

THE CONVERSATION

Jeremy Corbyn and the welcome return of older politicians

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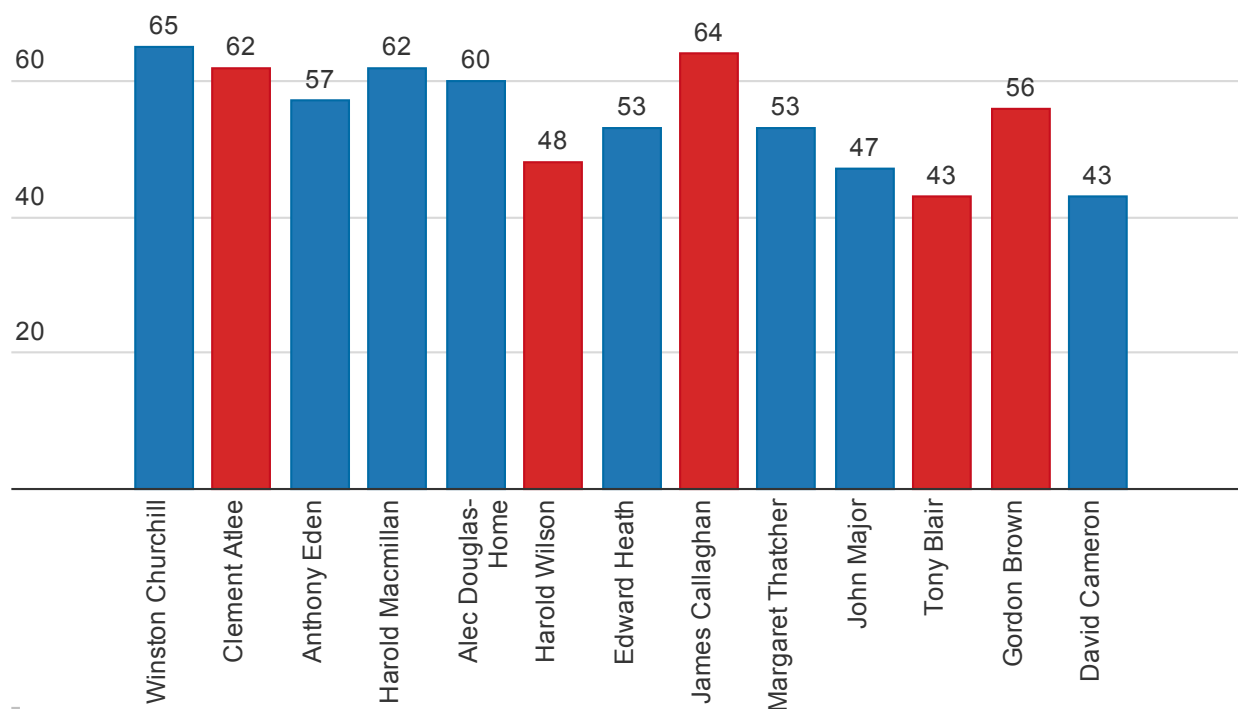


The elder statesman makes a comeback. Dominic Lipinski/PA Wire

Jeremy Corbyn's candidacy has provided the unexpected element of drama in the 2015 Labour leadership election. But beyond broadening the range of issues up for discussion, the presence of an older politician as a credible contender (Corbyn is 66) marks a long-overdue shift in British electoral politics.

Since Harold Wilson came to power aged 48 in 1964, there has been a general trend away from political leaders older than 60 – Gordon Brown, of course, would have been 10 years younger had he not had to wait for Tony Blair to step down. The recent political scene has been dominated by a succession of “bright young things”. While we've not yet seen 20-year-olds taking control of political parties, prime ministers and their political entourages have been getting gradually younger.

Age of British prime ministers at start of first term in office



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The average age of MPs elected at the 2015 general election was 50, a figure that's remained one of the most predictable aspects of British politics over recent elections. On average, Labour MPs are slightly younger than Conservatives, but the three leaders of the English political parties in 2015 were demographically – if not ideologically – striking in their similarity. The time could now be ripe for the electorate to reject a politics of sameness.

In recent years the pendulum has swung so far that it has become virtually impossible for anyone not middle class, white, and young-middle-aged to make it to the top of their party. Ming Campbell – hugely respected within his own party – lasted only a year as leader of the Liberal Democrats, stepping down in 2007 to make way for a candidate more amenable to the electorate. Then only 66, Campbell later admitted that the press focus on his age had been “bruising”.

A more mature electorate

So what's different now? Corbyn is the same age as Campbell was in 2007, yet his age has gone under the radar amid an avalanche of press inches about his unexpected campaign. Perhaps it's because Corbyn is different on so many levels from the kind of politician that we've become used to seeing. We also know that an ageing population is here to stay, the result of medical advances, falling fertility, and a healthier, more secure nation. Over half the children currently born in much of the developed world today can expect to live to 100.

With these shifts, we will all have to go on working longer – and probably more flexibly – to sustain our elderly population and to achieve a comfortable retirement. In this sense, that politicians should get older seems unavoidable. Indeed as we are healthier for longer than previous generations, stopping work in our mid-60s seems ever more irrational. Working after state pension age is one of the most significant shifts in the UK labour market of the early 21st century, and it is supported both by national social policy geared at extending working lives and a global push towards “active ageing”.

Corbyn's candidacy plays to these themes. That he has emerged from the early part of the leadership campaign as the most ideologically energetic and robust of the candidates strengthens the case for older politicians. Next year we will see an American election, with Hilary Clinton likely to win the Democratic Party nomination. She will be 69 by the time of the election, and is looking as committed as she ever has.

The experience agenda

Older politicians have much to offer. A portfolio of experience. A commitment to a range of causes, established over their working lives, adding plausibility to their promises. A contrast to younger politicians who have seemingly shot straight to the front benches.

The term "career politician" is often bandied about as an insult. However, taken more literally, Corbyn has devoted his life to politics having served for 32 years as an MP, and before that working in local politics. His longevity gives his biography a narrative, a connectedness with the events of the past 30 years. And at 66 he is credibly doing it out of conviction, rather than with an eye to future windfalls from speaking gigs on the after-dinner circuit.

MPs are in a relatively privileged position in that, once elected, they can continue working for as long as they are able to convince their constituencies to keep them in post. This is not the case in much of the UK labour market, where organisational norms can make it difficult for workers to carry on in jobs much beyond state pension age.

Politics is inherently a risky business, a profession where you can lose your job at the drop of a hat. Still, over the past few years we've all moved towards an expectation of less linear and more precarious pathways through employment, and amid this perhaps the older politician represents a stability that we lack in our own lives.

Political winds can change notoriously quickly, and Corbyn may yet prove too radical for the Labour Party. But politicians should pay attention to the fact that their electorate is ageing, and that voting is strongly age-related. A **staggering 78%** of those over 65 voted in the 2015 general election, compared to just 43% of those aged 18-25. This issue is not going away, and astute political parties won't alienate voters by marginalising their older statespeople.



Labour Party

Pensioners

Labour leadership race

Jeremy Corbyn