Part 1

United Kingdom

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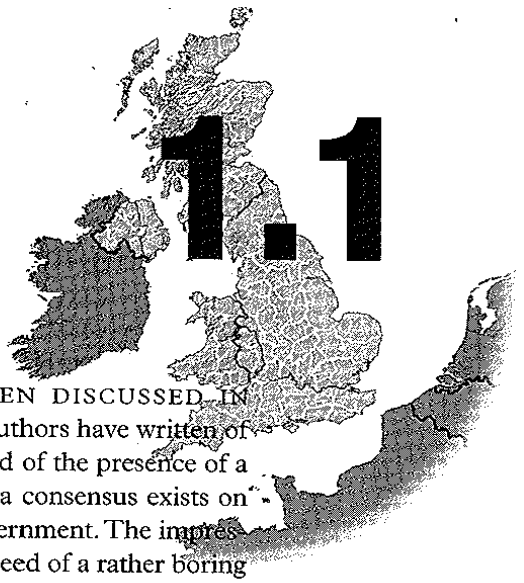
International boundary
Territory boundary
Lieutenancy boundary
Capital city
Administrative seat
Largest cities (by population)
Shetland Islands
Orkney Islands
Outer Hebrides
ATLANTIC OCEAN
SCOTLAND
Ben Nevis
River Tay
Glasgow
Edinburgh
North Sea
U N I T E D
K I N G D O M
NORTHERN IRELAND
River Bann
Belfast
Slieve Donard
Scafell Pike
Irish Sea
Liverpool
IRELAND
Snowdon
ENGLAND
River Severn
Birmingham
WALES
Thames
London
Cardiff
Celtic Sea
English Channel

1.1 The Context of British Politics



BRITISH SOCIETY AND BRITISH POLITICS ARE OFTEN DISCUSSED IN terms of their tradition, homogeneity, and integration. Some authors have written of the absence of significant social cleavages other than social class and of the presence of a uniform set of political and social values. Others have argued that a consensus exists on the nature of the political system and on the general policies of government. The impression commonly given, then, is one of homogeneity, stability, and indeed of a rather boring locale in which to study politics. The impression of stability was reinforced by the ability of two political leaders—Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair—to each remain in power for more than a decade. Further, even after the election of Blair's "New Labour" government to a third term in 2005, many Conservative policies remained in effect—enough, in fact, to prompt traditional supporters of Labour to argue that there has been too much continuity in British politics.

However, at the beginning of the second decade of the twenty-first century, many of the old certainties of British politics are being called into question. The country that provided the ideal type of Lijphart's majoritarian model of democracy now has its first postwar coalition government and a majority nationalist administration in the devolved Scottish Parliament. More than at any other time since the election of Margaret Thatcher in 1979, British political elites are uncertain about where future growth and prosperity will come from. Indeed, the very future of the British state itself will be decided in 2014 when Scotland holds a referendum on whether to secede from the United Kingdom. The Conservative Party has also promised a referendum on Britain's continued membership of the European Union.

The United Kingdom, then, is a state that is grappling not only with its own internal territorial diversity but also with the wider problems of being a midsize country in an increasingly globalized world.

In reality the social and political systems of the United Kingdom are substantially more diverse than they are frequently portrayed, and many of the factors that divide other democracies politically also divide the citizens of the United Kingdom. There are differences in religion, language, regional interests, and perceptions of issues that both mitigate and reinforce the traditionally dominant class divisions in British politics. Those divisive factors have become even more important, because immigration, Europeanization, continuing economic change, and the war on terror have tended to increase the salience of the existing social divisions and create new ones. The scandal over expenses claimed by members of Parliament (MPs) that erupted in 2009 highlighted traditional social class and elite–mass cleavages that simmer below the surface of British politics. Further, the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition government formed after the 2010 general election adds an interesting complication to governance in the United Kingdom.

Not only is there diversity but also the setting of British politics has some seemingly contradictory elements that make the management of government much more of a balancing act than might be thought at first glance. In fact, the genius of British politics in maintaining a stable political system over several centuries is not the good fortune of operating in a homogeneous society but the development of a set of institutions, values, and customs that permit the pragmatic acceptance of diversity and an effective accommodation to change. Historically, these changes were rather gradual, but the pace of transformation accelerated in the late twentieth century. This chapter explores several contradictory elements within the environment of British politics and their relationship to the functioning of the political system.

A United Kingdom of Four Countries

The diversity in British politics stems in part from the fact that the United Kingdom is a multinational state composed of four parts. This section begins, therefore, by introducing some nomenclature with real political importance. The proper name of the nation usually referred to as Great Britain is the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Great Britain, in turn, is a geographic, as well as cultural, identifier referring to the island that comprises England, Wales, and Scotland. All are constituent parts of the United Kingdom, albeit rather unequal partners in terms of population and economic productivity. More than 84 percent of the total population of the United Kingdom lives in England, 9 percent in Scotland, 5 percent in Wales, and the remainder in Northern Ireland. More than 90 percent of total wages and salaries in the economy are paid in England, with only 1 percent going to residents of Northern Ireland.

The three non-English components of the United Kingdom, sometimes called the Celtic fringe, joined with England at various times and various ways.[1] Wales was added first, by conquest, in the early fourteenth century. The English and Scottish crowns were united in 1603 when the Scottish king, James VI, also became King James I of England. The parliaments of the two countries were joined by the Act of Union in 1707. This unification did not, however, alleviate the conflict between the northern and southern portions of Great Britain. Scottish uprisings in 1715 and again in 1745 resulted in English occupation of Scotland and the outlawing of some Scottish customs such as the kilt and bagpipes. But these restrictions were removed, at least informally, by 1822, and manifestations of Scottish nationalism, despite being prominent, have been substantially less violent since that time.

The desire of some Scots (and substantially fewer Welsh) for greater autonomy or even independence has not, however, disappeared. A nationalist party began to run some candidates in Scottish elections during the 1880s and gained one seat in a by-election in 1945. Since 1967 the Scottish National Party (SNP) has been able to secure representation in Parliament in every election. During the 1970s the pressure for independence was sufficiently strong to force a referendum on the issue of home rule. That referendum failed, but the issues of self-determination and autonomy did not go away.[2] As the United Kingdom continued to elect Conservative national governments through the 1980s and early 1990s, the push for home rule among the mostly Labour-voting Scots grew in intensity. Another referendum in 1997 approved the devolution of some powers to a Scottish parliament, which formally took office in July 1999. Although its relationship with the British national Parliament at Westminster is complicated at best, the Scottish Parliament exercises primary legislative authority over most domestic policy areas within Scotland. Following a review[3]

commissioned by the main pro-Union parties in the Scottish Parliament (Labour, Conservative, and Liberal Democratic), the UK Parliament granted the Scottish Parliament further powers. Most significantly, its presently very limited fiscal powers will be expanded so that it will from 2015 set and retain a proportion of the income tax raised in Scotland.

Yet even after these changes, the devolution agreement is far from settled as the unprecedented (and unexpected) SNP government, elected in Scotland in 2011, has consistently pressed for expanded powers and has pledged to hold a public referendum on Scottish independence in 2014. Following extensive discussions, on October 15, 2012, David Cameron, the UK prime minister, and Alex Salmond, the Scottish first minister, signed the Edinburgh Agreement, laying out the basic foundation of the Scottish independence referendum that—pass or fail—will have a significant influence on future of UK governance.

Wales also received its own assembly in 1999, although that body has had substantially fewer powers than the Scottish Parliament. However, in a 2011 referendum the Welsh voted to expand the powers of their assembly, giving it direct legislative authority over devolved policy domains.[4] Devolution in Wales remains less extensive than in Scotland, but a review commissioned by the UK government looks set to recommend further powers over domestic policy areas for the Welsh assembly. This review has already recommended that the Welsh assembly be given fiscal powers similar to those already granted to Scotland.[5]

The involvement of the British government in Ireland has had a long and tortuous history. English armies began invading Ireland in 1170; the island was finally conquered in

Prime Minister David Cameron signing the Edinburgh Agreement in October 2012 establishing a legal basis for a referendum in 2014 on Scottish independence. If the referendum passes, the Scottish parliament is empowered to enact its terms.

Source: AP Photo/Gordon Terris, Pool

1603 and was formally joined with Great Britain to form the United Kingdom in 1800. The unity created was more legal than actual, and Irish home rule was a persistent political issue during the second half of the nineteenth century. Political arguments were accompanied by increasing violence and then by armed uprisings against British rule. The most famous of these was the Easter Uprising of 1916, which marked the onset of years of serious violence. After a long period of negotiation, the twenty-six southern counties of Ireland were granted independence in 1922 as the Irish Free State (later the Republic of Ireland), and six northern counties in Ulster remained part of the United Kingdom. But this partition did not solve the "Irish Question." The ongoing tensions and outbreaks of violence in Northern Ireland between Catholics seeking to join with the rest of Ireland and Protestants desiring to maintain unity with the United Kingdom have been a problem for British governments since the beginning of the "troubles." The London government did try in various ways to establish a political settlement—all in the general context of Ulster remaining within the United Kingdom. For a short time it devolved substantial rule to Belfast and experimented with arrangements for power sharing with Catholic groups. But none of the plans was successful, and they were followed by a return to direct rule and the large-scale use of British troops in Ulster.

In February 1995, Prime Minister John Major and John Bruton, the *Taoiseach* (prime minister) of Ireland, reached an agreement establishing the conditions for initial negotiations for an enduring settlement.[6] Of this agreement's points, the most important was a democratic means of negotiating a more enduring solution to the ongoing dispute. More immediately, the agreement meant that after several decades of doing so, British soldiers stopped patrolling the streets of Belfast. If nothing else this halt removed a symbol of the troubles and a continuing irritant for the Roman Catholic population.

A highly significant step toward resolving the question of Northern Ireland was the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, signed by Prime Minister Blair, the Irish prime minister, the leaders of Sinn Fein (the political arm of the IRA), and the Ulster Unionists. The agreement called for electing a new assembly for Northern Ireland, establishing institutions formed from both the nationalist and Unionist communities, and creating a joint consultative body between Dublin and Belfast to address issues that affect all of the island of Ireland. The most fundamental point was that a greater measure of self-government was to be returned to the province. A referendum on the agreement passed overwhelmingly in Northern Ireland and even more so in a simultaneous vote in the Republic of Ireland.

Peace seemed to be returning to Northern Ireland. Elections were held for the assembly in the spring of 1999, and in July the executive assumed office, with David Trimble, an Ulster Unionist, as first minister. The executive also included members of several important parties in the province, including Sinn Fein. Initial optimism over the government proved short-lived, however, when the peace process stalled over the question of decommissioning weapons held by the IRA and the Protestant paramilitaries. In response, London restored direct rule over the province. The political impasse was tentatively resolved when Sinn Fein, in an unprecedented move, called on the IRA in October 2001 to begin decommissioning its weapons. Trimble, who had resigned in July, was reelected first minister in November. After these steps there was little movement in the peace process until July 2005 when the IRA announced that it was officially ending its "armed campaign" and ordered its units to "dump" their weapons.[7] The Protestant paramilitaries then followed

suit.[8] The peace and reconciliation process again moved ahead in 2007 when a power-sharing government was established in Belfast between Ian Paisley, hard-core Protestant unionist and leader of the Democratic Unionist Party, and Martin McGuinness, avowed Catholic republican and leader of Sinn Fein, respectively serving as leader and deputy leader of the Northern Ireland executive.[9] These once sworn adversaries became the face of a more unified and conciliatory Northern Ireland government. Several nights of rioting in Belfast in July 2010 and again in January 2013, however, reveal that Northern Ireland still has a long way to go before it can resolve the sectarian and political tensions that have driven the conflict.

Preserving the unity of the United Kingdom does not prevent the expression of differences among its constituent parts—and to some degree those differences are enshrined in law and the political structure. Before devolution, each of the three non-English components of the United Kingdom had a cabinet department responsible for its affairs. Most laws were passed by Parliament with separate acts for England and Wales, for Scotland, and for Northern Ireland. This differentiation stems, in part, from the fact that both the Scottish and Ulster legal systems are substantially different from the English (and Welsh) systems, and legislation had to be tailored to conform to those differences.

With the devolution of many issues to the new legislative bodies in Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland, this system was amended, although not simplified. In Scotland most domestic matters—such as agriculture, education, criminal law, social welfare, health care, and the environment—are handled by the Scottish Parliament, while the British Parliament at Westminster retains the right and responsibility to regulate all policy areas that have national and international implications. The fact that the Scottish "domestic" and UK "national and international" policy areas are not strictly mutually exclusive areas of authority has caused several disputes within and between the parliaments.[10] However, broadly, intergovernmental relations between the UK government and the devolved regions have been marked by pragmatism on both sides, rather than open conflict.[11]

This point is an important backdrop to the 2014 Scottish independence referendum debates. The one aspect that is agreed by both the nationalists and the unionists is that the independence vote is likely only to be the start of an extended set of negotiations, whether Scotland votes to become independent or not. In the event of a yes vote, negotiations will begin on how Scotland would transition to full independence. A no vote would ensure Scotland remains part of the United Kingdom, though it is possible that there would be an eventual agreement to ensure *devo max,* or substantially more fiscal devolution from Westminster. Relations between Westminster and the National Assembly for Wales (Cynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru) in Cardiff are somewhat less strained. The passage of the 2011 devolution referendum in Wales, however, raises the possibility of increasing tensions as Welsh policy could begin to diverge from England when the Welsh assembly begins to exercise primary legislative authority over devolved policy areas.

Prior to the imposition of direct rule in Northern Ireland in 1972, Stormont, the Northern Ireland Assembly, had a major role in policymaking for that province, and a separate Northern Ireland civil service continues to implement the policies of the government in London. After direct rule, the role of Stormont was virtually eliminated, but one part of the proposed settlement with the Roman Catholic groups was the restoration of some powers to a legislature in Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland's experiences with some of

the areas of self-government have, however, revealed cracks in the power-sharing arrangements put in place by the Good Friday Agreement. With almost all of the parties in Stormont having ministers in the Northern Irish government, there are few parliamentarians to fill out the role of the "loyal opposition" and question the actions of the executive.[12]

Law, language, and religion differ in the four parts of the United Kingdom. Scottish law is derived in part from French and Roman law, as well as from common law, and various legal procedures and offices differ between English and Scottish practice. Language is also different in various parts of the United Kingdom. Welsh is recognized as a second language for Wales (and all official government documents in Wales must be published in both English and Welsh), although only about 20 percent of the population can speak Welsh and a mere 1 percent speak it as their only language. Some people in Scotland and Northern Ireland speak forms of Gaelic, but it has not been accorded formal legal status, perhaps because only just over 1 percent of the population speaks fluent Gaelic. The Scottish Parliament does, however, allow its members (members of Scottish Parliament, or MSPs) to address the parliament in Gaelic or Scots (providing they give the presiding officer prior notice) and publishes most of its official documentation in both English and Gaelic.

The established religions of the parts of the nation vary as well: the Church of England (Anglican) in England and the Church of Scotland (Presbyterian) in Scotland. Wales and Northern Ireland do not have established churches because of their religious diversity. The diversity in Wales between Anglicans and various "chapel religions" (Methodism in particular) has not produced the dire consequences of the differences between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland, but it has been a source of political diversity and somewhat different patterns of voting in the principality than in England.[13] These traditional religious divisions are becoming less important as church membership declines, but they are being replaced by differences with non-Christian religions, especially Islam.

Finally, the four components of the United Kingdom differ economically. This difference is less true of their economic structures than of their economic success. Unemployment levels are on average higher in the non-English parts of the United Kingdom (especially Northern Ireland) than in England. Another measure of economic success, average personal income, is lower in all three parts of the Celtic fringe than in England and by a large margin for Northern Ireland. Differences in the proportion of the working population employed in manual jobs, or even in the proportion employed in agriculture, are relatively slight between England and the Celtic fringe. The major difference in employment patterns is the substantially higher rates of public employment in the Celtic fringe, especially in Northern Ireland. All that said, it is difficult to talk broadly about "England" as a whole when referring to the economy since, in economic terms, the divide is between the south of England and the rest of the country. Unemployment rates in some parts of northern England are as high as or even higher than in Scotland or Wales, whereas the southwest and southeast have at times in the recent past experienced shortages of workers (see Table 1-1). London is a special case, having boroughs with some of the lowest (2.5 percent) and highest (11.3 percent) unemployment rates in the country. All these economic differences have political importance, because they create a sense of deprivation among non-English groups within the United Kingdom, as well as among residents of northern England. Not surprisingly, these areas have tended to vote heavily for the Labour Party.

Table 1-1 Unemployment Rates by Region: United Kingdom, 2013 (Percentage)

England	
Northeast	10.1
Northwest	8.3
Yorkshire and Humberside	9.2
West Midlands	9.1
Southeast	6.8
East Midlands	7.7
Southwest	6.2
East England	6.9
London	8.9
Scotland	7.3
Wales	8.2
United Kingdom	7.9

Source: Office for National Statistics, "Regional Labour Market Statistics, April 2013," May 15, 2013, www.ons.gov.uk/ons/dcp171778_306657.pdf

Although the differences among the four nations of the United Kingdom are manifested politically, fortunately it is seldom with the violence of Ulster politics. Scottish nationalism did not die entirely after the Act of Union but has experienced cyclical declines and surges. Votes for the SNP surged from 1959 to 1974: the SNP at least doubled its vote in every election during that period. In the 1970s and 1980s, the SNP's growth rate slowed, however. The party received more than 6 percent of the Scottish vote in the October 1974 Westminster election, but only 14 percent in 1987, some thirteen years and three elections later. In the Westminster elections of 1992, 1997, and 2001, the SNP held steady with slightly more than 20 percent of the Scottish vote (1992, 21.5 percent; 1997, 22.04 percent; 2001, 20.06 percent). With the redrawing of the constituency boundaries in Scotland for the 2005 elections (and Scotland's drop from seventy-two MPs to fifty-nine MPs), the SNP garnered almost 18 percent of the Scottish vote. Although this figure seems to be a drop for the SNP, because of the new constituency boundaries and the fewer number of Scots being sent to Westminster it actually represents a net gain of two seats for the SNP. In 2010 the SNP held this result with 20 percent of the vote and six seats in Westminster.

Support for the SNP within Scotland, however, may be greater than it appears when simply focusing on Westminster votes and seats. In the 2011 Scottish Parliament election, the SNP managed a feat previously thought impossible—despite an electoral system designed to discourage parliamentary majorities, the SNP secured a decisive majority of parliamentary seats. Analyses of the 2011 Scottish Election Study survey show that Scots seem to be developing multilevel partisan allegiances with one set of allegiances for the Scottish system and another for the UK system. This, then, leads to greater support for the SNP when discussing Scottish politics than might be evident when examining general UK politics.[14]

Although Welsh nationalism has been less successful than Scottish nationalism as a political force, Plaid Cymru, the Welsh national party, did win over 13 percent of the Welsh vote in the October 1974 Westminster election. Nationalist voting declined after 1974 but remained a significant factor in these Celtic portions of the United Kingdom. In the 1997 election, Plaid Cymru won 10 percent of the vote and continued to push for the referendum that eventually approved setting up the National Assembly for Wales. The party received 14.3 percent in 2001 but slipped to 12.6 percent in 2005 and dropped again to 11.3 percent in 2010.

Party politics in Northern Ireland, which has been based as much on cleavages of the seventeenth century as those of the twenty-first century, bears little resemblance to politics in the rest of the United Kingdom. Two parties represent the Roman Catholic population, and one has been allied with the former IRA. Two parties also represent the Protestant majority, varying primarily in the intensity with which they express allegiance to the United Kingdom and distrust of Roman Catholics, especially the IRA. Finally, one party attempts to be a catchall for the two confessional groups. Some elements of economics and class are in the political party equation—one of the Roman Catholic parties also has a moderate socialist agenda—but the fundamental basis of politics has been religion.

Thus, the first feature of the context of contemporary politics in the United Kingdom is that it is a single state composed of separate parts. Unlike the states of the United States, these elements of the union possess no reserved powers—only the powers delegated to them by the central government. This delegation of powers is true even for the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh assembly. Although these institutions were created in response to regional referenda, they exert only the authority delegated to them by Westminster. Nevertheless, in practice, it would be politically impossible for a UK government to reverse the powers granted to these institutions. Such a move would likely provoke a strong nationalist backlash that could lead to the secession of Scotland. The political system might therefore best be described as quasi-federal. It retains many of the features of the centralized and majoritarian democracy described by Lijphart, but, increasingly, as the devolved parliaments and assemblies are granted more powers, it is coming to resemble a more federalized union.[15]

It is not altogether surprising, therefore, that this uneasy compromise is coming under strain, not least from the 2014 Scottish independence referendum. A key feature of devolution in the United Kingdom is its lopsided nature. There has been no devolution to England, the part of the United Kingdom that represents the greatest share of population and economic output. There is also the question of how far devolution can reasonably go within the United Kingdom. Would a UK government, for instance, be willing to countenance a more fiscally autonomous Scottish Parliament undercutting tax rates in order to attract companies away from the northeast of England? Regardless of the outcome of the 2014 referendum, the evolution of devolution will remain a thorny issue for UK governments.

Stability and Change

A second feature of the context of contemporary politics in the United Kingdom is the continuity of social and political institutions, combined with a significant degree of change.

If a subject of Queen Victoria were to return during the reign of the present monarch, Elizabeth II, he or she might comment that—at least on the surface—little had changed. Laws are made by the House of Commons and the House of Lords. The leader of the party who commands a majority in the House of Commons is prime minister.

Yet there is a great sense of change in the United Kingdom. The political system has been greatly democratized since Victorian times. When Queen Victoria came to the throne in 1837, only about 3 percent of the adult population was eligible to vote, despite the Great Reform Act of 1832. During the reign of Elizabeth II, almost all adults have been entitled to vote. Before 1911, the House of Lords was almost an equal partner in making legislation; since then, the House of Lords has exercised far less influence over policy. A Victorian prime minister was definitely *primus inter pares* (first among equals), whereas in the twentieth century collegial patterns of decision making changed to create something approaching a presidential role for the prime minister. The monarchy in Victoria's day still had substantial influence over policy, but today it has been constitutionally reduced to virtual impotence. Finally, but not least important, the United Kingdom has evolved from perhaps the strongest nation on earth and the imperial master of a far-flung empire to a second-class power—economically and militarily—in a nuclear age.

Social and economic trends have paralleled political trends. Just as the monarchy has been preserved, so, too, has a relatively stratified social system that includes hereditary (as well as life) peerages. Meanwhile, working-class organizations such as trade unions have tended to lessen the domination of the upper classes and to generate some democratization of the society as well as the political system. The economic structure of the United Kingdom is still primarily based on free enterprise, but government ownership and regulation have had a significant, if declining, impact. The decade and a half of Conservative Party domination of politics that ended in 1997 weakened the unions and enhanced the power of business interests, and "New Labour" governments under Tony Blair and Gordon Brown did little to strengthen the influence of the unions. One strategy of the Conservatives in their conscious attempts to reinforce capitalism was the spread of wealth in the society through selling off public housing and privatizing public corporations. The Labour government first elected in 1997 continued to follow many of the same policies, albeit for different ideological reasons. The Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition government has generally pursued right of center "austerity" economic policies in dealing with the effects of the global economic downturn, while simultaneously moderating social policy positions, such as support for same-sex marriage.

Compared with those of many other industrialized nations, the British economy is no longer the great engine of production it once was. The relatively constrained economy of the United Kingdom, when it is compared with its European and North American counterparts, has severely restricted the policy options available to British government. This is especially true following the global banking and economic crisis that began in 2008. The government invested a great deal to prop up the financial industry in the United Kingdom, sending the public treasury deeply into debt. The coalition government elected in 2010 has significantly restrained public spending in an attempt to create a period of public austerity. Yet despite these efforts, the UK credit rating was downgraded in early 2013 (just as the US rating was reduced in 2011), reflecting the massive debt the country has accrued over a prolonged period.

The evolutionary change so characteristic of British political life has been facilitated by the absence of a written constitution. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say the absence of a single written document serving as a constitution, because many documents—the Magna Carta, the Bill of Rights, the Petition of Right, the 1911 Parliament Act, and the Statute of Westminster—have constitutional status. In addition, the Parliament of the day, expressing the political will of the British people, faces fewer checks on its power without the limitations of judicial review that exist in the United States. For example, the Scotland Act and the Government of Wales Act create a quasi-constitutional form of government that would have been alien to a centralized regime. Such constitutionally unlimited powers had the potential for great tyranny, inasmuch as only other politicians, the threat of elections, and their own good sense restrained governments. New institutional arrangements, however, such as the Supreme Court of the United Kingdom (established in 2009) and the European Union's increasing assertions of legal and judicial oversight, may serve as practical limits on parliamentary authority over time.

Although many aspects of the monarchy and Parliament have changed little, the executive branch of government underwent a revolution during the Thatcher government (1979–1990), and the pace of change lessened little during Major's tenure (1990–1997). Among other changes, large cabinet departments were broken up into "executive agencies" headed by chief executives who could be recruited from outside the civil service or other government organizations. In addition, in major policy areas, such as those covering the National Health Service (NHS), market-based instruments were introduced in an attempt to increase the efficiency of those services. Procedural changes also were introduced to improve the efficiency and economy of the public sector. The Blair government embraced many of these changes, with some retreat from the internal markets in health, but with a continuing interest in corporatization and privatization. In mid-1999 the Blair government converted the Post Office into a corporation, a move not dared even by Margaret Thatcher.

Traditional and Modern: The Political Culture of the United Kingdom

In the United Kingdom, much of the ability to accommodate political change while maintaining older political institutions may be explained by its political culture—that is, the values and beliefs that political elites and ordinary citizens have about politics and government. One way of describing this culture is "traditionally modern."[16] Specifically, traditional views are combined with modern elements to produce a blend that, if apparently internally contradictory, appears to produce effective government. This culture has not been static; rather, it has permitted relatively gradual change based on pragmatic acceptance of changing national needs and changing social values. The traditional elements of the political culture are best known, with deference, trust, and pragmatism still important to understanding how the British political system functions.

As for *deference,* the British population is generally deferential to authority. Authority implies citizens' lack of opposition to the actions of their government—or perhaps even positive acceptance of those actions. The British government has, by all accounts, a large reservoir of authority, for few citizens question the correctness of the current political arrangements or the right of the government to make and enforce laws. Because the populace gives *diffuse support* (or trust in the institutions of government) to the political system

and is willing to obey laws and accept the authoritative decrees of government, the United Kingdom is an easier nation to govern than many.

Over the years, the authority of elected governments in the United Kingdom has encountered only a few major challenges aside from the peculiar politics of Ulster. The trade unions attempted to bring down Conservative governments and their economic and industrial policies, succeeding against the government of Edward Heath in 1974 but not against Thatcher in the mid-1980s. In both attempts the miners union was central. The miners were able to bring about the changes they desired with the fall of Heath, but a yearlong strike against mine closings and working conditions under Thatcher resulted merely in a reassertion of the power of government to make law. Finally, during the early 1990s the Thatcher government's attempt to change the system of local government finance from property taxes (rates) to a per capita community charge (poll tax) provoked political violence and significant tax evasion. More recently, the 2011 London protests and riots, which spread to other English metropolitan areas, show that deference increasingly has its limits in the United Kingdom.

The obverse of the public's trust is the responsible behavior of elected leaders. Government has generally conducted itself responsibly, and, for the most part, has not violated existing political norms. When those norms have been violated, such as when elections were suspended during the two world wars, it has been by broad agreement among the political parties. Responsibility has also meant that parties and governments are expected

Rioters took to the streets of London in March 2011 to protest cuts in social security benefits.

Source: AP Photo/Lefteris Pitarakis.

to deliver more of what they promised in election campaigns than would be expected of American parties.

Despite relatively broad diffuse support, specific support for governments and institutions (i.e., trust in the government of the day) in the United Kingdom has been declining over the past two decades. In response to this decline and to public scandals during the Thatcher decade, in 1994 Major established the Committee on Standards in Public Life.[17] This committee, tasked with monitoring the ethical environment in Westminster and researching and reporting on public attitudes toward government and governance, continues to play an active role in overseeing the ethical behavior of MPs and Parliament more broadly.

Scandals have, however, continued to undermine specific support of elected politicians and civil servants. Many in Britain questioned the Blair government's motivations in invading Iraq, going so far as to call the prime minister "George [W.] Bush's poodle."[18] Further, the 2009 scandal over expenses claims submitted by MPs, with daily revelations in the *Telegraph* newspaper, seems to have further eroded public support for politicians. Certainly the revelations that among some of the parliamentarians' expenses were the costs of creating a "duck island" in a pond, repairing a tennis court, and moat cleaning—all at MPs' private residences—caused taxpayers to question politicians' integrity.[19] Indeed, somewhat over a month after the scandal first broke, the British Election Study's Continuous Monitoring Survey found that 59 percent of survey respondents said that the expenses scandal *proved* that *most* MPs are corrupt.[20]

Events such as the expenses scandals and 2011 London riots may serve to undermine the traditional British norm of deference over time, but another feature of the political culture that remains secure is *pragmatism*. Although ideologies are frequently spouted during campaigns or in speeches delivered for mass consumption, British politics is extremely practical. Indeed, an empirical, pragmatic mode of political thought has so dominated British political life that the preservation of traditional political institutions such as the monarchy is justified not on grounds that they are right and just but simply on grounds that they have worked. Even in the more ideological Thatcher government, there were enough turnarounds and changes in policy to illustrate the pragmatic mode of thinking about government at work. This pragmatism certainly infused the Blair and Brown Labour governments in their support of privatization in the public sector, and the political compromises struck within the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition government all but enshrined the idea of practical, pragmatic politics. Obviously, such a political epistemology will be associated with continual adjustment to changing conditions, thereby helping the system to modify all but its essential features to accommodate a modern world.

The traditional values of deference, trust, and pragmatism exist even in the context of a modern, or even postindustrial, political system. The policies pursued, the presence of mass democracy and mass political parties, a very high level of public revenues and expenditures, and some increasingly close linkages between state and society are evidence of the modernity of the political system. Yet with all that, political leaders are allowed the latitude to discuss and decide political issues without directly involving the public or press. This is a modern democracy, but it is a democracy that allows an elite to govern and exercises latent democratic power only at agreed-upon times.

Class Politics, But . . .

Social class (meaning primarily levels and sources of income) has been the principal basis of social differentiation and political mobilization in the United Kingdom, although education and ancestry still matter as well. Traditionally, the major partisan alignments in politics are along class lines, with the Labour Party representing the interests of the working classes and the Conservative Party (and to a lesser extent the Liberal Democrats) reflecting the interests of the middle and upper classes. The correspondence between class and party is far less than perfect and has been declining over time, but the generalization remains a useful one if only because the party-class linkages still pervade popular political discourse.

Social class is both an objective and a subjective phenomenon. Objectively, the United Kingdom has significant inequalities of income, even after the effects of redistribution of taxes and government expenditures are taken into account. The United Kingdom experienced a sharp increase in income inequality during the 1980s, and it has never returned to its pre-1980s level. Income inequality rose to its highest level since 1961 between 2007 and 2008 and 2009 and 2010, but there was a sharp drop in 2010 and 2011 due to the effects of the economic recession.[21] Although Britain now generates most of its wealth through services, there are regional variations. For instance, London has the highest proportion of jobs in the service sector (92.3 percent) while Wales has the lowest (78.6 percent).[22] Finally, according to some of the most recent evidence, in the United Kingdom intergenerational mobility is, at best, "limited," signifying that younger generations generally do not dramatically improve their class standing relative to their parents' position in their own generation. This limited mobility is, however, not markedly different from that in other European countries, and intergenerational mobility has been declining in the United States as well.

Access to other goods and services is also affected by class considerations, although again, perhaps, not to the extent as in other European nations. In particular, education is class-related, both in the small, elite private sector and in the larger state sector. Access to postsecondary education retains a pronounced upper-class bias, although again less so than in many European nations.

Subjectively, people in the United Kingdom are generally more willing to identify themselves as members of a particular social class than are Americans, who overwhelmingly identify themselves as members of the economic middle class. Issues of all kinds may become polarized on a class basis. Any policy that preserves or extends the privileges and power of the more affluent is immediately held suspect by the Labour Party and the trade unions, even when the policy (such as selling council houses to their current tenants) may have benefits for working-class families as well as the government.

Several caveats must be raised about a simple class model of British politics. The first is that it is changing. The rise of the working classes into the middle class, so obvious in many European nations, is occurring in Great Britain as well. Manual labor is a declining share of the labor force, even though it remains a larger share in the United Kingdom than in many Western European countries. Also, the wages paid to manual workers now often approach or even surpass wages and salaries paid to many nonmanual workers, and manual workers find some of their economic interests served by the Liberal Democrats and even the Conservatives. These changes within the occupational and economic structure

may mitigate the impact of class on politics, making class a less resolute predictor of voting behavior across the country.

Other factors also have reduced the dominance of class. The ethnic and regional cleavages based on the national constituent elements of the United Kingdom were noted earlier. Within those cleavages, nationalism in Scotland and Wales has tended to cut broadly across class lines. The 2011 census showed that the white ethnic group was 86 percent of the residential population in England and Wales, a decrease from 91.3 percent in 2001.[23] Ethnic minorities now dominate many of the older industrial towns such as Birmingham, Manchester, and Nottingham, and in some inner-city schools, English is taught as a second language. Because these groups are also multiplying more rapidly than white Britons, the specter of nonwhite domination and the loss of jobs by whites is a powerful weapon for some political groups, especially the British Nationalist Party, which won two UK European Parliament seats in the 2009 elections, and the UK Independence Party (UKIP), which had an exceptionally strong showing in the 2013 English local elections. Pressure by minorities for representation has already begun to affect the local and national political systems, with the main political parties attempting to court the ethnic minority vote.

Religion also plays a role in British politics. The monarch is required to be a Protestant, which, in practice, has meant a member of the Church of England, though prominent politicians have suggested that the ban on Catholic monarchs instituted in the 1701 Act of Settlement should be repealed.[24] While that repeal may be some time in coming, changes to the rules of succession that followed the announcement that Kate Middleton, the Duchess of Cambridge, was pregnant allow for sex-neutral primogeniture and future monarchs to marry Catholics (or people of other religious faiths). The Anglican monarch (Presbyterian while in Scotland) rules a population that is only about two-thirds Christian and contains a significant Roman Catholic minority. This characteristic has been most visible in Northern Ireland, but cities such as Liverpool and Glasgow also have large and politically relevant Roman Catholic populations. Overall, however, Christianity in Great Britain is, with the exception of Northern Ireland, of decreasing relevance, because only a small and declining proportion of the population actually practices its nominal religion. For many, "Christianity" is a cultural—not religious—identification.

Perhaps even more important, the fastest-growing religions in Great Britain are not Christian of any denomination but rather are Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist. As well as affecting political behavior, these religions raise questions about civil liberties and tolerance in a country without a formal bill of rights. The tensions created by the growing ethnic diversity are not as great as in France or Germany, but they are present nevertheless, and racial tensions are becoming of increasing concern to the police and civil libertarians alike. Ethnic and religious tensions have increased since the July 7, 2005, bombings in London that killed fifty-six people (including the four suspected bombers) and injured 700 people. This was the worst terrorist attack in the United Kingdom since the 1988 bombing of a Pan Am jet over Scotland. The July 7 attacks were followed two weeks later by another incident in which four bombs placed in the London Underground fortunately failed to detonate. Although these attacks were not as severe as those that brought down the towers of the World Trade Center in New York City on September 11, 2001, they shocked Britons and were the catalyst that dramatically increased religious and racial tensions across the country.

Caroline Lucas, the first Green Party MP, poses after casting her ballot in Brighton. The May 2010 election was the closest since 1992, with no party winning an outright majority of seats in Parliament.

Source: Luke MacGregor/Reuters/Corbis.

In summary, politics in Great Britain is not entirely about class, but social class is still relevant for politics. The importance of other cleavages varies with the region of the nation (with the Celtic fringe being the most influenced by other cleavages) and with the time and circumstances of the controversy. That said, politics in Great Britain also may revolve around substantive issues. For example, the green (environmental) movement has not been as powerful in Great Britain as in most of the rest of Europe, but its influence is growing. The Green Party enjoyed some success in the 2003 Scottish parliament elections (when it won seven seats) but has since seen its electoral fortunes wane, winning just two seats in the 2011 Scottish Parliament elections and 8.6 percent of the vote (and two seats) in the 2009 European Parliament elections. In the 2010 general elections, the Green Party elected its first MP to Westminster (Caroline Lucas, Green Party chair, received 31.3 percent of the vote in the Brighton Pavilion constituency). The nature of the electoral system prevents new parties or social movements from gaining representation in the British Parliament rapidly, but there does appear to be a real interest in issues that go beyond simple class politics.

Conservatively Liberal Policy Ideas

Another apparent paradox about British political life is the "conservatively liberal" nature of many UK policies and policy ideas. For much of the postwar period, members of the Labour Party regularly spoke about the virtues of socialism, and they often sang the "Red Flag" at their party congresses. Members of the Conservative Party regularly spoke about restoring laissez-faire economics, dismantling a good deal of the welfare state, and returning Great Britain to its more significant role in the world.

In practice, however, during the postwar period most of the policies adopted by most of the governments bore a remarkable resemblance. The Labour Party accepted the fact that most of the British economy would be privately owned, and at the same time, it

pressed for the nationalization of certain large industries and the extension of social services to the disadvantaged. The Conservative Party, while in office, generally accepted the virtual entirety of the welfare state, as well as government ownership of industries such as coal, steel, and the railways. The major deviation from this pattern was Thatcher's Conservative government, which began to sell off government stock in nationalized industries such as British Gas, British Telecom, British Steel, and British Airways and began to encourage local authorities to sell off their council housing to sitting tenants. Meanwhile, some social programs were cut or more stringent requirements for recipients were introduced.

These Thatcherite policies, largely continued by the Major government that followed, represented a significantly more ideological approach to policymaking than has been true for most postwar governments in the United Kingdom. The public water supply system was sold off to the private sector, and some local government services such as garbage collection were contracted out to the private sector under a system of "compulsory competitive tendering."[25]

In something of a return to the traditional British consensual style, the Blair government continued many of the programs of the previous governments. "New Labour" was much less interested in talking seriously about socialism than was old Labour. Instead, there was a good deal of discussion about how to use the private sector to provide many public services and the need to make government more like the private sector. The Blair government pursued the "third way," by seeking to inject "competition" in the system through programs such as quasi-privatization schemes within the NHS.[26] Following the 2010 election, the coalition government headed by David Cameron is a clear expression of consensual politics, with its pursuit of austerity in the public accounts yet moderate social policies such as the proposal to allow same-sex marriage. There has also been a degree of continuity in major domestic policy areas in England. The use of market-based mechanisms in the NHS, expanded by the Labour governments (1997–2010) has been continued. The coalition government's education reforms, including the major expansion of academy schools (similar to charter schools in the United States), can also be seen as a mark of continuity rather than radical change.

Despite the episodic intrusions of ideology, there is broad support for a mixed-economy welfare state. All major political parties favor the principal programs of the welfare state such as pensions, other social insurance programs such as unemployment protection, and the NHS. At the same time, the majority of the population accepts private ownership and management as the primary form of economic organization, despite the presence of a (declining) number of nationalized industries. What the parties and politicians appear to disagree about is the proper mix of a mixed economy and just how much welfare there should be in the welfare state.

Isolated But European

One of the standard points made about the history of Great Britain is that its insular position in relation to the European continent isolated the country from various influences and allowed it to develop its own particular political institutions and political culture. The mental separation from Europe was to some degree greater than the geographic separation, and so Great Britain may have looked European from North America, but Britons did not

always feel European. The separation of Great Britain from the continent and from the world can, however, be overstated; as John Major said, "We are only an island geographically." The country has not been invaded successfully since 1066, but it has been deeply involved in European politics and warfare. Also, Great Britain has by no means been insular when dealing with the rest of the world, managing a far-flung empire and even more far-flung trade routes from its little islands.

One of the major changes in the political environment of the United Kingdom has been its entry into the European Union four decades ago. After two denials of admittance, largely at the instigation of France and Charles de Gaulle, Great Britain joined the European Union in 1973, followed by the first advisory public referendum in its history. Joining the European Union not only has brought Great Britain closer to its continental counterparts but also has had important domestic consequences, including the introduction of a whole new level of government—some of the previously exclusive rights of Parliament to legislate for British subjects now actually reside in Brussels. In addition, in keeping with the European Union's move toward closer integration of the Europe market, some economic decision-making power has been transferred to Brussels. Meanwhile, the move toward greater political integration arising from the Maastricht treaty of 1992, the subsequent Lisbon treaty of 2007, and the adoption of the euro as a common currency by most EU member states (but not the United Kingdom) placed even more pressure on the British government to bring its policies in line with those of the continental countries. The Blair government pressed, if gingerly, for greater involvement in the European Union, but it faced stiff opposition from Conservatives and from a largely "euro-skeptic" population.[27] The British people, more than those of any other nation in Europe, are reluctant to accept any greater economic and political unification by the European Union. Great Britain may be a part of Europe, but it maintains some distance (psychological as well as geographic) from its EU partners. As an overt demonstration of this skepticism, 16.5 percent of those who voted in the 2009 European Parliament elections (turnout was only 34 percent of the voting population) voted for UKIP, which advocates separation from the European Union.

Great Britain's involvement with Europe has become an important issue in domestic politics. Thatcher lost her office in no small part because of her European policies, but she continued to oppose deeper involvement from the backbenches. Prime Minister Major sought to follow the more moderate path of a greater political role for European institutions but without supporting a more complete political union. Nevertheless, divisions within his party over Europe hastened the downfall of his government. Under the Blair and Brown Labour governments, the United Kingdom moved more in alignment with the European Union, although skepticism remained high. With the European Union struggling to maintain and secure the euro in the wake of the Greek, Portuguese, and Spanish economic troubles, the United Kingdom's relationship with the European Union has become a major source of contention within the (increasingly euro-skeptic) Conservative and (largely pro-European) Liberal Democrat coalition government. In a major address in early 2013, Prime Minister David Cameron, in pushing for the adoption of greater austerity measures in the EU budget, went so far as to raise the issue of a UK-wide referendum on continued EU membership. While he called for the referendum to occur after the next UK general election in 2015, euro-skeptic backbench Conservative MPs, as well as the leaders of UKIP, have used the idea of a referendum to pursue an anti-Europe

agenda. The prime minister insists that he will be able to negotiate a new settlement for the United Kingdom in the European Union, which will involve the repatriation of some powers and a strong focus on economic matters. However, even if he succeeds in doing so, many members of his own party would still campaign to leave. They are convinced that the United Kingdom has ceded too much sovereignty to the European Union and that it would be better off economically outside it, citing the examples of Norway and Switzerland. Many Conservative MPs are also worried about the threat to their seats from UKIP, which has a strongly conservative policy agenda on issues like immigration and the economy.

The Liberal Democrats are the most instinctively pro-European Union of the main UK political parties. Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg is a former member of the European Parliament (MEP). At the same time, the Conservative Party has become in recent years increasingly euro-skeptic. In opposition, David Cameron removed his MEPs from the main center-right grouping in the European Parliament in order to set up a new group committed to focusing the European Union on economic matters and returning powers to national governments. Moreover, whilst in the mid-1990s it was possible to discern a group of broadly pro-EU Conservatives, there are now vanishingly few who openly hold this position.

NOTES

1. See, for example, Richard Rose, *The Territorial Dimension of Government: Understanding the United Kingdom* (Chatham, NJ: Chatham House, 1982).
2. In some ways, the referendum was designed to fail. Passage required approval by a majority of all eligible voters, not just those actually voting.
3. Commission on Scottish Devolution, "Serving Scotland Better: Scotland and the United Kingdom in the 21st Century," June 2009, www.commissiononscottishdevolution.org.uk/uploads/2009-06-12-csd-final-report-2009fbookmarked.pdf.
4. Richard Wyn Jones and Roger Scully, *Wales Says Yes: Devolution and the 2011 Welsh Referendum* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2012).
5. Commission on Devolution in Wales, "Empowerment and Responsibility: Financial Powers to Strengthen Wales," November 2012, http://commissionondevolutioninwales.independent.gov.uk/files/2013/01/English-WEB-main-report1.pdf.
6. "A Knock at Number Ten," *Economist*, February 4, 1995.
7. "Now IRA Stands for I Renounce Arms," *Economist*, July 28, 2005.
8. Unfortunately, in early 2006 riots once again broke out in Belfast and across Northern Ireland, marking the worst violence seen in the province in seven years. The sectarian riots began in response to a government directive rerouting an Orange Order (Unionist) parade away from a Catholic neighborhood.
9. Alan Cowell and Eamon Quinn, "Two Former Enemies are Sworn to Lead in Northern Ireland's Government," *New York Times*, May 8, 2007, http://www.nytimes.com/2007/05/09/world/europe/09nireland.html.
10. Although there are agreements about which policy areas have devolved, it will be difficult at times to separate UK law and Scottish law cleanly. For example, education has devolved, but research and science support have not.
11. Nicola McEwen, Wilfreid Swenden, and Nicole Bolleyer, "Intergovernmental Relations in the UK: Continuity in a Time of Change?" *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 14, no. 2 (April 2012): 323–343.

12. Mark Devenport, "Stormont's Power-Sharing Flaws," BBC News, September 4, 2009, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/northern_ireland/8237962.stm.
13. Kenneth Wald, *Crosses on Ballots* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983).
14. See Carman, Johns, and Mitchell, 2013, chap. 5.
15. Vernon Bogdanor, *The New British Constitution* (London: Hart Publishing, 2009).
16. Richard Rose, "England: A Traditionally Modern Political Culture," in *Political Culture and Political Development,* ed. Lucian Pye and Sidney Verba (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965).
17. The scandals include disinformation about the sinking of the *General Belgrano* during the Falklands War and suspect dealings about the purchase of helicopters from Westland Corporation. See Magnus Linklater and David Leigh, *Not with Honour* (London: Sphere, 1986).
18. Nick Asinder, "Blair Battles 'Poodle' Jibes," BBC News, February 3, 2003, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/2721513.stm.
19. See the *Telegraph*'s dedicated website on the expenses scandal at http://parliament.telegraph.co.uk/mpsexpenses/home.
20. Harold Clarke, David Sanders, Marianne Stewart, and Paul Whiteley, "Public Reactions to the MPs' Expenses Claims Scandal: Evidence from the BES-CMS" (paper presented at the annual meeting of Elections, Public Opinion, and Parties, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, Scotland, August 29–31, 2009).
21. Institute for Fiscal Studies, "Living Standards, Poverty and Equality in the UK," June 2012, www.ifs.org.uk/comms/comm124.pdf, pp.1–2.
22. Office for National Statistics, "Regional Labour Market Statistics," April 2013, www.ons.gov.uk/ons/dcp171778_306657.pdf, p.6.
23. Office for National Statistics, "Ethnicity and National Identity in England and Wales 2011," December 2011, www.ons.gov.uk/ons/dcp171776_290558.pdf, p. 1.
24. Mark Macaskill, "Gordon Brown Aims to End Royal Ban on Catholics," *TimesOnline,* November 16, 2008, www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/scotland/article5162693.ece.
25. Kieron Walsh, *Public Services and Market Mechanisms: Competition, Contracting and the New Public Management* (Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan, 1995).
26. See Anthony Giddens, *The Third Way and Its Critics* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2000).
27. See David Baker, "Islands of the Mind: New Labour's Defensive Engagement with the European Union," *Political Quarterly* 76 (2005): 22–36.