

## UNITED KINGDOM

**Date of Elections:** February 28, 1974

### **Purpose of Elections**

General elections were held for the totality of the seats of the House of Commons, which House was dissolved 16 months prematurely.

### **Characteristics of Parliament**

The Parliament of the United Kingdom is composed of 2 Houses: 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 are in fact some 1,075 potential members of whom approximately 282 are debarred from taking part in the proceedings of the House, either because they are not in receipt of a writ of summons or because they are on leave of absence. The House is comprised partly of hereditary peers by succession (about 761), of *ex-officio* members (2 Archbishops and 24 Bishops), and of appointed members (210 life peers) and 77 hereditary peers of first creation.

### **Electoral System**

All British subjects or citizens of the Republic of Ireland, of either sex, 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 each year (for a parliamentary election in any constituency in Northern Ireland, the elector must have been resident in Northern Ireland for 3 months prior to the qualifying date). Members of the House of Lords, the mentally deficient, criminals sentenced to (more than 12 months') imprisonment or any persons who, during the 5 years prior to the election, have been found guilty of electoral corruption or fraud are, however, among those who may not exercise their right to vote.

Electoral registers are drawn up on the constituency level and revised annually at a fixed date. Voting is not compulsory.

Candidates to the House of Commons must be British subjects over **the** age of 21. Lunatics and bankrupts are ineligible, while civil servants, members

\* See section *Parliamentary Developments*, p. 16.

of the armed forces, policemen, judges, clergymen (except of Nonconformist churches) and members of the House of Lords are deemed to hold offices incompatible with membership of the House of Commons.

A nomination must be proposed by 2 eligible electors and supported by 8 others. It must further be accompanied by a deposit of £ 150.—, which is returned to the candidate if he obtains at least 1/8 of the total votes polled in his constituency.

The United Kingdom is divided into 635 constituencies, each of which elects one member of the House of Commons on the basis of simple majority of vote.

Vacancies arising in the House of Commons between general elections are filled at by-elections. Although in the House of Lords there is no fixed membership and therefore no general question of filling vacancies, Bishops' places are filled by the next senior diocesan bishop.

#### General Political Considerations and Conduct of the Elections

Parliament was dissolved on February 8, 1974, one day after Prime Minister Heath had announced that a general election would be held on February 28. The election campaign thus lasted 3 weeks, with February 18 scheduled as the last day for nomination of candidates.

Due to boundary changes effected as a result of redistribution of electoral constituencies, the total number of seats at stake for the House of Commons was 635 — 5 more than at the previous elections. Only 201 of these remained unaltered by boundary changes, while 32 constituencies disappeared and 37 new ones were created.

Both main political parties — the Conservative Party and the Labour Party — contested all parliamentary seats in England, Scotland and Wales. The Liberal Party followed with 517 candidates, while those of other political groups and independents brought the total number of candidates to over 2,100.

Since upon the calling of the general election a state of emergency was in force and a three-day work week in operation throughout the country as a result of a national coal strike, the election was seen primarily as a test of support between the Conservative Government's determination to hold firm against what it considered inflationary wage claims and the assertion, by the trade unions and the Labour Party, that the anti-inflation policy unfairly affected the workers. In a television address, Prime Minister Heath, emphasizing the Conservative campaign slogan of " Who governs Britain? ", characterized the stark choice facing the electorate: " The election ", he declared, " gives you, the people, the chance to say to the miners and everyone else

who wields similar power, ' times are hard, we are all in the same boat, and if you sink us now, we will all drown ' " .

The matter of inflation, unemployment and the question of which party would be best suited to borrow abroad in order to deal with the balance of payments deficit in fact constituted the brunt of the campaign issues for Conservatives, the Labour Party, and Liberals. The Conservatives favoured an adherence to their existing prices and incomes policy; Labour, led by former Prime Minister Harold Wilson, called for a " fair society ", and adopted the classic view of strict price control and free wage bargaining, as well as proposing a renegotiation of Common Market entry terms; the Liberals, led by Mr. Jeremy Thorpe, advocated a novel system of " penalties against inflation", which would be implemented against companies and workers after adoption of a tripartite accord on prices, wages and dividends, as well as increased employee participation, through stock ownership, in industrial capital.

Election returns proved inconclusive; for the first time since World War II, no political party obtained a majority in the Commons. Although Labour emerged as the largest party with 301 seats, it fell short of the 318 needed to gain an overall majority. Among minor groups, clear gains were recorded by the Scottish Nationalist Party and the United Ulster Unionist Council, which won 7 and 11 (of the 12 Northern Ireland seats) seats, respectively.

Immediately after the elections Mr. Heath made a bid to continue in office with the support of the Liberal Party. His efforts to persuade the latter were however of no avail. Labour Party leader Wilson was then named Prime Minister upon Mr. Heath's resignation on March 4. Within a few days, Wilson named a minority Labor Government — the first since 1929. Labour thus returned to power after an absence of 3 years and 8 months.

## Statistics

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

Number of registered voters. . . . .	39,789,899
Valid votes. . . . .	31,333,226

Political Group	Votes obtained	%	Number of Seats in House of Commons
Conservative Party. . . . .	11,963,207	38.2	296
Labour Party. . . . .	11,654,726	37.2	301
Liberal Party. . . . .	6,063,470	19.3	14
United Ulster Unionist Council. . . . .			11
Scottish Nationalist Party. . . . .			7
Welsh Nationalist Party. . . . .			2
Independent Labour Party. . . . .	1,651,823	5.3	1
Democratic Labour Party. . . . .			1
Social Democratic and Labour Party Speaker. . . . .			1
			635

One by-election outstanding at the time of dissolution.

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

Company directors, managers, etc. . . . .	218
Members of the legal profession . . . . .	115
Teachers, lecturers. . . . .	76
Skilled workers. . . . .	66
Journalists, etc. . . . .	62
Manual workers. . . . .	34
Farmers. . . . .	33
Doctors, surgeons. . . . .	10
Others. . . . .	<u>21</u>
	635

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

Men. . . . .	612
Women. . . . .	<u>23</u>
	635

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

Under 30. . . . .	12
31-35. . . . .	54
36-40. . . . .	64
41-45. . . . .	123
46-50. . . . .	115
51-55. . . . .	100
56-60. . . . .	81
61-65. . . . .	58
66-70. . . . .	20
Over 70. . . . .	5
	632*

Available figure.