

# BRITISH POLITICAL SYSTEM



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# Contents:



- Hystorical background
- The three arms of The State
- The UK Parliament
- The Legislative Process
- Political Parties
- The UK Government
- Devolved Government
- The UK Judiciary
- Civil Society





# Hystorical background



- The British political system have a long continuity. They have not had a revolution like many other countries and Britain has not been invaded or occupied for almost 1,000 years.
- The English Civil War (1642-1651) was 'the' revolution but the main constitutional consequence - the abolition of the monarchy - only lasted 11 years and the Restoration of the Monarchy has so far lasted 350 years (although it is now, of course, a very different monarchy).
- The Royal Monarchy became an independent institution since the Hannover House, a German Royalty House, began to rule Britain and changed some rules of the Institution Monarchy. Since this Royal House, with King George I, the Monarchy became more independent from the political situation in Britain, putting an end to the Absolutist Monarchy.





# Hystorical background



- They have not been colonised in a millennium but rather been the greatest colonisers in history, and in neither of the two world wars were they invaded or occupied.
- This explains why:
- It have no written constitution as well as Israel & New Zealand
- Its political system is not neat or logical or always fully democratic
- Its changes has been very gradual and pragmatic and built on consensus





# Hystorical background



- Since the all-powerful king to a national parliament that was increasingly representative of ordinary people and accountable to ordinary people, there have been a long and troubled road to full democracy. A key date in this evolution was 1215 when King John was forced to sign the Magna Carta which involved him sharing power with the barons. This is regarded as the first statement of citizen rights in the world.
- The so-called Model Parliament was summoned by King Edward I in 1295 and is regarded as the first representative assembly. As the King of England required the approval of Parliament to tax his subjects.



# Hystorical background

- The bicameral nature of the British Parliament - Commons and Lords - emerged in 1341 and the two-chamber model of the legislature has served as a model in very many other parliamentary systems.
- The Bill of Rights of 1689 - which is still in effect - lays down limits on the powers of the crown and sets out the rights of Parliament and rules for freedom of speech in Parliament, the requirement to regular elections to Parliament, and the right to petition the monarch without fear of retribution.

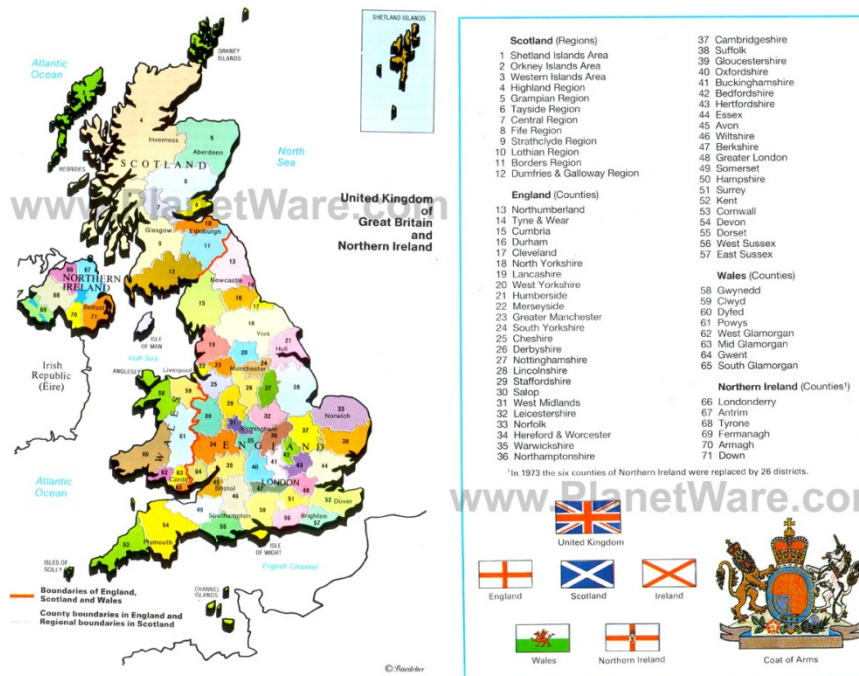






# Hystorical background

- The great Reform Act of 1832 abolished 60 'rotten', or largely unpopulated, boroughs and extended the vote from 400,000 citizens to 600,000. It was 1918 before the country achieved a near universal franchise and 1970 before the last extension of the franchise (to 18-21 year olds).
- Three parts of the United Kingdom - Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland - have a special status and have local administrations with a wide range of responsibilities. However, England - which represents about 84% of the total UK population of around 63 million - does not have a clear and strong sense of regionalism.





# Hystorical background

- Since 1973, the UK have been a member of the European Union (EU). Therefore the UK Government and Parliament are limited in some respects by what they can do because certain areas of policy or decision-making are a matter for the EU which operates through an European Commission.







# The three arms of The State

- The British political system is headed by the British Monarchy, currently Queen Elizabeth II, but they are mostly ceremonial. Even thou, the most important practical power is the choice of the Member of Parliament to form a government which is granted to the leader of the political party with the most seats in the House of Commons.
- Although any remaining powers of the monarchy are largely ceremonial, the Royal Family must to be consulted about legislation that might affect their personal interests or its people.





# The three arms of The State

- The monarch is determined on the hereditary and primogeniture principles. Under the terms of the Act of Settlement of 1701, the monarch and the monarch's spouse cannot be Catholics because the UK monarch is also the Head of the Church of England.







# The three arms of The State

- The three arms of the state are:
- The executive power: the Ministers who run the country and propose new laws.
- The legislature power: the elected body that passes new laws.
- The judiciary power: the judges and the courts who ensure that everyone obeys the laws.





# The three arms of The State

- The concept of “separation of powers”, created by Montesquieu, is not well apply in the British political system.
- All Ministers in the government are members of the legislature.
- Some very senior judges sit in the upper house of the parliament.
- The formal head of the judiciary is a senior minister.







# The UK Parliament

- The British Parliament is place in the Palace of Westminster.
- The British Parliament is bicameral, that is there are two houses or chambers.





# The UK Parliament

## □ The House of Commons

- This is the lower chamber but the one with the most authority. The House of Commons currently comprises 650 Members of Parliament or MPs (the number varies slightly from time to time to reflect population change).
- This is a large legislature by international standards.
- Each member in the House of Commons represents a geographical constituency.





# The UK Parliament

## □ The House of Commons

- Every citizen aged 18 or over can vote once in the constituency in which they live.
- Until now, in the UK (unlike many countries), there has not been fixed term parliaments. A General Election - that is, a nationwide election for all 650 seats - was held when the Prime Minister called it, but the election could be more than five years after the last one and it was usually around four years after the last one.



- Note 1: In practice, the Speaker - notionally Conservative - is not counted against any political party because he is required to be neutral.





# The UK Parliament

- **The House of Lords**
- This is the upper chamber but the one with less authority. Its main roles are to revise legislation and keep a check on Government by scrutinising its activities.
- There is no fixed number of members in the House of Lords, but currently there are around 830 members - many more than in the House of Commons.
- Ironically the size of the House of Lords continues to rise at the same time as the House of Commons has legislated to reduce its size.
- Historically most members of the House of Lords have been hereditary peers where the right to sit in the House has passed through the family from generation to generation.







# The UK Parliament

- **The House of Lords**
- Almost all the other members of today's House of Lords are life peers. This means that they have been chosen by the Queen or King, on the advice of the Government, to sit in the House for as long as they live, but afterwards no member of the royal family has the right to sit in the House. Many are former senior politicians. Others are very distinguished figures in fields such as education, health and social policy.
- 26 members are Archbishops and Bishops of the Church of England.
- House of Lords reform is unfinished business. The Parliament Act of 1911 first raised the prospect of an elected upper house but it has still not happened.





# The Legislative Process

- Almost all legislation is proposed by the Government and much of it comes from promises made in the manifesto of the relevant political party at the last election. At the beginning of each annual session of the Parliament, the main Bills to be considered are announced by the Queen in a speech opening that year's session of Parliament.
- All legislation has to be approved by both Houses of Parliament.
- In each House of Parliament, a proposed piece of legislation – called a Bill – goes through the following stages:
- First Reading: the Bill is introduced with simply a reading by a Minister of the long title of the Bill.
- Second Reading: the general principles of the Bill are debated by all the members of the House and a formal vote is taken.





# The Legislative Process

- **Committee Stage:** each clause and schedule of the Bill, plus amendments to them and any new clauses or schedules, is examined in detail, in the Commons by a small, specially chosen group of members meeting as Public Bill Committee, in the Lords by the members as a whole on the floor of the House.
- **Report Stage:** the changes made to the Bill in the Committee are reported to and debated by the whole House which is invited to consider the Bill as a whole, approve the changes by the Committee, and consider any further proposed changes that might be suggested.
- **Third Reading:** the final version of the Bill is considered by the whole House in a short debate (in the Commons without the facility for further amendments).
- **Royal Assent:** the Crown gives assent to the Bill which then becomes an Act, the provisions becoming law either immediately or at a date specified in the Act or at a date specified by what is called a Commencement Order.





# Political Parties

- The Conservative Party claims to be the oldest political party in the world.
- Political parties began to form during the English civil wars of the 1640s and 1650s. First, there were Royalists and Parliamentarians; then Tories and Whigs. Whereas the Whigs wanted to curtail the power of the monarch, the Tories - today the Conservatives - were seen as the patriotic party.







# Political Parties

Today there are three major political parties in the British system of politics:

- The Labour Party: the centre-Left party.
- The Conservative Party (frequently called the Tories): the centre-Right party.
- The Liberal Democrat Party (known as the Lib Dems): the centrist, libertarian party.
- There are some much smaller UK parties like: the UK Independence Party and the Green Party, and some parties which operate specifically in Scotland (the Scottish National Party), Wales (Plaid Cymru) or Northern Ireland (such as Sinn Fein for the nationalists and the Democratic Unionist Party for the loyalists). Each political party chooses its leader in a different way.





# Political Parties

- By convention, the leader of the political party with the largest number of members in the House of Commons becomes the Prime Minister (formally at the invitation of the Queen).





# Political Parties

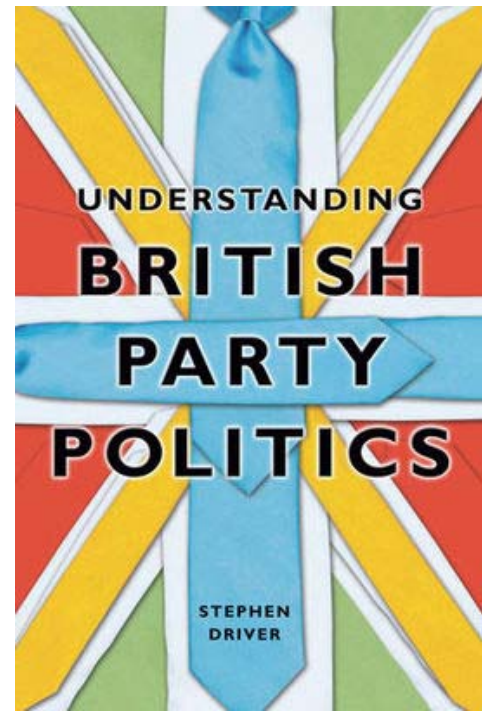
- The ideological differences between the parties are less than they were with the parties adopting more 'pragmatic' positions on many issues.
- In the past, class was a major determinant of voting intention in British politics, with most working class electors voting Labour and most middle class electors voting Conservative. These days, class is much less important.

In the British political system, there is a broad consensus between the major parties on:

- the rule of law
- the free market economy
- the national health service
- UK membership of European Union and NATO

The main differences between the political parties concern:

- how to tackle poverty and inequality
- the levels and forms of taxation
- the extent of state intervention in the economy
- the balance between collective rights and individual rights







# The UK Government

- All Government Ministers have to be a member of either the House of Commons (most of them) or the House of Lords (the remainder of them) and every Government Department will have at least one Minister in the Lords, so that the Department can speak in either House as necessary. The number of Ministers varies from administration to administration.
- Historically most British governments have been composed of ministers from a single political party which had an overall majority of seats in the House of Commons and the 'first-past-the-post' (FPTP) electoral system greatly facilitates and indeed promotes this outcome. However, occasionally there have been minority governments or coalition governments.



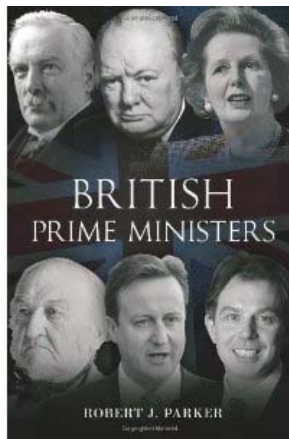




# The UK Government

## The Prime Minister

- Constitutionally the head of state is the monarch who is a hereditary member of the Royal Family. However, the monarch has very few formal powers and stays above party politics.
- The most important person in the British political system is the Prime Minister. In theory, the Prime Minister simply chooses the ministers who run Government departments and chairs the Cabinet – the collection of the most senior of those Ministers. In practice, however, the Prime Minister is a very powerful figure and increasingly has been behaving much like a president in other political systems, especially in the area of foreign policy.
- The official residence of the Prime Minister is at 10 Downing Street.



B	I	N	G	O
Margaret Thatcher	Ramsey MacDonald	David Lloyd George	Andrew Bonar Law	Harold Wilson
Herby Addington	Anthony Eden	Spencer Perceval	H.H. Asquith	Edward Heath
Neville Chamberlain	The Earl of Aberdeen	Free Space!	Arthur James Balfour	James Callaghan
Winston Churchill	Alec Douglas-Home	Clement Attlee	Marquis of Salisbury	John Major
Stanley Baldwin	Gordon Brown	Harold MacMillan	The Earl Grey	Tony Blair



# The UK Government

## Government Departments

- The most important political departments are called:
- **The Treasury:** It is responsible for the raising of all taxes and the control of all government expenditure plus the general management of the economy. The head of the Treasury is called the Chancellor of the Exchequer.
- **The Home Office:** It is responsible for criminal matters, policing, and immigration. The Head of the Home Office is called the Home Secretary.
- **The Foreign and Commonwealth Office:** It is responsible for all our international relationships, especially our membership of the European Union. The head of the Foreign Office is called the Foreign Secretary.

Many other UK Government Departments are similar to those in other countries and cover subjects such as education, health, transport, industry, and justice. However, there are also departments for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

CabinetOffice



HM TREASURY

DH Department of Health

Ministry of JUSTICE



DFID Department for International Development



defra Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs



department for culture, media and sport



Home Office

Department for Transport

department for children, schools and families

Communities and Local Government

BIS Department for Business, Innovation and Skills



MINISTRY OF DEFENCE

FCO Foreign and Commonwealth Office



# The UK Government

## Government Ministers

All Government Departments are run by Ministers who are either Members of the House of Commons or Members of the House of Lords. We have three classes of Minister:

- **Secretary of State:** This is usually the head of a Department.
- **Minister of State:** This is a middle-ranking minister.
- **Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State:** This is the most junior class of minister.
- The Prime Minister and all the Secretaries of State together comprise an executive body of government called the Cabinet. The Cabinet meets usually once a week on Tuesday morning. Cabinet meetings are confidential and all members are bound by any decision that it takes in a practice called collective responsibility.
- Although all Ministers are appointed by the Prime Minister and report to him, ultimately all Ministers are accountable to Parliament:
- About once a month, they have to face questions in the House of Commons about the work of the Department.
- Each government department has a special committee of the House of Commons which watches the work of that Department.





# The UK Government

## The civil service

- Each Secretary of State is able to appoint a couple of political advisers – formally known as Special Advisers – to serve him or her.
- But Special Advisers are simply advisers. They have no line management responsibilities in respect of the staff of the Department. Besides these tiny number of Special Advisers, Government Departments are run by civil servants who are recruited in a totally open manner and serve governments of any political parties. The independence and professionalism of the British civil service are fundamental features of the British political system.







# Devolved Government

- The UK has a devolved system of government, partly because less than a fifth of the citizens of the UK are covered the three bodies in question and partly because the three bodies themselves have different powers from one another.
- The three devolved administrations are:

## **The Scottish Parliament**

- This came into operation in May 1999 and covers the 5M citizens of Scotland. It has 129 members elected by a system of proportional representation known as the mixed member system. As a result, 73 members represent individual geographical constituencies elected by the 'first past the post' system, with a further 56 members returned from eight additional member regions, each electing seven members. All members are elected for four-year terms.
- The Scottish Parliament meets in Holyrood, Edinburgh. It has legislative powers over those matters not reserved to the UK Parliament and it has limited tax-raising powers.





# Devolved Government

## The Welsh Assembly

- This came into operation in May 1999 and covers the 3M citizens of Wales. It has 60 members elected by a system of proportional representation known as the mixed member system. As a result, 40 members represent individual geographical constituencies elected by the 'first past the post' system, with a further 20 members returned from five additional member regions, each electing four members. All members are elected for four-year terms.
- It meets in the Senedd, Cardiff. The Assembly has no tax-varying powers. The Welsh Assembly, therefore, has less power than either the Scottish Parliament or the Northern Ireland Assembly because Wales does not have a separate legal system from England.





# Devolved Government

## The Northern Ireland Assembly

- The present version of the Assembly came into operation in May 2007 and covers the 1.5M citizens of Northern Ireland. It has 108 members - six from each of the 18 Westminster constituencies - elected by a system of proportional representation known as the single transferable vote.
- It meets in the Parliament Building, Belfast. It has legislative powers over those matters not reserved to the UK Parliament, but it has no tax-raising powers.
- A First Minister and a Deputy First Minister are elected to lead the Executive Committee of Ministers. As a result of the sectarian division in Northern Ireland, the two must stand for election jointly and to be elected they must have cross-community support by the parallel consent formula, which means that a majority of both the Members who have designated themselves Nationalists and those who have designated themselves Unionists and a majority of the whole Assembly, must vote in favour. The First Minister and Deputy First Minister head the Executive Committee of Ministers and, acting jointly, determine the total number of Ministers in the Executive.







# The UK Judiciary

- The UK operates three separate legal systems: one for England and Wales, one for Scotland, and one for Northern Ireland. Although bound by similar principles, these systems differ in form and the manner of operation.
- The Lord Chancellor's office, which for 1,400 years maintained the judiciary, has now been replaced by the Ministry for Justice which administers the court system.
- The Appellate Committee of the House of Lords, previously the highest court in the land, was replaced by the Supreme Court in October 2009 to allow the judiciary to operate in total independence from the Government. The Supreme Court is now the ultimate court of appeal in all legal matters other than criminal cases in Scotland. It consists of 12 judges and sits in the Middlesex Guildhall in Parliament Square.





# The UK Judiciary

- The UK does not have its own Bill of Rights. However, since 1951 it has been a signatory to the European Convention on Human Rights (part of the Council of Europe) and since 1966 it has allowed its citizens the right of individual petition enabling them to take the government to the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg. The Blair Government incorporated the provisions of the European Convention in UK domestic law in 2000, so that citizens can now seek to have the provisions enforced in domestic courts.





# Civil Society

The special history of the UK - involving gradual changes over long periods - has created a subtle but effective civil society that outsiders often find a little difficult to understand. List of the important elements of the UK a civil society:

- **Bill of Rights:** Although Britain does not have a written constitution, it does have a Bill of Rights because it is a signatory to the European Convention on Human Rights which was drawn up by a body called the Council of Europe. The European Convention is part of its domestic law so that it can be enforced in its domestic courts as well as in the European Court of Human Rights.
- **Independent judiciary:** judges are appointed through an independent process and operate totally independently of government
- **A free media:** As long as they are not being libelous, newspapers, radio and television can say what they want about the Parliament, the Government and politicians. An important new development is the Internet. Web sites and blogs can say what they want about politicians and political issues.







# Civil Society

- **Freedom of information legislation:** They have a Freedom of Information Act which is a piece of legislation that obliges national government, local government and most public bodies to provide any information requested by any citizen. The only exceptions are things like information which concern national security, commercial confidentiality or the private matters of citizens.
- **Trade unions:** About a quarter of workers in Britain are members of trade unions representing different occupational groups or industries. These trade unions are totally independent of government and employers.
- **Pressure groups:** They have lots of organisations that campaign publicly on political issues such as poverty, pensions, and the environment. They perform an invaluable role in putting forward ideas and holding politicians to account.
- **Charities and voluntary groups:** they have lots of organisations that do some of the things that government does as well such as running schools and hospitals, looking after the poor and old, and cleaning up the environment.



# Sources:



- Darlington, R. (2013, January 30). *A short guide to the British Political system*. Retrieved from <http://www.rogerdarlington.me.uk/Britishpoliticalsystem.html>

