

UNITED KINGDOM

Date of Elections: 3 May 1979

Purpose of Elections

Elections were held for all the members of the House of Commons, whose term of office came prematurely to an end when Parliament was dissolved on 7 April 1979 following a vote of confidence. Previous general elections had been held on 10 October 1974.

Characteristics of Parliament

The bicameral Parliament of the United Kingdom consists of the House of Commons and the House of Lords.

The House of Commons consists of 635 members elected for 5 years. Of these 635 seats, 516 are set aside for England, 71 for Scotland, 36 for Wales and 12 for Northern Ireland.

The House of Lords is indeterminate in size. There were recently some 1,155 potential members, of whom 218 were debarred from taking part in the proceedings of the House either because they were not in receipt of a writ of summons or because they were on leave of absence. This membership comprises 809 hereditary peers and peeresses sitting by virtue of creation or descent, other than those who have disclaimed their titles for life under the provisions of the Peerage Act, 1963; life peers being (a) 18 Lords of Appeal (active and retired) under the Appellate Jurisdiction Act, 1876, as amended, and (b) 302 life peers and peeresses under the Life Peerages Act, 1958; 2 archbishops and 24 bishops (as long as they hold their sees). About 280 Lords attend their House's sessions with any regularity.

Electoral System

All British subjects and citizens of the Republic of Ireland are entitled to vote provided they have reached the age of 18 on polling day and are resident in a constituency on the "qualifying date" (October 10 of each year)*. Prisoners and members of the House of Lords cannot vote, while persons convicted for electoral offences may not do so for period of five years.

Electoral registers are drawn up on the constituency level and revised annually in October to take effect the following February. Voting is not compulsory. Proxy voting is permitted for members of the armed forces. Crown servants and British Council staff employed overseas, persons who are outside the country on polling day because of their employment, and the husbands or wives of any of the people in the above categories.

* For a parliamentary election in any constituency in Northern Ireland, the elector must have been resident in Northern Ireland for three months prior to the qualifying date.

Postal voting is allowed those people who, although in the United Kingdom, are prevented from voting in person in their constituency because of, *inter alia*, physical disability, religious observance, or inability to reach the polling station without an air or sea journey.

Candidates for the House of Commons must be British subjects at least 21 years of age. The insane and undischarged bankrupts are disqualified from membership of the House, as are members of the armed forces, policemen, civil servants, holders of certain judicial offices, clergymen (except of Non-conformist churches), peers and members of a large number of public boards and tribunals.

A nomination must be supported by 10 electors and accompanied by a deposit of £150, which sum is returned to the candidate if he obtains at least one-eighth of the total votes.

Each candidate may spend £1,750 in campaign expenses, plus 2 p. per elector in a county constituency or 1.5 p. per election in a borough constituency*.

For purposes of elections to the House of Commons, the United Kingdom is divided into 635 constituencies. In each, the candidate who has obtained the largest number of votes is declared elected.

By-elections are held to fill Commons seats which become vacant between general elections. In the House of Lords, Bishop's places are filled by the next senior diocesan bishop and seats of Lords in Appeal are filled by appointment.

General Political Considerations and Conduct of the Elections

On 28 March 1979, the Labour Government of Prime Minister James Callaghan lost a vote of no confidence in the House of Commons by one vote, 311 to 310. The next day, the Prime Minister announced that Parliament would be dissolved on 7 April and that a general election would be held on 3 May.

On 6 April, the Labour Party issued its manifesto, or platform. It gave as its priorities: keeping a curb on inflation and prices; implementing the new framework for industrial relations agreed between the Government and the Trade Union Congress; working for a return to full employment; enlarging people's freedom in various ways such as the development of industrial democracy; and, in the international sphere, co-operation with Britain's European partners which would nevertheless have to take into account Britain's strong views on the defects of the Common Agricultural Policy.

The programme of the major opposition Conservative Party emphasized: "restoring the health of our economic and social life, by controlling inflation and striking a fair balance between the rights and duties of the trade union movement; restoring incentives so that hard work pays, success is rewarded and genuine new jobs are created in an expanding economy; upholding Parliament and the rule of law; supporting family life, by helping people to become home-owners, raising the standards of their children's educa-

* See section *Parliamentary Developments*, p. 36.

tion, and concentrating welfare services on the effective support of the old, the sick, the disabled and those who are in real need; and strengthening Britain's defences while working with allies to protect the Nation's interests in an increasingly threatening world."

The smaller Liberal Party's manifesto stressed four underlying themes: commitment to fundamental political and constitutional reform; proposals for economic and industrial reform; plans to change and to simplify the over-burdened tax system; and concern to bring to bear an environmental perspective across the whole range of government policies.

Nominations closed on 23 April with a total of 2,576 candidates—a record number. On polling day, the Conservative Party received 44% of the votes cast and gained an overall Commons majority of 43 seats. The new Prime Minister, Mrs. Margaret Thatcher, announced her Cabinet on 5 May; she is the first woman to head a Government in Britain. The newly-elected Parliament first met on 9 May.

Statistics

*Results of the Elections and Distribution of Seats
in the House of Commons*

Voters		31,220,790 (7<>%)				
Political Group	Number of Candidates	Votes obtained	%	Number of Seats in the House of Commons	Number of Seats Dissolution	Number of Seats won at Previous Elections
Conservative Party . . .	622	13,697,753	43.9	339	282	276
Labour Party	622	11,509,524	36.9	268	306	319
Liberal Party	577	4,313,931	13.8	11	14	13
Scottish National Party	71	504,259	1.6	2	11	11
Official Unionists ¹ . . .	11	254,578	0.8	5	7	5
National Front	303	191,267	0.6	—	—	—
Social Democratic and Labour Party ²	10	137,110	0.4	1	1	1
<i>Plaid Cymru</i>	3d	132,544	0.4	2	3	3
Others?	324	479,824	\.>	7	7 [^]	123
				635	635	635

¹ Representing Northern Ireland.

² Including the Speaker, a former Labour Member in 1974; a former Conservative Member in 1979.

³ This category included the United Ulster Unionist Coalition, which had 10 seats; an independent Member from Northern Ireland; and the Speaker.

⁴ Before dissolution there were two Scottish Labour Members, three Unionists other than Official Unionists, and one independent from Northern Ireland. The category "Others" also includes the Speaker and there were four vacancies.

⁵ See note 3 above.

2. *Distribution of Members of the House of Commons according to Professional Category*

Members of the legal profession. . . . .	.103
Managers, executives and administratives	87
Company directors.	85
Members of the teaching profession.	74
Journalists and authors.	52
Engineers.	39
Farmers, landowners.	30
Trade union officials.	28
Economists.	18
Accountants.	17
Underwriters and brokers.	17
Party officials.	17
Mineworkers.	16
Bankers.	12
Rail workers.	9
Other manual workers.	9
Members of the medical profession.	8
Architects and surveyors.	7
Scientists.	6
Publishers.	5
Social workers.	4
Clerical and technical personnel.	4
Civil servants.	3
Local government officials.	3
Public relations.	2
Ministers of religion.	2
Others.	17
	674*

* Some MPs have two or three professions.

3. *Distribution of Members of the House of Commons according to Sex*

Men. . . . .	.616
Women. . . . .	.19
	635

4. *Distribution of Members of the House of Commons according to Age Group*

30 years and under. . . . .	.10
31-35. . . . .	.40
36-40. . . . .	.96
41-45. . . . .	.85
46-50. . . . .	.130
51-55.	111
56-60. . . . .	.77
61-65. . . . .	.50
66-70. . . . .	.24
Over 70.	<u>.12</u>
	635