

# **Prime Ministers**

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This note lists the Prime Ministers that have served in the United Kingdom, since 1721.

It summarises the reasons behind each change in Prime Minister since 1900, and it notes debate and discussion that took place in the House of Commons, and the media, when the identity of the Prime Minister changed during the course of a Parliament, rather than at a general election.

Finally, it lists the locations of Prime Ministerial papers, where known.

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# Contents

1	Chr	Chronological list of Prime Ministers		
	1.1	Eighteenth Century Prime Ministers, period of office and political party	3	
	1.2	Nineteenth Century Prime Ministers, period of office and political party	3	
	1.3	Twentieth Century Prime Ministers, period of office and political party	4	
	1.4	21st Century Prime Ministers, period of office and political party	4	
2	Background to change of Prime Minister since 1900			
	2.1	Summary	5	
	2.2	Information relating to changes in Prime Minister between elections	5	
3	Prime Ministerial Papers		11	
	3.1	Official Papers:	11	
	3.2	Personal and Private Papers:	11	

# 1 Chronological list of Prime Ministers

The following list of Prime Ministers is presented chronologically so Prime Ministers who served more than one distinct term appear more than once. Second and subsequent terms are noted in italics. For the list of twentieth century Prime Ministers, The Prime Ministers with emboldened names became Prime Minister at a time other than a general election:

# 1.1 Eighteenth Century Prime Ministers, period of office and political party

Sir Robert Walpole	1721-42	Whig
Spencer Compton, Earl of Wilmington	1742-3	Whig
Henry Pelham	1743-54	Whig
Thomas Pelham-Holles, Duke of Newcastle	1754-6	Whig
William Cavendish, Duke of Devonshire	1756-7	Whig
Thomas Pelham-Holles, Duke of Newcastle	1757-62	Whig
John Stuart, Earl of Bute	1762-3	Tory
George Grenville	1763-5	Whig
Charles Wentworth, Marquess of Rockingham	1765-6	Whig
The Earl of Chatham, William Pitt 'The Elder'	1766-8	Whig
Augustus Henry Fitzroy, Duke of Grafton	1768-70	Whig
Lord North	1770-82	Tory
Charles Wentworth, Marquess of Rockingham	1782	Whig
William Petty, Earl of Shelburne	1782-3	Whig
William Bentinck, Duke of Portland	1783	Whig

# 1.2 Nineteenth Century Prime Ministers, period of office and political party

William Pitt 'The Younger' Henry Addington	1783-1801 1801-4	Tory Tory
William Pitt 'The Younger'	1804-6	Tory
William Wyndam Grenville, Lord Grenville	1806-7	Whig
William Bentinck, Duke of Portland	1807-9	Whig
Spencer Perceval	1809-12	Tory
Robert Banks Jenkinson, Earl of Liverpool	1812-27	Tory
George Canning	1827	Tory
Frederick Robinson, Viscount Goderich	1827-8	Tory
Arthur Wellesley, Duke of Wellington	1828-30	Tory
Earl Grey	1830-34	Whig
William Lamb, Viscount Melbourne	1834	Whig
Sir Robert Peel	1834-5	Tory
William Lamb, Viscount Melbourne	1835-41	Whig
Sir Robert Peel	1841-6	Tory
Earl Russell	1846-51	Liberal
The Earl of Derby	1852	Conservative
Earl of Aberdeen	1852-5	Tory
Viscount Palmerston	1855-8	Liberal
The Earl of Derby	1858-9	Conservative
Viscount Palmerston	1859-65	Liberal
Earl Russell	1865-6	Liberal
The Earl of Derby	1866-8	Conservative
Benjamin Disraeli	1868	Conservative
William Ewart Gladstone	1868-74	Liberal

Benjamin Disraeli	1874-80	Conservative
William Ewart Gladstone	1880-85	Liberal
Robert Gascoyne-Cecil,	1885-6	Conservative
Marquess of Salisbury		
William Ewart Gladstone	1886	Liberal
Robert Gascoyne-Cecil,	1886-92	Conservative
Marquess of Salisbury		
William Ewart Gladstone	1892-94	Liberal
The Earl of Rosebery	1894-5	Liberal
Robert Gascoyne-Cecil,	1895-1902	Conservative
Marquess of Salisbury		

# 1.3 Twentieth Century Prime Ministers, period of office and political party

Marquess of Salisbury	1895-1902	Conservative
Arthur James Balfour	1902-5	Conservative
Henry Campbell-Bannerman	1905-8	Liberal
Herbert Henry Asquith	1908-16	Liberal
David Lloyd George	1916-22	Liberal
Andrew Bonar Law	1922-3	Conservative
Stanley Baldwin	1923	Conservative
James Ramsay MacDonald	1924	Labour
Stanley Baldwin	1924-9	Conservative
James Ramsay MacDonald	1929-35	Labour
Stanley Baldwin	1935-7	Conservative
Arthur Neville Chamberlain	1937-40	Conservative
Sir Winston Churchill	1940-5	Conservative
Clement Richard Attlee	1945-51	Labour
Sir Winston Churchill	1951-5	Conservative
Anthony Eden	1955-7	Conservative
Harold Macmillan	1957-63	Conservative
Sir Alec Douglas-Home	1963-4	Conservative
Harold Wilson	1964-70	Labour
Edward Heath	1970-4	Conservative
Harold Wilson	1974-6	Labour
James Callaghan	1976-9	Labour
Margaret Thatcher	1979-90	Conservative
John Major	1990-97	Conservative
Tony Blair	1997-2007	Labour

# 1.4 21<sup>st</sup> Century Prime Ministers, period of office and political party

Tony Blair	1997-2007	Labour
Gordon Brown	2007-2010	Labour
David Cameron	2010-present	Conservative

Source: 10 Downing Street, Prime Ministers in History, http://www.number-10.gov.uk/output/Page123.asp

# 2 Background to change of Prime Minister since 1900

### 2.1 Summary

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Marquess of Salisbury	1895-1902	Resigned	Cabinet split after Boer War
Arthur James Balfour	1902-5	Resigned	Dec 1905 - Party divided over fiscal policy
Henry Campbell-Bannerman	1905-8	Resigned	III health
Herbert Henry Asquith	1908-16	Resigned	Hostile press
David Lloyd George	1916-22	Resigned	Conservative coalition support withdrawn
Andrew Bonar Law	1922-3	Resigned	III health
Stanley Baldwin	1923	Defeated	Confidence motion Jan 1924
James Ramsay MacDonald	1924	Defeated	At general election following defeat on motions treated as confidence matters
Stanley Baldwin	1924-9	Resigned	Unable to form coalition after 1929 general election
James Ramsay MacDonald	1929-35	Resigned	Weight of criticism
Stanley Baldwin	1935-7	Resigned	Retired
Arthur Neville Chamberlain	1937-40	Resigned	After criticism over the failed Norway intervention
Sir Winston Churchill	1940-5	Defeated	At 1945 general election
Clement Attlee	1945-51	Defeated	At 1951 general election
Sir Winston Churchill	1951-5	Resigned	Retired
Anthony Eden	1955-7	Resigned	III health
Harold Macmillan	1957-63	Resigned	III health
Sir Alec Douglas-Home	1963-4	Defeated	At 1964 general election
Harold Wilson	1964-70	Defeated	At 1970 general election
Edward Heath	1970-4	Resigned	Unable to form coalition after Feb 1974 general election
Harold Wilson	1974-6	Resigned	Retired
James Callaghan	1976-9	Defeated	At 1979 general election
Margaret Thatcher	1979-90	Resigned	After party leadership challenge
John Major	1990-97	Defeated	At 1997 general election
Tony Blair	1997-2007	Resigned	Retired
Gordon Brown	2007-2010	Defeated	At 2010 general election

# 2.2 Information relating to changes in Prime Minister between elections Salisbury/Balfour, 1902

HC Deb 14 July 1902, cc127-9

In 1902 Balfour succeeded Lord Salisbury, his uncle, as Conservative Prime Minister, two years after the previous election. There was no confidence vote. The next day's business started with Questions (not restricted to a single department in those days). Balfour was greeted by loud cheers on both sides when he entered. Campbell-Bannerman, then Leader of the Opposition, interrupted Questions to make a short speech of welcome. Balfour responded that he was almost too moved to speak, and then the House returned to Questions, this time to the new Prime Minister. At the end of these Balfour asked leave of the House to say a few words about Salisbury. Campbell-Bannerman responded with a tribute of his own to the outgoing Prime Minister.

#### Balfour/Campbell-Bannerman, 1905

This was an unusual example of a Prime Minister being replaced mid-term by a successor from another party. It was also unusual in that Parliament was not sitting at the time, and in fact a lengthy gap occurred from August 1905 to February 1906. In December 1905 the King invited the Liberals under Campbell-Bannerman to replace Balfour's Unionists, who had

resigned. They accepted, Parliament was dissolved immediately and an election was called. As a result, Campbell-Bannerman first appeared in the Commons as Prime Minister after an election.

#### Campbell-Bannerman/Asquith, 1908

HC Deb 6 April 1908, cc958-60, HC Deb 27 April 1908, cc1033-40

In 1908 Campbell-Bannerman retired on grounds of declining health and Asquith took over. There was no confidence vote. Asquith was Chancellor of the Exchequer at the time. On 6 April 1908, a Monday, he rose after Questions to inform the House that the Prime Minister had resigned over the weekend. He paid tribute to him and said that, in its sadness over his departure and his condition, the House would be unable to carry out any business and should therefore adjourn for a week and a day. It would then resume for a day, to conclude some formal business, and then go into the Easter recess. Balfour then spoke for the Opposition, to express sadness over Campbell-Bannerman's retirement and to agree to the adjournment. Asquith moved two motions, one to adjourn the House until 14 April 1908, and another to allow committees to meet notwithstanding the adjournment.

On 14 April 1908 various items of formal business were done, and then the Easter adjournment was moved. The adjournment debate took the form of a number of questions to Ministers, with long exchanges on the replies, but none of these concerned the new Government.

By the time the House resumed after the recess, on 27 April 1908, Campbell-Bannerman had died. Asquith, now installed as Prime Minister, opened proceedings with a reference to the service in Westminster Abbey, from which he had just come. He paid a tribute to his predecessor, and this was followed by responses from the opposition parties and a motion to adjourn.

#### Asquith/Lloyd George, 1916

David Lloyd George became Prime Minister on the resignation of Asquith:

Following a hostile press campaign, Asquith resigned and the more dynamic Lloyd George became Prime Minister.<sup>1</sup>

#### Bonar Law/Baldwin, 1923

Stanley Baldwin became Prime Minister for the first time in 1923 following the resignation of Andrew Bonar Law for health reasons.<sup>2</sup> Tributes were paid in the House, led by Ramsay MacDonald, and the new Prime Minister was welcomed.<sup>3</sup>

#### Baldwin/MacDonald, 1924

HC Deb 17 January 1924, cc301-86, 18 January 1924, cc413-74, 21 January 1924, cc587-686; HC Deb 22 January 1924, cc703-10; HC Deb 12 February 1924, cc749-813, 13 February 1924, cc847-926, 14 February 1924, cc1065-1174

D Englefield, J Seaton and I White, Facts about the British Prime Ministers, Mansell, 1995, p230

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, p253

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> HC Deb 28 May vol 164 c845

This was another change of party as well as Prime Minister. James Ramsay MacDonald did not become Prime Minister immediately after the General Election in December 1923. Stanley Baldwin continued as Prime Minister but an amendment was made to the motion on the King's Speech. The amendment was a procedural device to engineer a change of Government following a general election. The election in December 1923 failed to give the then Conservative Government a majority. When Parliament assembled in January 1924 Clynes, as chairman of the Labour Party, moved the amendment to the King's Speech on 17 January, and when the debate concluded on 21 January, the amendment was carried. The amendment read: "It is our duty respectfully to submit to your Majesty that your Majesty's present advisers have not the confidence of this House"

On 22 January 1924 the Prime Minister, Baldwin, moved an adjournment immediately after Questions. He announced at the start of his speech that the Government had tendered its resignation, which had been accepted and would become effective once the new Government was in place. The House would then return on 12 February 1924.

When the House returned there were Questions followed by another Prime Ministerial adjournment motion. The new Prime Minister, MacDonald, opened with a speech on Labour Government policy, and there followed a long debate stretching over three days about that policy and the nature of the new administration. There were special concerns over the character of the first Labour Government and in particular its relationship with the Socialist International. The motion was only to adjourn, however, and in fact it lapsed without the Question being put, so there was not even an opportunity to divide.

#### MacDonald/Baldwin, 1935

Declining health and criticism over his handling of the international situation led to MacDonald's resignation in May 1935 with Baldwin, once again, becoming Prime Minister of the National Government after the House returned from the Whitsun recess. There were no tribute motions on this occasion.

#### Baldwin/Chamberlain, 1937

After Stanley Baldwin's retirement on 28 May 1937, the House paid tributes to him and the new Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain on 31 May 1937. This debate was also not on any motion. Once again, the tributes were cordial and did not involve calls for an election<sup>5</sup>.

## Chamberlain/Churchill, 1940

When Churchill became Prime Minister, succeeding Neville Chamberlain, there was a debate on the following confidence motion:

That this House welcomes the formation of a Government representing the united and inflexible resolve of the nation to prosecute the war with Germany to a victorious conclusion.<sup>6</sup>

There have been no examples of confidence motions following changes of Prime Minister mid-Parliament, post-World War II, although Churchill's formation of the Government of national unity in 1940 was followed by such a motion.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> HC Deb 17 January vol 169 c301

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> HC Deb 31 May 1937 c682-7

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> HC Deb 13 May 1940 c1501ff

#### Churchill/Eden, 1955

When Winston Churchill retired on 6 April 1955, the House had a short debate, without motion, paying tribute to the retiring Prime Minister and welcoming Anthony Eden as his successor.<sup>7</sup> There was no call for an election.

#### Eden/Macmillan, 1957

Anthony Eden retired on 9 January 1957 while the House was in recess, to be succeeded by Harold Macmillan. On 22 January 1957, there was a short debate, largely prompted by the retiring Eden's illness, in which the leaders of opposition parties paid tribute to Eden, wished him well and welcomed Macmillan to the job. There was no motion of confidence for this debate, or of any other kind. There was also no call for an election.<sup>8</sup>

#### Macmillan/Douglas-Home, 1963

Harold Macmillan resigned on 18 October 1963, while the House was in recess. There was some controversy about an attempt by the Government to prorogue immediately after the summer recess, evading debate until after the Queen's Speech. In the end they agreed to an adjournment debate, but not a motion of confidence.<sup>9</sup>

During the debate, The Leader of the Opposition at the time, Harold Wilson, said this:

**Mr Wilson**: When we had a change of Government in 1955 when Sir Anthony Eden, as he then was, became Prime Minister, he announced as his reason for going to the country that there had been a change of Prime Minister.<sup>10</sup>

Macmillan's successor, Alec Douglas-Home made his first appearance in the House as Prime Minister on 12 November 1963. Mr Wilson, replying to the Queen's speech said this:

**Mr Wilson**: .....In a television broadcast, the Prime Minister said that he was greatly tempted to have an election – I think that was his phrase – and he was reported yesterday to have said that he is spoiling for a fight. He can have one. What is stopping him? It is not this programme of legislation in the Gracious Speech. It is not the state of international negotiations. One thing only gives him pause, the thought of Luton, of Stratford, of the earlier by-elections, and the lessons they carry in terms of election defeat.<sup>11</sup>

Mr Douglas-Home did not respond directly to these comments in his reply.

#### Wilson/Callaghan, 1976

Harold Wilson announced his resignation on Tuesday 16 March 1976 and took Prime Ministers Questions. The then leader of the opposition, Margaret Thatcher also asked if there would be an election:

**Mrs Thatcher:** In spite of the political battles, we wish the Prime Minister well, personally, on his retirement. His decision has come at a time of great financial difficulty and of unprecedented parliamentary events. Is he aware that the best way to

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> HC Deb 6 April 1955 c1181-8

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> HC Deb 22 Jan 1957 cc36ff

<sup>9</sup> HC Deb 24 Oct 1963 cc901ff

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> HC Deb 24 Oct 1963 c905

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> HC Deb 12 Nov 1963 c20

resolve the uncertainty and to give the new Prime Minister the authority required would be to put the matter to the people for their vote?

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Lady for her opening words. They are in accordance with the traditions of this House. She is absolutely right, in that, whatever differences may divide us in this House on policy and political philosophy, on occasions such as this nice, kind words like hers have been uttered. I hope that I shall not spoil the atmosphere by saying that I totally reject the second part of her question – I am not sure that she is all that keen on it either [interruption]. My reason for saying that is that there has been a certain degree of hubris about recent by-elections. The right hon. Lady should remember that the Conservatives lost Bromsgrove the year after they came to office and that a majority of 11,800 was turned into a majority, the other way, of 1,800. Macclesfield was nearly as bad, in the following year. She will find that the swings in the recent by-elections are much smaller than is normal at this stage in a Government's life. <sup>12</sup>

Callaghan's first day coincided with Prime Ministers Questions.<sup>13</sup> Margaret Thatcher and Jeremy Thorpe were courteous to him, and even, to some extent, to Healey, whose enormously long budget speech followed. There was no motion of confidence at any point.

#### Thatcher/Major, 1990

Margaret Thatcher resigned on Thursday 22 November 1990. She took Prime Ministers Questions on that day and was asked by Neil Kinnock if there would be a general election as a result of her relinquishing of the premiership:

**Mr. Kinnock:** May I pay tribute to the Prime Minister, and to the decision that she made this morning? By that, she showed that she amounts to more than those who have turned on her in recent days. The right hon. Lady, I know, considers the principle of choice extremely important, and rightly so. Does she agree that the people of Britain should now be given the power of choice in a general election?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his earlier comments. The reply to his later question is no--no more than we had a general election when Mr. Wilson was replaced by Mr. Callaghan.<sup>14</sup>

There was also a confidence motion on the same day, which was rejected by 367 to 247.15

When John Major took over there was a day of normal business, with a focus on the Iraq crisis and then some legislation. He took Prime Ministers Questions on his second day, and was given a slightly bumpier ride than Callaghan had enjoyed.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> HC Deb 16 Mar 1976 c1123

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> HC Deb 6 April 1976 cc223ff

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> HC Deb 22 Nov 1990 c420

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> HC Deb 22 November 1990 cc439-518

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> HC Deb 29 November 1990 cc1011ff

#### Blair/Brown 2007

On 10 May 2007 Tony Blair announced that he would stand down as Prime Minister on 27 June.<sup>17</sup> This triggered a Labour Party Leadership contest between Gordon Brown and John McDonnell. However, John McDonnell failed to receive sufficient nominations from within the party and Gordon Brown's appointment as Labour leader was effectively uncontested.<sup>18</sup>

In his Labour Party leadership acceptance speech on 24 June 2007 Gordon Brown fuelled speculation of an early poll by announcing that Douglas Alexander would be his general election campaign coordinator.<sup>19</sup>

On 25 June 2007 David Cameron urged Gordon Brown to call a 'snap election':

If Gordon Brown is serious about wanting to listen to the people of this country then he should call a general election right now...Gordon Brown has no mandate to be prime minister and he cannot be the change the country needs...People want real change and the next general election can't come soon enough so that they have an opportunity to vote for it."<sup>20</sup>

Tony Blair formally resigned on Wednesday 27 June 2007 after taking Prime Minister's Questions for the last time. David Cameron led a tribute to Tony Blair:

**Mr. Cameron:** On behalf of everyone on these Benches, may I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on his remarkable achievement of being Prime Minister for 10 years? [Hon. Members: "Hear, hear."] For all the heated battles across the Dispatch Box, for 13 years he has led his party, for 10 years he has led our country, and no one can be in any doubt about the huge efforts he has made in public service. He has considerable achievements to his credit, whether it is peace in Northern Ireland or his work in the developing world, which will endure. I am sure that life in the public eye has sometimes been tough on his family, so on behalf of my party may I wish him and his family well, and wish him every success in whatever he does in future?<sup>21</sup>

Gordon Brown held his first Prime Minister's Questions the following week on 4 July 2007; the main issues discussed were security and terrorism<sup>22</sup>

Speculation about an early election continued in the media throughout the summer.<sup>23</sup> In his address at the Conservative party conference in October David Cameron again challenged Gordon Brown to call an election:

Let the people decide who can make the changes that we really need in our country. Call that election...We will fight. Britain will win.<sup>24</sup>

However, on 6 October 2007 Prime Minister Gordon Brown said he would not hold an autumn election as he wanted a chance to implement his "vision" for the country and to develop his policies further.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>17</sup> http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/6639945.stm

http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk\_politics/6664063.stm

http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk\_politics/6234048.stm

http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2007/jun/25/gordonbrown.labour

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> HC Deb 27 June 2007 c326

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> HC Deb 04 July. 2010 cc950-61

http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk\_politics/7032099.stm

 $<sup>\</sup>stackrel{\cdot}{\text{http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk\_politics/7024919.stm}}$ 

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/7031749.stm

# 3 Prime Ministerial Papers

#### 3.1 Official Papers:

The National Archives holds the official papers of successive Prime Ministers from 1916 (beginning with David Lloyd George) until 1970.<sup>26</sup>

The Prime Minister's correspondence and papers from 1970 are gradually being released annually on completion of the statutory thirty-year period for disclosure. The new twenty year period enacted in the *Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010* is being phased in. For further details see Standard Note 4377 *Public Records, Freedom of Information and the Royal Family*.

In the meantime, the National Archives is preserving digital government information by regularly archiving UK central government websites.<sup>27</sup>

For example, dated versions (or 'snapshots') of the www.number10.gov.uk website during Tony Blair's administration, are available on the National Archives website at the following: Number10-Tony Blair Archive

#### 3.2 Personal and Private Papers:

Margaret Thatcher's papers are held at Churchill College, Cambridge.

Contact details in respect of the papers are: Andrew Riley Archivist/Thatcher Papers Churchill Archives Centre Churchill College Cambridge CB3 0DS

E-mail: Thatcher.Archives@chu.cam.ac.uk

Sir Winston Churchill's papers are also kept at Churchill College, Cambridge.

Harold Wilson's papers are held at the Bodleian Library, Oxford.

Address: Bodleian Library, Broad Street, Oxford OX1 3BG

Phone: 01865 277000 Fax: 01865 277182

Email: enquiries@bodley.ox.ac.uk

Harold Macmillan's papers are also held at the Bodleian Library.

Sir Anthony Eden's papers, ('The Avon papers'), are held at the University of Birmingham

Address: Special Collections, Main Library,

University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham, B15 2TT

Phone: +44 (0) 121 414 5838/9 Fax: +44 (0) 121 471 4691

Email: special-collections@bham.ac.uk

 $<sup>^{26}\,\,</sup>$  http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/records/research-guides/pm-office.htm

http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/webarchive/