

The 1979 General Election

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The logo for Ealing Independent College, featuring a stylized red 'E' and a red circular emblem with a cross-like pattern.

Why did the Tories win the 1979 election?

The Contenders



Margaret Thatcher
(Conservatives)



v Jim Callaghan
(Labour)

The Background

- In April 1976, Prime Minister Harold Wilson was succeeded by Jim Callaghan.
- Callaghan had been Chancellor and Home Secretary in the 1964-70 administration and served as Foreign Secretary from 1974.
- He remains the only Prime Minister to have served in all three 'great offices of state' before entering Number 10.

The Background

- Britain's economy during the 1970s was so weak that Labour minister James Callaghan warned his fellow Cabinet members in 1974 of the possibility of "a breakdown of democracy", telling them, "If I were a young man, I would emigrate."

The Background

- By April 1976 the government had lost its formal majority. The immediate reasons were a by-election defeat, the defection of two of Callaghan's backbenchers to form a new 'Scottish Labour Party' and the defection of the maverick John Stonehouse.

The Background

- By March 1977, after further by-election losses, he agreed to a parliamentary arrangement with David Steel and the Liberal Party which became known as the 'Lib-Lab Pact'
- The Lib-Lab pact ended in August 1978. The pact had been unpopular with some activists in both Parties, and in any case, an election was expected soon.

The Background

- This minority government also managed to stay in power with unofficial deals with the Ulster Unionist Party and Scottish National Party.

The Background

- By September 1978, economic growth was re-established and inflation was below 10%, although unemployment now stood at a postwar high of 1.5million and with most of the opinion polls showing a clear Labour lead it was widely expected that prime minister Callaghan would call a general election that autumn, in order to gain a majority and give his government the chance of surviving in office until 1983.

The Background

- However, he resisted these calls and Britain began 1979 with Labour still in power and Callaghan still in charge, but his failure to call a general election during the autumn of 1978 would prove to be the undoing of this Labour government.

The Background

- The Callaghan Government introduced a range of measures aimed at moderating pressures for wage rises and to create a favourable climate “for an orderly restoration of collective bargaining.” These included the granting of family income supplements to bring the incomes of lower-paid workers up to the level of social security benefits, the lowering of marginal tax rates on smaller incomes by rises in personal allowances, and increases in children’s allowances (which were payable to the mother).

The Background

- However, child tax allowances were lowered, which had the effect of reducing the take home pay of fathers. The impact of consumer price rises was also mitigated by higher income limits for free school meals, an increased milk subsidy, and a substantial reduction in the duty on petrol. In addition, electricity prices were lowered for families in receipt of supplementary benefits.

The Background

- The government came under fire from the British public in November 1977, when the Fire Brigades Union called its first national strike, in response to the government's refusal to grant firefighters a 30% pay rise. The strike lasted until after Christmas, and for its duration Britain's fire services were operated by hastily-trained army troops, whose Green Goddess vehicles dated from the 1950s and were considerably slower than the fire engines of the 1970s, and the troops lacked the breathing equipment available to the fire brigade. Well over 100 people died in fires during the strike, with the worst tragedy occurring in Wednesbury, where four children died in a house fire.

Why did the Tories win the 1979 election?

- **Leadership of Thatcher**
- **Economy: Inflation and Unemployment**
- **Winter of Discontent**
- **Advertising/Media**
- **Callaghan's Miscalculations**
- **Conservative Policies**

Leadership of Thatcher

- The Conservative Manifesto, issued on 11 April, reflected Thatcher's views. It promised five major policies:
- "(i) to restore 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;
- (ii) to restore incentives so that hard work pays, success is rewarded and genuine new jobs are created in an expanding economy;
- (iii) to uphold Parliament and the rule of law;
- (iv) to support family life, by helping people to become home-owners, raising the standards of their children's education and concentrating welfare services on the effective support of the old, the sick, the disabled and those who are in real need; and
- (v) to strengthen Britain's defences and work with our allies to protect our interests in an increasingly threatening world."



Economy: Inflation and Unemployment

- The percentage unemployed out of the total number of employees stood at 2.6 per cent in 1970, rising to 3.5% and 3.8% in 1971 and 1972 respectively... in 1975 it rose to 4.1% , in 1976 to 5.7%, in 1977 to 6.2%... Inflation, which had been running at an annual average of 5.2% in the latter sixties and at 9.3% between 1971 and 1974, reached the frightening height of 27% in 1975.



Winter of Discontent

- A period of strikes and unemployment
- Lorry drivers, Hospital porters and even grave diggers went on strikes
- Bodies were not buried; rubbish was not collected and the country seemed in anarchy
- The government seemed as if it could not cope



Winter of Discontent

- This was made worse when Callaghan came back from an economic conference.
- When asked about the growing industrial crisis facing Britain, Callaghan denied any crisis existed, leading to *The Sun* headline 'Crisis? What Crisis?'



Advertising/Media

- The Conservatives media campaign was excellent
- Thatcher worked particularly hard to provide the media with photo-opportunities, whether it was by swinging her shopping basket, drinking tea in a factory or cuddling a new-born calf.

LABOUR ISN'T WORKING.

UNEMPLOYMENT
OFFICE



BRITAIN'S BETTER OFF WITH THE CONSERVATIVES.





Advertising/Media

- Thatcher's advisers, Gordon Reece and Timothy Bell, co-ordinated their presentation with the editor of *The Sun*, Larry Lamb. *The Sun* printed a series of articles by disillusioned former Labour ministers (Reginald Prentice, Richard Marsh, Lord George-Brown, Alfred Robens and Lord Chalfont) detailing why they had switched their support to Thatcher. She explicitly asked Labour voters for their support when she launched her campaign in Cardiff, claiming that Labour was now extreme.

Conservative Policies

- High on principal, but light on specific commitments.
- The manifesto did, however, promise to reduce government spending, to toughen rules regarding trade unions, and to control the money supply (monetarism).
- the Tories as the party of Law and Order, offering Britain a new start after a prolonged period of chaos amounting to anarchy.

Callaghan's Miscalculations

- Callaghan had had the option of calling an election in the autumn of 1978, but decided to carry on and face the country after the economy had improved
- Then the Winter of Discontent happened



- The one 'gaffe' of the campaign came from Sir Harold Wilson - the former Labour Prime Minister - who conceded in an interview with the *Daily Mail* that his wife might vote for the Conservatives, because their leader was a woman.



The Result

Party	Votes	Seats	Change	UK Vote Share (%)	GB Vote Share (%)
Conservative	13,697,923	339	+ 62	43.9	44.9
Labour	11,532,218	269	- 50	36.9	37.8
Liberal	4,313,804	11	- 2	13.8	14.1
Others	1,677,417	16	- 10	5.4	3.2

