

Speaking 'properly' isn't necessarily speaking correctly

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There are a few people in England who aren't fortunate enough to have a regional accent.

They include many of the men who are currently in charge of the nation. David William Donald Cameron, George Gideon Oliver Osborne, Nicholas William Peter Clegg, and Alexander Boris de Pfeffel Johnson all have the misfortune of not seeming not to come from anywhere in particular at all when they speak English.

You can tell they hail from England, rather than Ireland or Canada or New Zealand. But that's about it. They're nowhere men.

This is because their parents paid large sums of money – £30,000 a year for Eton, currently – for them to go to schools for deracinated upper-class people where they, quite naturally, came to speak like all the other deracinated upper-class pupils.

There are about 220 of these so-called Public Schools in England, out of a total of around 4,000 secondary schools, so little more than 5pc of the total.

The upper-class accent which is transmitted from one generation to another in these schools goes by different names.

Linguists scientists call it RP.

This stands for Received Pronunciation,



■ Public school pupils such as Boris Johnson have accents which bear no trace of their roots.

an old-fashioned Victorian/Edwardian term meaning "accepted in the 'best' social circles".

Linguists don't much like this term, but we seem to be stuck with it now. Other people have called it the BBC accent, or Oxford English, or the Queen's English.

The accent is non-regional because the Public Schools were traditionally boarding schools.

Upper-class children, originally mostly boys, were first taken from their homes at a young age and sent to board at Preparatory Schools.

Then, at the age of 13 or so, they were sent to spend most of their adolescence at a Public School away from their family home.

So the RP accent tells listeners very little about where its speakers come from geographically, but a lot about their social background.

This is very odd. On a world-wide scale, the RP accent is a freak – just about everybody else in the world betrays their geographical origins to a greater or lesser extent when they speak.

Speakers of this freakish accent are sometimes said to be "well-spoken".

This is, if you think about it, outrageous. Why should "speaking well" mean sounding like George Osborne?

Why can't it mean speaking clearly and articulately; and being able to say exactly what you want to say?

You can do that in any local accent.