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, 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 18th and 19th centuries throughout her far-flung empire. At the beginning of the 20th century, Britain was undoubtedly the most powerful country in the world. Truly the name "Great Britain" applies to her 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 conquered the world! At any rate, the two names aptly define Britain's dilemma at the dawn of the 21st 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 her 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.

The world watches as Britain helps define the meaning of progress. Perhaps 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.

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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 the government has developed gradually, so that today tradition is a primary source of stability. 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 17th 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, legal codes, and customs combining to form what is often called the "Constitution of the Crown."

Two important documents that are central to the British "constitution" are:

- **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 places restrictions on the power of monarchs.

- **The Bill of Rights** - This document bears little resemblance to the American Bill of Rights, because it lists rights retained by Parliament, not by individual citizens. William and Mary signed this document in 1688, giving important policy-making power to Parliament, including the power of the purse.

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 from the dramatic changes brought by the Industrial Revolution in the late 18th and 19th 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 17th century with powers seriously restricted by Parliament. Today, the monarchy has no decision-making power but plays an important ceremonial 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, so 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 it through succeeding kings. The power of the king's prime minister was firmly established in the 18th 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. Lives of peasants were transformed as they left rural areas, moved to cities, and went to work in factories. New merchants, businessmen, and workers all demanded that the political system respond by including them in decision-making. The 19th century reforms reflect their successes.

• **Britain in the 20th and early 21st centuries** - At the dawn of the 20th century, Britain was the greatest imperialist nation in the world. By the early 21st century, her 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, that was curtailed during the 1980s by a wave of "Thatcherism," a conservative, capitalist backlash led by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. 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 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."

William Shakespeare’s  *Richard II*

This famous quote from Shakespeare 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.

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

- **An island** - far enough away from mainland Europe to protect her as long as she has had a good navy. Yet the island is close enough to the mainland to allow interaction.
- **Small size** - As a result, her resources are limited. This geographical fact shaped her efforts to colonize other lands and become an imperial power.
- **A short supply of fertile soil, short growing season** - Britain's ability to feed her 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 it is considerable lower in northern areas.
- **No major geographical barriers** (mountains, raging rivers) to hamper transportation/communication within the country.
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 their land in return for labor. Today, noblesse oblige is reflected in the general willingness of the British to accept a welfare state, including the National Health Service. During the 1980s, Margaret Thatcher's government brought this willingness into question by cutting social services significantly. However, some of these services have been restored in recent years.

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

Is noblesse oblige a thing of the past? See how Slate Magazine applies the concept to the Bush family in the U.S. - [http://slate.msn.com/id/31470/](http://slate.msn.com/id/31470/)

George Orwell's 1941 comments about the political culture of Britain are still timely [http://orwell.ru/library/essays/lion/e/e_eye.htm](http://orwell.ru/library/essays/lion/e/e_eye.htm)

**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 policy-making 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 &endash; the signing of the Magna Carta, the English Civil War, and the Glorious Revolution &endash; 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 20th century, and the economic crisis of the 1970s. 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 18th century created two new social classes that were not accommodated under the parliamentary system: the 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 their decision to incorporate the new elements into the political system. The decision is a reflection of noblesse oblige. Starting in 1832, the franchise gradually broadened:

EXTENSION OF VOTING RIGHTS

- **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 allowed the right to vote.
- **Representation of the People Act of 1884** - The electorate is further expanded so that the majority of the voters are working class.
- **Women's suffrage** - All women over the age of 28 and all men over 21 were granted the right to vote in 1918. By 1928, all women over the age of 21 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.

19TH CENTURY WORK AND WELFARE REFORMS

During the 19th century, labor unions formed to protect workers' rights on the job. By the end of the 19th 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. With these demands came a new party - Labour. By the end of World War I, Labour had pushed the Liberals into third place 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 has been a major force in British politics since. The British labor movement has always been tough, resentful of being treated like inferiors. That militancy carries through to today, only to be softened in very recent years by party leaders Neil Kinnock, John Smith, and Tony Blair.

**EFFECTS OF WORLD WAR II; COLLECTIVE CONSENSUS**

Under the leadership of Winston Churchill Britain united behind the World War II effort. 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.

**CHALLENGES TO THE COLLECTIVE CONSENSUS SINCE 1970**

During the late 20th and early 21st 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 CRISIS 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 a decline in international influence, both 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 oil 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 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 policies were further influenced by a distinct movement left 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 the labor unions, and returned to market force controls on the economy. She was a controversial 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 office in 1990 when other Conservative Party leaders challenged her leadership.

TONY BLAIR'S THIRD WAY

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 moderating them by abolishing Thatcher's poll tax, reconciling with the European Union, and slowing 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 in the center was rewarded with the election of Tony Blair, who promised to create a "New Labour" Party and rule in a "third way" &endash; a centrist alternative to the old Labour Party on the left and the Conservative Party on the right.
CITIZEN, STATE and SOCIETY

In many ways, Britain is a homogeneous culture. English is spoken by virtually all British citizens, and only about 5% of Britain's population of 60 million are ethnic minorities. The major social cleavages that shape the way the political system works are based on multi-national identities, social class distinctions, and the Protestant/Catholic split in Northern Ireland. In recent years some critics believe that new tensions are developing regarding Muslim minorities, 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.

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 16th century, did not rule any of the other lands. By the 18th century, England ruled the entire island, and became known as "Great Britain." In the early 20th 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 the 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 16th century, and has remained so till the present. Modern Welsh pride is reflected in their 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.

- **Northern Ireland** - England and Ireland have a long history of arguing about religion. After Oliver Cromwell won the English Civil War in the mid 17th 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 exception 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 guerilla 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 sense is that keeping the old job and living in the old neighborhood &endash; the sense of family and friends &endash; is more important than individual success.

EDUCATING THE ELITE: "PUBLIC" SCHOOL AND "OXBRIDGE"

"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 classes commonly attend private grammar schools, where students wear uniforms but do not live in. Only 65 percent of British seventeen-year-olds are still in school, the lowest level of any industrialized democracy.

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. Still, university attendance in Britain is much lower than in other industrialized democracies.

ETHNIC MINORITIES

According to the 2001 census, only about 7.1% of the British population is of non-European origin, with most coming from countries that were formerly British colonies. However, the minority ethnic population grew by 53 percent between 1991 and 2001, from 3 million in 1991 to 4.6 million in 2001. The main groups are:

- **Indian** - 23% of all non-European population
- **Pakistani** - 16%
- **Afro-Caribbean** - 12.2%
- **Black African** - 10.5%

Because of tight immigration restrictions in the past, most ethnic minorities are young, with about half of the population under the age of 25. The growth in percentages of minorities has
grown despite the restrictions that were placed on further immigration during the Thatcher administration of the 1980s. Immigration restrictions are currently under debate, but the Labour government has allowed the restrictions to remain in place.

Britain has often been accused of adjusting poorly to their new 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. 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.

**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 have challenged this view of citizenship in Britain, but 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.

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 these radical changes of the 1970s and 80s, Britain has not deserted its traditional political culture. Tony Blair now leads a Labour Party that has 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 21st century, both parties are more inclined to a middle path, or "third way."

**VOTING BEHAVIOR**

Like most other Europeans, British citizens have relatively high percentages of qualified voters who go to the polls. Although there was a notable decline in the elections of 2001 and 2005, 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 to 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 show that the party is strongest among people who feel disadvantaged: the Scots, the Welsh, and the poor.

- **Regional factors** - The Labour Party usually does well in urban and industrial areas and in Scotland and Wales. 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 his/her cabinet form the policy-making 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 policy-making activities are complex, and its linkage institutions are well developed.

POLITICAL PARTIES

Britain's political parties began to form in the 18th 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 19th 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 20th 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), 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 LABOUR PARTY

The largest party on the left is the Labour Party. It has controlled the British government since 1997 when their leader, Tony Blair became Prime Minister. 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 19th century. Traditionally, labor unions have provided most party funds, although Blair has loosened the union ties and has 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) and Tony Blair (1994-present).

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 that 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 has tried to redefine itself as a moderate party with support from many different types of voters.

THE CONSERVATIVE PARTY

The Conservative Party was the dominant party in Britain 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 they prospered partly because they traditionally have 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. The senior party members formed the cabinet and were chosen by the party leader.

Since Labour seized control of the government in 1997, the Conservative Party has been 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 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 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 Democrats. Their 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) in Britain, they only won 23 seats (3.5%). They campaigned for proportional representation, which would have given 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. 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.

OTHER PARTIES

Britain has many smaller parties including nationalist groups for 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 in 1997, 2001 and 2005. However, Labour is strong in the two regions, and the two parties combined won only nine seats in the House of Commons in 2005. The parties' fortunes were strengthened after Labour's return to power in 1997, when the Blair leadership created regional assemblies for Scotland and Wales. The Plaid Cymru currently has 12 of 60 seats in the Welsh Assembly, and the Scottish National Party has 27 of 129 seats in the Scottish Assembly.

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 nine parliamentary seats in 2005.

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 the prime minister may 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 is 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. Like 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 this system "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 — or districts that 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 some districts in Scotland. 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 (a majority). 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 matches the percentage of the total vote each received. In later agreements with Scotland and Wales, their regional parliaments also are based on proportional representation. Also, the mayor of London is now elected directly for the first time.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>U.S. vs. British Elections*</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>Party is less powerful.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Britain</td>
<td>Party determines who runs where.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Members must live in districts.</td>
<td>Members usually don't live in their districts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party leaders run in their respective districts.</td>
<td>Party leaders run in &quot;safe districts.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual votes for four officials on the national level.</td>
<td>Individual votes for only one official on the national level.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between 30 and 50 percent of the eligible voters actually vote.</td>
<td>About 70-80 percent of the eligible voters actually vote (less in 2001 and 2005).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First past the post, single-member districts; virtually no minor parties get representation</td>
<td>First past the post, single-member districts; some representation from minority parties, but still less than if they had proportional representation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

Not surprisingly, the most influential interest groups have been those linked to class and industrial interests. Between 1945 and the 1970s, business interests and trade union organization fiercely competed for influence over the policy-making process. The powerful Trade Unions Congress (TUC), that 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 a coalition of business groups — 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, but she slammed the door shut on TUC. As labor unions lost public support, they also lost political sway, and the Labour Party loosened their ties to unions and began to broaden its voter base. Since Thatcher left in 1990, interest groups have regained power, but Blair's "third way" partners 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 class, 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.

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 BBC for its reporting. The report prompted the chairman of BBC board of governors to resign, an action that signaled an almost unprecedented embarrassment for the network.

THE INSTITUTIONS OF NATIONAL GOVERNMENT

Just as 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 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 the United States. In a parliamentary system, the executive branch is fused with the legislative branch because the prime minister and his 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 they have no role in interpreting the "Constitution of the Crown."

THE CABINET AND THE PRIME MINISTER

The cabinet consists of the prime minister and ministers, each of which head 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 policy-making in the British political system, and the prime minister has the responsibility of shaping their decisions into policy. The cabinet does not vote, but 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 he/she 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. Currently, the Labour Party is in power, and has been since 1997.

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

### COMPARATIVE EXECUTIVES*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prime Minister of Britain</th>
<th>President of the United States</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Serves only as long as he/she remains leader of the majority party</td>
<td>Elected every four years by an electoral college based on popular election</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elected as a member of parliament (MP)</td>
<td>Elected as President</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has an excellent chance of getting his/her programs past Parliament</td>
<td>Has an excellent chance of ending up in gridlock with Congress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cabinet members are always MPs and leaders of the majority party</td>
<td>Cabinet members usually don't come from Congress (although they may)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cabinet members not experts in policy areas; rely on bureaucracy to provide expertise</td>
<td>Some expertise in policy areas; one criteria for their appointment; head vast bureaucracies</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*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.*
PARLIAMENT

Although British government consists of three branches, little separation of powers exists between the cabinet and parliament.

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." So, 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 &endash; who is elected as an MP like all the rest &endash; sits on the front bench of the majority side in the middle. He or she becomes prime minister because all the members of the majority party have made that selection. The majority party 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, who 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 "backbenchers" - 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 policy-makers 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 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 can 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 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 membership. If a party loses a vote of confidence, all MPs lose their jobs, so there is plenty of motivation to vote the party line. A recent vote of 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 policy-making power of the House is very limited since many government decisions are ratified by the Cabinet and never go to Parliament.

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

**House of Lords**

The House of Lords is the only hereditary parliamentary house in existence today. Although historically it was the original parliament, today it has minimal influence. The House of Commons established supremacy during the 17th century, and Lords gradually declined in authority. Since the turn of the 20th century, the only powers that Lords has had was 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. The chamber also includes five law lords who serve as Britain's highest court of appeals, but they cannot rule acts of Parliament unconstitutional. Until 1999 about one-half of the membership of Lords were hereditary peers, or hold seats that have been passed down through family ties over the centuries. The remainder 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. Despite these changes and proposals, the fact remains that the House of Lords has very little policy-making power in the British government.

**THE BUREAUCRACY**

Britain has hundreds of thousands of civil servants who administer laws and deliver public services. The largest number of 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 coordinate the policies that cabinet members set with their actual implementation by the bureaucracy.

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 area. 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 policy-making. The minister has a powerful position on the cabinet, but he/she relies heavily on the advise 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 13th 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 determine actions, laws and other court decisions 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.

British courts do make distinctions between original and appellate jurisdiction. District Courts hear cases that may be appealed to the High Courts, which may in turn be appealed to the highest court in the land - the law lords. They are actually members of the House of Lords who are designated as a "Supreme Court" to settle disputes from lower courts. Of course, the law lords do not have the power of judicial review, so their authority is limited. The role of the law lords will almost certainly be changing soon, as a result of the Constitutional Reform Act of 2005 that provides for a Supreme Court of the United Kingdom to take over the existing role of the law lords.

By and large, 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 at public schools and at Oxford and Cambridge, and their positions are prestigious.

Despite the limited policy-making 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 policy-making process considerably.

PUBLIC POLICY

The election of 2005 secured an historic third term for Tony Blair and the Labour Party. However, Blair's support of the war in Iraq was very controversial among British voters, and probably cost Labour a good many votes. Labour MPs slipped from 403 to 356, a loss of 47 members. The biggest beneficiary was the Liberal Democratic Party that picked up 11 MPs for a total of 62. Conservatives picked up 33, but their total numbers rose to 198, still far behind Labour's lead. For now, Tony Blair still has a solid majority, and his government gained enough votes to continue the course they have followed since 1997. Many issues confront the British political system today, but four of the most important are:

- The evolving relationship between government and the economy
- British relationships with the European Union
- Blair's balancing act between the U.S. and the EU
- Devolution

BRITISH RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE EUROPEAN UNION

British insularity has always meant that they tend to keep their 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, her membership was vetoed twice by French President Charles DeGaulle. Finally, in 1978, Britain joined the Common Market, but the Thatcher government was opposed to rapid integration of European markets. 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 is still more favorable. However, the Conservative Party is openly split over EU matters, and the majority of the British public still wants to hold on to the British pound.

BLAIR'S BALANCING ACT BETWEEN THE U.S. AND THE EU

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.

The British government is still a unitary one, with the most authority emanating from London. However, continuing desire by Scots and the Welsh for their independence and the problems with Northern Ireland have led to the development and implementation of the policy of devolution. Even before Margaret Thatcher delayed the process when she took office in 1979, the Labour party supported devolution, or the turning over of some political powers to regional governments. However, a 1977 referendum to create Scottish and Welsh assemblies failed. In 1999, though, referendums in both regions passed, and each now has its own regional assembly, which has powers in taxation, education, and economic planning. 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 2003. Just how much these new parliaments will affect London's authority is yet to be seen.

Other reforms under consideration include a written Bill of Rights for individual citizens, a written constitution, freedom of information, and possible a new electoral system. Whatever reforms are made, Britain still retains a strong attachment to her 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.

Visit the official home page for the [Scottish Parliament](http://www.parliament.scot). The Northern Ireland Parliament was suspended in October 2002, but their [website](http://www.nidirect.gov.uk) is still up. You can take a tour of their buildings!