

Political life



Introduction

the British – show little enthusiasm for politics
stereotypical view of politics: necessary evil, dirty business
politicians – regarded with suspicion; it is assumed that they are **not telling the truth**

Popular quote: ***Never trust anything until it has been officially denied.***

In recent years, the public trust in politicians has dropped dramatically due to various corruption scandals (“cash for honours“ scandal under Blair, MPs expenses scandal under Gordon Brown)

> general disillusionment with institutions that were once considered the pillars of the liberal and democratic British system > a crisis of the political establishment

BCKGROUND INFO

A key fact to the character of British politics > Britain has not been invaded and occupied since 1066 > development through gradual change and reform based on consensus, rather than through revolutionary events

A major feature > the British political system is not very neat or logical; much of it is based on custom and tradition; there is a great deal of pragmatism involved

There is no written constitution! Instead, three sources serve its purpose:

- All the laws and decrees made over the centuries (Common Law)
- The way these laws have been interpreted and re-interpreted in Law Courts
- The way things have been done over the centuries, though not written down

Key developments

- The main historical development > shift of power from an absolute monarch to a parliament increasingly representative of and accountable to the general population (the bicameral Parliament > from 14th century; a model to parliaments elsewhere)
- Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland > have their own representative assemblies with a wide range of powers (= devolution)

The British Parliament has two "houses". They are the House of Lords and the House of Commons.

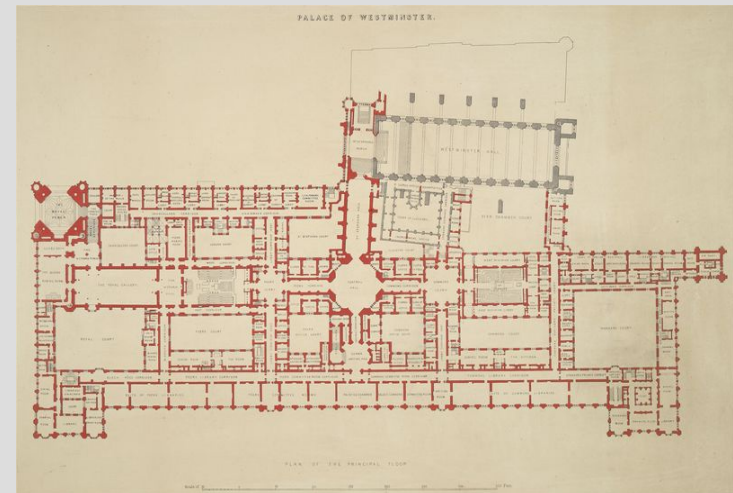


“Corridors of Power”

The style of British politics – marked by the respect for privacy and secrecy

important decisions – not taken at large meetings, but at lunches, over drinks or accidental encounters in the **corridors of power** > things decided before discussed officially

The layout of the Westminster Palace – mirrors this practice > incredibly complex, allowing the unofficial encounters to take place



Conservatives

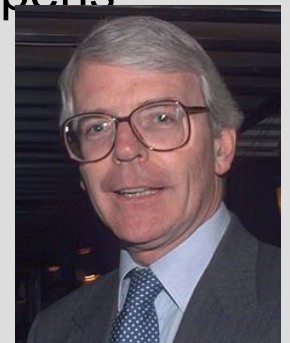
- Traditionally – a party representing and defending British institutions (from parish to palace)
- In the past two centuries, they have cleverly combined the appearance of traditionalism with adaptability to changing environment (aristocratic facade combined with middle-class businessmanship)
- After Churchill's defeat in 1945, the party reinvented itself under Harold Macmillan
- Despite the patriarchal image of his government, Macmillan was moving his party to the left
 - retreat from the Empire
 - moving towards Europe
 - promising a good living standard to ordinary Britons
- After the subsequent defeats by Wilson's Labour Party, the Tories came back under Ted Heath (a carpenter's son) > beginning of a big rift in the party
 - the traditional Tory grandees and landowners
 - the “new”, more egalitarian Tories, embracing European integration, business competition and meritocracy



Conservatives II

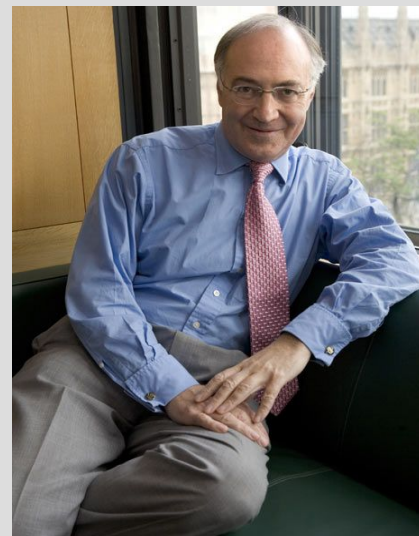


- 1979 – Heath ousted out by Margaret Thatcher > a stark break in the Conservative party philosophy, a move towards the policy of personal domination
- Thatcher – spoke the language of Churchillian patriotism but her real belief was in American-style individualism and moneymaking
- Little respect towards institutions
 - *“She cannot see an institution without hitting it with her handbag”* -MP Julian Critchley
- As a strong leader – Thatcher became less and less accountable to her party > her domineering tendencies finally contributed to her fall
- Under John Major – the crisis in the Conservative Party deepens as the weak PM is unable to offer a new vision of the party that would match the youthful Tony Blair's rebrand of Labour



Conservatives III

- Three subsequent leaders – not strong enough to win elections
- William Hague – intelligent but lacking media image and charisma
- **Iain Duncan Smith** – from the right-wing section of the Tories; too weak to keep his split party unified
- **Michael Howard** – capable and resolute but mocked over his Romanian roots (nicknamed “Dracula”)
- His anti-immigration stance also proved controversial



Cameron's Conservatives



- David Cameron – elected Tory leader in 2005 on a mandate to change and modernize the party (“compassionate conservatism”)
- His original agenda:
 - social justice and social action
 - environmentalism
 - more women and ethnic minority candidates standing for the Conservative Party, support of gay marriage
- After becoming head of the Coalition government in 2010 > his policies changed > the priority became reducing the budget deficit > this gave rise to massive welfare cuts (= **austerity**), causing increase in poverty and homelessness
- Under his premiership > Britain votes to leave the EU in a referendum in 2016

Labour

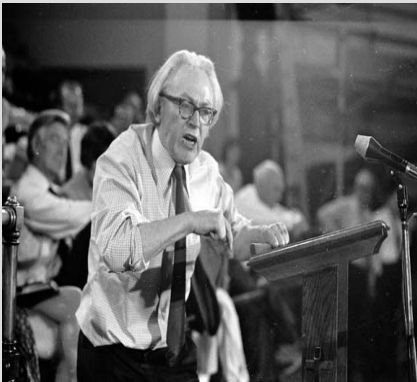
- In the early 1960s – Labour is still a movement as much as a party, with ideals of socialism attracting workers and left-wing intellectuals
- Strongly tied to Trade Unions (in finance as well as membership)
- The gap between the TU members and Labour's intellectual leaders (many Oxford-educated) - increasingly widening
- Despite its Socialist agenda – Labour is not a revolutionary party; even more reluctant to embrace change (especially in economy and industry) than the Tories
- The underlying fear - of factory closure and job losses > the opposition of its members to modernization brought about the industrial chaos of the 1970s and Labour's subsequent defeat



Fall and rise

During the years of Thatcherism – Labour in political wilderness > the party fails to find a new voice as the country is swept by Thatcherism and rising consumerism

- Leaders – Michael Foot, (hard left), Neil Kinnock, John Smith (both more moderate)
- 1994 > Tony Blair a new leader, transforming Labour from a party comitted to socialism and public ownership into a centrist, free-market party > election victory in 1997



Jeremy Corbyn

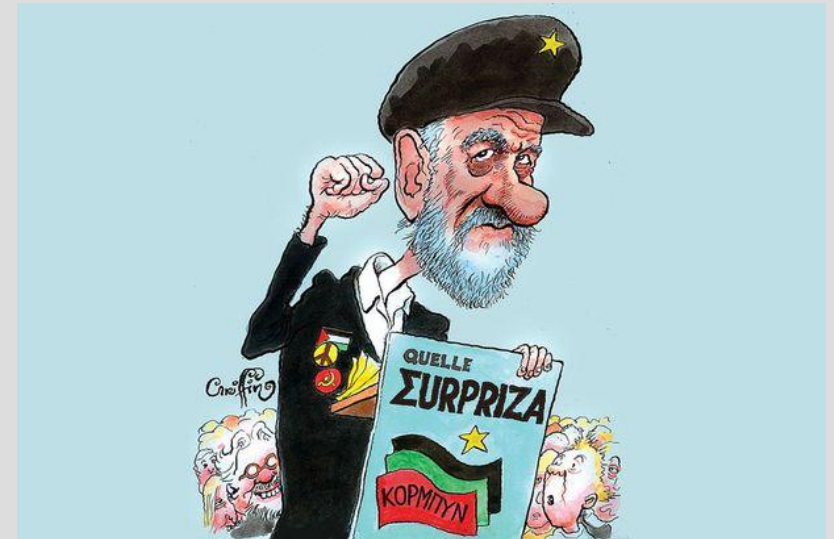
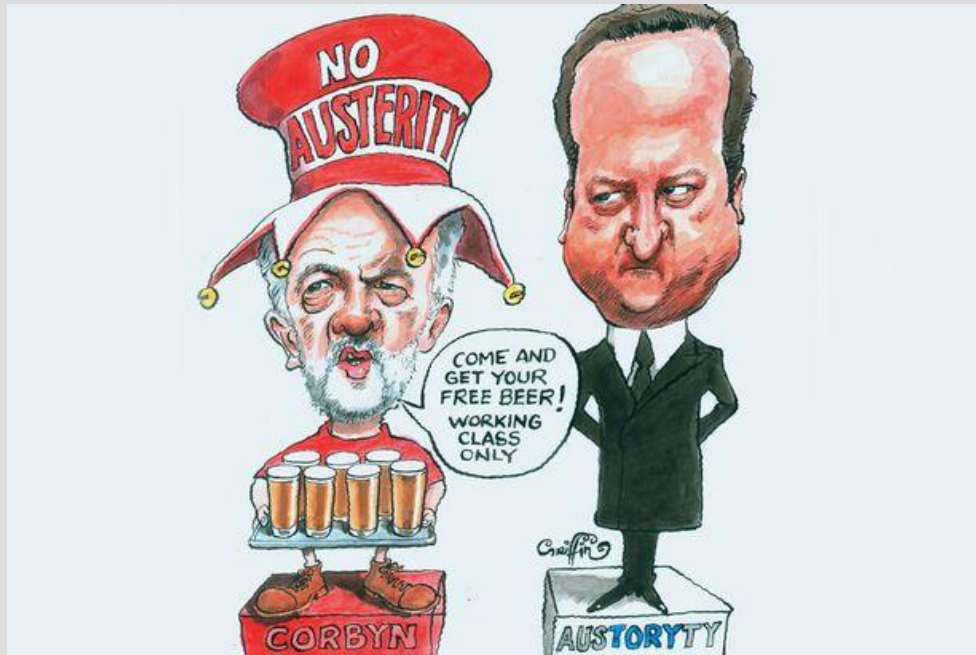
Unexpectedly elected
Labour Leader in 2015

A lifetime backbench rebel and
street protester

- left-wing humanitarian
- against war + Western expansionism
(Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria)
- against corporate capitalism
- Strong emphasis on equality and caring for the society's vulnerable



Mocked by corporate press



... popularity among grassroots voters



Other parties

- **Liberal Democrats** (LibDem) – formed in 1988 by merging of the Social Democratic Party and Liberals
 - Ideology – a mixture of include social democracy, green liberalism, civil libertarianism, internationalism, community politics
 - Voted for by middle-class, university-educated population
 - Its popularity has been in decline since it formed a Coalition government with Cameron’s Conservatives in 2010
- **UKIP (UK Independence Party)**
 - started as a single-issue party (to effect UK’s withdrawal from EU)
 - Under leadership of Nigel Farage - it adopted a wider agenda
 - Ideology – mixture of national conservatism and economic liberalism (free trade, flat tax rate)
 - against political correctness and multiculturalism but also rejecting nationalism based on ethnicity > advocating “**uniculturalism**” (a single British culture embracing all races and religions)
 - Farage – an outspoken critic of the EU, his speeches in the European Parliament are famous
- **The Green Party** (a liberal left party with green agenda)
- **The national parties** (Scottish National Party, Plaid Cymru, Democratic Unionist Party) > representing the interest of other regions beside England

The mavericks – BNP and UKIP

The British National Party (BNP) > far-right populist party with an aim to restore the “overwhelmingly white ethnicity of Britain that it says existed prior to 1948 through legal means“ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/British_National_Party

Voters – mainly working-class people disillusioned with the failure of mainstream parties to address immigration and job losses for British workers > “protest vote“


Leader: Nick Griffin



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The Cabinet

- The Cabinet – formed after the General Election
 - “**First-past-the post**” **election system** (the “winner takes all”) > the party winning in the majority of constituencies forms Her Majesty’s government, other parties go into opposition
 - Cabinet members – some 22 key government secretaries
 - Meetings – every Tuesday at Downing Street in the so-called Cabinet Room
- 
- The Cabinet – functions on the principle of **collective responsibility** > the ministers required to be loyal to Prime Minister, not showing their differences of opinion (in US cabinet disagreements are allowed)
 - Once they openly disagree, they are expected to resign (such as Labour ministers Robin Cook and Clare Short did in 2003 after refusing to support Britain's war on Iraq)

Decline in Cabinet's role

- **Increasing role of the Prime Minister** at the expense of Cabinet members
- Originally, the PM was only „primus inter pares“ - first among the most important government officials
- However, in a trend started by Thatcher and continued by Blair > the PM is now assuming almost presidential powers
- One effect of this > decisions taken with the help of unelected advisers rather than discussed with Cabinet colleagues or in the House of Commons
- **Lack of talent among cabinet ministers**
- The pool of talent for choosing govt members > too limited to find enough able personalities
- Many leading businessmen – have complained about this:
- *“For the purposes of government, a country of 55 million people is forced to depend on an overworked talent pool which could not sustain a single multinational company“* Sir John Hoskyns, a computer tycoon;
- An American President – can choose whomever he wants to have in his Cabinet; a British PM can only choose from among the MPs

Cabinet members

- Usually highly unrepresentative of the rest of the nation; members of small closed groups
- **Macmillan's** cabinet – full of Old Etonians and aristocrats
- **Wilson's** – Oxbridge academics and economists
- **Thatcher's** – many businessmen
- **Blair's** – from more diverse class background, but most were from the North or Scotland > the most populous South East barely represented
- Many of Blair's ministers – professional politicians rather than experts in particular fields
- Owing to frequent reshuffles – they did not get to know their resort properly
- Few of them were down-to-earth people with a sense of the ordinary voter's needs, contrary to Attlee's requirement:

„You've got to have a certain number of solid people whom no one would think particularly brilliant, but who between conflicting opinions can at as middlemen, give you the ordinary man's view.“ (quoted in Sampson, 92)

- No real spokesman for workers or trade unions > almost complete insulation from the electorate

The Civil service - function

- the permanent professional bureaucracy supporting and advising HM's Government; established in mid-19th century
- Civil servants (colloquially called “mandarins”) – guardians of state continuity
- Ministers often change posts > not enough time to gain expertise of their entrusted fields
- On the contrary – civil servants understand the complex apparatus of administration, so their advice is invaluable
- Their permanent position > they are loyal to their ministers regardless of party membership
- Historically, some civil servants have been more powerful than Cabinet ministers (as seen from the figure of Humphrey Appleby of *Yes, Minister*)
- Their position: difficult, as they have to combine loyalty with independent judgment



Changes in Whitehall's power

- Combining loyalty with independent expertise > difficult during premierships of more dictatorial PMs
- Thatcher > weakened the Civil Service
 - politicizing it and making sure its representatives agreed with her
 - attempting to introduce business management methods into the traditional environment
- Blair – continued with the process of politicization
- Result: the quality of the Whitehall staff decreased as opposed to the 1960s and 70s.
- The civil servants – suffer from loss of self-confidence and status
- Another threat to the Civil Service > commercialization and increasing interconnectedness between government administration and business
 - many Civil Service heads move to boards of big corporations (Shell, ICI, HBSC, BskyB)
 - They get involved in the companies they were originally supposed to oversee
 - They become mixed up with corporate executives

Britain's international relations

- With the **Commonwealth of Nations** (a loose association of Britain's former colonies)
 - Nowadays, these ties are mostly cultural, rooted in shared history
- With the **European Union** > a troubled relationship; Britain joined the European Community in 1973 but was always a reluctant member
 - areas of discord: immigration, asylum, common agricultural policy
 - right now, Brexit is underway (the soft version likely to succeed as opposed to hard Brexit which would involve total disconnection from the common market and other ties)
- With the **United States of America**
 - A tradition of a "special relationship" give by the common heritage
 - For much of 20th century history – Britain was economically dependent of the USA (both world wars and the post-war period)
 - Britain – America's crucial ally (Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria)
 - The submissive attitude of Britain to the USA – often criticized (Tony Blair – portrayed as "Bush's poodle")
- With other countries > recent focus on China as the UK looks for new markets

