Elite Ambivalence

1201 (White man, Father = academic, St Mary’s School, Cambridge, No Clubs, Barrister)

[01:07:08]

**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?

1206 (South Asian (ethnicity) woman, Father = GP, Forest School, London, Cambridge, No clubs, Solicitor

[1:57:30.6]

**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.

[1:57:30.6]

**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.

[1:58:37.0]

**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.

[1:59:18.6]

**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.

[1:59:54.5]

**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.

1202 White man, Father = GP, Radley College, Cambridge, No Clubs, Academic

**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.

[01:15:23]

**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.

1207 (South Asian Man, Father = business manager, Ewart School, Madras, Christian Med. Coll., Vellore, Clubs = Athenæum, MCC; Leander (Henley-on-Thames); Hawks (Hon. Mem.) (Cambridge), Consultant)

[00:01:31]

**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.

[00:02:31]

**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.

1210 (South Asia woman, Father = Civil engineer, New Delhi Public School, City of London Polytechnic, No club, headteacher)

**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.

[01:21:32]

**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.

1211 (South Asian man, Father = car mechanic, Orange Hill Co. Grammar School; Univ. of Newcastle upon Tyne, Clubs = Athenæum, Academic

[01:22:17]

**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.

[01:22:53]

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.

[01:23:26]

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.

[01:24:02]

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?

1212 (South Asian Man, Father = butcher, Padworth College, Elston, Durham Athenaeum Club, Academic)

[01:29:30]

**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.

[01:30:27]

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.*

[01:31:00]

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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[01:31:41]

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.

[01:32:10]

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.

[01:33:06]

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.

1215 (Indian (dual heritage) man, Father = telephone engineer, St Paul’s School, London, Cambridge, Clubs?, Barrister

(1:00:28)

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.

1219 (Carribean woman, Father = drugstore worker, Camperdown High School, Jamaica, LSE, No clubs, Personnel trainer)

(1:15:46)

**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?

(1:16:17)

**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.

1228 (Nigerian woman, Father - doctor, Burgess Hill Girls School, West Sussex, Newcastle Univ. Law School, No clubs, lawyer)

**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.

[0:59:00.2]

**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!”

[0:59:29.8]

**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]

[1:00:13.0]

**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.

1230 (South Indian woman, Father = doctor, Westbourne Sch. for Girls, Glasgow, Univ. of Essex, No clubs, circuit Judge)

[1:21:04.0]

**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.

[1:21:34.9]

**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.

[1:22:13.5]

**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.

[1:22:41.6]

**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.

[1:22:53.5]

**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?”

[1:23:18.0]

**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.

[1:23:46.7]

**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.

1233 (African (Nigerian) man, father = ran GlaxoSmithKline Nigeria, All Hallows School Dorset, King’s College London, Clubs = Reform, Lansdowne, 5 Hertford Street, Engineer/entrepreneur)

**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?

[0:54:04.3]

**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].

[0:54:18.3]

**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.

[0:54:34.3]

**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.

[0:54:46.3]

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

[0:54:57.0]

**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.