UK IN A CHANGING EUROPE

# What do MPs think?

## Expectations, issues and identities

A briefing in co-operation with Ipsos MORI

# INTRODUCTION

British politics has experienced half a decade of rapid and unpredictable change. As the UK settles into life outside the European Union and after 18 months of managing the impact of a global pandemic, big decisions now need to be made about the shape of the UK economy, and about our relationships with the EU and the rest of the world.

This briefing sets out where the House of Commons stands on key public policy issues facing the country and its expectations for the future. Drawing on a representative survey of Members of Parliament undertaken by Ipsos MORI between June and August 2021, it provides a pen portrait of opinion within the corridors of Westminster. Ipsos MORI – who have conducted this survey twice a year for over 40 years – interviewed 47 Conservative, 37 Labour, eight SNP and three MPs from other parties via telephone. The results are then weighted to provide an accurate reflection of opinion in the Commons.

Our analysis is focused particularly on the sample of Conservative and Labour MPs, and in some senses represents a follow-up to our 'Mind the Values Gap' report last year that looked at the social and economic values of MPs, party members and voters. In this report, we drill down into some of the key policy choices that MPs have to confront. The questions have been chosen to tap into the views of MPs across some (though inevitably by no means all) of the post-Brexit and post-Covid policy issues on which politicians are making important choices: on attitudes to protecting the environment, views on income inequality, what our immigration system should look like and the operation of the Northern Ireland Protocol.

The economic context in which MPs are legislating is particularly uncertain. We felt it was therefore also important to test the extent to which Brexit and Covid-19 were felt by MPs to be events that will define our society in years to come. We asked MPs to consider the relative impact of both, as part of a wider UK in a Changing Europe series of work that looks to unpick the perceived and real impacts of these two 'shocks' to date.

Finally, we looked at something increasingly thought of as an underlying driver in our politics: the question of national identity and 'Englishness' and 'Britishness'. We compare English voters with Labour and Conservative MPs, to understand whether MPs identify in the same way as voters. Sample sizes meant we could not make equivalent comparisons with Scottish, Welsh or Northern Irish MPs.

Where possible, we have also measured the views of MPs against established, longitudinal public opinion resources including the British Election Study, the British Social Attitudes survey and (when looking at the Protocol) a project tracking public opinion in Northern Ireland – the ESRC-funded Governance for 'a place in between'. This allows for a comparison between public opinion and the views of our politicians. Equally, we can see where a disconnect exists between the policy positions of our political parties, and the private views of MPs.

For further methodological details, see the note at the end of this briefing. For full data tables, visit the data tables at Ipsos MORI. Due to rounding and the exclusion of don't know responses, some numbers may differ from those in the published tables – and the small sample sizes (the nature of legislative surveys of this kind) mean that there are potentially large confidence intervals when interpreting this data.

For broader comment on some of the implications of the study's findings, visit ukandeu.ac.uk.

# ECONOMIC EXPECTATIONS

## Conservative MPs think Brexit will have a positive impact, while Labour MPs do not.

We asked MPs to consider whether Brexit will have a positive or a negative effect across a range of sectors in the UK economy.

Of those that expressed a view, Conservative MPs overwhelmingly feel that Brexit will have a positive impact: despite repeated backbench attempts to amend the Agriculture Act to provide additional safeguards for the sector, 87% of Conservative MPs think that Brexit will have a positive impact on agriculture (including the fishing industry), 70% think manufacturing will benefit from leaving the EU and 74% say the UK's financial services industry will perform better outside the bloc. Only in transport and haulage – 28% predicting a positive impact, and 32% negative – do Conservative MPs feel the negative outweighs the positive (despite the fact these results were gathered prior to September's acute supply chain disruption).

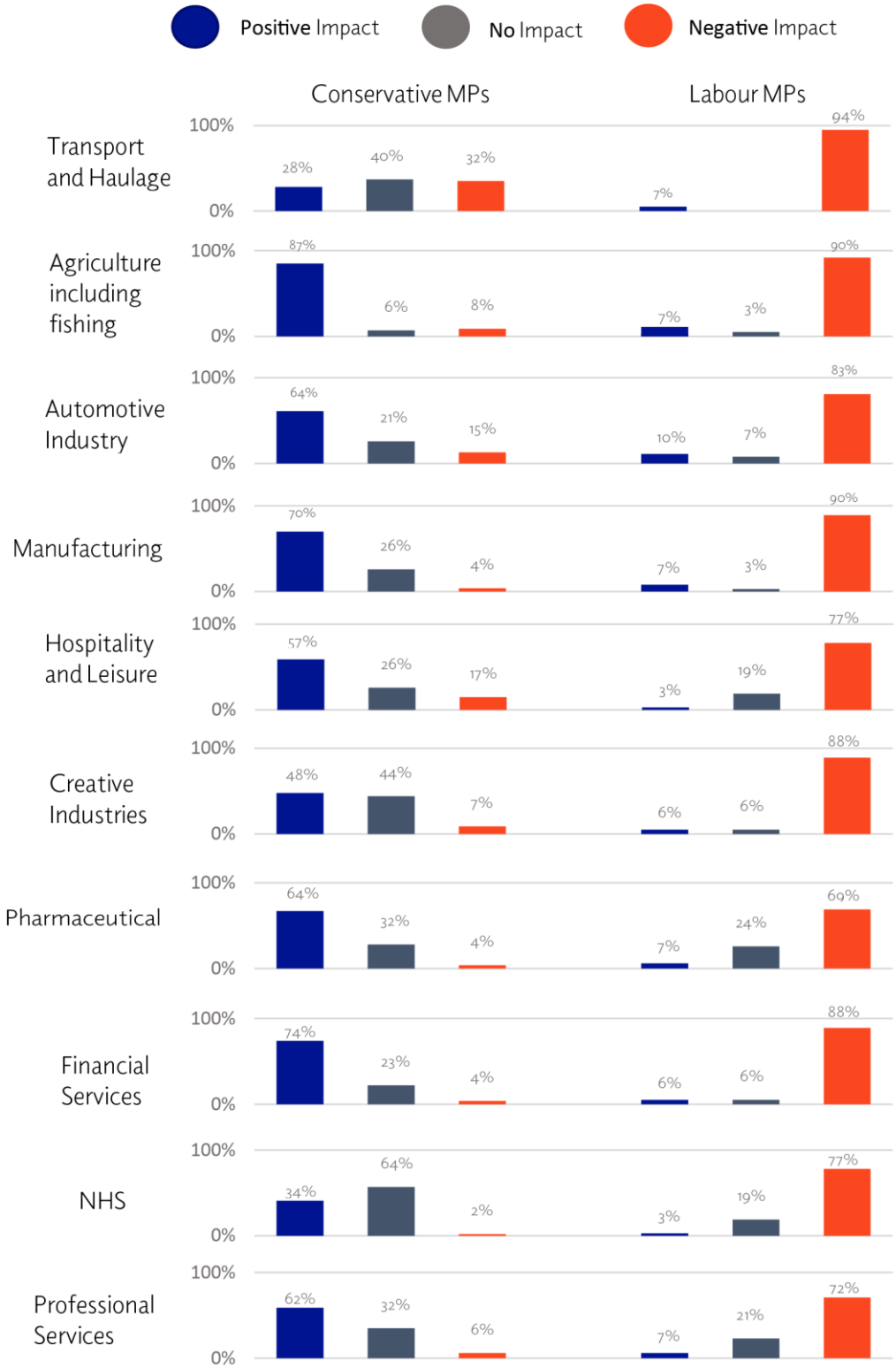
Apart from haulage, the sector Conservative MPs are least bullish about is the creative industries: around half with a view (48%) say that Brexit will have a positive impact, perhaps the result of campaigns highlighting visa and logistical problems facing artists touring in the EU. Conservative MPs are also largely of the view that Brexit will have no effect either way on the NHS – around two thirds (64%) expecting no impact on the health service.

Labour MPs are more negative about the economic effect of the Brexit settlement – despite, of course, ultimately voting to back the deal in the House of Commons. They are overwhelmingly negative across all areas of the UK economy, but particularly on the impact on transportation and haulage (94% negative), agriculture (90% negative), financial services and insurance (88% negative) and the creative industries (88% negative).

## Conservative MPs overwhelmingly think Brexit will have a positive impact on most sectors of the British economy

*Do you think that Britain's departure from the EU will have a positive impact, a negative impact or no impact on the following industries*

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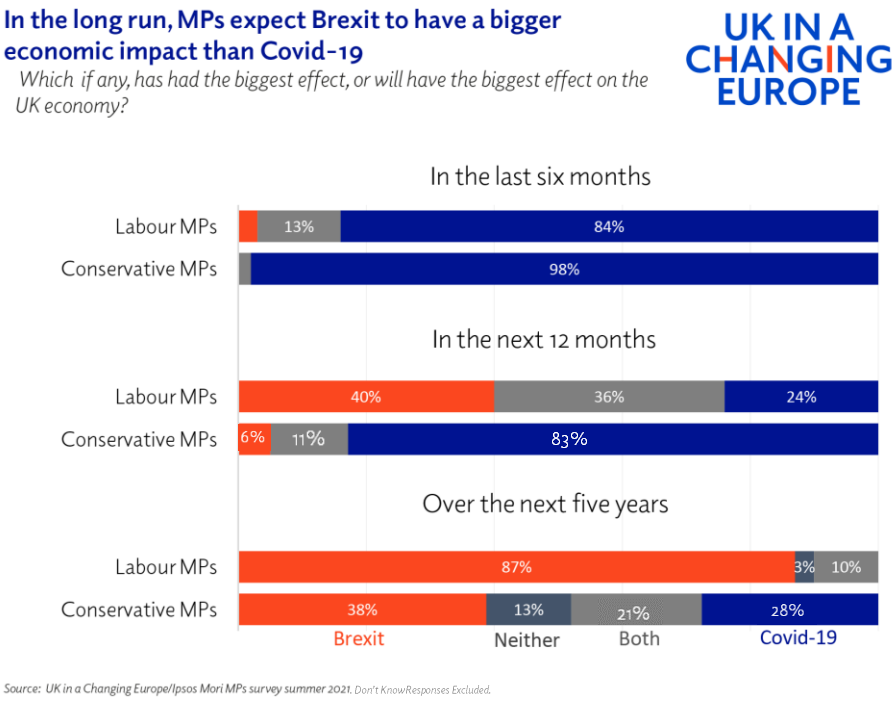



*Source: UK in a Changing Europe/Ipsos MORI Summer 2021 survey. Don't Knows Excluded*

## MPs think the economic effects of Brexit have been overwhelmed by Covid, but by 2026 Brexit impacts will dominate.

Understanding the twin shocks of Brexit and Covid-19 and their relative impact is something beginning to occupy the public debate. We therefore posed Conservative and Labour MPs a set of questions asking them to distinguish which has had, and which will have, the biggest effect on the UK economy.

When it comes to the short-term impact of the pandemic, politicians across both parties are on the same page – Covid-19 has overwhelmed all else before it. 98% of Conservative MPs that we asked, and almost every Labour MP, said that Covid-19 has had the biggest impact in the last six months (the first half of 2021).




Yet asking MPs to try and glance into the future – even just in the short term – elicits a very different, and more polarised, response. A plurality of Labour MPs said that the economy is likely to feel the effects of Brexit more deeply than it will the effects of Covid-19 in the year ahead: 40% saying Brexit will have the deepest impact, against 24% saying the pandemic. Just 6% of Conservative MPs thought Brexit will be the defining issue for the UK economy for the year ahead.

Over the next five years, Labour MPs near universally think that Brexit will be more impactful than any 'long Covid' effect on the economy – indeed, none said that Covid-19 would have a bigger long-term impact than Brexit, although 10% say the impact of both will continue to be felt. Strikingly, a plurality of Conservative MPs agree: 38% of those with an opinion said that Brexit will trump Covid-19 in terms of its impact on the UK economy, with 28% saying Covid-19 and the remainder a mix of neither or both.

In short, MPs on both sides of the Brexit debate are prepared for the economic effects of leaving the EU to continue to play out over this Parliament and beyond, long after recovery from the pandemic.

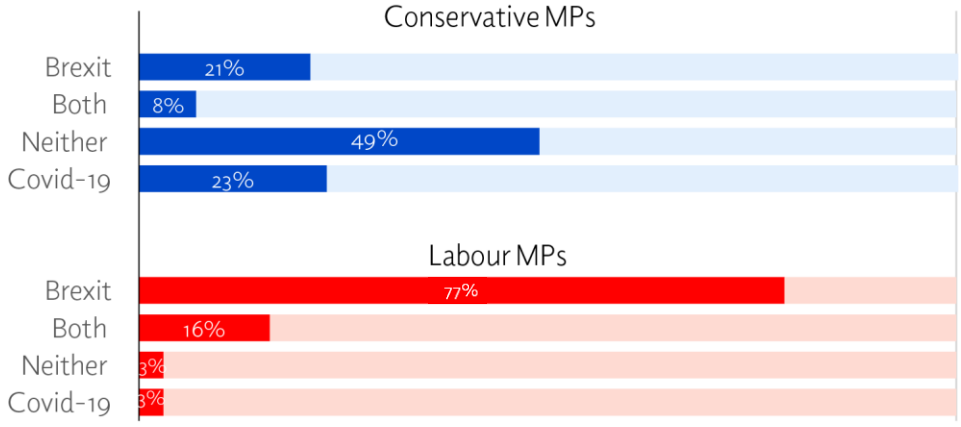
But, when it comes to 'levelling up', Conservative MPs think that neither Brexit nor Covid will make a difference in the long run.

When thinking about the long-term future of the economy, we also tried to understand what MPs thought about the relative impact of Brexit and Covid-19 on regional economic inequality. 'Levelling up' is a core stated priority for the government – and one that is potentially impacted by the decision to leave the European Union and the pandemic.

**Half of Conservative MPs think neither Brexit nor Covid will have a significant effect on regional inequality**

*Which of the following, if any, will have the biggest effect on regional inequality in the UK in the next five years?*

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*Source: UK in a Changing Europe/Ipsos Mori MPs survey summer 2021. Don't Know responses excluded.*

Among Conservatives who think there will be an impact and expressed a view, opinion is evenly divided between the bigger influence being Brexit (21%) or the pandemic (23%). But

by far the biggest bloc – 49% – think that neither will have an impact on regional economic inequality.

In contrast, Labour MPs think that Brexit is far more likely to have a long-term effect on levels of regional inequality in the UK over the next five years than any Covid after-effects. Just three per cent think that Covid-19 will have a bigger role, while 77% say Brexit.

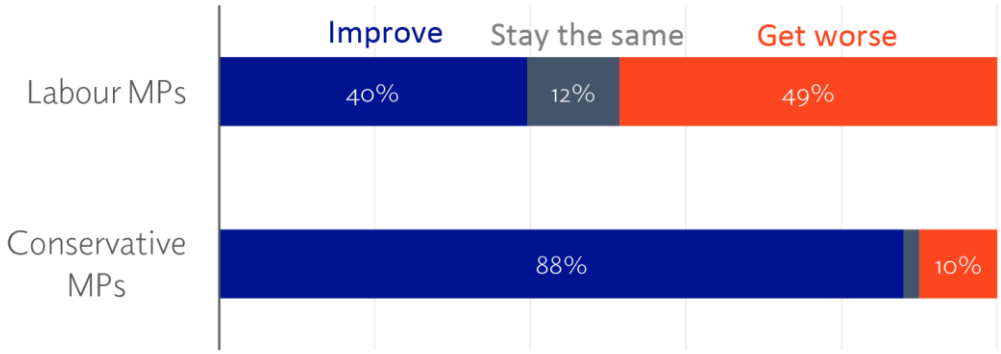
In the summer of 2021, nine out of ten Conservative MPs were optimistic about the state of the economy compared to four in ten Labour MPs.

We asked MPs a question that Ipsos MORI regularly ask in opinion polling used to measure economic confidence: whether the 'general economic condition' of the UK economy is expected to improve or worsen over the year ahead.

**Labour MPs are split on whether the economy will improve over the next 12 months**

*Do you think that the general economic condition of the country will improve, stay the same or get worse over the next 12 months?*

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*Source: UK in a Changing Europe/Ipsos Mori MPs survey summer 2021.*

Labour MPs – at the time of asking over summer when fears of inflation were not as salient as they are at the time of publication – were split on their expectations: slightly more of the Parliamentary Labour Party expected economic conditions to deteriorate (49%) versus improve (40%). Conservative MPs, less surprisingly, were overwhelmingly positive.

In a similar period over August, Ipsos MORI found 44% of the public expected economic conditions to improve and 39% expected conditions to worsen, a net figure of +5. Since then,

expectations have fallen and, in November, the net figure was -26. It is fair to say, therefore, that we took the temperature of MPs' views on the economy at a time of relative prevailing optimism.

## Covid-19 has dominated MPs' mailbags and surgeries.

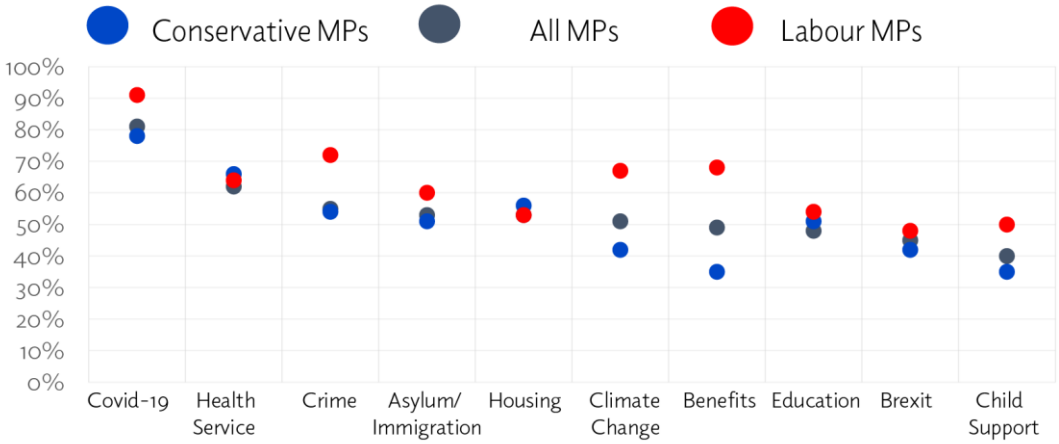
Many of these judgements about the relative impact of Covid-19 and Brexit will be informed by the political judgement of MPs. But they will also be informed by the daily experiences of their role as a member of parliament. A key – and overlooked – aspect of the work of MPs is the casework that they undertake on behalf of their constituents. We asked MPs to highlight which issues had featured most regularly in correspondence and approaches from constituents. And, unsurprisingly, Covid-19 dominated.

The graphic below shows the relative prevalence of correspondence of the top 10 issues in MPs' constituency work. Some of these are clearly common themes. For Labour MPs, crime was the second more common theme to be identified, by 72% of Labour MPs (and was an issue that came fourth, on 54%, for Conservative MPs).

**Covid-19 has dominated the casework and mailbags of Members of Parliament**

*Which of the subjects on this list do you receive most letters about in your post bags, or receive most approaches about in clinics or other ways?*

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*Source: UK in a Changing Europe/Ipsos MORI MPs survey summer 2021*

Issues around the benefits system and child support were also seen as more common issues by Labour MPs, with 68% of Labour MPs saying it is one of the top issues they deal with. For Conservative MPs, housing (though our question could not differentiate whether this was driven by demand for more, or for fewer, houses) was the third placed issue. Labour MPs say

they have received significantly more correspondence about climate change than Brexit, but Conservative MPs do not say the same.

It is a reminder that the views of our Members of Parliament are shaped in part by the concerns of constituents, concerns that will inevitably vary place to place; but, also, that MPs in both parties are likely to have different priorities when carrying out constituency work.

## POST-BREXIT PUBLIC POLICY

As a result of leaving the European Union, politicians in Westminster can make decisions over some areas they could not before Brexit. The House of Commons is also bound by the treaties agreed between the UK and the EU in 2019 and 2020. And, of course, there are the challenges that the UK is facing up to outside the bloc: on what to do about net zero and protecting the environment, and on the levels of inequality revealed by the pandemic. On each, politics – the direction of opinion within Westminster, along with the shape of public opinion – will be a key factor in determining policy outcomes.

There are four policy areas across which we tested how the position of MPs measures up to that of the public. Firstly, on the Northern Ireland Protocol, we sought to compare the views of MPs on the efficacy of the arrangement, with the public in Northern Ireland directly impacted by it.

On immigration, a significant area of post-Brexit policy divergence – and one in which public attitudes have shifted since 2016 – we sought the test how popular immigration from different countries is, as well as views on the salary requirements within the points-based migration system.

On the environment, we tested where MPs place the relative importance of protecting the environment versus economic growth. And, on inequality, we measured views within both parliamentary parties on income inequality and the degree to which governments should intervene to ensure equal outcomes. Each is an area where fresh or urgent, and sometimes fresh and urgent, choices are being confronted in Westminster.

## The Northern Ireland Protocol is more popular in Northern Ireland than in Westminster.

It is perhaps easy to see why the Northern Ireland protocol has few friends in the House of Commons, given the party that negotiated the agreement now say it is unsustainable.

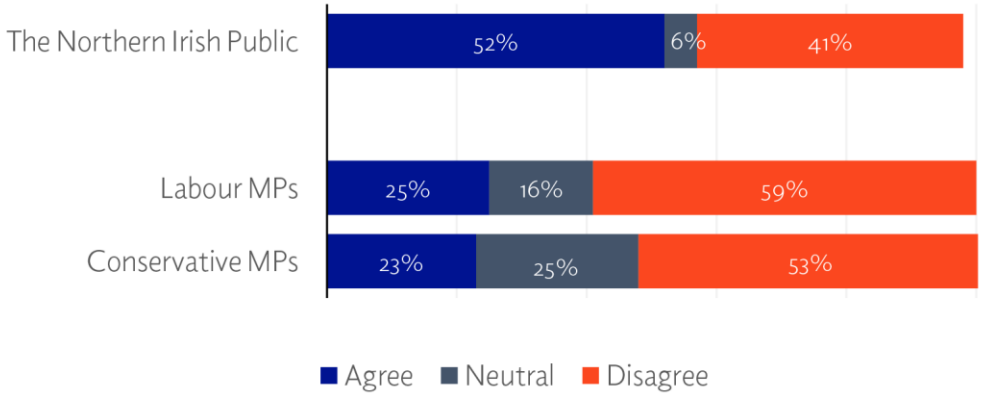
Indeed, it is a striking fact that views on both sides of the aisle are broadly similar: just over half of Labour (59%) and roughly half of Conservative (53%) MPs who state an opinion say the protocol is a bad thing for Northern Ireland; only around a quarter are willing to say that it has been an overall benefit to Northern Ireland. While their reasons may be markedly different – some Labour MPs supporting closer integration with the EU, and Conservative MPs frustrated by a customs border in the Irish Sea – clearly the status quo does not have cross-party support.

This puts Westminster at odds with public opinion in Northern Ireland itself. When Katy Hayward and David Phinnemore posed the same question to the public in Northern Ireland at the start of October, 52% said they support the Protocol on balance, and 41% said they do not.

**A majority in Northern Ireland support the Protocol, but MPs do not.**

*To what extent to do you agree or disagree? The Northern Ireland Protocol is on balance a good thing for Northern Ireland.*

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*Source: UK in a Changing Europe/Ipsos Mori MPs survey summer 2021; ESRC 'Governance from 'a place between' project'. Don't Know responses excluded.*

We also posed a subtly different question: whether the Protocol 'provides appropriate means for managing the effects of Brexit on Northern Ireland'. After all, you may think that the Protocol provides effective mitigation against the effects of Brexit, even if the settlement is

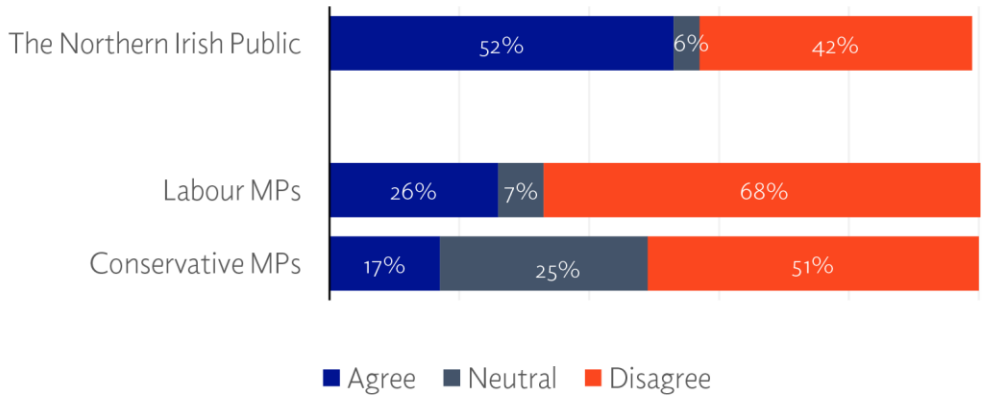
not overall a 'good thing'.

While the response in Northern Ireland to this question is little different, Westminster politicians are more likely to think the protocol is appropriate, thus widening the gap. Seven in ten Labour MPs, and five in ten Conservatives with a view, say that the current arrangements do not provide an appropriate institutional framework for managing Brexit. Only 17% of Conservatives are prepared to say that they think the Protocol is effective.

**A majority in Northern Ireland support the Protocol, but MPs do not.**

*To what extent to do you agree or disagree? The Northern Ireland Protocol provides appropriate means for managing the effects of Brexit on NI?*

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*Source: UK in a Changing Europe/Ipsos Mori MPs survey summer 2021; ESRC 'Governance from 'a place between' project'. Don't Know responses excluded.*

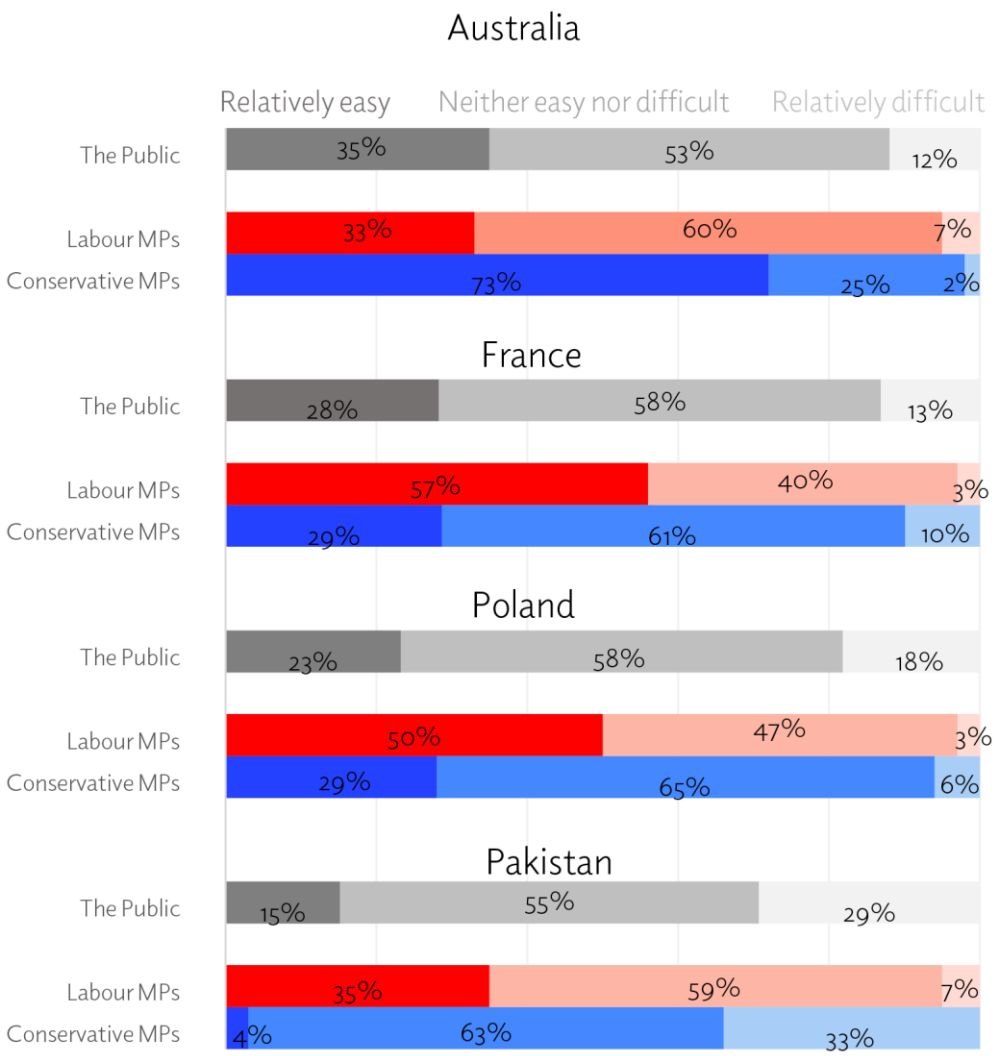
## Conservative MPs support a more liberal immigration regime for immigrants from Australia, Labour support easy migration from European countries.

Broadly speaking, the UK's new post-Brexit migration system does not discriminate by country of origin. The ending of free movement has meant that there is no preference for new EU migrants. However, the UK could negotiate more differentiated arrangements as part of future trade deals. Using a question posed to the public by the British Social Attitudes survey, it is possible to see whether MPs' views on migrants from different countries are similar to those of the public at large.

## Country of origin of migrants is more important to Conservative MPs than the public

*Would you say it should be relatively easy for people from X country to come to the UK to live and work, relatively difficult, or neither easy nor difficult?*

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*Source: UK in a Changing Europe/Ipsos MORI MPs survey summer 2021./ BSA post-Brexit public policy survey February 2020*

Few politicians, and not many of the public, feel that immigration should be 'relatively difficult' from any of the nations given as options: just 12% of the public with a view say immigration from Australia should be 'relatively difficult' – the equivalent numbers are 13% for France, 18% for Poland and 29% for Pakistan.

Yet there are some differences between Parliamentarians and the public. Labour are clearly more enthusiastic about preferential treatment for EU nationals than the public: around half with an opinion support easier access from Poland and France to live and work in the UK, and around a third for Pakistan and Australia. Conservative MPs are more enthusiastic about immigration from Australia than the public. While nearly three-quarters of Conservative MPs (73%) think migration from Australia should be relatively easy, that is true of just over a third of the public.

## MPs on both sides of the House of Commons, and the public, say they would support a lower salary threshold for migrants.

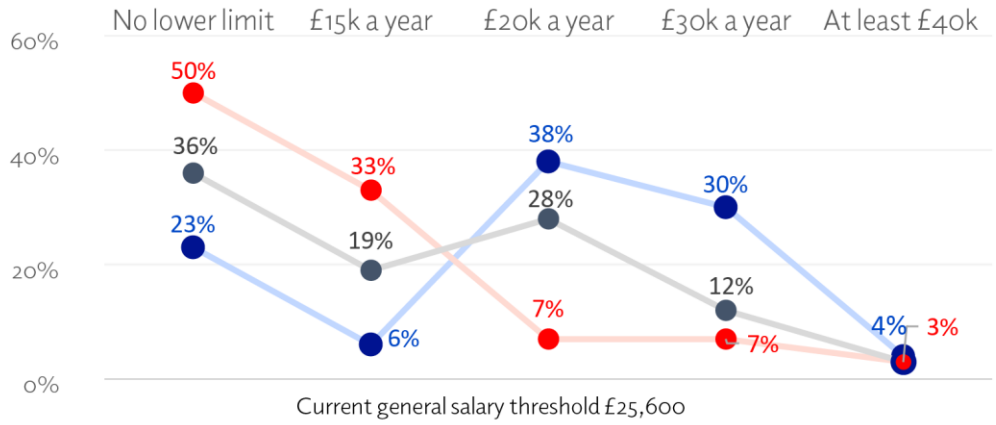
The UK now has a points-based migration system, and one of its key pillars is a salary threshold – currently set at £25,600. Views on the amount somebody should need to earn before they are allowed to live and work in the UK have been tested as part of the British Social Attitudes survey.

Keir Starmer has previously pledged to scrap the salary threshold. Half of Labour MPs with a view support that position, being prepared to see no salary cap, and nearly all the rest support a lower cap than the status quo. Just ten per cent support a threshold of £30,000 a year or more.

A majority of Conservative MPs who expressed an opinion also support a more liberal system. Around one in five say there should be no cap, with a further 44% saying the cap should be 20k or lower. This evidence suggests that neither voters nor MPs would stand in the way of a system that places less emphasis on the salary of prospective immigrants to the UK.

**A majority of MPs, and a majority of the public, support a lower salary threshold for UK immigration**

*How much do you think someone from another country should have to earn before they are allowed to come to Britain to live and work?*




*Source: UK in a Changing Europe/Ipsos MORI MPs survey summer 2021. 6% of Labour MPs, and 2% of Conservative MPs, answered 'Don't Know'.*

## Labour MPs agree with their voters on the relative importance of protecting the environment, while Conservative MPs rate it less important than theirs do.

There is often seen to be a trade-off between economic growth and the environment (though many would contest that trade-off in the long-run). We posed MPs a question regularly asked by the British Election Study, which asks respondents to put their view on this issue on a scale where '0' is a prioritisation of economic growth, and '10' is a prioritisation of environmental protection.

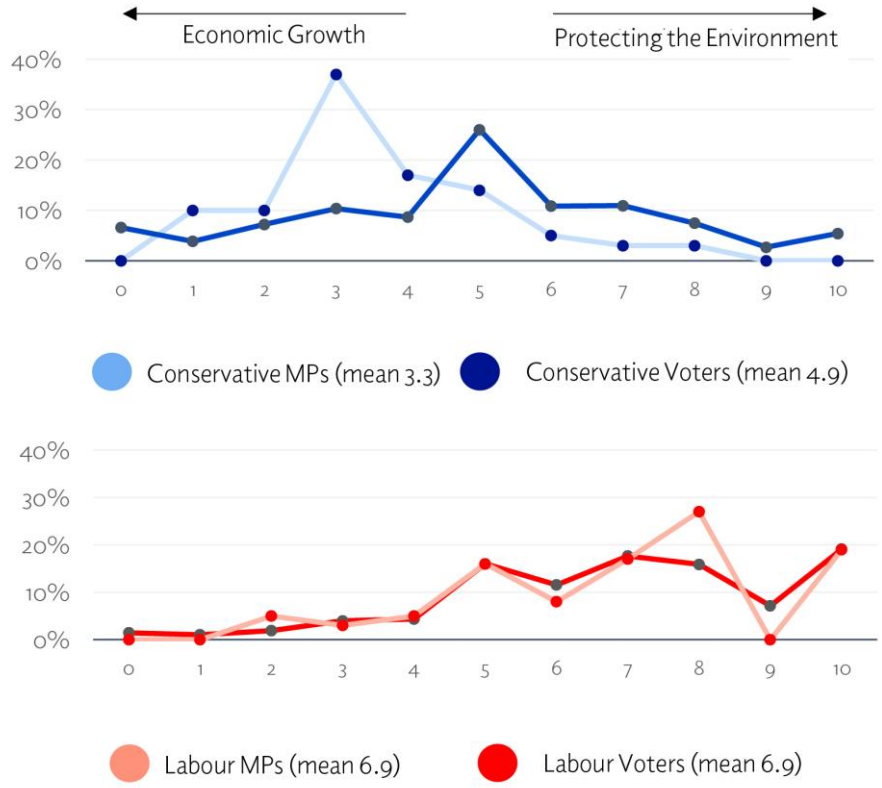
The key finding is that Conservative MPs place more emphasis on economic growth over protecting the environment, and greater emphasis on growth than their voters. For example, just seven per cent of Tory MPs with a view put themselves at seven out of ten or higher in favour of protecting the environment on this scale (compared to 27% of Tory voters). Meanwhile 57% put themselves at 3 or lower on this scale, versus 28% of Tory voters. In contrast, the shape of views – the proportion who put themselves on each number from 0 to 10 – is near identical among Labour MPs and voters, as is the average (mean) score of 6.9 out of 10. For now, at least, the issue of the environment is one where Labour MPs and voters are

singing from the same hymn sheet.

**Conservative MPs are less likely than Conservative voters to say they prioritise protecting the environment**

*Where would you place yourself on this scale where 0 is economic growth should have priority and 10 is protecting the environment should have priority?*

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*Source: UK in a Changing Europe/Ipsos MoriI survey, summer 2021; British Election Study Wave 20. Don't know responses excluded.*

## MPs are more polarised on income inequality than voters.

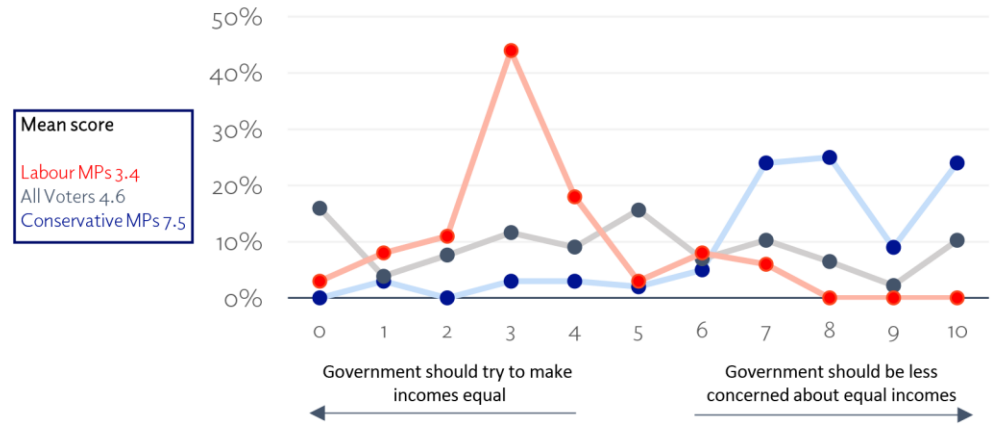
Much discussion in Westminster has centred on whether the Conservative Party has taken a 'turn to the left' on economic policy. However, a key question remains whether that is a shift that has taken place within the Parliamentary Conservative Party itself.

To shed light on this question, we asked MPs a question about income inequality, again one posed by the British Election Study. This asks respondents to place themselves on a scale, where '0' is the belief that Government should do what it can to ensure equality of incomes, and '10' that Government should be less concerned about income inequality. On this indicator, the public spread themselves relatively evenly across the scale, with an average score of 4.6 out of 10. Yet it is a measure that reveals a real divide between Labour and Conservative MPs.

**Conservative MPs think the government should not be concerned about equal incomes**

*Where would you place yourself on a scale where 0 is the government should try to make incomes equal and 10 is the government should be less concerned about equal incomes?*

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*Source: UK in a Changing Europe/Ipsos Mori survey, summer 2021; British Election Study Wave 20. Don't know responses excluded.*

Clearly, and unsurprisingly, Labour MPs support greater redistribution and Conservative MPs are less concerned about income inequality.

The average score for Labour MPs (3.4) on this scale is more similar to voters (4.6) than Conservative MPs (7.5). This is, in large part, because a significant tranche – some 44% – put themselves at three out of ten on this scale. Just 3 per cent of Labour MPs put themselves as a 0 out of 10 – the strongest possible support for income redistribution. In contrast, 24% of Conservative MPs would place themselves at 10 out of 10 – the highest possible opposition to the government intervening to increase income equality.

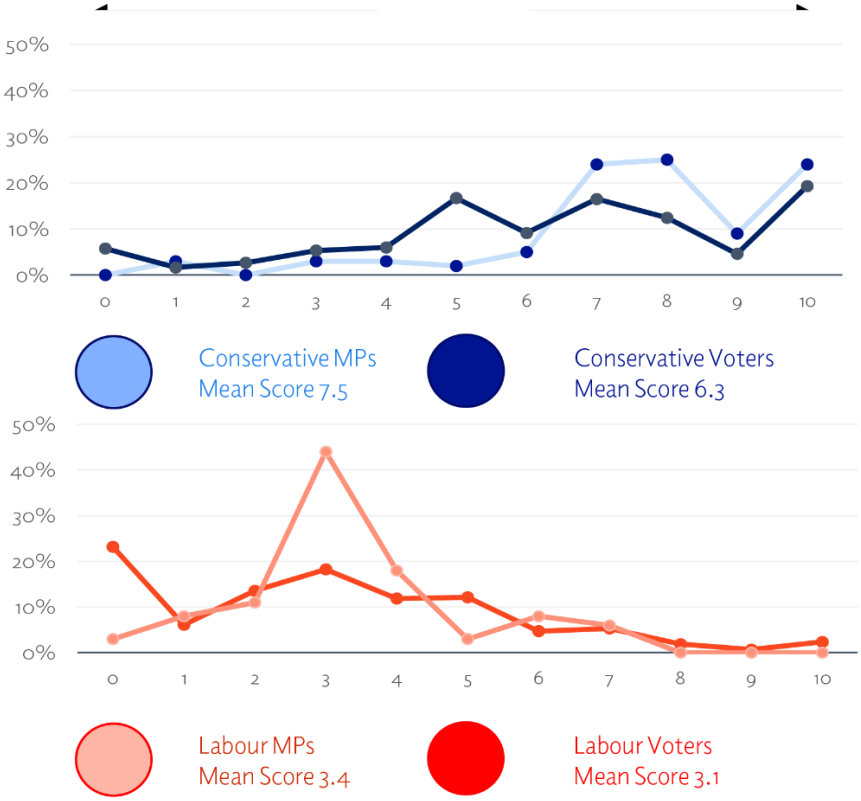
Next, in the graph below, we break down further, and compare Labour and Conservative MPs to Labour and Conservative voters.

First, we find a broadly similar distribution of views among MPs and voters in both parties: MPs and voters for each party think broadly alike on this question. However, there are some key differences: we can see a significant spike in the Labour graph among Labour voters at the 'pro income inequality' end of the scale – some 23% put themselves at 0 out of 10. Labour MPs, on the other hand are much more likely to take a 'moderate' position. In contrast, Conservative MPs are more sceptical than Conservative voters in large part because many of the latter put themselves at the middle of this scale.

**Conservative and Labour MPs' views on redistribution and income inequality broadly align with their voters**

*Place yourself on a scale where 0 is the government should make incomes equal and 10 is the government should be less concerned about equal incomes?*

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*Source: UK in a Changing Europe/Ipsos Mori survey, summer 2021; British Election Study Wave 20. Don't know responses excluded.*

# NATIONAL IDENTITY

One of the key aspects of British politics in the past decade has been a growing sense that a more assertive 'English' identity has become an important driver of political attitudes and political behaviour. For example, in the 2016 referendum, some 74% of those who felt 'English but not British' voted to leave, whereas the figure for those who felt 'British but not English' was just 38%.

A growing body of research has looked at the role of national identity on party politics – particularly, the possibility that the Labour Party's disconnect from some voters can be explained by a problem with 'Englishness'. However, we did not previously have a good idea of where MPs from both parties sit when it comes to the relative strength of their own sense of

'Englishness' and 'Britishness'.

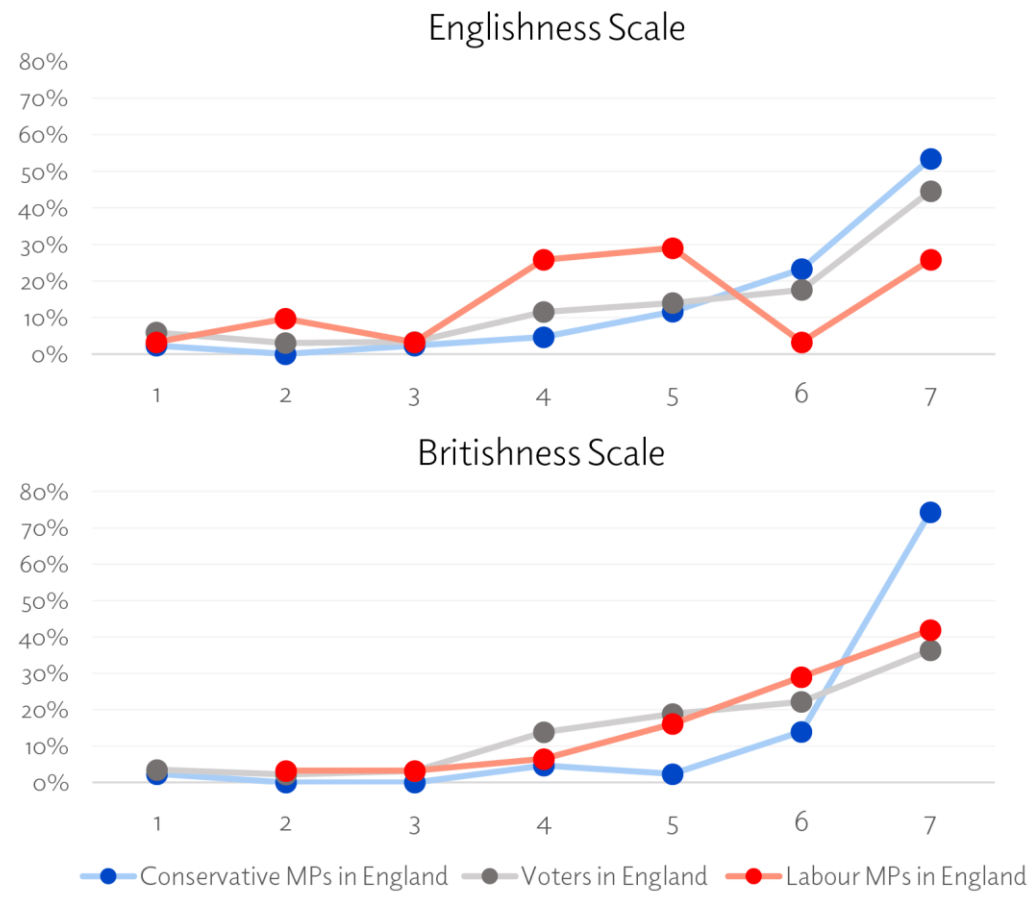
## Conservative MPs feelings of 'Englishness' are close to that of the public.

We look specifically here at the national identity of English voters, and subset of Labour and Conservative MPs representing English constituencies (removing some MPs from our sample). It is important to note that not all these MPs will necessarily have been born in England or in Great Britain. We asked respondents to place themselves on two scales – designed by the British Election Study, to allow for that comparison with voters – where 1 is that they are 'not at all English' or 'not at all British', and 7 is that they are 'very strongly British' or 'very strongly English'.

When it comes to feelings of 'Britishness', Conservative MPs representing places in England have a stronger identity than English voters: 80% put themselves at 7 out of 7 on the 'Britishness' scale, compared to 36% of the English public and 42% of Labour MPs representing English constituencies. When comparing the number of those in each group who put themselves at least 5 out of 7 on the 'Britishness' scale, those numbers come closer together: 94% for Conservative MPs, 84% for Labour MPs and 77% for the English public.

**Conservative MPs feel similarly English, and Labour similarly British, to the average voter in England**

*Where would you place yourself on these scales, where 0 is 'not at all English/British' and 7 is 'very strongly English/British'?*




*Source: UK in a Changing Europe/Ipsos MORI MPs survey summer 2021/BES Wave 20*

As for feelings of 'Englishness', the picture is different. 58% of our sample of Labour MPs in England would put themselves as a 5 out of 7 on the 'Englishness' scale, compared to 77% of the public and 84% of Conservative MPs in England. Just 27% of Labour MPs in England would say they are '7 out of 7' on this scale, compared to 45% of English voters and 49% of Conservative MPs for English constituencies.

# CONCLUSIONS

MPs often have to deal with the accusation they are out of touch: that they have views that do not resemble those of voters and have little or no idea what the people that vote for them think. Clearly, this is a caricature and, as has been discussed in recent weeks, the work of an assiduous member of Parliament involves often being deeply connected to their constituent's concerns. We find – as we have found previously – that MPs think about politics differently to the public in some key respects. Conservative MPs are more likely to choose economic growth over protecting the environment and are less worried about income inequality than the general public and their voters. While Labour MPs are (unsurprisingly) more in favour of redistribution and (more surprisingly) environmental protection than voters, those differences are much less pronounced.

On both questions, the evidence suggests the Conservative Party in Parliament has instincts more distant from the average voter. Yet, when it comes to how voters feel about their national identity, and what they think about immigration, Conservative MPs are much more in tune with the voters.

The least surprising aspect of these results is that Conservative MPs think Brexit will be good for the British economy, and Labour MPs think it is bad. More surprising perhaps is the fact that MPs in both parties think Brexit is likely to be a more defining issue for the economy over the next five years than Covid-19. Clearly Brexit will continue to be a central feature of our politics.

Perhaps the starkest division in views that we found is the gap between those in the House of Commons and the people of Northern Ireland on the Protocol. There is a striking disjuncture between the majority in Northern Ireland who think the Protocol is a positive thing, and the cross-party opposition of Labour and Conservative MPs who think it is neither good for Northern Ireland nor appropriate as a solution. As the UK and the EU gear up for a further fight over the Protocol, it is a reminder of the importance of sentiment in SW1.

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