



BRIEFING PAPER

Number CBP 7483, 12 November 2018

Social background of MPs 1979-2017

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Summary

This briefing paper provides data on the gender, age, ethnicity and educational backgrounds of Members of Parliament elected at the 2017 General Election and how this has changed since 1979:

- There were 208 female MPs elected at the 2017 General Election (32% of all MPs). This is the highest ever number and proportion. In 1979 there were 19 women MPs, 3% of the total.
- 47 MPs elected in 2017 were openly lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans or queer (LGBTQ), 7% of the total. This was the highest ever recorded figure.
- 52% (339) of MPs elected in 2017 were aged over 50. Following the election, the proportion of MPs aged 70 and over increased to 4% (28). 14 MPs aged under 30 were elected (2% of the total).
- 52 MPs were from non-white backgrounds, 8% of the total. Around 14% of the whole UK population are from a non-white background.
- 82% of MPs were graduates and 24% have attended Oxford or Cambridge. 29% of MPs attended fee-paying schools.
- 87 MPs elected in 2017 had no previous Parliamentary experience (13%). 551 (85%) had been MPs in the previous Parliament and 12 were re-elected having served in a previous Parliament.

Data on UK elections prior to 1979 is available in the [UK Election Statistics: 1918-2012 12/43](#) research paper.

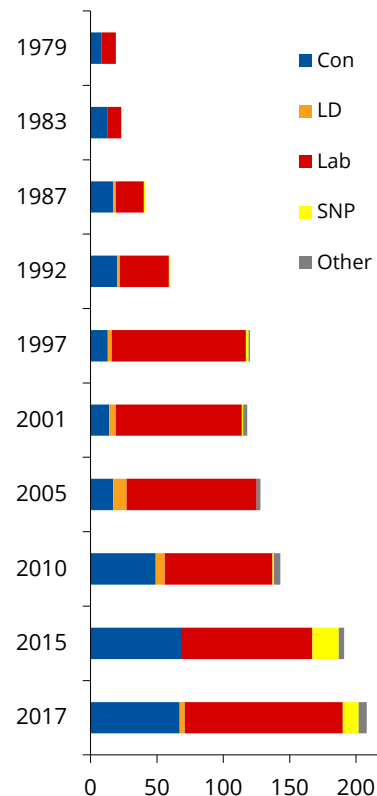
1. Gender

There were 208 female MPs elected at the 2017 General Election (32% of all MPs) – the highest ever number and proportion. There were 19 female MPs in 1979, 3% of the total. The number of female MPs rose slowly over the next three parliaments to 60 in 1992. With the 1997 Labour landslide, the number of women MPs doubled to 120. That number fell back to 118 after the 2001 election but rose again in at subsequent general elections.

1. MEN AND WOMEN MPS				
Election	Men	Women	Total	% women
1979	616	19	635	3%
1983	627	23	650	4%
1987	609	41	650	6%
1992	591	60	651	9%
1997	539	120	659	18%
2001	541	118	659	18%
2005	518	128	646	20%
2010	507	143	650	22%
2015	459	191	650	29%
2017	442	208	650	32%

As Table 2 shows, Labour have tended to have the highest number of female MPs, and have had the highest proportion since 2001.

2. WOMEN MPS BY PARTY					
	LAB	CON	LD	SNP	Other
Number					
1979	11	8	0	0	0
1983	10	13	0	0	0
1987	21	17	2	1	0
1992	37	20	2	1	0
1997	101	13	3	2	1
2001	95	14	5	1	3
2005	98	17	10	0	3
2010	81	49	7	1	5
2015	99	68	0	20	4
2017	119	67	4	12	6
Percentage of party MPs					
1979	4%	2%	0%	0%	0%
1983	5%	3%	0%	0%	0%
1987	9%	5%	9%	33%	0%
1992	14%	6%	10%	33%	0%
1997	24%	8%	7%	33%	4%
2001	23%	8%	10%	20%	13%
2005	28%	9%	16%	0%	12%
2010	31%	16%	12%	17%	22%
2015	43%	21%	0%	36%	17%
2017	45%	21%	33%	34%	25%



Sources: *Kavanagh and Cowley, The British General Election of 2015 & previous editions;*

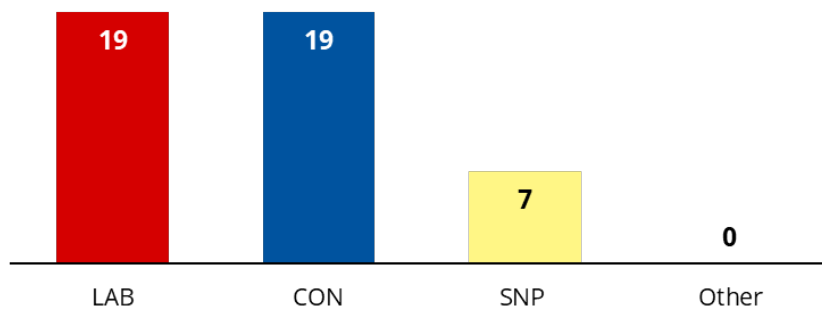
House of Commons Library, General Election 2017: full results and analysis

2. LGBTQ

The British General Election of 2017 Study by Philip Cowley and Dennis Kavanagh suggests that there were 45 openly lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans or queer (LGBTQ) MPs, the highest ever recorded number.

The graph below shows that Conservative and Labour parties each had 19 and the SNP 7 LGBTQ MPs elected at the 2017 General Election.

LGBTQ MPS BY PARTY ELECTED IN 2017



Source: Cowley, Kavanagh, The British General Election of 2017

Age

In the period from 1979 to 2017, the average age of MPs at elections has been consistently around 50 years. From 1997 to 2005 the average age of MPs elected rose, from 49.3 years in 1997 to 51.2 years in 2005, before falling to 50.5 in 2017.

In 2017, 52.2% (339) of those elected were aged over 50. This is lower than in 2005 (56.2%), and very similar to in 2015 (52.8%). The proportion of MPs aged 70 and over increased from 2.5% (16) in 2010 to 4.3% (28) in 2017 – the highest share since 1979. In the current Parliament, the number of MPs aged under 30 increased to 14 (2.2%), the highest proportion ever other than 15 in 2010 (2.3%).

3. AGES OF MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT ELECTED AT GENERAL ELECTIONS									
Election	Average Age at election							Not specified	Total
	(Years)	18-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-69	70+		
1979	49.6	6	120	205	203	87	14	635	
1983	48.8	10	120	223	201	86	9	649	
1987	49.0	4	112	252	197	79	6	650	
1992	50.0	1	82	259	211	95	3	651	
1997	49.3	10	92	255	225	69	8	659	
2001	50.3	4	79	236	247	83	10	659	
2005	51.2	3	89	191	249	100	14	646	
2010	49.9	15	108	196	216	99	16	650	
2015	50.6	13	89	205	212	107	24	650	
2017	50.5	14	102	190	197	114	28	650	

Notes: Age given at the date of the general election. Publicly-available data sources were used where dates of birth were not available from the House of Commons Members’ Names Information Service. In some cases, ages are approximate (e.g. based on a birth year or month rather than a specific day).

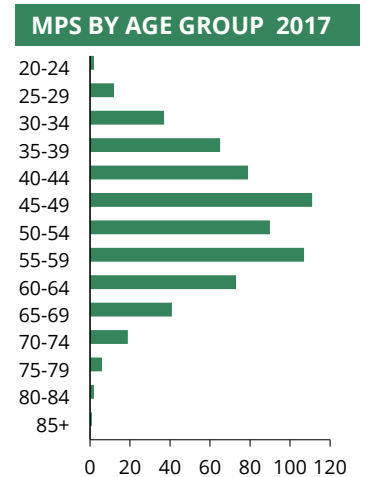
Source: House of Commons Library, *Members’ Names Information Service*; Library research.

The Labour party has a higher proportion of MPs over the age of 60. 27% of Labour MPs are aged over 60 compared to 19% of Conservatives, 17% of Liberal Democrats and 9% of Scottish National Party MPs. The average age for SNP MPs is 46, the lowest average for any of the four largest parties (those with 8 or more MPs).

	Average age		Age group			
	Number	(years)	Under 40	40-59	60+	Unknown
LAB	262	51.6	20%	52%	27%	2%
CON	317	49.9	14%	67%	19%	0%
LD	12	53.5	17%	67%	17%	0%
SNP	35	46.0	31%	60%	9%	0%
Other	24	51.2	21%	50%	29%	0%
<i>All</i>	650		18%	60%	22%	1%

Notes: See Table 3, above. Data was not available for four Labour MPs and one Conservative MP.

Source: House of Commons Library, *Members’ Names Information Service*; Library research.

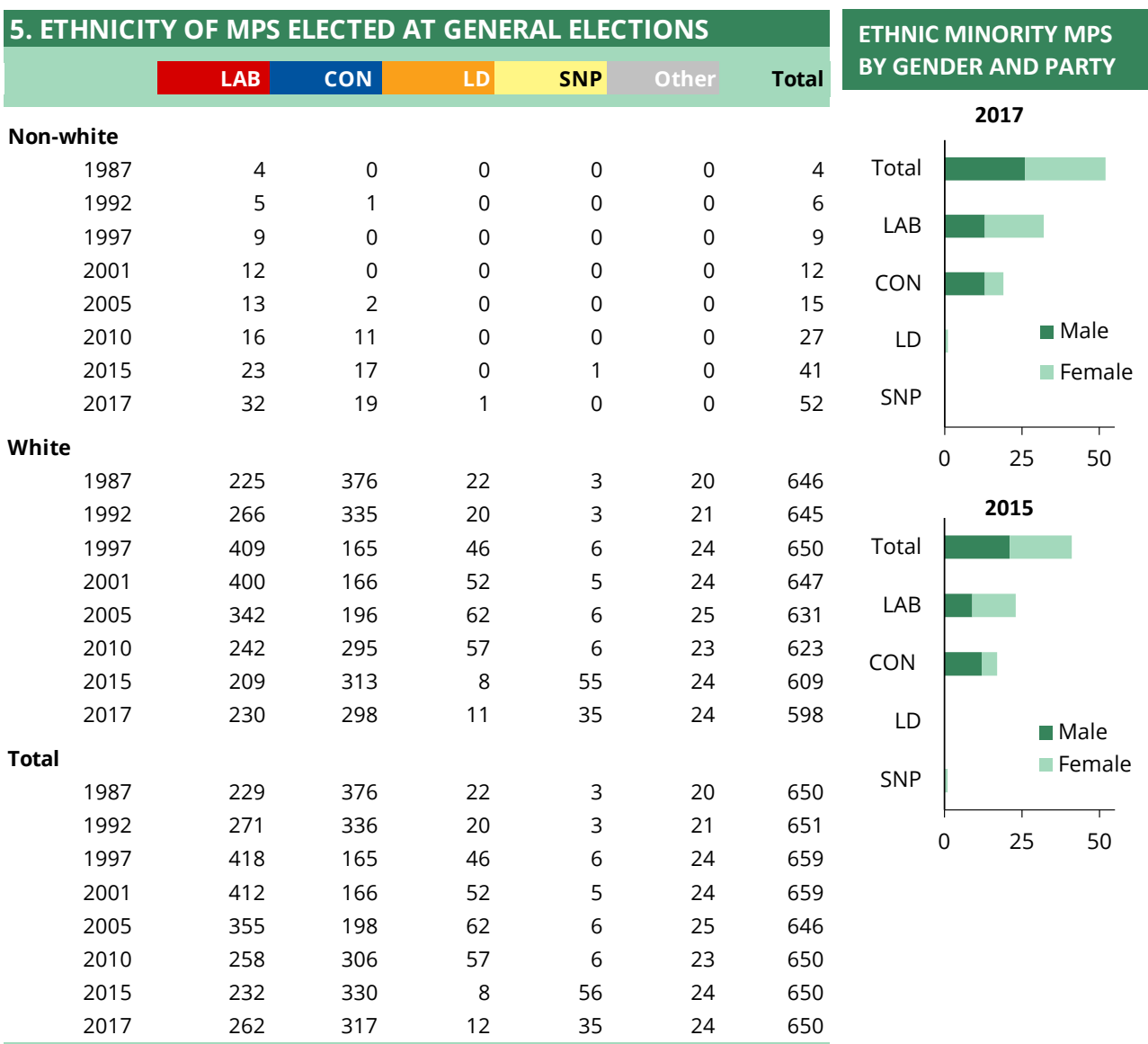


3. Ethnicity

As an individual's ethnicity is self-defined, it is hard to obtain complete records of MPs' ethnicity, particularly historically. It is generally stated that the first non-white MPs since World War II were elected in 1987, when four Labour MPs were from a non-white background.

52 non-white MPs were elected at the 2017 General Election, according to analysis from [British Future](#). This represents 8% of all MPs and is the highest number and proportion of ethnic minority MPs returned at a general election to date.

Around 13.6% of people in the UK were from an ethnic minority group at the time of the 2016 Annual Population Survey.¹



Source: House of Commons Library, *General Election 2017: results and analysis*; British Future, *52 minority MPs to sit in 'most diverse UK parliament ever'*, 9 June 2017

¹ Annual Population Survey, Q1 2016 – Q4 2016 dataset

The gender split of ethnic minority MPs elected at the 2017 General Election is exactly even: 26 are male and 26 are female. 19 (59%) of Labour ethnic minority MPs are female, compared to 13 (32%) of Conservative ethnic minority MPs.

The Liberal Democrats gained one female ethnic minority MP, Layla Moran. She is the first non-white Liberal Democrat to be elected at a general election (Parmjit Singh Gill was elected for the Liberal Democrats at a 2004 by-election, but did not retain the seat in the 2005 General Election).

The first ethnic minority SNP MP, Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh, was elected in 2015. She did not retain her seat in 2017.

4. Parliamentary Experience

Of MPs elected in 2017, 87 (13%) had no previous Parliamentary experience. 551 (85%) had been MPs in the 2015-17 Parliament, while 12 were re-elected having served in a previous Parliament.

6. MPS ELECTED AT 2017 GENERAL ELECTION BY DATE FIRST ELECTED

Includes by-elections before next general election

	CON	LAB	SNP	LD	Other	Total
Number of MPs elected by general election						
1970	1	1	0	0	0	2
1974 (Oct)	1	2	0	0	0	3
1979	0	4	0	0	0	4
1983	12	6	0	0	0	18
1987	4	5	0	0	0	9
1992	13	11	0	0	0	24
1997	19	41	0	3	2	65
2001	14	13	1	2	5	35
2005	46	23	2	2	2	75
2010	112	56	0	1	6	175
2015	65	54	31	0	3	153
2017	30	46	1	4	6	87
Total:	317	262	35	12	24	650
% of MPs elected by general election						
1970	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
1974 (Oct)	0%	1%	0%	0%	0%	0%
1979	0%	2%	0%	0%	0%	1%
1983	4%	2%	0%	0%	0%	3%
1987	1%	2%	0%	0%	0%	1%
1992	4%	4%	0%	0%	0%	4%
1997	6%	16%	0%	25%	8%	10%
2001	4%	5%	3%	17%	21%	5%
2005	15%	9%	6%	17%	8%	12%
2010	35%	21%	0%	8%	25%	27%
2015	21%	21%	89%	0%	13%	24%
2017	9%	18%	3%	33%	25%	13%
Total:	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Note: MPs elected at by-elections are categorised by the first general election at which they were elected.

Sources: House of Commons Library, Members Names Information Service

In the current Parliament, Kenneth Clarke and Dennis Skinner share the longest length of service (46.1 years excluding dissolution periods). Both have been MPs continuously since the 1970 General Election. However, Kenneth Clarke is the current Father of the House.² They are followed by Sir Peter Bottomley (41.2 years of service) and Geoffrey Robinson (40.5 years of service).

² In the situation when several MPs share the longest continuous service the Father of the House is considered to be the MP who took their Oath first.

Since 1979, the shortest service has been by MPs who won by-elections. Two Members subsequently died; Bobby Sands (Fermanagh & South Tyrone) 26 days after election and Mike Carr (Bootle) after 57 days. Ossie O'Brien (Darlington) was elected at a by-election but defeated 77 days later at the 1983 General Election.

7. THE 25 LONGEST-SERVING MPS

As at 2017 General Election

Rank	Name of MP:	Days in service ^a	Years in service ^a	First started	Party
1	Clarke, Mr Kenneth	16,847	46.1	1970	CON
2	Skinner, Mr Dennis	16,847	46.1	1970	LAB
3	Bottomley, Sir Peter	15,053	41.2	1975	CON
4	Robinson, Mr Geoffrey	14,801	40.5	1976	LAB
5	Beckett, Margaret	13,841	37.9	1974	LAB
6	Field, Frank	13,672	37.4	1979	LAB
7	Sheerman, Mr Barry	13,672	37.4	1979	LAB
8	Harman, Ms Harriet	12,398	33.9	1982	LAB
9	Amess, Sir David	12,201	33.4	1983	CON
10	Barron, Sir Kevin	12,201	33.4	1983	LAB
11	Brown, Mr Nicholas	12,201	33.4	1983	LAB
12	Corbyn, Jeremy	12,201	33.4	1983	LAB
13	Gale, Sir Roger	12,201	33.4	1983	CON
14	Leigh, Sir Edward	12,201	33.4	1983	CON
15	Soames, Sir Nicholas	12,201	33.4	1983	CON
16	Cash, Sir William	11,872	32.5	1984	CON
17	Clwyd, Ann	11,872	32.5	1984	LAB
18	McLoughlin, Sir Patrick	11,137	30.5	1986	CON
19	Howarth, Mr George	10,948	30.0	1986	LAB
20	Abbott, Ms Diane	10,762	29.5	1987	LAB
21	Campbell, Mr Ronnie	10,762	29.5	1987	LAB
22	Flynn, Paul	10,762	29.5	1987	LAB
23	Redwood, John	10,762	29.5	1987	CON
24	Tredinnick, David	10,762	29.5	1987	CON
25	Vaz, Keith	10,762	29.5	1987	LAB

Notes: (a) 'Days /years in service' does not include the Parliament dissolution periods and is estimated as at the dissolution of the 2015-17 Parliament.

Source: House of Commons Library, Members Names Information Service

5. Education

The *British General Election of...* series of books provide analyses of Education of candidates and MPs at each election.³

82% of MPs elected at 2017 General Election were graduates and 24% have attended Oxford or Cambridge. 29% of MPs attended fee-paying schools, 1% decrease compared to 2015.

Conservative MPs elected at 2017 General Election were the most likely to have attended fee paying school: 44% did compared to 30% Liberal Democrat MPs, followed by 13% Labour and 6% SNP. The Conservatives were also more likely to be Oxford or Cambridge graduates (34%). SNP MPs were least likely to have attended a private or selective school (88% attended a comprehensive school). None of the SNP MPs attended Oxford or Cambridge.

8. SCHOOL AND UNIVERSITY BACKGROUND OF MPS ELECTED IN 2017

	Fee-paying school	State school		Oxbridge
		Comprehensive	Selective	
CON	44%	34%	23%	34%
LAB	13%	65%	22%	20%
SNP	6%	88%	6%	0%
LD	30%	60%	10%	17%

Note: The data for schooling of 588 MPs

Source: Cowley, Kavanagh, *The British General Election of 2017*, pp 399-400

One-third of MPs elected in 2015 went to fee-paying schools. The proportion varied by party from 7% of Scottish National Party, to 13% of Liberal Democrats, 16% Labour, and 50% of Conservatives. Around three-quarters of MPs elected in 2015 were university graduates.

9. EDUCATION OF MPS ELECTED IN GENERAL ELECTIONS 1979 TO 2017 (4 MAIN PARTIES)

% attending educational institution		1979	1983	1987	1992	1997	2001	2005	2010	2015	2017
CON	Fee-paying school	73%	70%	68%	62%	66%	64%	60%	54%	50%	44%
	University	68%	71%	70%	73%	81%	83%	81%	80%	81%	83%
	Oxford / Cambridge	49%	48%	44%	45%	51%	48%	43%	34%	30%	34%
LAB	Fee-paying school	18%	14%	14%	15%	16%	17%	18%	14%	16%	13%
	University	59%	53%	56%	61%	66%	67%	64%	72%	77%	84%
	Oxford / Cambridge	21%	15%	15%	16%	15%	16%	16%	17%	21%	20%
LD	Fee-paying school	55%	52%	45%	50%	41%	35%	39%	39%	13%	30%
	University	45%	65%	73%	75%	70%	69%	79%	81%	100%	92%
	Oxford / Cambridge	27%	30%	27%	30%	33%	27%	31%	28%	13%	17%
SNP	Fee-paying school									7%	6%
	University									75%	62%
	Oxford / Cambridge									0%	0%

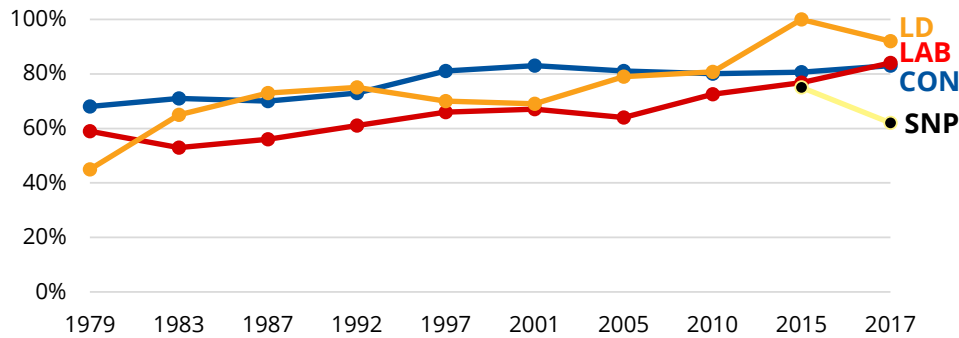
Source: Cowley, Kavanagh, *The British General Election of 2017* & earlier editions

³ Kavanagh, Cowley et al, *The British General Election of 2015 & previous editions*.

Table 9 and charts below show how MPs' educational background has changed since 1979.

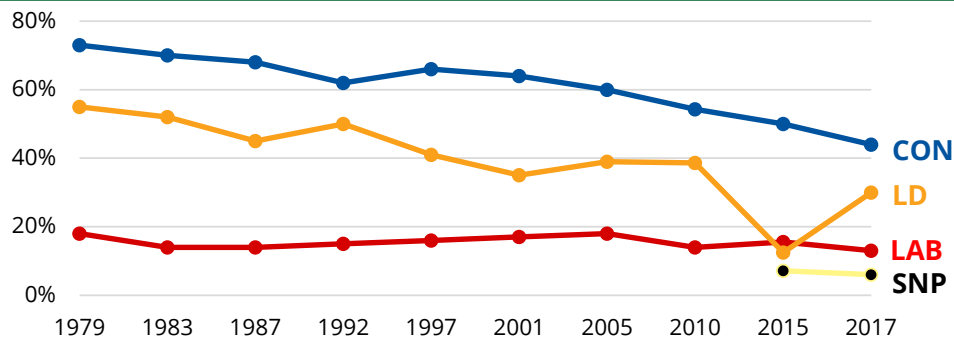
Over the period, the proportion of MPs who are university graduates increased. The 2017 General Election was the first time when Labour had (a slightly) higher proportion of university graduates than the Conservatives. The share of university-educated Labour MPs increased from 59% in 1979 to 84% in 2017. The proportion of Conservatives rose from 68% to 83%. The share of SNP MPs with university degree decreased from 75% in 2015 to 62% in 2017.

MPS WHO GRADUATED FROM UNIVERSITY BY PARTY



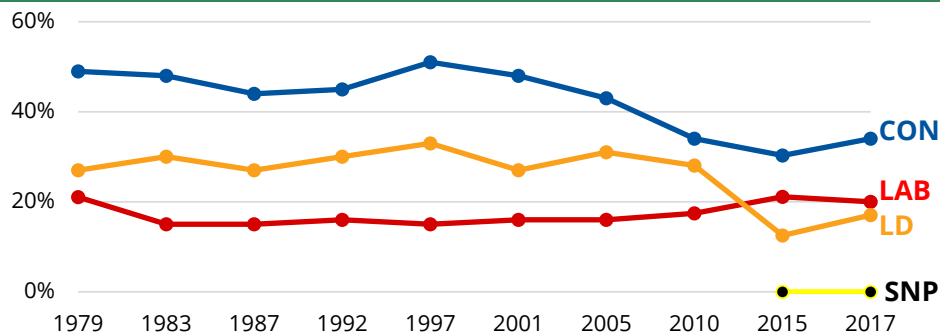
The overall share of MPs who attended fee-paying schools decreased since 1979. The proportion of Conservative MPs decreased the most from 73% to 44% in 2017. Share of Liberal Democrats fell to 55% to 30% and Labour from 18% to 13%.

MPS WHO ATTENDED FEE-PAYING SCHOOLS BY PARTY



The proportion of Oxford and Cambridge graduates decreased. In 1979, 225 MPs elected Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat MPs been to Oxford or Cambridge, 36% of these parties' MPs. Around 23% of MPs elected at the 2017 election came from an Oxbridge background.

MPS WHO GRADUATED FROM OXFORD OR CAMBRIDGE BY PARTY



Source: Cowley, Kavanagh, The British General Election of 2017 & earlier editions

6. Occupation

The *British General Election of...* series of books provide analyses of occupations of candidates and MPs at each election.⁴

The historic data is restricted to Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat parties, but gives a reasonably consistent guide to the occupational background of MPs over the period from 1979-2010.⁵ The 2015 data also includes Scottish National Party MPs. The following table 10 summarises the main occupation groups of MPs elected up to 2015. The latest data for 2017 was published in a different format and is not comparable with earlier years. The latest breakdown by occupation is available in table 11 on page 15.

10. MPS' OCCUPATIONS 1979 TO 2015									
MPs (Conservative/Labour/Liberal Democrat/Scottish National*)									
	1979	1983	1987	1992	1997	2001	2005	2010	2015 ¹
<i>Number</i>									
Professions	278	278	262	258	272	270	242	218	194
Barrister	67	69	57	53	36	33	34	38	38
Solicitor	29	35	31	30	28	35	38	48	51
Doctor	8	5	5	6	9	8	6	9	10
Civil service/local govt	30	27	22	26	37	35	28	18	16
Teachers: University/college	28	32	36	45	61	53	44	25	16
Teacher: school	49	43	48	57	65	64	47	24	16
Business	138	162	161	152	113	107	118	156	192
Miscellaneous	106	115	133	154	188	200	217	222	221
White Collar	9	21	27	46	72	76	78	84	71
Politician/Political organiser	21	20	34	46	60	66	87	90	107
Publisher/Journalist	46	45	42	44	47	50	43	38	34
Farmer	23	21	19	12	7	6	8	10	7
Manual Workers	98	74	73	63	56	53	38	25	19
Miner	21	20	17	13	13	12	11	7	[7²]
Total	619	629	629	627	629	630	615	621	626
<i>Percentage</i>									
Professions	44.9%	44.2%	41.7%	41.1%	43.2%	42.9%	39.3%	35.1%	31.0%
Barrister	10.8%	11.0%	9.1%	8.5%	5.7%	5.2%	5.5%	6.1%	6.1%
Solicitor	4.7%	5.6%	4.9%	4.8%	4.5%	5.6%	6.2%	7.7%	8.1%
Doctor	1.3%	0.8%	0.8%	1.0%	1.4%	1.3%	1.0%	1.4%	1.6%
Civil service/local govt	4.8%	4.3%	3.5%	4.1%	5.9%	5.6%	4.6%	2.9%	2.6%
Teachers: University/college	4.5%	5.1%	5.7%	7.2%	9.7%	8.4%	7.2%	4.0%	2.6%
Teacher: school	7.9%	6.8%	7.6%	9.1%	10.3%	10.2%	7.6%	3.9%	2.6%
Business	22.3%	25.8%	25.6%	24.2%	18.0%	17.0%	19.2%	25.1%	30.7%
Miscellaneous	17.1%	18.3%	21.1%	24.6%	29.9%	31.7%	35.3%	35.7%	35.3%
White Collar ³	1.5%	3.3%	4.3%	7.3%	11.4%	12.1%	12.7%	13.5%	11.3%
Politician/Political organiser	3.4%	3.2%	5.4%	7.3%	9.5%	10.5%	14.1%	14.5%	17.1%
Publisher/Journalist	7.4%	7.2%	6.7%	7.0%	7.5%	7.9%	7.0%	6.1%	5.4%
Farmer	3.7%	3.3%	3.0%	1.9%	1.1%	1.0%	1.3%	1.6%	1.1%
Manual Workers	15.8%	11.8%	11.6%	10.0%	8.9%	8.4%	6.2%	4.0%	3.0%
Miner	3.4%	3.2%	2.7%	2.1%	2.1%	1.9%	1.8%	1.1%	[1.1%]

- Notes: 1. Scottish National Party data is only included from 2015;
 2. The number of former miners is not recorded in the *British General Election of 2015*. The number for 2015 based on the House of Commons Library calculations.
 3. From 2010, Nuffield study categories: 'White collar' includes: misc. white collar; union official; public relations; and charity/voluntary sector;

Sources: *Kavanagh, Cowley et al The British General Election of 2015 & previous editions*

⁴ Kavanagh, Cowley et al, *The British General Election of 2015 & previous editions*.

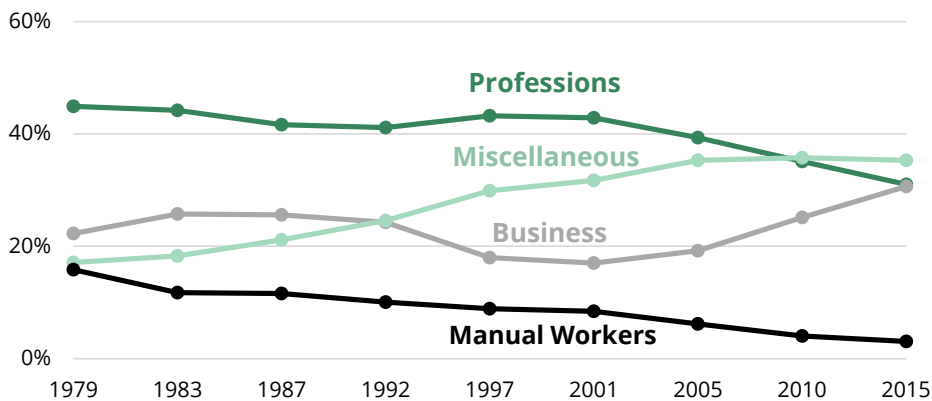
⁵ In the period from 1951 to 2010 on average 97% of all elected MPs represented Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat Parties (including predecessors).

The number of MPs who were former manual workers decreased from around 16% of all MPs in 1979 to 3% in 2015. The proportion of MPs with a background in one of the ‘traditional’ professions⁶ has also fallen, from 45% in 1979 to 31% in 2015. Within this category the proportion of former school teachers and former barristers has declined while the proportion of former solicitors has risen. The numbers of teachers from schools and teachers from universities and colleges were rising until 1997. In the period from 2001 to 2015 it fell below the 1979 level.

As the established professions have declined they have been replaced by MPs from other non-manual occupations. Particularly notable is the growth in the number of MPs who come to Westminster already with previous political experience. In 1979 3% of MPs from the main parties were previously politicians/political organisers, compared to 17% in 2015.

MPs with a background in business tend to be Conservative. The decline in their number was reversed in 2005 and they now form a quarter of the main parties’ MPs.

MPs' OCCUPATIONS



Sources: *Kavanagh, Cowley et al The British General Election of 2015 & previous editions*

The table 11 shows MPs’ occupation immediately before the 2017 General Election.

Half of Labour MPs (49%) have an “instrumental” background, higher than 37% of SNP, 31% of Conservative and 25% of Liberal Democrat MPs.

Conservative had the highest proportion of MPs with a business/commerce background (41%), followed by 33% of Liberal Democrats 17% SNP and just 6% Labour.

Just under one-fifth of SNP (20%), Labour (19%), Conservative (17%) and one third of Liberal Democrat (33%) MPs were in ‘brokerage’ occupations prior to the 2017 General Election.

⁶ The ‘traditional’ professions category is listed in - Cowley and Kavanagh *The British General Election of 2015*.

11. 2017 MPS' OCCUPATION IMMEDIATELY PRIOR TO THE ELECTION								
	CON	LAB	SNP	LD	CON	LAB	SNP	LD
Brokerage	55	50	7	4	17.4%	19.1%	20.0%	33.3%
Legal profession	38	25	1	2	12.0%	9.5%	2.9%	16.7%
Education	6	20	3	2	1.9%	7.6%	8.6%	16.7%
Physicians/dentists	7	3	2		2.2%	1.1%	5.7%	
Architects/surveyors/engineers	4	2	1		1.3%	0.8%	2.9%	
Instrumental	101	129	13	3	31.9%	49.2%	37.1%	25.0%
Councillor/other elected office	28	47	5	2	8.8%	17.9%	14.3%	16.7%
Political/social/policy research	30	27	5		9.5%	10.3%	14.3%	
Party official	14	14	2		4.4%	5.3%	5.7%	
Journalism/broadcast/media	10	6	1	1	3.2%	2.3%	2.9%	8.3%
Trade union official		30				11.5%		
Lobbyist	19	5			6.0%	1.9%		
Business/commerce	130	15	6	4	41.0%	5.7%	17.1%	33.3%
Other	29	64	8	1	9.1%	24.4%	22.9%	8.3%
Agriculture/farmers	6				1.9%			
Armed forces	2	2			0.6%	0.8%		
Civil service/local authority	5	3	1		1.6%	1.1%	2.9%	
Clergy		1				0.4%		
NHS	2	7			0.6%	2.7%		
Other		4	2	1		1.5%	5.7%	8.3%
Other white collar	6	8	2		1.9%	3.1%	5.7%	
Retired	2		1		0.6%		2.9%	
Social worker		5				1.9%		
Voluntary sector	5	32	2		1.6%	12.2%	5.7%	
Writer/literacy/artist	1	2			0.3%	0.8%		
Manual	2	4	1		0.6%	1.5%	2.9%	
Total	317	262	35	12	100%	100%	100%	100%

Source: Kavanagh, Cowley et al *The British General Election of 2017*

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