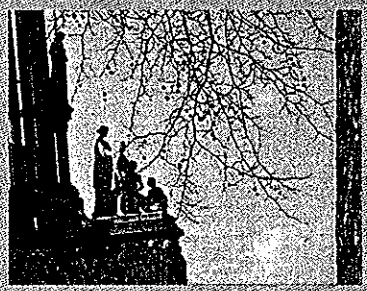
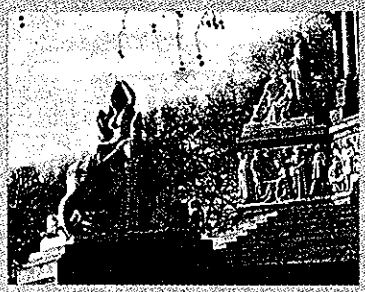
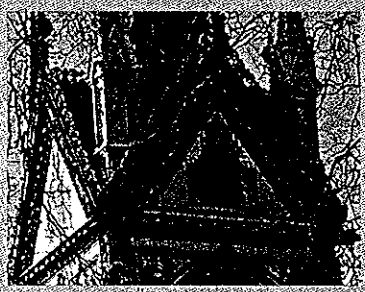
Chapter 3

Britain: The Key Institutions








It is commonly said that Britain has no written constitution, but parts of the British constitution are written. It does not consist of a single document but is rather a centuries-old collection of Common Law, historic charters, **statutes** passed by Parliament, and, most important, established custom.

This **eclectic** quality gives the British constitution flexibility. With no single, written document to refer to, nothing can be declared "unconstitutional." Parliament—specifically the House of Commons—can pass any law it likes, letting the British political system change over time without a systemic crisis. The U.S. Supreme Court sometimes blocks changes as unconstitutional, rarely a problem in Britain.

The negative side to this was that Britain had little to guarantee human rights. In 1991, six men convicted as IRA bombers in 1975 were freed with the shameful admission that confessions had been beaten out of them and the police had rigged evidence. The European Court of Human Rights, located in Strasbourg, France, ruled against British justice in several such cases, a considerable embarrassment for Britain. In 2000, Britain adopted the European Convention on Human Rights as domestic law, finally giving Britons the equivalent of a U.S. Bill of Rights.

Questions to Consider

1. What did Bagehot mean by "dignified" as opposed to "efficient" offices? Examples?
2. How is Britain a "prime ministerial government"?
3. Does Britain have checks and balances?
4. What are Brown's political positions?
5. When does Britain hold general elections?
6. What are the differences between presidential and parliamentary systems?
7. What did Blair do with Lords?
8. How does the British electoral system work?
9. What are Britain's main parties?

The British speak of "the Crown," an all-encompassing term meaning the powers of government in general. Originally, the Crown meant the king, but over the centuries it has broadened to include everyone helping the king or queen, such as Parliament, the cabinet, and civil servants. Let us consider some of these.

The Monarch

In Britain there is a clear distinction between "head of state" and "chief of government." In America this distinction is ignored because the two are merged into one in the presidency. In most of the rest of the world, however, there is a top figure without much power who symbolizes the nation, receives foreign ambassadors, and gives speeches on patriotic occasions. This person—often a figurehead—can be either a hereditary monarch or an elected president, although not a U.S.-style president. Britain, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Spain are monarchies. This does not mean they are undemocratic; it just means the head of state is a carry-over from old days.

statute Ordinary law, usually for a specific problem. (See page 33.)

eclectic Drawn from a variety of sources. (See page 33.)

Crown The powers of the British government. (See page 33.)

dignified In Bagehot's terms, symbolic or decorative offices.

efficient In Bagehot's terms, working, political offices.

A hereditary head of state can be useful. Above politics, a monarch can serve as psychological cement to hold a country together because he or she has no important role in government. Because the top position in the land—what royalist philosophers used to call the sovereign—is already occupied, there are no political battles over it. The nastiest struggles in the world are precisely over who is to be sovereign; in Britain, the issue has long been settled.

The great commentator on the British constitution, Sir Walter Bagehot, divided it into **dignified** and **efficient** parts. The monarch, as head of state, is a dignified office with much symbolic but no real political power. He or she "reigns but does not rule." The king or queen nominally appoints a cabinet of His or Her Majesty's servants (see box on page 36), but otherwise a monarch is more like an official greeter.

The "efficient" office in Britain is the chief of government, the prime minister—a working politician who fights elections, leads his or her party, and makes political deals. Despite the prestige of a prime minister, it does not have nearly the "dignity" that the monarch has. There is an advantage in the way Britain and other countries split the two positions. If the chief of government does something foolish or illegal, he or she will catch the public's ire, but the blame will fall on the individual prime minister, and respect will not diminish for the head of state, the "dignified" office. The system retains its legitimacy. Where the two offices are combined, as in the United States, and the president is involved in something crooked, the public gets disgusted at both the working politician and the nation's symbolic leader. "The British do not need to love their prime minister," said one diplomat. "They love their queen."

The 1997 death of Princess Di, ex-wife of Prince Charles, jolted Britain, including the royal family. Di was the only royal with the common touch; her charity work and love life upstaged the cold and remote House of Windsor. Amidst the outpouring of grief for Di came mutterings that the royal family really did not much care. Some even thought it might be time to dump the monarchy. But old dynasties know how to survive, and the Queen and Prince Charles quickly became more public and outgoing.

Although few would exchange the monarchy for a republic, some (including Queen Elizabeth herself) suggest reforms that would cut government funds for the royal house and make female heirs to the throne the equal of males. Look for a major decision point when Queen Elizabeth dies. Will Charles automatically accede to the throne? Even with his 2005 remarriage? To a commoner (herself divorced)? The last time this happened, in 1936, King Edward VIII abdicated, but a replay is unlikely;

Prince Charles, Britain's future king and head of the state, in happier days with his then-wife, the late Princess Diana, and their children, Prince William, also a future king, and Prince Henry. The divorce of Charles and Diana in 1996 did not affect Charles's succession to the throne.

times have changed. Britain will likely retain a monarchy, but it may be a monarch with reduced financial support and political roles.

MP Member of Parliament.

junior minister MP with executive responsibilities below cabinet rank.

portfolio Minister's assigned ministry.

fusion of powers Connection of executive and legislative branches in parliamentary systems; opposite of U.S. separation of powers.

Cortes Spain's parliament.

antithetical Ideas opposed to one another.

The Cabinet

The British cabinet also differs from the U.S. cabinet. The former consists of members of Parliament (most in Commons, a few in Lords) who are high up in their parties and important political figures. Most have lots of experience, first as ordinary **MPs** (members of Parliament), then as **junior ministers**, and finally as cabinet ministers. In 2006 eight junior ministers resigned their positions (but not their seats in Parliament) to protest Blair's refusal to set a date for stepping down. It was one of the pressures on Blair to leave in 2007. Prime ministers are powerful, but only with the solid support of their parties.

Originally, the British cabinet consisted of ministers to the king. Starting in the seventeenth century, the cabinet became more and more responsible to Parliament and less and less to the king. A British minister is not necessarily an expert in his or her **portfolio** but is carefully picked by the prime minister for political qualifications. Both major British parties contain several viewpoints and power centers, and prime ministers usually take care to see they are represented in the cabinet. When Prime Minister Thatcher ignored this principle by picking as ministers only Tories loyal to her and her philosophy, she was criticized as dictatorial and ultimately lost her job. Balancing party factions in the cabinet helps keep the party together in Parliament and in power. British cabinet government has been declining since World War I, which required speedy, centralized decisions. Now the prime minister develops policy with a small personal staff and then informs the cabinet of it. British commentators fear the rise of a "command premiership" in this development.

Notice the British cabinet straddles the gap between "executive" and "legislative." The elaborate American separation of powers (adopted by the Founding Fathers from an earlier misperception of British government by Montesquieu) does not hold in Britain or in most of the world. The United Kingdom has a combining or **fusion of powers**.

Democracy

The Last Political Monarch

Unlike other European monarchs, King Juan Carlos of Spain retains some crucial political functions. Juan Carlos took over as head of state after Franco's death in 1975 and initiated and backstopped a process that turned Spain from dictatorship to democracy. He named a prime minister who dismantled the Franco structure, carried out Spain's first free elections in forty-one years, and drafted a new constitution—all with the open approval of the king.

Juan Carlos's real test as defender of democracy came in 1981 when some disgruntled officers attempted a coup; they held the entire **Cortes** at gunpoint. In military uniform, the king addressed the nation on television and ordered the troops back to their barracks. They complied, and democratic Spaniards of all parties thanked God for the king. Democracy and monarchy are not **antithetical**; one can support the other. *¡Viva el rey!*

The British cabinet practices "collective responsibility," meaning they all stick together and, in public at least, support the prime minister. Occasionally, a minister resigns in protest over a major controversy. In recent years, the cabinet has consisted of some twenty ministers, although this number and portfolio titles change. Prime ministers design their own cabinet; they add, drop, rename, or combine ministries. Each cabinet is different. Most countries function that way (not, of course, the United States). The 2007 Brown cabinet consisted of the following "secretaries of state":

- Chancellor of the Exchequer (treasury)
- Lord Chancellor (member of Lords, heads judiciary)
- Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs
- Home Department (internal governance, including police)
- Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs
- International Development
- Work and Pensions
- Children, Schools, and Families
- Transport
- Communities and Local Government
- Business, Enterprise, and Regulatory Reform
- Health
- Northern Ireland
- Wales
- Scotland
- Defense
- Trade and Industry
- Innovation, Universities, and Skills
- Culture, Media, and Sport

The Secretary for Defense did double duty as Secretary for Scotland; the Secretary for Work and Pensions also served as Secretary for Wales. The leaders of both Commons and Lords are in the cabinet, along with a chief secretary for the cabinet as a whole. In addition, several junior ministers and "parliamentary private secretaries" held specialized offices in the cabinet. A British cabinet is almost a free-form exercise created by each prime minister.

Below cabinet rank are more than thirty noncabinet "departmental ministers" and a similar number of "junior ministers" assigned to help cabinet and departmental ministers. All totaled, at any given time about a hundred MPs are also serving in the executive branch. The hope of being named to one of these positions ensures the loyalty and obedience of most younger MPs.

DEMOCRACY

THE QUEEN CHOOSES A NEW PRIME MINISTER

In June 2007 an old ritual was repeated. Ostensibly Queen Elizabeth II chose a new prime minister, but of course she really had no choice at all. Events unrolled according to the fiction that the prime minister is still chief advisor to the monarch.

Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair, having served ten years, resigned to make way for his fellow Labourite Gordon Brown, who had ably served as Chancellor of the Exchequer. The two rivals inside the Labour party had made a deal: Blair would serve first, then Brown would step up. Brown was publicly impatient for his turn. It was an unusual transition, with neither a general election nor a party conference to make Brown party chief and PM. Instead, Blair simply designated Brown as his successor.

Blair called on the Queen and formally resigned as first minister to Her Majesty. (He also resigned his seat in Parliament and resigned as Labour's leader.) That same day the Queen called Gordon Brown, as leader of the largest party in the Commons, to Buckingham Palace and "asked" him to form a new government. He accepted.

For all intents and purposes, in Britain (and in most parliamentary systems) cabinet equals **government**; the two terms are used interchangeably. One speaks of the "Brown government." (Only the United States uses the word "administration.") When the "government falls" it simply means the cabinet has resigned. Britain is often referred to as "cabinet government," although some call it "prime ministerial government."

government A particular cabinet, what Americans call "the administration."

whip Parliamentary party leader who makes sure members obey the party in voting.

division Vote in the House of Commons.

THE PRIME MINISTER

The prime minister, PM for short (not to be confused with MP, which he or she also is), is the linchpin of the British system. In theory, the PM's powers could be dictatorial. Because the prime minister picks and controls the cabinet and heads the largest party in Parliament, he or she should be able to get nearly any measure passed. British parliamentarians are well-disciplined; party **whips** make sure their MPs turn out for **divisions** and vote the party line. Yet even with the reins of power held by one person, prime ministers do not turn into dictators, chiefly because general elections are never more than five years away.

KEY CONCEPTS

PRIME MINISTERS INTO PRESIDENTS

Political scientists have for some time noted that prime ministers are becoming more and more presidential. Postwar British prime ministers increasingly concentrated and centralized power in their immediate office at the expense of the cabinet and Commons.

Brown, for example, no longer pretended to be "first among equals" in his cabinet, which met less often and decided issues less frequently. Like the U.S. cabinet secretaries, British ministers became more like top administrators. Instead, Brown presided over an enlarged staff at 10 Downing Street, headed with trusted advisors, and used them to make decisions, rather like the White House.

Continuing a trend, Brown spent less time in Commons. Prime Minister Churchill voted in 55 percent of Commons divisions in 1951. Prime Minister Wilson voted 43 percent of the time in 1974. Tony Blair voted 5 percent of the time in Commons in 1997.

Some called both Blair and Brown "control freaks" who broke with British tradition in order to amass personal power. Maybe, but personality alone does not explain the long-term trend for prime ministers everywhere to become presidential. One key factor worldwide: television, which centralizes election campaigns, emphasizes the top candidates, creates massive need for fundraising, bypasses parties and parliaments, and enables leaders to reach people directly. Other factors include the decline of legislatures, the growth of interest groups, and the tendency of voters to concentrate in the center of the political spectrum.

Parliamentary systems cannot operate as before. Systems as different as Britain, France, Germany, and Japan have tended to "presidentialize" themselves as prime ministers gain power and start acting as if they have been directly elected. Everywhere, even in parliamentary systems, parties in elections showcase their leading personality as if he or she was a presidential candidate. Parliamentary systems will not turn completely into U.S.-type systems, but neither will any of them return to the pure parliamentary model, which was never completely realistic. Even in parliamentary systems, power long ago began shifting to prime ministers, and this has continued. A strong prime minister begins to resemble a U.S.-type president.

Prime ministers are usually cautious about introducing measures that might provoke public ire. When Tory PM John Major saw his popularity slipping, he knew he would lose if he "went to the country" with new elections, so he tried to stall, hoping his party's fortunes would rise before the five years were up. Typically, prime ministers introduce moderate, piecemeal measures to avoid offending key blocks of voters. Fear of losing the next election keeps most prime ministers (but not Thatcher) cautious.

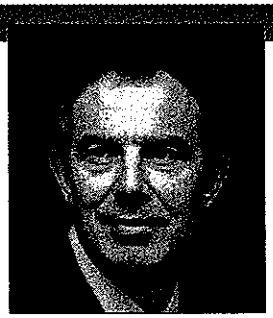
PERSONALITIES

FROM BLAIR TO BROWN

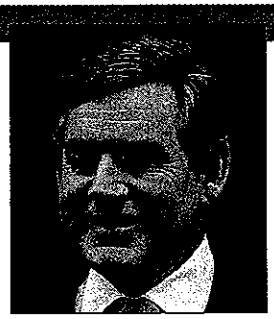
Two back-to-back Labour prime ministers—Tony Blair (1997–2007) and Gordon Brown (2007–)—show much continuity but also some interesting differences, mostly related to personality. Both were born in Scotland—Blair in Edinburgh in 1953, Brown in Glasgow in 1951—but Blair always considered himself English and Brown a Scot. Both are very bright but Brown probably brainier. Brown, physically rugged, lost an eye playing rugby. Blair studied law at Oxford; Brown went to the University of Edinburgh at age 16 to earn a doctorate on Scottish Labour party history. Blair joined Labour only after college; Brown was committed to it from youth. Both lost their first tries at election to Commons but won their second attempts, both in 1983. Brown still represents his constituency near Edinburgh in Parliament.

The two helped push the Labour party from its leftist positions—which cost it four elections in a row—to a reformist and centrist "New Labour" that won the 1997 elections in a landslide. Earlier, Blair and Brown vied for Labour leadership, but in a murky 1994 deal Brown agreed to let Blair lead the party and become PM first while Brown would do economic policy and become PM later.

In 1997 Blair became Britain's youngest prime minister since 1812; Brown became Chancellor of the Exchequer (treasury minister) and did an excellent job of keeping the British economy growing and scrutinizing the ministries' budgets. Brown is an energetic detail person. Blair and Brown continued a trend that some observers say has been underway since the 1960s: prime ministers acting more like presidents. They indeed centralized and concentrated power in the prime minister's office at the expense of the cabinet and Commons (see box on page 37).



Tony Blair



Gordon Brown

Over time, Brown's impatience to step up to Number 10 grew more public, but Blair wanted a full ten years to push through his agenda—a settlement of the Northern Ireland conflict, devolution for Scotland and Wales, reform of Lords (see page 43), and adoption of the EU human rights charter. Neither Blair nor Brown wished to change Margaret Thatcher's free-market economic policies. Blair made himself unpopular by sending British forces to Iraq—he was called "Bush's poodle"—and under heavy party pressure agreed to step down in mid-2007. Brown likes America and knows it well—he often vacationed there and follows American scholarship—but never liked the Iraq War. He pulled British forces out of Iraq with an eye to the next general election, which he must call by mid-2010.

Personality made a difference in Blair's and Brown's tenures. Blair was nice, optimistic, chatty, and superficial. Brown, son of a Presbyterian minister, exudes the Protestant work ethic and demands it of others. Brown is the dour Scot and detail person who can blow up when angered. Some call Brown a rigid and domineering "control freak," and his popularity has plunged as the British economy has slowed. By-elections and public opinion surveys suggest Brown's tenure could be short.

Furthermore, a prime minister has to be careful of the major currents of opinion within party ranks. As in the United States, the two large British parties contain left, right, and center wings, as well as regional viewpoints, and a prime minister usually constructs the cabinet with top MPs representing several views within the majority party. In cabinet meetings the PM tries to fashion a consensus from the several stands.

vote of no-confidence Parliamentary vote to oust cabinet.

by-election Special election for vacant seat in Parliament.

Then the cabinet has to sell the policy to their MPs back in Commons. Party discipline is good but rarely total. The prime minister, through the chief whip, has a hold on the MPs, but never a perfect hold. Many leftist Labour MPs voted against Blair's centrist policies and the Iraq War. One who does not "take the whip" (follow the party line on a vote), however, risks losing his or her nomination for reelection—in effect, getting fired from Parliament, which happened to one especially anti-Blair Labourite. If a party policy really bothers an MP, the member can "cross the aisle" and join the other party in protest (as did the young Winston Churchill).

A prime minister can even be dumped by MPs. Labour and Conservative cabinets have had to withdraw or water down legislative proposals amid a backbenchers' revolt within their own party. A backbenchers' revolt helped oust Thatcher in 1990. In 2005 forty-nine backbenchers revolted against a bill Blair said was necessary to fight terrorism. The vote was over how long police could detain without charges, but the underlying issue was Blair's Iraq policy. Labour backbenchers shot down Blair's bill, in effect saying: "Blair, time for you to go." In 2007, he went.

Commons can oust a PM on a **vote of no-confidence**, but that is rare; it indicates the ruling party has split so badly its MPs are willing to give up power. Blair's 2005 loss was not a "motion of confidence" and so did not require him to resign. Loss of a big measure, such as the budget, would require the PM to resign.

The PM does have a potent political weapon: the power to call new elections whenever he or she wishes. By law, the Commons can go up to five years without a general election. **By-elections** when an MP dies or retires can come any time; they are closely watched as political barometers. Crafty prime ministers call for new general elections when they think the party will do best. A good

WHO WAS WHEN: BRITAIN'S POSTWAR PRIME MINISTERS

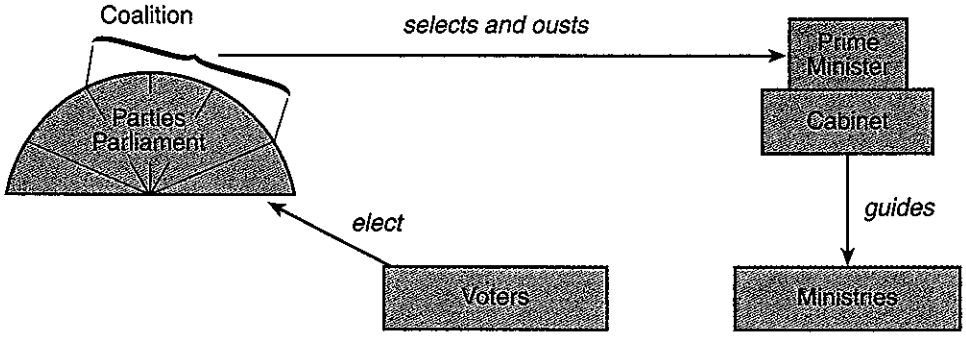
Clement Attlee	Labour	1945–1951
Winston Churchill	Conservative	1951–1955
Anthony Eden	Conservative	1955–1957
Harold Macmillan	Conservative	1957–1963
Alec Douglas-Home	Conservative	1963–1964
Harold Wilson	Labour	1964–1970
Edward Heath	Conservative	1970–1974
Harold Wilson	Labour	1974–1976
James Callaghan	Labour	1976–1979
Margaret Thatcher	Conservative	1979–1990
John Major	Conservative	1990–1997
Tony Blair	Labour	1997–2007
Gordon Brown	Labour	2007–

economy and sunny weather tend to produce a happy electorate, one that will increase the seats of the ruling party. In 1974 Britain held two general elections because Prime Minister Harold Wilson thought he could boost Labour's strength in the Commons (he did). In 2001 and 2005 Tony Blair called elections a year early to take advantage of good economic news and disarray in the Conservative party; he won handily. New elections must be held by 2010 but again will likely be called a year early. Public-opinion polls and by-elections help the prime minister decide when to ask the queen to dissolve Parliament and hold new elections.

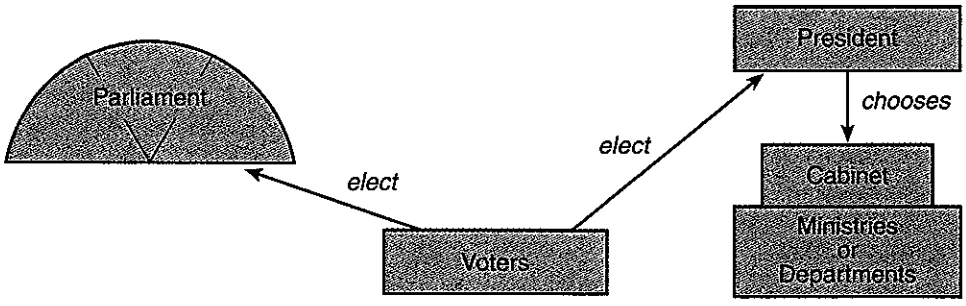
DEMOCRACY

PARLIAMENTARY VERSUS PRESIDENTIAL SYSTEMS

In a parliamentary system, like Britain, voters choose only a parliament, which in turn chooses (and can oust) the executive branch, headed by a prime minister. The executive is a committee of the legislature. In a presidential system, such as the United States, voters choose both a legislature and a chief executive, and the two are expected to check and balance each other. In a parliamentary system, they are not.



A Parliamentary System



A Presidential System

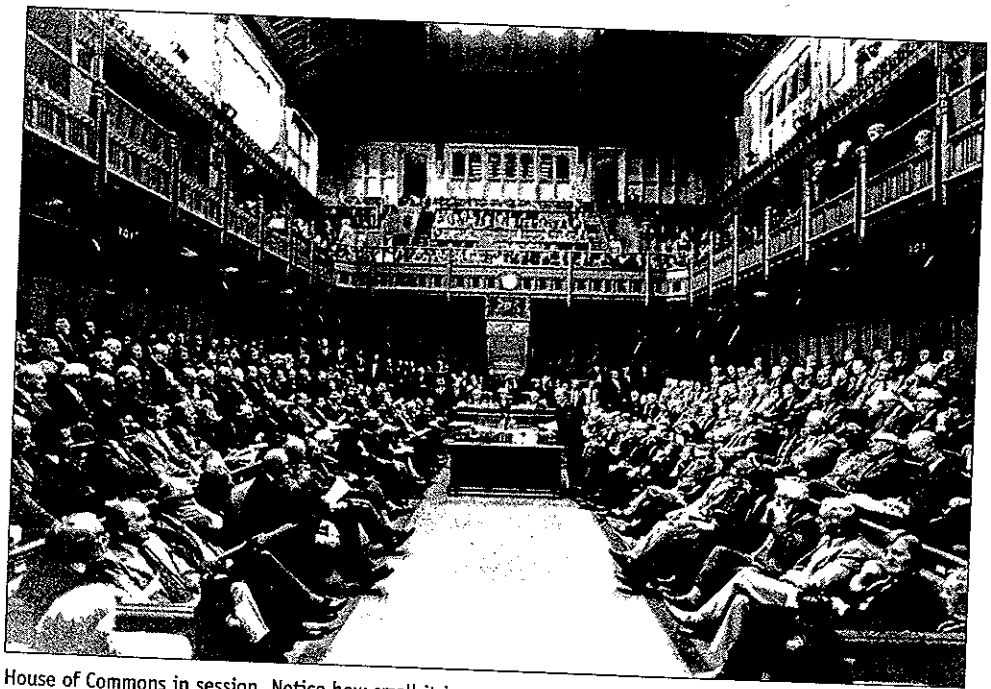
Whitehall Main British government offices.

Westminster Parliament building.

Since 1735 British prime ministers have resided in an ordinary brick row house, No. 10 Downing Street. Except for London bobbies on guard outside, it looks like a private home. This is deceptive; behind the walls, Downing Street is the nerve center of Whitehall. Upstairs at No. 10, the prime minister has his or her apartment. On the ground floor, in the back, the cabinet meets in a long white room. No. 10 connects to No. 12 Downing Street, the residence of the chief whip, the prime minister's parliamentary enforcer. They can visit without being seen from the street. Also connecting out of sight is No. 11 Downing Street, residence of the important Chancellor of the Exchequer, head of the powerful Treasury Ministry. Next door is the Foreign Office. At the corner of Downing Street, also connecting to No. 10, is the cabinet secretariat, responsible for communication and coordination among the departments.

COMMONS

One can look at the cabinet as a committee of the House of Commons sent from Westminster to nearby Whitehall to keep administration under parliamentary control. Another way is to view Commons as an electoral college that stays in operation even after it has chosen the executive (the cabinet). In Lockean theory, legislative power has primacy, but in practice Commons has rarely been free and independent and is becoming less so. Prime ministers lead and control Commons.



House of Commons in session. Notice how small it is.

opposition Parties in Parliament that are not in the cabinet.

backbencher Ordinary MP with no executive responsibility.

The two main parties in Commons—Conservative and Labour—face each other on long, parallel benches. The largest party is automatically Her Majesty's Government and the other party is Her Majesty's Loyal **Opposition.** Commons is very small—only 45 by 68 feet (14 by 21 meters)—and was originally designed for only about 400 members. How then can it possibly hold the current membership of 646? Membership has increased over the years as Britain's population has grown in some areas more than in others. Parliament in 2005 cut thirteen seats by combining some smaller constituencies, but it is still crowded. Unlike most modern legislators, Parliament members have no individual desks. For important votes, MPs have to pack in like sardines and sit in the aisles.

The cramped setting ensures that members face each other in debate a few yards apart. The parallel benches go well with the two-party system; the half-circle floor plan of most Continental legislatures facilitates pie-like division into multiparty systems. The chamber was always small, ever since 1547 when Henry VIII first gave Commons the use of the St. Stephen's royal chapel. During World War II when Commons was damaged by German bombs, Prime Minister Winston Churchill ordered it rebuilt exactly the way it had been.

Each side of the oblong chamber has five rows of benches. The front row on either side is reserved for the leading team of each major party, the cabinet of the government party, and the "shadow cabinet" of the opposition. Behind them sit the **backbenchers**, the MP rank and file. A neutral Speaker, elected for life from the MPs, sits in a throne-like chair at one end. The Speaker, who never votes or takes sides, manages the floor debate and preserves order. In 1992, Commons elected its first woman Speaker, Labourite Betty Boothroyd.

A table in the center, between the party benches, is where legislation is placed (the origin of the verb "to table" a proposal). The Speaker calls the house to order at 11:30 A.M. and sessions can go on until 7:30 P.M. Unless "the whip is on"—meaning an MP had better be there because an important vote is expected—many MPs are busy elsewhere.

DEMOCRACY

THE DECLINE OF LEGISLATURES

Commons is less important than it used to be. As in most of the world, legislatures, the great avenues of democracy are declining in power. Fewer people—especially young people—bother voting and fewer follow debates in Commons, which gets less media attention. The debates matter little; thanks to Britain's (over)disciplined parties, the prime minister almost always gets his or her way. The only way to jump-start Commons back into life would be to let MPs ignore the whip and vote as they wish. A deliberate weakening of Britain's parties might make Commons exciting, unpredictable, and messy, like the U.S. Congress. A word of caution here: Capitol Hill has also been losing power to the White House. This may be an unstoppable world trend. Even so, legislatures are invaluable for scrutinizing executive power, holding it accountable, and occasionally ousting it. If they do this, they are still bulwarks of democracy.

How Commons Works

Each year Parliament opens in November with another tradition, a Speech from the Throne by the queen. The MPs are ritually summoned from Commons by Black Rod, the queen's messenger, and then they file into the nearby House of Lords. (Neither monarchs nor lords may enter Commons.) From a gold-paneled dais in Lords, Her Majesty reads a statement outlining the policies "her government" will pursue. The speech has been written by the prime minister, with the queen merely serving as the announcer. George VI, a conservative king, once read a Labour speech (in 1945) promising extensive nationalization of industry.

select committee Specialized committee of Commons focusing on one ministry.

life peers Distinguished Britons named lords for their lifetimes only; does not pass on to children.

Just as the queen takes her cues from the prime minister, so does Commons. Practically all legislation is introduced by the "government" (that is, the cabinet) and stands a high chance of passing nearly intact because of the party discipline discussed previously. What the PM wants, the PM usually gets. When a Labour government introduces bills into Commons, Labour MPs—unlike their American counterparts in Congress—rarely question them. Their job is to support the party, and individual conscience seldom gets in the way.

The task of challenging proposals falls to the opposition, seated on the Speaker's left. From the opposition benches come questions, denunciations, warnings of dire consequences, anything that might make the government look bad. There is no bipartisanship. Government MPs, particularly the cabinet and subcabinet ministers on the front bench, are duty-bound to defend the bills. In situations like these, the famous rhetorical ability of MPs produces debates matched by few other legislatures.

Although the rhetoric is brilliant and witty, the homework is somewhat lacking. Because they are expected simply to obey their party, few MPs specialize. Traditionally, British parliamentary committees were also unspecialized; they went over the precise wording of bills but called no witnesses and gathered no data. The structure of legislative committees is an important key to their power, and eventually some MPs recognized the need for a more American type of committee system. In 1979, fourteen **select committees** were established to scrutinize the workings of each ministry; these committees have the power to gather written and oral evidence. The select committees—with permanent, stable membership—resemble U.S. Congressional committees.

Peerless Lords

In 1999, Parliament drastically reformed the House of Lords by kicking out most of its hereditary peers, thus turning it over to **life peers**. Since 1958, distinguished Britons in the disciplines of science, politics, diplomacy, military service, business, literature, and the arts have been named as Lords or Ladies of the Realm, but for their lifetimes only. This change has done nothing to enhance Lords' weak powers. Lords now has some 740 peers (a number that changes with deaths and new appointments), most of them life peers, along with 92 hereditary peers and 26 top churchmen.

Law Lords Britain's top judges, members of Lords.

anachronism Something from the past that does not fit present times.

The British Parliament is nominally bicameral, but Commons has limited Lords' powers over the centuries, so that now when one says "Parliament," one really means Commons. Early on, Commons established supremacy in the key area of money: raising revenues and spending them. (An echo of this is the U.S. provision that money bills originate in the lower chamber, the House of Representatives.) Britain's seventeenth-century battles centered on the power of Commons, and it emerged the winner; Lords gradually took a back seat. By 1867 Bagehot considered Lords a "dignified" part of the constitution. Strictly speaking, a unitary system like Britain does not need an upper house; federal systems do, to represent the component parts (see page 188 in Chapter 13). New Zealand realized this and dropped its upper chamber in 1951.

Since Britain's unwritten constitution does not specify or make permanent the powers of the two chambers, it was legally possible for Commons to weaken Lords. The 1911 Parliament Act allows Lords to delay legislation not more than thirty days on financial bills and two years (since 1949, one year) on other bills. Lords can amend legislation and send it back to Commons, which in turn can (and usually does) delete the changes by a simple majority. Every few years, however, Lords jolts the government by forcing Commons to take another look at bills passed without sufficient scrutiny. Lords, then, is somewhat more important than a debating club. It is the only British institution in a position to check the powers of a prime minister who has a large and disciplined majority in Commons. It is thus a weak analog to the U.S. Supreme Court, a "conscience of the nation." Lords is also able to debate questions too hot for elected officials—for example, laws concerning abortion and homosexuality.

Usually, fewer than three hundred lords turn up in the House of Lords; a quorum is three. A few lords are named to the cabinet or to other high political or diplomatic positions. The chamber is also home to the five **Law Lords**, life peers who are the top judges in the British court system to whom cases may be appealed. Now that Britain has a Human Rights Act (see page 78), a sort of embryonic constitution, the law lords can declare something "unconstitutional." The law lords may thus turn into a U.S.-style Supreme Court.

Most Britons agree that Lords is an anachronism ripe for reform but cannot agree on what to do with it. Blair's 1999 step depriving most hereditary peers of their seats made Lords meritocratic but not democratic. In 2007 Commons proposed making Lords fully elected, like the U.S. Senate, but some feared that would dilute the legislative supremacy of Commons and turn Lords over to vote-seeking party politicians. Changing constitutions is tricky: When you change one thing, you change everything.

THE PARTIES

Commons works as it does because of the British party system. This is a fairly recent development; only since the time of the French Revolution (1789) has it been possible to speak of coherent parties in Britain. Parties are now the cornerstone of British government. If a party elects a majority of the MPs, that party controls Commons and forms the government.

British parties are more cohesive, centralized, and ideological than American parties. It is fair to say there are as many differences within the two big U.S. parties as between them. Now,

however, like their U.S. counterparts, the two large British parties tend to converge to the center. Earlier, British Labourites, who sometimes called themselves Socialists, favored nationalization of industry, more welfare measures, and higher taxes. Conservatives urged less government involvement in society and the economy and lower taxes. Internal party differences arose from the degree to which party members supported these general points of view. Now, as we shall explore subsequently, differences between the two parties are muted.

In 1981, the moderate wing of the Labour party split off to form a centrist Social Democratic party. They argued that Labour had fallen under the control of leftist radicals. The Social Democrats faced the problem that besets Britain's third party, the struggling Liberal Democrats, namely, that single-member plurality districts penalize smaller parties.

"two-plus" party system Two big parties and several small ones.

single-member district Sends one representative to Parliament.

FPTP "First past the post," short for "single-member districts with plurality win."

plurality Largest quantity, even if less than a majority.

majoritarian Electoral system that encourages dominance of one party in a parliament, as in Britain and the United States.

KEY CONCEPTS

BRITAIN'S TWO-PARTY SYSTEM

Britain is usually described as a two-party system, but some third parties are important. Britain, like many democracies, is more accurately a **"two-plus" party system.** In 1979, for example, the withdrawal of support by the eleven Scottish Nationalists in Commons brought down the Callaghan government in a rare *vote of no-confidence*. In general elections, the Liberal Democrats may win 20 percent, forcing the Labour and Conservative parties to change positions on some issues.

Britain's electoral system keeps two parties big and penalizes smaller parties. Britain, like the United States and Canada, uses **single-member districts** as the basis for elections. This old English system is simple: Each electoral district or constituency sends one person to the legislature, the candidate that gets the most votes even if less than a majority, sometimes called "first past the post," **FPTP**. In 1992, for example, a Lib Dem in Scotland won with just 26 percent of the vote. This system of single-member districts with **plurality** victors tends to produce two large political parties. The reason: There is a big premium to combine small parties into big ones in order to edge out competitors. If one of the two large parties splits, which sometimes happens, the election is thrown to the other party, the one that hangs together. In countries with proportional representation there is not such a great premium on forming two large parties, and that contributes to multiparty systems.

Countries that inherited the British **majoritarian** system tend toward two large parties, one left, the other right, such as the U.S. Democrats and Republicans. India is an exception to this pattern, because its parties are territorially concentrated, so that India's parliament has dozens of parties (see pages 455–457). Canada has this to a lesser extent, permitting the separatist Bloc Québécois and socialistic New Democrats to win seats. New Zealand used to have the Anglo-American system, and it, too, yielded two large parties. It also left many New Zealanders discontent because other viewpoints got ignored, so its parliament in 1993 adopted a new electoral law, modeled on Germany's hybrid system of half single-member districts and half PR (see page 189). New Zealand soon developed a more complex party system.

proportional representation (PR), electoral system of multimember districts with seats awarded by percentage parties win.

The Liberal party illustrates how smaller parties suffer under the British system of electing MPs. In the nineteenth century it was one of the two big parties, but by the 1920s it had been pushed into a weak third place by Labour. Now, although the Liberal Democrats often win nearly 20 percent of the vote, they rarely get more than a few dozen Commons seats because their vote is territorially dispersed, so in few constituencies does it top Tories or Labourites.

In 1983 and 1987, the Liberals and Social Democrats ran jointly as the "Alliance," and in 1988 they merged into the Liberal Democratic party. Because they are spread rather evenly, the "Lib Dems" still get shortchanged on parliamentary seats (see box on page 45). The Liberal Democrats would like to move away from the majoritarian system and toward **proportional representation** (PR). The leading proposal is to keep FPTP but "top off" seats to more accurately reflect nationwide party strengths. (The German system, by contrast, starts with PR but adds FPTP.)

Scottish and Welsh nationalist parties have had spurts of growth and decline. Their territorial concentration enables them to win a few seats in Westminster and many seats in the Scottish and Welsh assemblies instituted in 1999. We will explore patterns of interaction among the parties and the voters in Chapter 5.

KEY TERMS

anachronism (p. 44)
antithetical (p. 35)
backbencher (p. 42)
by-election (p. 39)
Cortes (p. 35)
Crown (p. 34)
dignified (p. 34)
division (p. 37)
eclectic (p. 34)
efficient (p. 34)
FPTP (p. 45)
fusion of powers (p. 35)
government (p. 37)
junior minister (p. 35)
Law Lords (p. 44)
life peers (p. 43)
majoritarian (p. 45)
MP (p. 35)
opposition (p. 42)
plurality (p. 45)
portfolio (p. 35)
proportional representation (p. 46)
select committee (p. 43)
single-member district (p. 45)
statute (p. 34)
"two-plus" party system (p. 45)
vote of no-confidence (p. 39)
Westminster (p. 41)
whip (p. 37)
Whitehall (p. 41)

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