



## UNIT ONE: ADVANCED DEMOCRACIES

During the era of the Cold War, most political science scholars categorized countries of the world according to the "Three Worlds" approach. The First World included the United States and its allies; the Second World included the U.S.S.R. and its allies; and the Third World included all countries that could not be assigned to either camp. Today, with the Cold War over and the world encompassed by forces of globalization and fragmentation, we will use these three categories to more effectively compare political systems: advanced democracies, communist and post-communist countries, and developing/less-developed countries. In this section of the book, we will consider advanced democracies.

What do we mean by the term, "advanced democracies"? The term applies to countries that have a long history of democracy that has stabilized as the established form of government. We may consider these countries according to two dimensions: political type and level of economic development.

### POLITICAL DIMENSIONS

Politically, advanced democracies exemplify many facets of democracy, not just the characteristic of holding regular and fair elections. Other qualities of advanced democracies are:

- **Civil liberties**, such as freedom of belief, speech, and assembly
- **Rule of law** that provides for equal treatment of citizens and due process

- **Neutrality of the judiciary** and other checks on the abuse of power
- **Open civil society** that allows citizens to lead private lives and mass media to operate independently from government
- **Civilian control of the military** that restricts the likelihood of the military seizing control of the government

Advanced democracies generally have a high degree of legitimacy, partly because their systems have been in place for a long time. Another source of legitimacy is a large amount of **social capital**, or reciprocity and trust that exists among citizens, and between citizens and the state. All advanced democracies guarantee participation, competition, and liberty, but they differ in the methods that they use. For example, some have proportional representation electoral systems; others have plurality systems; and still others combine the two systems. Participation rates vary considerably, too. The uses of referenda and initiatives differ greatly across these countries; most advanced democracies use them, although the United States, Japan, Canada, and Germany do not allow such votes on the national level. In most of the countries, it is the responsibility of the state to ensure that all eligible voters are automatically registered to vote. However, in the United States and France, the responsibility to register rests with the individual. In several Scandinavian countries, citizenship is not required for voting; anyone who is a permanent resident may vote. In Australia, Argentina, Uruguay, and Belgium, voting is mandatory.

## ECONOMIC DIMENSIONS

In thinking about the values that form the political culture of advanced democracies, they may be described as reflecting **post-modernism**. **Modernism** is a set of values that comes along with industrialization. Values of modernism include secularism (an emphasis on non-religious aspects of life), rationalism (reasoning), materialism (valuing concrete objects and possessions), technology, bureaucracy, and an emphasis on freedom rather than collective equality. In other words,

## POLITICAL SYSTEMS IN ADVANCED DEMOCRACIES

PARLIAMENTARY	SEMI-PRESIDENTIAL	PRESIDENTIAL
Australia	Austria	The United States
Belgium	Finland	
Canada	France	
Denmark	Portugal	
Germany		
Israel		
Italy		
Japan		
Netherlands		
New Zealand		
Norway		
Spain		
Sweden		
Great Britain		

**Parliamentary, Semi-Presidential and Presidential Systems.** As the chart demonstrates, most advanced democracies have a parliamentary system. Although the United States is the only advanced democracy with a presidential system, other countries – such as Mexico and Nigeria – use it.

industrialization encouraged making money and gaining economic success. Advanced democracies, such as Britain and the United States, experienced this transformation during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Others were later, but all advanced democracies have also experienced post-modernism, a set of values that emphasizes quality of life over concern for material gain. Some examples of post-modern values are the preservation of the environment and the promotion of health care and education. These values accompany the economic changes of **post-industrialism**, in which the majority of people are employed in the **service (tertiary) sector**, including such industries as technology, health care, business and legal services, finance, and education. These contrast to the most common type of job created earlier by industrialization, the **industrial (secondary) sector**, which employs people to create tangible goods, such as cars, clothing, or machinery. The **agricultural (primary) sector** of post modern societies is very small since mechanized farming (first developed during the industrial era) allows only a few farmers to produce enough food to feed all the workers in the industry and service sectors.

The sector percentages for some advanced democracies look something like this:

**EMPLOYMENT BY ECONOMIC SECTOR  
IN ADVANCED DEMOCRACIES**

	Services	Industry	Agriculture
United States	79.1%	20.3%	.7%
Canada	76%	19%	2%
Japan	70.9%	26.2%	2.9%
United Kingdom	83.5%	15.2%	1.3%
France	75.7%	21.3%	3%
Germany	73.8%	24.6%	1.6%

Source: *CIA Factbook*, 2006-2015 estimates, as percentage of employment by sector

We may also refer to advanced democracies as liberal democracies, which value individual freedoms in both economic and political realms. Many advanced democracies, but not all, established democratic political systems many years ago, and now operate under stable governments that have long followed democratic traditions.

Many countries in Europe are among the most stable democracies in the modern world. Although their political systems operate in a variety of ways, they share common characteristics that allow effective comparison of both similarities and differences. The citizens of each country are diverse, and they actively participate in political affairs. In the AP Comparative Government and Politics course, Britain represents this group. Britain has a well-organized, competitive party system and interest groups, as well as a representative form of government.

**INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS: THE EUROPEAN UNION AND NAFTA**

One of the most important developments of the past few decades in Europe has been the slow but steady march toward integration of the continent's countries. After World War II the most obvious need was

to rebuild the infrastructures of countries devastated by the conflict. As the Cold War set in, the "Iron Curtain" separated western and eastern Europe based on economic and political differences, with countries in the east dominated by communism. Still, the urge to integrate first economically and eventually politically, continued throughout the century. By the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, the European Union had emerged as a strong **supranational organization** that encourages cooperation among nations and promises to redefine the meaning of national sovereignty. Old nationalist impulses currently threaten to weaken or even dissolve the Union, but so far, the supranational organization has held together.

The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) is an international organization that binds the United States, Canada, and Mexico. Created in 1995 mainly as a free trade area, NAFTA has much narrower integration goals than the EU, and its member-states still retain their sovereignty. Unlike the EU, no common currency has been adopted for North American countries, and no parliament or court systems have been set up.

In the first part of this section, the political system of Britain will be discussed, and students should note that the outline of concepts in Chapter One is followed throughout. The second part of this section is a brief review of the development and current status of international organizations, with a focus on the European Union, a major force that shapes policymaking in Britain and other European countries.

### IMPORTANT TERMS AND CONCEPTS

modernism

post-modernism

post-industrialism

sectors of the economy (agriculture, industry, service)

supranational organization



## CHAPTER TWO: GOVERNMENT AND POLITICS IN BRITAIN

### GREAT BRITAIN OR LITTLE ENGLAND?

Britain clearly has had one of the most influential and powerful political systems in world history. It was the first country in Europe to develop a limited monarchy, which was achieved gradually so as to maintain stability. Modern democratic institutions and modern industrialization have their roots in English soil, and English influence spread all over the world during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries throughout a far-flung empire. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Britain was undoubtedly the most powerful country in the world, so truly the name "Great Britain" applies to its many accomplishments.

Yet many British subjects refer to their homeland affectionately as "Little England." Perhaps there is something of the "David and Goliath" appeal – the little island that miraculously conquered the world. At any rate, the two names aptly define Britain's dilemma in the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As a precursor in the development of modern democracy, industrialization, and imperialism, it is now a model in the art of growing old gracefully. Britain has lost much of its empire and has slipped out of the front rank of the economies of western Europe, and yet the country is still a major player in world politics.

Many other nations watch as Britain helps define the meaning of progress. However, it is not unilateral – onward ever, backward never. Instead, Britain is adjusting to its new reality as one European country among many, and yet the nation's influence remains strong. Many believe that regeneration is in the making – politically, economically,

and socially – despite the challenges presented by the recent global economic recession.

### **SOVEREIGNTY, AUTHORITY, AND POWER**

Great Britain has the oldest democratic tradition of any country in the world, and as a result, has many sources of authority and power that provide stability and legitimacy. This section is divided into three parts:

- Social compacts and constitutionalism
- Historical evolution of national political traditions
- Political culture

#### **Social Compacts and Constitutionalism**

The legitimacy of Britain's government has developed gradually, so that today tradition is a primary source of stability. Like so many other advanced democracies in Europe, **traditional legitimacy** for many years was based on the belief that an hereditary ruling family had the right to rule. Although the tradition includes a monarchy, the limitation of the king's power began early, until the power of Parliament gradually eclipsed that of the king by the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Today most British citizens accept democracy as a basic component of their government. With the notable exception of Protestant/Catholic conflicts in Northern Ireland, most British citizens accept a church/state relationship in which the church does not challenge the authority of the government.

Ironically, the country that influenced the development of so many other modern democracies has never had a written constitution as such. Instead, the "constitution" has evolved over time, with important documents, common law, and customs combining to form what is often called the "**Constitution of the Crown.**"



### CHANGE OVER TIME: KEY FEATURES IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF CONSTITUTIONALISM IN BRITAIN

By the end of the 17th century, Britain's political system was clearly based on **rational-legal authority** – a system of well-established laws and procedures. Despite Britain's beginnings centuries before in the traditional legitimacy of an hereditary monarch, the country had gradually developed a "Constitution of the Crown" through many important documents and legal principles, including these:

- **Magna Carta** – In 1215 King John signed this document, agreeing to consult nobles before he made important political decisions, especially those regarding taxes. Magna Carta, then, forms the basis of limited government that placed restrictions on the power of monarchs.
- **The Bill of Rights** – This document lists rights retained by Parliament, not by individual citizens. William and Mary signed this document in 1688, giving important policymaking power to Parliament, including the power of the purse.
- **Common law** – This legal system is based on local customs and precedent rather than formal legal codes. It developed gradually in Britain, and today is found in Great Britain, the United States, and other countries with a strong English influence. Common law allows the decisions that public officials and courts make to set precedents for later actions and decisions, eventually forming a comprehensive set of principles for governance.

### Historical Evolution of National Political Traditions

The British political system is influenced by many traditions from the country's long history. Britain's political culture has developed for the most part gradually and consensually, although not totally without conflict. However, many current political conflicts result from unresolved issues that rose from the dramatic changes brought by the Industrial Revolution in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. The evolution of British political traditions may be analyzed in these historical categories:

- **The shaping of the monarchy** – The British monarchy has been in place for many centuries and has survived many transformations. Britain established a limited monarchy as early as the 13th century when nobles forced King John to sign the Magna Carta. During the English Civil War of the 1640s, the monarch, Charles I, was beheaded, but the monarchy was brought back later in the 17<sup>th</sup> century with powers seriously restricted by Parliament. Today, the monarchy has no decision-making power but plays an important symbolic role in British society.
- **The ascendancy of Parliament** – The English Civil War was a conflict between the supporters of the king, Charles I, and those of Parliament (the Roundheads). Parliament won, the king was executed, and the Roundhead leader, Oliver Cromwell, took over the country. However, the “Protectorate” that followed was short-lived, and the monarchy was restored when Parliament brought Charles II, the beheaded king’s son, to the throne. Succeeding kings did not always respect the power of Parliament, but the balance of power was decided by the Glorious Revolution of 1688. This bloodless revolution established the constitutional monarchy when William and Mary agreed to written restrictions on their power by signing the Bill of Rights. Parliament and its ministers continued to gain strength as the monarchy lost power through succeeding kings. The authority of the king’s prime minister was firmly established during the 18<sup>th</sup> century by Robert Walpole, minister to Kings George I and George II.
- **Challenges of the Industrial Revolution** – During the 18th century, two very important economic influences – colonial mercantilism and the Industrial Revolution – established England as a major economic power. The results radically changed traditional English society and its economic basis in the feudal relationship between lord and peasant. The brisk trade with colonies all over the world and the manufacture of goods created unprecedented wealth held by a new class of merchants and businessmen. The lives of peasants were transformed as they left rural areas, moved to cities, and went to work in factories.

Merchants, businessmen, and workers all demanded that the political system respond by including them in decision making. The 19<sup>th</sup> century reforms reflected their successes.

- **Colonialism** – During the era from about 1750 to 1914, the forces of nationalism and industrialization made it possible for European nations to build global empires that stretched across the continents. The famous statement, “The sun never sets on the British Empire”, describes the huge network of control that Britain was able to establish during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, making it among the most powerful empires in all of world history. Nationalism enabled the government to rally citizens’ support for overseas expansion. Industrialization allowed the British to produce goods to sell in foreign markets, and it encouraged them to look for raw materials not available at home. Claiming lands far away increased the country’s ability to create wealth and assert power. Industrialization also made communications and transportation so much more efficient that it became possible to link lands together across the globe under one imperial banner. Just as Britain’s democratization was gradual, so too was the erosion of the British Empire. It began with the loss of the American colonies in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, although Britain actually gained in stature and wealth during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with expansion in Asia and Africa.
- **Britain in the 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries** – At the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Britain was the greatest imperialist nation in the world. By the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, its power had been diminished by two world wars, serious economic problems of the 1970s, and the rising power of the United States. After World War II, Britain developed a strong welfare state, which was curtailed during the 1980s by a wave of “**Thatcherism**”, a conservative, capitalist backlash led by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. In more recent years, Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair charted a course toward what he called “A Third Way”, but Blair’s political fortunes waned when he supported the U.S.-led war in Iraq. His successor, Gordon Brown, lost the election of 2010, when no party won a majority in Parliament, forcing a coalition government between the Conserva-

tives and Liberal Democrats. Modern Britain, then, is adjusting to a new level of world power, and is trying to find the right balance between the benefits of the welfare state and the trend toward greater reliance on a market economy.

### Political Culture

“This fortress built by Nature for herself,  
Against infection and the hand of war,  
This happy breed of men, this little world,  
This precious stone set in the silver sea,  
Which serves it in the office of a wall,  
Or as a moat defensive to a house,  
Against the envy of less happier lands;  
This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England.”

*Richard II*  
William Shakespeare

This famous quote tells us a great deal about the political culture of Great Britain. It reflects a large amount of **nationalism**, or pride in being English. It also reflects **insularity**, or the feeling of separation from the continent of Europe. In modern times, insularity has caused Britain to have a cautious attitude toward participation in the European Union. When most of the EU members accepted the euro as a common currency in January 2002, Britain refused, and instead kept the English pound. However, despite Shakespeare’s joy in this “fortress” state, his country has been far from isolated and has spread its influence around the world.

Other characteristics of the political culture include:

- **Noblesse oblige and social class** – Although the influence of social class on political attitudes is not as strong as it has been in the past, a very important tradition in British politics is *noblesse oblige*, the duty of the upper classes to take responsibility for the welfare of the lower classes. The custom dates to feudal times when lords protected their serfs and land in return for labor. Today, *noblesse oblige* is reflected in the general willingness of the British to accept a “**welfare state**,” in-

cluding the National Health Service. The welfare state gained support in many other European nations in the period after World War II, with a common acceptance of the government's responsibility to provide public benefits, such as education, health care, and transportation. However, during the 1980s, Margaret Thatcher's government brought Britain's acceptance of the welfare state into question by cutting social services significantly. *Noblesse oblige* also supported the building of Britain's colonial empire as the country extended its paternalism to overseas possessions.

- **Multi-nationalism** – Although Britain has a relatively large amount of **cultural homogeneity**, its boundaries include England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, all of which have been different nations in the past, but are united under one government today. Although English is a common language, it is spoken with different dialects, and religious differences between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland remain



#### BRITAIN: THE INFLUENCES OF GEOGRAPHY

England's geographic features have shaped its political culture through the years. Important features include:

- **An island** – Britain is far enough away from mainland Europe for protection as long as it has had a good navy. Yet the island is close enough to the mainland to allow interaction.
- **Small size** – As a result, its resources are limited. This geographical fact shaped its efforts to colonize other lands and become an imperial power.
- **A short supply of fertile soil, short growing season** – Britain's ability to feed its population is limited as a result.
- **Temperate climate, but cold, chilly, and rainy** – Britain's population density is one of the highest in the world, but population distribution is uneven, with considerably fewer people living in northern areas.
- **No major geographical barriers** – No large mountains, deserts, or raging rivers hamper transportation/communication within the country.

a major source of conflict today. These national identities are still strong today, and they greatly impact the way that the political system functions.

The legitimacy of the British government is evidenced by the willingness of the English people to obey the law. Britain's police force is smaller than that of most other advanced democracies, and crimes tend to be based on individual violence, and not on strikes against the state, such as assassinations. Until relatively recently, the only notable exception was Northern Ireland, where many crimes have been carried out with the political objective of overturning an elected government. In more recent years, Britain has experienced terrorist acts as part of the larger wave of terrorism that has swept over many advanced democracies in the post-9/11 world.

### **POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC CHANGE**

Political change in Britain has always been characterized by its gradual nature. **Gradualism** in turn established strong traditions. This process helps to explain the transition in policymaking power from the king to Parliament. That transition may be traced to the days shortly after William the Conqueror defeated Harold II at the Battle of Hastings in 1066. In order to ensure his claims to English lands, William (a Norman) gathered support from the nobility by promising to consult them before he taxed them. This arrangement led to a gradual acceptance of a "House of Lords", and as commercialism created towns and a new middle class, eventually the establishment of a "House of Commons". Both were created through evolution, not revolution. Of course, there are important "marker events" that demonstrate the growing power of Parliament – the signing of the Magna Carta, the English Civil War, and the Glorious Revolution – but the process was gradual and set strong traditions as it developed.

Despite the overall pattern of gradualism, Britain's political system has had to adjust to internal economic changes, as well as international crises. Some sources of change have been the Industrial Revolution, imperialistic aspirations, the two world wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the economic crises of the 1970s and 2008. These events have had significant consequences for Britain's political system.

## Adjusting to the Industrial Revolution

The Industrial Revolution that began in England during the late 18<sup>th</sup> century created two new social classes that were not accommodated under the parliamentary system: a business middle class and laborers. At first, Parliament resisted including them, thinking that it might lead to disaster, perhaps even a revolution like the one that France had in 1789. However, the tradition of gradualism guided the decision to incorporate the new elements into the political system. The decision is a reflection of *noblesse oblige*, an extension of elite obligations to the rest of the population. Starting in 1832, the franchise gradually broadened:

### Extension of Voting Rights and Work and Welfare Reforms

- **Great Reform Act of 1832** – About 300,000 more men gained the right to vote, and the House of Commons gained more power in relation to the House of Lords.
- **Reform Act of 1867** – The electorate reached 3,000,000, as many working-class people were given the right to vote.
- **Representation of the People Act of 1884** – The electorate was further expanded so that the majority of the voters were working class.
- **Women's suffrage** – In 1918, another Representation of the People Act enfranchised all males and women over the age of 30 who already had the right to vote in local elections. 8,400,000 women were enfranchised. By 1928, all women 21 and over were allowed to vote.

The gradual inclusion of the people in the political process meant that Marxism did not take root as it did in many other European countries, where the middle and lower classes had few political rights.

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, labor unions formed to protect workers' rights on the job. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, some basic provisions were made for social services. For example, in 1870, mandatory elementary

education was put into law. From 1906 until 1914, laws were enacted providing for old age pensions.

### **Political Effects of the Extension of Rights to the “Common Man”**

The balance of power between the House of Commons and the House of Lords changed slowly but surely, as the new commercial elites became Members of Parliament. By 1911, the House of Lords was left with only one significant power – to delay legislation. The House of Commons was clearly the dominant legislative house by the early 20th century. By then political party membership was determined largely by class lines. The **Labour Party** was created in 1906 to represent the rights of the newly-enfranchised working man, and the Conservative Party drew most of its members from middle-class merchants and businessmen.

With the enfranchisement of the working class, a demand for welfare measures put pressure on the political system to change. Reform measures were passed by Parliament, including legislation for public education, housing, jobs, and medical care. These demands supported the creation of a new party – Labour. By the end of World War I, Labour had pushed the Liberals into third party status where they have remained ever since. Labour was never Marxist, but it combined militant trade unionism with intellectual social democracy to create a pragmatic, gradualist ideology that sought to level class differences in Britain. The **Trade Union Council** emerged as a coalition of trade unions that became a major force in British politics. The British labor movement has always been tough and especially resentful of being treated like inferiors. That militancy carries through to today, although it was softened in recent years by party leaders Neil Kinnock, John Smith, Tony Blair, Gordon Brown, and Ed Miliband. Many speculate that the selection of left-leaning Jeremy Corbyn as the Labour Party leader in 2015 indicates a redirection of the party back to its roots.

### **Reacting to the Loss of Its Status as an Imperialist Power**

In contrast to World War I, when physical destruction was limited to the front lines around the trenches on the Continent, the nature of warfare during World War II brought much more widespread damage

to Britain. German bombing raids decimated roads, bridges, public buildings, and homes, and Britain had many war debts. Although the economic aid by the United States-sponsored Marshall Plan eventually aided economic recovery in Britain, an important price that the country paid was the loss of many of its colonies in Africa and Asia. In most cases, Britain helped the colonies to prepare for independence, and as a result retained economic and political bonds to them, which contributed to Britain's eventual economic recovery. However, because other European powers were also letting their colonies go because they could no longer afford to maintain them, World War II marks the collapse of the old imperialist order and the beginning of the global hegemony of the United States and the Soviet Union. Britain, then, had to adjust to its new place in world politics, and since then, has had to balance its relationship with the United States against a history-ridden relationship with the European continent. This new reality has shaped British foreign policy through to the present.

### Collective Consensus

Britain joined the allied forces during World War II under the leadership of Winston Churchill. Churchill emphasized the importance of putting class conflicts aside for the duration of the war. Although he gained the Prime Minister's post as leader of the Conservative Party, he headed an all-party coalition government with ministers from both major parties. The primary objective was to win the war. After the war was over, the spirit of **collective consensus** continued until well into the 1960s, with both Labour and Conservative Parties supporting the development of a modern welfare system. Before the war was over, both parties accepted the **Beveridge Report**, which provided for a social insurance program that made all citizens eligible for health, unemployment, pension, and other benefits. One goal of the Beveridge Report was to guarantee a subsistence income to every British citizen. In 1948, the **National Health Service** was created under the leadership of the Labour Party. Even when Conservatives regained control in 1950, the reforms were not repealed. Although the electorate was divided largely by social class, with 70% of working class voting Labour and even larger percentages of middle class voting Conservative, both parties shared a broad consensus on the necessity of the welfare state. As a result, the foundations were laid for a **mixed economy**,

with the government directing the economy and nationalizing major industries without giving up basic principles of capitalism, such as private ownership of property.

### **Challenges to the Collective Consensus since 1970**

During the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, Britain has experienced considerable economic and political turmoil. The era began with a serious decline in the economy, followed by a growing divide between the Labour and Conservative Parties. Labour took a sharp turn to the left, endorsing a socialist economy and serving as a mouthpiece for labor union demands. The Conservatives answered with a sharp turn to the right, advocating denationalization of industries and support for a pure market economy. During the 1990s, both parties moderated their stances, and the economy showed some signs of recovery.

### **Economic Crises of the 1970s**

The collective consensus began to break apart with social and economic problems beginning in the late 1960s. Britain's economic problems included declining industrial production and international influence, which were exaggerated by the loss of colonies and the shrinking of the old empire. The impact of OPEC (Organization for Petroleum Exporting Countries) was devastating. The quadrupling of oil prices and the embargo by oil-producing countries caused recession, high unemployment rates, a drop in the GNP, and inflation.

The economic problems led labor unions to demand higher wages, and crippling strikes – such as the coal strike of 1972-73 – plagued the nation. The Labour Party lost membership, and many voters turned to the Liberals, the Conservatives, or the various nationalist parties. Many middle-class voters reacted against Labour, and the Conservatives selected Margaret Thatcher as their leader. Her very conservative stance on political and economic issues was appealing enough to sweep the Conservatives to power in 1979.

### **Thatcherism**

**Margaret Thatcher** blamed the weakened economy on the socialist policies set in place by the government after World War II. Her poli-

cies were further influenced by a distinct turn toward leftist politics by the Labour Party that gave a great deal of power to labor unions. In response, she privatized business and industry, cut back on social welfare programs, strengthened national defense, got tough with labor unions, and returned to market force controls on the economy. Her policies reflect the influence of **neoliberalism**, a term that describes the revival of classic liberal values (p. 33) that support low levels of government regulation, taxation, and social expenditures as well as the protection of individual property rights. She was prime minister for eleven years. Her supporters believed her to be the capable and firm “**Iron Lady**”, but her critics felt that her policies made economic problems worse and that her personality further divided the country. Thatcher resigned from office in 1990 when other Conservative Party leaders challenged her authority. Despite the controversial nature of her leadership, her policies redirected Britain’s path to the welfare state, and although her successors moderated her stances, privatization and downsizing of government have remained important trends in policymaking.

### **The Third Way and the “Big Society”**

After the jolts of the economic crisis of the 1970s and Margaret Thatcher’s firm redirection of the political system to the right, moderation again became characteristic of political change in Britain. Thatcher’s hand-picked successor, **John Major**, at first followed her policies, but later abolished the poll tax, reconciled with the European Union, and slowed social cutbacks and privatization. The Conservative Party retained the majority in the 1993 parliamentary elections, but only by a very slim margin. Then, in 1997, Labour’s gradual return to the center was rewarded with the election of **Tony Blair**, who promised to create a “New Labour” Party and rule in a “**third way**” – a centrist alternative to the old Labour Party on the left and the Conservative Party on the right. Tony Blair’s popularity slipped sharply after he supported the United States in the Iraq War in 2003. By sending troops and publicly committing his support to U.S. President George Bush, he not only alienated other European leaders, but much of the British public as well. In 2007, Blair stepped down from his post to be replaced by long-time cabinet member **Gordon Brown**, who despite his attempts to step out from the shadow of his controversial predecessor, had a

great deal of trouble convincing the British public to remain loyal to the Labour Party. The economic recession of 2008 hit Britain particularly hard, making it even more difficult for Brown to maintain control of the government.

By the election of 2010, the “third way” was in trouble, and challenges to Labour control of government were abundant. Although Labour went down to defeat, the Conservatives could not muster a majority, and so a coalition government was formed between the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats. The new prime minister, **David Cameron**, initiated his vision of a “**Big Society**,” one that is energized by grass-roots volunteers and private organizations, no longer harnessed by “big government.” In 2015, the Conservative Party regained its majority in the House of Commons, as both the Labour Party and the Liberal Democratic Party lost a significant number of seats.

### CITIZENS, SOCIETY, AND THE STATE

In many ways, Britain is a homogeneous culture. English is spoken by virtually all British citizens, and only about 13% of the United Kingdom’s 64 million people are ethnic minorities. For much of British history, the major **social cleavages** that shape the way the political system worked were based on multi-national identities, social class distinctions, and the Protestant/Catholic split in Northern Ireland. In recent years a major cleavage has developed based on race and ethnicity, with tensions regarding Muslim minorities increasing, as evidenced in race riots in May 2001 in the northern town of Oldham, and similar disturbances in Burnley, Leeds, and Bradford a few weeks later. In more recent years, terrorist activities have deepened the divisions, a situation that many advanced democracies of Europe and North America now face.

#### Multi-National Identities

The “United Kingdom” evolved from four different nations: England, Wales, Scotland, and part of Ireland. England consists of the southern 2/3 of the island, and until the 16<sup>th</sup> century, did not rule any of the other lands. By the 18<sup>th</sup> century, England ruled the entire island, and became known as “Great Britain.” In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Northern Ireland

was added, creating the "United Kingdom." These old kingdoms still have strong national identities that greatly impact the British political system.

- **England** – The largest region of Great Britain is England, which also contains the majority of the population. Throughout most of the history of the British Isles, the English have dominated other nationalities, and they still have a disproportionate share of political power. Today the challenge is to integrate the nationalities into the country as a whole, but at the same time allow them to keep their old identities.
- **Wales** – west of England – became subject to the English king in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and has remained so till the present. Modern Welsh pride is reflected in the flag – the **Plaid Cymru** – and in the fact that the language is still alive and currently being taught in some Welsh schools. Even though Wales accepted English authority long ago, some resentment remains, as well as some feelings of being exploited by their richer neighbors.
- **Scotland** – For many years the Scots resisted British rule, and existed as a separate country until the early 1600s. Ironically, Scotland was not joined to England through conquest, but through intermarriage of the royalty. When Queen Elizabeth I died without an heir in 1603, the English throne went to her nephew James I, who also happened to be king of Scotland. A century later both countries agreed to a single Parliament in London. However, Scots still have a strong national identity, and tend to think of themselves as being very different from the English. The Scots too have their own national flag, and the Scottish Parliament has recently been revived. In 2015, a vote for Scottish Independence was narrowly defeated.
- **Northern Ireland** – England and Ireland have a long history of arguing about religion. After Oliver Cromwell won the English Civil War in the mid 17<sup>th</sup> century, he tried to impose Protestantism on staunchly Catholic Ireland to no avail. English claims to Irish lands were settled shortly after World War I ended, when Ireland was granted **home rule**, with the ex-

ception of its northeast corner, where Protestants outnumbered Catholics by about 60% to 40%. Home rule came largely because of pressure from the **Irish Republican Army (the IRA)**, who used guerrilla warfare tactics to convince the British to allow Irish independence. Finally, in 1949, the bulk of Ireland became a totally independent country, and Northern Ireland has remained under British rule, but not without a great deal of conflict between Protestants and Catholics.

### Social Class Distinctions

Distinctions between rich and poor have always been important in Britain, with the most important distinction today being between working and middle-class people. The two classes are not easily divided by income, but psychologically and subjectively, the gulf between them is still wide. German sociologist Ralf Dahrendorf explains the divide in terms of **solidarity**, particularly among the working class. The point



**The British Settlement with Ireland, 1922.** In December 1922, after intense guerilla warfare in Ireland, the Irish parliament sitting in Dublin proclaimed the existence of the Irish Free State, a self-governing dominion which included all of Ireland except the six northern counties of Ulster, where Protestants outnumbered Catholics by about 60% to 40%. These counties formed Northern Ireland, which still sends representatives to the British Parliament.

is that keeping the old job and living in the old neighborhood – the sense of family and friends – is more important than individual success.

British social classes have traditionally been reinforced by the education system. “**Public schools**” were originally intended to train boys for “public life” in the military, civil service, or politics. They are expensive, and they have educated young people to continue after their parents as members of the ruling elite. A large number of Britain’s elite have gone to “public” boarding schools such as Eton, Harrow, Rugby, St. Paul’s, and Winchester. Middle-class students commonly attend private grammar schools, where students wear uniforms but do not reside. The percentage of British seventeen-year-olds that are still in school is lower than in many other industrialized democracies. However, the leaving age for compulsory education was raised from 16 to 18 by the Education and Skills Act of 2008. The change took effect in 2013 for 16-year-olds and 2015 for 17-year-olds.

The most important portal to the elite classes is through Oxford and Cambridge Universities, or **Oxbridge**. Nearly half of all Conservative Members of Parliament went to Oxbridge, as have about one quarter of all Labour MPs. Percentages in cabinet positions are even higher, and prime ministers almost always graduate from one or the other school. Since World War II, more scholarships have been available to Oxbridge, so that more working and middle-class youths may attend the elite schools. Also, the number of other universities has grown, so that higher education is more widespread than before. However, this trend was recently challenged, since Parliament raised the maximum level of tuition to English universities from \$5,400 to \$14,500 in 2012, making higher education less accessible to many students.

### **Ethnic Minorities**

According to the 2011 census, about 13% of the British population is of non-European origins, with most coming from countries that were formerly British colonies. However, most members of the minority ethnic population grew rapidly, increasing from about 7% in the 2001 census. The main groups are:

- black/African/Caribbean/black British 3%
- Asian/Asian British: Indian 2.3%,
- Asian/Asian British: Pakistani 1.9%,
- mixed 2%,
- other 3.7%

Because of tight immigration restrictions in the past, most ethnic minorities are young, with about half of the population under the age of 25. Percentages of minorities have grown despite the restrictions that were placed on further immigration during the Thatcher administration of the 1980s. The Labour government kept the restrictions in place, and the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government pledged to halve net immigration, which was about 200,000 people in 2010. Since it cannot curb arrivals from the European Union, that almost certainly means a cutback on non-Europeans.

The British have often been accused of adjusting poorly to their ethnic population. Reports abound of unequal treatment by the police and physical and verbal harassment by citizens. The May 2001 race riots in several cities increased tensions, and new fears of strife have been stoked by post 9/11 world politics. Widespread rioting in the summer of 2011 was triggered when a young black man was killed by the police, leading to accusations of racial bias. Today there is some evidence that whites are leaving London to settle in surrounding suburban areas, resulting in a higher percentage of minority population living in London. Despite this segregation, the mixed-race population appears to be increasing, with the census of 2001 offering for the first time in British history a category for mixed-race people.

#### Muslim Minorities

Terrorist attacks, successful and attempted, have occurred in Britain over the past few years, with a major attack in 2005, schemes foiled by the government in the summer of 2006, and car-bombings in 2007. Other advanced democracies have suffered attacks and plots as well. Of course, the United States was attacked on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, and the Madrid bombings in 2004 were Europe's most lethal terrorist

incidents. In Canada 17 people were arrested in June 2007 on suspicion of scheming to blow up buildings.

In recent years, concern about radicalized British Muslims has increased as some have joined extremist groups, such as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The British government estimates that 500 or more British men and women have gone to fight for militant groups in Iraq and Syria. The 2014 beheading of American journalist James Foley drew renewed attention to the dangers posed by radicalized young British Muslims, and the government turned to anti-extremist imams for help to prevent their followers from adopting radical views.

Although many European countries face these problems, Britain's risk for home-grown terrorist attacks may be greater than many other countries. Several problems for Britain are:

- **Distinct minority/majority cleavages** – Muslims have an identity of being a minority distinct from a well-established majority, such as the English in Britain, the French in France, and the Germans in Germany. In contrast, many people in the United States are immigrants, and the “majority” ethnicity of white Americans in many U.S. cities has already become a minority. With so many different ethnic and racial identities, the majority identity in the United States is not as clear-cut as it is in most European countries.
- **Social class differences of Muslims** – In the United States, many Muslims tend to be relatively well-off, while many British Muslims are disaffected and unemployed. Many British Muslims are the children of illiterate workers who entered as cheap industrial labor, and their childhood experiences have not endeared them to British culture.
- **Pakistani Muslims** – Many Muslims in the rest of Europe came from Turkey and Africa, but the largest group of British Muslims comes from Pakistan. Since Osama bin Laden and his companions were found in Pakistan, some scholars think that a higher percentage of British Muslims are linked to al-Qaeda than are Muslims in other countries.

- **Lack of integration of minorities** – Polls suggest that alienation of minorities in Britain may be higher than it is in other countries because the national culture has not absorbed the groups into mainstream culture. This problem is apparent in France as well, where girls are not permitted to wear head scarves at school. In Britain they may attend classes in full *hijab*, but many minorities still feel as if they are treated as second-class citizens.

#### Immigrants from Eastern Europe and the Middle East

Another major change in British demographics is an influx of about one million immigrants from the eight central and eastern European countries that joined the European Union in 2004. Poles, who have made up about two-thirds of the newcomers, are now the largest group of foreign nationals in Britain, up from 13<sup>th</sup> place in 2004. The main draw has been better job opportunities in Britain than in eastern Europe, but the recession in 2008 led many newcomers to return home since the British job market withered. However, since the job market has been even worse in eastern Europe, at least some of the new workers stayed in Britain. Many are migrant workers who pick crops in rural areas or fill other low-paying jobs that British workers shun, although with unemployment rates going up, the potential for labor conflict is real. By 2012, more than 130,000 immigrants from Romania and Bulgaria were living in Britain, and the numbers of immigrants coming from these two countries is continuing to grow.

In 2015, as the civil war in Syria intensified, refugees poured out of the country and into Europe. The exodus created a crisis in Europe, and the British reaction was criticized by many. Britain did not accept quotas set by the European Union, but instead came up with a separate policy. In September 2015, the prime minister announced the government's decision to accept 20,000 refugees from camps neighboring Syria, but none who have already travelled to Europe, sparking intense debate about the appropriate response to the refugee crisis. According to Prime Minister Cameron, the refugee crisis "complicates" the issue of whether or not Britain will remain in the European Union.

### Political Beliefs and Values

In the early 1960s political scientists Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba wrote that the “**civic culture**” (political culture) in Britain was characterized by trust, deference to authority and competence, pragmatism, and harmony. The economic crisis of the 1970s and the continuing conflicts regarding Northern Ireland challenged this view of citizenship in Britain, as have fears of terrorism in recent years. However, the overall characteristics seem to still be in place today.

British citizens reflect what Almond and Verba saw as good qualities for democratic participation: high percentages of people that vote in elections, acceptance of authority, tolerance for different points of view, and acceptance of the rules of the game. However, social and economic changes during the 1970s altered these characteristics so that today British citizens are less supportive of the collective consensus and more inclined to values associated with a free market economy. Many observers believe that the “**politics of protest**” – or the tendency to disagree openly and sometimes violently with the government – have become increasingly acceptable. The rioting in 2011 confirmed this analysis, although the reasons for the riots are far from clear.

Some manifestations of changing political beliefs and values include:

- **Decreasing support for labor unions** – British labor unions have strong roots in the Industrial Revolution, and class solidarity supports union membership. However, when unions staged crippling strikes during the 1970s, public opinion turned against them, as people began to view unions as “bullies” to both the government and the general population. Margaret Thatcher’s tough stance against the unions intensified strife between unions and the Conservative government.
- **Increased violence regarding Northern Ireland** – The issues surrounding British claims to Northern Ireland intensified during the early 1970s after British troops killed thirteen Catholics in a “bloody Sunday” incident in January 1972. The IRA

and Protestant paramilitaries stepped up their campaigns of violence. Although in recent years the groups have consented to negotiate with the government, the threat of violent eruptions remains strong today.

- **Thatcherism** – The Conservative Party controlled British government from 1979 until 1997. Although later modified by Prime Minister John Major, Margaret Thatcher's "revolution" toward a free market economy certainly affected political attitudes. She rejected collectivism and its emphasis on the redistribution of resources from rich to poor and government responsibility for full employment. Thatcherism fostered entrepreneurial values of individualism and competition over the solidarity of social classes and the tradition of *noblesse oblige*.
- **New Labour** – Despite the radical changes of the 1970s and 1980s, Britain has not deserted its traditional political culture. **Tony Blair** led a Labour Party that loosened its ties to labor unions, and a new "Good Friday" Agreement on Northern Ireland was reached in 1998. Thatcherism has been incorporated into political attitudes, but in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, both parties are more inclined toward a middle path, or "**third way**." The coalition government formed in 2010, at first criticized as unworkable, also encouraged compromise, although significant differences of opinion existed among cabinet members. The election of 2015 left the Labour Party much weakened, and the choice of left-leaning Jeremy Corbyn as the party leader may represent a move away from the "third way."
- **Protests over the Iraq War** – Not only did ordinary citizens vocally protest Britain's involvement in the Iraq War, many political leaders openly criticized it as well. In a political system where party loyalty is valued above all, many Labour MPs (Members of Parliament) withdrew their support for Blair's policy in Iraq. Their resistance to the party leadership extended to the cabinet, with several party leaders resigning their posts, despite the strong tradition of collective consensus. The ill will spread into domestic affairs as well, so that Blair had little choice but to resign from office in June 2007.

### Voting Behavior

As in most other European countries, a relatively high percentage of qualified British voters go to the polls. Although there was a notable decline in recent elections (66% voted in 2015) more than 70% of eligible citizens normally vote in parliamentary elections. Today voters have less party loyalty than they once did, but voting behavior is still clearly tied to social class and region.

- **Social class** – Until World War II, voting in Britain largely followed class lines. The working class supported the Labour Party, and the middle class voted Conservative. However, today the lines of distinction are blurred, partly because the society and the parties themselves have changed. For example, some middle-class people who grew up in working-class homes still vote the way their parents did. On the other hand, many in the working classes have been attracted to the Conservative platform to cut taxes and keep immigrants out. In recent years, both parties have come back to the center from the extreme views of the 1970s and 1980s, as reflected in Labour leader Tony Blair's program to provide a "third way," or a centrist alternative. However, the Labour victories of 1997, 2001 and 2005 showed that the party was strongest among people who feel disadvantaged: the Scots, the Welsh, and the poor. In the post-Blair years, the distinctions between Labour and Conservative Parties have continued to blur, leaving room for other parties, particularly the Liberal Democrats, to compete for votes in all social classes.
- **Regional factors** – The Labour Party usually does well in urban and industrial areas and in Scotland and Wales. However, in 2015, Labour lost seats to the Scottish National Party, with SNP picking up 56 of the 59 seats in Scotland. The industrial cities of the north – around Liverpool, Manchester, and Newcastle, and in Yorkshire – almost always support the Labour candidates, as do people that vote in central London. The areas where Conservatives usually win are mostly in England, especially in rural and suburban areas. These voting patterns

are tied to social class, but they also reflect urban vs. rural values.

## POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS

Strong political traditions and institutions that have been in place for hundreds of years guide Britain's stable democratic regime. The monarch still rules as head of state, but the prime minister and the cabinet form the policymaking center. The system is **parliamentary**, which means that the prime minister and cabinet ministers are actually members of the legislature. In this section, we will explore the parts of the British political system and the ways that they interact to make policy.

### Linkage Institutions

Linkage institutions play a very important role in British government and politics. Political parties, interest groups, and print and electronic media have long connected the government to British citizens. The British government's policymaking activities are complex, and its linkage institutions are well developed.

### Political Parties

Britain's political parties began to form in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and their organization and functions have shaped the development of many other party systems (including the United States) through the years. At first they were simply **caucuses**, or meetings of people from the same area or of like mind. Only in the 19<sup>th</sup> century did a two-party system emerge with roots in the electorate. The labels "**Whig**" and "**Tory**" first appeared under Charles II, with the Tories supporting the king and the Whigs opposing. Both were derisive names: Whigs were Scottish bandits; Tories, Irish bandits. The Whigs eventually became the Liberal Party and the Tories (still a nickname today) the Conservatives. The Labour Party emerged in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in response to new voter demands created by the Industrial Revolution.

Today the two major political parties are **Labour** and **Conservative**, but several other significant parties are represented in Parliament. Historically, Britain has had strong third parties that significantly affect

election results. For example, in the 1980s, the **Liberal Democratic Alliance Party** garnered as much as 26% of the popular vote, but because of Britain's single-member plurality election system (one member per district who only has to get more votes than anyone else, not a majority), it never claimed more than 62 seats in the House of Commons. The House of Commons is dominated by the two largest parties, but three or four-way elections for MPs are usual. The 2010 parliamentary elections resulted in an unusual, but not unprecedented, **hung parliament**, in which no party gained a majority and a coalition government formed. The Conservative Party recaptured the majority in the 2015 elections, winning 330 seats.

### *The Labour Party*

The largest party on the left is the Labour Party. It controlled the British government between 1997, when **Tony Blair** became prime minister, and 2010, when Labour ceded power to a coalition government. The party began in 1906 as an alliance of trade unions and socialist groups that were strengthened by the expansion of rights for the working class during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Traditionally, labor unions have provided most party funds, although Blair loosened the union ties and sought to broaden the base of party membership.

The early history of the party was defined partially by the controversial "**Clause 4**" that called for nationalization of the "**commanding heights**" of British industry. The growing moderation of the party was reflected by the removal of the clause from the Labour Party Constitution in the early 1990s. The shift in policies toward the center became apparent shortly after **Neil Kinnock** became the party leader in the early 1980s, and has continued under leaders **John Smith** (1993-1994), **Tony Blair** (1994-2007), **Gordon Brown** (2007-2010), and **Ed Miliband** (2010 to 2015). After Labour's serious losses in 2015, Miliband resigned, and many predict that the new leader, Jeremy Corbyn, may reverse the party's move toward moderation.

Labour's 1992 loss in an election that they were widely predicted to win almost certainly was a turning point in its development. Its failure to capture the majority led to the resignation of Neil Kinnock as party leader, and the appointment of John Smith, a moderate Scotsman

who the party hoped would solidify support from Scottish nationalist groups. Smith died suddenly in 1994, and was replaced by Tony Blair, a young leader who did not come from union ranks. Instead, he was an Oxford educated barrister-turned-politician who hoped to bring more intellectuals and middle-class people into the party. Labour won the elections of 1997, 2001, and 2005, and tried to redefine itself as a moderate party with support from many different types of voters. Even though the party won the 2005 election, its margin of victory was much smaller than before, contributing to Blair's resignation as party leader in 2007.

Labour's prospects for the future continued to fall after Britons in the local elections across England in June 2009 gave the party only 23% of the vote, its worst showing ever and well behind the opposition Conservatives' 38%. In the elections for the European Parliament on the same day, Labour won less than 16% of the vote. Labour lost the election of 2010, and Gordon Brown resigned, leaving the party leadership to **Ed Miliband**, whose political preferences were left of center. As the coalition government formed between the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats, the Labour Party was left to struggle to regain voter support. The party's losses in the election of 2015 reinforced its waning influence.

#### *The Conservative Party*

The Conservative Party dominated British politics between World War II and 1997, holding the majority in Parliament for all but sixteen years during that period. The Conservative Party is the main party on the right, but it has prospered partly because it traditionally has been a pragmatic, rather than an ideological party. Although the party supported a market-controlled economy, privatization, and fewer social welfare programs during the 1980s under the leadership of Margaret Thatcher, the Conservatives moved back toward the center under Prime Minister John Major (1990-1997).

The party is characterized by *noblesse oblige*, and its power is centered in London. The organization of the party is usually viewed as elitist, with the MPs choosing the party leadership. No formal rules for choosing their leader existed until recently, but now the leadership

must submit to annual leadership elections. This new process proved to be problematic for Margaret Thatcher in 1990, when she was challenged strongly in the election and virtually forced to resign.

After Labour seized control of the government in 1997, the Conservative Party was weakened by deep divisions between two groups:

- **The traditional wing (one-nation Tories)** values *noblesse oblige* and wants the country ruled by an elite that takes everybody's interests into account before making decisions. This wing generally supports Britain's membership in the European Union.
- **The Thatcherite wing** of strict conservatives wants to roll back government controls and move to a full free market. The members of this wing are often referred to as **Euroskeptics** because they see the EU's move toward European integration as a threat to British sovereignty.

The current party leader and prime minister is **David Cameron**, who won the position in December 2005. Cameron's youth and debating ability, as well as Tony Blair's vulnerability as Labour leader, revived the Conservative Party's hope of recapturing the majority. During 2006 and early 2007 the party established a lead in opinion polls, but with Blair's resignation and the rise of **Gordon Brown** to the prime minister's post, Labour regained its lead in major polls during the summer of 2007. However, with Brown's growing unpopularity during 2008, the Conservatives again gained support and were well positioned for the election in 2010. Cameron has generally been more of a "one-nation" Tory, and at first he distanced himself from the Thatcherite wing, but by 2009 his words were more conciliatory as he hoped to unite his party for victory in the election of 2010. When his party won a plurality, but not a majority of seats, Cameron became prime minister of a coalition government formed with the Liberal Democrats, with **Nick Clegg** – the Liberal Democrat leader – serving as deputy prime minister. The party regained its majority in 2015, extending Cameron's leadership for another few years.



### COMPARISON: LABOUR AND CONSERVATIVE PARTIES IN BRITAIN

#### LABOUR PARTY

Main party on the left; began as an alliance of trade unions and socialist groups; have moved toward the center since the 1990s; was the majority party from 1997 until 2010; generally more supportive of EU membership

#### CONSERVATIVE PARTY

Main party on the right; split between the traditional wing (*noblesse oblige*) and "Thatcherites" who want to roll back government controls and move to a full free market; tend to see EU as threat to British sovereignty

### *The Liberal Democrats*

Two parties – the Liberals and the Social Democrats – formed an alliance in the 1983 and 1987 elections, and formally merged in 1989, establishing the Liberal Democratic Party. The goal was to establish a strong party in the middle as a compromise to the politics of the two major parties: Thatcher's extremely conservative leadership and Labour's leftist views and strategies. The party won an impressive 26% of the votes in 1983, but because of the single member district **plurality voting system** (see the section on Elections, p. 128) in Britain, it only won 23 seats (3.5%). Liberal Democrats have campaigned for **proportional representation**, which would give them an equal percentage of the MP seats, and for a **Bill of Rights** modeled after the first ten amendments of the U.S. Constitution.

The party's strength declined in the early 1990s as both the Conservative and Labour Parties moved to the center of political opinion, and in

the 1992 election the party picked up only about 17% of the total votes cast. The party held on, though, partly due to the popularity of its leader, Paddy Ashdown, and to some strong stands on the environment, health, and education. Ashdown retired in 1999, and was replaced by a Scottish MP, Charles Kennedy, and the Liberal Democrats picked up seven seats in the 2001 election. The party also benefited from public disillusionment with the Blair government's support for the war in Iraq when it picked up 11 more MPs in the election of 2005. In December 2007, party leadership passed to **Nick Clegg**, who criticized the Labour government for its erosion of individual civil liberties, a stand that the party has long supported. However, the party still remains tremendously underrepresented in Parliament, considering their relative popularity at the polls. After the 2005 elections, the Liberal Democrats had 62 MPs (out of 646), even though they won more than 22% of the vote. In 2010, the party won 23% of the vote, but only managed to capture 57 seats in the House of Commons. However, since no party won a majority, the Conservative leader, David Cameron, invited the Liberal Democrats to help form a coalition government, and Nick Clegg became deputy prime minister.

The formation of the coalition was controversial among long-time supporters of the party, with some criticizing Clegg for supporting the center-right policies of the Conservative Party. The coalition showed signs of stress, since the two parties took increasingly different positions on issues such as Britain's role in Europe – with Liberal Democrats generally being more supportive of the EU – and on reform of Britain's unelected upper house of parliament. The Liberal Democrats' poor showing in the election of 2015 forced Clegg's resignation, leaving the party seriously weakened.

#### *Other Parties*

Britain has many smaller parties including nationalist groups in Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland. **Plaid Cymru** in Wales and the **Scottish National Party** in Scotland both won seats in the House of Commons during the 1970s, and they have managed to virtually shut the Conservative Party out in the elections in their regions since the late 1990s. The parties' fortunes were strengthened after Labour's return to power in 1997, when the Blair leadership created regional assem-

blies for Scotland and Wales. However, Labour has been strong in the two regions, and the two parties combined won only nine seats in the House of Commons in 2010. The Scottish National Party surged in popularity in 2015, winning 56 of Scotland's 59 seats in Commons, largely at the expense of the Labour Party. The Plaid Cymru currently has 11 of 60 seats in the Welsh Assembly, and the Scottish National Party has 64 of 129 seats in the Scottish Parliament. Northern Ireland has always been dominated by regional parties, including **Sinn Fein** (the political arm of the IRA) and the **Democratic Unionist Party**, led by Protestant clergymen. Together they captured 12 parliamentary seats in 2015.

Two parties on the far right benefitted from the growing criticism of the Labour government before the 2010 election: the **British National Party**, and the **UK Independence Party**. The British National Party formed in 1982, but has never been represented in Parliament. Historically the BNP has been overtly anti-Semitic, but in recent years it has focused on ousting Muslims from Britain. During the 2010 General Election, the BNP received 1.9% of the vote and failed to win any seats. All three mainstream political parties in the UK openly condemn the BNP. The UK Independence Party has focused more on its opposition to British membership in the European Union. In the 2009 European elections, the BNP won two seats in the European Parliament, representing the first time that the party ever won in a national poll. The UKIP, which had previously held twelve seats in the European Parliament, picked up an extra seat, giving it a total of 13 (finally settling to 11 due to defections), which tied the number of seats that the Labour Party won. In the 2010 UK general election, the party polled 3.1% of the vote (up 0.9%). Despite being the fourth largest party in terms of vote share, UKIP failed to win any seats. In 2015, the party only won one seat in Parliament, but it picked up 12.6% of the vote, reflecting its growing popularity.

### Elections

The only national officials that British voters select are members of Parliament. The prime minister is not elected as prime minister but as an MP from a single electoral district, averaging about 65,000 registered voters. Elections must be held every five years, but traditionally, the

**BRITISH PARTIES: ELECTED MEMBERS  
IN PARLIAMENTS, 2015**

Party	UK House of Commons	Scottish Assembly	Assembly of Wales	Northern Ireland Assembly	European Parliament
Conservative	330	15	14	0	19
Labour	232	38	30	0	20
Liberal Democrats	8	5	5	0	1
Democratic Unionist	8	0	0	38	1
Scottish Nationalist	56	64	0	0	2
Sinn Fein	4	0	0	29	1
Plaid Cymru	3	0	11	0	1
UK Indepen- dence Party	1	0	0	0	24

**British Parliamentary Elections.** Regional differences are apparent in the chart above. Especially notable is the jump in support for the Scottish Nationalist Party in the UK House of Commons election in 2015. The SNP almost certainly benefited from the strong movement for Scottish independence in 2013-2014.

prime minister could call them earlier. Officially, elections occur after the Crown dissolves Parliament, but that always happens because the prime minister requests it. The power to call elections has always been very important, because the prime minister – as head of the majority party – always calls them when (s)he thinks that the majority party has the best chance of winning.

The **Fixed-term Parliaments Act of 2011** altered these traditions by introducing fixed-term elections to Parliament. Under the provisions of the Act, parliamentary elections must be held every five years, beginning in 2015. Fixed-term Parliaments, where general elections ordinarily take place in accordance with a schedule set far in advance, were part of the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition agreement that was produced after the 2010 general election. The act limits the

prime minister's power to call elections, except in the case of a vote of no confidence. An early election might also be called if 2/3 of the MPs vote to do so.

### *The Plurality Electoral System*

As in the United States, British parliamentary elections are "winner-take-all," with no runoff elections. Within this single-member plurality system, each party selects a candidate to run for each district post, although minor parties don't always run candidates in all districts. The person that wins the most votes gets the position, even if (s)he does not receive the majority of votes in the district. The British nickname for this system is "first-past-the-post" (like a race horse). Since MPs do not have to live in the districts that they represent, each party decides who runs in each district. So party leaders run from safe districts where the party almost always wins. Political neophytes are selected to run in districts that a party knows it will lose. They are usually happy to just make a good showing by receiving more votes than the party usually gets.

The "winner-take-all" system often exaggerates the size of the victory of the largest party and reduces the influence of minor parties. This system is the main reason that the Liberal Democrats have not been able to get a good representation in Parliament. Regional parties tend to fare better. For example, the Scottish National Party generally has a good chance of picking up districts in Scotland, as it did in 2015. However, Parliament still remains a two-party show, even though many other parties may get a sizeable number of votes. For example, in the election of 2005, the Labour party received 35.3% of the vote (not a majority), but they received 356 out of 646 seats (i.e., a majority). Likewise, in 2015, UKIP won 12.6% of the vote but only won one seat in Parliament.

In 2010, Liberal Democrats garnered 23% of the popular vote, but only won 57 of 650 seats in the House of Commons. This situation inspired Nick Clegg, the Liberal Democrat leader and deputy prime minister, to call for a referendum in May 2011, on an **alternate vote (AV)**, which would have allowed voters to rank candidates on the



### BRITISH GENERAL ELECTION, 2015

650 seats total

<b>Leader</b>	David Cameron	Ed Miliband	Nick Clegg
<b>Party</b>	Conservative	Labour	Liberal Democrat
<b>Seats before</b>	306	258	57
<b>Seats won</b>	330	232	8
<b>Seat change</b>	↑ 24	↓ 26	↓ 49
<b>Popular Vote</b>	11,334,576	9,347,304	2,415,862
<b>Percentage of popular vote</b>	36.9%	30.4%	7.9%

**The Effects of First-past-the-post Voting.** Even though the Conservative Party won only 36.9% of the vote, it still won a majority of the seats in the House of Commons. The Liberal Democratic Party won 7.9% of the popular vote, but only won 8 seats, whereas the Scottish Nationalist Party won only 4.7% of the popular vote but won 56 seats. The SNP vote was concentrated in the districts in Scotland, so they won a disproportionate number of seats, especially as compared to the Liberal Democratic Party, whose supporters were more spread out across the country.

ballot in order of preference. If after a first round no candidate had more than 50% of the votes, cast, the votes of the least popular candidate would be redistributed, following the second preferences indicated by supporters of that eliminated candidate. Rounds of redistribution continue until someone crosses the 50% line. Along with the Liberal Democrats, the Labour leader Ed Miliband supported the AV, but Conservatives and many Labour MPs opposed it. The referendum went down to decisive defeat, so national elections in Britain continue to follow the first-past-the-post model.

The election of 2015 reflected a strong surge in the popularity of the Scottish Nationalist Party, which captured 56 seats in the House of Commons. The feat eclipsed the Liberal Democratic Party's 8 seats, so that the SNP gained a larger presence in Parliament, especially as articulated by **Nicola Sturgeon**, the party's leader.

### *Elections for Regional Governments*

Some signs of change in the electoral system have emerged in very recent years. For example, in the **Good Friday Agreement** of April 1998, Britain agreed to give Northern Ireland a regional government in which all parties would be represented on a proportional basis. In other words, the religion-based parties would each have a percentage of representatives that matched the percentage of the total vote each received. According to later agreements with Scotland and Wales, their regional parliaments also are based on **proportional representation**. As a result, both bodies have often not had a clear majority party. However, the largest party in the Welsh Assembly after the election of 2011 was Labour, with 30 of 60 members. In the Welsh Assembly, the Plaid Cymru won 11 seats, and the Conservatives won 14. After the Scottish election of 2011, the Scottish National Party had 68 of 129 total members, with Labour at 37 and Conservatives at 15. Other changes have occurred on the local level, with the mayor of London now elected directly for the first time ever.

### *European Parliament Elections*

Britain participates in the elections to the European Parliament, which is the directly elected parliamentary institution of the European Union. The elections are held every five years by people of the EU's member-states. In 2014, 73 members were elected from Britain using proportional representation, with 19 seats going to the Conservatives, 24 to the UK Independence Party, and 20 to Labour. Most notable was the drop in support for Conservative Party candidates, with the UK Independence Party actually garnering more votes than any other party. The Scottish Nationalists won 2 seats, and the Liberal Democrats secured only 1 seat.

### U.S. vs. British Elections\*

United States	Britain
Parties are less powerful.	Party determines who runs where.
Members must live in districts.	Members usually don't live in their districts.
Party leaders run in their respective districts.	Party leaders run in "safe districts."
Individual votes for four officials on the national level.	Individual votes for only one official on the national level.
Between 30 and 60 percent of the eligible voters actually vote (more in recent elections)	About 70 percent of the eligible voters actually vote (less in 2001, 2005, 2010, and 2015).
Elections are by first-past-the-post single-member districts; almost no minor parties get representation.	Elections are by first-past-the-post, single-member districts; minor parties get some representation, but less than if they had proportional representation (regional elections in Ireland, Scotland and Wales use proportional representation).

\*Note: The Comparative AP Exam does not require knowledge of U.S. government, but this chart is intended to help students understand British elections.

### *Campaign Financing*

British campaigns for public office are much shorter and less expensive than those in the United States. However, in 2006 both major political parties were under police investigation for campaign financing. The two areas of investigation were the use of peerages (seats in the House of Lords) and the disclosure of non-commercial loans. In the first, parties were investigated for breaking a parliamentary act of 1925 that prohibited the offering of peerages in return for money. Secondly, parties were suspected of breaking a 2000 law, which requires parties to

disclose the benefits they derive from personal loans. In question were secret loans from wealthy well-wishers. The investigation increased the pressure on Tony Blair to step down as Labour leader.

### Interest Groups

Like most other advanced democracies, Britain has well-established interest groups that demonstrate **interest group pluralism** (pp. 71-72) with relatively autonomous groups competing with one another for influence in policymaking. British politics are also characterized by **neocorporatism**, in which interest groups take the lead and sometimes dominate the state. Perhaps the greatest influence of British interest groups comes through **quangos** (quasi-autonomous nongovernmental organizations), or policy advisory boards appointed by the government. Using a neocorporatist model, quangos, together with government officials develop public policy, working in different policy areas. Some simply advise on policy while others deliver public services. Quangos weakened while Margaret Thatcher was prime minister, and their numbers have declined even more during recent years. In recent years, a number of quangos have been abolished under Conservative plans to reduce the overall budget deficit. However, about a thousand still remain.

Not surprisingly, the most influential interest groups have been those linked to class and industrial interests. Between 1945 and 1979, business interests and trade unions fiercely competed for influence over the policymaking process. The powerful **Trade Unions Congress (TUC)**, which represents a coalition of unions, had a great deal of clout because the government often consulted them on important decisions. While no comparable single group represents business interests, they too had an open door to inner government circles. For example, in 1976, Chancellor of the Exchequer Denis Healy negotiated with TUC and the **Confederation of Business Industries (CBI)** to limit TUC's wage demands in exchange for 3% reduction in income tax rates. All of this changed when Margaret Thatcher took control in 1979. Thatcher wanted to reduce the power of interest groups in general, and she slammed the door shut on TUC. As labor unions lost public support, they also lost political sway, and the Labour Party loosened its ties to unions and began to broaden its voter base. Since Thatcher left

in 1990, interest groups have regained power, but the government has partnered not only with unions, but with businesses as well.

### The Role of the Media

Not surprisingly, British newspapers reflect social class divisions. They are sharply divided between quality news and comment that appeals to the middle and upper classes, and mass circulation tabloids that carry sensational news. Radio and television came to life during the collective consensus era, so originally they were monopolized by the **British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)**. The BBC sought to educate citizens, and it was usually respectful of government officials. Commercial television was introduced in the 1950s, and now there are five stations that compete, as well as cable. A variety of radio stations also exist. Despite the competition from private companies, the government strictly regulates the BBC and the commercial stations. For example, no advertisements may be sold to politicians, parties, or political causes.

### *BBC and Government Relations*

The BBC had a significant clash with the Blair government in 2003 over support for the war in Iraq. BBC reporter Andrew Gilligan wrote that a government statement that Iraqi forces could deploy weapons of mass destruction within 45 minutes was based on false intelligence that officials knew was unreliable. The conflict grew into a crisis when weapons inspector Michael Kelly (the alleged source of the "false intelligence") committed suicide. Tony Blair appointed appeals judge Lord Hutton to investigate the death, and the judge ended the crisis when he exonerated the Blair government in early 2004 and criticized the BBC for its reporting. The report prompted the chairman of the BBC board of governors to resign, an action that signaled an almost unprecedented embarrassment for the network.

Despite this disagreement, the Labour government continued to support the BBC with a license fee levied on any household in Britain with a television that receives broadcasts. This fee has allowed the BBC to maintain its large presence on television and the internet and to support BBC Worldwide, the corporation's commercial arm. The Conservatives have been critical of raising the license fee, and they

have advocated for a more transparent BBC, with full audits and expenditures published online.

### *Media Scandal of 2011*

An investigation into phone-hacking practices of major British tabloids led to the closing of one of Rupert Murdoch's most influential newspapers, *The News of the World*, in the summer of 2011. When it was discovered that the paper's employees hacked the cell phone of a murdered 13-year-old, the scandal snowballed as it became apparent that phone hacking was a common practice among the tabloids. Even though David Cameron called for an investigation, his own credibility was questioned, since his former media chief, Andy Coulson, who had been an editor for the Murdoch paper, was questioned and arrested by the police. The scandal escalated to include London's Metropolitan Police, who were charged with failing for years to fully investigate phone-hacking at *The News of the World*.

The scandal brought the relationship between government and the media into question, as revelations unfolded of political favoritism and coziness between media moguls and elected officials, as well as the tabloids' harassment and manipulation of government officials. For example, the *New York Times* reported on July 10, 2011, an incident in which a Labour member of Parliament criticized *The Sun* for its features of topless women that appeared regularly on Page 3 by saying, "I'd like to take the pornography out of our press." The paper responded with this headline: "Fat, Jealous Clare Brands Page 3 Porn", accompanied by a photograph of the MP's head over the body of a topless woman. Press regulation clearly came to the fore as an issue for the Cameron coalition government.

## THE INSTITUTIONS OF NATIONAL GOVERNMENT

Just like most other countries of the world today, the British government has three branches of government and a bureaucracy. Furthermore, the legislature is divided into two houses, a model that the British invented, and is now widely copied. However, their system is **parliamentary**, and the interactions among the branches are very different from those in a **presidential system**, such as in the United

States. In a parliamentary system, the executive branch is fused with the legislative branch because the prime minister and the cabinet are actually the leaders of parliament. As a result, separation of powers – a major principle of American government – does not exist. Also, the judicial branch lacks the power of judicial review, so it has no role in interpreting the “Constitution of the Crown”.

Britain is a **unitary state** with political authority centralized in London. Decisions made by the central government – both laws passed by Parliament and regulations prepared by the bureaucrats in Whitehall – are binding on all public agencies.

### **The Cabinet and the Prime Minister**

The cabinet consists of the prime minister and ministers, each of which heads a major bureaucracy of the government. Unlike the U.S. cabinet, the British cabinet members are party leaders from Parliament chosen by the prime minister. The **collective cabinet** is the center of policymaking in the British political system, and the prime minister has the responsibility of shaping decisions into policy. The cabinet does not vote, and all members publicly support the prime minister’s decisions. In other words, as the leaders of the majority party elected by the people, they take “**collective responsibility**” for making policy for the country. The unity of the cabinet is extremely important for the stability of the government.

The prime minister is the “**first among equals**”, but (s)he stands at the apex of the **unitary government**. Despite many recent changes, political authority in Britain is still centralized in the London-based government. The prime minister is not directly elected by the people, but is a member of Parliament and the leader of the majority party. In 2010, no majority party emerged from the election, so a coalition government formed with David Cameron, the Conservative leader, as prime minister, and Nick Clegg, the Liberal Democrat leader, as deputy prime minister. Since the system is designed to work with a clear majority party, the coalition cabinet had to incorporate the points of view of both parties in the coalition, and Labour and minor parties were left as the “loyal opposition.” After the Conservative Party regained the majority in 2015, the system returned to normal.

## COMPARATIVE EXECUTIVES\*

## PRIME MINISTER OF BRITAIN

## PRESIDENT OF THE U.S.

Serves only as long as he/she remains leader of the majority party/coalition

Elected every four years by an electoral college based on popular election

Elected as a member of Parliament

Elected as president

Has an excellent chance of getting his/her programs past Parliament

Has an excellent chance of ending up in gridlock with Congress

Cabinet members always MPs and leaders of the majority party/coalition

Cabinet members usually not from Congress (although they may be)

Cabinet members not experts in policy areas; rely on bureaucracy to provide expertise

Expertise in policy areas one criteria for appointment to cabinet; members head vast bureaucracies

\*Note: The Comparative AP Exam does not require knowledge of U.S. government, but this chart is intended to help students understand the British executive.

## The prime minister

- speaks legitimately for all members of Parliament
- chooses cabinet ministers and important subordinate posts
- makes decisions in the cabinet, with the agreement of the ministers
- campaigns for and represents the party in parliamentary elections

## Parliament

Although British government consists of three branches, little separation of powers exists between the cabinet and parliament. Like most other parliamentary systems, the executive and legislative branches are fused, largely because the leaders of the majority party in Parliament are also the cabinet members.

## The House of Commons

Even though Britain has multiple political parties, the House of Commons is based on the assumption that one party will get the majority number of seats, and another will serve as the "opposition." One way to look at it is that Britain has a multi-party system at the polls, but a two-party system in the House of Commons. Whichever party wins a plurality at the polls becomes the majority party, and the second party becomes the "**loyal opposition**".

### *Set-up of the House of Commons*

The House of Commons is set up with long benches facing one another with a table in between that is by tradition two-sword-lengths wide. The prime minister – who is elected as an MP like all the rest – sits on the front bench of the majority side in the middle. He or she becomes prime minister because the members of the majority party have made that selection. The majority party members may vote to change their leader, and the prime minister will change as a result. Right across from the prime minister sits the leader of the "opposition" party, whose members sit on benches facing the majority party. Between them is the table. Cabinet members sit on the front rows on the majority side, and the "**shadow cabinet**" faces them on the opposition side. On the back benches sit less influential MPs – the "**back-benchers**" – and MPs from other political parties sit on the opposition side, but at the end, far away from the table.

### *Debate*

The "**government**", then, consists of the MPs on the first rows of the majority party side, and they are the most important policymakers as long as they hold power. Debate in the House is usually quite spirited, especially once a week during **Question Time**. During the hour the prime minister and his cabinet must defend themselves against attack from the opposition, and sometimes from members of their own party. The **speaker of the house** presides over the debates. Unlike the



**House of Commons.** The chamber is small enough that it is crowded when all MPs are present. The majority party faces the opposition parties, with the prime minister sitting in front by the table with the leader of the opposition directly across – two sword lengths away.

speaker in the U.S. House of Representatives, the speaker is supposed to be objective and often is not a member of the majority party. The speaker's job is to allow all to speak, but not to let things get out of hand. (S)he often has to gavel MPs down that get too rowdy.

One reason that debate can be so intense is that the floor of Parliament is the place where MPs gain attention from others, possibly casting themselves as future leaders. Also, the opposition is seen as the "check" on the majority party, since checks and balances between branches do not exist.

### *Party Discipline*

Because the majority party in essence is the government, party discipline is very important. If party members do not support their leadership, the government may fall into crisis because it lacks legitimacy. Above all, the majority party wants to avoid losing a "**vote of no confidence**", a vote on a key issue. If the issue is not supported, the cabinet by tradition must resign immediately, and elections for new MPs must be held as soon as possible. This drastic measure is usually avoided by settling policy differences within the majority party mem-

bership. If a party loses a vote of no confidence, all MPs lose their jobs, so there is plenty of motivation to vote the party line. A vote of no confidence occurred in early 2005, when the Labour government's Higher Education Bill squeaked by with an approval vote of 316 to 311. The bill proposed raising university fees, a measure criticized by not only the opposition, but also by some outspoken Labour MPs. The vote narrowly allowed Blair's government to continue to control Commons. The policymaking power of the House is very limited since many government decisions are ratified by the cabinet and never go to Parliament.

Since the 1970s, backbenchers have been less deferential to the party leadership than in the past. A backbencher rebellion against John Major's EU policy weakened the prime minister significantly. Tony Blair faced a major rebellion of Labour backbenchers on key votes in February and March 2003 regarding the use of force in Iraq. After the disastrous 2009 local and European elections, many Labour MPs called for Gordon Brown's resignation, and five cabinet members resigned. In an effort to shore up his support, Brown reshuffled his cabinet, giving choice positions to key people in the government, and breaking the momentum of the cabinet meltdown that threatened to force him out. The near-collapse of the government came on the heels of the exposure of a widespread parliamentary expenses scandal, in which Parliament members charged thousands of pounds' worth of expenses to the taxpayers. The scandal questioned the very nature of **parliamentary sovereignty** (the principle that Parliament's decisions are final), and the government had a great deal to do to restore its image with the public.

Parliament has some substantial powers because its members

- debate and refine potential legislation
- are the only ones who may become party leaders and ultimately may head the government.
- scrutinize the administration of laws
- keep communication lines open between voters and ministers

### The House of Lords

Britain is no exception to the rule in its bicameral legislative structure. However, many of the benefits of bicameralism (including the dispersing of power between two houses) do not operate because the House of Lords has so little power. The House of Lords is the only hereditary parliamentary house in existence today, and although historically it was the original parliament, today it has minimal influence. The House of Commons established supremacy during the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and Lords gradually declined in authority. Since the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the only remaining powers are to delay legislation, and to debate technicalities of proposed bills. Lords may add amendments to legislation, but the House of Commons may delete their changes by a simple majority vote. Until 2009, the chamber also included five law lords, who served as Britain's highest court of appeals, but they could never rule acts of Parliament unconstitutional.

Until 1999 about one-half of the members of Lords were **hereditary peers**, who hold seats that have been passed down through family ties over the centuries. The remaining were **life peers**, people appointed to nonhereditary positions as a result of distinguished service to Britain. In 1999 the Labour government took seats away from most of the hereditary peers, so that today only 92 hereditary seats remain among 567 life peers. In late 2001, the government announced plans for a new upper house with about 550 mostly appointed members, but with no hereditary posts. In March 2007 the House of Commons voted, in principle, in favor of replacing the Lords with an elected chamber, either 100% elected or 80% elected, 20% appointed.). However, the House of Lords, feeling threatened by the idea of dismantlement, rejected this proposal and voted for an entirely appointed House of Lords. In 2008 Jack Straw, a top cabinet member, introduced a "white paper" (an announcement of government policy) that proposed to replace the House of Lords with an 80-100% elected chamber, with one third being elected at each general election, for a term of 12 to 15 years. The current system continues, despite the ongoing debate.

One criticism of the British parliamentary system is that the lack of separation between the prime minister and the legislature creates a

dangerous concentration of power, since both are controlled by the same party. Supporters of the parliamentary system praise its efficiency, since it does not experience the crippling "gridlock" found between Congress and the president in the United States.

### **The Bureaucracy**

Britain has hundreds of thousands of civil servants who administer laws and deliver public services. Most civil servants do clerical work and other routine work of a large bureaucracy. However, a few hundred higher civil servants directly advise ministers and oversee work of the departments. They actually coordinate and implement the policies that cabinet members set.

The British bureaucracy is a stable and powerful force in the political system. Top-level bureaucrats almost always make a career of government service, and most are experts in their areas. Because the ministers are party leaders chosen by the prime minister, they understand a great deal about British politics, but they generally are not experts in particular policy areas. In contrast, the top bureaucrats usually stay with their particular departments, and the ministers rely on their expertise. As a result, the top civil servants often have a great deal of input into policymaking, including **discretionary power** to make many decisions in implementing legislative and executive decisions. The minister has a powerful position in the cabinet, but (s)he relies heavily on the advice of the bureaucrats. Bureaucrats almost never run for public office and are usually not active in party politics. Therefore, as cabinets come and go, the bureaucrats stay and fulfill an important role in government.

### **The Judiciary**

English ideas about justice have shaped those of many other modern democracies. For example, the concept of trial by jury goes back to the time of Henry II in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Britain has had a judicial branch for centuries, but ironically, the modern judiciary has much more limited powers than those in the United States, France, and Germany. In Britain, the principle of **parliamentary sovereignty** (Parliament's decisions are final) has limited the development of judicial review (the

courts' ability to decide whether or not actions, laws, and other court decisions are unconstitutional). British courts can only determine whether government decisions violate the common law or previous acts of Parliament. Even then, the courts tend to rule narrowly because they defer to the authority of Parliament. By tradition, the courts may not impose their rulings on Parliament, the prime minister, or the cabinet.

The British legal system based on **common law** contrasts to the stricter **code law** (see p. 29) practiced in the rest of Europe. Code law is much less focused on precedent and interpretation than common law. British courts, like those in most other advanced democracies, do make distinctions between original and appellate jurisdiction. District Courts hear cases that may be appealed to the High Courts, which until 2009 were in turn appealed to the highest court in the land – the **law lords**. They were actually members of the House of Lords who were designated as the highest judicial authority in Great Britain to settle disputes from lower courts.

In 2009, a **Supreme Court** was created to replace the law lords as the highest judicial authority in the United Kingdom. The court consists of a president and eleven justices appointed by a panel of lawyers. Its chief function is to serve as the final court of appeal on points of law in cases across the country, although Scotland maintains a separate legal system. The British Supreme Court has much more limited powers than its counterpart in the United States. It can nullify government actions if they are judged to exceed powers granted by an Act of Parliament, but it cannot declare an Act of Parliament unconstitutional. Parliament remains the supreme authority under the principle of parliamentary sovereignty.

In general, judges have the reputation of being independent, impartial, and neutral. Few have been MPs, and almost none are active in party politics. Judges are appointed on “good behavior,” but they are expected to retire when they reach the age of 75. Most judges are educated in public schools and at Oxford and Cambridge, and their positions are prestigious.

Despite the limited policymaking power of the judiciary, Britain's membership in the European Union has given judges a new responsibility that promises to become even more important in the future. Since Britain is now bound by EU treaties and laws, it is the judges' responsibility to interpret them and determine whether or not EU laws conflict with parliamentary statutes. Since the British tend to be skeptical about their EU membership, the way that possible conflicts between supranational and national laws are settled by British judges could impact the policymaking process considerably.

### **PUBLIC POLICY AND CURRENT ISSUES**

Many serious issues confront the British political system today. Some of the most important are:

- **The evolving relationship between government and the economy**
- **Transparency in government**
- **Relationships with the European Union**
- **Terrorism and cohesion**
- **Relationships with the U.S.**
- **Devolution and constitutional reform**

#### **The Evolving Relationship between Government and the Economy**

The historical basis for Britain's political economy is **liberalism**, the philosophy that emphasizes political and economic freedoms for the individual and the market. Yet liberalism in Great Britain has been reshaped over the years, particularly in recent decades. The recession that began in late 2007 deepened the economic issues that preoccupy the government, as unemployment rates went up and business earnings decreased. The state-owned Bank of England, which is the central bank for all of Britain, responded to the economic crisis in September 2008 by cutting interest rates and by buying government bonds and corporate debt. The Bank has kept interest rates low since then, but Britain's economy was slow to recover until 2013, when GDP began to grow and unemployment rates began going down.

Since the end of World War II, the British government has redefined its relationship with the economy several times. Until the 1970s, the **collective consensus** philosophy was based on social democratic values that support a great deal of government control of the economy, including the nationalization of many major industries. The approach taken is called **Keynesianism** (after British economist John Maynard Keynes), in which the government took action to secure full employment, expand social services, maintain a steady rate of growth, and keep prices stable. Then, Margaret Thatcher reversed this trend by emphasizing **neoliberalism**, a revival of the old political and economic philosophy of liberalism that had guided Britain in earlier years. Thatcher's policies moved toward a free market economy and denationalization of industries. Since then, the government has tried to establish a middle way, but the best balance between state control and the free market is a matter of great dispute.

During the Blair years (1997-2007) the prime minister teamed with Gordon Brown, the chancellor of the exchequer (treasury), to craft the direction of the political economy. By 2001 the Blair-Brown team had succeeded in bringing Britain's "**misery index**" (inflation plus unemployment) down to a new low. While holding income tax rates steady, the government still managed to fund a variety of welfare programs, including those intended to improve living standards and job opportunities for the poor. However, with the recession that began in late 2007, economic growth stagnated, and the new coalition government faced growing deficits. As GDP growth slowed significantly, the government looked for ways to cut the budget, putting a particular squeeze on public sector spending, such as health care and education. In response, David Cameron advocated his "**Big Society**", a vision of Britain's future that emphasizes greater roles for private companies, charities and employee-owned cooperatives: groups funded by the state, but embedded in society. Cameron's argument is that the British state has become too big, impersonal and monolithic, and he wants to devolve more power to local councils and individual citizens.

#### Austerity Programs

The Liberal Democrats generally shared Cameron's vision, but the coalition suffered criticism for its drastic reductions in public spending.

In 2010, the government introduced an **austerity program**, a series of reductions in public spending, intended to cut welfare and other public institutions. One example is the government plan to shift college tuition costs from the state to students by raising the maximum fees English universities can charge. In 2010, Parliament voted to increase the maximum from \$5,400 to \$14,500 by 2012, an action that sparked angry protest demonstrations from students. Most universities appear to be setting tuitions at the maximum level, leaving Cameron's government open to further criticism. Although austerity programs were meant to end in 2016, in 2014, the Treasury extended the austerity period until at least 2018.

Protests to the government's austerity plans have grown louder as the economy has improved, with many people concerned about welfare cuts that have reduced social security benefits. Disability rights groups have argued that budget cuts disproportionately affect disabled people. Critics point out that the use of food banks has increased as benefit claimants feel the pinch of government cuts.

#### Health Care Issues

The attempt to balance the budget is illustrated by debates over what to do with the National Health Service (NHS). Many support it, saying that the British population is much healthier than it used to be, and that the British working class has especially benefited. However, the system is challenged by the aging population, a general trend in most mature democracies today. Others criticize the service for the increasing expense to the government and for a long wait lists for medical treatment. Private medical care is becoming more common, but many Britons want to keep the NHS, especially if it can be reformed. The NHS and education were "ringfenced" and protected from the austerity program's spending cuts, but the high cost of health care is still controversial.

In 2012, after much debate, Parliament passed the Health and Social Care Act. At its heart are plans for a radical restructuring of the health service, which gives general practitioners control of much of the NHS's annual budget, cuts the number of health bodies, and introduces more competition into services, all with the intention of reduc-

ing administrative costs, something the government says is essential if the health service is to cope with the ever-rising cost of caring for an aging population, and new, expensive medicines and treatments.

### **Transparency in Government**

The British government has long had a solid reputation for its transparency, so the parliamentary scandal that broke in the spring of 2009 was surprising to many people around the globe. The *Daily Telegraph* reported first on expense reports from Labour ministers, then on Labour backbenchers, and finally on Conservative and Liberal Democrat MPs. The reports revealed huge amounts of personal expenses charged to the government, ranging from small, everyday purchases to thousands of pounds' worth of home improvements. One particularly controversial type of spending was categorized as the "second-homes allowance" for MPs who maintain homes in both London and their constituencies. Some MPs were getting reimbursements for improvements to both of their homes, and others were spending money on their homes just before they re-classified them as main residences, even though both practices were against the rules for the second-homes allowance. The depth of the damage to Parliament's image was reflected by the resignation of Michael Martin, the House of Commons speaker, who claimed thousands of pounds for a chauffeur-driven car that drove him about his Glasgow constituency, one of Britain's poorest.

The British public reacted strongly against these exposures, causing the leadership to apologize for the entire Parliament and promise that colleagues would pay back unjustified claims. Brown called for an end to the functioning of Parliament as "a gentlemen's club" that makes its own rules on members' benefits. Other reforms demanded wider changes that would make Parliament and the government more accountable to the people. Some suggestions included reducing the number of MPs, parliamentary committees with real powers of oversight and investigation, and primary elections to select parliamentary candidates. This scandal caused British citizens, already beleaguered by recession, to lose trust in their government.

Even before the scandal, an April 2009 YouGov poll showed very low political efficacy rates among Britons, with a third of the respondents indicating that they trusted no politician to tell the truth. Of

course, the fact that the scandals have been exposed indicates that the transparency level is still high, since an independent press may freely criticize the government. The coalition government elected in 2010 made increased transparency a priority, with the prime minister's office announcing in late 2010 the launching of a new website ([www.number10.gov.uk](http://www.number10.gov.uk)) whose purpose it was to provide users with information about government activities and policies. The website features detailed information about ministers' schedules and access to videos of the prime minister's statements and questions in Parliament.

### **Relations with the European Union**

British insularity has always meant that the country tends to keep its allies at arm's length. The British government did not enter the Common Market (a precursor to the European Union) when it was established in 1957. When Britain finally decided to enter in the early 1960s, its membership was vetoed twice by French President Charles De Gaulle. Finally, in 1978, Britain joined the Common Market, but the Thatcher government was opposed to rapid integration of European markets, and she was adamantly opposed to the adoption of the euro in place of the pound. Under Prime Minister John Major, Britain signed the Maastricht Treaty that created the European Union, and under Labour's Tony Blair, the government was still more favorable. When the Labour government first took power, it openly advocated adoption of the euro and further integration with the EU. However, once in power, Labour backed away from its initial commitment, although during the 2005 campaign Blair promised future referenda on the new EU constitution and the euro. Since Blair's time in office, the EU constitution has been abandoned, but Britain's membership in the EU is still controversial, with the Conservative Party openly split over EU matters.

Recent polls indicate that the percentage of the British public who want to hold on to the British pound hovers around 50%, so it appears as if Britain will continue to play its age-old cat and mouse game with the European continent. However, Gordon Brown was much less vocal in his support for strong ties with the EU than Tony Blair was, and David Cameron has been caught between the conflicting wings of the Conservative Party, which cannot agree on Britain's role in the

EU. Meanwhile, many British citizens expressed their disapproval of the EU in the 2015 elections by supporting UKIP candidates, who received about 12.6% of the total vote. In 2013, bowing to pressure from Euroskeptics in his party, David Cameron promised a renegotiation of the U.K.'s membership of the EU, followed by popular vote on whether to stay in the bloc, if his party won the 2015 general election outright, which it did. Cameron reiterated the party's commitment to hold an "in-out" referendum on Britain's membership of the European Union by the end of 2017, following negotiations with EU leaders. Government-sponsored legislation to authorize the referendum was introduced in the House of Commons in May 2015.

### **Terrorism and Violence**

Tony Blair aptly described changes in the nature of terrorism in Britain in an essay published in *The Economist* at the end of his tenure:

"Over ten years I have watched this [terrorism] grow. (If you had told me a decade ago that I would be tackling terrorism I would have readily understood, but thought you meant Irish Republican terrorism.)"

The meaning of terrorism certainly changed after four British Muslim suicide bombers attacked the London transit system in July 2005 killing 52 people. Two other major terrorist plots were uncovered in 2006, and in 2007 several car bombs exploded – one outside a London nightclub, one near Trafalgar Square in London, and one in the Glasgow airport. Within four days of the car bombs, the main players had been arrested. The government is now earmarking extra money for security, a mosque watchdog is in operation, and the M15 (British security service) is keeping track of many suspected terrorists.

In his first press conference as prime minister, Gordon Brown reacted to the 2007 attacks by affirming his government's commitment to non-violence, and expressed his distaste for the "extreme message of those who practice violence and would maim and murder citizens on British soil." Shortly afterward, the government began a pilot curriculum to be taught in some Muslim religious classes that emphasizes nonviolence among British Muslims. The program has been criticized for singling out young Muslims for civics lessons, and the British gov-

ernment is still struggling with how to isolate the extremist Muslim minority from the moderate majority. One of the thorniest issues of all is maintaining a cohesive society, despite the demographic changes of recent years.

Torn between the task of narrowing the social, economic and cultural gap between Muslims – especially in poor urban areas of northern Britain – and the rest of society – and simply fighting terrorism, the government believes that it must at least do the latter. Probing and preempting attacks by Muslim extremists occupies about 75% of the energy of the British security services, who have had a fair amount of success in uncovering terrorist plots before the last minute, according to a report in *The Economist* in February 2009. The riots that broke out across Britain in the summer of 2011 also increased anxiety over maintaining law and order, even as Britons struggled to understand why the rioting occurred. Recent budget cuts have made it more difficult for the police to do their job, and security pressures were strong as London hosted the Olympics in 2012. Tensions increased after G4S, a company hired by the government to provide security during the games failed to fulfill its contract. However, the army deployed troops to make up the shortfall, and the games passed without notable security scares.

### **Relationship with the United States**

When Tony Blair became prime minister of the United Kingdom in 1997, he took on a very ambitious agenda. Domestically, he wanted to sustain economic prosperity and increase social equality, as well as reinforce traditional British national identity and political institutions. Internationally, he sought to develop a new relationship with Europe in which the United Kingdom would play a central and self-confident role, and yet maintain a special relationship with the United States that had been in place since World War II.

Blair's efforts seemed to succeed until the Iraq crisis drove Washington in the opposite direction from Paris and Berlin. France and Germany were outspoken in their criticism of the U.S. invasion of Iraq and of Britain's support for the war under Blair's watch. The crisis challenged the cornerstone of Tony Blair's vision that the United

Kingdom could act as a bridge across the Atlantic. It damaged Britain's relationship with France and raised questions about the wisdom of its special relationship with the United States. It caused dissent within the Labour leadership and seriously undermined Blair's popular support, a situation that resulted in the party losing many seats in the House of Commons in the election of 2005, and eventually led to Blair's resignation in 2007.

Since the election of American president, Barack Obama, in November 2008, the direction of U.S./British relations has been positive. The global economic crisis required Obama and Brown, and then Cameron, to work together to address the problems. During Obama's state visit to Britain in 2011, both leaders referred to their "essential relationship," and the two countries are crucial allies in building coalitions to deal with international crises. However, British budget cuts have seriously impacted the country's defense capabilities, so that the country's ability to provide real international military support is in question.

### **Devolution and Constitutional Reform**

The British government is still a **unitary** one, with the most authority emanating from London. However, continuing desire by the Scottish and Welsh for their independence and the problems with Northern Ireland have led to the development and implementation of the policy of **devolution**, or turning over of some political powers to regional governments. Even before Margaret Thatcher delayed the process when she took office in 1979, the Labour party supported devolution. However, a 1977 referendum to create Scottish and Welsh assemblies failed. In 1999, though, referenda in both regions passed, and each now has its own regional assembly, which has powers of taxation, education, and economic planning.

#### **Northern Ireland**

In the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, a parliament was set up for Northern Ireland as well, although London shut down its activities after violence broke out in 2002. The Northern Ireland Assembly remained suspended for almost five years, not reopening until May 2007. A new challenge was presented to the Assembly in early 2009, when two British soldiers and a police constable were killed and dissident re-

publican terrorists claimed responsibility for both killings. These first murders of members of the security forces since 1998 brought thousands out in peaceful protest rallies across Northern Ireland. Some observers found hope in the response by political leaders of Sinn Fein, the Democratic Union Party, and the English boss of the Northern Ireland police, who appeared and were photographed standing shoulder-to-shoulder outside the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Just how much these new parliaments will affect London's authority is yet to be seen. Devolution has also included the creation of the office of mayor and a general assembly for London, giving the city more independence from the central government.

### Scottish Independence

In recent years, the movement for Scottish independence has gained momentum, coming up for a vote in a referendum in September 2014. The Scottish Parliament set the arrangements for the referendum in November 2013, when it passed the Scottish Independence Referendum Act, following an agreement between the Scottish and the UK governments. The campaign was intense, with both sides presenting heated arguments for their points of view. The question was "Should Scotland be an independent country?" The "No" side won with 55.3% of the voters, while 44.7% voting "Yes." The voter turnout of 84.6% was much higher than for any election or referendum in the United Kingdom in recent memory. Although the campaign for independence failed, it has many supporters, and most believe that the issue remains a viable one.

Some critics have argued that devolution should be only one step toward modernizing the political system. Other reforms under consideration include a written Bill of Rights for individual citizens, a written constitution, freedom of information, and a new electoral system. One crucial reform – proportional representation – was rejected by British voters in 2011, but its supporters are still numerous. Whatever reforms are made, Britain still retains a strong attachment to its many traditions, and the government's long lists of accomplishments are not all in the past. As the nation redefines both external and internal political relationships, Britain still serves as a role model for the development of democratic traditions in the modern world.

## IMPORTANT TERMS AND CONCEPTS

alternate voting (AV)  
austerity program  
backbenchers  
Beveridge Report  
Blair, Tony  
British Broadcasting Corporation  
British National Party  
Brown, Gordon  
Cameron, David  
caucuses  
“civic culture”  
Clause 4  
Clegg, Nick  
coalition government  
collective consensus  
collective responsibility  
Confederation of Business Industries  
Conservative Party  
“Constitution of the Crown”  
cultural heterogeneity  
Democratic Unionist Party  
devolution  
the English Bill of Rights  
Euroskeptics  
“first-past-the-post” voting system  
Fixed-term Parliaments Act of 2011  
the Glorious Revolution  
the “government”  
gradualism  
hereditary peers  
home rule  
hung parliament  
insularity  
Irish Republican Army  
“Iron Lady”

Keynesianism  
Labour Party  
law lords  
Liberal Democratic Alliance  
liberalism  
life peers  
limited government  
"loyal opposition"  
Magna Carta  
Miliband, Ed  
"misery index"  
mixed economy  
multi-nationalism  
neo-corporatism  
neo-liberalism  
*noblesse oblige*  
OPEC  
Oxbridge  
parliamentary system  
Plaid Cymru  
plurality voting system  
politics of protest  
proportional representation  
quangos  
Question Time  
rational-legal legitimacy  
referendum  
safe districts  
Scottish Independence Movement  
Scottish National Party  
"shadow cabinet"  
Sinn Fein  
solidarity  
Speaker of the House  
Thatcherism  
the third way  
Tories  
Trade Union Congress

traditional leadership

UK Independence Party

unitary government

“vote of no confidence”

welfare state

Whigs