that process in your own [missed]?

PARTICIPANT 1: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: Is there anything else you think we should consider in terms of notions of how a British elite operates, circulates or reproduces itself?

PARTICIPANT: Well I think, you know, obviously gender is a big part of it, and you will be talking about that, but I think that, you know, I went to a male-only school and I think that, and it’s quite interesting, you know, being considered for being Master. I mean I’m really pleased that Claire appointed a woman, and I didn’t ever apply but I was asked to apply for Jesus and they appointed a black woman, and I think, you know, that is how the [Missed] [01:16:37] establishment should go. And I think the fact that more Oxbridge colleges have got women and black folk and gay folk and diversity is really how they should go, and I’m very pleased they go. So you’ll be looking at that I’m sure, but there is a sexism about the British elite. What else? Yeah um I suppose, you know, I mean I’m disabled so I would make a big thing of disability. Now disability’s interesting because people get disabled as they grow older, so I suspect that a lot of people in Who’s Who would be disabled, but they wouldn’t have spent all their life as disabled and they wouldn’t have identified as disabled.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. Did you feel like that gave you an ability to kind of, I don’t know, represent in certain spaces or say things that otherwise might [Missed] [01:19:00]-

PARTICIPANT: Yeah. Yeah, no I think it did, I think it did, and I think it was very helpful to me. I mean this is a cynical way of saying it, and I don’t think I used it in this way, but you could argue that just as the British establishment’s trying to open up then somebody like he comes along who’s male, white, upper middle class and disabled, so it’s like a big tick. And I think, for example I’m a Fellow of the British Academy, which is great, but I’m pretty sure that they thought, ooh who around is disabled that we can have to make us feel, or do better? And they thought, oh Tom, he’s a prof, he’s disabled, he's written a lot of books, he’s very prominent. If we get him as one of our number, and I don’t think that that’s the only reason that I’m there, I hope it’s not, but I think it would’ve helped.

P: So you know I’ll give you an example, so for example I was on the board of the X, and to begin with, I was the only woman of colour, I was the only Muslim person in the whole organisation—a small organisation but the only Muslim—and so I was able to bring that to the table, something that nobody in that organisation had experience of, and it was, in fact you know, next week I’m seeing the chief exec and they’ve set up—and we’ve been talking about it for quite a few years and it’s finally, we were talking about equality and diversity, and so we’ve so the committee’s been set up and I had been, you know, I was talking about that basically from the day I started that organisation, and it was a new organisation, it was a new setup so it was gonna take some time.

P: But it’s finally set up and I think that if I hadn't kept—well not just me but other people as well when they join new people then pursued that with me, but I think, I don’t think that necessarily would have gained traction if I hadn’t kept you know beating the drum [1:28:35.9] about it, number one.

Yeah. Interesting. So, a few final questions, these are more topical, but hopefully, drawing on your lived experience, as well, and thank you so much for your time, I'm so grateful. So do you think it's become harder or easier for people from disadvantaged backgrounds to succeed in British society, in terms of what you've observed, and has this changed over your lifetime?

PARTICIPANT 1: Well, I think it has. I mean, it was very difficult in the early days but now look at it [missed] [00:47:42] but look at the cabinet. It's , you know, it's multicultural, isn't it? If you look at – if you look now at – in medical schools, okay. There was always the complaint, there are not sufficient number of doctors who are – but there are now. There aren't sufficient women – well, God, there are now. Not in the very senior positions, but they're beginning to grow. There's no doubt about that, and quite good. And some of them extremely able, I mean, you know.

INTERVIEWER:

So it feels like the – medicine and as we're looking at the government has become more open for people of colour and for women.

PARTICIPANT 1: Women in medicine, of course, there is the problem that they tend to drift away for a few years while they bring their families up, right? Or alternatively, try and combine both, which is difficult, but some do it very well. Certain specialties tend to be more male dominated – and that's changing, surgery, for example. I'd be perfectly happy for a woman to operate on me, and probably sew me up a lot better than some of the male colleagues. Because they do it all the time, you know!

INTERVIEWER 1: In a majority white environment. In terms of the schools you worked in, and later in your senior positions, working with government.

PARTICIPANT 1: I've never thought about it. I suppose because I was so confident in myself, in what I believed in, I didn't see it as an issue. I wasn't scared by it, I wasn't frightened by it. I relished it, and I didn't see myself as the person with the authority. So, for example, when I was chairing the Primary Heads Reference Group, I just saw myself as being one of the group, but I had a role to play. So, I don't think I'm any better or any worse. And even when I was made, which, by the way, my husband didn't believe that I was going to be made a dame, and my husband's a republican, so he didn't actually come with me for the ceremony.

INTERVIEWER 1: Oh dear.

PARTICIPANT 1: Our son flew in from Geneva, but my husband refused to come. So, he's got his own values and principles, which is absolutely fine. Even then, if I was being really honest with you, I'd say that there were people far more deserving than I, that should have been made a dame. But I think it's about who knows you. And if I'm also honest with you and know a little bit about how the honour system works, then our daughter is in the civil service, I won't tell you which department, but she did say, but mum, unless a minister approves... damehoods and knighthoods are never given without ministers’ approval. So, the committee can make recommendations, but ultimately, the ministers need to. Now David Cameron knew me, Michael Gove knew me, Nick Gibb knew me.

PARTICIPANT 1: And I was brown, and I know you have to have a certain number of females, non-whites and so on. So not being cynical, being realist, that year, another year, I might have been given an OBE. I don't know, and sometimes people say, you're short selling yourself, which I might be too, but I do think it's about people who know you, which comes back to networks as well. People far senior to me in government knew of my work, had been to visit my school, knew what I was doing, knew of my reputation, knew of my track record and suppose that's how I got it. But in terms of authority, I don't see myself as an authority figure. I do see myself as someone trying to influence change. That matters more to me than being an authority.

INTERVIEWER 1: And the last big question. Some people would consider reaching the Who's Who as a quintessential marker of joining the British elite. How does that word 'elite' land with you. Do you consider yourself part of that? And if not, why not? And if so, why so.

PARTICIPANT 1: In one sense, I know that I have a profile and a presence. By many markers. I'm the kind of person who can't go out in the street and walk about dancing without creating a certain dislocate, a cognitive dissonance in what I am, what I'm supposed to be. You know I'm a visitor of an Oxford college?

INTERVIEWER 1: Yes.

PARTICIPANT 1: Of course there are elites. One of the things that's very interesting and notable about the UK, and particularly England, is that there are [01:14:56] [Missed] elites, and actually they don't all feed into each other, and support each other, and reinforce each other. But there's a sense in which having a certain amount of power, however earned, does also bring with it a certain amount of responsibility, I think.

PARTICIPANT 1: So, I think, one objective level, obviously being in Who's Who, it's about some kind of elitism. The giveaway's in the title. You are a who. But there are lots of areas in which the different elites actually clash with each other, but they don't support each other necessarily. We're not a single strand society, rooting in our ancestral past, and so on. And there's quite a lot of room for movement.

PARTICIPANT 1: The elite from the elite side down, or elite side out, is, I think, more open and porous and welcoming than would appear at first sight to the people who don't feel themselves part of the elite. And I think one of the ways that we think about social mobility, just making society a bit more porous, is about ways in which people can slot in at different levels. And think for example about an example locally.

PARTICIPANT 1: You can be a [01:16:35] [Missed] over here in your work, and locally, in some local endeavour, you are really no different from another person on the allotment committee, trying to get your seeds in all at the same time. So, I think there's a sense in which it matters that we should keep it in perspective.

INTERVIEWER 1: Yeah, that's interesting. So, whereas you may be elites in one sphere, whether that's your profession, your sector, in another sphere you're not operating in that status. I think that's a really interesting point.

PARTICIPANT 1: There's that wonderful 1770s poem which goes "sceptre and crown shall tumble down, and in the dust be equal made with a lowly scythe and spade." And it's kind of a [01:17:23] [Missed] thing, but there's a sense in which... there are many spheres of life, and many different spheres in which different excel and different people take the lead, and it's quite important for that fluidity to be encouraged.

So, I'm conscious that I don't come from a background which makes entry to the bar difficult apart from money. So, one of the issues when I entered the profession was financing because there was very little support, so I had to be quite resourceful about financing entry to the profession, but the profession has become much better at giving scholarships and so on, so that people from less advantaged backgrounds have a chance of making it to the bar.

So, I’m conscious that background of having a first from Oxford, being in a really good set of chambers, which then appears at the bottom of court documents and so on, it's a slight leg up. So, when you appear in court, judges will know to be in my chambers, you'd have to be pretty bright.

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PARTICIPANT: So, it became, I think one of the downsides of more formalised, so the Blair government wanted to open up the profession, and they wanted to end any culture of secret soundings or the old boys’ network or everything like that.

So, in the old days to become a high court judge, it tended to be sent to the Lord Chancellor, then who was a government minister as well, taking soundings from the senior judiciary about who the top practitioners were.

And then, asking people to become high court judges or circuit judges who are lower down the pecking order, whatever. And if the Lord Chancellor asked to become a judge 95%, something like 90%, people would say yes. And now, to become a judge, you have to fill in a 50-page application form involving self-assessment, 20 referees, all sorts of things.

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So, the first one is, do you think it's become harder or easier for people from disadvantaged backgrounds to succeed in British society, in terms of your observations? And do you think this has changed over your lifetime?

PARTICIPANT: Definitely, yes. Much easier. And just focusing on my narrow part of the profession, which is the bar. The bar is very self-conscious of its reputation for being very Oxbridge, very public school. And the bar has collected together in a much more organised way to make sure that there are scholarships and funding for people from underprivileged backgrounds.

And we've reached out in terms of cooperation with, for example, the Sutton Trust and so on in having work placements for children from more disadvantaged backgrounds to experience the bar, and basically to regard the bar as something they could see themselves doing.

And so, you know, we've got members of chambers who have had support from the Sutton Trust, for example, when they were growing up. We've got a much higher quotient of state school-educated people. When I joined chambers, it was probably about 90% public school background.

I would say now, about, that has reduced about 40%. So, 60% of members of chambers now went to state schools, and that proportion is increasing year-on-year. What we haven't really changed is the proportion of people who come from Oxbridge.

I think in our defence, I would say that that's partly a result of Oxbridge having widened its horizons beyond private schools. And so, I take comfort from the fact that if you analyse our intake in terms of people who went to state schools that has increased drastically.

In terms of non-Oxbridge backgrounds, that hasn't changed drastically, because even people who didn't necessarily do their first degrees at Oxford have tended to go to do their second degrees at Oxford or Cambridge, whether it's, you know, a Masters’ in law, whatever. That hasn't changed drastically in Oxbridge terms, but it has in terms of state school background,

P: Taking silk, taking silk as a woman, taking silk as a woman from a state school, taking silk as a woman from a state school and being Asian and having had children and also by then I was divorced, so all of these additional things meant that I felt it definitely is knocking down barriers and there was about 15 women who took silk in my cohort.

P: It may have been more, and I remember seeing a photograph of us, we were all together, and I think it was about 15, and that was a bumper year, and you know it still, not enough women apply but it is getting better, it’s getting nearer to 50% of applicants now are women which just reflects, you know, there’s been a delay of people applying. So definitely taking silk was a highlight, that was a sea change in my work, my status, the opportunities I get, and what I can do for others now.

INTERVIEWER: No, I think you've said that so well, and I'm aware we've got five minutes till we both have to leave, which personally I'm devastated by. So, I might ask this last question, if that's okay, and I have to be brief. So, some people consider reaching “Who's Who” as a quintessential marker of joining the British elite. How does that word, British elite, or how does that term land with you?

PARTICIPANT: I want Britishness to be wider than white, middle-class people. But therefore, if you have, what others would describe as odd-sounding Muslim names as part of that, that it widens the definition of Britishness, and that's a good thing.

And that's something I want to promote. Because I don't want people to ask me, where am I from; Slough is the answer. But because I'll always look different, because I'm not white, there will always be this sense of well, he's not quite one of us, maybe.

And so, “Who's Who”, you know, whether you call it the establishment, whether you call it the elite. The fact is, we are contributing now to the heart of British society, in doing stuff which we need, we collectively need doing, and that should be recognised. And it's not about me; it's about about a name being there. It’s about role models.

INTERVIEWER: Right. Okay, so it wasn't like a specific target for your individual achievement, but a sense of being representative of a broader inclusion.

PARTICIPANT: When I got my CBE, I refuse to put it after my name. And then I had a conversation with somebody, and he said to me, you're not doing it for yourself, you're missing the point. When you put CBE after your name, what you're showing the world is people like you and me can have CBE after my name.

So, it's a wider concept, isn't it? It's not about my success. It's about each of us; it doesn't matter where we come from, can be part of the influence as part of the way that we change a society. We can be part of the judiciary, we can be part of medicine, accountancy, whatever it is, and we can contribute, and we can be recognised because we are recognised by the establishment.

You know, I don't feel part of the establishment. I'll be really frank with you, I feel like the outsider, still having a go on the inside. But the point it makes is that we can be outsiders on the inside and still get recognised.

INTERVIEWER: Absolutely, yeah, that's a really important point. And I suppose my next question is kind of related to that, so I'll ask you a few more topical questions now. But I believe this will also join in with your experience. Do you think it's become harder or easier for people from disadvantaged backgrounds to succeed in British society, in terms of your observations? And do you think this has changed over your lifetime?

PARTICIPANT: I think it's become easier now, and I think it has changed over my lifetime, and that there are more opportunities now. So, let's say, let's use kind of ethnic minority applicants as an example. There are now kind of specific schemes to try to get people from ethnic minority backgrounds involved in the professions.

There are schemes to help socially disadvantaged people, which means you have working class people. So, there's just more awareness now. There's also a more of a belief that actually, there needs to be change. Because I think maybe 50 years ago, people thought, we can't let working class, we can't let these people in, as in a way that it's gonna get worse and it's not a good thing.

Whereas now, it's the opposite. Now, people they know is a good thing that others should have access to the work, it's good generally. It means that they're fulfilling their potential, it means that the profession generally is maximising the talent available to it. So, I think that is a key change in the awareness and this led to more opportunities being available. So, it's better now than I think it was, but it's by no means okay, but it's better than it was. But it still needs to be so much more done.

INTERVIEWER: Right, there's been a cultural shift.

PARTICIPANT: Yeah, exactly. But I think there are difficulties now to do with financing these things. Because now, you know, I gave you the example of when I was at university of grants, so we didn't have the problem of funding university, whereas now, there's such little kind of support for education in terms of higher education, for funding that I think that presents people with a big problem.

We don't have the problem at the bar so much, but lots of occupations do make people themselves pay to kind of get work experience, which is a big issue. So, I think from that perspective is a big, that's a big problem, the practical, the finance aspects, that's a big thing. That's a barrier, a real barrier to access. But I think culturally, it's changed, and it's opened up more.

But that, there must be the suitable kind of financial support for people to do things. But then again, I think lots of places are aware of that now, so there's no point, then, having schemes to welcome people if people can't afford to go on. So, I think that's becoming, I think as the professions become bit more representative themselves, then people involved think, yeah, we do need to change these things.

P: So I remember going to the Law Society, our membership organisation, and talking to the president. My son was about three or four, he had to come with me because the au pair had a date or there was something that evening that she couldn’t look after him.

P: And I challenged the president and said, “What are you doing? I mean, there’s almost 200,000 solicitors, there’s now over 200,000. Do you not realise there’s this issue?” And they had no diversity team, nothing, no awareness. No one had spoken up, or not been taken seriously, and that’s how over the years, as a volunteer on top of my day job, on top of caring for my son, I helped the Law-and that’s where I got my MBE, you know. I helped the Law Society build up their DEI awareness, the team, all the different communities for different diversity strands over you know, the best part of 20 years, really, in the end.

P: But there was no, there was no awareness at all. And the data has changed significantly as a result of all of that.

…

PARTICIPANT: So it serves, honours really do serve their purpose. And finding out who had supported afterwards, when the list was published, all these people came forward and told me they had nominated me, they’d written letters, you know, it was a wide range of senior partners at law firms who I never thought would be on side, and my former headmistress from school, and mentees, and things like that.

P: So that was a real pinnacle, because from that point onwards the work became even more elevated, you know, it gives you real credibility and you do need that, sadly, doing this work. You know, people do, if you say you’ve got a Queen’s honour it shuts people up who are going to be difficult.

P: It opened more doors, I was able to do a lot more government-related work, you get invited to more things that are going to drive even bigger change, and for that I’m-King Charles was amazing, I met him twice within a year, and I’ll tell you this, because it’s public knowledge now, but, you know, he gave me my MBE at Buckingham Palace. We had a very quick chat.

P: Announced my name flawlessly, flawless Yoruba accent, he was well briefed, and I said, “Would you consider having a Commonwealth reception again?”, because Brexit had just happened, and I always like to ask something in return, you know what I mean [laughs].

P: And he went “Oh, I’ll look into that”, and I just thought, “Oh whatever”, you know, and then a few months later I got an invite to the Commonwealth reception and I met him again, there’s a picture of me and him, two pictures of us at Clarence House, shaking hands, he remembered me as well, because I looked very unusual in what I was wearing and I showed him the picture.

P: And he was true to his word and we talked about the Prince’s Trust, the work we do with young people and so on. So all of that together, despite what I hear about the Royal Family, nothing’s black and white, you know, there’s always nuance, you know, there’s always grey areas.

P: But he really, that combination of those two things made a huge difference, huge difference to my work, huge difference.

INTERVIEWER: Oh that’s interesting, yeah, so not only the status attached to that, but perhaps also the networks of being in those space and meeting people, yeah, and it sounds like validation, as well?

PARTICIPANT: Hugely, yeah, and that’s important doing this work, you really do need that. Anyone who says otherwise really is not doing the work. It’s very important that you have some form of validation, doing it, you know, so yeah.

…

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, that particular diaspora and how they operate, their priorities, yeah. And so the last few questions now are more topical but ideally will draw on your lived experience and your observations. So the first one will be, do you think it’s become harder or easier for people from disadvantaged backgrounds to succeed in British society? And do you think this has changed over your lifetime?

PARTICIPANT: Well I’d say over my lifetime it’s improved. So over my lifetime we’ve had you know, higher education has opened up, although that’s closed down a bit more now, with having to pay, but there was a period of time where you get a full grant and your local authority would pay. And I have a lot of my friends from university who benefited from that. There are many more schemes now around social mobility as well. There’s a lot more schemes around work experience, you know, all these things that we know if you’re born into poverty you will lose out on.

P: Quality work experience, for example. Having mentoring schemes. There are so many more of those now. So to that extent, there’s more awareness, there’s a lot more support. But I will say that I am constantly shocked at what I hear and say, given that the UK, I’m now a dual citizen, I have been for, you know, I’ve got both passports, I’ve been a British citizen for over 20 years now. I’m shocked that we’re a developed country and I still hear about the disparities in mortality rates in the North compared to the South. The class divide when it comes to nutrition, access to medical care, there’s so many things that come with you having privilege, you know, a friend was talking about her daughter having special needs.

P: Because she’s a solicitor, she was able to challenge the local authority, get a lawyer, you know, many people wouldn’t have that wherewithal and that meant that her daughter was able to go to a good school. There are lots of people who wouldn’t have that access, and I find the intersectionality aspect very upsetting, because it does tend to be minority ethnic communities that are poor that suffer the most. I have a lot of friends who do work around social mobility. I did a massive piece of work on it myself. And I was really shocked by the data, you know.

P: I was really shocked by the data, so yeah, it’s a bittersweet pill really, you know, there need to be more work done around that, for sure.

INTERVIEWER: A kind of mixed- mixed in terms of opening up and shutting down at the same time. And you specified within your lifetime, did you have a sense of you know, beyond that, a sense of the direction?

PARTICIPANT: I think technology, to be fair to my son who is militant about technology and what it can do, I do generally see that technology is the leveller. I’ve seen that, I’ve seen people build businesses online. You know, as long you have Wi-Fi access. I see so many people without formal education being able to make a living with online, you know, access to online. And if you’re good, if you can code, and lots of people can, I can’t, but, you don’t even need a degree to be a software engineer.

P: My son happens to want to go to university, but I know lots of successful programmers who don’t have a degree. So technology for me is the way forward, and I see that as democratising so much of this, providing you have the Wi-Fi access, of course, and you’ve got the laptop that you need. But that’s been a definite shift, for sure.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, that gender dynamic. So the last three questions are more topical but you know, draw on your lived experience, your observations, the first one is, do you think it’s become harder or easier for people from disadvantaged backgrounds—whatever that might mean—to succeed in British society? And do you think this has changed over your lifetime?

PARTICIPANT: I do think it’s easier, and that’s not to say it’s easy, but I think it’s easier, and I definitely think it’s changed over my lifetime. Partly because people are much more aware of it and it is considered objectively to be a good thing. Whereas I think before, nobody really thought about it, nobody was particularly interested in it.

P: And you see it, although the law in particular is still very... Is very traditional, it has lots of people from a certain background, you are beginning to see a change, I see it in the people who are around me. There are more people like me, and I don’t mean that from a gender or race point of view, but people who are from slightly more normal, what I’d call normal backgrounds, you know.

## Elites claiming eliteness

It's funny now, using words like "working class", but one of the reasons I reacted against my parents' lives was it represented something upper class, and I, like so many of my generation, wanted somehow, to bridge over and be part of the large sort of proletariat life.

And my father built a substantial house, on about two and a half acres, not far from the railway station in Beaconsfield, in a cherry orchard, and so we lived in, in some middle-class comfort in Beaconsfield, including, of course, during the War.

Well, then I went to Oxford, which, of course, was, in those days, all of us, from what was really a privileged background, and we'd all assumed that if we wanted to, we'd go to Oxford or Cambridge. In those days, there weren't many other universities, well, not ones that we counted in, no doubt, a somewhat snobbish way. Coming from, as we practically did, privileged backgrounds, with, anyway, enough money, and having been in Winchester and, and an officer in the brigade of Guards, you had, everything was open to you, in what was then a still a very male world, so I'll come back on to the girls, which actually was a very important feature. The ... and everything was open to you. We'd, we'd been, seen something of the world. Those of us who had had, as good a training as you had at Winchester, frankly could do, could get by on a minimum of work. If you hadn't been to as good a school, then you probably had to work harder. Also you were, probably more industrious, and more conscientious than I and a lot of my friends were.

He had been very well paid at British American Tobacco, and, in fact, now, we acted for the directors of British American Tobacco, here, I say here - at Freshfields. And none of them, as I recall, died, worth less than a quarter of a million. Now, a quarter of a million then was an awful lot of money. It's like sort of 10 million, is it? It must be at least that now, the 1930s, surely it must be 2O times, I should think. Well, anyway, it was that sort of thing.

We were very comfortably off. You word, correct. Absolutely correct word. We were very comfortable. No question at all, I mean, now we've seen the accounts, that income was declining in the thirties, and was quite modest through the forties, at Freshfields. And, in fact, this was, this went to, to this point, that my father, of course, then, had also made restricted provisions for a savings pension. He could only, as I recall, save up to about £1700 a year, my father, as a senior partner, which is one reason why he had to go on working till quite late. And he, well, of course, obviously started with absolutely nothing, I suppose there's some measure at the end, the end of his life he wasn't badly ... his estate, I think it was about 100,000.

But that said, we, we, we lived perfectly comfortably. I mean, we had a full-time gardener. And up to the War, we had maids, two maids, not very good maids, I mean, they were Irish girls, but that, but that was how people, and, of course, we had a nanny.

Yes, it was mainly...it was very quiet. The houses there have remained...well some have changed, a number of the houses are the same. And ours was a three-storey house, and it had a garden to it, as I say large enough to run around and play cricket in the back. And we had at that stage, I mean it sounds terribly ritzy now, I remember my parents had a cook and a...I think she was probably called a house parlour maid or something like this, but they lived on the top floor, and we had a room on the top floor. I think there was probably only one bathroom in the house at that stage. And these two women as I say each had their own room at the top, and my brother and I shared a room at the top, and on the next floor down my parents had a bedroom, and there was a study which we used quite a lot. And there was a spare room there, and a bathroom there. And then on the ground floor, which actually was up a little bit because there was a floor below that which looked out onto the garden, but really the main ground floor there was a large, really quite a large drawing-room which ran the length of the house, and on the other side there was another large room, which was a dining...well, it was a dining-room. And the kitchen was below, and there was a funny little lift that brought up food. But as I say, they weren't well off but we had these servants and that time.

I suppose you would describe them as upper middle-class Midlands professional would be the sort of bracket. That's the bracket I think they would like to be put in, so it's probably reasonably fair. Mummy was very clever, and went to Birmingham University and read science, which in those days for a woman was fairly unusual

And I like the army. And I like the army because you met people from all different sorts of walks of life, and having been at grammar schools and St. Paul's, I’d had a fairly protected middle class, upper middle class life, if you like, surround. And you certainly met people from a whole different range of activities, lives, experiences and classes, and it was a very class divided society in those days, and that was good in itself. And I think that's something-, those who did national service in the 50s had a slight flavour of people who served in the war, not quite the same as fighting day by day, but the comradeship, the coming together, and all of that was very much part of army life and I enjoyed it.

In fact I remember being very upset that I had to wear brown shoes, which was a kind of upper-class thing and everybody else had black shoes, and...

Sorry, brown shoes were upper class?

They were rather posh.

I see.

But black shoes were the rule in all of my fellow pupils and I was so ashamed to have brown shoes.

There was a certain amount of money knocking about there, because he seemed to move from one sort of journey to another, and slightly hypochondriac, but could move about the place quite a lot. And the children were extremely well brought up, those Birrell children. I suppose I'm talking about Augustine Birrell's father. Yes, they had of course, now I remember from his biography, little biographical notes which are published, a very good little book actually, and it's a fascinating book. They were brought up in Edinburgh in some considerable style, and of course they went to private tutors, and my grandmother, those two girls could read Greek at about the age of seven or eight; I mean, it was that kind of family. And of course their ancestors again had been again ministers, but one of them had been the first moderator of the Church of Scotland, I mean it was a substantial, substantial upper middle- class professional family, with surgeons and doctors and that kind of thing. And one of them must have...because their cousin was John Grey Dilston, who was a cousin of Earl Grey do you see, and Dilston is just outside Newcastle, and my grandmother was brought up largely there in company with very distinguished people like Elizabeth Garrett Anderson and various social reformers.

So, I thought I would ask you something about the sort of financial circumstances that you were growing up in.

Oh, yes. Well as I said we started off when I was small, I remember in Campden Hill Square as I've described, everything appeared to be set fair so far as I could see for a successful young lawyer's career, you know, proper upper-middle-class do you see.

If you'll excuse me, may I just ask you, how you felt, sitting in the Royal Box? Were you self-conscious about that?

Oh not at all, anybody could buy it, I mean, they can now. It's called the Royal Box because any royalty can go there, but I mean, anybody can buy it. There's no privilege in it whatsoever.

I was wondering if you had yet developed a sense of your position, as it were?

No, not in the least, no, except I thought other people in the stalls had better seats!

Was your father giving you any guidance on how a, the young aristocrat should behave?

No, not really. I mean, if I behaved out of line, he'd make it quite clear.

I don't want to labour the point, but were you beginning to feel that you were treated slightly differently?

No, not in the least, no.

Because you must have been addressed as Viscount Errington.

No, not in the least, no that never really came up in life at all.

You'd think it would though. Was that because the circle you moved in, was very much of a similar class and nature?

Well, I think that, if you go back to the Eton days, you see, there were lots of boys with titles of one sort and another, and a Viscount wasn't very high. It didn't make any difference. I mean, it was in the school list, it was known, but if it was a list of boys in the class or whatever it is, you were just the same as anybody else, I mean, you weren't Viscount then.

Could you do something similar for the life of your mother, to give me an account of the life of your mother up to the point that you were born?

Yah. I mean she was also from a middle-class family. Father was a sort of landed, belonged to the landed gentry of Colombo and he was a rich man, he owned a lot of houses. And he, he was also quite stern in his disposition to his children and to everyone, an austere character, very sort of, formidable looking, moustache and, and acted the, tried to act like an English gentleman. Again, I didn’t know him that well. My interaction with him was just sort of, family visits a couple of times a week and sitting in a veranda and listening to the parents talking and talking to their parents. So, the relationship was far from being close. I mean my, the closest family relationships I had were within my own family and with my father who was a very gentle person, and he was very keen on talking to me and talking to his other children about life and, and the world, and, and science and so on.

He then lived the life of a retired gentleman. But he was a City man really, all his days. Yes, very much the traditional society, I suppose, of a professional family of those days. Plenty of home help and nannies and things,

Ah. So, your home, I mean was it...well you said your father was a merchant banker so presumably you had a fairly comfortable childhood.

Yes.

Were you brought up by a nanny or was your...?

Oh yes, by a nanny.

Of course, presumably at the time when you were settling yourself a property, it wasn't at such a ridiculous level?

No, it wasn't. It didn't matter, we both had capital, I mean, I had quite a lot of capital, both from my father and my mother's side, and my wife has inherited, from her grandfather, one of the farms in Gloucestershire, and also had some other capital. So we have never been short of money. And my father was always very insistent on that, he said, "If you have some capital, it gives you some freedom, you're not at the beck and call", and I note that the tax system in this country has been extremely light on capital, I mean,if you inherit capital and you look after it, it's been very tough on income, at some times, but it hasn't really touched the capital very much. So, anyway, I've never been other than comfortably off, and I've never felt I have to, you know, take every penny from my work, etc., etc.. And that's just a bit of luck

Well, I mean, my family … we were Smith, we were able Smith's and we started the first provincial bank outside London, in about 1650, or something, something like that a long time ago, for the Bank of England and it spread to-, they did very well, and they spread to London, and they were very successful in London. And my forbearer, the Lord Carrington, was Robert Smith and he was quite distinguished. He was a member of parliament and a minister and one thing another. And he was made a peer in 1790, something or other. And everybody in the house Lords got up and walked out because he was in trade. He was a banker. Most probably would know, be exactly the same now (laughing). But he was pretty upset by that, because he was a good deal more respectable, a member of parliament, he was a good deal more respectable than some of the people in the House of Lords at the time, sort of royal bastards and so on, but he was a bit upset. And he was a distinguished old boy, and but before that, quite a lot of our ancestors, Smith's, have been members of parliament and he himself had been a member of parliament.