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United Kingdom

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Introduction

Following a tumultuous 2016, British politics was again highly unsettled in 2017. In March the government invoked Article 50 to officially start the UK's withdrawal process from the European Union. Three weeks later Prime Minister Theresa May unexpectedly called for a General Election. On 8 June her Conservative Party lost their majority in Parliament and were forced to form a minority government, relying on support from the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) of Northern Ireland. In the wake of eventual 'Brexit', the issue of the border between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland rumbled throughout the year. The year was also overshadowed by a major fire at Grenfell Tower in London, which claimed 71 lives, and terror attacks: three separate vehicle-attacks in London and a bombing in Manchester claimed 36 lives and injured hundreds. Two of these attacks occurred during the election campaign, and parties agreed not to campaign in the days immediately following.

Election report

After repeatedly claiming there would be no election before 2020, on 17 April Prime Minister Theresa May announced she had changed her mind. With the support of the Opposition, the House of Commons voted to dissolve itself as required by the Fixed Term Parliament Act 2011. Most opinion polls pointed towards a comfortable Conservative majority (c.f. Coates 2017), yet, on a turnout of 66.8 per cent, the result ended in a hung parliament, the second since 2010. A minority government was formed by the Conservative Party with the support of the DUP.

Following the Conservative majority in 2015 and the Brexit vote, British politics had thrown up another result that confounded expectations, leading to heightened uncertainty over the ongoing process of leaving the European Union.

Below the headline results are a number of interesting stories. Whilst the Labour Party achieved a considerable 9.6 per cent surge in votes, the Conservative Party also saw a vote share increase of 5.5 per cent. Alongside weak progress for the Liberal Democrats, the complete collapse in support for the UK Independence Party (-10.8 per cent) in England, and the fall back of the Scottish National Party (-13.1 percentage points) in Scotland, this left the two main parties with their highest vote share since 1970 and subsequent questions as to whether the country was returning to a two-party system.

A key narrative surrounding the EU referendum vote the previous year concerned voters who had been socially and economically 'left behind', were abandoning the main parties, and had chosen to vote Leave on this basis. Therefore, a crucial role in the 2017 election was played by voters who previously supported UKIP as it was expected that they would turn to the Conservatives. UKIP election strategy even supported such a move (Johnston and Pattie 2017). Post-election analysis in fact demonstrated a split in their support, with those supporting a harder form of Brexit and curbs on immigration leaning towards the Conservatives, but those more concerned with living standards and austerity leaning towards Labour (Goodwin and Heath 2017).

As the polling gap narrowed in the final weeks leading up to the vote, the electoral campaigns themselves are also of considerable interest. Overall, Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn and his team appeared to: energise a large youth contingency (although youth turnout increased only very slightly, despite ‘youthquake’ being chosen as the Oxford English Dictionary’s word of 2017); dominate coverage on social media (Cram et al 2017, Shephard 2017); drive up Corbyn’s visibility with high-profile and well-attended public rallies (Middleton 2017); and, amass a wealth of support from third-party campaigning organisations (Dommett & Temple 2018). In comparison, the Conservative campaign was criticized on numerous fronts, including; presenting a repetitive and somewhat robotic “Strong and Stable” mantra; a confused policy platform that raised the unpopular issue of fox-hunting alongside what become known as the ‘dementia tax’; and, having what has been described as a ‘rusty’ and ‘hollowed out’ campaign machine with no clear chain of command (see Wallace 2017 for an overview).

Table 1. Elections to the lower house of parliament (the House of Commons) in UK in 2017

| Date of election | 8 June 2017 | | | Previous election | | 7 May 2015 | |
|--|--------------|-------|--------|---------------------|-------|------------|-------|
| Electorate | 46,835,433 | | | Total seats | | 650 | |
| Total votes cast | 32,204,124 | | | Turnout | | 68.8% | |
| Total valid votes | 32, 129, 935 | | | Share of valid vote | | 98.6% | |
| Party | Votes | | | Seats | | | |
| | N | % | Δ% | N | % | ΔN | Δ% |
| Conservative and Unionist Party (CONS) | 13,636,684 | 42.3% | +5.5% | 317 | 48.8% | -13 | -2.0% |
| Labour Party (LAB) | 12,877,858 | 40.0% | +9.5% | 262 | 40.3% | +30 | +4.6% |
| Liberal Democrat | 2,371,861 | 7.4% | -0.5% | 12 | 1.8% | +4 | +0.6% |
| Scottish National Party (SNP) | 977,568 | 3.0% | -13.1% | 35 | 5.4% | -21 | -3.2% |
| UK Independence Party (UKIP) | 594,068 | 1.8% | -10.8% | 0 | 0.0% | -1 | -0.2% |
| Green Party | 525,665 | 1.6% | -2.1% | 1 | 0.2% | 0 | 0.0% |
| Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) | 292,316 | 0.9% | +0.3% | 10 | 1.5% | +2 | +0.3% |
| Sinn Féin | 238,915 | 0.7% | +0.2% | 7 | 1.1% | +3 | +0.5% |
| Plaid Cymru | 164,466 | 0.5% | -1.7% | 4 | 0.6% | +1 | +0.2% |
| Others | 450,534 | 1.4% | +0.5% | 2 | 0.0% | 0 | 0.0% |

Source: UK Parliament (2017)

Sub-national Elections

On 4 May local elections took place in England, Scotland, and Wales, alongside combined authority mayoral (CAM) elections in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, Greater Manchester, Liverpool City, Tees Valley, West Midlands, and West of England. In Scotland and Wales all councils were up for election, whereas in England 35 were contested. Local election turnout stood at 35.1 per cent in England, 42.0 per cent in Wales and 46.9 per cent in Scotland; for the CAM elections turnout was lower, averaging 27.8 per cent across the six authorities.

Unusually for a party in power, both the local and CAM elections saw strong results for the Conservative Party. In England they achieved a vote increase of 12.2 per cent and gained control of 10 councils. In contrast, the Labour Party vote fell by 1.6 per cent. Fortunes changed even more considerably in Scotland; with a vote increase of 12.1 per cent the Conservatives leapfrogged Labour (whose vote dropped by 11.4 per cent) to become the second largest party. In Wales Labour had another poor showing, losing 107 seats and control of three councils, whilst the Conservatives gained 80 seats and control of a council. In the CAM elections the Conservatives performed better than expected by gaining the traditionally Labour-supporting Tees Valley. However, Labour's Andy Burnham comfortably won Manchester, the most high-profile mayoral seat which sits at the centre of devolution policy surrounding the north of England. Overall, however, the very worst fortunes came for UKIP; in the local councils contested in England their number of councillors fell from 143 to 1.

Cabinet report

Following the election Theresa May carried out a reshuffle to form her second Cabinet. Whilst most of the jobs remained unchanged there did follow three high-profile changes over the course

of the second half of 2017 – Damien Green (Minister for Cabinet Office and First Secretary of State), Priti Patel (Secretary of State for International Development), and Michael Fallon (Secretary of State for Defence), resigned or were sacked. Overall, gender composition fell from 34.8 per cent to 30.4 per cent of Cabinet seats filled by women. Since the Leader of the House of Commons is considered to be a post that only ‘also attends’ Cabinet, the permanent female Cabinet percentage can in fact be calculated at only 26 per cent (UK Parliament 2018).

Table 2. Cabinet composition of May I in United Kingdom in 2017

| Duration of cabinet Period covered by table Type of cabinet | Inception From Single Party Majority (SPMA) | 14 July 2016 1 January 2017 | Dissolution Until | 19 April 2017 19 April 2017 |
|--|---|--------------------------------|--|---------------------------------|
| A. Party/gender composition on 1 January 2017 | | Seats in cabinet N % | Seats held by women N % of party | Seats in parliament N % |
| Conservative Party (CONS) | | 23 100% | 8 34.8% | 329 50.6% |
| Totals | | 23 100% | 8 34.8% | 329 50.6% |
| B. Composition of May I cabinet on 1 January | | | | |
| See previous editions of the Political Data Yearbook for UK or http://politicaldatayearbook.com | | | | |
| C. Changes in composition of May I cabinet during 2017 | | | | |
| There were no changes during 2017 | | | | |
| D. Party/gender composition on 19 April 2017 | | | | |
| Same as on 1 January | | | | |

Table 3. Cabinet composition of May II in United Kingdom in 2017

| Duration of cabinet Period covered by table Type of cabinet | Inception From Single Party Minority (SPMI) | 11 June 2017 11 June 2017 | Dissolution Until | Still in office by the end of 2017 31 December 2017 |
|--|---|------------------------------|--|--|
| A. Party/gender composition on 11 July 2017 | | Seats in cabinet N % | Seats held by women N % of party | Seats in parliament N % |
| Conservative Party | | 23 100.0% | 7 30.4% | 317 48.8% |
| Totals | | 23 100.0% | 7 30.4% | 317 48.8% |
| B. Composition of May II cabinet on Cabinet inception date 11 July 2017 | | | | |
| Ministerial Title | Minister | | | |
| Prime Minister, First Lord of the Treasury and Minister for the Civil Service | Theresa May (1956, female, Cons) | | | |
| Chancellor of the Exchequer | Philip Hammond (1955, male, Cons) | | | |
| Secretary of State for Education | Justine Greening (1969, female, Cons) | | | |
| Home Secretary | Amber Rudd (1963, female, Cons) | | | |
| Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs | Boris Johnson (1964, male, Cons) | | | |
| Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice | David Lidington (1956, male, Cons) | | | |
| Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union | David Davis (1948, male, Cons) | | | |
| Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade | Liam Fox (1961, male, Cons) | | | |
| Secretary of State for Defence | Sir Michael Fallon (1952, male, Cons) | | | |
| Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy | Greg Clark (1967, male, Cons) | | | |
| Secretary of State for Work and Pensions | David Gauke (1971, male, Cons) | | | |
| Secretary of State for Health | Jeremy Hunt (1966, male, Cons) | | | |
| Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government | Sajid Javid (1969, male, Cons) | | | |
| Secretary of State for International Development | Priti Patel (1972, female, Cons) | | | |
| Secretary of State for Transport | Chris Grayling (1962, male, Cons) | | | |
| Secretary of State for Scotland | David Mundell (1962, male, Cons) | | | |
| Secretary of State for Northern Ireland | James Brokenshire (1968, male, Cons) | | | |

| | | | | | | | |
|--|---------------------------------------|------------------|-------------------------------------|---|---------------------|-----|-------|
| Secretary of State for Wales | | | | Alun Cairns (1970, male, Cons) | | | |
| Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs | | | | Michael Gove (1967, male, Cons) | | | |
| Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport | | | | Karen Bradley (1970, female, Cons) | | | |
| Leader of the House of Commons | | | | Andrea Leadsom (1963, female, Cons) | | | |
| Leader of the House of Lords, Lord Privy Seal | | | | Baroness Evans of Bowness Park (1975, female, Cons) | | | |
| Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster | | | | Patrick McLoughlin (1957, male, Cons) | | | |
| First Secretary of State & Minister for Cabinet Office | | | | Damien Green (1956, male, Cons) | | | |
| C. Changes in composition of May II cabinet during 2017 | | | | | | | |
| Ministerial title | Outgoing minister | Outgoing date | Incoming minister | | | | |
| Secretary of State for International Development | Priti Patel (1972, female, Cons) | 8 November | Penny Mordaunt (1973, Female, Cons) | | | | |
| Minister for Cabinet Office | Damien Green (1956, male, Cons) | 20 December | David Lidington (1956, male, Cons) | | | | |
| First Secretary of State | Damien Green (1956, male, Cons) | | Vacant | | | | |
| Secretary of State for Defence | Sir Michael Fallon (1952, male, Cons) | 1 November 2017 | Gavin Williamson (1976, male, Cons) | | | | |
| D. Party/gender composition on 31 December 2017 | | | | | | | |
| | | Seats in cabinet | Seats held by women | | Seats in parliament | | |
| | | N | % | N | % of party | N | % |
| Conservative Party | | 23 | 100% | 7 | 30.4% | 316 | 48.6% |
| Totals | | 23 | 100% | 7 | 30.4% | 316 | 48.6% |

Source: UK Parliament (2018); BBC (2017a; 2017d)

Parliament report

Three by-elections took place during 2017 (UK Parliament 2017). Triggered by the resignation of Labour MPs the elections in Copeland and Stoke-on-Trent Central became high-profile events in February. In Stoke-on-Trent Central the UKIP leader, Paul Nuttall, stood for election but came second as Labour held the seat. In Copeland the seat was gained by the Conservative Party; the first by-election gain for a governing party since 1982. By the end of 2017 party seat numbers changed slightly: three MPs from the Labour Party and one from the Conservative Party had the whip removed.

Table 4. Party and gender composition of the lower house of parliament (House of Commons) in the United Kingdom in 2017

| Party | 1 January 2017 | | | | 31 December 2017 | | | |
|---|----------------|-------|-------|-------|------------------|-------|-------|-------|
| | All | | Women | | All | | Women | |
| | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % |
| Conservative (CONS) | 329 | 50.6% | 69 | 20.6% | 316 | 48.6% | 67 | 21.2% |
| Labour (LAB) | 231 | 35.5% | 101 | 43.7% | 259 | 39.8% | 119 | 45.9% |
| Liberal Democrats | 9 | 1.4% | 1 | 11.1% | 12 | 1.8% | 4 | 33.3% |
| Scottish National Party (SNP) | 54 | 8.3% | 18 | 33.3% | 35 | 5.4% | 12 | 34.3% |
| Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) | 8 | 1.2% | 0 | 0.0% | 10 | 1.5% | 1 | 10.0% |
| Sinn Fein | 4 | 0.6% | 0 | 0.0% | 7 | 1.1% | 2 | 28.6% |
| Independent | 4 | 0.6% | 3 | 75.0% | 5 | 0.6% | 1 | 20.0% |
| Plaid Cymru | 3 | 0.5% | 1 | 33.3% | 4 | 0.6% | 1 | 25.0% |
| Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) | 3 | 0.5% | 1 | 33.3% | 0 | 0.0% | 0 | 0.0% |

| | | | | | | | | |
|------------------------------|-----|-------|-----|--------|-----|-------|-----|--------|
| UK Independence Party (UKIP) | 1 | 0.2% | 0 | 0.0% | - | - | - | - |
| Green Party | 1 | 0.2% | 1 | 100.0% | 1 | 0.2% | 1 | 100.0% |
| Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) | 2 | 0.3% | 0 | 0.0% | - | - | - | - |
| Speaker | 1 | 0.2% | 0 | 0.0% | 1 | 0.2% | 0 | 0.0% |
| Totals | 650 | 100.0 | 195 | 30.0% | 650 | 100.0 | 208 | 32.0% |

Source: UK Parliament (2018)

Table 5. Party and gender composition of the upper house of parliament (House of Lords) in the United Kingdom in 2017

| Party | 1 January 2017 | | | | 31 December 2017 | | | |
|---------------------------------|----------------|--------|-------|--------|------------------|-------|-------|--------|
| | All | | Women | | All | | Women | |
| | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % |
| Conservative (CONS) | 255 | 31.5% | 63 | 24.7% | 247 | 31.2% | 60 | 24.3% |
| Labour (LAB) | 204 | 25.2% | 66 | 32.3% | 195 | 24.6% | 62 | 31.8% |
| Cross-benchers | 179 | 22.1% | 40 | 22.3% | 183 | 23.1% | 41 | 22.4% |
| Liberal Democrats | 103 | 12.7% | 34 | 33.0% | 99 | 12.5% | 34 | 34.3% |
| Bishops | 26 | 3.2% | 2 | 7.6% | 25 | 3.2% | 2 | 8.0% |
| Non-Affiliated | 28 | 3.5% | 3 | 10.7% | 28 | 3.5% | 5 | 17.9% |
| UK Independence Party (UKIP) | 3 | 0.4% | 0 | 0.0% | 3 | 0.4% | 0 | 0.0% |
| Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) | 3 | 0.4% | 0 | 0.0% | 3 | 0.4% | 0 | 0.0% |
| Plaid Cymru | 1 | 0.1% | 0 | 0.0% | 1 | 0.1% | 0 | 0.0% |
| Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) | 2 | 0.2% | 0 | 0.0% | 2 | 0.3% | 0 | 0.0% |
| Green Party | 1 | 0.1% | 1 | 100.0% | 1 | 0.1% | 1 | 100.0% |
| Independent Labour | 2 | 0.2% | 0 | 0.0% | 3 | 0.3% | 1 | 33.0% |
| Independent Ulster Unionist | 1 | 0.1% | 0 | 0.0% | 1 | 0.1% | 0 | 0.0% |
| Independent Social Democrat | 1 | 0.1% | 0 | 0.0% | 1 | 0.1% | 0 | 0.0% |
| Totals | 809 | 100.0% | 209 | 25.8% | 792 | 100% | 206 | 26.0% |

Source: UK Parliament (2018). Excludes ineligible members

Political party report

In 2017 political leadership across Labour, the Conservatives, the SNP, Plaid Cymru, the DUP and the Green Party remained unchanged. UKIP's leadership problems continued as Paul Nuttall stood down in June to be replaced by Henry Bolton (who was then sacked in February 2018).

Tim Farron stood down as leader of the Liberal Democrats to be replaced by Vince Cable in July. In November Kezia Dugdale, leader of the Scottish Labour Party, was succeeded by Richard Leonard.

Table 6. Changes in political parties in United Kingdom in 2017

| Party leadership changes in 2017 |
|--|
| UK Independence Party leader Paul Nuttall (1976, male, UKIP) was replaced by Henry Bolton (1963, male, UKIP) on the 29 September. |
| Liberal Democrat party leader Tim Farron (1970, male, Lib Dems) was replaced by Vince Cable (1943, male Lib Dems) on the 20 July |
| Scottish Labour Party leader Kezia Dugdale (1981, female, Labour) was replaced by Richard Leonard (male, 1962, Labour) on 18 November. |

Source: BBC (2017d; 2017g)

Issues in National Politics

Alongside the election, the negotiation on exiting the European Union unsurprisingly dominated politics throughout 2017. The triggering of Article 50 – the process for leaving the EU – was mired in controversy. A Supreme Court decision determined that Parliament had to vote on the initiation of the withdrawal, leaving some MPs in the position of having to choose between their own vote, the result in their constituency, and the party line. For the Labour Party this involved numerous shadow cabinet and front bench resignations against the leadership demand to approve the vote. In the final result 498 voted to allow the government to start the process, whilst 114 voted against, including, as expected, 50 SNP MPs and 7 Liberal Democrats, but also 47 Labour MPs and one Conservative MP (Kenneth Clarke) defied their party whip.

Concerning the nations, at the start of the year the Wales Act 2017 was passed, granting further devolutionary powers to the Welsh Assembly. The SNP continued to raise the prospect of a second referendum on Scottish independence, however the bill was put on hold after the General Election result (BBC 2017h). Little progress appeared to be made over the issue of whether Brexit would lead to a hard border between Northern Ireland the Republic of Ireland.

Alongside Brexit, British politics was occupied with debates around the terrorist attacks and policing numbers, the government response to the fire at Grenfell Tower and safety standards in high-rise housing, free schools, cyber security and the NHS, and the renovation (and subsequent silencing) of the famous London landmark Big Ben.

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