

UNITED KINGDOM

Date of Elections: 9 June 1983

Purpose of Elections

Elections were held for all the seats in the House of Commons, whose members' term of office came prematurely to an end when Parliament was dissolved on 13 May 1983. Previous general elections had been held on 3 May 1979.

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 650 members* elected for 5 years. Of the 650 seats, 523 are set aside for England, 72 for Scotland, 38 for Wales and 17 for Northern Ireland.

The House of Lords is indeterminate in size. There were, in December 1982, 1177 potential members, of whom 246 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. The membership comprises 799 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) 21 Lords of Appeal (active and retired) under the Appellate Jurisdiction Act, 1876, as amended, and (b) 327 life peers and peeresses under the Life Peerages Act, 1958; 2 archbishops and 24 bishops (as long as they hold their sees). About 300 peers 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 that 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 of electoral offences may not do so for a 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. Postal voting is allowed to 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.

* See section *Parliamentary Developments*, p. 14.

** 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.

Candidates for the House of Commons must be British subjects at least 21 years of age. The insane, undischarged bankrupts and persons serving a prison sentence of more than one year 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-Formalist 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 £2,700 in campaign expenses, plus 3.1 p. per elector in a county constituency or 2.3 p. per election in a borough constituency.

For purposes of elections to the House of Commons, the United Kingdom is divided into 650 constituencies. In each, the candidate who obtains 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 of Appeal are filled by appointment.

General Considerations **and** Conduct of the Elections

On 9 May 1983, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher (Conservative Party) announced the calling of premature general elections, a move prompted by the hope of improving her party's parliamentary standing and in order to serve "the national interest". Parliament was dissolved four days later and the election campaign thus lasted one month.

Confronting the ruling Conservatives were, principally, the Labour Party, led by Mr. Michael Foot, and the new centrist alliance of Liberals and Social Democrats. A record number of 2,579 candidates were in the running. The overriding campaign issue was the Government's economic policies (especially regarding unemployment), which the Conservatives contended were slowly bringing the country out of its prolonged decline. Debate also focused on national defence and nuclear components thereof.

On polling day, the Conservatives swept to victory, picking up 63 additional seats to arrive at a total of 397 in the 650-seat House of Commons, which had been enlarged following redistricting measures. Labour was a distant second, with 209 seats, while the Liberal-Social Democratic alliance won 23. Remaining seats went to small nationalist parties of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Prime Minister Thatcher, having won a second term of office, reshuffled her Cabinet between 11 and 15 June.

Statistics

1. Results of the Elections and Distribution of Seats
in the House of Commons

Number of registered electors.	42,197,344
Voters.	(73%)
Valid votes.	30,670,895

Political Group	Number of Candidates	Votes obtained		Number of Seats	Number of Seats held at Dissolution
Conservative Party.	633	13,012,602	42.4	397	334
Labour Party.	633	8,457,124	27.6	209	239
Liberal/Social Democratic Alliance	633*	7,780,577	25.4	23**	42***
Scottish National Party	72	331,975	1.1	2	:
Plaid Cymru.	38	125,309	0.4	2	:
Northern Ireland parties	94	764,474	2.5	17	10
Others.	476	198,834	0.6		6****
				650***	635

* Liberals 322, Social Democrats 311.

** Liberals 17, Social Democrats 6.

*** Liberals 13, Social Democrats 29.

**** Including the Speaker and two vacancies.

***** 15 seats added since last elections.

2. Distribution of Members of the House of Commons according to Sex

Men	627
Women	<u>23</u>
	650