

BRITISH POLITICS

THIRD EDITION

SIMON GRIFFITHS
ROBERT LEACH



'Bang up to date with its coverage of British politics – taking in the aftermath of the 2016 referendum and the 2017 general election – and the recent academic literature, this text offers a balanced, wide-ranging and, above all, crystal-clear overview.'

– Andrew Hindmoor, University of Sheffield, UK

'A comprehensive and insightful look at the ever changing landscape of British politics. As in their previous writing, the authors' thorough and engaging manner makes this textbook an informative guide for students at all levels.'

– Victoria Honeyman, University of Leeds, UK

'*British Politics* has always been my 'go-to' textbook and this latest edition shines a light on the changing nature of British politics, not least in terms of devolution and multi-level governance and set against the backdrop of the 2016 EU Referendum result. The companion website is a treat for those with different learning styles and is packed with videos, quizzes and flashcards. Highly recommended for academics and students alike.'

– Cathy Gormley-Heenan, University of Ulster, UK

'Just what's needed: approachable, well-organised, and very much on-point, this new edition keeps pace with events, yet continues to provide readers with the essentials they really need to know. Highly recommended.'

– Tim Bale, Queen Mary University of London, UK

'UK politics seems to be changing daily to reflect economic, political, and constitutional crises. It is difficult, but necessary and profoundly important, to produce a comprehensive textbook that remains authoritative and up to date on so many developments. Therefore, Griffiths and Leach should be congratulated for providing such a rich account of British politics.'

– Paul Cairney, University of Stirling, UK

'An excellent new edition to a definitive text. It provides an engaging and accessible introduction to British politics, from established academic debates to the volatility of the contemporary political setting. An essential starting point for any student interested in British politics.'

– Ian Stafford, Cardiff University, UK

BRITISH POLITICS

THIRD EDITION

SIMON GRIFFITHS
ROBERT LEACH



palgrave

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TOUR OF THE BOOK

Politics in Action video

Watch video interviews showcasing different opinions on political ideas and theories in practice.

Opening vignette

Kick-start your reading with a concise example exploring key issues

British politics seems to be in flux. In a BBC Radio 4 programme called *Tearing Up the Politics Textbook* (BBC, 2016a), political scientist Rosie Campbell asked 'How should we understand this new landscape... And what should go in the new politics textbooks?' This book tries to answer some of those questions.

Spotlight On ...

Dive deeper into a particular example or case study

SPOTLIGHT ON ...

Conditions for representative democracy

1.1

- ▶ Full adult franchise: all adults have the right to vote
- ▶ A secret ballot: helps ensure voting without intimidation or bribery
- ▶ Regular elections: governments and parliaments must not be able to postpone elections
- ▶ Fair elections: each vote should count equally
- ▶ An effective choice of candidates and parties for voters
- ▶ A level playing field between rival parties and candidates contesting elections
- ▶ A free and diverse media enabling a wide expression of views

Power is the capacity to achieve desired goals.

Authority is the rightful or legitimate use of power.

Influence involves the ability to shape a decision or outcome through various forms of pressure.

Glossary

Solidify your understanding of important terminology



KEY FIGURES 2.1

John Maynard Keynes

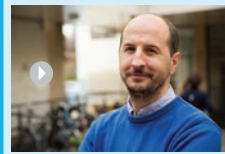
John Maynard Keynes (1883–1946) had been a brilliant critic of interwar economic policy. *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* (1936), his key work, argued that governments could secure full employment, stable prices, steady economic growth and a healthy balance of payments by influencing total (or aggregate) demand for goods and services, through fiscal and monetary policy, without requiring direct intervention, or controls on particular firms and industries (often described as 'Keynesian demand strategies'). So, whenever unemployment appeared to be rising above politically acceptable levels, government could stimulate demand in the economy by reducing taxation and/or increasing government spending (if necessary running a budget deficit).

Key Figures

Learn about leading individuals and their contributions to the field

POLITICS IN ACTION

In this video Simon Griffiths, one of the authors of this book, provides an overview of some of the key questions and themes in this Part.



Emily Robinson talks about some of the historical and social events that have shaped politics since 1945, and reflects on why such an understanding is useful for politics students today.



Watch the videos at www.macmillanihe.com/griffiths-brit-pol-3e

COMPARING BRITISH POLITICS 5.2

Amending constitutions

Procedures for amending the US Constitution are described in Article 5 of the Constitution. Congress can propose amendments that have been approved by a two-thirds majority in each House. Any such amendment must also be approved by three-quarters of the state legislatures before it takes effect. Thus, amending the US Constitution is very difficult. Even so, a number of important amendments have been passed. These include:

- ▶ The Bill of Rights, the name given to the first ten amendments, ratified in 1791, which includes a number of basic citizen rights.

▶ The limitation of the presidential period of office to two terms (22nd amendment, 1951). In Australia, constitutional amendments require the support of both houses of parliament, then a referendum which must receive majority support overall and in a majority of states.

In Germany, constitutional amendments need a two-thirds majority in both houses of parliament, but the federal system and the rights of German citizens cannot be amended.

France has two methods for making constitutional amendments:

Comparing British Politics

Take a look at how Britain stacks up against other nations

Timeline 2.1 The welfare state: key developments

- 1942** The Beveridge Report, *Social Insurance and Allied Services*
- 1944** Education Act
- 1944** White Paper on employment policy (high and stable level of employment)
- 1945** Family Allowances Act
- 1946** National Insurance Act (implemented Beveridge Report)
- 1948** Establishment of the National Health Service

Timelines

Recap key dates and events

**FURTHER READING**

The first chapter of Heywood's (2013) *Politics* addresses the question 'What is Politics?' It includes a particularly useful brief discussion of power. There is also a brief discussion of alternative views on the nature of politics in Leach and Lightfoot (2010, pp. x-xi) *The Politics and its Companion*. The same subject is treated in more depth from different perspectives by several authors in Lefkovich (ed) (2004) *What is Politics?* Older classic texts include Lasswell (1938) *Politics: Who Gets What, When, How?* and Crick (1993) *In Defence of Politics*, which is thought-provoking, if a little idiosyncratic. French political scientist Duverger's *The Study of Politics* (1972) is still worth reading. Arblaster (1987) provides a readable short introduction to Democracy. Macpherson's almost as brief *The Life and*

The distribution of power in Britain is, inevitably, a controversial subject. One readable personal view is provided by Sampson (2009) *Who Runs This Place?*, the last of a series of studies of the 'Anatomy of Britain' which he began in 1962. For a more theoretical discussion of power see Lukes (1999) (2005). Classic texts on participation and representation are also worth reading, notably Carole Pateman *Participation and Democratic Theory* (1970) and Hanna Pitkin, *The Concept of Representation* (1967). Dunleavy and O'Leary's (1987) *Theories of the State* provides a clear account of most of the models of power (pluralism, elitism, Marxism, etc.) briefly described in this chapter. On the issues around the widespread current disillusionment with politics and democracy, there are two provocative prizewinning books:

Further Reading

Widen your knowledge by exploring other works on key issues

Summary

Review the key points covered in the chapter and check your understanding

**SUMMARY**

- Politics involves far more than government and party politics. It is about power and decision-making that affect all our lives and determine how scarce resources are allocated - 'who gets what, when, how'.
- There are disagreements over the legitimate scope of politics. Some distinguish between a public or political sphere and a private sphere, between the state and civil society. Others would deny that politics can or should be excluded

few, others that it is widely dispersed. Theories or 'models' of power reflect conflicting underlying assumptions and look at different kinds of evidence.

- Although politics is about the conflicting interests of different social or ethnic groups, it is also about ideas. Political differences commonly reflect contrasting underlying ideological assumptions.

Questions for Discussion

Join in the debate yourselves and consolidate your comprehension of chapter themes

**QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

- What is politics? Why do many people seem to show distaste for politics? Or are people 'fed up' with politicians or the political process?
- Should we distinguish between a political (or public) sphere and a private sphere from which politics should be excluded?
- What do you understand by democracy? How far is Britain a democracy?
- Who governs Britain? Where does power lie in Britain? Is power highly concentrated in the
- Is political change driven by ideas and principles, or by economic and social change?
- Is it possible, or desirable, to take such issues as education, health, defence or law and order out of politics?
- Does it still make sense to study British politics, particularly when the British state is apparently in the process of being eroded from above and below?

Useful Websites

Tap in to useful online sources for further information

**USEFUL WEBSITES**

The Political Studies Association exists to develop and promote the study of politics in the UK. It also blogs on many issues on the study of British politics: www.psa.ac.uk.

Tearing Up the Politics Textbooks, Rosie Campbell's programme referred to at the start of this chapter, can be heard at: www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b07wqkm7.

Online Teaching and Learning Materials

Access a wide range of ancillary resources to support the book



Further student resources to support learning are available at www.macmillanihe.com/griffiths-brit-pol-3e

TEACHING AND LEARNING RESOURCES

British Politics

Third Edition
by Simon Griffiths and Robert Leach
Beliefed Titles 2


- > HOME
- > TEACHING RESOURCES
- > LEARNING RESOURCES
- > ABOUT THIS BOOK

Fully revised and updated third edition of a popular, established textbook, providing a definitive introduction to Britain's politics, political institutions and processes. Comprehensively re-worked and re-structured to better align with courses, this new edition places great emphasis on the changing context of British politics while addressing key themes such as the ongoing importance of gender and ethnicity to political and social life in Britain. Furthermore, the book's familiar authoritative style has been retained with a fresh look and revitalized pedagogical features to provide a complete learning package.

The book is designed for courses on or related to British Politics. Its accessible style and context-setting Part 1 will make it ideal for students new to the field (particularly those who haven't studied the subject at school level or international students), but its rigour will stimulate and engage more experienced students.

Key features include:

- Authoritative yet accessible introduction to the field
- Designed to align with courses
- Focus on the changeability of British Politics, with coverage of important elements such as devolution, multi-level governance, the rise of populism and social movements
- Rich learning resource – incorporates a wide suite of learning features to stimulate and reinforce student engagement and support comprehension and retention



To support the use of this book, the companion website contains a host of interactive and ancillary content that can be used during lectures and seminars, or as a self-study aid. These can be found at www.macmillanihe.com/griffiths-brit-pol-3e.

TEACHING RESOURCES:

Lecturers using this book on their course can take advantage of the following materials to support their teaching:

- » Lecture slides
- » Testbank of assessment questions

LEARNING RESOURCES:

Students using the book have access to interactive learning aids, including:

- » Politics in Action video interviews
- » Interactive Timelines
- » Flashcard quizzes
- » Content updates

POLITICS IN ACTION VIDEO INTERVIEWS

Accompanying this textbook is a series of video interviews with key figures in the field, who offer their thoughts on a number of important issues. Bringing politics to life, these videos invite you to expand your learning beyond this textbook.

PART 1: FROM PAST TO PRESENT

EMILY ROBINSON



Emily Robinson is Senior Lecturer in Politics at the University of Sussex and a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society. Her publications include *The Language of Progressive Politics in Modern Britain* (Palgrave, 2017) and *History, Heritage and Tradition in Contemporary British Politics* (Manchester University Press, 2012).

PART 2: GOVERNMENT AND GOVERNANCE

CATHERINE HADDON



Dr Catherine Haddon is the Institute for Government's resident historian. She joined in November 2008 from academia and leads the Institute's work on the history of government and civil service, general elections, changes of government, constitutional issues and government reform. She often features as a commentator on radio and TV.

PART 3: PEOPLE AND POLITICS

ROSIE CAMPBELL



Professor Rosie Campbell is a Professor of Politics at Birkbeck University of London. She is the principle investigator of the ESRC funded *Representative Audit of Britain*, looking at the 2015 and 2017 British General Elections, and co-investigator of a Leverhulme funded study of British parliamentary candidates and MPs from 1945–2015. Rosie has presented four episodes of RadioFour’s *Analysis* programme on British politics.

PART 4: POLITICS AND POLICYMAKING

PATRICK DIAMOND



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PREFACE

Since the last edition of this book, British politics has been in turmoil. Some of this instability can be traced back to the effects of the global banking crisis of 2007–08, which soon turned into a full-blown economic slump. In the UK, this was the end of a long period of sustained growth. Debates suddenly shifted from how the state should invest money wisely in public services to how to rein in spending. The unexpected crash led political parties across the world to shift to a politics of ‘austerity’, which often meant deep cuts to public spending in order to rebalance the economy (Lodge and Hood, 2011). This was the language that dominated the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition, for example, in government from 2010 to 2015. For many other people, the crisis raised new questions about the fairness and stability of the political and economic system and led to a renewed search for alternatives.

Economic worries seemed to be linked to a crisis in ‘politics as usual’. In June 2016, against the advice of the leadership of every significant party in the House of Commons, the UK population voted to leave the European Union (EU), scuppering the UK’s main economic strategy for the previous half century.

Party politics in the UK has been just as volatile. Experts and pollsters confidently predicted that the 2017 general election would lead to a significant Conservative victory. Instead, it resulted in Prime Minister Theresa May losing her majority in parliament and controversially relying on the support of Northern Ireland’s Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) to keep the Conservatives in power.

The 2017 election was just one example of the unpredictability that has come to define contemporary party politics in the UK. Two years earlier, just before the 2015 general election, a group of experts put the Conservative’s chance of having a majority of seats in the House of Commons at 200 to 1. When the Conservatives unexpectedly won the 2015 election outright, the position of their leader, David Cameron,

seemed impregnable. Just over a year later he had resigned, after leading the UK into a referendum on membership of the EU and backing the losing side.

In the aftermath of the 2015 general election, Labour ditched their electoral strategy of the previous 30 years – which had seen leaders taking the party to the political centre – by electing Jeremy Corbyn, a veteran socialist, as leader. Corbyn had spent much of his time in Parliament on the backbenches rebelling against his own party. Some Labour MPs were so unhappy at the direction Corbyn was taking the party that they forced a leadership election. Just a few months later people were starting to take the idea of Prime Minister Corbyn seriously.

North of the border, the dominance of the Scottish National Party (SNP) broke the two-party duopoly in 2015. The SNP won all but three seats in Scotland at that election, increasing their representation from 6 to 56 MPs (although they dropped back again in 2017). Politics, in recent years, is nothing if not unpredictable.

British Politics is the first textbook to really try to make sense of these dramatic changes. It has been extensively revised to take account of these, and many more, recent developments. It sets out to try and understand the interplay of individuals, groups, institutions and ideas that shape and reshape politics, as well as understanding their history, so we know better how we got to where we are today. For that reason, Part I, ‘From Past to Present’, sets out some of the main trends in British politics since the Second World War, taking us up to the present day. It ends with a snapshot of contemporary UK society in all its diversity.

Part II explores questions of ‘Government and Governance’ in the UK. It sets out the changing constitution within which British politics operates and explores some of the key institutions, from Parliament to the law. It also examines the various tiers of government in the UK from local to European, ending with

an exploration of Britain's relationship with Europe after 'Brexit' and the ensuing desperate wrangling for a deal with the EU.

Part III, 'People and Politics', examines how politics is organised and carried out. It explores voting behaviour and the systems used to elect representatives in the UK. It also examines the nature of political parties and ideology, and looks at how we participate – or don't participate – in the political process. It concludes with a discussion of how the media affects politics – including exploring the way in which new media (such as Facebook or Twitter) and traditional media (like newspapers) feed off one another.

Part IV, 'Politics and Policy-making', explores the policy-making process in more detail, setting out some of the theoretical approaches to policy and examining the framework in which it operates. It then explores some of the big policy questions the UK faces today: how to create a successful economy; provide welfare and public services; and protect the environment. It concludes with an exploration of foreign policy and an analysis of Britain's place in an increasingly globalised world.

There is never an ideal time to produce a new book on British politics – authors and publishers always risk being overtaken by events, particularly given the fast pace and unpredictable direction of recent changes discussed above. However, we have tried to more than simply update the text to include recent developments.

This book builds on the success of previous editions, but pays more attention to the changing nature of politics and society. This means that there is a greater focus on questions of gender, ethnicity, nationalism and other important forms of identity, as well as an attempt to show not only what political institutions have been, but also how they are changing. There is also a renewed focus on how mainstream politics in the UK has historically excluded certain groups, such as women and ethnic minorities.

It is always a challenge writing for a wide audience and this is particularly true of

textbooks such as this one. We hope that this book is rewarding for all readers. For students who have studied British politics and history before, we hope that after the introductions, we have pushed the analysis far enough to challenge you.

At several points in the book, we have included links to videos on our website, where leading experts in the field give their perspectives on the issues discussed. We hope these sections challenge all readers. We include questions at the end, which are still the subject of debate in the academic community, and which we hope will stimulate further debate. We also link to wider reading if you want to go further. Many of these new pedagogic features are set out in the 'Tour of the Book', above, which introduces the book's various exciting new features. Inevitably, we can't please everyone, but we hope that there is enough here to introduce you to some of the most engaging and tricky questions in British politics.

For students who are unfamiliar with British politics, we have focused on making sure that the most important issues and debates are set out clearly and in an engaging and accessible way.

Bill Coxall and Lynton Robins deserve the credit for establishing this textbook. They wrote its predecessor, *Contemporary British Politics* (1989, 1994, 1998). Robert Leach took the lead in producing the fourth edition of *Contemporary British Politics* (2003) and the fully revamped text, *British Politics* (2006, 2011). Simon Griffiths and Robert have taken responsibility for this third edition. Many people have invested their time in making this book as good as it can be. We would both like to thank Niki Jayatunga, Lloyd Langman and Georgia Park at Palgrave, Maggie Lythgoe for her work copyediting the text, Elizabeth Evans for her helpful and careful comments across many chapters, and several anonymous reviewers who commented insightfully on all or parts of the draft script. Although any errors remain the authors' own, there are far fewer of them thanks to the help, support and advice of this group.

ABBREVIATIONS

Please note: these are some of the most frequently used abbreviations.

AMS	additional member system	NAO	National Audit Office
AV	alternative vote	NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
BAME	black, Asian and minority ethnic	NEC	National Executive Committee (of the Labour Party)
BME	black and minority ethnic	NHS	National Health Service
CAP	Common Agricultural Policy	NPM	new public management
CBI	Confederation of British Industry	NUM	National Union of Mineworkers
CCT	compulsory competitive tendering	OBR	Office of Budget Responsibility
CND	Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament	ONS	Office for National Statistics
Defra	Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs	PAC	Public Accounts Committee
DSC	departmental select committees	PCA	Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration
DUP	Democratic Unionist Party (Northern Ireland)	PCT	primary care trust
GDP	gross domestic product	PFI	private finance initiative
EC	European Community	PLP	Parliamentary Labour Party
ECHR	European Convention on Human Rights	PMQs	Prime Minister's Questions
ECtHR	European Court of Human Rights	SCS	Senior Civil Service
ECSC	European Coal and Steel Community	SDLP	Social Democratic and Labour Party (Ireland)
EEC	European Economic Community	SDP	Social Democratic Party
ERM	Exchange Rate Mechanism	SMP	single member plurality
EU	European Union	SNP	Scottish National Party
FSA	Financial Services Authority	STV	single transferable vote
GLC	Greater London Council	TUC	Trades Union Congress
IMF	International Monetary Fund	UK	United Kingdom
IRA	Irish Republican Army	UKIP	United Kingdom Independence Party
IS	'Islamic State'	UN	United Nations
LCC	London County Council	USA	United States of America
LGBT+	lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender	USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
MEP	Member of the European Parliament	UUP	Ulster Unionist Party (Ireland)
MP	Member of Parliament	WMDs	weapons of mass destruction
MPC	Monetary Policy Committee	WTO	World Trade Organization
MSP	Member of the Scottish Parliament		

PART I

FROM PAST TO PRESENT

Part I introduces you to the study of politics in the UK. We examine the history of politics in the UK from the Second World War onwards, arguing that it is impossible to understand contemporary politics without understanding the recent past. It ends by providing a snapshot of contemporary politics and society, and examining the diversity of the UK today.

- 1 The Study of British Politics
- 2 The Shadow of the Past I: From War to Welfare
- 3 The Shadow of the Past II: Thatcher and After
- 4 Life in Contemporary Britain

POLITICS IN ACTION

In this video Simon Griffiths, one of the authors of this book, provides an overview of some of the key questions and themes in this Part.



Emily Robinson talks about some of the historical and social events that have shaped politics since 1945, and reflects on why such an understanding is useful for politics students today.



Watch the videos at www.macmillanihe.com/griffiths-brit-pol-3e

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THE STUDY OF BRITISH POLITICS

British politics seems to be in flux. In a BBC Radio 4 programme called *Tearing Up the Politics Textbook* (BBC, 2016a), political scientist Rosie Campbell asked: 'How should we understand this new landscape ... And what should go in the new politics textbooks?' This book tries to answer some of those questions.

In the last two decades, British politics has entered a period of transformation and unpredictability. The uncodified British constitution, which for decades grew organically, has gone through more change in the past 20 years or so than any other stage. New, devolved parliaments and assemblies were created in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, passing control of significant areas of policy over to the territories that make up the United Kingdom (UK). In 2014, Scotland voted on whether it wanted to remain a part of the UK at all. The answer was hardly a resounding 'yes' and the Scottish nationalists are pushing for a second vote.

Other constitutional changes have shaken politics in the UK. In 1999, the House of Lords ceased to be a hereditary body, whose members were mainly the sons of white, aristocratic families. The Human Rights Act incorporated the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) into UK law in 1998. Britain's relationship with the rest of the world is also changing. In 2016, the UK voted to leave the European Union, breaking the dominant approach to British foreign and economic policy for much of the previous half century.

Party politics also seems more volatile than ever. While 2017 appeared to be a return to normality, with Labour and the Conservatives dominating the general election, the result masks a long-term rise in multiparty politics within the UK. The Scottish National Party hold most of the seats north of the border, in both Scottish and Westminster elections. Voters are less wedded to the old parties. In 1900, 99% of voters in the general election supported one of the big three parties – the Conservatives, Labour or the Liberals. Over a century later, in 2005, this figure was almost unchanged: 94% of the population supported one of those parties or their contemporary successors. By the 2015 general election, however, that figure had fallen to 77%. Smaller parties squeezed out bigger ones. The United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) gained votes from the bigger parties, particularly in large parts of England and Wales. The Scottish National Party (SNP) all but wiped out the other parties in Scotland (BBC, 2016b), although they made something of a recovery in 2017.

The behaviour of electorates also seems to be becoming more unpredictable. In 2015, Jeremy Corbyn took over as leader of the Labour Party. Just weeks before his election he was 100/1 with some bookmakers to win the leadership. He set about taking a radically different approach to many of his predecessors; ignoring their lesson that elections are won from the centre, he offered a radical, populist manifesto at the 2017 general election that his critics argued would be a disaster and would force his resignation. Instead, Labour hugely increased its share of the popular vote and the number of seats cast. Politics in the UK has rarely been so surprising.

In this chapter, we examine some issues that will inform the rest of this book.

THIS CHAPTER:

- » Asks what 'politics' is, and sets out some of the ways in which the term is used in this book.
- » Explores 'power' in British politics, and the related concepts of 'authority' and 'influence'.
- » Sets out some of the main views on 'democracy' – the power of the people – the principle on which our parliamentary system is now said to be based.
- » Looks ahead to some of the big issues in policy, such as how we end discrimination or promote social justice, run our public services, or conduct foreign policy, discussed later in the book.
- » Asks if it still makes sense to talk about something called 'British' politics, as opposed to local, regional or national politics, after all the changes of recent years.

WHAT IS POLITICS?

Politics fascinates many people and the volatility of recent years makes it all the more interesting. The numbers of students studying the subject reflects this. Yet the fascination is far from universal. Colin Hay (2007), British academic, wrote *Why We Hate Politics*, in response to evidence among some sections of society of increasing apathy, alienation and disillusion from mainstream politicians and political parties. This alienation is disturbing, not least because the UK, along with most other countries in the world, claims to be a democracy, a system of government that requires a widespread degree of public political interest and involvement. (This is discussed further in [Chapter 13](#).)

Perhaps we should not be surprised that politics inspires such contradictory feelings. The subject is bound up with controversy, which is one reason why it both attracts and repels. Some of this controversy will surround the current political issues facing the UK, which

are often deeply divisive. Recent examples include an ongoing economic crisis, the decision to leave the European Union, terrorism and climate change, among many others. Other areas of controversy concern the mechanics of government and the political process, such as reforming the electoral system and parliament, or re-examining the relationship between the constituent nations of the UK. Some of it relates to deeper questions over ideas and values that have long exercised philosophers and political scientists: the distribution of political power, and the nature of politics itself, which is the subject of this chapter.

Before we begin to explore British politics in more detail, it would make sense to ask 'what is politics?' Various interpretations have been given (see Leftwich, 2004 and Heywood, 2013, Ch. 1 for good summaries). The answer we choose – from a focus on the mechanics of government to a study of power relations in British society – will inform what we consider the appropriate focus of this book.

POLITICS AS THE STUDY OF THE STATE AND GOVERNMENT

The first interpretation of politics is derived from the word itself. 'Politics' is from the Ancient Greek word, *polis*, literally meaning city-state. Thus, politics is 'what concerns the *polis*' or in modern terms, the **state**. The study of politics from earliest times has focused largely on a unit of government called the 'state'.

A **state** is a political and governmental unit – a compulsory association that is sovereign over a particular territory.

States have differed considerably in geographical extent and population size over space and time, from the small 'city-states' of Ancient Greece, through more recent nation states and colonial empires, such as the British Empire, to the considerable variation in size and wealth of modern independent sovereign states. The state that is the focus of this book is the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, one of 193 independent sovereign states that today are members of the United Nations (UN).

The term 'independent sovereign state' is commonly used to stress that the state has supreme (or sovereign) power within its own borders, and no external power can interfere in its internal affairs. No particular system of government is implied – it can be a hereditary monarchy, a military dictatorship or a representative democracy.

Max Weber (1991, p. 78), German sociologist, argued at the end of the First World War that: 'The state is a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory.' Without this exclusive right to employ force, individuals and groups could take the law into their own hands with impunity, leading to lawless chaos; countries where this is the case are often termed 'failed states'. Weber also stresses that the force is legitimate (or lawful). This may mean simply that the state is widely accepted as legitimate and acts within the law that it has itself established. In the UK, it is only the state that can, after due process, imprison

us (or, until the 1960s, even execute us) if we have broken the state law. In practice, even states established through violent usurpation or conquest – including the United States – often acquire legitimacy over time, through the acquiescence or willing acceptance of their subjects and through their acceptance by the governments of other states.

Under this view, therefore, politics is the study of the state and government. This interpretation makes its way into our everyday use of the term: people are said to be 'in politics' if they hold public office. Indeed, it can sometimes narrow to a simple equation of politics with party politics. While MPs are in politics, a common criticism of the Civil Service or judiciary made by politicians is that they are getting 'too involved in politics' (an issue we discuss in [Chapters 8](#) and [9](#)). Academic study is more likely to acknowledge the political role of these state actors, with a focus on the institutions and process associated with government or government policy. These are, of course, all legitimate subjects for academic study, and are an important part of this book.

However, 'British politics' is surely broader than the study of the British state or its government. This definition implies that politics is a rather remote activity, distinct from the lives, activities and input of ordinary people. How far does politics include the governed as well as those doing the governing? Although the state and government are important, this understanding of politics is too narrow for our interpretation of British politics in this book.

POLITICS AS THE STUDY OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS

A second, broader view interprets politics as public affairs. As such, British politics is not limited to the study of the British state or what goes on in government, but involves all of 'public life'. This implicitly contrasts the public sphere with the private sphere. It leads to an immediate question. Where should the distinction between public and private be made?

Some liberals and conservatives would draw a clear distinction between the state and civil society. This contrasts a public or political

sphere and a private sphere of life from which politics should be excluded, for example the family, private business and other voluntary clubs and associations. The Wolfenden Report, which was published in 1957 and paved the way for the decriminalisation of homosexual acts in England, implicitly drew on this distinction, arguing that: 'It is not, in our view, the function of the law to intervene in the private life of citizens.' Champions of the free market would also seek to exclude politics from much economic activity, and place firm limits on government intervention.

Drawing this neat line of distinction has been controversial. Many feminists, for example, have objected that the equation of politics with 'public affairs' ignores the impact of politics in our private lives. They have argued that 'the personal is political'. They are not just concerned with formal legal equality in the public sphere, but with gender relations in the family, home and bedroom, because these are seen as central to the types of injustice and oppression suffered by women. Consequently, personal and sexual relations and the division of labour within the home are not purely private matters but a legitimate sphere for political engagement. The hard distinction therefore between a public political world and a private non-political one excludes many



Source: [iStock.com/violinconcertono3](https://www.istock.com/violinconcertono3)

For feminists, in particular, politics is understood broadly, to include both personal and public life.

personal issues that are within the scope of politics, as we understand it in this book.

POLITICS AS A PROCESS OF COMPROMISE

A third, rather different account of politics argues that it is about compromise. This conception of politics is less interested in the *arena* of politics – the state or the public sphere, for example – and more in the way in which politics is conducted. Under this view, politics is seen as a means of resolving conflict, through compromise, and reaching a peaceful resolution. To the British Conservative politician 'Rab' Butler (1971), politics was 'the art of the possible'. Butler hints at the constraints involved in the political process. Compromise is often necessary because different sections of the community want different and often conflicting things. Thus, political decisions commonly produce winners and losers. Bernard Crick (1993), British socialist political scientist, made a similar argument in his book, *In Defence of Politics*, originally published in 1962, which focused on the necessity of compromise.

This definition of politics is also found in our everyday use. For example, Jeremy Corbyn (BBC News, 2017a) argued that military action was not the answer to the crisis in Syria and called for a 'political solution'. However, this account of politics is, to some degree, limited to parliamentary democracies like the UK, with free elections and multiple political parties. Clearly, an account of politics that excludes any state which does not meet such standards cannot be a far-reaching one. However, Crick's argument is a useful reminder that politics is about processes of reaching decisions, as well as the study of the state or the public sphere, for example. The focus on process is an element of the view of politics we draw on in this book.

POLITICS AS THE STUDY OF POWER

A fourth, much broader account equates politics with power. This view is associated with radical French philosopher Michel Foucault ([1975] 1991). Under this interpretation, politics is not confined to a particular arena – the government, the state or the 'public' realm – or

a process, such as compromise. It takes place in our social interactions with families and friends, as much as it does in our dealings with government. This interpretation has found its way into common use too. People often talk about ‘the politics of the boardroom’ or the ‘lecture hall’. A lecturer standing at the front of a room is in a position of power. However, under this view, politics becomes conflated with the study of power relations in society. It raises the question, what is distinctive about *political* activity compared to any other form of social behaviour?

A useful, workable definition of the term ‘politics’ comes from Harold Lasswell (1936), American political scientist, who defined the subject as the study of ‘who gets what, when, how’. This concise definition suggests that politics is about choosing between different possibilities. Individuals, communities and governments must determine their priorities – they cannot have everything they want. Politics

is therefore about conflict, but it is also about the distribution of scarce resources. Politics is not only about the struggle for those scarce resources, but also an analysis of the process of getting them. We return to Lasswell’s question (who gets what, when and how?) at various points in this book.

POWER IN BRITISH POLITICS

Politics is clearly in part about **power**, but this key concept is difficult to define. Power suggests a capacity to achieve desired results and compel obedience. It may be lawful or unlawful. An armed criminal may force his victims to do things they would not choose to do. He is clearly exercising power, although unlawfully. Others, such as a government minister or a judge, may also wield effective power, but power that is generally recognised as lawful. (For a classic analysis of power, see Lukes (1974 [2005]), discussed in more detail in Ch. 18.)



Source: Getty Images/Vetta/Clerkenwell

If politics is about power, then many everyday situations, from lectures to relationships, are ‘political’.

The term **authority** is widely used to describe the rightful use of political power, or legitimate power. Power may compel obedience, while authority is widely accepted by those over whom it is exercised. We voluntarily obey those in authority because we accept the legitimacy of their power. Max Weber asked many of these questions (discussed further in [Key Figures 1.1](#)).

Power is sometimes also distinguished from **influence**. While power implies a capacity to determine outcomes directly, influence suggests the ability to shape outcomes indirectly, to exert pressure on those who are taking the decisions, persuading them to change their opinion and behaviour. The study of politics therefore involves examining not just the formal institutions and offices directly

involved in government, but also the influences on government and the policy process, including, for example, the role of business organisations and trade unions, religious sects, voluntary bodies and cause groups. Many policy decisions taken by politicians or civil servants may have their origin and explanation in the successful influence of groups outside government (see [Chapter 18](#), pp. 379–81).

Power is the capacity to achieve desired goals.

Authority is the rightful or legitimate use of power.

Influence involves the ability to shape a decision or outcome through various forms of pressure.



KEY FIGURES 1.1

Max Weber

Max Weber (1864–1920), German sociologist, asked why we choose to obey those in authority. He argued that it was because we accept the legitimacy of their power. He distinguished between three main types or sources of authority: traditional, charismatic and legal-rational:

- » *Traditional authority* rests on long established custom – the authority of a tribal chief or hereditary monarch, for example.
- » *Charismatic authority* derives from the compelling personal qualities of an individual – the authority exercised by a Napoleon, Hitler or (more positively) Nelson Mandela. They are obeyed because of *who* they are, rather than *what* they are.
- » *Legal-rational authority* is based on formal rules. An elected politician or appointed government official may be obeyed, not because of custom, nor because of their personal qualities, but because it is acknowledged that they legitimately hold their office under accepted rules and procedures. It is the office or post rather than the person occupying it whose authority is obeyed.

Weber considered that legal-rational authority is the characteristic form of authority in the modern world. Both modern bureaucracy, such as that embodied by the UK's Civil Service, and representative democracy involve legal-rational authority.

DEMOCRACY: POWER TO THE PEOPLE?

Britain, along with most states in the modern western world, and many others elsewhere, claims to be a **democracy**. This near universal approval of democracy as a system of government is relatively recent. A form of

democracy had flourished in the small city-state of Ancient Athens nearly 2,500 years ago, where direct rule by the people themselves (or at least those men who were not slaves) was just about possible. However, with the emergence of extensive empires and larger nation states, democracy was regarded as a remote and essentially impractical system of government.

Democracy is a term derived from Ancient Greek to mean the rule or power of the people. 'Our constitution is called a democracy because power is in the hands not of a minority but of the whole people' (Pericles of Athens, 431 BCE, as reported in Thucydides' History of the Peloponnesian War [5th century BCE] 1972, p. 145).

Democracy became more feasible with the development in the nineteenth century of the idea of **representative democracy**, that is government by the elected representatives of the people, rather than **direct democracy**, or government by the people themselves (such as had existed in Ancient Athens). It is representative democracy rather than direct democracy that has become the approved system of government over much of the modern world, although some advocate extending direct citizen participation in the political process beyond voting, infusing representative democracy with elements of direct democracy.

Democracy may have become widely approved, but it has often been accorded only faint praise by some influential modern thinkers and politicians. Whether modern representative democracy does ensure real government 'by the people', as Abraham Lincoln asserted, is far from clear. Indeed, it does not even invariably result in a government chosen by the majority of the people. Yet despite their limitations, mature democracies do offer an element of real

choice between rival parties and programmes, divergences of opinion and a process of resolving dispute that renders opposition respectable rather than treasonable, as well as providing for the peaceful transfer of power between governments (as Crick, 1993, argued).

Representative democracy involves indirect government by the people through representatives elected by the people. In 1863, in his Gettysburg Address, US President Abraham Lincoln defined democracy as 'government of the people, by the people, for the people'.

Direct democracy involves the direct and continuous participation of citizens in government, for example, through regular referendums.

While the British like to think they invented modern representative democracy, the Americans and the French have a rather better claim. Britain only came to terms with democracy rather later (as shown in [Timeline 1.1](#)). Although England boasts an ancient Parliament with over 700 years of near continuous existence since it was established in 1265, even the lower house of that Parliament, the House of Commons, was not democratically elected until recently. Even today, it is questionable how far Britain satisfies all the conditions to qualify as a full and fair system of representative democracy (see [Spotlight 1.1](#)).

Timeline 1.1 The emergence of democracy in Britain

Date	Event	Implications for democracy
1776	Declaration of Independence by American rebels against the British state and crown	Creation of the first modern democracy, although voting limited by gender and race
1789	French Revolution	Replaced (initially only briefly) the autocratic monarchic system with the ideas of popular sovereignty and liberty, equality and fraternity
19th century	Reform Acts in Britain	Extended the vote to most men
1918	Representation of the People Act in Britain	Women over the age of 30, who met minimum property qualifications, gained the right to vote
1928	Extension of the Representation of the People Act in Britain	All women over the age of 21 could vote, equalling the terms for men

SPOTLIGHT ON ...

Conditions for representative democracy

1.1

- » Full adult franchise: all adults have the right to vote
- » A secret ballot: helps ensure voting without intimidation or bribery
- » Regular elections: governments and parliaments must not be able to postpone elections
- » Fair elections: each vote should count equally
- » An effective choice of candidates and parties for voters
- » A level playing field between rival parties and candidates contesting elections
- » A free and diverse media enabling a wide expression of views

POWER IN THE UK

It would be generally conceded that elections in the UK do involve a choice and that they are not patently rigged (as they are in some countries). Yet, regardless of the extent of the right to vote and the mechanics of the electoral system, there are many who would question whether 'government of the people, by the people, for the people' is a reality in Britain. Are the elected representatives of the people the real rulers of Britain? Do these elected representatives really serve the interests of the people, or simply their own interests? If Britain is a democracy that, in theory, gives power to the many, not the few, how far do ordinary people have any real control or influence over those who govern them?

Voting offers only a limited choice. Those who bother to use their vote in a general election may determine which of the rival teams of politicians occupy government posts for the next five years, but does this give voters significant influence over key government decisions and policies? What other opportunities do citizens have to participate in the political process? How far can 'ordinary people' hope to have a real voice in the many decisions that affect them?

Do elected politicians make the real decisions that affect the British people? Perhaps the real decision-makers are not the politicians who tend to dominate the news but relatively faceless civil servants or advisers (discussed in [Chapter 8](#)). Alternatively, more real power

and influence may be exercised by individuals who are not part of the formal political process at all – businessmen (and they are usually still men), bankers, or owners of newspapers, television companies and other media, some of whom may not even be British. Newspapers and magazines sometimes attempt to compile lists of the most powerful people in Britain. These may generally be headed by the prime minister, as one might expect, but often include prominent businesspeople, media magnates, appointed officials, even sports personalities and pop idols, interspersed among some other elected politicians. Such lists are hardly scientific and may reflect little more than the highly subjective views of the journalists who compose them. However, they do suggest that power is dispersed more widely than those who hold some formal position in government.

One cynical conclusion might be that 'money talks'; those with substantial wealth and income can use it to buy (sometimes literally) political influence. Yet there is no simple correlation between wealth and power. Newspapers also sometimes list the wealthiest people in Britain, but some of the names near the top of such lists, such as the Duke of Westminster or the Queen, do not figure prominently, if at all, in the lists of those with power. Celebrities, such as footballers or pop stars, may avoid any formal association with politics and lack significant economic power, but could still have enormous influence as role models for behaviour, and perhaps contribute more to changing political attitudes on key issues than professional



Source: BEN STANSALL/AFP/Getty Images

Where does power lie in the UK? Critics of capitalism have argued that the multinational corporations, and in particular the financial sector, hold too much power in the UK.

politicians. Yet again, it is possible that real power and influence are exercised by many who are not celebrities – ‘faceless bureaucrats’ or anonymous figures, global capitalists perhaps – pulling strings behind the scenes.

However, this whole approach may make too much of the power of particular individuals. Ministers and company chairs come and go, but the organisations they head generally last much longer. Perhaps we should be looking at the power of institutions or corporate power. Perhaps the Civil Service, the financial centre of the City of London or multinational corporations exercise far more effective power and influence in the British political process than any single personality. Alternatively, power may not lie with particular institutions but with more amorphous **elites**, such as **the ruling class** or **the establishment**, or interests around ‘big business’ or ‘global capitalism’. Those

who hold formal positions of power, such as elected politicians, are perhaps driven by interests outside their control. Indeed, this kind of argument has been made with great success in recent years by Nigel Farage, when he was leader of UKIP, and Donald Trump in his successful campaign to become president of the USA. Both men presented themselves as outsiders who would take on the ‘elite’ who ran ‘the establishment’.

An **elite** is a small dominant group. Elite theorists argue that power is inevitably exercised by the few (or by an elite or elites), even in nominally democratic organisations or states.

The ruling class is a term used particularly by Marxists to describe those who own and control capital, and whose economic power gives them political power.

The establishment is a term sometimes used to describe the British elite, an unaccountable dominant social group largely educated at leading private schools and ancient universities.

Alternatively, we can seek to identify those who are effectively excluded from power. Thus, it is often suggested that certain groups or interests might be marginalised in the political system – the unemployed, ethnic minorities, teenagers, women, or those who live and work in the countryside. Entire groups may be excluded from the political process.

All this implies that power may be rather, or very, unevenly distributed. Some, perhaps a small minority, appear to have a great deal of power, others relatively little influence, while others again may be virtually excluded from any effective participation in the decisions that affect their lives. Yet, while **elitism** suggests that political power is narrowly concentrated, **pluralism** implies that ordinary people do have the capacity to influence and even determine key outcomes, in accordance with notions of democracy.

Elitism suggests power is substantially concentrated in the hands of an elite or ruling class.

Pluralism involves the belief that power is widely dispersed through society.

The distribution of power may also change over time. Journalist Anthony Sampson wrote a series of books examining power in Britain, the first in 1962, the last in 2005. He suggested that over that period some institutions, such as trade unions and universities, had lost influence, while the media had become more important than ever. He thought power had become more centralised and the prime minister and the Treasury more dominant, while the Cabinet and the civil service were less influential. Looking back with a more sceptical eye, Sampson (2005, p. xii) had become ‘more impatient and intolerant of the humbug and deceptions of democracy’, which is, of course, only one person’s view and not necessarily right. Moreover, he died before the financial and economic crises of 2007 onwards and the

2010 coalition government that might have suggested further changes in the distribution of power and influence in Britain.

WHO RULES BRITAIN? PERSPECTIVES ON POWER

The question, ‘Who then rules Britain?’ is a simple one, to which a variety of simple answers may be given: Cabinet or prime ministerial government; parliamentary sovereignty; an elected dictatorship; government by bureaucracy; business or corporate power; an ‘establishment’ or ‘ruling class’; men. All these answers, and others besides, have some plausibility and are worth serious consideration. Yet, although it is certainly possible to provide a wealth of relevant information and analysis that should help towards an appreciation of who rules Britain, it should be acknowledged right away that it is impossible ultimately to give an authoritative and definitive answer to the question. Those answers that are given inevitably reflect different interpretations of the facts, contrasting perspectives on politics and varied underlying ideological assumptions.

The term ‘model’ is often used in social science to describe a simplified version of reality. We try to make sense of a wide range of possibly relevant information by constructing simple hypotheses about the relationship between key variables, and see how far the real world fits the resulting models. Some simple models of the possible distribution of power in society are shown in [Table 1.1](#). The crucial question is how far power is dispersed or concentrated in the political system, but the different models also provide alternative explanations of the institutions and mechanisms involved.

These are not the only possible models and, indeed, different names or versions of these models may be encountered elsewhere. Moreover, not all the models are mutually exclusive. ‘Pluralism’, ‘liberal capitalism’ or ‘liberal democracy’ are the names often given to a composite version of the first three models listed in [Table 1.1](#), suggesting a model where power is dispersed through a mixture of elections, the free market and the influence of group interests on the policy process. Certainly, these institutions and processes can be seen as playing a mutually reinforcing role. Yet they

Table 1.1 Competing models of possible power distributions

Name of model	Key players	Power	Evidence	Thinkers
Representative democracy model	Individual voters through the ballot box	Dispersed	Formal political mechanisms, electoral system, written constitutions	Bentham, John Stuart Mill
Market model	Individual consumers and producers through the free market	Dispersed	Classical economic assumptions: evidence of working of the market	Adam Smith, Hayek, Friedman
Pluralist model	Pressure groups and parties	Relatively dispersed	Influence of groups in case studies of decision-making	Bentley, Truman, Dahl, neopluralists (e.g. Lindblom)
Elitist model	Elites: social, business, military, or bureaucratic	Concentrated	Reputation of key figures and their interrelations	Pareto, Mosca, Michels, Wright Mills
Marxist model	Ruling class, 'bourgeoisie' in a capitalist society	Highly concentrated	Distribution of income and wealth: working of capitalist system	Marx, Lenin, Trotsky, Gramsci, Ralph Miliband

also reflect different and sometimes competing perspectives. Some old-fashioned liberals (or those on the modern New Right) place far more emphasis on the free market than the verdict of the ballot box, particularly if that leads to interference with free-market forces. Similarly, they may fear that group influences represent selfish sectional interests and illegitimate power that may distort the market. While pluralists assume a role for elections and representative institutions, they regard these as only providing a limited, occasional and blunt instrument for popular political participation, and place more emphasis on the continuous influence of countless pressure groups on the policy process.

Neopluralism is a modified version of pluralism, which still emphasises the dispersal of power while acknowledging the influence of key interests (e.g. business).

How persuasive are these models? Which is the most convincing? The obvious answer is to look at the evidence, but the problem here

is that each model begins from rather different assumptions, employs different methodologies and looks at different sorts of evidence. The representative government model largely assumes that political power lies where the constitution, laws and other official documents say it does, so here it is important to examine the theory and practice of the key institutions. The market model derives its key assumptions from classical economics. It is countless individual producers and consumers operating through the market who determine the crucial questions of 'who gets what, when, how'. The role of politics in this economic process is (and, they argue, should be) strictly limited, as government intervention can only distort the operation of the free market and lead to a less efficient allocation of resources. Evidence in support of these assumptions comes from analyses of market forces and government intervention in practice. Pluralists cite case studies in decision-making to demonstrate the role of large numbers of different groups in the political process. Elitists, by contrast, identify key individuals or groups who dominate decision-making in their

communities. Marxists, finally, infer political power from economic power. They document the massive inequalities in income and wealth in modern capitalist society and assume that it is those who control the means of production who will also control the political process.

At this point, a reader coming to the study of politics for the first time might ask: 'Is this description or prescription? Political science or ideology?' The answer is, inevitably, both. While writers on politics may conscientiously strive to provide an accurate picture of the way in which the political process actually operates, they are inevitably influenced by their own fundamental assumptions, and sometimes also by their ideals. Marx believed he was providing a dispassionate analysis of the underlying forces within capitalism, but it is difficult to divorce this analysis entirely from his condemnation of capitalism and hopes for a future socialist revolution. Marx (*Theses on Feuerbach* XI, in Tucker, 1978) wrote: 'The philosophers have only interpreted the world ... the point, however, is to change it.' There is a similar mixture of analysis and prescription among modern free marketeers. Like Marx, they too want to change the world, although in a quite different direction. Moreover, while much of the debate between pluralists and elitists apparently involves dispassionate social scientific research into the distribution of power, most of those involved are also defending or advancing theories of democracy, and implicitly or explicitly criticising or defending the processes they describe.

POLICY: WHO GETS WHAT, WHEN, HOW?

The academic discipline of politics has previously concentrated on political ideas, institutions and processes, but often neglected the decisions, policies and outcomes that are the product of the political system. Yet it is through policies that politicians try to implement their values and priorities. Thus, it is almost impossible to understand British conservatism without examining some of the policies that Conservative politicians have pursued and continue to do so under the current government of Theresa May. How policies are made tells us

much about the political system in action (see [Chapter 18](#)). Where did the initiative come from? Who influenced the policy process and affected the outcome? How far did wider public opinion play a part? How was the policy implemented? How far did the policy meet its proclaimed objectives? What explanations can be offered for its apparent success or failure? Who ultimately gained and who lost? Some of the answers to these questions may provide suggestive clues to the distribution of political power and influence.

Questions about who gets what, when and how are also related to issues of equality and social justice. Whole communities within the general population, including women, ethnic minorities, faith groups, the disabled, gays and others, may be more systematically excluded from power and a share of general prosperity as a result of blatant or more subtle forms of discrimination, injustice and prejudice. The proposed remedies often reflect not only alternative values, but different perspectives on the nature of the problem.

The question of who gets what, when and how is also affected when some of the most important areas of policy may be subject to forces partially or substantially outside the control of domestic politics. Commonly, governments are judged by how they manage the economy. While they claim credit for the good times, they often blame economic disasters on global circumstances outside their control, as with the ongoing economic crisis, which stemmed from a global financial crisis in 2007–08. Opposition politicians naturally take a different view, condemning the government for their mismanagement. Apportioning responsibility is not easy. Apparent success may be due as much to good luck as good judgement, with the converse applying to failure. Yet even in an increasingly globalised economy, governments by their actions or inactions can help or hinder national prosperity (see [Chapter 19](#)).

Public services such as health and education are now at the centre of political debate in Britain. Upon the quality of these services depends an important element of the quality of life of individuals and communities. Poor education in schools, colleges and universities ultimately affects everyone, not just the unfortunate recipients. Thus, it has long been recognised

that such services cannot be left to the free market. Yet how far the state should intervene, the level of service and the method of control, delivery and finance of services remain acutely controversial (see [Chapter 20](#)).

Can governments eradicate poverty? If the rich are getting richer, is that necessarily a bad thing? How far is it the role of government to promote equality and social justice? Such questions are at the centre of debate between socialists, liberals and conservatives, and the answers depend inevitably on ideological assumptions as well as economic analysis. Yet the relative poverty of some can affect people generally, obviously from the payment of taxes to fund social security benefits, less directly from the possible knock-on effects on national economic prosperity, health, education and crime. Child poverty, the problems of low income and one-parent families, rundown housing estates and deprived urban areas are problems that successive British governments have tried to tackle in different ways.

Foreign policy manifestly has causes and consequences beyond national boundaries. While Britain has not been involved in a major war since 1945, British troops have been engaged in active combat in (among other places) Korea, the South Atlantic, the Persian Gulf, Kosovo, Afghanistan and Iraq. Britain's membership of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), a military alliance initially covering the leading states of North America and Western Europe, has determined much of its foreign policy. There has also been a tension between the 'special relationship' with the USA, on the one hand, and ties with nearer neighbours in the European Union (EU) on the other. A more fundamental problem, however, for Britain and other advanced capitalist countries are the gross and intensifying differences in living standards across the world, which could now threaten a political explosion.

However, it is no longer only the threat of violent conflict between the 'haves' and the 'have nots' that now endangers the future of the planet. The relationship of humankind with its environment has only been widely recognised as a serious issue in relatively recent times, but for some this has become the supreme political problem facing this country and the world

generally. Finite resources are being used up, and various forms of environmental pollution threaten irreversible changes to soil, seas and climate. At best, future generations may suffer a heavy burden from our extravagance. At worst, our planet could be heading for catastrophe. The rising scepticism of current politicians in many cases, particularly many members of the Trump administration in the USA, elected in 2016, about human responsibility for global warming in the face of scientific evidence makes this considerably more likely. The politics of the environment has added a new dimension to ethical and political debate (see [Chapter 21](#)).

'BRITISH' POLITICS

This is a book that focuses primarily on British politics. This may appear unduly narrow and insular, particularly in the light of the discussion in the previous section, which raises some questions about the whole future of independent sovereign states in circumstances of increasing globalisation. If many of the problems facing us are substantially global, surely we should be focusing our attention on global politics, rather than the institutions, processes and policies of a single state?

There is still much to be said for the in-depth study of a particular political system, either in parallel or prior to other studies. This helps to explain the special characteristics of British politics, and the interdependence of features of the British political system as a whole. Moreover, a close study of British politics does not preclude the study of comparative politics, international relations and global politics. Thus, while this book, as the title suggests, focuses on British politics, it is not wholly confined to Britain, partly because much of politics in Britain is influenced by wider forces, including globalisation.

Specific aspects of British government and politics can only be appreciated in comparison with practices elsewhere. Both the similarities and the differences with other states can be instructive. It is, for example, helpful to discuss the system of voting in Britain, its advantages and disadvantages, and proposals for reform, with reference to voting systems in

other countries (see [Chapter 13](#)). In this book there will be frequent references to politics and government in other countries, some in Comparing British Politics boxes. Of course, none of this can be a substitute for a systematic analysis of comparative politics, but it may perhaps help foster an interest in other political systems, as well as setting British political institutions and practices in a broader context.

Needless to say, the level at which decisions should be taken is often an acutely controversial political question. Some fear British national sovereignty is being eroded and British citizens are losing control of decisions that affect them, while others seek to devolve power downwards to the nations, regions and localities within the UK or even to break away, as many Scottish nationalists hope to do. If these hopes or fears are fully realised, this could even mark the end of British politics as it has traditionally been understood.

Indeed, the very term 'Britain' and the notion of 'British politics' is itself increasingly contested (Davies, 2000, pp. 853–86). The official name of the state (since 1922) is the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, often described more simply as the United Kingdom or by the acronym UK. This book tends to follow convention and uses 'British Politics' as shorthand for the politics of the entire UK, although we recognise this is problematic at times. Where we refer to matters in a part of the UK, we try and make that explicit. Northern Ireland remains part of the UK, although its inhabitants remain fiercely divided in their political allegiance. A narrow majority insist they are 'British', often rather more passionately than most people who live across the Irish Sea in Great Britain. A large minority consider themselves Irish rather than British, and wish to belong to the Irish Republic rather than remain within the UK or British state. The remarkable power-sharing agreement, signed in 1999 between republicans (who wish Northern Ireland to be part of a wider Irish state) and unionists (who want to remain a part of the UK), provides grounds for optimism that whatever transpires need not involve further bloodshed and violence, although the frequent difficulty that both sides have in working together since then leads to caution. The political future of Northern Ireland

remains acutely controversial, particularly after Theresa May's controversial deal with the Democratic Unionist Party after the 2017 general election (discussed in [Chapter 3](#)). These difficulties are discussed in more detail in [Chapter 11](#).

Even without the long-running problem of Northern Ireland, the future of Britain and the British state is an increasingly open question. England is the largest of the constituent parts of Britain in territory and by far the largest in population. Many of those who live in England describe themselves almost interchangeably as 'English' or 'British', a confusion that can infuriate those who live in Scotland or Wales. Wales was absorbed by the English Crown in the Middle Ages and was formally politically united with England in 1536. Scotland was an independent state until King James VI of Scotland became also James I of England in 1603, although this Union of the Crowns did not involve full political union until 1707. The notion of a British state and the image of 'Britannia' effectively date from then. Some inhabitants of Scotland and Wales consider themselves to be both Scots or Welsh and British. Others consider themselves primarily or exclusively Scots or Welsh, and a significant minority, particularly in Scotland, would prefer to be part of an independent country (see [Chapter 11](#)). Indeed, some have long forecast the imminent 'breakup of Britain' (Nairn, 1981, 2000).

The 'breakup of Britain' has become rather more likely since the Scottish National Party (SNP) gained power in Scotland in 2007 (first as a minority administration and since 2011 with a majority of seats in the Scottish Parliament). They delivered on their promise of a referendum in Scotland for full independence in 2014, which resulted in a relatively narrow victory for those voters who wanted to remain part of the UK. The continuing dominance of the SNP in Scottish politics makes possible a second referendum on Scottish independence in the next few years. Meanwhile, Plaid Cymru, the Welsh nationalist party, became the second largest party in the Welsh Assembly after Labour in 2016. If the majority of those in Scotland and/or Wales clearly wished to be part of a separate state, it would be impossible to maintain the union. 'Britain' would no longer exist as a meaningful political entity,

although it would probably survive as a useful geographical term to describe the island. 'British politics' would be confined to the history books, to be replaced by the study of English (or Scottish or Welsh) politics.

Yet, for the present, 'British politics' remains a convenient shorthand term to describe politics and government at various levels inside the UK, and the growing two-way influences between the UK and other levels of government, including – for the time being – European and international. This is sometimes described as **multi-level governance**. While many of the crucial decisions that affect British citizens are still resolved within Britain's central government around Whitehall and Westminster, others are effectively taken elsewhere. Some decisions are made above the level of the British state; for example, by the UN,

the International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Organization, NATO or (especially) the EU. Other decisions are taken below the level of the central UK government based in Whitehall and Westminster, by devolved parliaments and assemblies (see [Chapter 11](#)) or local councils (see [Chapter 10](#)). Even with Britain's planned withdrawal from the EU, British politics is increasingly multilayered. Pressure for the breakup of Britain and an unknown future outside the EU make British politics more unpredictable than ever before.

Multi-level governance is the idea that there are many interacting authority structures at work in the emergent global political economy and that domestic and international levels of authority are entangled.



SUMMARY

- » Politics involves far more than government and party politics. It is about power and decision-making that affect all our lives and determine how scarce resources are allocated – 'who gets what, when, how'.
- » There are disagreements over the legitimate scope of politics. Some distinguish between a public or political sphere and a private sphere, between the state and 'civil society'. Others would deny that politics can or should be excluded from many areas previously considered private.
- » Although politics is clearly about power, this is difficult to define and measure. A distinction can be drawn between power and authority (or legitimate power). Those without formal power may still have influence over decisions that affect them.
- » Britain is called a representative democracy, implying that the people or the majority have effective influence over government and over decisions that affect them. Britain satisfies most of the conditions commonly laid down for representative democracy.
- » There is disagreement over the distribution in power in Britain. Some argue that it is effectively concentrated in the hands of the few, others that it is widely dispersed. Theories or 'models' of power reflect conflicting underlying assumptions and look at different kinds of evidence.
- » Although politics is about the conflicting interests of different social or ethnic groups, it is also about ideas. Political differences commonly reflect contrasting underlying ideological assumptions.
- » Many crucial political decisions that affect people in Britain are made both above and below the level of the British state, for example by international institutions, the EU, devolved governments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, local councils and other public bodies. There is no longer a single British government, but rather a complex system of multi-level governance. However, most British citizens are still principally affected by political decisions made in Westminster and Whitehall.
- » The very future of British government and politics is now uncertain, particularly as a result of increased support for Scottish, Welsh and Irish nationalism within the UK, which could lead either to a quasi-federal or fully federal system of government, or the end of the union.



QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- » What is politics? Why do many people seem to show distaste for politics? Or are people 'fed up' with politicians or the political process?
- » Should we distinguish between a political (or public) sphere and a private sphere from which politics should be excluded?
- » What do you understand by democracy? How far is Britain a democracy?
- » Who governs Britain? Where does power lie in Britain? Is power highly concentrated in the hands of the few, or relatively widely dispersed?
- » Is political change driven by ideas and principles, or by economic and social change?
- » Is it possible, or desirable, to take such issues as education, health, defence or law and order out of politics?
- » Does it still make sense to study British politics, particularly when the British state is apparently in the process of being eroded from above and below?



FURTHER READING

The first chapter of Heywood's (2013) *Politics* addresses the question 'What is Politics?' It includes a particularly useful brief discussion of power. There is also a brief discussion of alternative views on the nature of politics in Leach and Lightfoot (2018, pp. x–xx), *The Politics and IR Companion*. The same subject is treated in more depth from different perspectives by several authors in Leftwich (ed.) (2004) *What is Politics?*

Older classic texts include Lasswell (1936) *Politics: Who Gets What, When, How?* and Crick (1993) *In Defence of Politics*, which is thought-provoking, if a little idiosyncratic. French political scientist Duverger's *The Study of Politics* (1972) is still worth reading. Arblaster (1987) provides a readable short introduction to *Democracy*. Macpherson's almost as brief *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy* (1977) might also be consulted. Fuller and more ambitious is Held (1987) *Models of Democracy*.

The distribution of power in Britain is, inevitably, a controversial subject. One readable personal view is provided by Sampson (2005) *Who Runs This Place?*, the last of a series of studies of the 'Anatomy of Britain' which he began in 1962. For a more theoretical discussion of power, see Lukes ([1974] 2005). Classic texts on participation and representation are also worth reading, notably, Carole Pateman *Participation and Democratic Theory* (1970) and Hanna Pitkin, *The Concept of Representation* (1967).

Dunleavy and O'Leary's (1987) *Theories of the State* provides a clear account of most of the models of power (pluralism, elitism, Marxism, etc.) briefly described in this chapter.

On the issues around the widespread current disillusionment with politics and democracy, there are two provocative prizewinning books: Stoker (2017) *Why Politics Matters* and Hay (2007) *Why We Hate Politics*.



USEFUL WEBSITES

The Political Studies Association exists to develop and promote the study of politics in the UK. It also blogs on many issues on the study of British politics: www.psa.ac.uk.

Tearing Up the Politics Textbooks, Rosie Campbell's programme referred to at the start of this chapter, can be heard at: www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b07wgkm7.



Further student resources to support learning are available at www.macmillanihe.com/griffiths-brit-pol-3e

2

THE SHADOW OF THE PAST I: FROM WAR TO WELFARE

A country's politics is shaped by its history. Key features of the British system of government examined in this book are centuries old. The monarchy dates back to the tenth century, Parliament to the thirteenth century and Cabinet government and the post of prime minister to the eighteenth century. Although none operate in the same way as they did in the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries, Britain retains a monarchy, a prime minister, a Cabinet and two Houses of Parliament. British politics, as it is today, is only understandable through understanding the context in which it emerged (see [Comparing British Politics 2.1](#)).

In this chapter and [Chapter 3](#) we focus on the evolution of British politics from the Second World War. The recent political history of the UK is worth examining. First, although the Second World War is beginning to fade from living memory, it had a massive and lasting impact on British society, economy and politics. Many of the practices and institutions that survive to this day, such as the National Health Service (NHS) and the welfare state, were the product of the immediate postwar years. And while these have been greatly reformed since their conception, the legacy of their creation can still be seen in the way they work today. The worldview of many contemporary politicians, including Theresa May and Jeremy Corbyn, was also shaped in the postwar world.

Second, the historical view is worth examining because an appreciation of the recent history of British politics also shows us that things do not have to be the way they are. The institutions we examine in this book are the result of contingency rather than inevitability. Had the factors that shaped our current society come together differently, we would not be where we are today. The NHS and the welfare state, for example, are the products of the actors, events and interests that came together after the Second World War. British politics and society could have been different, and it will be in future.

THIS CHAPTER:

- » Introduces the shadow of the Second World War on later politics.
- » Sets out some of the main policies of the 1945 Labour government, including much greater state involvement in the economy and social life.
- » Examines the period of postwar 'consensus'.
- » Explores Britain's place in the world, the decline of empire, and introduces some of the tensions between the different territories that make up the United Kingdom.
- » Introduces some of the factors that led to the collapse of the postwar consensus.

WARFARE TO WELFARE

The declaration of war in September 1939 was not welcomed by cheering crowds, as some previous wars had been. Most British citizens had been relieved when Prime Minister Chamberlain returned from Munich in 1938, believing he had secured 'peace for our time' (quoted in Self, 2017, Ch. 13). However, following Hitler's invasion of Poland in September 1939, most accepted with resignation rather than optimism that war was inevitable. To that extent, the country was reasonably united.

Previous wars in which Britain had been engaged were largely fought on foreign soil, with little direct impact on the civilian population, apart from higher taxation and shortages of imported produce. Even the monstrous carnage of the First World War most directly affected the British armed forces, who discovered when they returned on leave that those at home had little conception of the horrors of the front line. The Second World War was different. Although mainland Britain was never invaded and to that extent suffered less than much of the European continent, its cities were extensively bombed, with heavy casualties. Hundreds of thousands of urban children were evacuated to the relative safety of the countryside. Yet despite the privations of wartime rationing of food and clothing, some of the poor actually enjoyed a healthier although limited diet, and no one starved. High unemployment, which had caused so much deprivation in the 1930s, was no longer a problem. Indeed, the shortage of male labour,

caused by conscription into the armed forces, led to women being recruited for all kinds of work previously performed almost exclusively by men. In a real sense, the whole country was in it together.

The sense that all parties, at least, were 'in it together' was replicated at Westminster, with the formation of a coalition government from 1940 under Winston Churchill, whose own long political career had survived two changes of party, and included periods of high office and isolation in the political wilderness. Once bitterly hostile to socialism and the Labour Party, Churchill welcomed its leading figures into a new government of national unity.

Labour had only previously experienced two brief and frustrating spells of government in 1924 and 1929–31, the latter abruptly terminated by a global financial crisis, in which the party's erstwhile leader Ramsay MacDonald formed a new 'National Government' (largely made up of Conservatives), which then defeated Labour at the polls, but had little success in reducing the long recession of the 1930s. In the wartime coalition, Labour's leading figures, including Clement Attlee, Herbert Morrison, Stafford Cripps and Hugh Dalton, and key trade unionists, such as Ernest Bevin, leader of the huge Transport and General Workers' Union, gained vital experience of government and a new political credibility, transforming the party's standing and, ultimately, its electoral prospects. They were all to figure prominently in Attlee's postwar Labour government, with Bevin as foreign secretary. (Attlee is discussed further in [Key Figures 2.2](#) on p. 23.)

At home, the war involved a massive expansion of government power and control, and a commensurate increase in taxation and expenditure. In the midst of a desperate battle for survival, time was also devoted to using these new powers and resources for future postwar reconstruction, as we will explore later in this chapter.

Britain survived, initially precariously, particularly after the defeat and occupation of its ally France in 1940, when the country stood alone against Nazi Germany and fascist Italy, which had overrun much of Continental

Europe. Britain's 'finest hour' involved its air force winning the 'Battle of Britain'. Yet what turned the tide was, first, Hitler's invasion of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), which brought it into the war on the same side as Britain, and, second, the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour, which led to the USA joining the allied cause. Although final victory over Germany and, later, Japan was greeted euphorically as a triumph in Britain, it was largely the USSR and the USA that had won the war, and it was these countries that were to dominate international relations in the postwar world (as we discuss further below).

COMPARING BRITISH POLITICS 2.1

Continuity and change in Britain and other countries

British politics may seem a model of stability and continuity, as compared with many other modern states. France, for example, has experienced a succession of revolutions and regime changes over little more than two centuries, including several forms of monarchy, two periods of empire and five republics. Italy and Germany, which only became nation states in the late nineteenth century, went through similar upheavals, culminating in the fascist and Nazi dictatorships, before the restoration of parliamentary democracy following the military defeat of those regimes in 1945. Spain, Portugal and Greece have only more recently re-established democracy after periods of dictatorship. Eastern European countries only escaped from communist dictatorship with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Most states now represented at the United Nations (UN) did not even exist in 1945; many were former colonies

that have since gained their independence, while other new countries have emerged from the partition of larger states.

While Britain experienced violent civil war and political revolutions in the seventeenth century, from then on its politics has evolved largely peacefully. The bullet has not generally been a feature of the politics of mainland Britain (although Ireland is another matter). Yet the appearance of stability and continuity is, in some respects, illusory. Power has shifted, and the substance of British politics has profoundly changed. Further changes, some even threatening the continuation of the UK, are far from unthinkable, particularly following the 2016 referendum vote to leave the EU, with the Scots and Northern Irish preferring to remain. Thus, the appearance of stability and continuity is illusory: the British state and British politics are in a state of flux, as will be apparent in some later chapters.

'THE NEW JERUSALEM': LABOUR, THE WELFARE STATE AND THE MIXED ECONOMY

Churchill had won huge credit for winning the war, as much for his oratory and indomitable spirit, as for any critical decisions (where in truth his record was more chequered). Thus, there was considerable surprise abroad and even at home when he was swept

from power in the postwar Labour election landslide of 1945. There was perhaps more fondness among voters for Churchill than the Conservative Party – although Churchill was never universally popular, and was remembered by many working-class voters for his hostility to striking workers during the interwar period. There was also lingering hostility to the Tories for their failure to rearm the country under Conservative Prime

Minister Neville Chamberlain in the run-up to the Second World War and their willingness to appease German expansion. Finally, there was a sense of radicalism among voters who had felt let down by the interwar governments, which had promised a 'land fit for heroes' after the First World War (1914–18), but had presided over economic crises and high unemployment. It was Labour that seemed to mark a decisive break with the politics of the past. Attlee's Labour government promised a 'new Jerusalem' – a phrase taken from William Blake's poem – that is, a fair society, particularly for the less affluent majority.

It was during the war that the Archbishop of York (and later Canterbury) first popularised the term **welfare state**, which he contrasted positively with a 'warfare state' (Bandelj and Sowers, 2013, p. 88). While some of the foundations of the welfare state had been laid in wartime, including the Butler Education Act 1944 and the payment of family allowances to mothers (1945), it was the 1945–51 Labour government that was substantially responsible for its establishment. They drew, above all, on the wartime Beveridge Report

(1942) – officially entitled *Social Insurance and Allied Services* – to form the basis for the postwar welfare state. Labour rapidly implemented Beveridge's national insurance scheme. To help ensure the maintenance of full employment, the government relied on 'demand management' techniques, advanced by economist John Maynard Keynes. Thus, the ideas of the Liberals, Beveridge and Keynes (discussed in [Key Figures 2.1](#)) remained critical to Labour's welfare programme. However, it was left-wing socialist Aneurin Bevan, who was responsible for the most substantial and enduring legacy of the postwar Labour government, the establishment in 1948 of the new NHS, initially opposed by the Conservatives and many doctors (Thomas-Symonds, 2014). It was to receive strong support from the wider public, both then and ever since.

A **welfare state** is one in which the government takes responsibility for providing for the social and economic security of its population through the provision of pensions, unemployment insurance, healthcare and so on.



KEY FIGURES 2.1

John Maynard Keynes

John Maynard Keynes (1883–1946) had been a brilliant critic of interwar economic policy. *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* (1936), his key work, argued that governments could secure full employment, stable prices, steady economic growth and a healthy balance of payments by influencing total (or aggregate) demand for goods and services, through fiscal and monetary policy, without requiring direct intervention, or controls on particular firms and industries (often described as 'Keynesian demand strategies'). So, whenever unemployment appeared to be rising above politically acceptable levels, government could stimulate demand in the economy by reducing taxation and/or increasing government spending (if necessary running a budget deficit).

In the Second World War, Keynes rejoined the Treasury, and his economics became the new orthodoxy. His 'managed capitalism' was attractive to leading postwar politicians across the political spectrum, including Conservatives such as Harold Macmillan and 'Rab' Butler, and Labour's Hugh Gaitskell and Anthony Crosland (see [Chapter 15](#), p. 319), in what some described as a Keynes-Beveridge consensus, involving both Keynesian economic demand management and the pursuit of social welfare. Subsequently, and especially from 1979 onwards, the Conservative New Right blamed Keynesian economic policies and increased welfare costs for rising government spending and fuelling inflation. However, the 2008 banking and subsequent economic crisis briefly assisted a revival of some of the ideas and prescriptions of Keynes. (See [Chapter 19](#), pp. 406–08 for a discussion of Keynesian economics.)

It was anticipated that the costs of the NHS would initially rise until the backlog of untreated ill health in the community was cleared (because hitherto some were too poor to afford medical treatment). However, it was expected that thereafter costs would fall. In practice, a steadily rising population of the elderly (in part a consequence of better healthcare) and the development of new forms of treatment led to ever higher demands and costs. These have been a headache for successive governments from the beginning (as [Chapter 20](#) explores in more detail).

It was Attlee's government that was later responsible for the first significant exception to free healthcare. Charges for dental and eye care were introduced by Chancellor of the Exchequer Hugh Gaitskell in 1951, partly to help pay for Britain's involvement in the 1950–53 Korean War. This provoked the resignation of Bevan together with Harold Wilson, a future Labour leader, and initiated the split between Bevanites and Gaitskellites, which continued to divide the party through the 1950s and after, long after its leading figures died (Bevan in 1960, Gaitskell in 1963). Later governments have extended charges to a few other services, and have encouraged some further private provision of some NHS services, but the broad principle of a health service substantially free at the point of use has been maintained. Even some Conservatives, critical of the growth of the state and public spending, such as Margaret Thatcher, maintained their public commitment to Britain's free NHS, as we see in [Chapters 3](#) and [20](#).

Timeline 2.1 The welfare state: key developments

1942	The Beveridge Report, <i>Social Insurance and Allied Services</i>
1944	Education Act
1944	White Paper on employment policy (high and stable level of employment)
1945	Family Allowances Act
1946	National Insurance Act (implemented Beveridge Report)
1948	Establishment of the National Health Service

Labour was committed to some form of economic planning, but although Attlee's government maintained some rationing in the face of postwar shortages, they did not attempt detailed controls of production and labour. Nor did Labour pursue the wholesale **nationalisation** of industry, implied in clause IV of its own constitution, in which the party proclaimed its commitment to the 'common ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange'. Instead, Attlee's government proceeded to take into public ownership what were sometimes described as the 'commanding heights' of the economy, the Bank of England (1946), coal (1947), electricity, gas and rail (all 1948), and finally steel and road haulage (1949), thus establishing a mixed economy with a substantial state sector. Moreover, of these measures, only steel and road haulage were acutely controversial. The other nationalised industries were either already substantially state owned (electricity, gas) or declining (railways, coal).

Nationalisation is the transfer of private assets into public ownership, in the UK usually through a public corporation. In the UK, many industries and the public utilities – gas, electricity, water and so on – were taken into public ownership after 1945.

THE END OF EMPIRE AND THE BEGINNING OF THE COLD WAR

Although Britain emerged from the Second World War as a victor, escaping the defeat and occupation that was the fate of much of Continental Europe, and still appeared a great power, one of the 'big three' (along with the USA and the USSR) determining the shape of the postwar world, its great power status was largely illusory. The British economy, which had lost its status as the world's biggest earlier in the century, was further damaged by the war, and the British manufacturing industry was ill-equipped to compete effectively with the USA, and later subsequently with the fast-recovering economies of Western Europe and Japan. The once extensive British Empire was to be substantially liquidated within 25 years of the war, starting with the independence of India and Pakistan, followed by most of its



KEY FIGURES 2.2

Clement Attlee

Clement Attlee (1883–1967) was ranked Britain's most successful prime minister in a survey of academics specialising in post-1945 British history and politics (Cowburn, 2016). His government introduced the NHS, nationalised one-fifth of the British economy and oversaw the transition to independence of India. He was the Labour leader for almost 20 years, and prime minister from 1945–51.

Attlee had a conventional, middle-class upbringing. He went to Oxford University and began a career as a barrister. However, he later abandoned this path to become a social worker, managing Haileybury House, a youth charity, in Limehouse, east London. The experience had a deep impact on Attlee, and the poverty he saw in the East End shaped his political views. He joined the Labour Party in 1908. During the First World War, he served in the army, rising to become a major, a title that would stay with him throughout his life. Attlee was elected as MP for Stepney in east London in 1922 and became a junior minister in the brief 1924 and 1929 Labour-led governments. He became party leader in 1935, partly because several of his more charismatic rivals lost their seats at the 1931 election.

As leader in the 1930s, Attlee became an increasingly strong opponent of appeasing German expansion under Hitler. He took Labour into the wartime coalition, led by the Conservative Winston Churchill, in 1940 and was appointed deputy prime minister in 1942. Attlee and Churchill worked together surprisingly harmoniously during the war, with Attlee handling much of the domestic policy and detail, as Churchill focused his attention on diplomacy and military policy.

The coalition government was dissolved with victory in Europe in May 1945. For the Conservatives, Churchill (2013, p. 188) expected to be rewarded for leading Britain during 'its darkest hour'. To many people's surprise, however, Attlee led the Labour Party to a landslide victory, securing 48% of the vote and 393 seats to the Conservative's 213. Attlee's tenure as prime minister was hugely active. Labour implemented nearly all their 1945 manifesto pledges, changing the direction of British policy for a generation and creating a new consensus about the direction postwar Britain would take.

Attlee was modest and unassuming, largely ineffective at public relations, which mattered less then than today, and lacked Churchill's charisma. Attlee's leadership style was collective, but once the Cabinet had voiced their opinions, he would make decisions quickly with military precision. Attlee saw his role as that of a cricket umpire, reconciling the opinions of 'big beasts' in the Cabinet, such as Ernest Bevin, Aneurin Bevan and Herbert Morrison. After Labour's defeat in the 1951 general election, Attlee's authority was undermined by infighting between left and right in the party and his effectiveness declined (Radice, 2008). He resigned in 1955, and remains, by some distance, the longest serving Labour leader. Through the policies of his government, Britain was a different place from when he was elected Labour leader 20 years before.

remaining African and Asian colonies in the 1950s and 60s, some painfully and reluctantly abandoned, following losing struggles against nationalist revolts (e.g. Kenya, Malaya, Cyprus), others more readily conceded.

The former British Empire was rapidly converted into a Commonwealth of independent states – a loose group of nations

formerly part of the British Empire. The loss of the empire was regretted by many in Britain, particularly on the right of the Conservative Party, although it was celebrated by others active in organisations such as the Movement for Colonial Freedom – a civil rights group founded in 1954, which had the backing of many senior Labour MPs. However, the transition from empire to Commonwealth,



Source: Arvind Yadav/Hindustan Times/Getty Images

The end of British rule is a cause for celebration in many parts of the world. Here, schoolchildren celebrate 70 years of independence at the Red Fort in New Delhi, India on 15 August 2016.

while it involved some violence and bloodshed, was largely achieved without military conflict by UK forces. This is in stark contrast to French withdrawal from Indochina and Algeria, which involved bloody and prolonged wars of independence and traumatic consequences for French domestic politics. Even so, there was a painful process of adjustment, as Britain lost much of its influence in wider geopolitics. As former US Secretary of State Dean Acheson famously observed: 'Great Britain has lost an empire and not yet found a role' (quoted in McKercher, 2017, p. 75).

Britain's postwar foreign policy was largely shaped by the **Cold War** between the two superpowers, the USA and the USSR. Although both had been Britain's wartime allies, there was never any doubt that Britain would side with the USA, becoming one of the founding members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, a military alliance between several North American and European countries, established in 1949, where each member state agrees to

mutual defence in response to an attack by any external party. The most obvious threat at the time was the USSR, which followed suit in 1955 by creating the Warsaw Pact, an opposing alliance of states allied with the Soviets. The UK positioned itself as America's most reliable ally. The policy was largely bipartisan, pursued and maintained by Conservative and Labour governments, although the Labour Party contained a significant minority that favoured greater neutrality and, subsequently, nuclear disarmament.

The Cold War describes the long tension from the end of the Second World War (1945) to the fall of the Berlin Wall (1989) between the USSR and its allies, on the one hand, and the USA and its allies, on the other. It was a 'cold' war because it never involved direct armed conflict between the two major powers, despite periodic crises when the Cold War threatened to become a hot war. Some argue this was only prevented by the fear of war between the two major nuclear powers.

Timeline 2.2 The end of empire (dates when selected former colonies gained independence from the UK)

1947	India, Pakistan
1948	Burma (Myanmar), Ceylon (Sri Lanka)
1957	Malaya (now part of Malaysia)
1960	Cyprus, Nigeria, Ghana, Lesotho
1961	Sierra Leone, Tanzania
1962	Jamaica, Uganda
1963	Kenya
1964	Malta, Malawi, Tanzania, Zambia
1965	Singapore, Gambia
1966	Guyana, Barbados
1967	Aden and Yemen
1970	Fiji
1971	Gulf states
1980	Zimbabwe*
1997	Hong Kong (transferred to China after lease expired)

* Date when independence was recognised. The white settler government of Ian Smith had earlier made a unilateral declaration of independence in 1965.

However, what became known as the ‘special relationship’ between the UK and the USA was always an unequal one, with the UK very much a junior partner (see [Chapter 22](#), pp. 463–64). Although Britain became a nuclear power, in practice its independent nuclear deterrent became increasingly dependent on American rockets and submarines. On the one occasion when a British government engaged in a foreign policy adventure opposed by the USA, the Anglo-French attack on the Suez Canal in 1956, they were forced into a humiliating climb-down, entailing the resignation of Anthony Eden, the prime minister responsible. However, the illusion among many in the governing class that the UK still had its ‘great power’ status, the ‘special relationship’ with the USA and

the continuing concern with the empire and Commonwealth effectively deterred British governments from closer engagement with Continental Europe in the years following the war. Neither Labour nor the Conservatives were interested in joining the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), set up by the 1951 Treaty of Paris, or the European Economic Community (EEC), established by the 1957 Treaty of Rome. Britain thus missed the opportunity to help shape the new Europe (see [Chapter 12](#)).

THE 1950s ONWARDS: AN AGE OF CONSENSUS?

‘YOU’VE NEVER HAD IT SO GOOD’

The Conservatives returned to power in 1951, but apart from the denationalisation of steel and road haulage in 1953, there was no sharp reversal of policy by the incoming Conservative administration under the now elderly Churchill. Indeed, Labour’s Dick Crossman observed in his diary: ‘the general make-up of the Churchill Cabinet means that it will be only very slightly to the right of the most recent Attlee Cabinet. Just as Attlee was running what was virtually a coalition policy on a Party basis, so Churchill may well do the same’ (Morgan, 1981, p. 30).

Both parties built on, but were constrained by, the legacy of the past. Both were determined to turn their backs on the policies of the interwar years, which had failed to deal with unemployment at home or the rise of the fascist dictators Hitler and Mussolini abroad. It was no accident that it was first Labour and then former Conservative rebels such as Churchill, Eden and Macmillan, who dominated the politics of the early postwar years. Indeed, many of the policies pursued by Labour and Conservative postwar governments had their roots in the experience of war, and the wartime coalition government (Page, 2015, Ch. 3).

There appeared so little difference between the economic policies pursued by Labour Chancellor Hugh Gaitskell and his Conservative successor R.A. Butler that *The Economist* in

1954 coined the term 'Butskellism' to describe their approach (Dutton, 1997, p. 57). This involved continuing to pursue Keynesian demand management (see below for more on Keynes). These policies apparently succeeded in maintaining close to full employment, in marked contrast to the interwar period. Thus, it has been claimed that there was a substantial consensus (or agreement) between the major parties on economic and social policies in the postwar period. Key elements of agreement included the system of government, the welfare state and the mixed economy, with a substantial state sector. All this substantially persisted until the government of Margaret Thatcher (see Chapter 3). Even so, the extent

and even the reality of the postwar consensus has been questioned (see [Spotlight 2.1](#)).

In some respects, Harold Macmillan personified the apparently dominant 'one-nation' conservatism in the 1950s and early 1960s – a centrist form of conservatism, which stressed the responsibility of those at the top of society for those at the bottom (see [Chapter 15](#), pp. 312–14). As housing minister, Macmillan proudly boasted that he had built 300,000 houses a year (many of them council houses). Later, as prime minister, he accepted the resignation of his entire Treasury team who demanded cuts in public spending. To Macmillan and his supporters, the Conservative Party was quite at peace with Labour's 'new Jerusalem'.

SPOTLIGHT ON ...

Consensus politics: myth or reality?

2.1

The postwar consensus was said to be the agreement between the main parties in Westminster from the 1940s until the 1970s about certain key principles, including full employment, a mixed economy in which the state controlled certain important industries, active government in which the state would use Keynesian techniques to boost demand, a strong welfare state, conciliation with trade unions and the role of the expert civil servant in running government and the economy.

The mainstream view on the consensus is put forward by Paul Addison ([1975] 1994) in *The Road to 1945*, who claimed that the new consensus 'fell like a plum' into the lap of the Attlee government, who arrived to find the Beveridge Report and other White Papers written and public demand for change ripe. Even before the term 'consensus' was much used, Canadian academic Robert McKenzie (1955) claimed that there were minimal differences between the major British parties, while British observers saw much in common between the social democracy of Gaitskell and Crosland and the one-nation conservatism of Macmillan and Butler. American political scientist Daniel Bell (1960) suggested that the West was witnessing the 'end of ideology'; policy-makers

used modern social science to find practical solutions to problems, rather than relying on old ideological assumptions.

Later historians have questioned the extent of consensus. Ben Pimlott (1994) talked about the 'the myth of consensus', arguing that the term minimises differences between parties and the population, and was only ascribed to the first two or three postwar decades by politicians and commentators viewing the postwar years from the more divisive 1980s.

Kevin Hickson (2004) has provided a more qualified account of consensus. He argued that the consensus was limited to the leadership in the Labour and Conservative Parties. There was plenty of dispute among backbenchers and within society as a whole. He also argued that consensus was limited to policy, not ideology. Both one-nation Conservatives and Labour socialists supported the building of council houses, for example. But they did so for different reasons: Labour to create good homes for the working class as part of a more equal society; one-nation Conservatives because they saw it as the responsibility of those at the top to care for those at the bottom. Consensus, to Hickson, was more limited than earlier accounts showed.

FOREIGN RELATIONS AND SEXUAL AFFAIRS

Churchill's second administration survived until 1955, when he was succeeded as prime minister by Anthony Eden, whose political experience was largely in foreign affairs, which, ironically, was to end his premiership and ruin his political reputation. In July 1956, President Nasser of Egypt nationalised the Suez Canal, which had, in practice, been managed by the French and British and provided them with a quick sea route from Europe to trading partners in Asia and elsewhere. After intense international debate had failed to resolve the crisis, Britain and France invaded Suez. In a highly controversial and at the time top secret piece of foreign policy, this was carried out with the collusion of Israel, which had launched an attack on Egypt at the same time. Ostensibly, Anglo-French involvement was meant to keep the combatants apart, but was universally interpreted as a reoccupation and re seizure of the canal, and was condemned by international opinion, including the USA and the Labour opposition at home. One upshot was that the Suez Canal was effectively blocked for months by ships sunk by the retreating Egyptians. Following continued international pressure, including more pertinently the threat to withhold a loan from the USA to the UK, the Anglo-French forces withdrew, to be replaced by a UN contingent. (An unfortunate side effect of the world's distraction was the reoccupation of Hungary by Russian forces, following a popular revolt.) Altogether, it was perhaps the most discreditable episode in Britain's postwar foreign policy. Eden was eventually obliged to resign, officially on health grounds, early in 1957, to be succeeded by Harold Macmillan. (The Suez crisis and its effect on UK foreign policy are discussed in more detail in [Chapter 22](#).)

Macmillan initially restored his party's fortunes, healing the transatlantic alliance damaged by Suez, after a successful Anglo-American summit in Bermuda in 1957. His Edwardian manner proved surprisingly popular. (As a young man, Macmillan had been wounded in the First World War and, as he got older, he projected a charming, aristocratic and rather genteel persona.) When the

cartoonist Vicky satirised him as 'Supermac', a kind of comic superman, the image worked in his favour. He capitalised on rising living standards, boasting: 'You've never had it so good!' In the 1959 election, the Conservatives claimed: 'Life's better under the Conservatives. Don't let Labour ruin it!' They were returned with a larger majority.

After the election Macmillan further strengthened the transatlantic alliance following summits with the new US President Kennedy at Bermuda in 1961 and Nassau in 1962, which substantially preserved Britain's independent nuclear deterrent. Yet at home, the government's popularity was falling, following economic problems and by-election defeats. Macmillan had boldly decided to seek British membership of the EEC in 1961, but negotiations dragged on. Macmillan's difficulties worsened after a major Cabinet reshuffle (described as the 'night of the long knives') backfired in 1962.

Macmillan was not helped by the scandals that enveloped the last years of his government, particularly after his minister of war, John Profumo, was forced to resign after he admitted lying to the Commons over an extramarital relationship with Christine Keeler, who had also been involved – at the height of the Cold War – with a Russian naval attaché. Rumours of further scandals surrounded other public figures and to some extent the whole establishment. Macmillan seemed suddenly old and out of touch, facing criticism within his own party. Moreover, in 1963, the long negotiations over UK membership of the EEC were abruptly terminated, effectively by the veto of the French President Charles de Gaulle. (Britain's difficult relationship with Europe is discussed in more detail in [Chapter 12](#).) Following the death of Gaitskell and the election of Harold Wilson as Labour leader, Macmillan now faced an agile younger opponent who was surprisingly successful in reuniting his previously divided party and restoring its electoral fortunes. In October 1963, Macmillan resigned, ostensibly on grounds of ill health, to be eventually succeeded by Lord Home, who resigned his peerage, and fought a by-election to win a seat in the Commons (a process that finally confirmed that the

prime minister should be a member of the lower elected house). Home did not last long, as he was obliged to call a general election in October 1964, when the Conservatives were narrowly defeated. This meant that Harold Wilson became Britain's first Labour prime minister for 13 years, and only the second to enjoy an (initially small) majority in the House of Commons.

FROM EMPIRE TO EUROPE

Both Conservative and Labour governments had failed to deal with Britain's persistent economic problems. Both came to see entry to the EEC, the forerunner to today's EU, as a possible solution to those issues. The six countries that originally formed the EEC in 1957 were all apparently growing much faster than Britain. West Germany and Italy, in particular, went through rapid periods of industrial development, with the expansion of manufacturing companies like Volkswagen in Germany and Fiat and Zanussi in Italy. British membership was increasingly seen as a potential answer to slow economic growth and lack of competitiveness. Macmillan's Conservative government applied to join in 1963 and Wilson's Labour government in 1967; both attempts were effectively vetoed by de Gaulle, who feared the economic and cultural influence the UK would have over the EEC. After de Gaulle's departure from office, Heath's government successfully negotiated entry in 1973. Membership was subsequently endorsed by two-thirds of British voters in a referendum in 1975, after some minor renegotiation of the terms of entry by the incoming 1974 Labour government.

The time finally seemed ripe for Britain to engage with Europe. Earlier obstacles to membership, including ties with the British Empire, the Commonwealth and the wider world, no longer seemed so important. Most former colonies had achieved, or would very soon achieve, full independence. British forces had been withdrawn from east of Suez, in line with a scaling down of defence commitments, and sterling was no longer the most powerful currency in international trade. The leaders of all three parties had supported entry, and those politicians who had opposed it largely

accepted that the 1975 referendum had settled the issue for the immediate future.

However, the British commitment to Europe was less than wholehearted, while entry into the European Community (EC) provided no instant answer to Britain's economic problems. The timing was unfortunate. The UK missed out on the years of growth and rising living standards that the original six member states had experienced. It joined in 1973, the year of the energy crisis, when major industrial countries faced substantial petrol shortages, due to instability in the oil-exporting Middle East. This crisis precipitated an international economic downturn. Moreover, the UK had joined the club too late to affect the development of its rules, which did not always suit British needs. Thus, Britain's small but comparatively efficient agricultural sector did not benefit much from the cumbersome Common Agricultural Policy, which initially consumed three-quarters of the EC's total budget. This led to early complaints that Britain was paying in far more than it was getting in return, and Margaret Thatcher's subsequent and ultimately successful demand for a budget rebate.

Only the then tiny Liberal Party were consistently in favour of EC membership. Labour was divided. Broadly speaking, the social democratic right were in favour and the more socialist left, who regarded it as a rich man's club, were against, although there were exceptions to this generalisation on both sides. Wilson had finally and reluctantly agreed to a referendum on the issue to avoid splits in his own party, yet under the leadership of Michael Foot, Labour was to fight the 1983 election committed to withdrawal from Europe without a referendum. Although the end of empire initially made it easier for many Conservatives to accept Europe as a practical alternative, a significant minority remained opposed to the implications for Britain's national sovereignty. From the early 1990s the Conservatives became an increasingly Eurosceptic party, opposing EU expansion and aiming ultimately to pull the UK out of the EU. Ironically, over the same period, the majority of the Labour Party became more positive towards Europe (see [Chapter 12](#)).

THE 1960S AND AFTER: CONSENSUS TO CRISIS

SOCIAL CHANGE AND THE POLITICS OF PROTEST

Living standards rose continuously in the postwar decades. Rationing was phased out in the early 1950s and wartime shortages abated. There was a greater range of goods on which to spend money, including durable consumer goods such as cars, washing machines and television sets, increasingly within the range of ordinary working people. Some argued that increased prosperity was affecting political allegiances. Workers in the then flourishing car industry acquired middle-class lifestyles, and perhaps attitudes, for the middle-class vote was then overwhelmingly Conservative. Conservative election posters in 1959 showed happy middle-class families with father,

mother and two children enjoying their new home and car.

Increasing prosperity was accompanied by other social change, less consistent with traditional family values. It was becoming easier for men and women to choose alternative lifestyles. The 1960s have been associated with increased personal liberation: contraceptive pills enabled couples to plan or avoid parenthood; more couples lived openly together unmarried and having a child outside marriage lost much of its earlier stigma; abortion was largely decriminalised in 1967; and divorce law was reformed, making divorce easier and cheaper. Homosexual acts, previously punishable by law, were legalised between consenting adults in private, although it took much longer for public attitudes to homosexuality to change. State censorship for obscenity was relaxed, allowing classic novels like D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* to be legally sold in the UK for the first time. Some critics deplored increased social and sexual permissiveness and the effects it had on the traditional family. Others countered that easier divorce enabled some women, in particular, to escape from violent marriages and freed couples from long, unhappy relationships. Women's increased earning power gave them more freedom to choose and control their own lives.

The families portrayed in election posters, commercial advertising and in the media generally remained overwhelmingly white until the last years of the twentieth century. Yet one largely unintended consequence of empire had been substantial immigration into Britain from its former colonies, particularly from the West Indies, the Indian subcontinent and parts of Africa. The growing black and Asian population faced considerable prejudice and discrimination, and in the largely inner urban areas where most of them settled, there were ethnic tensions and sometimes serious riots. Politician Enoch Powell courted controversy and destroyed his own chances of ever leading the Conservative Party with his 'rivers of blood' speech in 1968, which was widely seen to be racist, and in which he warned against the UK's immigration policy. In spite of discrimination, over the postwar years Britain was transformed



Source: The Conservative Party Archive/Getty Images

For many Britons, the 1950s were a time of economic growth. It was the Conservatives who were the main electoral beneficiaries.

into an increasingly multicultural society, accommodating a range of different religions, languages and lifestyles (see [Chapter 4](#)). Ethnic minorities undoubtedly brought a new dimension to British politics, but there was still tension and conflict. The children and grandchildren of immigrants, while often assimilating much of British culture, were less prepared to accept casual discrimination and prejudice.

Social change provoked political change. Largely outside the parties, the politics of protest grew in the 1960s and 70s. The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) organised a series of massive marches against nuclear weapons, while they and other groups demonstrated against the American war in Vietnam, as part of a growing peace movement. Others became active participants in the developing environmental movement (see [Chapter 21](#)). The continuing economic, social, legal and political inequality suffered by women inspired a powerful feminist movement, which by the 1970s would help secure significant changes in the law and some real advances in employment opportunities, childcare and political representation. (Many of these legal advances are set out in [Chapter 9](#).) In response to the racist agitation stimulated by some far-right groups, and tacitly endorsed



Source: The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament
The threat of nuclear war loomed large and spurred many citizens, particularly younger people, into action and protest. The first CND badges were made using clay and distributed with a note explaining that in the event of a nuclear war, these fired badges would be among the few human artefacts to survive.

by a few mainstream politicians, the Anti-Nazi League and ethnic minority groups sought to counter racial prejudice and discrimination, and champion the rights of minorities. Much of this politics of protest involved a reaction against the political mainstream and the established traditional parties, and cut across old class divisions. The relative homogeneity of British society and culture, proclaimed by some earlier British and foreign observers, seemed to be breaking down.

NORTHERN IRELAND, SCOTLAND AND WALES

To some observers in the 1970s, the main threat to the integrity and sovereignty of the UK came not from Europe but from within, from the resurgence of Irish, Scottish and Welsh nationalist desires to break off from the UK, linked perhaps with the relative political and economic decline of Britain, now neither a world power, nor the centre of an extensive overseas empire. Some Scots and Welsh felt that they were no longer partners in a great imperial enterprise, but neglected second-class citizens of a shrunken British state. Economic problems hit the more peripheral areas of the UK particularly hard – Northern Irish shipbuilding, the coal and steel industries of South Wales and the industrial belt of central Scotland. Those nationalists who had always questioned union with England now had additional economic arguments to support their case.

Northern Ireland posed the first and most immediate threat to the British state (see [Chapter 11](#)). Following persistent Irish nationalist pressure in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Ireland had been partitioned, substantially on religious lines, in 1922, with the majority of the country becoming an independent Irish state. The predominantly Protestant six counties of the province of Northern Ireland remained part of the British state. It had its own devolved government and Parliament (at Stormont), but also sent MPs to the Westminster Parliament. While the Protestant majority maintained a fierce allegiance to the British crown, most Catholics were nationalists who sought a united Ireland. Even so, despite periodic disturbances, the province had been fairly

quiet since the war. The Ulster Unionist Party, then affiliated to the Conservatives, dominated both the Stormont Parliament and Northern Ireland representation at Westminster. The nationalist party, Sinn Féin, won odd seats in predominantly Catholic areas, but declined to take them up, as they did not recognise British rule. Unionist (and Protestant) domination of the province seemed complete, while Catholics were a disadvantaged minority.

From the mid-1960s, Catholics, dissatisfied with their second-class status, demanded civil and political rights. This led to political disturbances. Concessions announced by the unionist government upset many 'loyalist' Protestants without winning support from Catholics. The two communities became increasingly polarised. Riots became frequent. A new hard-line Protestant unionism, in which Ian Paisley was to become a key figure, emerged. Troops sent in by the British government to restore order in 1969 were at first welcomed by the Catholics, who had suffered attacks by loyalists. However, perhaps inevitably, these troops soon became targets for nationalists who saw them as representatives of an alien occupying force. The Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA) began a violent campaign to secure the withdrawal of British troops and ultimately a united Ireland. In 1972, the events of 'Bloody Sunday', when British troops fired on demonstrators, killing 13 civilians, led to the suspension of the Stormont government and the imposition of direct rule from Westminster. Violence, involving sectarian murders, revenge attacks and bombings, was to remain a feature of Ulster life for a quarter of a century, and was periodically exported to the mainland of Britain. A series of political initiatives failed to end the cycle of violence.

The Irish nationalist challenge to the historic union of Great Britain and Northern Ireland was paralleled by a resurgence of Scottish and Welsh nationalism, although these were almost entirely nonviolent. Parliamentary by-election victories for nationalists led to a more marked advance for the Scottish National Party and (to a lesser extent) Plaid Cymru in the two general elections of 1974. Disturbed by the threat to its support in Scotland and Wales, Labour

promised a new elected Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly, involving some devolution of power rather than the independence pursued by nationalists. This first attempt at devolution foundered with the failure to secure sufficient support in referendums in 1979, an outcome that precipitated the fall of Callaghan's Labour government. The Conservatives had long been the party of the union, and the later governments of Thatcher and Major made no concessions to nationalist pressures. These seemed to recede for a time in Scotland and Wales, although not in Northern Ireland (see [Chapter 3](#)).

'THE CRISIS OF THE 1970s': UNDERPERFORMING ECONOMY, 'STAGFLATION', TRADE UNIONS AND INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS

Despite continuing political stability, coupled with the establishment and maintenance of full employment, a mixed economy and the welfare state, all did not seem well with the British economic and political system in the 1960s and 70s. Britain's economic growth was only modest in comparison with that of major competitors in North America, Western Europe and Japan. Low growth was blamed on 'stop-go' policies, under which expansion led to inflation and a balance of payments crisis, followed by cuts in public spending, recession and increased unemployment, sparking reflation and a recurrence of excess demand and rising prices. Thus, governments seemed incapable of pursuing steady growth. Britain's competitiveness also appeared to be undermined by relatively low labour productivity, exacerbated by strikes and other problems with industrial relations, and outdated management.

After 13 years of Conservative rule, the new Labour government under Harold Wilson in 1964 was pledged to modernise the economy and secure an annual rate of economic growth of 4% to pay for further social reform and increased spending on public services. Yet the government was handicapped by a deteriorating balance of payments and increasing pressure on the exchange rate of the pound sterling, which eventually forced

devaluation in 1967, an event from which Wilson's reputation never quite recovered. Both his government and the following Conservative government under Heath (1970–74) attempted to reform trade unions and industrial relations, but failed. Increasing numbers of days were lost to industrial action, culminating in the miners' strike of 1973–74 that effectively brought down the Heath government.

The Keynes-Beveridge consensus was under threat. While some criticised the rising cost of the welfare state, others questioned its effectiveness. Problems such as homelessness, failing schools, child poverty and inner-city decline showed that the system was not providing effective social security 'from the cradle to the grave'. Moreover, although Keynesian theory recommended contrasting policy remedies to cope with inflation, on the one hand, or economic stagnation with rising unemployment, on the other, by the 1970s governments were confronted with rising prices *and* rising unemployment. Journalists coined the term **stagflation** to describe this apparently new phenomenon.

Stagflation is persistent high inflation combined with high unemployment and stagnant demand in a country's economy.

Politicians from both parties concluded that unreasonable wage increases were pushing up prices. So governments from Macmillan's to Callaghan's tried to restrain inflationary pressures through various forms of incomes policy. This entailed making deals with the leaders of business and organised labour. Some observers discerned a new system of making policy involving government, the Confederation of British Industry and the Trades Union Congress, a process described as 'tripartism' or 'corporatism'. These terms described who was involved, but said little about the power relationships between them. While some saw corporatism as a new political system involving partnership with business and labour, others saw it as an essentially top-down process, bypassing Parliament and people. Some socialist critics thought the

apparent participation of the unions in policy-making was essentially cosmetic; the reality involved restraints on workers' wages in the interest of business profits. By contrast, critics on the right thought the unions had been given too much power, and that incomes policies interfered with free-market forces, damaging Britain's competitiveness. In practice, incomes policies appeared to restrain wage rises in the short term, but were difficult to maintain on a longer term basis.

The Heath government's attempts to control inflation were not helped by the 1973 energy crisis, which saw a quadrupling of oil prices. This underlined the continued importance of Britain's coal industry and the industrial muscle of the miners, who began a national strike in 1973. Heath responded by imposing a three-day working week to save energy costs. The crisis provoked an early election in February 1974, which the government narrowly lost, producing a **hung parliament**. This allowed Wilson to return as the prime minister of a minority Labour government, which acquired a slim majority in a second election the same year.

A **hung parliament** (or a *hung council*) is one where no single political party can command a majority, implying coalition or minority government.

Inflation continued to rise steeply under Labour (Dutton, 1997, p. 102). The government initially sought to maintain its spending plans by borrowing. In 1976, after Callaghan had replaced Wilson as prime minister, mounting debts forced the government to seek a massive loan from the International Monetary Fund under conditions that required major cuts in public spending. Confidence in Keynesian solutions was undermined, as Callaghan (1987, p. 426) mournfully acknowledged to the Labour Party conference in 1976:

We used to think that you could just spend your way out of recession and increase employment by cutting taxes and boosting government spending. I tell you, in all candour, that that option no longer exists, and that in so far as it ever did exist, it only worked ... by injecting a bigger dose of

inflation into the economy, followed by a higher level of unemployment as the next step.

Savage deflationary policies eventually enabled the Labour government to control spending and reduce inflation, but at considerable political cost, alienating voters and many in the unions, and dividing the Labour Party. Callaghan could have called a general election in late 1978, and seemed close to doing so, but decided to wait until after the winter in the hope that the economy would improve and voters would return the Labour government. It was a mistake (Dorey, 2016). The last version of the incomes policy introduced by the Callaghan government culminated in a series of strikes by key public sector workers, dubbed

the **winter of discontent** by newspapers (Shepherd, 2013). While the Conservative Party and other anti-Labour groups did much to exaggerate the extent of the crisis, the strikes fatally undermined Callaghan's Labour government (Hay, 2009). The government collapsed in March 1979, after losing a vote of 'no confidence', and on 3 May 1979, Labour were defeated at general election. It was to be the last Labour government for almost 18 years, by which time the Conservatives, under Thatcher for much of that time, set about dismantling much of the postwar consensus.

*The **winter of discontent** was a series of public sector strikes during the winter of 1978/79 that undermined the Labour government.*



SUMMARY

- » Although British politics from 1939 to 1979 was clearly shaped by past history, and showed a marked stability and continuity with the past, it was extensively transformed by the Second World War and its aftermath.
- » Key features included the development of the welfare state at home, the Cold War between the USA and the USSR abroad, coupled with the decline of empire.
- » Although the British people continued to enjoy rising standards of living and relatively low unemployment, Britain continued to suffer relative economic decline.
- » The declining British Empire and the 'special relationship' with the USA were obstacles to Britain engaging with the movement for closer European economic and political integration on the European continent. When Britain finally joined the EEC in 1973, it was too late to shape its rules or share early benefits, and the commitment was less than wholehearted.
- » From the late 1960s onwards, the UK faced threats to the maintenance of the union from nationalist movements in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. The first attempt of Labour to establish greater devolution in Scotland and Wales did not attract sufficient support in referendums in 1979.
- » Changes in population, living standards and lifestyles raised new political issues, and involved some rejection of traditional values. It helped spark a politics of protest largely outside the traditional party system.



QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- » How does war change society?
- » How far was Britain's great power status an illusion after the Second World War?
- » Should politicians have focused on the economy or welfare in the years after the Second World War?

- » Was there a political consensus in the period after the Second World War, and if so, on what was it based?
- » Why were British governments not involved in closer European integration in the 1950s? Why have British governments, and the British people, not engaged more closely with Europe?
- » How was the unity of the United Kingdom apparently threatened in the 1970s and why?
- » How far was 'the crisis of the 1970s' a real crisis that Britain had to face?



FURTHER READING

There are several useful books on postwar British politics. Kynaston's series, *Austerity Britain 1945–51* (2008), *Family Britain, 1951–1957* (2010) and *Modernity Britain, 1957–62* (2015) provide an excellent social history. Black's (2010) *Redefining British Politics: Culture, Consumerism and Participation, 1954–70* explores the ideas, moments, identities, organisations and individuals that created social change. Hennessy's *Never Again: Britain 1945–1951* (1993) and *Having It So Good: Britain in the Fifties* (2006) are also good accounts. Sandbrook produced a readable series, *Never Had It So Good: A History of Britain*

from Suez to the Beatles (2005), *White Heat: A History of Britain in the Swinging Sixties* (2006) and *State of Emergency: The Way We Were: Britain, 1970–1974* (2010). From a different political angle to Sandbrook, Judt's (2005) *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945* provides a valuable broader European perspective and a particularly useful brief comparison of the German and British economies in the postwar period (pp. 354–59). On the experience of particular groups, Clair Wills, *Lovers and Strangers: An Immigrant History of Post-War Britain* (2017) and Jane Lewis, *Women in Britain Since 1945* (1992) are well worth a read.



USEFUL WEBSITES

The journal *Contemporary British History* has many relevant articles: www.tandfonline.com/toc/fcbh20/current.



Further student resources to support learning are available at www.macmillanihe.com/griffiths-brit-pol-3e