Part One: The House of Commons

MPs have long been perceived as middle class, middle aged, male and white and most Members of Parliaments elected between 1951 and 2001 conformed to this pattern, though subject to three significant provisos. First, the term ‘middle class’ is an arbitrary expression extending from high status professionals to public sector teachers and local government officials and from privately-schooled ‘Oxbridge’ graduates to the state-educated products of post-war universities and polytechnics. A second proviso concerns the greater diversity of Labour MPs reflected in a significant, if latterly declining, minority drawn from the ranks of manual workers. Thirdly, by the end of the century, another significant minority of Labour MPs was female.

Table 3.1, drawn from the Nuffield election studies, compares Conservative and Labour MPs by occupation, education, sex, race and age in 1951 and 2001. The first three occupational categories constitute the ‘middle class’ upon which the Conservative Party has been almost exclusively reliant for its MPs and in proportions virtually unchanged from mid-century to end-of-century. But in each of the three categories there were perceptible changes. Among the professions there was a retreat of the Bar and of military service. At mid-century 19% of Conservative MPs were barristers, but by 2001 only 11%. As the barristers retreated, in the 1980s, so the proportion of solicitors rose, from 3% in 1951 to 8% in 2001. Officers in the armed forces provided one in ten Conservative MPs at mid-century, but only one in twenty by the elections of the 1980s and 1990s. A professional category rising slightly over the period was that of teachers (including lecturers) which doubled, albeit from the very low base of 2% in 1951.
to 4% in 2001, though it had been as high as 7% in 1987. In the business category there was a trend away from captains of industry to business executives and the self-employed, but no overall diminution in the proportion of Conservative MPs with experience of the commercial world. In the miscellaneous category there was a doubling of the percentage of journalists to 8% and a reduction of farmers from one-in-ten at mid-century to under one-in-thirty by 2001. By the end of the period the party retained its mid-century ethos comprising businessmen and business-related professionals.

The position in the Parliamentary Labour Party was much less stable. The Party’s distinct contribution had been to introduce working men into the political elite. In 1951 manual workers comprised 37% of the PLP. Between 1951 and 1987 manual workers averaged 32% of Labour MPs, but thereafter the proportion dropped steeply to 22% in 1992, 13% in 1997, and 12% in 2001. With the retreat of manual workers came the ‘white collarisation’ of the PLP, but it was a process that still left Labour uniquely reliant for over half the 2001 PLP on MPs drawn from families of working class origin, compared with 6% of Conservatives and 20% of Liberal Democrats. Social mobility had taken these sons and daughters of manual workers into the public sector professions – teaching (24% in 2001, 14% in 1951), local government administration, social work, and politics-related occupations of union official, full-time councillor, party staffer and political adviser –