

Introducing British Politics

This book seeks to examine state power in Britain. At its heart lies our attempt to answer four key questions:

▶ **How is state power formally organized?**

In part I we are concerned with the formal rules that govern the organization of the state; we are concerned, that is, with constitutional *theory*. We are also interested in the way parties and voters try to influence power within the British system of liberal-democratic government.

▶ **Who runs or influences the state?**

In part II we look at the way the system actually works in *practice*. Various interests inside and outside the state attempt to get what they want out of the formal system of power. This leads us to consider the crucial question of who (if anybody) has the most leverage over the way the state system works.

▶ **What are the outputs from the state and who benefits?**

In part III we shift away from looking at the state system and ‘who participates’ in public policy-making in favour of identifying ‘who benefits’ from the outputs of the British state in key issue areas. We look at economic management; social welfare; law and order; and also attend to the changes in the constitutional rules governing the way state power is used and controlled.

▶ **What are the external constraints on the state?**

In part IV we look beyond Britain to the ‘global system’ of power and to Europe. Some argue that the British state is powerless, having lost out to international organizations like the European Union and to the power of global capital and giant multinational corporations. In this part of our book we move beyond considering

the *internal* constraints on state power in order to look at the *external* constraints. Has the locus of effective political power shifted beyond the boundaries of the British state?

If we can answer these four questions, then we will have developed a sharp understanding of British politics. But three prior questions need to be confronted given our interest in understanding political power in Britain.

- 1 *What is 'power'?* In particular, what is 'political power' or 'state power'?
- 2 *What does it mean to understand political power?* This will involve our thinking about explanation and theory and the importance of empirical evidence. Much of this book will involve our setting down and assessing different theories, or perspectives, that have been advanced to understand power in Britain, although we are also attentive to the importance of political history.
- 3 *What is 'Britain'?* A question that is less simple than it might appear.

WHAT IS 'POWER'?

Power: the Ability to Achieve What You Want

Power is central to the whole of social life. Every day, individuals interact with one another, either in a personal capacity, or as representatives of various groups or organizations. In the course of their actions, all these individuals hope to achieve certain objectives. The problem, however, is that they do not all share the same objectives. Inevitably, given that our paths keep crossing, there will be clashes as I try to realize my goals and values while you try to realize yours. *Conflict*, in other words, is a normal feature of any society.

What matters is who wins and who loses. This will generally depend on who is the more powerful. Power, therefore, is crucial in the relationships between people, for power determines who is able to achieve their objectives and who has to give way.

Power is the ability of individuals in relationships with other people to achieve their will, even if the others resist.

Max Weber

Power and Domination

While conflict may be normal, we do not spend all our time struggling against others to get our own way. Most of the time, we obey commands and nobody even thinks of resisting.

- When the traffic light turns to red, we stop; we do not struggle with the traffic police to see whose will shall prevail.
- When the boss gives us a job to do, we do it; we do not generally challenge her right to tell us what to do.

- When the Inland Revenue sends us a tax demand, we pay up.

What this means is that power is generally *routinized* so that we rarely stop to think about it. Power that is routinized is more effective than power that has to be asserted against resistance. The person who, calmly and quietly, can tell others what to do and who is obeyed is clearly more powerful than the person who has to bully, cajole, threaten and bribe to get others to comply. Routinized power (which Weber called *domination*) is the kind of power that enables individuals to issue commands to others, secure in the knowledge that they will be obeyed.

If we wish to understand political power in Britain, then we need to pay special attention to routinized power and to the way it operates through the mundane routines of ruling. The great set-piece events, such as the drama of a general election, are important, but so too are the quiet briefings of ministers by their civil servants and the daily production of directives by the European Union (EU). To understand how political power works, we have to go beyond the visible clashes of big issue public politics and into the closed worlds where deals are struck and decisions taken.



Tony Blair, newly elected as Prime Minister, waves at Union-Jack-waving supporters on his arrival at Number 10 Downing Street
Popperfoto/Jacques

Economic, Social and Political Power

What is it that gives some people power over others?

From our perspective, the perspective of political science and political sociology, the answer lies in the kinds of *resources* which people control. Different people occupy different positions in society, positions which give them access to various different means of power. These positions bring with them resources which enable individuals to realize their objectives when coming into contact with others who lack them. Three kinds of resources are particularly significant:

Economic resources: money, wealth and ‘human capital’

I can often get what I want if I have money because this means I can pay people to do what I want or to sell me what I want. Similarly, if I have special skills – ‘human capital’ – then I can also often get what I want by demanding a high price for my services in the labour market. People like computer troubleshooters and footballers can command small fortunes for their services.

People who have money and wealth, or who have special skills, can be said to enjoy *economic power*. Economic power is used in market situations, where people seek to achieve their objectives through buying and selling. It is what some sociologists call *class power*, for classes in society are often distinguished according to the quantity and type of economic resources at their disposal.

Social resources: social status

Some power resources are less tangible and attach to particular social positions and identities. People who are recognized by others as having special prestige and social standing can often count on others to defer to their wishes. Titled members of ‘old families’, famous film stars and pop idols, TV personalities and Old Etonians may all find that they can ‘pull strings’ to get a table in a restaurant that is fully booked or even get an invitation to a soiree at 10 Downing Street.

Sometimes such privileges attach to whole categories of people in society. Traditionally, for example, men have enjoyed considerable dominance over women and have secured privileges for themselves which have been denied to the opposite sex. Similarly, members of religious or ethnic minorities may find that they are shut out from access to certain kinds of work, or even from certain civic rights, while others get an inside track.

All of this is what we mean by *social power*; the power that attaches to social positions. It is sometimes referred to as *status group power*, for it derives from membership of particular social status groups such as the aristocracy, the celebrities of popular culture, the fraternity of white males, or whatever.

Political resources: state power

The third category of resources on which the exercise of power can be based derives from people’s relationship to the state.

The state occupies a unique place because it is the only organization that can claim the legitimate right to *force* people to obey its commands. If we resist the power of the state, we can be arrested, put on trial, fined, imprisoned or even executed. No other organization in society can claim this unique right. No private company can force you to come to work for it or to buy its products. No trade union can force you to join up and pay subscriptions. No newspaper can force you to read its columns.

The state is a *compulsory association*, and for as long as you live within its boundaries, you have to obey what it tells you to do or bear the consequences. It can even demand that you go off and risk your life in its defence at times of war, and it can lock you up if you refuse.

Clearly, therefore, those who occupy strategic positions within the state system – the people who can make decisions, change laws and issue orders – are potentially very powerful individuals in society. People like government ministers, top civil servants and the heads of the armed services are, potentially at least, powerful by virtue of the *control* that they can operate over the levers of state administration and policy-making. It also follows that those who can *influence* these people will also be powerful, for they can affect what the state does, thereby achieving their objectives even against those of other groups in society.

All of this is what we mean by *political power*.

POLITICAL POWER

The ability to achieve one's will (even against the resistance of others) which accrues to individuals as a result of their control or influence over the apparatus of the nation-state.

In this book we shall be looking at all three sources of power, but our primary focus is on political power: we shall be analysing the way power is organized within, through, and over the British state.

PERSPECTIVES ON POLITICAL POWER

Given the importance of state power in shaping what goes on in society, it comes as no surprise to discover that questions about who has the most political power, and why, and who benefits are strongly contested. In this book, we shall try to answer these questions by exploring theories and looking at the evidence. This is not as simple as it sounds.

Theory and Evidence

Why we need theories

Our four key questions about political power in Britain – how is it organized, who exercises it, with what results, and under what constraints – are, ultimately, factual or

empirical questions. They are questions that have to be answered by looking at the evidence, the ‘facts’.

But when we pose questions like these, we are not only asking about facts. The facts are important, but what we also want to know is *why* the facts are as they are. For example, it is important to know who exercises power within the British political system (a factual question), but this immediately poses the question of why and how they come to enjoy such power.

Political analysis cannot stop at the point where we have established the facts (*descriptive analysis*). It must always go on and ask why and how the facts are as they appear to be (*causal analysis*). Once we ask these kinds of additional questions – the ‘why’ and the ‘how’ questions – we move into the realm of *theory*, for what theories provide is an explanation for why and how things turn out as they do; for how the facts hang together.

Theories can basically be understood as attempts to explain the *causal links* between different sets of facts. Isaac Newton did not simply observe that apples fell down, he came up with an explanation for *why* things always seem to fall down – an explanation which posited a force (gravity) which causes things to be drawn towards the centre of the earth. In other words, he gave us a theory to explain what we can see happening around us.

There are differences between political science and the physical sciences, but what we share with Newton is a concern to develop theories which can account for the facts that we observe. To get to grips with British politics, we need to inspect the evidence *and* we need to try to *make sense* of what we find by developing theories about why the political system operates as it does.

The simpler, the better!

The best theories tend to be simple ones that identify clear causal links between a small number of things or events. Of course, the world of politics is a complex world, so it might be expected that we need complex theories to help us understand it.

Suppose, for example, that we want to understand why some pressure groups are successful (and we look at this question in chapter 6). Many different factors may be implicated in this. We might expect, for example, that groups will be more successful if:

- They have a large membership.
- They are well financed.
- They have good connections with powerful politicians.
- Their demands are modest.
- They are tightly organized.
- They can attract publicity for their cause.
- There are no other groups challenging them from a different position.

We could go on and on, but the point is that a good theory is one that distils all these different factors down so that we can get to the simplest and most powerful explanation while cutting out the clutter. What we want is a theory that can pinpoint the crucial factors, and that can explain why they are so pivotal. A theory encompassing

hundreds of causal factors may be accurate but it will simply end up redescribing what we see happening around us rather than explaining it. We know that the world is a complicated place – our job is to tease out theories to make it simpler *and* more intelligible.

That said, it is important to recognize that many of the theories you will encounter when trying to understand British politics are pretty thin gruel. That is why ‘thick descriptions’ and a sound appreciation of *history* are also of importance as you struggle to make sense of things. This will become particularly clear in part III when we deal with the historical development of policies in a number of key issue areas.

Levels of abstraction

To say that good theories are simple is not to imply that good theories are necessarily easy to understand. Einstein’s General Theory is extremely simple – $E = MC^2$ – but very few people understand what it means. This is because it is highly *abstract*.

Simple theories will often be abstract theories precisely because they distance themselves from the messy complexity of the world as we see it, and they try to distil the key features of this world into a simple statement of causality. Obviously, the more things a theory is trying to explain, the more it is going to have to be *either* very complicated (juggling lots of different factors together), *or* very abstract. The bad news is that in political science the most ambitious theories very often end up *both* complicated and abstract.

The simplest theories we shall come across are limited to answering fairly modest questions. For example:

- What is the relationship between Parliament and the executive? (chapter 2)
- How do political parties mediate the relationship between political leaders and rank-and-file members? (chapter 3)
- Why and how do parties win general elections? (chapter 5)

These are all crucial questions, and as we shall see, they are not that easy to answer, but they are quite specific and limited in focus. Some of the theories you will encounter actually try to *predict* what will happen but their record of success is limited, perhaps because so much can change in ways that are very hard to anticipate.

The most ambitious theories we shall encounter are those that seek to explain much more general questions, our big four questions. For example:

- How does the whole system of political power work?
- How does the organization of state power relate to the wider society of which the state forms a part?

Most ambitious of all, perhaps, are some of the political theories inspired by Karl Marx (discussed in chapter 9), for these claim to apply to *all* capitalist countries. These theories claim that all states in the capitalist world work in *essentially* the same way, despite the various differences between them. Like Einstein’s theoretical physics, these Marxist theories want to explain the whole system, and this can result in the

development of theories which seem to be very divorced from the nuts and bolts of any specific political system at any particular time.

One of the problems we encounter when theories reach such a high level of abstraction is that they can be extremely difficult to test; to check against the facts. It is usually much easier to test the claims of theories pitched at a lower level of abstraction. We can fairly easily check out the validity of a theory that tells us that the larger the membership of a pressure group the more successful it will be. It is much less easy to test a theory that claims that the political system necessarily operates over the long term to ensure the future stability of the capitalist system of private property ownership.

If we are concerned to back up our arguments with evidence, then simpler theories at a lower level of abstraction may be preferred to more complex ones pitched at a higher level which cannot easily be tested against our observations. Answers to the big questions are hard to resolve on the basis of evidence; they are always open to challenge.

Does evidence depend on theory?

There are those who argue that no theory can be tested against empirical evidence.

The basis of this argument is that there is no such thing as ‘facts’, which means there is no such thing as ‘factual evidence’. Those who argue this way claim that the way we see things is always dictated by the prior ideas and expectations that we have about the world. If this is the case, then our observation of ‘facts’ will always be influenced by our theories, in which case we cannot use factual evidence independently to test these theories. Rather than theories standing or falling on evidence, this means that *evidence depends on theory*.

To understand the point that is being made here, go back to a time when everybody believed that all the heavenly bodies revolved around the earth. Looking to the heavens, observation seemed to confirm this theoretical assumption, for people could plainly ‘see’ the sun *moving* across the sky every day, ‘rising’ in the east and ‘setting’ in the west. Only when Copernicus and Galileo turned our ideas about the solar system inside out did we learn to ‘see’ that what was ‘really’ happening each day was the spinning of the earth on its axis as it follows its annual orbit around the sun. The same thing is therefore seen completely differently today than in the past because we are now wedded to a different theory of the cosmos.

Some philosophers believe that this poses a major problem for any attempt to use evidence to test different claims about the way the world works. If it is true that *all* our observations *depend* on our prior ideas about what it is that we are looking at, then the hope that we might be able to resolve arguments with resort to evidence obviously collapses. This is as true in political science as it is in the natural sciences.

Consider, for example, the belief that there is a ‘dominant ideology’ in Britain which shapes and moulds the way we all think (we touch on this claim in chapter 6 and explore it in chapter 14). If people’s thoughts can be controlled, then resistance can be stopped before it starts, and an apparent popular ‘consensus’ can be engineered to endorse whatever it is dominant groups want to achieve. As George Orwell recognized in his novel *1984*, control over the way we think and talk is probably the ultimate form of power in society.

But how can we test for such control? How can we find evidence for (or against) the existence of a dominant ideology? If such an ideology exists, and operates as it is meant to operate, we will never even realize that it is there! We might try to disprove the theory by pointing to disagreements, but those who believe in the theory will tell you that such disagreements take place *within* the framework of dominant ideas and are never allowed to challenge the fundamentals of the ideology itself.

Just as the person who believes that the sun goes around the earth will find evidence supporting this belief whenever she looks to the sky, so too the person who believes that power is underpinned by a dominant ideology will find evidence for this assertion every time she switches on the television or steps inside a classroom.

No matter what evidence we bring forward, it seems that ‘the facts’ will always depend on the theoretical spectacles through which we observe them. Some social scientists have concluded from this that evidence can never be unravelled from the pre-existing ideas in which it is enmeshed. If this is the case we might as well give up on observing the world and retreat into mere theoretical speculation and argument. After all, if nothing can be learned through observation, then the only source of valid knowledge must lie in the contesting of ideas.

Evidence is not *determined* by theory

In our view, however, such a retreat is unduly pessimistic. It is true at the most general level that what we ‘see’ around us is governed by the ways we have learned to look at the world. The point, however, is that most theories can agree in most instances on how evidence is to be recognized.

Consider, for example, two political scientists who vehemently disagree over the way power is distributed and organized in Britain.

1 The first observer believes that power is concentrated in just a few hands. She looks around and points to evidence that Parliament increasingly struggles to contain the power of the Prime Minister, that leading civil servants can often influence the way ministers think by shaping and controlling the presentation of their agenda, that a whole clutch of newspapers is owned by a single corporation, that voters have precious little influence over specific policy outcomes, and so on. Such observations surely lead to the conclusion that power in Britain is heavily concentrated and centralized.

2 The second observer disagrees. She believes that power in Britain is broadly dispersed, and to support this view points to evidence that governments and political parties have become increasingly concerned to heed ‘public opinion’ (which they constantly monitor through opinion polls and focus groups), that pressure groups consisting of ordinary people have successfully challenged even the best-resourced and most well-connected individuals and organizations, that newspapers compete fiercely with each other to attract readers and are therefore more concerned to reflect rather than mould the interests and opinions of the mass of the people, and so on.

The point about these examples is that both observers may well be right! The key problem they face is not really about deciding what the evidence is, for they can probably agree in most cases about whether the ‘facts’ are ‘true’ or ‘false’. Their theories are not *determining* what they see. Their real disagreement is about what the facts *mean* and whether they are *relevant*. The problem, in other words, lies in *interpreting* the facts rather than in recognizing them.

When one observer claims, for example, that newspaper ownership is heavily concentrated in a few hands, our protagonists can take themselves off to a suitable reference library and find out if this is true (we look at this evidence in chapter 14). When the other observer claims that ordinary people can come together in pressure groups that can defeat corporations, they can look up newspaper reports, or interview activists, and thereby come to a conclusion about whether this has really happened (we shall consider evidence relevant to this claim in chapter 6).

Some facts, of course, will be more difficult to ascertain than others, and some may always be disputed, but most of the time, people wedded to different theories can nevertheless agree on whether or not specific factual claims hold water.

Where our observers are more likely to disagree, however, is in *selecting and interpreting* evidence. Particular theoretical assumptions will tend to lead you in one direction rather than another, and this means that you are more likely to go looking for one set of ‘facts’ while remaining ignorant of other evidence which might be inconsistent with the perspective you are taking. It is not that theory dictates what we see; it is rather that theory guides us in what we are looking for.

Evaluating the evidence

This need not be an insurmountable problem, however. Provided there is no censorship, and provided that information is relatively accessible, different theorists can develop their different arguments and dredge up such evidence as they can find to support their case, and we can then decide for ourselves which position has the stronger claim.

For example, when we discover (as we shall) that most national newspapers in Britain are indeed owned by a small number of individuals or corporations, we shall have to consider how compelling such evidence is as support for the theory that power in Britain is heavily concentrated in just a few hands. To do this, we shall need to see what competing theories have to say about the relevance of such evidence – some may see it as conclusive, others as unimportant – and then we have to draw our own conclusions. We will never achieve certainty that any particular perspective is valid (and it may even be difficult to prove that any particular theory is clearly wrong), but we can evaluate the strength of different arguments against each other, and we can weigh the evidence which each puts forward in its own defence.

In this book, we shall encounter a range of different theories and perspectives on British politics. The book does not explicitly attempt to ‘test’ one theory against another, nor do we try to convince our readers that any one perspective is preferable to all others. As we encounter them, so we shall consider what these various theories can offer in the way of interpreting the evidence with which the book is primarily concerned. It will then be for the reader to draw her own conclusions about which perspectives offer the most in helping her understand the political system in which we live.

In the end, the answers will be found in the weight of the evidence, not in the theories. The theories can help us understand and interpret what the evidence means, but they cannot substitute for it.

The Contours of Theoretical Debate

As we go through the chapters that follow, we shall encounter a range of different theories and perspectives on British politics. It would serve no purpose at this point to set out the basic propositions of these various theories. As we have already suggested, theories are useful only when related to questions of evidence, and a theoretical review in advance of any serious discussion of the evidence would be pointless and premature. What may be useful, however, is a guide to the way various theories divide over the four key questions the book addresses.

Question 1: How is power organized? Formal versus informal processes

Theoretical traditions differ in the claims they make about the organization of political power. The fundamental division is between theories which refer to the *formal* and official rules and procedures of power and policy-making, and those which emphasize the importance of *informal* processes which are never laid down in any political rule books and which may never be officially recognized.

What is at issue here is the question of how far political behaviour is rule governed.

1 If you believe that the actors who make up the political system all behave in the way specified in the various sets of formal rules which govern their actions, then the crucial questions of political theory will concern the nature of these rules. The most basic set of rules governing political life is that which comprises the British constitution, and we begin the first section of this book with a review of what the constitution has to say about how the system of political power in Britain is supposed to work.

2 But if you believe that formal rules are routinely renegotiated, reinterpreted, and ignored when they conflict with what people really want to do, then you will not dally long over theories about constitutions and formal procedures. As we shall see, just as some theories limit themselves to how the constitution operates, so others pay it little or no attention whatsoever. For the latter, the task is to explain how power ‘really’ works, and we shall see that this quest has taken analysts further and further away from the legal textbooks and out into the world beyond Westminster.

Question 2: How is power distributed? Concentration versus dispersal

Our second question concerns the distribution of power and who has their hands on the levers. Here theoretical perspectives divide over the issue of concentration.

1 Some approaches hold that Britain is a democracy and that power is dispersed. Constitutional ‘checks and balances’ ensure that no one part of the state can ride roughshod over the rest, and the system as a whole is structured to ensure that power resides with millions of voters and thousands of different pressure groups.

2 Other approaches dismiss such claims as ‘ideological’. These alternative theories suggest that power is concentrated, although different theories differ over where and how it is centred. Some believe that power accrues to the Prime Minister in what has

become a presidential system. Others think that power has gravitated to the top civil servants, or to ‘corporatist’ organizations which bring top government personnel into regular contact with special interests. And still others think that ‘real power’ lies outside the state system in the hands of conspiring cabals of powerful business leaders who shape public policy from behind the scenes.

In part II of the book, we evaluate these competing claims and arguments, considering in each case how far they can be supported or refuted by the evidence.

Question 3: How is power used? Sectional interests versus public interest

The system of political power allocates benefits and costs unevenly across the population. Almost every government decision benefits somebody more than somebody else. Whether it is banning hunting, subsidizing public transport or raising interest rates, most government interventions probably help some groups while hurting others.

Most theories recognize this. Where they differ, however, is on whether outcomes of the political process demonstrate a systematic bias in favouring any one set of interests in society over all others.

1 Some theorists argue that, under democratic conditions, governments have to pay attention to what most people want. You may be in a minority on one issue and lose, but on another you will find yourself part of a winning coalition. There is therefore no systematic or inherent bias towards or against you.

2 Other theorists, however, suggest that one interest, or cluster of interests, generally prevails. Marxist theorists suggest that big business normally wins out. Public choice theorists think it is usually public sector bureaucrats and their allies who get most out of the system. Feminists have argued that public policy has traditionally favoured men rather than women (an argument we consider in chapter 9). The arguments vary, but these approaches all find common ground in denying that government can or does ‘serve the public interest’.

Question 4: What are the constraints? Agency versus ‘structure’

No political theorist believes that political leaders can do whatever they want. Even an absolute dictator is constrained and may be stabbed by a bodyguard while asleep. Equally, it is unusual to come across a theory that holds that individuals can have no autonomous effect on political outcomes (although some versions of Marxist theory come very close to this). Between these two extremes, however, lies an intense theoretical argument about the degree to which political processes and outcomes are shaped by human agency.

1 Some approaches place the main emphasis of their explanations on the actions of individuals. In this view, if you want to understand why something happens, it is important to identify the individuals who were responsible for making it happen and to try to understand their goals and values. It is probably true to say that most of the approaches we shall encounter in this book see individual actions as an important factor in the explanation of political processes.

2 Other approaches, however, put their emphasis squarely on what is commonly referred to as ‘structural’ features of the political system itself. From this kind of perspective, it hardly matters whether the Conservatives or Labour are in office, whether newspaper editors favour this cause or that, or even whether business leaders huddle in smoke-filled rooms to plot to subvert the democratic process. The secret to understanding politics lies, for these theories, in developing an understanding of the underlying ‘structure’ of the system in which all these individuals are constrained to operate.

Mapping theoretical approaches

Each of our four key questions is theoretically contested.

- Is the system of political power governed mainly by formal rules or informal, uncodified procedures?
- Is power concentrated in a few hands or dispersed among many?
- Is political power generally exercised to benefit everybody, or is the political system fundamentally skewed in favour of some groups and to the detriment of others?
- Is effective power mobilized in the freely chosen actions of key individuals, or does it lie in the deep structure of the political system itself?

At the risk of some oversimplification and exaggeration, it is possible to map each of these four sets of disagreements on to some of the main theoretical perspectives which we shall encounter in forthcoming chapters. The chart below cannot possibly indicate all the pertinent dimensions of each of these approaches, but it may help you to understand how they differ from one another as regards the core concerns addressed in the chapters that follow.

PERSPECTIVES ON BRITISH POLITICS				
	Formal rules	Dispersed power	Public interest	Individual agency
Constitutional theories	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Pluralist theories	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Corporatist theories	No	No	Yes	Yes
Public choice and elite theories	No	No	No	Yes
Structuralist state theories	No	No	No	No

Constitutional theories emphasize formal rules governing procedure; they hold that power is relatively dispersed; they claim that political power is used in the pursuit of the public interest rather than sectional interests; and they emphasize the actions and responsibilities of individual office-holders. At the opposite extreme, structuralist state theories see formal rules as irrelevant; hold that power is concentrated; see the state

operating in the interests of the capitalist class; and emphasize the structural features of the state system (and its relation to the economic system) as against the role of individual human agency.

WHAT IS 'BRITAIN'?

Nation, State and Society

Most people in the world know the name of the country to which they belong. In Britain there is confusion. When England supporters go to watch their national football team, some of them wave the English flag of St George but others wave the union flag incorporating the insignia of two rival nations, Scotland and Ireland. When supporters take a car abroad to watch an away match, they stick on a 'GB' plate indicating that they are citizens of Great Britain. But when they arrive, they show passports indicating that they are actually citizens of a nation called the United Kingdom.

Let us try to work out what country we belong to. We live in a nation – a homeland – which gives us our 'nationality'; a state which gives us our 'citizenship'; and a society which has a 'culture'. These distinctions are difficult to discern in practice, but it is easy enough when nations, states and societies fail to overlap because:

- *Not all nations are states.* Many Arabs, for example, claim Palestinian nationality and yet there is still no independent Palestinian state.
- *Not all societies are nations.* Tribal societies, for example, share a common culture, but wandering over a wide area, they recognize no boundaries to their movement.
- *Not all states are nations.* In the ancient world, for example, the most powerful states were based on cities, and in medieval Europe too, great cities often governed themselves autonomously as 'city-states'.
- *States sometimes encompass several nations.* The former USSR, for example, was a single state which was based on the Russian nation, but which also annexed the Georgians, the Ukrainians, the Latvians, and many other nationalities.
- *Nations sometimes spread across several states.* The German nation, for example, was until recently divided into two main states.

The idea of 'nation' and 'state' are, then, quite distinct. The reason that we often confuse them is that for the last two hundred years or so we have been living in a world that is increasingly composed of *nation-states*.

Where does Britain fit into all of this?

The Four Nations of the UK State

This state – the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, to give it its full and proper name – consists of four (or perhaps three and a half, depending on your point of view) different nations cemented into a single union. This union was only finally agreed in 1921 and today it seems to be coming unstuck.

England

The nation at the core of the union is England. First unified under Roman occupation in 55 BC, England was later carved up into seven separate kingdoms before being reunited in 1016, only to fall to the invading Norman army in 1066.

Ever since 1016, England has been a single country under a single Crown. By international standards, this makes it a remarkably old nation. Between 1016 and 1707, England was a sovereign nation-state. However, it ceased to be a nation-state in 1707 when it joined with Scotland in a new, merged state. Ever since then, England has been one constituent nation in the United Kingdom.

Wales

Wales was never a unified state. The country consisted of fragmented chiefdoms until the English Crown annexed half of it in 1277, with the remainder following in 1536.

Today Wales is one of four nations that make up the United Kingdom. Never having been an independent kingdom, but being an annex of England, it was subject to English law; it was run from Westminster; the Church of England was imposed as its official Church; and the English language was imposed as the official language. Wales did not 'join' England; it was unified by England and became England's first conquest.

Scotland

Unlike Wales, Scotland was once an autonomous and unified state under a single Scottish Crown. For several centuries, the English and Scottish kingdoms skirmished. Gradually, however, Scotland fell under the growing economic and political influence of its more powerful southern neighbour. In 1603, the two Crowns were unified. In 1707, the two states joined together in an Act of Union which established the United Kingdom of Great Britain.

Scotland was clearly the weaker partner but the Act of Union preserved key aspects of Scottish autonomy. Scotland retained its own Church, its own legal system and its own education system. Joining with England, however, meant that Scotland lost its parliament, although it secured a new one in 1999.

Northern Ireland

Ireland, like Wales, was never a single state. It was divided into various Catholic clan chiefdoms until England defeated two of the big Ulster clan chiefs and seized their lands in 1607. This land was then reallocated to settlers from Britain, most of whom were Scottish Protestants. Protestant ascendancy was consolidated in 1690 when William of Orange followed James II to Catholic Ireland and defeated his forces at the Battle of the Boyne.

William set up a Dublin parliament. But following yet another Irish rebellion an Act of Union was passed by the Westminster parliament in 1800. Ireland was absorbed into

the United Kingdom and was governed directly from London. The four nations of England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland were now fused together into a single state – the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland.

Opposition to British rule never went away and the Catholic population never accepted their subordination. Various bills for Irish Home Rule (what today we would call ‘devolution’) were introduced in the Westminster parliament, but all were lost. Irish nationalists led an uprising in Dublin in Easter 1916. After the First World War, Catholic rebels based in the south continued to fight for independence while Protestants in the north armed themselves in readiness to resist their absorption into a new, Catholic, Irish state. Faced with an impossible dilemma, Britain set up separate parliaments for Dublin and Belfast in 1920.

In 1921 the twenty-six southern counties were allowed to leave the United Kingdom and form the Irish Free State. The remaining six counties in the north, most of them heavily Protestant, remained part of the UK, which now became the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Unlike the Welsh, the Scots and the English, the people of Northern Ireland retained their own parliament. The Protestant majority had permanent control of this parliament at Stormont and they used it to further their interests. In the late 1960s, Catholics launched a series of civil rights protests. Gradually, as the protests escalated, the Catholic and Protestant communities began to fight, and troops from Britain were sent in to restore order.

In 1972, Britain closed the Stormont parliament and imposed direct rule from Westminster. After years of ‘troubles’ and endless talks, a peace deal was struck in 1998 between the British and Irish governments and various Northern Ireland parties. It is, however, a very fragile peace.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

Part I: The Constitutional System, Political Parties and Elections

Chapter 2 deals with the basic rules defining the political game in Britain. These rules constrain and enable the behaviour of political and governmental leaders. Taken together they constitute the essence of the contemporary British constitution, or system of rule.

Because the British have never made a written constitution from scratch, but have always built on the past, it is important to understand constitutional history and constitutional change. We argue that constitutional change is most likely to occur when political power does not mesh with the established patterns of constitutional authority; when there is a ‘gap’ between what constitutional theory allows and what political practice is coming to demand.

In concrete terms, we pay attention to the balanced constitution of the eighteenth century and to the liberal constitution of the nineteenth century, before devoting particular attention to the liberal-democratic constitution that came together at the end of the nineteenth century. According to liberal-democratic constitutional theory,

we the people are politically sovereign and the Cabinet and the Prime Minister are responsible and accountable to us through regular general elections. In the 1970s, however, a new gap was seen to have opened up between liberal-democratic constitutional theory and political practice. The British constitution was in some kind of crisis and constitutional change was on the cards, something we go on to discuss in chapter 11.

Chapter 3 considers the changing nature of the British party system and the part that political parties play in British politics. Political parties are informal organizations that organize government and organize us into voting. It is hard to envisage how any country could be governed democratically without political parties and free elections. That said, we recognize that disputes abound as to the *kind* of party system that is required to make for a viable democracy. Some see two parties with single party governments as best, whereas others make a case for multiparty politics, coalition government and consociational democracy. And while some academics have praised the part played by British political parties as contributing to responsible party government, others have seen only the irresponsible divisiveness of adversary party politics.

As well as attending to the party *system*, we also explore the changing *organization* of the political parties. The Conservative Party started inside the House of Commons as a small 'caucus party'. The Labour Party was formed outside of Parliament and had aspirations to be a 'mass party' organized through branches. Both parties now struggle to become 'catch-all parties' because they are insecure about relying on their traditional class base of supporters.

Chapters 4 and 5 deal with the British voter. Because elections and parties are essential defining elements of the British system of representative democracy, voters assume a position of importance and power. General elections give voters a regular opportunity to choose which party will govern for the next five years. Not surprisingly, much academic and partisan effort has been devoted to trying to explain electoral choice so as to make good sense of why voters cast their votes for one party rather than another. In these chapters we aim to make good sense of voting behaviour by assessing different theories of that behaviour.

We pay particular attention to the way a number of social science disciplines have approached the problem of explaining electoral choice. In chapter 4, we deal with the *sociology* of voting and the party identification theory, before turning our attention to the changing sociology of voting; to dealignments, sectoral cleavages, realignments, and to the radical structural approach. In chapter 5, we move on to look at *economic*, *geographical* and *political* explanations of voting behaviour. Economists armed with 'rational choice' theories of human behaviour have a general difficulty explaining why people bother to vote at all, and a particular difficulty explaining the results of recent general elections in Britain. Geographers focus on the importance of locality effects in voting and argue that there are significant territorial cleavages in the patterns of electoral support across the country. Finally, in considering the sheer *politics* of voting, we pay particular attention to the fortunes of the Labour Party over the years and to the 1997 general election because that result challenged several of the established theories of voting behaviour.

Part II: Pressures, Power and the State

Chapter 6 explores the part played by interest groups and social movements in British politics. These informal organizations try to ‘pressure’ those in positions of formal authority within the institutions of the state in order to secure particular public policies to their advantage. We begin by setting down the essentials of pluralist democratic theory, assessing the cogency of this perfect competition perspective as a way of making sense of interest group politics in Britain. This leads to an exploration of various rival perspectives on interest group politics in Britain. We explore feminist and Marxist arguments about male and business dominance respectively; New Right arguments about demand overload (and economic decline); and less partisan arguments that have pointed to corporatism and a pattern of closed competition that favours certain groups over all others, which are left out in the cold.

We also discuss some of the problems associated with interest group politics. We pay particular attention to collective action and the ‘free rider’ problem; to direct action and new social movements; and to the secret world of political lobbying by insiders within the system. We recognize that some see all interest group activity as ‘undemocratic’ and as working against the larger general interest, but we also recognize that few defend insider lobbying and most want to see more openness and even regulation.

Chapters 7 and 8 move beyond the *elected* side of the British state at Westminster. There is more to the state than prime ministers, cabinets, governments and Parliament. To look at British politics as if it were just a democracy encourages a very narrow view. It leads to certain state institutions being written out as beyond independent consideration because they are all seen as crisply controlled by elected politicians. We do not discount the importance of democracy or deny that the elected side of the state is significant. But in these chapters we stress that you also need to consider the independent political power of those state institutions that are not elected, at the same time as you consider those other parts of the state that exist beyond Westminster and Whitehall.

In chapter 7 we consider the position of the civil service; the role of the independent Bank of England; the contribution of the armed services (and the arms industry) in shaping defence policy; the strange position of the security service (MI5) as both a defender of and a threat to democracy; and the part played by the judiciary in lawmaking. In chapter 8 we consider the significance of local government; the mess that is regional administration; the role of quangos; and the significance of devolved government.

We can offer no general overarching theory to make sense of all these institutions. But in challenging democratic orthodoxies and in focusing on what these institutions actually do and on how they operate in practice, we can begin to encourage you to think about the institutions of the British state in new and different ways.

Chapter 9 looks beyond the state system to ask whether there are powerful individuals, groups or organizations in Britain which can and do shape the political process from outside. The springboard for this analysis is Karl Marx’s claim that even when countries develop democratic institutions which give everybody a vote, the state will still operate in the interests of those who own the banks, the factories, the land, the big

corporations. Later Marxists have tried to show that this is indeed the case in Britain, and in this chapter we evaluate some of the arguments and the evidence which they have put forward in support of such a claim.

Marxism is not the only body of theory which predicts that the state will come under the influence and control of powerful groups operating outside it in the wider society. Traditional elite theory also argues this, but it differs from Marxism because it insists that *all* societies, not just capitalist ones, end up being dominated by small elite groups. As with Marxism, so too with elite theory, we look at whether or not these claims hold up against the evidence from contemporary Britain, although there are real problems in finding suitable evidence with which to test these sorts of claims. We conclude that although there is certainly a British ‘establishment’, the assertion that Britain is run by a capitalist ‘ruling class’ or by a ‘power elite’ seems unlikely.

Part III: Ideas and Issues

In part III we turn to consider the outputs from the system of state power in Britain. We start by mapping the basic ideological contours within which contemporary policies in Britain are made, before analysing four core areas of policy.

Chapter 10 begins by looking at what the Labour Party traditionally stood for. It has always been a reformist party dedicated to running capitalism, as against a socialist party committed to the overthrow of capitalism, and we show why socialism is unlikely to re-emerge as a potent electoral force. We then look at what the Conservative Party traditionally stood for, and we show how Margaret Thatcher’s leadership dragged the party away from its pragmatic roots and turned it in the 1980s into a flagship for old-style liberal economic principles.

A key argument in this chapter is that it is a mistake to try to map political positions on a simple ‘left–right’ continuum. British politics has always been structured around *three* fundamental ideological positions. In addition to socialism (on the left) and conservatism (on the right), there is traditional liberalism with its commitment to private property, the free market and the liberty of the individual as against the threat posed by the modern state. Thatcher resurrected traditional liberalism and tried to blend it with old-style conservatism. What Tony Blair then did in the Labour Party was attempt to blend traditional liberalism with old-style ethical socialism. The chapter ends by outlining the basic contours of New Labour’s position – the so-called ‘Third Way’, which emphasizes both ‘social justice’ and individual responsibility.

Chapter 11 returns to the British constitution but this time around we focus on constitutional crisis; constitutional challenges; and constitutional change. We argue that the liberal-democratic constitution was in crisis and became a grinding issue in British politics from the 1970s because a gap was seen to have opened up between liberal-democratic constitutional theory and political practice. Not only was there confusion as to what the British constitution was, but there was rough agreement that British politics had slipped beyond both the explanatory grasp *and* the restraining control of the established rules of the game.

We go on to set down some of the challenges to the established liberal-democratic constitution that emerged during what has proved to be a lengthy period of crisis and debate. We pay attention to the positions adopted by the established constitutional

authorities; the Conservatives and the New Right; the nationalist parties such as the Scottish National Party; the Liberal Democrats; and Charter 88. Having discussed the challenges we go on to deal with constitutional change under the New Labour government. We look at voting reform and proportional representation; devolution to Scotland and Wales; reform of the House of Lords; modernization of the House of Commons; the incorporation of the European Convention on Human Rights into British law; freedom of information legislation; and the use of referendums. Finally, we assess the extent to which this hotchpotch of new constitutional arrangements hangs together as some kind of coherent constitutional whole that is substantially different from the established liberal-democratic set-up.

Chapter 12 looks at the sorry history of how governments have attempted to support, regulate, manage, run or influence the British economy. Economic policy is fundamental, for everything that government does depends on the continuing vitality of the private sector. The British economy has grown hugely during the twentieth century, and it continues to grow today, but for most of this time it has not been growing at as fast a rate as that achieved by most of its competitors. In relative terms, Britain has been getting poorer. The question is why, and whether governments could have done anything to prevent it from happening.

In this chapter we trace the shifts in government economic policy. In the early part of the twentieth century there was a liberal non-interventionist stance emphasizing free trade and a strong currency. In the Keynesian postwar years governments tried to maintain full employment and to plan for economic growth. In the 1960s and 1970s, corporatist arrangements involved prime ministers entertaining trade union bosses and company chiefs to beer and sandwiches in Downing Street. In the 1980s there was the monetarist experiment, and today policies emphasize 'supply side' reforms. Most things have been tried; little has really worked.

Chapter 13 explores social policy, which accounts for around 60 per cent of all government spending. Again, we take a historical perspective. We trace the development of the welfare state from the nineteenth-century Poor Law. We note the Liberal government's introduction of state pensions and health and unemployment insurance before the First World War. We deal with the policy responses to mass unemployment in the interwar years. And we explain the establishment of a comprehensive system of state welfare after the Second World War. The chapter then looks at the arguments which began to be put against the welfare state from the 1960s onwards. Some said that it had failed to eliminate poverty and that it benefited middle-class people more than those who needed it most. Others said that it had created a damaging culture of dependency. The chapter concludes with a review of the reforms of the Thatcher years and the reforms of New Labour.

What this chapter demonstrates is the difficulty of devising systems of social support which help those who need it without undermining the work ethic, giving money to people who do not need it, or running up ever greater bills for the taxpayers. These problems were at the heart of the nineteenth-century Poor Law reform, and they remain at the heart of contemporary policies like New Labour's welfare-to-work programme. What this chapter also illustrates is the sheer difficulty of reforming a system from which so many people expect to benefit (6 million people, for example, now claim income support, and everybody expects a state pension, even though it is becoming increasingly difficult to meet the costs of such provisions). For all its

radicalism, the Thatcher government failed to cut total welfare spending, and the Blair government may well increase it. It will be a brave government that seriously tries to tackle the problem of welfare reform.

Chapter 14 looks at policies which impact on social order and social cohesion. In dealing with law and order policy we explain how policing in Britain is organized and how penal policy has been changing with the privatization of prisons and the development of alternative forms of sentencing. We ask why governments of both parties failed to stem an extraordinary increase in crime rates between the 1950s and the 1990s, and we also examine charges that the police are beyond democratic control and that Britain has become a much more ‘authoritarian society’ than it used to be.

But social order is not just a function of policing. Arguably much more important are various agencies and institutions involved in socializing each generation so that it learns to respect the core rules and values of the society. So in addition to discussing the role of the police and courts, this chapter will look at how the state relates to and affects institutions like the family, the churches, local community and voluntary associations, schooling, the press and television. All these institutions play a part in maintaining or weakening the cohesion of our society. We conclude that self-control and self-regulation have become much weaker than they were in the past, but that new technologies of surveillance, coupled with a tougher stance on punishment, may now be halting the forty-year rising trend of anti-social behaviour.

Part IV: Britain and the World

Chapter 15 focuses on those constraints that come from other states; from international organizations; and from the complicated implications of our economic and political involvement in a global market for goods and services, a market that is increasingly being organized by large multinational corporations that effortlessly straddle frontiers and borders.

The core theme of the chapter is the idea of ‘globalization’. First, we reflect on the extent to which there actually is a new global economy. Second, we explore the argument which suggests that national politics have been sidelined by global market forces so that states are everywhere in decline, increasingly powerless, and lacking in a capacity to truly govern affairs within their own borders. And, third, we attend to the implications of British involvement in international organizations like the United Nations; the International Monetary Fund; the World Trade Organization; and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

Chapter 16 deals with the European Union, the most important supranational organization limiting the autonomy of the UK State. The EU deserves a chapter to itself, for not only is the nature of British membership a key and ongoing issue in British politics, but the EU mocks the comfortable notion that we are a sovereign nation-state solely governed by elected politicians in Westminster.

The EU has evolved from a simple trading bloc to become a major new system of supranational political power, and we consider how this political system makes its decisions and how its power affects the lives of every citizen across a bloc of fifteen different European countries. The EU has its own constitution, its own elected assembly, its own system of party organization, its own complex bureaucracy, its own

currency with its own central bank, and its own evolving system of law. It also attracts its own, special kinds of interest groups, and it passes its own unique kinds of regulations and directives. In many respects, the EU looks already like a fully fledged federal superstate, in which case we need to ask whether the four countries that make up the United Kingdom can any longer be said to retain political control of their own affairs.

References and Guide to Further Reading

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Contains the famous 1964 essay 'The origins of the present crisis', an essay that influenced a debate on the 'character' of the British state and that was picked up by E. P. Thompson (below). The volume ends by looking at the recent evolution of Labourism.
- Brown, A., McCrone, D. and Paterson, L. (1997) *Politics and Society in Scotland*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
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- Coates, D. (1994) *The Question of UK Decline*. London: Harvester-Wheatsheaf.
The problem of Britain's relative economic decline has had profound implications for British politics. Coates provides a good review of the arguments and the evidence.
- Dearlove, J. (1982) 'The political science of British politics'. *Parliamentary Affairs* 35: 436–55.
Contains exactly what the title suggests but dated in paying no attention to the importance of feminism, Europe or globalization.
- Dunleavy, P. and O'Leary, B. (1987) *Theories of the State*. London: Macmillan.
A very useful review of the key theoretical perspectives concerned to explain how modern liberal-democratic states operate. Includes pluralist and neopluralist theories, public choice and 'New Right' theories, elite theories and Marxism.
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- Griffiths, D. (1996) *Thatcherism and Territorial Politics: A Welsh Case Study*. Aldershot: Avebury.
As good an analysis of Welsh politics as you will get.
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- Jessop, B. (1990) *State Theory*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
If you enjoyed Dunleavy and O'Leary and relish a challenge, then read this.
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Explores the British engagement with the federal idea from the early 1600s onwards. Pays particular attention to the contemporary discussions about the division of power between Westminster and the parliaments and assemblies in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and also discusses the issues surrounding the UK and the EU.

- McGarry, J. and O'Leary, B. (1995) *Explaining Northern Ireland*. Oxford: Blackwell.
Explores the most frequent explanations for the conflict in Northern Ireland. Pays particular attention to the 'external' explanations advanced by nationalists, unionists and Marxists, but also addresses the 'internal' explanations that bear on religious, cultural and economic factors.
- Russell, B. (1940) *Power: A New Social Analysis*. London: Basic Books.
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- Ryan, A. (1970) *The Philosophy of the Social Sciences*. London: Macmillan.
An excellent guide to the nature of social scientific explanation, the role of theory, and the extent to which we can rely on the evidence of our senses to determine whether claims are true or false.
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One of England's leading Marxist historians responds to Perry Anderson (above) and considers the extent to which upheavals like the Civil War, the Glorious Revolution, and the Great Reform Act of 1832 left the basic structure of power intact.
- Tivey, L. (1988) *Interpretations of British Politics: The Image and the System*. London: Harvester-Wheatsheaf.
Terrific little book that sets down and comments on 'the main general interpretations of British politics put forward between 1860 and the present time'.
- Weber, M. (1968) *Economy and Society*. 2 vols, New York: Bedminster Press.
Volume 2, chapter 9, is the key part of this huge work where Weber deals with state power, but the short section 16 of chapter 1 in volume 1 is also important.

