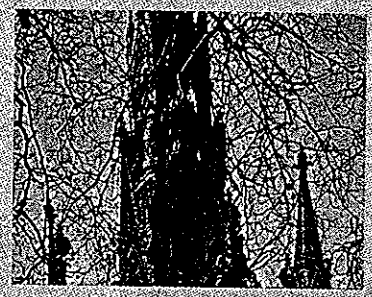
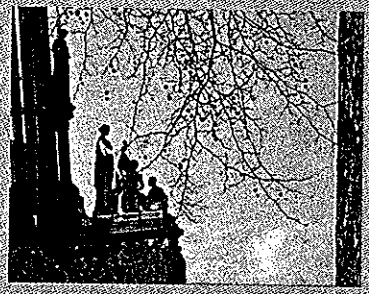
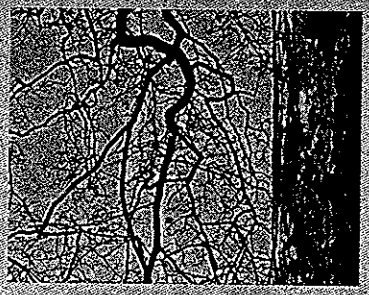
Chapter 4

British Political Culture






"England is a snob country," one longtime American resident in London told me. She added: "And I'm a snob, so I like it here." Her candor touched one of the facets of British political life: the large and often invidious distinctions made between and by social classes.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. How does a wage differ from a salary? In class terms?
2. What is the difference between objective and subjective?
3. What is a British "public" school?
4. How does an "Oxbridge" education form an elite?
5. What is *class voting*, and has it declined?
6. What story does a map of the 2005 elections tell?
7. What center-periphery tensions does Britain have?
8. Have British parties always been pragmatic?
9. What do polls tell politicians about voters' ideology?
10. How did Northern Ireland become such a problem?

Social class can be analyzed in two different ways, objectively and subjectively. The objective approach uses data such as income and neighborhood to place people into categories. The subjective approach asks people to place themselves into categories. There are often discrepancies between the results of the two approaches, as when, for example, a self-made businessman, thinking of his humble origins, describes himself as **working class**, or when a poorly paid schoolteacher, thinking of her university degrees, describes herself as **middle class**. In Britain and in most industrialized democracies, the main politically relevant distinction is between working class and middle class.

Objectively, class differences in Britain are no greater than in the rest of West Europe. The time has long passed when Disraeli could write that Britain was not one nation but two, the rich and the poor. Since then, the British working class has grown richer, the middle class bigger, and the small upper class poorer. But **subjectively** or psychologically, class differences remain. Working-class people live, dress, speak, and enjoy themselves differently than the middle class. Britons seem to like these differences and try to preserve them.

German sociologist Ralf Dahrendorf believed that the key word in Britain is not class but **solidarity**. Although there has been a leveling of objective class differences, Dahrendorf held, the idea of individual competition and improvement has not caught on in Britain as it has in other industrial countries. Rather than struggling to improve themselves individually, many Britons relish the feeling of solidarity that they get from sticking with their familiar jobs, neighborhoods, and pubs. "Britain is a society in which the values of solidarity are held in higher esteem than those of individual success at the expense of others," Dahrendorf wrote. Whether one refers to Britain's divisions as class or solidarity, the fact is that they influence British politics. They contribute to the way Britons vote, color the attitudes of labor unions and of the Labour party, and—very importantly—give birth to Britain's elites through the education system.

"Public" Schools

Although many claim that since World War II Britain has become a meritocracy, having the right parents still helps. No society, including the United States, is purely merit-based. One way the British upper and upper-middle classes pass on their advantages is the "public" school—actually private and expensive—so called after their original purpose of training boys for public life in the military, civil service, or politics. Eton, Harrow, Rugby, St. Paul's, Winchester, and other famous academies have for generations molded the sons of better-off Britons into a ruling elite.

social class Layer or section of population of similar income and status. (See page 49.)

working class Those paid an hourly wage, typically less affluent and less educated. (See page 49.)

middle class Professionals or those paid salaries, typically more affluent and more educated. (See page 49.)

objective Judged by observable criteria. (See page 49.)

subjective Judged by feeling or intuition. (See page 49.)

solidarity Feeling of cohesion within a social class. (See page 49.)

meritocracy Promotion by brains and ability rather than heredity.

public school In Britain, a private, boarding school, equivalent to a U.S. prep school.

old boy Someone you knew at public school.

What a small minority of young Britons learn from ages thirteen to eighteen is more than their demanding curriculum. It is the personal style inculcated in public schools: self-confident to the point of arrogance, self-disciplined, bred to rule. Spy novelist John Le Carré recalled with distaste how his public schoolmates during World War II felt nothing but contempt for lower-class "oiks." In terms of class relations, added Le Carré decades later, "nothing, but absolutely nothing, has changed" since the 1940s.

The British private-school system generates an **old boy** network that assists graduates later in life. The years of floggings, vile food, and bullying by upper-classmen forge bonds among old schoolmates, and they often help each other get positions in industry and government. Most of Britain's elite have gone to private boarding schools, including over half of Conservative MPs. Fewer Labour MPs went to such schools; Prime Minister Brown did not but Blair did. Most of Thatcher's and Major's ministers had been privately educated, but only a minority of Blair's and Brown's.

Until the 1970s, most young Britons took a frightening exam at age eleven (the "11-plus") that selected the best into state-funded *grammar* schools but left most in *secondary modern* schools. In all but

DEMOCRACY

WHAT TO DO WITH "PUBLIC" SCHOOLS?

The British Labour party has long sought to do away with the country's private boarding schools. Labourites regard these schools as undemocratic, part of a class system that benefits a privileged few. Many Conservative politicians have attended "public" schools, but few Labour politicians have. Conservatives want to maintain the schools, arguing that they train the best people and imbue them with a sense of public service.

In practice, Labour governments essentially let the private boarding schools alone while they upgrade the quality of publicly supported "comprehensive" schools. Blair's and Brown's education policies, for example, left the public schools untouched. The problem may be solving itself: Boarding-school enrollment has slumped while day-school popularity has climbed. Changing lifestyles have convinced many British parents that sending their children away is cruel and unloving.

Northern Ireland, Labour governments phased out most of the selective grammar schools in favor of *comprehensive* schools for all, like U.S. high schools. This did not solve the twin problems of educational quality and equality. Now better-off children go to boarding schools, middle-class children go to private day schools, while working class children go to mediocre state-funded comprehensive and technical schools, from which many drop out. Until after World War II, there was no free high-school system in Britain. Only 65 percent of British seventeen-year-olds are still in school (including technical training), the lowest level of any industrial land. (Comparative figures: Germany, 97 percent; United States, 88 percent; Japan, 83 percent.) In spite of the efforts of the Labour party since World War II, British education is weak and still divided by class.

Oxbridge Informal, Oxford and Cambridge universities.

Rhodes scholarship Founded by South African millionaire; sends top foreign students to Oxford.

class voting Tendency of classes to vote for parties that represent them.

"Oxbridge"

The real path to position and power in Britain is through the elite universities of Oxford or Cambridge. Nearly half of Conservative MPs are Oxford or Cambridge graduates (usually after attending a public school, such as Eton), while a quarter of Labour MPs are **Oxbridge** products. In the cabinet, these percentages are higher. And most prime ministers are graduates of either Oxford or Cambridge; Thatcher and Blair were Oxonians. In recent years, only Labour Prime Minister James Callaghan (1976–1979) and Conservative John Major (1990–1997) never went to college. In few other industrialized countries are the political elite drawn so heavily from just two universities.

British university education used to be elitist, enrolling the products of private schools. Since World War II, education opened to the working and lower-middle classes by direct-grant secondary schools and scholarships for deserving youths. Oxford and Cambridge became less class-biased in their admissions, and many new institutions were founded or expanded. (They are now called euphemistically "mainstream" universities.) The percentage of British secondary (high-school) graduates going to some type of higher education shot up from 14 in 1985 to nearly 40 today, approaching U.S. levels.

Only a small percentage of Oxbridge students go into politics, but those who do start with advantages. An Oxford or Cambridge degree—which takes three years to earn—commands respect and hones political skills. One popular major for aspiring politicians is "PPE"—philosophy, politics, and economics—in effect, how to run a country. Debating in the Oxford or Cambridge Unions trains students to think on their feet and confound their opponents with rhetorical cleverness, a style that carries over into the House of Commons. Perhaps the main advantage of an Oxbridge education, however, is the "sense of effortless superiority" graduates carry all their lives. One U.S. president (Clinton), two Supreme Court justices, and several cabinet secretaries attended Oxford on **Rhodes scholarships**.

Class and Voting

Britain used to be a good example of **class voting**—a situation where most of the working class votes for the left party (in this case, Labour) while most of the middle class votes for the right (in this case, Conservative). Actually, class voting in Sweden is higher than in Britain, but nowhere is it

deferential Accepting leadership of social superiors.

the Establishment Half in jest, supposed monopoly of clubby social elite in British politics.

100 percent because some working-class people vote Conservative, and some middle-class people vote Labour. Class differences may be part of Britain's political culture, but they do not translate into class voting on a one-to-one basis.

What dilutes class voting? Some working-class people are simply convinced that Conservatives do a better job governing. Some workers have a sentimental attachment to the country's oldest party. Some issues have little to do with class. The Tories win a large part of the working class on the issues of economic growth, keeping taxes down, and keeping out immigrants.

Going the other way, many middle-class and educated people are intellectually convinced that the Labour party is the answer to what they see as an establishment-ruled, snobbish class system. Such intellectuals provide important leadership in the Labour party. The leader of the Labour left for a long time was an aristocrat, Anthony Wedgewood Benn, or, as he liked to be known, Tony Benn. Furthermore, some middle-class people grew up in working-class families and vote like their parents.

Class voting changes over time. The British generation that came of age during and after World War II, especially the working class, was quite loyal to the Labour party, which it swept to power in 1945. Since then, class voting has declined in Britain and other advanced, industrialized democracies, including the United States. Class is not what it used to be in any country's voting patterns.

It is, however, still a factor. Typically, political scientists find voting behavior is influenced by social class plus one or more other factors, such as region, ethnic group, religion, and urban-rural differences. The 2005 British general election partially bears this out (see box on page 53). Tories were strongest in England, especially the south of England, and in small towns and rural areas. They were weaker in Scotland and Wales and in the big industrial cities, places with a long-term Labour identification and unemployment. Class by itself explains only part of British voting patterns. Class plus region explains more.

THE DEFERENTIAL BRITISH?

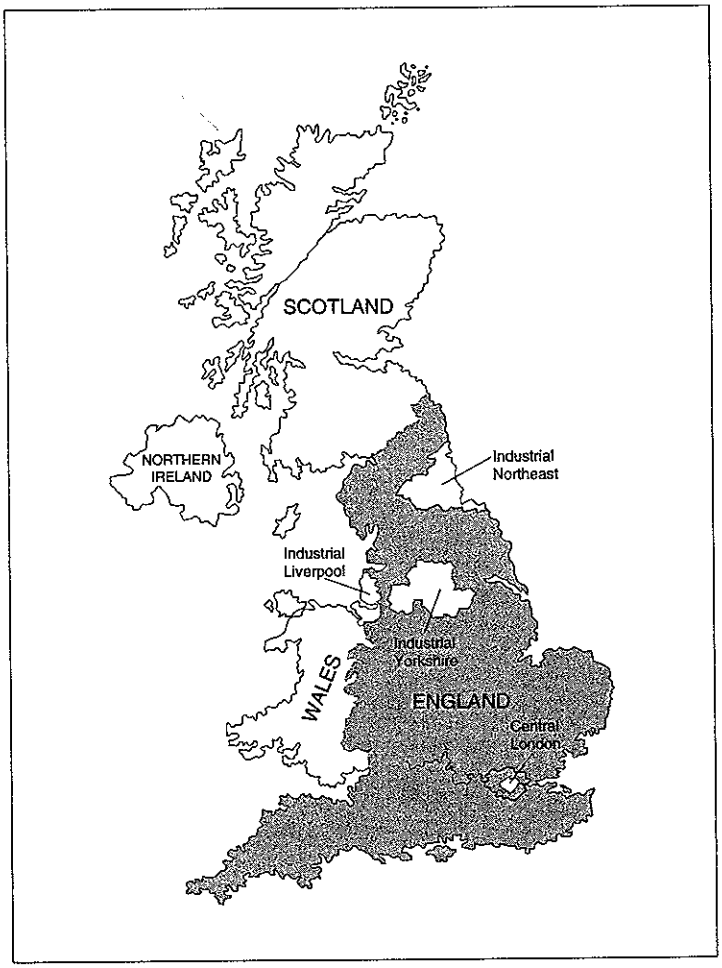
One old image of the British was that they were **deferential**, that is, the average Briton deferred to the political judgment of the Oxbridge-educated **Establishment** and let it lead. The deferential model is now obsolete. Perhaps in earlier decades, when class differences were enormous, the working class deferred to its social betters, but they also built up resentment. As noted in Chapter 2, the labor movement came into British politics in the nineteenth century with a snarl. Some sectors of the British working class still show their resentment in the militant socialism within the Labour party and in indifferent work attitudes and a readiness to strike. The deferential model cannot explain such behavior.

The "working-class Tory" has been explained as a wage-earning voter who defers to the Conservatives and votes for them. But such voting may have little to do with deference. Many such voters think that the Conservatives have the right policies, the Labour party has swung too far left, and there are too many nonwhite immigrants. Furthermore, the 1997, 2001, and 2005 elections saw a return of the "middle-class Labour voter," a shift that has nothing to do with social deference.

Geography

The 2005 Elections: Region and Class

A country's electoral geography—rooted in the history, resentments, and culture of its regions—is long-lasting. Britain illustrates that how a region voted in the past likely predicts how it will vote next time. Labour won a third victory in 2005, but scored above its national average in Scotland, Wales, and the industrial areas of London, Liverpool, Yorkshire, and the Northeast, areas where it has long held sway. Social class is also a factor, as Labour scores well among people who feel disadvantaged: the Scots, the Welsh, and the working class. The areas where the Conservatives fare above average (the shaded portion) are mostly in England, especially in rural and suburban parts. In a nearly universal political pattern, large cities tend to vote left. Region plus class predicts the British vote.



Shaded: Where Tories Won above Average in 2005

BRITISH CIVILITY

In Britain, **civility** is based on a sense of limits: Do not let anything go too far. Thus, while Labourites and Conservatives have serious arguments, they keep them verbal. The British political game is not one of total annihilation, as it has sometimes been in France, Germany, and Russia. British politicians are fairly decent toward one another.

civility Good manners in politics.
heckling Interrupting a speaker.
hooliganism Violent and destructive behavior.

But British civility allows **heckling**. In Parliament a cabinet minister presenting a difficult case sometimes faces cries of "Shame!" or "Treason!" from the opposition benches. Margaret Thatcher faced Labourites chanting "Ditch the bitch." Insults and heckling are a normal part of British debates and are not viewed as out of bounds but rather as tests of a debater's poise and verbal skills.

Civility is usually the case in public also, but not always. Amateur orators at the famous Speakers' Corner of Hyde Park in London can have their say on any subject they like, although they, too, face heckling. British politics turned uncivil on the question of race, which we will discuss later, and there have been demonstrations and riots that led to deaths. Murder rather than civility was the norm for years in Northern Ireland. British civility has been overstated; Swedes are more civil.

PRAGMATISM

As noted in Chapter 1, *pragmatic* has the same root as *practical* and means using what works regardless of theory or ideology. British political culture, like American or Swedish, is generally pragmatic. The Conservatives used to pride themselves on being the most pragmatic of all British parties. They were willing to adopt the policies of another party if they won votes. In the nineteenth century, Disraeli crowed he had "dished the Whigs" by stealing their drive to expand the voting franchise. In the 1950s, the returning Conservative government did not throw out Labour's welfare state; instead they boasted that Tories ran it more efficiently. This changed with the laissez-faire economic program of Prime Minister Thatcher in 1979. The fixity of her goals contributed to ideological debates within and between the two large and usually pragmatic parties. Pragmatism returned to the Tories after Thatcher.

The British Labour party historically offered little ideology beyond the welfare state. With the Callaghan government in the 1970s, however, ideological controversy engulfed Labour. Callaghan was

POLITICAL CULTURE

FOOTBALL HOOLIGANISM

Underscoring the decline in British civility was the rise of football **hooliganism**, the gleeful rioting of some British soccer fans. Drunken fans sometimes charge onto the field in the middle of a game. In 1985, Liverpool fans killed thirty-eight Italian spectators by causing their bleachers to collapse. All over Europe, the English fanatics were feared and sometimes barred from games.

What causes the violence? Some blame unemployment; the games offer the jobless one of their few diversions. But most hooligans are employed and some earn good livings. Others see hooliganism as the erosion of civilization itself. "The truth is," said one self-confessed Manchester hooligan, "we just like scrappin'."

a very moderate, pragmatic Labourite, hard to distinguish from moderate Conservatives. Many Labour personalities, including some union heads, resented Callaghan's centrism and rammed through a socialist party platform despite him. The moderate wing of the Labour party split off in 1981 to form a centrist party, the Social Democrats. As we shall consider in Chapter 5, a series of Labour party leaders pushed the party back to the nonideological center, leading to its 1997, 2001, and 2005 electoral victories.

periphery Nation's outlying regions.

center-periphery tension Resentment in outlying areas of rule by nation's capital.

There is and always has been a certain amount of ideology in British politics, but it has usually been balanced with a shrewd practical appreciation that ideology neither wins elections nor effectively governs a country. The ideological flare-up of the 1980s in Britain made it perhaps the most polarized land of West Europe. Ironically, at this same time, French parties, long said to be far more ideological than British parties, moved to the center, where British parties used to cluster.

One aspect of British pragmatism is their "muddling-through" style of problem solving. The British tend not to thoroughly analyze a problem and come up with detailed options or "game plans." They try to "muddle through somehow," improvising as they go. This often works with small problems, but with a big problem, such as the situation in Northern Ireland, it amounts to a nonsolution.

Traditions and Symbols

As noted, British politics keeps traditions. Political usages often follow well-worn paths, observed even by left-wing Labourites, who, whether they recognize it or not, subscribe to Burke's idea of keeping the forms but changing the contents. As Burke saw, traditions and symbols contribute to society's stability and continuity; people feel disoriented without them.

The typical British man or woman likes traditions and symbols. Although some Britons wince at the tabloid lifestyle of the younger generation of "royals," only a minority would abolish the monarchy in favor of a republic with a president. Parades with golden coaches and horsemen in red tunics

Geography

Centers and Peripheries

A country's capital is often called its "center," even though it may not be in the precise center of the land. Closer to the boundaries of the state are the **peripheral** areas. Often these are more recent additions to the territory of the state. Some of them still speak a different language and resent rule by the capital. This **center-periphery tension** is nearly universal.

Over the centuries, England added Wales, Scotland, and Ireland. Resentment was so high in Ireland that Britain granted it independence in the last century. Now Britain retains only Northern Ireland, long a source of resentment and violence. Scotland and Wales also harbor grudges against rule by London and demand more home rule. As we shall consider in Chapter 6, Tony Blair's Labour government tried to calm these feelings by granting Scotland and Wales their own legislatures.

The U.S. Civil War was an effort by the southern periphery to cast off rule by Washington. In terms of culture and economics, the North and South really were two different countries, a gap that has been partly closed since then. The center of U.S. population, politics, economics, communications, education, and culture long remained in the northeast. This still fosters slight center-periphery tension; some western politicians express irritation at rule by Washington.

center-peaked Distribution with most people in the middle, a bell-shaped curve.

center-seeking Tendency of political parties toward moderate politics calculated to win the center.

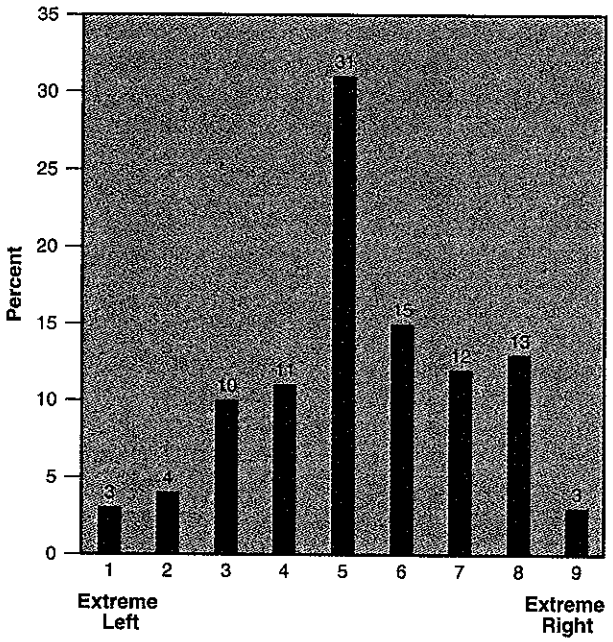
are not just for tourists—although they help Britain's economy—they also serve to deepen British feelings about the rightness of the system.

Traditions can also tame political radicals. Once they win seats in Commons, radicals find themselves playing according to established parliamentary usages. "Well, it simply isn't done, old boy," is the standard lesson taught to newcomers in Parliament. They may still have radical views, but they voice them within traditional bounds.

Political Culture

The Shape of the British Electorate

Virtually all modern democracies show a strong clustering in the ideological center with a tapering off toward the extremes: bell-shaped curves. Such a **center-peaked** distribution is probably necessary to sustain democracy, for it encourages **center-seeking** politics. A U-shaped distribution indicates extreme division, possibly heading toward civil war (example: Spain, 1936). Pollsters and political consultants constantly remind their clients of the distribution of ideological opinion and warn them not to position themselves too far left or right. It took the Labour party several electoral defeats to get the message. Tony Blair finally pushed Labour into about the 5 position (exact center) with vague but upbeat party positions.



THE SELF-PLACEMENT OF BRITISH VOTERS ON A LEFT/RIGHT IDEOLOGICAL SCALE

Legitimacy and Authority

authority Political leaders' ability to be obeyed.

Irish Republican Army (IRA), anti-British terrorists who seek unification of all Ireland.

Legitimacy is a feeling of rightness about the political system. As we noted in Chapter 1, it originally meant the right king was on the throne, not a usurper. As used by political scientists, it refers to public perceptions that the government's rule is rightful. Legitimacy is a feeling among the people; it is not the same as "legal." When a political system enjoys high legitimacy, people generally obey it. They will even do things they do not want to, such as paying their income taxes.

Legitimacy is closely related to **authority**, obeying duly constituted officials. British legitimacy and authority were famous, but they were exaggerated and oversold. British policemen did not carry guns and had good relations with the people on their beat. Political scientists used to cite such points to illustrate Britain's nonviolent qualities. During the 1970s, however, Britain turned more violent. The **Irish Republican Army** (IRA) spread their murderous tactics from Ulster, planting bombs that killed dozens. In 1984, one bomb blew up near Prime Minister Thatcher. Criminals started using handguns. In Britain's inner cities, relations between police and youths, especially black youths, grew hateful and contributed to urban riots (which, nonetheless, cost very few lives). After the 2005 London subway bombings, police shot and killed an innocent passenger on the mistaken suspicion that he was a terrorist. Some critics decried the gunplay as the Americanization of their police. A few British policemen now carry guns and riot gear, a symbol of the erosion of legitimacy and authority in Britain.

The Ulster Ulcer

While Britons on the whole still value civility, pragmatism, legitimacy, respect for authority, and nonviolence, Northern Ireland (sometimes called Ulster) is a massive exception. Northern Ireland illustrates how a system that works amid widespread legitimacy fails when it is lacking. Unlike the rest

Political Culture

The IRA: Ballots and Bullets

The Irish Republican Army is illegal in both Eire and Northern Ireland, but its political arm, Sinn Féin (pronounced *shin fane,* "We Ourselves") is not. It still ultimately aims to get Britain out of Northern Ireland so it can unify with the Republic. Many Northern Irish Catholics vote for Sinn Féin candidates; in 2005 five were elected to Commons (where they do not vote). Sinn Féin leader Gerry Adams, an MP representing Belfast West, denies belonging to the IRA but never condemned its violence. Now voicing a moderate line, he urges peace and disarmament of all sides and only political means to unite Ireland. Ever disrespectful of the English Crown, he calls Queen Elizabeth "Mrs. Windsor."

In 1981 Ulster's Catholics elected Bobby Sands, an imprisoned IRA gunman, who starved himself to death in a hunger strike. The fact that so many men and women of Ulster are willing to vote for an extremist party indicates the depth of hatred and the difficulty of compromising on the basic question of which country to belong to, Britain or Ireland.

Malthusian View that population growth outstrips food supply.

home rule Giving region some autonomy to govern itself.

Eire Republic of Ireland.

Orangemen After King William of Orange (symbol of Netherlands royal house), Northern Irish Protestants.

anglophile Someone who loves England and the English.

francophobe Someone who dislikes France and the French.

of Britain, Ulster is a split society, more like those of Latin Europe—France, Spain, and Italy—where part of the population does not see the government as legitimate.

The Ulster problem has its roots in the eight centuries England ruled Ireland, at times treating the Irish as subhuman, seizing their land, deporting them, even outlawing the Catholic faith. In the 1846–1854 Potato Famine a million Irish starved to death while the English, with plentiful food stocks, watched. (An example of what happens when you make too many babies, admonished English **Malthusians**.) At that time about a million and a half Irish emigrated, most to the United States. The Irish problem was the great issue of nineteenth-century British politics, "the damnable question" of whether to keep it firmly under British control or grant it **home rule**.

In the spring of 1916, while the English were hard-pressed in World War I, the "Irish Volunteers" used guerrilla warfare in the Easter Rising in an attempt to win freedom for Ireland. (They renamed themselves the IRA in 1919.) By 1922, after brutally crushing the rising, the British had enough; Ireland became a *free state* of the British Commonwealth. In 1949, the bulk of Ireland ended this free-state status and became sovereign **Eire**.

But this did not solve the Ulster problem; a majority of the 1.5 million people in these six northern counties are Protestant (descended from seventeenth-century Scottish immigrants) and are determined to remain part of Britain. Fiercely Protestant, for years these **Orangemen** treated Northern Irish Catholics as a different race and feared "popish" plots to bring Northern Ireland into the Catholic-dominated Irish Republic to the south. In control of Ulster's local government, the Protestants shortchanged the Catholic minority in jobs, housing, and political power. For many years, most Catholics did not even have the right to vote for the Ulster legislature.

In 1968 Catholic protests started, modeled on U.S. civil-rights marches. But Catholic *nationalists* or *republicans*, who sought to join the Republic of Ireland, soon battled with Protestant *loyalists* or *unionists*, who insisted that Northern Ireland stay part of Britain. A "*provisional*" wing of the IRA enrolled Catholic gunmen, and Protestant counterparts reciprocated. Murder became nearly random. Over 3,600 were killed—including MPs, Earl Mountbatten, British soldiers, but mostly innocent civilians—and for some years the United Kingdom was the most violent nation in West Europe. Most Ulstermen welcomed a 1998 power-sharing agreement. Violence has largely ended, but mistrust remains (see Chapter 6).

A Changing Political Culture

We are trying to put British political culture into perspective. Britons are neither angels nor devils. Political scientists used to present Britain as a model of stability, moderation, calm, justice, and niceness. In contrast, France was often presented as a model of instability and immoderate political attitudes. The contrast was overdrawn; neither the British nor the French are as good or as bad as sometimes portrayed.

Observations of a country's political culture can err in two ways. First, if you are favorably disposed toward a country—and Americans are great **anglophiles** (while many are **francophobes**)—you may overlook some of the nasty things lurking under the surface or dismiss them as aberrations. For years U.S. textbooks on British politics ignored or played down the violence in Northern Ireland.

Such "incivility" seemed too un-British to mention. Riots in impoverished parts of British inner cities caught observers by surprise.

Second, studies of political culture are carried out during particular times, and things change. The data for Almond and Verba's *Civic Culture* (see box on page 9), were collected in 1959 and 1960. Their composite portrait of Britain as a "deferential civic culture" has not been valid for decades. Since World War II, Britain has undergone trying times, especially in the area of economics. This did not erase British culture wholesale; they simply made manifest what had been latent. Political attitudes change; they can get nastier or better.

KEY TERMS

anglophile (p. 58)
authority (p. 57)
center-peaked (p. 56)
center-periphery tension (p. 55)
center-seeking (p. 56)
civility (p. 54)
class voting (p. 51)
deferential (p. 52)
Eire (p. 58)
Establishment, the (p. 52)
francophobe (p. 58)
heckling (p. 54)
home rule (p. 58)
hooliganism (p. 54)
Irish Republican Army (p. 57)
Malthusian (p. 58)
meritocracy (p. 50)
middle class (p. 50)
objective (p. 50)
old boy (p. 50)
Orangemen (p. 58)
Oxbridge (p. 51)
periphery (p. 55)
public school (p. 50)
Rhodes scholarship (p. 51)
social class (p. 50)
solidarity (p. 50)
subjective (p. 50)
working class (p. 50)

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