CHAPTER 5

POLITICS IN BRITAIN

Richard Rose

Country Bio

UNITED KINGDOM

Population
60.6 Million

Territory
94,525 square miles

Year of Independence
From the twelfth century

Year of Current Constitution
Unwritten; partly statutes, partly common law and practice

Head of State
Queen Elizabeth II

Head of Government
Prime Minister Gordon Brown

Language
English plus about 600,000 who regularly speak Welsh and about 60,000 who speak Gaelic, plus immigrants speaking languages of the Indian subcontinent and elsewhere

Religion
Nominal identification in census: Church of England 26.1 million, Roman Catholic 5.7 million, Presbyterian 2.6 million, Methodist 1.3 million, other Christian 4.0 million, Muslim 1.5 million, Hindu 500,000, Sikh 330,000, Jewish 260,000, other 300,000, no religion 8.6 million, no reply 4.4 million

In a world of new democracies, Britain is different because it is an old democracy; its political system has been evolving for more than 850 years. In medieval times the King of England claimed to rule France and Ireland, as well as England. From the end of the fifteenth century onward, the claim to rule France was abandoned, and sovereignty was gained over Wales and Scotland. The government of the **United Kingdom** was created in 1801 by merging England, Scotland, Wales, and Ireland under the authority of Parliament in London.

Unlike new democracies in Eastern Europe, Latin America, and Asia, Britain did not become a democracy overnight. It became a democracy by evolution, rather than revolution. Democratization was a slow process. The rule of law was established in the seventeenth century, the accountability of the executive to Parliament was established by the eighteenth century, and national political parties organized in the nineteenth century. Even though competitive elections had been held for more than a century, the right of every adult man and woman to vote was not recognized until the twentieth century.

The evolution of democracy in Britain is in contrast with a European history of countries switching between democratic and undemocratic forms of government. Whereas older British people have lived in the same political system all their lives, the oldest Germans have lived under four or five constitutions, two democratic and two or three undemocratic.[1]

At no point in history did representatives of the British people meet to decide what kind of government they would like to have, as happened in America and France at the end of the eighteenth century and in many democracies since. British politicians have been socialized to accept institutions and rules of the game as a legacy from distant predecessors. Ordinary citizens have been socialized to accept established institutions, too.

The influence of British government can be found in places as far-flung as Australia, Canada, India, and the United States. Just as Alexis de Tocqueville travelled to the United States in 1831 to seek the secrets of democracy, so we can examine Britain for secrets of stable representative government. Yet, the limitations of Britain as a model are shown by the failure of many attempts to transplant its institutions to countries gaining independence from the British Empire—and even more by the failure of its institutions to bring political stability to Northern Ireland.

POLICY CHALLENGES FACING THE BRITISH GOVERNMENT

In Britain the term **government** is used in many senses. People may speak of the Queen's government to emphasize enduring and nonpartisan features, they may refer to a Labour or Conservative government or the government of the day to emphasize partisanship, or they may speak of Gordon Brown's government to stress its transitory personal feature. The departments headed by Cabinet ministers advised by senior civil servants are referred to collectively as **Whitehall,** after the London street on which many major government departments are located. **Downing Street,** where the prime minister works, is a short street off Whitehall. **Parliament**—that is, the popularly elected House of Commons and the nonelected House of Lords—is at one end of Whitehall. The term Parliament is often used as another way to refer to the House of Commons. Together, all of these institutions are often referred to as **Westminster,** after the district in London in which the principal offices of British government are located.

The constitutional doctrine that Parliament is sovereign was traditionally interpreted as holding that the government of the day can do whatever it wants, as long as it has the backing of a majority in the House of Commons. However, the claim to sovereignty of this island state stops at the water's edge. In a world in which many policy issues transcend national boundaries, the first challenge facing governors is to answer this question: Where does Britain belong? Prime ministers from Winston Churchill to Gordon Brown have claimed that Britain is a major world power because of its close ties with Commonwealth countries, the United States, and Europe.

The British Empire was transformed after World War II into the Commonwealth, a free association of 54 sovereign states with members on every continent. The independent status of its chief members is shown by the absence of the word *British* from their names. Commonwealth countries from Antigua and Australia to Zambia and Zimbabwe differ from each other in wealth, language, culture, and religion. They also differ in their commitment to democracy.

Every British prime minister claims a special relationship with the United States. The traditional view, dating back to the time of Winston Churchill and Franklin D. Roosevelt, was that "America provides the brawn and we provide the brains." However, the number of countries with which America has a special relationship keeps expanding, whereas British prime ministers have not built equally strong relationships with other countries. After the end of the Cold War, the emergence of the United States as a unique global force has made the relationship more attractive to Britain. However, the unilateralist policy of Washington under President George W. Bush reduced the influence that Britain and other countries may have hoped to have on American foreign policy.

When President Bush formed a "coalition of the willing" to attack Iraq, Prime Minister Tony Blair was more than willing, believing it desirable to do so to make the world a safer place. In response to doubts raised in the House of Commons, Blair argued that allying with the United States in Iraq would give Britain greater influence. However, both British Members of Parliament (MPs) and the public have had their doubts. In a June 2006 Populus poll of public opinion, two-thirds said Britain's relationship with the United States had become less important than its other international ties.

As countries such as Germany and France have regained economic and political significance, the British government has looked to Europe. In the jet age, the English Channel is no longer a barrier to travel to the European continent, and a tunnel under the English Channel provides a rail and road link to Paris that is shorter than that to the North of England or Scotland. Manufacturers such as Ford Motor Company link their plants in Britain with factories across Western Europe, just as Ford links factories across the United States.

Although the European Economic Community (EEC) was established in 1957, Britain did not join it until 1973. Since then the EEC has grown in membership and powers and has become the European Union (EU). The EU has the power to impose regulations affecting British business and limiting the government's economic policies. Government ministers spend an increasing amount of their time negotiating with other countries of the EU on matters ranging from political fundamentals to whether British beer should be served in metric units or by the traditional measure of a British pint.

Britain's governors accept the inevitability of globalization: In 2005 the prime minister, the deputy prime minister, the foreign secretary, and the ministers of Defence, Trade and Industry, and Environment each averaged more than one day a week traveling abroad. However, commitment to the EU remains limited. In small countries, which have always recognized the influence of bigger neighbors, exchanging nominal sovereignty to participate in the EU presents no problems. However, it is a shock to Britain's governors, who pride themselves on having a major role in three different international settings—the Commonwealth, Europe, and Washington, D.C.

When a public opinion poll asks whether Britain should act like a leading world power or a small neutral country like Sweden or Switzerland, 49 percent favor being a small power, as compared to 34 percent wanting the country to be a world power.[2] However, Britain's island status cannot insulate it from the rest of the world. It is not possible for Britain to become a small, rich country like Switzerland or Sweden. The effective choice today is between Britain being a big, rich country and Britain being a big, relatively less prosperous country.

A second set of challenges in the economic field makes the link between international and domestic policy very visible. For centuries Britain has depended on world trade, importing much food and many raw materials. To pay for these imports, it exports manufactured goods and "invisible" services of banks and other financial institutions in the city of London, and it does a big trade in tourism. The British pound sterling (£) is an international currency, but speeches by the prime minister and head of the Treasury do not determine its international value. This is decided in international markets in which currency speculators play a significant role. Since 1997 the value of the British pound in exchange for the dollar has ranged from \$1.35 to \$2.00.

Economic growth is important not only for British consumers, who borrow heavily, but also for the government, which usually runs a deficit to meet the bills for public spending. An aging population requires more health care and pensions, an educated population demands better education for their children, and a more prosperous society wants a better environment. However, the means of raising additional revenue without raising visible taxes are few. Moreover, any increase in deficit spending threatens inflation and a rise in interest rates by the independent Bank of England. The fiscal dividend of economic growth makes it much easier to meet these challenges.

Some challenges, such as fighting crime, cannot be resolved solely by spending money. Successive Conservative and Labour governments have spent more money on the police and built more prisons. However, their efforts have been accompanied by random crimes of street violence and stabbing, especially in London, and the use of guns in robberies and in shootings of police officers. Multiculturalism is another problem that cannot be met just by spending more money. The government seeks to promote a sense of "Britishness" among immigrants, giving lessons about the rights and obligations of citizens to immigrants wanting British passports. British-born offspring of immigrants automatically gain citizenship. Whether they choose to adopt British ways is greatly influenced by family and ethnic background and, in the case of a few Muslims, by jihadist activists.

Notwithstanding the power of the government of the day within Westminster, ministers are regularly confronted with challenges concerning the delivery of public services by local government, the National Health Service, and other institutions. Schools whose pupils have bad examination results embarrass the minister responsible for education, a social security official that loses computer disks with confidential details about millions of claims embarrasses the minister responsible for pensions, and the health minister is called to account when shortcomings of hospital cleaning staff lead to infections causing the death of patients These failings lead to calls for the government of the day to "do something," but it is not easy for a Cabinet minister in Whitehall to monitor the activities of more than a million health workers or millions of pupils. Whitehall has contracted with profit-making companies to deliver a variety of

public services in a businesslike way. However, when these organizations make mistakes, the blame continues to fall on the government department that employed the faulty supplier.

With a general election due no later than Spring 2010, party leaders are concentrating on winning the next election. Gordon Brown, the leader of the **Labour Party,** faces a unique problem: As prime minister he must defend the record of a Labour government continuously in office since 1997. Labour's narrow margin of victory in 2005 makes its parliamentary majority vulnerable. After a "honeymoon" with the public after becoming prime minister in summer 2007, Brown has faced a legacy of taxing and spending problems and a worldwide economic and financial crisis. His hesitancy in making and explaining decisions, combined with a reserved personality, has led to an approval rating in the polls as low as that of his Labour predecessor, Tony Blair, at the end of Blair's prime ministership.

After losing three successive elections under three different leaders, the **Conservative Party,** the official Opposition, accepted the challenge to change by electing a youthful new leader, David Cameron. His strategy has much in common with that of Tony Blair in Opposition: to move the party from being promarket and antigovernment to occupying the political center by showing sympathy with measures to improve the environment, gay rights, and other liberal issues. Since Cameron has been an MP only since 2001, he cannot be identified with unpopular policies that led to his party's previous defeats. However, since neither he nor his principal associates have ever held office in government, inexperience raises questions about what a Cameron-led government would actually do if it were to win an election. As Opposition leader, Cameron has a problem in gaining public recognition. But since big majorities have come to disapprove of the Labour government's record under Blair and Brown, the Conservative Party has been ahead of Labour in the opinion polls because it offers a change from an unpopular government.

The **Liberal Democratic Party** is now the closest approximation to a "left" party that Britain has. It favors social and environmental policies and attacks government proposals that encroach on civil liberties. It is strongly in favor of the EU, where its leader, Nick Clegg, once worked as an official. It is also the only British party that opposed the Iraq War. Because of being third in seats in the House of Commons, the Liberal Democrats have no chance of forming a government on their own. But because the Conservative Party faces an uphill struggle to win an absolute majority in the House of Commons, it could hold the balance of power in the House of Commons after the next general election.

A change of government following the next general election would not change the problems facing government. A new government would then be challenged to realize its campaign promises. But this is easier said than done. As Tony Blair ruefully admitted five years after becoming prime minister, "In opposition, announcement is the reality. For the first period in government, there was a tendency to believe this is the case. It isn't. The announcement is only the intention."[3]

THE ENVIRONMENT OF POLITICS: ONE CROWN, BUT FIVE NATIONS

The Queen of England is the best known monarch in the world, yet there is no such entity as an English state. In international law the state is the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Great Britain is divided into England, Scotland, and Wales. The most distinctive feature of **Wales** is that one-quarter of the population speaks an old Celtic language, Welsh, as well as English. **Scotland,** once an independent kingdom, has been an integral part of Britain since 1707. However, the Scots have separate legal, religious, and education institutions. The fourth part of the United Kingdom, **Northern Ireland,** consists of six counties of Ulster. The remainder of Ireland rebelled against the Crown in 1916 and established a separate Irish state in Dublin in 1921. The current boundaries of the United Kingdom, colloquially known as Britain, were fixed in 1921.

The United Kingdom is a unitary state because there is a single source of authority, the British Parliament. However, the institutions of government are not uniform throughout the United Kingdom. In the minds of its citizens, it is a multinational state, for people differ in how they describe themselves (Table 5.1). In England people often describe themselves as English or British without considering the different meanings of these terms. This does not happen elsewhere in the United Kingdom. In Scotland three-quarters see themselves as Scots. In Wales three-fifths identify themselves as Welsh. In Northern Ireland people divide three ways: almost half see themselves as British, one-quarter see themselves as Irish, and another one-quarter identify with Ulster (i.e., Northern Ireland).

TABLE 5.1

National Identities

Identities vary within each nation

	England	Scotland	Wales	Northern Ireland
Self-identifying as:				
British	51%	19%	27%	47%
English, Scots, Welsh, Irish	38	75	60	27
Other, don't know	11	6	13	26*

Sources: England: British Social Attitudes Survey, 2004; Scotland: Scottish Social Attitudes Survey, 2004; Wales: Life and Times Survey, 2003; Northern Ireland: Life and Times Survey, 2004.
*Includes 21 percent identifying as Ulster.

Historically, Scotland and Wales have been governed by British Cabinet ministers accountable to Parliament. After decades of campaigning by nationalist parties seeking independence, in 1997 the Labour government endorsed **devolution**; an Act of Parliament gave responsibilities for policy to elected assemblies in Scotland and in Wales, and they came into being in 1999. The revenue of both assemblies comes from Westminster. It is assigned by a formula relating it to public expenditures on comparable policies in England.

The Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh has powers to legislate and to initiate a wide variety of social and environmental policies, including those delivered by Scottish local government. Elections to the 129-seat Parliament mix the traditional British **first-past-the-post electoral system** and proportional representation (PR), which are discussed in more detail later in the chapter. After the 1999 and 2003 elections, the Labour Party in Scotland formed a coalition government with the Liberal Party. In the May 2007 Scottish election, the unpopularity of the British Labour Party resulted in a one-seat margin for the Scottish National Party (SNP) over the Labour Party, 47 to 46. The remaining seats were divided among the Conservatives, 17; Liberal Democrats, 16; and others, 3.

Under the leadership of Alex Salmond as First Minister, the SNP established a minority government. Its first aim has been to demonstrate that the SNP was not just a protest party, but a party that was capable of governing as well as or better than parties that appeal for votes across the whole of Britain. Its second aim is to promote a referendum on independence for Scotland. The three Opposition parties have reacted by establishing a commission to recommend increases in powers devolved to Scotland, subject to approval by the British government in London. The chief dividing issue in Scotland today is what question or questions should be put to the Scottish people in a referendum that could take place in 2010 or 2011.

The 60-seat Welsh Assembly in Cardiff has power over a variety of local and regional services, and its activities are conducted in English and in Welsh. However, it does not have the power to enact legislation. It is elected by a mixed first-past-the-post and PR ballot. Labour has consistently been the biggest party at each election, but it has difficulty winning a majority of Assembly seats. After the May 2007 Assembly election, Labour held 26 seats, Plaid Cymru (the Welsh National Party) 14, Conservatives 12, Liberals 6, and others 2. Labour and Plaid Cymru together formed a coalition government. There is no effective political demand for independence.

Northern Ireland is the most un-English part of the United Kingdom. Formally, it is a secular polity, but differences between Protestants and Catholics about national identity dominate its politics. Protestants, who make up about three-fifths of the population, want to remain part of the United Kingdom. Until 1972 the Protestant majority governed through a home-rule Parliament at Stormont, a suburb of Belfast. Many of the Catholic minority did not support this regime, wanting to leave the United Kingdom and join the Republic of Ireland, which claims that Northern Ireland should be part of the Republic.

After Catholics launched protests against discrimination in 1968, demonstrations turned to violence in 1969. The illegal **Irish Republican Army (IRA)** was revived and in 1971 began a military campaign to remove Northern Ireland from the United Kingdom. Protestants organized illegal armed forces in response. More than 3,500 people have been

killed in political violence since. After adjusting for population differences, this is equivalent to more than 140,000 political deaths in Britain or more than 700,000 such deaths in the United States.

In 1969 the British Army went into action in Northern Ireland to protect Catholics. In 1971 it helped intern hundreds of Catholics without trial in an unsuccessful attempt to break the IRA. In 1972 the British government abolished the Stormont Parliament, placing government in the hands of a Northern Ireland Office under a British Cabinet minister. In 1985 the British government took the unprecedented step of inviting the Dublin-based government of the Republic of Ireland to participate in institutions affecting the governance of Northern Ireland.

A stable settlement requires the support of paramilitary organizations, as well as political parties on both sides of the political divide. In 1994 the IRA announced a cessation of its military activity, and Sinn Fein, the political party of the Irish Republican movement, agreed to talks. Protestant paramilitary forces also announced a cessation of activities. On Good Friday of 1998, an agreement was reached that provided for an elected power-sharing executive and cross-border institutions involving both Dublin and Belfast. Contrary to the practice of government at Westminster, power-sharing means that whatever the outcome of a Northern Ireland election, government must be a coalition of parties representing both the pro–Britain Protestant majority and the pro–Irish Republic Catholic minority. The coalition government initially formed along these lines collapsed in a dispute about whether the IRA had decommissioned its arsenal of weapons.

An election for the 108-seat Northern Ireland Assembly in 2007 gave the Democratic Unionist Party led by Dr. Ian Paisley 36 seats, the Republican Sinn Fein 27, the Ulster Unionist Party 18, the pro-Irish Social Democratic and Labour Party 16, the cross-religious Alliance Party 7, and others 4. After intensive negotiations in which London and Dublin offered incentives to Irish Republicans and put pressure on Ulster Unionists, a coalition government was formed with Dr. Ian Paisley, an outspoken Unionist and Protestant, as First Minister and Martin McGuinness, a Sinn Fein politician who had been active in the IRA, as Deputy First Minister, plus representatives of the Ulster Unionist Party and the Social Democratic and Labour Party.

While there is no agreement about national identity within Britain, there is no doubt about which nationality is the most numerous. England dominates the United Kingdom. It accounts for 84 percent of the United Kingdom population, as compared to 8 percent in Scotland, 5 percent in Wales, and 3 percent in Northern Ireland. Previous editions of this chapter have been called "Politics in England" because, as Tony Blair once said, "Sovereignty rests with me, as an English MP, and that's the way it will stay."[4] However, changes in other parts of the United Kingdom have begun to affect politics in England. For example, in the 2005 British general election the Conservative Party won the most votes in England, but the Labour Party, thanks to its dominance in Scotland and Wales, won the most votes in the United Kingdom and a majority in the British Parliament. Demands by the Scottish National Party for independence have been met by English demands to reduce the share of British tax revenue that Westminster allocates to Scotland.

A Multiracial Britain

Throughout the centuries England has received a relatively small but noteworthy number of immigrants from other parts of Europe. The Queen herself is descended from a titled family that came from Hanover, Germany, to assume the English throne in 1714. Until the outbreak of anti-German sentiment in World War I, the surname of the royal family was Saxe-Coburg-Gotha. By royal proclamation King George V changed the family name to Windsor in 1917.

The worldwide British Empire was multiracial, and so is the Commonwealth. Since the late 1950s, job seekers have been arriving in Britain from the West Indies, Pakistan, India, Africa, and other parts of the Commonwealth. Hundreds of thousands of people from Australia, Canada, the United States, and the member countries of the EU flow in and out of Britain as students or as workers. A strong British economy attracts temporary workers from Central and Eastern European countries in the EU. Public opinion has opposed unlimited immigration, and both Labour and Conservative governments have passed laws trying to limit the number of immigrants. However, these laws contain many exceptions.

Political disturbances around the world in the past two decades have increased the number of immigrants claiming asylum as political refugees from troubled areas in the Balkans, the Middle East, and Africa. Some have valid credentials as refugees, whereas others have arrived with false papers or make claims to asylum that courts have not upheld.

In response to popular concern, the government has tried to make deportation of illegal immigrants easier. However, the government has admitted that hundreds of thousands of illegal immigrants now live in Britain.

The minority ethnic population of the United Kingdom has risen from 74,000 in 1951 to 4.6 million in the latest census, almost 8 percent of the total population. Official statistics define the minority population by the one characteristic that they have in common—they are not white. Because persons placed in this catchall category have neither culture nor religion in common, there is a further subdivision by race and ethnicity. West Indians speak English as their native language and have a Christian tradition, but this is often not the case for black Africans. Ethnic minorities from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh are divided among Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs, and most speak English as a second language. Chinese from Hong Kong have a distinctive culture. Altogether, almost half of the minority category comes from the Indian subcontinent, a quarter consists of black people from the Caribbean or Africa, one in seven is often of mixed British and minority origin, and the remainder come from many different countries.

With the passage of time, the ethnic minority population is becoming increasingly British-born and -educated. This raises an important issue: What is the position of British-born offspring of immigrants? Whatever their country of origin, they differ in how they see themselves: 64 percent of Caribbean origin identify themselves as British, as do more than three-fifths of Pakistanis, Indians, and Bangladeshis and two-fifths of Chinese. However, some offspring of immigrants have rejected integration. A coordinated terrorist attack in London on July 7, 2005, that killed more than fifty people was organized by British-born offspring of Pakistani immigrants who had been converted to jihadism at British mosques. British-born jihadists have been able to receive training in Pakistan and neighboring Afghanistan.

In response to terrorist attacks, the government has shifted from promoting multiculturalism to stressing the integration of immigrant families into the British way of life. It has greatly increased police powers, justifying shoot-to-kill policies even when people wrongly suspected of being terrorists are the victims. Its program of cooperating with people it identifies as leaders of the Muslim community has faced difficulties. Those cooperating with the British government have found themselves in dispute with their coreligionists. Moreover, they have criticized police methods used in surveillance of the Muslim community and British military actions in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Many immigrants and their offspring are being integrated into electoral politics, since residential concentration makes their votes important in some parliamentary constituencies. Some candidates from different immigrant groups compete with each other. There are now hundreds of elected minority ethnic councillors in local government. The 15 ethnic MPs in the Commons today come from diverse backgrounds—India, Pakistan, the West Indies, Ghana, and Aden—and sit for the Labour, Liberal Democratic, and Conservative parties. A disproportionate number of minority ethnic people have voted Labour.

THE LEGACY OF HISTORY

The legacy of the past limits current choices, and Britain has a very long past. Much of its legacy is positive, for many fundamental problems of governance were resolved centuries ago. The Crown was established as the central political authority in medieval times. The supremacy of the state over the church was settled in the sixteenth century when Henry VIII broke with the Roman Catholic Church to establish the Church of England. The power struggle between the English Crown and Parliament was resolved by a civil war in the seventeenth century in which Parliament triumphed and a weakened monarch was then restored. A Parliament chosen by an unrepresentative franchise was able to hold the Crown accountable in the eighteenth century.

The continuity of England's political institutions through the centuries is remarkable. Prince Charles, the heir to an ancient Crown, pilots jet airplanes, and a medieval-named chancellor of the Exchequer pilots the British economy through the deep waters of the international economy. Yet, symbols of continuity often mask great changes in English life. Parliament was once a supporter of royal authority. Today Parliament is primarily an electoral college deciding which party leader is in charge of government.

There is no agreement among political scientists about when England developed a modern system of government.[5] The most reasonable judgment is that modern government developed during the very long reign of Queen Victoria, from 1837 to 1901, when government institutions were created to cope with the problems of a society that was increasingly urban,

literate, industrial, and critical of unreformed institutions. The creation of a modern system of government does not get rid of the problems of governing.

Developments since World War II can be divided into stages. The first stage, an all-party consensus on a mixed-economy Keynesian welfare state, built on the foundations of a wartime coalition government led by Winston Churchill. The Beveridge Report on social welfare, John Maynard Keynes's Full Employment White Paper, and the Butler Education Act of 1944 were initiatives named after Liberals and Conservatives. The 1945 British general election was won by a Labour government led by Clement Attlee. It combined social welfare policies, leading to the establishment of a comprehensive National Health Service, and socialist economic policies, under which many basic industries were taken into state ownership. Between 1951 and 1964, Conservative governments led by Winston Churchill, Sir Anthony Eden, and Harold Macmillan maintained a consensus about the mixed-economy welfare state. Keynesian techniques for promoting economic growth, full employment, and low inflation led to an era of consumer prosperity, and the availability of free university education was greatly expanded.

A flood of books on the theme "What's wrong with Britain?" proclaimed the need for faster economic growth and led to a second stage in which parties competed in innovation. The Labour Party under Harold Wilson won the 1964 election, campaigning with the vague activist slogan "Let's go with Labour." New names were given to government department offices, but behind their entrances many officials went through the same routines as before. The economy did not grow as predicted. In 1967 the government was forced to devalue the pound and seek a loan from the International Monetary Fund. Labour lost the 1970 election.

The major achievement of Edward Heath's 1970–1974 Conservative government was to make Britain a member of the EU. Doing so divided his own party and the Opposition. In trying to limit unprecedented inflation by controlling wages, Heath risked his authority in a confrontation with the left-wing-led National Union of Mineworkers, which struck for higher wages in what was then the state-owned coal industry. When Heath called the "Who Governs?" election in February 1974, no party won a majority of seats in the Commons. Labour formed a minority government, with Harold Wilson again as prime minister. A second election in October 1974 gave Labour a bare majority. Inflation, rising unemployment, and a contraction in the economy undermined Labour's program. James Callaghan succeeded Wilson as prime minister in 1976. Keynesian policies were abandoned in 1977 after Labour relied on a loan from the International Monetary Fund to stabilize the value of the pound in international markets.

When Margaret Thatcher won the 1979 election as leader of the Conservative Party, she became the first woman prime minister of a major European country (see Box 5.1). Thatcher's radical break with the economic policies of her predecessors introduced a third stage: She promoted free market policies and a reduction in the size of government. She regarded the economic failures of previous governments as arising from too much compromise. "The Old Testament prophets did not say 'Brothers, I want a consensus.' They said: 'This is my faith. This is what I passionately believe. If you believe it too, then come with me.'"[6]

Divisions among opponents enabled Thatcher to lead her party to three successive election victories, although never winning more than 43 percent of the total vote. Militant left-wing activists seized control of the Labour Party, and in 1981 four former Labour Cabinet ministers formed a centrist Social Democratic Party (SDP) in an alliance with the Liberal Party. The Labour Party's 1983 election manifesto was described as the longest suicide note in history. After Thatcher's third successive election victory in 1987, the SDP leadership merged with the Liberals to form the Liberal Democratic Party.

While proclaiming the virtues of the market and attacking big government, Thatcher did not court electoral defeat by imposing radical spending cuts on popular social programs. In consequence, public spending continued to grow in the Thatcher era. It was 40 percent of the gross domestic product in her last full year in office. While the Conservative majority in Parliament endorsed Thatcher's policies, it did not win the hearts and minds of the electorate. On the tenth anniversary of Thatcher's period as prime minister, an opinion poll asked whether people approved of "the Thatcher revolution." Less than one-third said they did.[7]

Within the Conservative Party, Thatcher's increasingly autocratic treatment of Cabinet colleagues created resentment, and during her third term of office, she became very unpopular in opinion polls. In autumn 1990 disgruntled Conservative MPs forced a ballot for the party leadership that caused her to resign. Conservative MPs elected a relatively unknown John Major as party leader. In 1992 Major won an unprecedented fourth consecutive term for the Conservative government. However, a few months afterward his economic policy, based on a strong British pound, crashed under pressure from foreign speculators. A division opened up within the Conservative Party between hard-line Thatcherite opponents of Europe and those who supported Major's acceptance of EU initiatives. The Major government held onto office and maintained such Thatcherite policies as the **privatization** of the coal mines and railways.

A fourth stage opened after Tony Blair became Labour leader in 1994. Blair was elected leader because he did *not* talk or look like an ordinary Labour Party member. Instead of being from a poor background, he was educated at boarding school and studied law at Oxford. Instead of having grown up in the Labour movement, his parents were Conservatives. He joined the Labour Party due to the encouragement of a girlfriend, Cherie Booth, now his wife and a successful lawyer.

Blair first won office by proclaiming that he represented New Labour, a vague Third Way philosophy modeled on that of President Bill Clinton. It was invoked to show that he rejected socialist values and principles. In setting out Labour's manifesto, Blair proclaimed, "We are proud now to be the party of modern, dynamic business, proud now to be the party of law and order, proud now to be the party of the family, and proud now to be the party pledged not to increase income tax."[8] He pledged a pragmatic government that would do "what works" and appealed to the voters to "trust me" (see Box 5.2).

The first term of the Blair government (1997–2001) was devoted to demonstrating that Labour was fit for government. Blair and his chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown, endorsed Thatcher's efforts to limit public spending and payments to private-sector businesses to manage the delivery of major health, education, and other services. Five months after reelection in 2001, Blair responded to the September 11 attack by closely aligning himself with U.S. policies.

The Meaning of Thatcherism

BOX 5.1

Among modern British prime ministers, Margaret Thatcher has been unique in giving her name to a political ideology, **Thatcherism**.* Thatcher's central conviction was that the market offered a cure for the country's economic difficulties. She rejected the mixed-economy welfare state philosophy of her Conservative as well as her Labour predecessors. As Milton Friedman, the Nobel Prize–winning monetary economist, noted: "Mrs. Thatcher represents a different tradition. She represents a tradition of the nineteenth-century Liberal, of Manchester Liberalism, of free market free trade."†

In its economic policy, the Thatcher government experienced both successes and frustrations. The rate of economic growth increased and inflation dropped; however, unemployment rose. Industrial relations acts gave union members the right to elect their leaders and to vote on whether to hold a strike. State-owned industries and municipally owned council houses were sold to private owners. What were described as "businesslike" methods were introduced into managing everything from hospitals to museums.

As long as she was in control, Thatcher believed in strong government. In foreign policy she strongly promoted what she saw as Britain's national interest in dealings with the European Union and in alliance with President Ronald Reagan. The 1982 Argentine invasion of the Falkland Islands, a remote British colony in the South Atlantic, led to a brief and victorious war. Thatcher was also quick to assert her personal authority against colleagues in the Cabinet and against civil servants. The autonomy of local government was curbed, and a property tax on houses was replaced by a poll tax on each adult.

Following her departure from office, British Conservatives divided between those who sought to push market-oriented and anti–European Union measures further, the so-called Thatcherites, and those who believed the limits of cutbacks on the size of government had been reached.

*Cf. Margaret Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993); Dennis Kavanagh, *The Reordering of British Politics* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1997).

†"Thatcher Praised by Her Guru," *The Guardian* (London), March 12, 1983.

Britain sent troops to Afghanistan and Iraq in 2003, but this policy lacked the full support of his party. It was endorsed in Parliament only with the support of Conservative MPs. In 2005 Labour again won a majority of seats in the House of Commons, making Blair Britain's second-longest-serving prime minister in more than a century.

Since a prime minister does not have a fixed term of office, when Blair fell in the opinion polls, he came under pressure to fulfill his promise to retire rather than fight a fourth election. He did so in June 2007. The Labour Party unanimously elected Gordon Brown as its leader on the basis of his record as the government's chief economic minister, the chancellor of the Exchequer. During Brown's period as chancellor, the economy grew steadily, inflation was low, and unemployment fell, and Brown claimed that he had put an end to the recurring cycle of economic boom and bust. However, the turmoil in the world economy in 2008 showed this was not the case. After blaming the country's financial problems on world rather than domestic economic mistakes, Brown has initiated measures involving tens of billions of pounds in efforts to prevent the recession in the economy turning into a major depression.

THE STRUCTURE OF GOVERNMENT

We must understand what government is as a precondition of evaluating what it does. Descriptions of a government often start with its constitution. However, Britain has never had a written constitution. In the words of constitutional lawyer J. A. G. Griffith, "The Constitution is what happens."[9]

The **unwritten constitution** is a jumble of acts of Parliament, court rulings, customs, and conventions that constitute the rules of the political game. The vagueness of the constitution makes it flexible, a point that political leaders such as Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair have exploited to increase their own power. Comparing the written U.S. Constitution and the unwritten English constitution emphasizes how few are the constraints of an unwritten constitution (see Table 5.2). Whereas amendments to the U.S. Constitution must receive the endorsement of well over half the states and members of Congress, the unwritten constitution can be changed by a majority vote in Parliament or by the government of the day acting in an unprecedented manner.

The U.S. Constitution gives the Supreme Court the final power to decide what the government may or may not do. By contrast, in Britain the final authority is Parliament, where the government of the day commands a majority of votes. Courts do not have the power to declare an Act of Parliament unconstitutional; judges simply ask whether the executive acts within its authorized powers. Many statutes delegate broad discretion to a Cabinet minister or public authority. Even if the courts rule that the government has improperly exercised its authority, the effect of such a judgment can be annulled by a subsequent Act of Parliament retroactively authorizing the action.

The Bill of Rights in the U.S. Constitution allows anyone to turn to the courts for the protection of their personal rights. Instead of giving written guarantees to citizens, the rights of British people are meant to be secured by trustworthy governors. However, individuals who believed their personal rights infringed had no redress through the courts until the Blair government incorporated the European Convention of Human Rights into the country's laws.

In Britain the **Crown** is the abstraction that is used in place of the continental European idea of the state. It combines the dignified parts of the constitution, which sanctify authority by tradition and myth, with the efficient parts, which carry out the work of government. The Queen is only a ceremonial head of state. Some Britons argue that a monarchy is out of date, and the Labour government has sought to promote British values as an alternative focus of loyalty. The public reaction to the accidental death of Princess Diana was a media event, but not a political event like the assassination of President John Kennedy. Queen Elizabeth II does not influence the actions of what is described as Her Majesty's Government. While the Queen gives formal assent to laws passed by Parliament, she may not publicly state any opinion about legislation. The Queen is expected to respect the will of Parliament, as communicated to her by the leader of the majority party in Parliament, the prime minister.

What the Prime Minister Says and Does

Leading a government with a complex structure (see Figure 5.1) is a political rather than a managerial task. Within the Cabinet the **prime minister** occupies a unique position, sometimes referred to as *primus inter pares* (first among equals). But as Winston Churchill once wrote, "There can be no comparison between the positions of number one, and numbers two, three or four."[10] The preeminence of the prime minister is ambiguous. A politician at the apex of government is remote from what is happening on the ground. The more responsibilities attributed to the prime minister, the less time there is to devote to any one task. Like a president a prime minister is the prisoner of the law of first things first. Regardless of personality, a prime minister wears multiple hats as party leader, head of government, and spokesperson for the nation. Simultaneously, he or she is concerned with the following:

1. ***Winning elections.*** A prime minister may be self-interested, but he or she is not self-employed. To become prime minister, a politician must first be elected leader of his or her party. The only election that a prime minister must win is that of party leader. Seven prime ministers since 1945—Winston Churchill, Anthony Eden, Harold

BOX 5.2

The Accomplishments and Frustrations of Tony Blair

Tony Blair became the leader of the Labour Party with the goal of winning elections. To make the party electable, he abandoned traditional commitments to trade unions and to socialist policies. Blair's personality and actions appealed to middle-class voters, whose support Labour needed to win elections. Blair's efforts to create what he called a **New Labour Party** were rewarded with three straight Labour election victories in 1997, 2001, and 2005.

After becoming prime minister, Blair gave priority to running a perpetual election campaign through the media and used his rare appearances in the House of Commons to play to the television cameras there. The number of political appointees at 10 Downing Street increased substantially. Although they usually had no prior experience working in government, they were given unprecedented power to give orders to civil servants.

Blair promoted reforms in state-financed health and education services through competition intended to give citizens a measure of "consumer" choice in health and education. However, the methods chosen to do so angered many doctors, teachers, and public employees, who saw it as making their professional judgments subject to targets laid down by management consultants, continuing Thatcher's emphasis on making government businesslike, rather than a public service. Given that it takes years to deliver changes in social policies, many effects of Blair's measures may become evident only years after he has left office.

Major constitutional reforms included the devolution of executive responsibilities to elected assemblies in Scotland and Wales and to a power-sharing government in Northern Ireland. London was given a popularly elected mayor. Human rights laws were adopted. However, in the wake of terrorist attacks, the government drew protests from civil liberties groups because of the way it pursued terrorist suspects. Blair welcomed such criticism as proof of his toughness.

In international affairs Blair gave priority to close working relationships with Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush. Following the September 11 attack on the United States, he committed British troops to Afghanistan and Iraq. Although Blair was successful in getting close to the White House, he failed in his declared goal of placing Britain at the heart of Europe—for example, by adopting the euro as Britain's currency. In his last full year in office, Blair was out of the country for 58 days on trips to more than two dozen different national capitals on six different continents.

Shortly after winning his first election victory, 75 percent approved of Blair as prime minister. Within a year of his second election victory, Blair's rating fell below 50 percent and never recovered. Blair's third election victory in 2005 was won with only 35.2 percent of the popular vote, a fall of 8.0 percent from his first victory. By June 2006, he reached a low: Only 23 percent approved of his performance as prime minister. A year later he resigned. Since then Blair has extended his public role as an envoy for peace between Israel and Palestine and has privately enriched himself through a part-time job advising Wall Street banker J.P. Morgan.

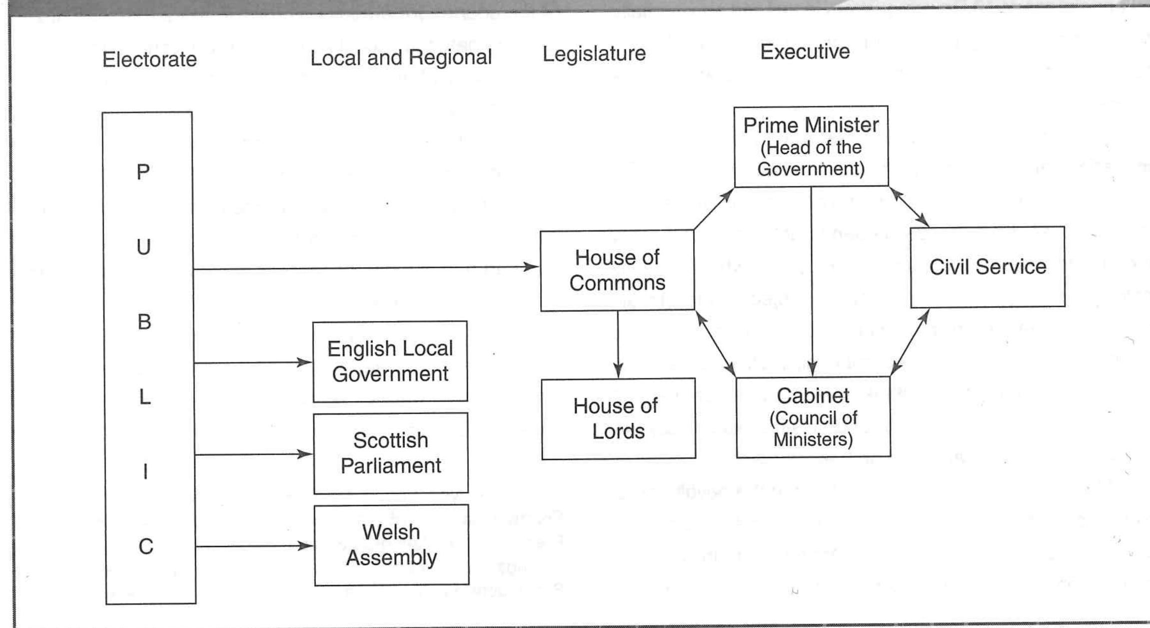
Tony Blair, *New Britain: My Vision of a Young Country* (London: Fourth Estate, 1996); Anthony Seldon, *Blair* (New York: Free Press, 2004); Anthony Seldon, Peter Snowdon, and Daniel Collings, *Blair Unbound* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2007); Simon Jenkins, *Thatcher and Sons* (London: Allen Lane, 2006).

Constitutional Comparison
Comparing an Unwritten and a Written Constitution

TABLE 5.2

	Britain (unwritten)	United States (written)
Origin	Medieval customs	1787 Constitutional Convention
Form	Unwritten, indefinite	Written, precise
Final constitutional authority	Majority in Parliament	Supreme Court
Bill of individual rights	No	Yes
Amendment	Ordinary vote in Parliament; unprecedented action by government	More than majority vote in Congress, states
Policy relevance	Low	High

Structure of the British Government **FIGURE 5.1**



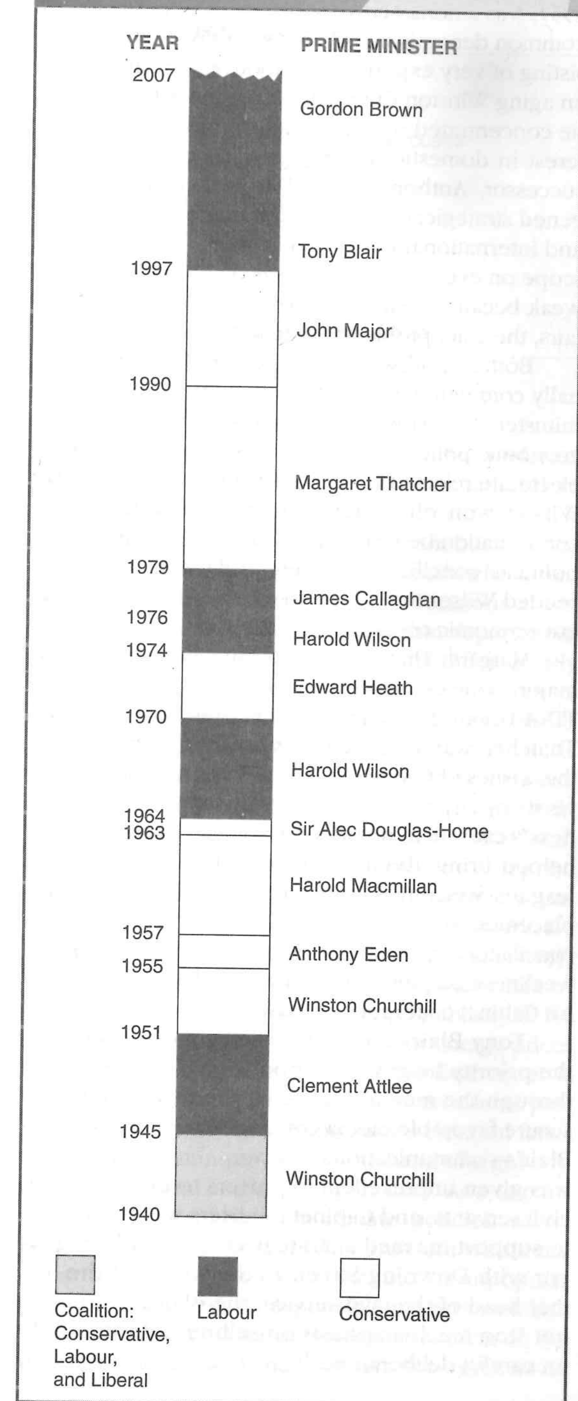
Macmillan, Alec Douglas-Home, James Callaghan, John Major, and Gordon Brown—initially entered Downing Street during the middle of a Parliament, rather than after a national election. In the 17 elections since 1945, the prime minister of the day has ten times led the governing party to victory and seven times to defeat.

2. ***Campaigning through the media.*** A prime minister does not need to attract publicity; it is thrust on him or her by the curiosity of television and newspaper reporters. During an election campaign, the prime minister gets four times as much coverage as any other member of his Cabinet team. Media eminence is a double-edged sword, for bad news puts the prime minister in an unfavorable light. The personality of a prime minister remains relatively constant, but during a term of office, his or her popularity can fluctuate by more than 45 percentage points in public opinion polls.[11]

3. ***Dispensing patronage.*** To remain prime minister, a politician must keep the confidence of a party. Potential critics can be silenced by appointing a quarter of MPs to posts as government ministers, who sit on front bench seats in the House of Commons. MPs not appointed to a post are backbenchers; many ingratiate themselves with the party leader in hopes of becoming a government minister. In dispensing patronage a prime minister can use any of four different criteria: (a) personal loyalty (rewarding friends), (b) cooption (silencing critics by giving them an office so that they are committed to support the government), (c) representativeness (for example, appointing a woman or someone from Scotland or Wales), and (d) competence in managing a large department.
4. ***Performing well in Parliament.*** The prime minister appears in the House of Commons weekly for half an hour of questions from MPs, engaging in rapid-fire repartee with a highly partisan audience. Unprotected by a speechwriter's script, the prime minister must show that he or she is a good advocate of government policy or suffer a reduction in confidence. By being in the Commons and participating in votes there, the prime minister is able to judge the mood of the governing party. Whereas his predecessors would participate in at least a third of the votes in the Commons, Tony Blair turned his back on Parliament, in some years participating in as little as 6 percent of votes there.
5. ***Making and balancing policies.*** The overriding concern of a prime minister is foreign affairs because as head of the British government he or she deals with heads of other governments around the world. When there are conflicts between international and domestic policy priorities, the prime minister is the one person who can strike a balance between pressures from the world "out there" and pressures from the domestic electorate. The number of "intermestic" policies (that is, problems combining both an international and a domestic element) is increasing. The prime minister also makes policy by striking a balance between ministers who want to spend more money to increase their popularity and a Treasury minister who wants to cut taxes in order to boost his or her popularity.

While the formal powers of the office remain constant, individual prime ministers (see Figure 5.2)

Prime Ministers and Governments Since 1940 **FIGURE 5.2**



have differed in their electoral success, in how they view their job, and in their impact on government. Clement Attlee, Labour prime minister from 1945 to 1951, was a nonassertive spokesperson for the lowest common denominator of views within a Cabinet consisting of very experienced Labour politicians. When an aging Winston Churchill succeeded Attlee in 1951, he concentrated on foreign affairs and took little interest in domestic policy; the same was true of his successor, Anthony Eden. Harold Macmillan intervened strategically on a limited number of domestic and international issues, while giving ministers great scope on everyday matters. Alec Douglas-Home was weak because he lacked knowledge of economic affairs, the chief problem during his administration.

Both Harold Wilson and Edward Heath were initially committed to an activist definition of the prime minister's job. However, Wilson's major initiatives in economic policy were unsuccessful, and in 1974 the electorate rejected Heath's direction of the economy. Wilson won office again by promising to replace confrontation between management and unions with political conciliation. James Callaghan, who succeeded Wilson in 1976, also emphasized consensus, but economic crises continued.

Margaret Thatcher had strong views about many major policies; associates gave her the nickname TINA because of her motto: There Is No Alternative. Thatcher was prepared to push her views against the wishes of Cabinet colleagues and civil service advisors by any means necessary. In the end her "bossiness" caused a revolt of Cabinet colleagues that helped bring about her downfall. Her former colleagues welcomed John Major as a consensus replacement of a domineering Thatcher. However, his conciliatory manner was often interpreted as a sign of weakness. Sniping from ministers led Major to refer to his Cabinet colleagues as "bastards."

Tony Blair carried into the prime ministership the priority he gave in Opposition to campaigning through the media. Managing the flow of news to secure favorable media coverage was a top priority. Blair's communications director, Alastair Campbell, was given unprecedented powers to give orders to civil servants, and Cabinet ministers were supposed to support his media strategy on pain of losing favor with Downing Street. In the words of the former head of the civil service, the Blair government put "too much emphasis on selling" and "too little on careful deliberation."[12]

Gordon Brown came to the prime ministership with a reputation for success in managing the economy, which had enjoyed an unprecedented period of growth while he was in charge of the Treasury. He also used its power of the purse to influence Cabinet colleagues. Labour MPs unhappy with Tony Blair's endorsement of many policies of Margaret Thatcher hoped that Brown's left-wing views in youth would be reflected in policies promoting more egalitarian and socialist goals. After a brief honeymoon with public opinion, Brown fell out of favor. By the end of the summer of 2008, his approval ratings in opinion polls were at a historic low, the Labour Party had lost two by-elections, and Labour MPs afraid of defeat at the next general election were publicly discussing the desirability of another change of leadership, but the rules of the Labour Party make it difficult for dissatisfied members to mount an effective challenge to an incumbent.

Brown's quick response to the autumn 2008 financial crisis helped him regain some support, but continuing economic difficulties have continued to threaten his position.

Blair's innovations have led to charges that Britain now has a presidential system of government in which power is concentrated in the hands of one person. However, by comparison with a U.S. president, a British prime minister has less formal authority and less security of office (see Table 5.3). The president is directly elected for a fixed four-year term. A prime minister is chosen by his or her party for an indefinite term and is thus vulnerable to losing office if its confidence wanes. The president is the undoubted leader of the federal executive and can dismiss Cabinet appointees with little fear of the consequences; by contrast, senior colleagues of a prime minister are potential rivals for leadership and may be kept in the Cabinet to prevent them from challenging him or her.

However, with the support of the Cabinet and the majority of the governing party's MPs, a prime minister can be far more confident than a president that major legislative proposals will be enacted into law. Although the president is the chief of the executive branch of the federal government, the White House is without authority over Congress, state and local government, and the judiciary. By contrast, the prime minister is at the apex of a unitary government, with powers that are not limited by the courts or by a written constitution.[13]

TABLE 5.3

Prime Minister and President

Comparing the powers of and processes for choosing a prime minister and a president

	Britain (prime minister)	USA (president)
Media visibility	High	High
Route to top	Parliament	Governor, senator
Chosen by	Party vote	State primaries and caucuses
Elected by	Parliament	National election
Term of office	Flexible, insecure	Four years, secure
Constitution	Unitary	Federal
Domestic influence	High	So-so
International role	Semi-independent	Superpower
Checks	Informal	Congress, Supreme Court

Source: Adapted from Richard Rose, *The Prime Minister in a Shrinking World* (Boston: Polity Press, 2001), p. 242.

THE CABINET AND CABINET MINISTERS

The **Cabinet** consists of ministers appointed by the prime minister to head Whitehall departments. They must be members of either the House of Commons or the House of Lords. As ministers are leading figures in the majority party in Parliament, they contribute to what Walter Bagehot described as "the close union, the nearly complete fusion of the executive and legislative powers."[14]

Historically, the Cabinet was the forum in which the prime minister brought together leading members of the governing party, many with competing departmental interests and personal ambitions, to ensure agreement about major government policies. This was possible because the convention of Cabinet responsibility required that all Cabinet ministers give public support to, or at least refrain from public criticism of, what the government was doing, even if they opposed a policy in private. A minister unwilling to share responsibility was expected to resign from office.

The Cabinet is no longer a place for collective deliberation about policies. A half century ago there were usually two Cabinet meetings a week, and many took several hours to arrive at a political consensus. By the time of John Major, meetings were shorter and occurred less than once a week. Tony Blair further reduced the frequency of meetings and cut their average length to under an hour; he used them as a forum in which to exhort ministers to support Downing Street's media priorities. Gordon Brown has preferred to take charge of a wide range of issues, rather than trusting Cabinet colleagues.

Cabinet ministers remain important because the department that each heads is responsible for a major area of public policy and most decisions about what government does are taken within departments (see Box 5.3). Whitehall departments differ greatly from each other. For example, the Department of Business, Enterprise, and Regulatory Reform (DBER) has a larger staff than the Department of the Treasury. However, because of the importance of its responsibility for taxation and public expenditure, the Treasury has more senior civil servants. The DBER staff have a dispersed variety of concerns, including the competitiveness of industry, trade, employment, energy, and regulation. The Treasury staff concentrate on one big task, the management of the economy. The varied tasks of the DBER secretary make him or her much more vulnerable to adverse publicity if, for example, there is a financial scandal or energy prices rise. The job of the chancellor of the Exchequer is more important politically, insofar as economic performance affects the governing party's electoral fate.

A Cabinet minister is both the head of a government department and a party politician. As a department head, he or she can initiate policies, select among alternatives brought forward from within the department, and try to avoid making an unpopular decision. A minister is responsible for actions taken by thousands of civil servants nominally acting on the minister's behalf and must answer for agencies to

BOX 5.3

Departmental Organization and Reorganization

British government departments are multipurpose organizations created as a result of the growth of government. Some departments focus on a clearly defined major function, while others combine multiple functions. The names and functions of departments are often reorganized to reflect changes in policy, political expediency, or fashion. For example, since 1964 responsibilities for trade, industry, and technology have been placed in departments labeled Trade and Technology, then Trade and Industry, then separate departments for Trade and for Industry, and again reunited as a single Trade and Industry department. Today the policies are divided between departments for Business, Enterprise, and Regulatory Reform and for Innovation, Universities, and Skills. Each time that the title on the front door of the department was changed, most officials and programs continued as before.

In March 2009 the government of Gordon Brown was organized as follows:

1. *External affairs:* foreign and commonwealth affairs; defense; international development.
2. *Economic affairs:* treasury; business, enterprise, and regulatory reform; transport; innovation, universities, and skills; energy and climate change.
3. *Legal and constitutional issues:* justice; home office; law officer's department; equalities office.
4. *Social services:* health; children, schools, and families; work and pensions; culture, media, and sport.
5. *Territorial:* environment, food, and rural affairs; communities and local government; Northern Ireland office; Scotland office; Wales office.
6. *Managing government business:* Cabinet office; leader of the House of Commons; chief whip in the House of Commons; leader of the House of Lords; chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster; Privy Council office.

Source: www.parliament.uk

which Whitehall is increasingly contracting out responsibility for delivering public services. In addition, a minister is a department's ambassador to the world outside, including Downing Street, Parliament, the mass media, and interest or pressure groups. Not least, Cabinet ministers are individuals with ambitions to rise in politics. The typical minister is not an expert in a subject, but an expert in politics, and is willing to deal with any department that offers opportunities to further his or her political career.

The political reputation of Cabinet ministers depends on their success in promoting the interests of their department in Parliament, in the media, and in battles within Whitehall. Cabinet ministers are willing to go along silently with their colleagues' proposals in exchange for endorsement of their own measures. However, ministers often have to compete for scarce resources, making conflict inevitable between departments. Regardless of party, the ministers responsible for defense and education will press for increased spending, while the Treasury minister will oppose such moves. Cabinet ministers sometimes resolve their differences in Cabinet committees that include all ministers whose departments are most affected by an issue.

Tony Blair sought to exercise control over ministers through his personal staff. However, Blair did not have time during the week to go into the details of policy. Because he had never been a departmental minister, his public remarks sometimes showed naiveté about how the government actually worked—and the same was even more true of his staff. After years in office, Blair attacked the consequences of government by political advisors and spin doctors. In a leaked memo to Cabinet ministers, he criticized them for "too often" rushing out policies "in ignorance of the risks," thus making the government look bad.[15]

The Civil Service

Although government could continue for months without new legislation, it would collapse overnight if hundreds of thousands of civil servants stopped administering laws and delivering public services that the government of the day had inherited from its predecessors. The largest number of civil servants are clerical staff with little discretion; they carry out the routine activities of a large bureaucracy. Only if these duties are executed satisfactorily can ministers have the time and opportunity to make new policies.

The most important group of civil servants is the smallest: the few hundred higher civil servants who advise ministers and oversee work of their departments. Top British civil servants deny they are politicians because of the partisan connotations of the term. However, their work is political because they are involved in formulating and advising on controversial policies. Thus, a publication aimed at recruiting bright graduates for the higher civil service declares: "You will be involved from the outset in matters of major policy or resource allocation and, under the guidance of experienced administrators, encouraged to put forward your own constructive ideas and to take responsible decisions."[16]

Top civil servants are not apolitical; they are bipartisan, being ready to work for whichever party wins an election. Their style is not that of the professional American athlete for whom winning is all-important. English civil servants have grown up playing cricket; its motto is that winning is less important than how one plays the game. However, ministers want to win.

The relationship between ministers and higher civil servants is critical. A busy politician does not have time to go into details; he or she wants a brief that can catch a headline or squash criticism. Ministers expect higher civil servants to be responsive to their political views and to give advice consistent with their outlook and that of the governing party and Downing Street. Civil servants like working for a political heavyweight who can carry the department's cause to victory in interdepartmental battles. Civil servants prefer to work for a minister who has clear views on policy, but they dislike it when a minister grabs a headline by expressing views that will get the department into trouble later because they are impractical.

Both ministers and civil servants are concerned with political management in complementary ways. High-level civil servants are expected to be able to think like politicians, anticipating what their minister would want and objections that would be raised by Parliament, interest or pressure groups, and the media. Ministers are expected to be able to recognize the obstacles to achieving desirable goals that civil servants identify for them, However, this has caused activist prime ministers such as Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair to regard much civil service advice as unhelpful to them in achieving their ambitions.

Ministers now have at hand political advisors to advise them on measures they can announce that will reflect credit on them in the media and in the governing party. This has caused civil servants to complain that ministers too often ignore advice that calls attention to the difficulties in achieving their intentions. In the words of a senior civil servant, "Just because ministers say to do something does not mean that we can ignore reality."[17] When ministerial decisions attract criticism, ministers may blame civil servants, rather than taking responsibility themselves. The head of the trade union of higher civil servants has argued, "There is a danger of descending into a search for scapegoats when problems emerge."[18]

The Thatcher government introduced a new phenomenon in Whitehall: a prime minister who believed civil servants were inferior to business people because they did not have to "earn" their living—that is, to make a profit. *Management* was made the buzzword in Whitehall, and departments were supposed to be run in a businesslike fashion, achieving value for money so that the government could profit politically by cutting taxes. Parts of government departments were "hived off" to form separate public agencies, with their own accounts and performance targets. The Blair government continued Thatcher's attempts to make the civil service more businesslike, in hopes of providing public services more cheaply.

During 11 years as head of the Treasury, Gordon Brown gathered around him a small team of political appointees and civil servants to further his efforts to manage the economy. As prime minister he has faced a different challenge: to concentrate attention on a few big decisions and to delegate tasks that he lacks the time to deal with. Cabinet ministers criticize Brown for trying to take charge of too many policies and then delaying decisions when all alternatives appear politically unpopular.

The Role of Parliament

The principal division in Parliament is between the party with a majority of the seats in the House of Commons and the Opposition parties. The government expects to get its way because its members are the leading politicians in the majority party. MPs in the majority party almost invariably vote as the party leadership instructs because only by voting as a bloc can their party maintain control of government. If a bill or

a motion is identified as a vote of confidence in the government, the government will fall if it is defeated.

The government's state of mind is summed up in the words of a Labour Cabinet minister who declared, "It's carrying democracy too far if you don't know the result of the vote before the meeting."[19] In the great majority of House of Commons votes, MPs vote along party lines. If a handful of MPs votes against the party whip or abstains, this is headlined as a rebellion. The Opposition cannot expect to alter major government decisions because it lacks a majority of votes in the Commons. It accepts the frustrations going with its minority status for the life of a Parliament because it hopes to win a majority at the next election.

Whitehall departments draft bills presented to Parliament, and few amendments to legislation are carried without government approval. Laws are described as acts of Parliament, but it would be more accurate if they were stamped "Made in Whitehall." In addition, the government, rather than Parliament, sets the budget for government programs. The weakness of Parliament is in marked contrast to the U.S. Congress, where each house controls its own proceedings independent of the White House. A U.S. president may ask Congress to enact a bill, but cannot compel a favorable vote.

The chief functions of Parliament are political, rather than legislative. First of all, it weighs political reputations. MPs continually assess their colleagues as ministers or potential ministers and as allies or potential allies in internal party disputes about policy and personalities and promotion. A minister may win a formal vote of confidence, but lose status if his or her arguments are demolished in debate. They continually assess their leader as a person who will lead them to victory or defeat at the next election.

Second, backbench MPs can demand that the government do something about an issue and force a minister to explain and defend what he or she is responsible for. The party whip is expected to listen to the views of dissatisfied backbench MPs and to convey their concerns to ministers. In the corridors, dining rooms, and committees of the Commons, backbenchers can tell ministers what they think is wrong with government policy. If the government is unpopular and MPs feel threatened with losing their seats at the next election, they will be aggressive in demanding that something be done.

Publicizing issues is a third function of Parliament. MPs can use their position to call the media's attention to issues and to call the public's attention to themselves. Television cameras are now in Parliament, and a quick-witted MP can provide the media with sound bites.

Fourth, MPs can examine how Whitehall departments administer public policies. An MP may write to a minister about a department responsibility affecting a constituent or pressure group. MPs can request the parliamentary commissioner for administration (also known as the ombudsman, after the Scandinavian original) to investigate complaints about maladministration. Parliamentary committees scrutinize administration and policy, interviewing civil servants and ministers. However, as a committee moves from discussing details to discussing issues of government policy, it raises a question of confidence in the government, and this can divide a committee along party lines, with MPs in the governing party in the majority.

MPs are expected to promote the interests of their constituency and be helpful to individual constituents having trouble in dealing with a government department. However, the obligation to follow the party line when it comes to a vote limits the influence they can exert. Most MPs hold their seat by a comfortable majority conferred by partisan electors who identify with their party. When their party is in trouble nationally, constituency work and personal popularity cannot save MPs in seats held by a narrow margin from defeat.

A newly elected MP contemplating his or her role as one among 646 members of the House of Commons is faced with many choices. An MP may decide to be a party loyalist, voting as the leadership decides without participating in deliberations about policy. The MP who wishes more attention can make a mark by exhibiting brilliance in debates, by acting as an acknowledged representative of a pressure group, or by acting in a nonpartisan way—for example, helping look after unglamorous parliamentary services. An MP is expected to speak for constituency interests, but constituents accept that their MP will not vote against party policy if it is in conflict with local interests. The only role that an MP rarely undertakes is that of lawmaker—this job is undertaken in Whitehall departments.

Backbench MPs perennially demand changes to make their jobs more interesting and to give them more influence. However, the power to make major changes rests with the government, rather than the House of Commons. Whatever criticisms MPs made of Parliament while in Opposition, once in government they have an interest in existing arrangements that greatly limit the power of Parliament to influence or stop what ministers do.

The second chamber of the British Parliament, the House of Lords, is unique because it was initially composed of hereditary peers, now supplemented by lords appointed for life. However, in 1999 the Labour government abolished the right of all but 92 hereditary peers to sit in the House of Lords. Today a large majority of its members are life peers who have been given a title later in life for achievement in one or another public sphere, government ministers who have been appointed without having a seat in the House of Commons, and prominent donors of money to a party. In Tony Blair's third term of office, the police investigated allegations that he had raised $50 million from rich backers hoping to be made into a lord and thereby being given a seat in the upper chamber of Parliament.

No party has a majority of seats in the House of Lords, and more than one-fifth of its members are cross-benchers who do not identify with any party. The government often introduces relatively noncontroversial legislation in the Lords. and it uses the Lords as a revising chamber to amend bills. Members of the Lords can raise party political issues or issues that cut across party lines, such as problems of the fishing industry or pornography. The Lords cannot veto legislation, but it can and does amend or delay the passage of some government bills.

Although all parties accept the need for some kind of second chamber to revise legislation, there is no agreement about what its composition or its powers should be. Current methods of appointment have raised concerns about the abuse of appointment powers. In 2007 a majority of MPs voted in favor of a completely elected House of Lords. However, the government has made no commitment to implement so large a reform. The last thing the government of the day wants is a reform that gives the upper chamber enough electoral legitimacy to challenge government legislation.

Government as a Network

Policy making involves a network of prime minister, ministers, leading civil servants, and political advisors, all of whom share in what has been described as the "village life" of Whitehall. An English village is far smaller and more intimate than the city full of politicians inside the Washington, D.C., beltway.[20]

The growth of government has increased specialization so that policy makers see less and less of each other. For a given issue, a relatively small number of people are involved in the **core executive** group that makes a decision. However, members of the network are a floating population of people in Westminster; it is not the same for decisions about transport and agriculture or about health and defense.

The prime minister is the single most important person in government. Since there is no written constitution, a determined prime minister can challenge the status quo and turn government to fresh ends. But to say that the prime minister makes the most important decisions and leaves the less important ones to department ministers begs this question: What is an important decision? Decisions in which the prime minister is not involved are more numerous, require more money, and affect more lives than do most decisions taken at Downing Street. Scarcity of time is a major limitation on the influence of the prime minister. In the words of one Downing Street official, "It's like skating over an enormous globe of thin ice. You have to keep moving fast all the time."[21]

Within each department the permanent secretary, its highest-ranking civil servant, usually has much more knowledge of a department's problems than does a transitory Cabinet minister. Political advisors brought into a department to put the best spin on what their minister does know less about the department's work than its career civil servants. However, they have the political advantage of knowing the minister better.

POLITICAL CULTURE AND LEGITIMACY

Political culture refers to values and beliefs about how the country ought to be governed. For example, there is a consensus that Britain ought to have a government accountable to a popularly elected Parliament. This view is held not only by the major parties, but also by parties that demand independence, such as the Scottish National Party.

The values of the political culture impose limitations on what government can do and what it must do. Regardless of party preference, the great majority of British people today believe that government ought to provide education, health services, and social security. Cultural norms about freedom of speech prevent censorship of criticism, and liberal laws on sexual relations and abortion allow for great freedom of choice in sexual matters.

Today many limits on the scope of public policy are practical, rather than normative. Public expenditure

on popular policies, such as the health service, are limited by the extent to which the economy grows and the reluctance of Labour or Conservative governments to raise more money by increasing taxes. Trying to introduce new legislation or reverse a major policy is difficult because of the need to take into account well-entrenched programs and interests.

There are three competing normative theories of how British government ought to operate. The **trusteeship theory of government** assumes that leaders ought to take the initiative in deciding what is collectively in the public interest. It is summed up in the epigram "The government's job is to govern." The trusteeship doctrine is always popular with the party in office because it justifies doing whatever the government wishes. The Opposition party rejects it because it is not in office.

The **collectivist theory** sees government as balancing the competing demands of collective groups in society. From this perspective, parties and pressure groups advocating group or class interests are more authoritative than individual voters.[22] Traditional Conservatives emphasized harmony between different classes in society, each with its own responsibilities and rewards. For socialists, group politics has been about class conflict. With changes in British society, party leaders have distanced themselves from close identification with representing collective interests, as they realize that votes are cast by individuals, rather than by business firms or trade unions.

The **individualist theory** postulates that political parties should represent people, rather than organized group interests. In the 1980s Margaret Thatcher was an outspoken advocate of economic individualism, regarding each person as responsible for his or her welfare. In an interview in 1987 she went so far as to declare, "There is no such thing as society." Liberal Democrats put emphasis on individual freedom from government enforcement of social norms, too. However, individuals are rarely offered a referendum allowing them to vote directly on what government does.

The Legitimacy of Government

The legitimacy of government is shown by the British people simultaneously valuing their form of government with free elections to a representative Parliament, while making many specific criticisms about how it works.

Dissatisfaction with government encourages protest, but it is normally kept within lawful bounds. The World Values Survey finds that nearly every Briton says he or she might sign a petition and half might participate in a lawful demonstration. However, only one-sixth might participate in an illegal occupation of a building or factory. The readiness of groups in Northern Ireland to resort to armed action for political ends makes it the most "un-British" part of the United Kingdom.

The legitimacy accorded to British government is not the result of economic calculations about whether parliamentary democracy "pays" best. During the depression of the 1930s, Communist and Fascist parties received only derisory votes in Britain, while their support was great in Germany and Italy. Likewise, inflation and unemployment in the 1970s and 1980s did not stimulate extremist politics.

The symbols of a common past, such as the monarchy, are sometimes cited as major determinants of legitimacy. But surveys of public opinion show that the Queen has little political significance; her popularity derives from the fact that she is nonpolitical. The popularity of a monarch is a consequence, not a cause, of political legitimacy. In Northern Ireland, where the minority denies the legitimacy of British government, the Queen is a symbol of divisions between British Unionists and Irish Republicans, who reject the Crown. Habit and tradition appear to be the chief explanations for the persisting legitimacy of British government. A survey asking people why they support the government found that the most popular reason was "It's the best form of government we know."

Authority is not perfect or trouble free. Winston Churchill made this point when he told the House of Commons: "No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all wise. Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of government, except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time."[23] In the words of English writer E. M. Forster, people give "two cheers for democracy."

Courts and Abuses of Power

The Constitutional Reform Act of 2005 authorized the creation of a Supreme Court as the highest judicial authority in the United Kingdom, with effect from autumn 2009. It ends the centuries-old practice of having a committee of the House of Lords operate as the highest court. The new Supreme Court consists of a president and 11 other justices appointed by the prime minister. Its chief function is to serve as the final court of appeal on points of law in cases initially heard by courts in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland and in some cases by courts in Scotland, which maintains a separate system of courts, albeit the content of laws is usually much the same. Although the name of the new British Supreme Court is the same as that of the highest court in the United States, its powers are much more limited. It cannot declare an Act of Parliament unconstitutional, for Parliament remains the supreme authority in deciding what government can and cannot do.

In constitutional theory Parliament can hold ministers accountable for abuses of power by the government. In practice Parliament is an ineffective check on abuses of executive power because the executive consists of the leaders of the majority party in Parliament. When the government is under attack, the tendency of MPs in the governing party is to close ranks in its defense. The government can use this shield to protect itself from charges of abusing its power.

The decline of ministerial accountability to Parliament in recent decades has encouraged the courts to become more active in making rulings against the elected government of the day if ministers can be shown to have acted inconsistently with grants of power contained in acts of Parliament. Governments of both parties have responded by including clauses in acts that give ministers broad grants of discretionary power.

Britain's membership in the EU offers additional channels for judicial influence. The United Kingdom is now bound to act within laws and directives authorized by the EU. British judges can use EU standards when evaluating government actions, and plaintiffs can challenge British government actions at the European Court of Justice. The 1998 Human Rights Act of the Westminster Parliament allows citizens to ask British courts to enforce rights conferred by the European Convention on Human Rights.

Terrorist activities challenge conventional norms about individual rights and the collective interests of the state. At times British government forces dealt with the violence of the IRA and illegal armed Protestant groups by "bending" the law, implementing shoot-to-kill policies and fabricating evidence to produce convictions of terrorist suspects that the courts have subsequently overturned. As a response to jihadist terrorist bombings in London, the police are ready to use harsh measures against suspects, including shoot-to-kill responses when arresting suspects. The Labour government's proposals for reducing the rights of suspect terrorists have been condemned by Opposition parties as creating a risk of a "siege" or "authoritarian" society.[24]

Tension is emerging between the principle that the elected government of the day should do what it thinks best and the judges' view that government should act in accord with the rule of law, whether an Act of Parliament or an obligation contained in a European treaty that the British government has endorsed. When judges make decisions that Labour government ministers do not like, the ministers have publicly attacked the decisions of the court. Judges reply by stating that they should not be attacked for enforcing the law. If the government does not like it, it should pass a new Act of Parliament or secure amendments to European treaties.

Both ministers and senior civil servants sometimes mislead Parliament and the public. A Conservative minister nominally responsible for open government told a Commons select committee in 1994 that "in exceptional cases it is necessary to say something that is untrue in the House of Commons." When accused in court of telling a lie about the British government's efforts to suppress an embarrassing memoir by an ex-intelligence officer, Robert Armstrong, then the head of the civil service and secretary to the Cabinet, described the government's statements as "a misleading impression, not a lie. It was being economical with the truth."

Whitehall practices of "cutting corners" or abusing powers have been protected from parliamentary scrutiny by legislation on **official secrecy**. This legislation treats information as a scarce commodity that should not be given out freely. Information about policy deliberations in departments is often deemed not in the "public" interest to disclose, for it can make government appear uncertain or divided. The Whitehall view is "The need to know still dominates the right to know."[25] Secrecy remains strong because it serves the interests of the most important people in government, Cabinet ministers and civil servants. A Freedom of Information Act has reduced, but not ended, the executive's power to keep secret the exchange of views within the Whitehall network. For example, in response to a request for information about its operation, a civil servant at the Histories, Openness, and Records Unit of the Cabinet Office wrote: "Releasing information which would allow analysis of policy decisions affecting the operation of the Act would of itself be detrimental to the Act's operation."[26]

Occasional abuses of executive power have created tensions for civil servants who believe that their job is not only to serve the elected government of the day, but also to maintain the integrity of government.

BOX 5.4

Conflicting Loyalties Among Civil Servants

The inability of Parliament to hold the government of the day accountable for palpable misdeeds disturbs senior civil servants who know what is going on and risk becoming accessories before the fact if they assist ministers in producing statements that mislead Parliament.

In one well-publicized case, a Ministry of Defence official, Clive Ponting, leaked to the House of Commons evidence that questioned the accuracy of government statements about the conduct of the Falklands War. He was indicted and tried for violating the Official Secrets Act. The judge asked the jury to think about the issue this way: "Can it then be in the interests of the state to go against the policy of the government of the day?" The jury concluded that it could be; Ponting was acquitted.

Most senior civil servants are unwilling to become whistle-blowers, challenging actions of ministers, and thereby jeopardizing their own careers. However, inquiries after major mistakes can show that these mistakes have occurred because ministers have refused to listen to cautions from civil servants or misrepresented their views. This was notably so in Tony Blair's justification of going to war in Iraq.

Graham Wilson and Anthony Barker, "Whitehall's Disobedient Servants? Senior Officials' Potential Resistance to Ministers in British Government Departments," *British Journal of Political Science* 27, no. 2 (1997): 223–246.

This has led civil servants at times to leak official documents with the intention of preventing government from carrying out a policy that the leaker believes to be unethical or inadvisable (see Box 5.4).

British citizens have reacted to abuses of public office by becoming distrusting. Only a third of Britons report that they have a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in Parliament. The press and trade unions—institutions that theories of civil society describe as important in holding government accountable—are trusted by even fewer people. The most trusted public institutions today are those that maintain authority, led by the armed forces and the police (see Figure 5.3).

POLITICAL SOCIALIZATION

Socialization influences the political division of labor between those who participate in politics and those who do not. The family's influence comes first chronologically; political attitudes learned within the family become intertwined with primary family loyalties. However, social change means that the views that parents transmit to their children may not be relevant by the time that their offspring have become 40 to 50 years old. In contemporary Britain whether one is a Christian or a Muslim is more relevant than whether one was brought up in the Church of England or the Methodist Church.

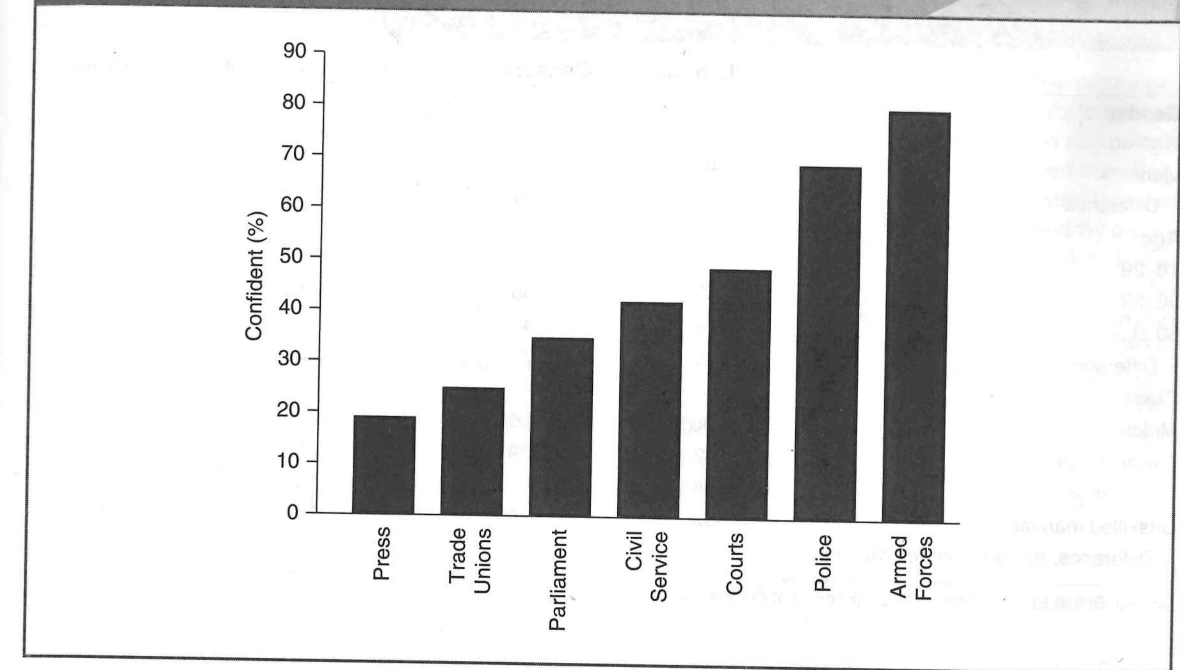
Family and Gender

A child may not know what the Labour, Conservative, or Liberal Democratic Party stands for, but if it is the party of Mom and Dad, this can be enough to create a youthful identification with a party. However, the influence of family on voting is limited because 36 percent do not know how one or both of their parents usually voted or else their parents voted for different parties. Among those who report knowing which party both parents supported, just over half vote as their parents have. In the electorate as a whole, only 35 percent say that they know how both parents voted and that they vote for the same party.[27]

Children learn different social roles according to gender; yet, as adult citizens, men and women have the same legal right to vote and participate in politics. Bipartisan interest in appealing to women is illustrated by the 1976 Sex Discrimination Act, prohibiting discrimination in employment. It was enacted by a Labour government following a report by a Conservative government. For each general election, the votes of women are divided in much the same way as those of men.

FIGURE 5.3

Trust in Political Institutions



Source: Ronald Inglehart et al., World Values Survey and European Values Survey, 1999–2001 (Ann Arbor, MI: Interuniversity Consortium for Political and Social Research). Interviews were conducted in Great Britain in October–November 1999 (N = 1,000).

Whether talking about economic, social, or international issues, politicians usually stress concerns common to both men and women. Men and women tend to have similar political attitudes. For example, more than half of women and half of men favor capital punishment, and a substantial minority in each group opposes it. Gender is less important than class, age, or education as an influence on party loyalties (see Table 5.4).

Gender differences do, however, lead to differences in political participation. Men are almost twice as likely as women to be local government councillors. Women are almost half the employees in the civil service, but are heavily concentrated in lower-level clerical jobs; women hold about 10 percent of the top appointments in the civil service. A record number of women candidates stood for the Commons in 2005, but male candidates still outnumbered women by a margin of four to one. A total of 128 women were elected to the House of Commons; it remains four-fifths male.

Education

The majority of the population was once considered fit for only a minimum of education, but that minimum has steadily risen. In today's electorate the oldest voters left school at the age of 14 and the median voter by the age of 17. Less than 6 percent of young persons attend "public" schools—that is, fee-paying schools, which are actually private schools. Whereas half a century ago Britain had few universities, today there are more than one hundred universities and almost one-half of young persons are in postsecondary institutions, many of which lack the facilities of established research universities.

The stratification of English education used to imply that the more education a person had, the more likely that person was to vote for Conservatives. This is no longer the case. People with a university degree or its equivalent now divide their votes among the Conservative, Labour, and Liberal Democratic parties.

TABLE 5.4

Social Differences in Voting

The Labour Party drew on a different electoral base than the Conservative Party in 2005

	Labour	Conservative	Liberal Democratic	Other
Gender				
Women	39%	34%	22%	5%
Men	40	29	23	8
Difference	−1	5	−1	−3
Age				
18–29	44%	20%	30%	6%
30–59	40	30	23	7
60 plus	36	41	18	5
Difference	8	−21	12	2
Class				
Middle	36%	36%	23%	5%
Lower middle	32	39	24	5
Skilled manual	48	27	18	7
Unskilled manual	52	18	20	10
Difference, middle unskilled manual	−16	18	3	−5

Source: British Election Survey, 2005 (number of reported voters = 2,787).

Education is strongly related to active participation in politics. The more education a person has, the greater the possibility of climbing the political ladder. University graduates make up more than two-thirds of the members of the House of Commons. The expansion of universities has broken the dominance of Oxford and Cambridge; barely one-quarter of MPs went to these two institutions. The concentration of graduates from many different British universities in top jobs is a sign of a meritocracy, in which officials qualified by education have replaced an aristocracy based on birth and family.

Class

Historically, party competition has been interpreted in class terms; the Conservative Party has been described as a middle-class party and Labour as a working-class party. Class has appeared as relatively important in England because of the absence of major divisions of race, religion, or language, as are found in the United States, Canada, and Northern Ireland. The concept of **class** can refer to occupational status or serve as a shorthand term for the social status conferred by income and education. Occupation is the most commonly used indicator of class. Manual workers are usually described as the working class and nonmanual workers as the middle class.

Most Britons have a mixture of middle-class and working-class attributes. The mixed-class group has been increasing, as changes in the economy have led to a reduction in manual jobs and an increase in middle-class jobs. Many occupations such as computer technicians now have an indeterminate social status. When British citizens are asked whether they belong to a social class, 57 percent now reject placing themselves in either the middle or the working class.

The relationship between class and party has become limited. No party now wins as much as half the vote of middle-class electors. In the 2005 election, just over half of unskilled manual workers and just under half of skilled manual workers voted Labour (see Table 5.4). Due to the cross-class appeal of parties, less than half of the electorate conforms to the stereotypes of middle-class Conservative and working-class Labour voters.

Socioeconomic experiences other than occupation also influence voting. At each level of the class structure, people who belong to trade unions are more likely to vote Labour than Conservative. Housing creates neighborhoods with political relevance. People who live in municipally built council houses tend to vote Labour, while Conservatives do relatively well among homeowners, who are now a large majority of the electorate.

The focus of the mass media on what's happening today makes them an agency for resocializing people. The media's stress on what is new deemphasizes tradition. Today the upper class no longer commands deference, and celebrities owing their prominence to the media and achievements in sports, rock music, or the like are better known than most MPs and even some Cabinet ministers. Moreover, the Internet provides people with alternative sources of information and opinion, and most Britons old enough to vote are able to find information there.

The British press is sharply divided. A few quality newspapers such as *The Times, The Guardian, The Daily Telegraph, The Independent,* and *The Financial Times* carry news and comment at an intellectual level higher than most American newspapers. Mass-circulation tabloids such as *The Sun*, Britain's best-selling newspaper, concentrate on trivia and trash. Most papers tend to lean toward one party. However, if the party that a paper normally supports becomes very unpopular, then the paper will criticize it or even lean toward whichever party has risen in popularity.

In the aggressive pursuit of news and audiences, journalists are prepared to grab attention by making the government of the day look bad, and television interviewers can gain celebrity by insulting MPs and ministers on air. A majority of MPs think that the media are to blame for popular cynicism about politicians and parties. However, a Populus poll in 2007 found that a majority of the electorate thinks that the conduct of politicians is just as much to blame for cynicism about politics as is the conduct of the media.

Television is the primary source of political news. Historically, radio and television were a monopoly of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). Seeking to educate and to elevate, the BBC was also very respectful of all forms of authority, including government. The introduction of commercial television in the 1950s and commercial radio in the following decades has made all broadcasting channels populist in competing for audiences. There are now many television channels and a great variety of radio stations. The law forbids selling advertising to politicians, parties, or political causes.

Current affairs programs often seek audiences by exposing alleged failings of government, and television personalities make their names by the tough cross-examination of politicians of all parties. However, the government of the day controls the renewal of the broadcasting companies' licenses, and it sets the annual fee that every viewer must pay for noncommercial BBC programs, currently about $250 a year. Broadcasters try to avoid favoring one party because over a period of time control of government is likely to shift between parties and, with it, the power to make decisions that affect the companies' revenué and licenses.

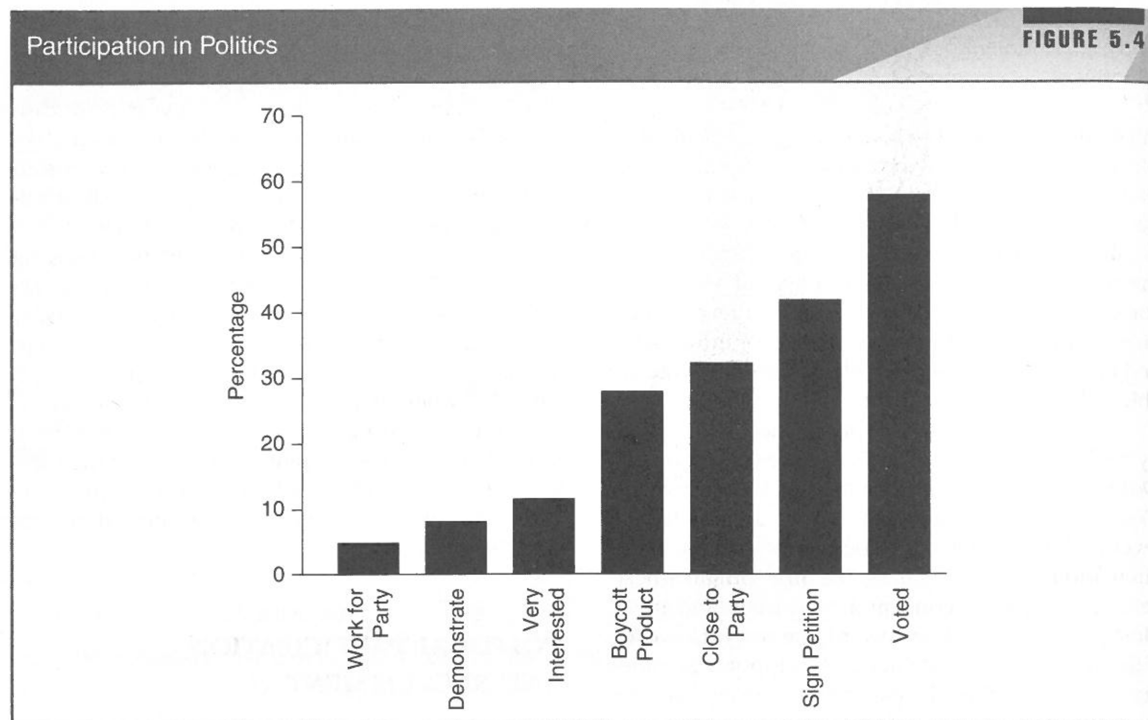
Since political socialization is a lifetime learning process, the loyalties of voters are shaped by an accumulation of influences over many decades. Today there are still some members of the electorate who are old enough to have voted for or against Winston Churchill when he led the Conservative Party. However, the youngest electors had not been born until after Margaret Thatcher retired as leader of the Conservative Party. The median elector in the next British general election cast his or her first vote in the 1992 election.

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND RECRUITMENT

Participation

An election is the one opportunity people have to influence government directly. Every citizen aged 18 or over is eligible to vote. Local government officials register voters, and the list is revised annually, ensuring that nearly everyone eligible to vote is actually registered. Turnout at general elections averaged 77 percent in the 50 years since 1950. However, in 2001 it fell to 59 percent. In an attempt to boost turnout, the Labour government has experimented with encouraging people to vote by post, rather than in person. When postal ballots were mailed out in several North of England constituencies during the 2004 European Parliament election, three-fifths of those receiving a ballot did not bother to return it. In the 2005 general election, postal voting on demand led to serious allegations of fraud in several inner-city constituencies. Even then, turnout was only 61 percent.

Between elections there are additional opportunities to express political opinions (Figure 5.4). More than one-third have signed a petition on a public issue, and more than one-fifth say that politics has affected their shopping by causing them to boycott a product. The most politically involved—those who say they are very interested in politics, take part in a demonstration, or are active in a political party—make



Source: Roger Jowell and the Central Coordinating Team, European Social Survey, 2002–2003 (London: Centre for Comparative Social Surveys, City University). Interviews were conducted in the United Kingdom from September 24, 2002, to February 4, 2003 (N = 1,908).

up no more than one-tenth of the electorate. However, a London-based protest by a few thousand people can get national media coverage, even though those participating make up only 0.01 percent of the electorate.

If political participation is defined as paying taxes and drawing benefits from public policies, then virtually every Briton is involved. Public programs provide benefits at each stage of the life cycle, from maternity allowances to mothers through education, employment and unemployment benefits, health care, and pensions in old age. The median British household receives two major benefits from public policies.

Political Recruitment

The most important political roles in Britain are those of Cabinet minister, higher civil servant, partisan political advisor, and intermittent public person, which is analogous to a Washington insider. Each group has its own recruitment pattern. To become a Cabinet minister, an individual must first be elected to Parliament. Shortly after leaving university, ambitious politicians often become assistants to politicians and then "graduate" to becoming lobbyists, journalists, or MPs. Individuals enter the civil service shortly after leaving university by passing a highly competitive entrance examination; promotion is based on achievement and approval by seniors. Intermittent public persons gain access to ministers and civil servants because of the knowledge and position they have gained by making a career outside party politics.

In all political roles, starting early on a political career is usually a precondition of success because it takes time to build up the skills and contacts necessary to become a major political actor. Geography is a second major influence on recruitment. Ministers, higher civil servants, and other public persons spend their working lives in London. A change at Downing Street does not bring in policy makers from a different part of the country, as can happen in the White House when a president from Chicago succeeds a president from Texas. Since London is atypical of the cities and towns in which most British people live, there is a gap between the everyday lives of policy makers and those of the majority on whose behalf they act.

MPs and Cabinet Ministers

For a person with ambitions to be a Cabinet minister, becoming an MP is the necessary first step. An ambitious person is not expected to begin in local politics and work his or her way gradually to the top at Westminster. Instead, at an early age an individual becomes a "cadet" recruit to a junior position such as a parliamentary assistant to an MP or a "gofer" for a Cabinet minister.

Nomination for a winnable or safe seat in the House of Commons is in the hands of local party committees. A candidate does not have to be resident in the constituency in which he or she is nominated. Hence, it is possible for a young person to go straight from university to a job in the House of Commons or party headquarters and then look around the country for a winnable seat for which to be nominated, a process that usually takes years. Once selected for a constituency in which his or her party has a large majority, the MP can then expect to be reelected routinely for a decade or more.

After entering the House of Commons, an MP seeks to be noticed. Some ways of doing so—for example, grabbing headlines by questioning the wisdom of the party leadership—make it difficult to gain promotion to the ministerial ranks. Other approaches assist promotion, such as successfully attacking Opposition leaders in debate or being well informed about a politically important topic. So, too, does showing loyalty to the party leader.

Experience in the Commons does not prepare an individual for the work of a minister. An MP's chief concerns are dealing with people and talking about what government ought to do. A minister must also be able to handle paperwork, relate political generalities to specific technical problems facing his or her department, and make hard decisions when all the alternatives are unpopular.

The restriction of ministerial appointments to MPs prevents a nationwide canvass for appointees. A prime minister must distribute about 100 jobs among approximately 200 MPs in the governing party who are experienced in Parliament and have not ruled themselves out of consideration on grounds of parliamentary inexperience, old age, political extremism, personal unreliability, or lack of interest in office. An MP has a better than even chance of a junior ministerial appointment if he or she serves three terms in Parliament. Exceptionally, Tony Blair gave a variety of ministerial posts to personal supporters whom he made life peers; they owed their posts to their patron, Blair, rather than to voters and to the Labour Party.

A minister learns on the job. Usually, an MP is first given a junior post as an under secretary and then promoted to minister of state before becoming a full member of the Cabinet. In the process an individual is likely to be shuffled from one department to another, having to learn new subject matter with each shift between departments. The average minister can expect to stay in a particular job for about two years and never knows when an accident of politics—a death or an unexpected resignation—will lead to a transfer to another department. The rate of ministerial turnover in Britain is one of the highest in Europe. The minister who gets a new job as the result of a reshuffle usually arrives at a department with no previous experience with its problems. Anthony Crosland, an able Labour minister, reckoned: "It takes you six months to get your head properly above water, a year to get the general drift of most of the field, and two years really to master the whole of a department."[28]

Higher Civil Servants

Whereas MPs come and go from ministerial office with great frequency, civil servants can be in Whitehall for the whole of their working lives. Higher civil servants are recruited without specific professional qualifications or training. They are meant to be "the best and the brightest"—a requirement that has traditionally meant getting a prestigious degree in history, literature, or languages. The Fulton Committee on the Civil Service recommended that recruits have "relevant" specialist knowledge, but the committee members could not decide what kind of knowledge was relevant to the work of government.[29] The Civil Service Commission tests candidates for their ability to summarize lengthy prose papers, to resolve a problem by fitting specific facts to general regulations, to draw inferences from a simple table of social statistics, and to perform well in group discussions about problems of government.

Because bright civil service entrants lack specialized skills and need decades to reach the highest posts, socialization by senior civil servants is

especially important. The process makes for continuity, since the head of the government's civil service usually started there as a young official under a head who had himself entered the civil service many decades before.

In the course of a career, civil servants become specialists in the difficult task of managing political ministers and government business. As the television series *Yes, Minister* shows, they are adept at saying "yes" to a Cabinet minister when they really mean "perhaps" and saying "up to a point" when they really mean "no." Increasingly, ministers have tended to discourage civil servants from pointing out obstacles in the way of what government wants to do; they look to "can do" advisors from outside the civil service.

Political Advisors

Most advisors are participants in party politics, for their job is to mobilize political support for the government and for the Cabinet minister for whom they work. Because their background is in party politics and the media, such advisors bring to Whitehall skills that civil servants often lack and that their ministers value. But because they have no prior experience with the civil service, they are often unaware of its conventions and legal obligations. The methods used by political appointees to put a desirable spin on what the government is doing can backfire and cause public controversy. For example, when the September 11 disaster dominated the news, a Whitehall advisor emailed colleagues that this was a good time to put out news that revealed departmental mistakes, since the media would bury it beneath stories from the United States.

In addition, experts in a given subject area, such as environmental pollution or cloning, can act as political advisors. Even if inexperienced in the ways of Whitehall, they can contribute specialized knowledge that is often lacking in government departments, and they can be supporters of the governing party, too. For example, Margaret Thatcher brought in a free market economics professor, Alan Walters, to give her advice from a different perspective than that of the advice she received from what she regarded as a "socialist" civil service.

Most leaders of institutions such as universities, banks, churches, and trade unions do not think of themselves as politicians and have not stood for public office. They are principally concerned with their own organization. But when government actions impinge on their work, they become involved in politics. For example, university heads lobby Whitehall for more money for higher education, while simultaneously demanding freedom from ministerial directions that they describe as "political" interference. Because the actions of government are directly or indirectly relevant to almost all major institutions of society, in effect their leaders intermittently must participate in political debates on public policy.

Selective Recruitment

Nothing could be more selective than an election that results in one person becoming prime minister of a country. Yet, nothing is more representative because an election is the one occasion when every adult can participate in politics with equal effect.

Traditionally, political leaders had high social status and wealth before gaining political office. Aristocrats, businesspeople, and trade union leaders can no longer expect to translate their high standing in other fields into an important political position. Today politics is a full-time occupation. As careers become more specialized, professional politicians become increasingly distant from other spheres of British life.

The greater the scope of activities defined as political, the greater the number of people actively involved in government. Government influence has forced company directors, television executives, and university heads to become involved in politics and public policy. Leadership in organizations outside Whitehall gives such individuals freedom to act independently of government, but the interdependence of public and private institutions, whether profit-making or nonprofit, is now so great that sooner or later they meet in discussions about the public interest.

ORGANIZING GROUP INTERESTS

Civil society institutions have existed in Britain for more than a century. Their leaders regularly discuss their views of public policy with government officials in the expectation that this will put pressure on government to do what they argue is in their groups' interest, as well as the public interest.

The scope of group demands varies enormously from the narrow concerns of an association for single parents to the encompassing economic policies of organizations representing business or trade unions.

Groups also differ in the nature of their interests: Some are concerned with material objectives, whereas others deal with single causes such as television violence or race relations.

The Confederation of British Industries is the chief representative organization of British business. As its name implies, its membership is large and varied. The Institute of Directors represents the highest-paid individuals at the top of large and small businesses. The largest British businesses usually have direct contacts with Whitehall and with ministers, whatever their party, because of the importance of these businesses' activities for the British economy and for its place in the international economy. For example, British Petroleum is one of the world's largest oil companies, and most of the oil it drills is found outside the United Kingdom. Government deems the success of such a company as important for national security, as well as for the national economy. The construction industry has access to government because home-building is important for the national economy, and Whitehall's tight control over land use influences where houses can be built.

The chief labor organization is the Trades Union Congress (TUC); its members are trade unions that represent many different types of workers, some white-collar and some blue-collar. Most member unions of the TUC are affiliated with the Labour Party, and some leading trade unionists have been Communists or Maoists. None has ever been a supporter of the Conservative Party.

Changes in employment patterns have eroded union membership; today only one-quarter of the labor force belongs to a trade union. Over the years the membership of trade unions has shifted from workers in such heavy industries as coal and railways to white-collar workers such as teachers and health service employees. Only one in six private-sector workers belongs to a trade union. By contrast, almost three-fifths of public-sector workers are union members. Elected representatives control their wages, and strikes or go-slow actions by teachers, hospital workers, or other public employees can cause political embarrassment to the government.

Britain has many voluntary and charitable associations, from clubs of football team supporters to the Automobile Association. It is also home to a number of internationally active nongovernmental organizations such as Oxfam, concerned with the problems of poor, developing countries, and Amnesty International, concerned with political prisoners. These nongovernmental organizations try to bring pressure not only on Westminster, but also on organizations such as the World Bank and on repressive governments around the world.

Unlike political parties, interest groups do not seek influence by contesting elections; they want to influence policies regardless of which party wins. Nonetheless, there are ties between interest groups and political parties. Trade unions have been institutionally part of the Labour Party since its foundation in 1900 and are the major source of party funds. The connection between business associations and the Conservatives is not formal, but the party's traditional commitment to private enterprise is congenial to business. Notwithstanding common interests, both trade unions and business groups demonstrate their autonomy by criticizing their party ally if it acts against the group's interest. Whichever party is in office, they seek to exercise influence.

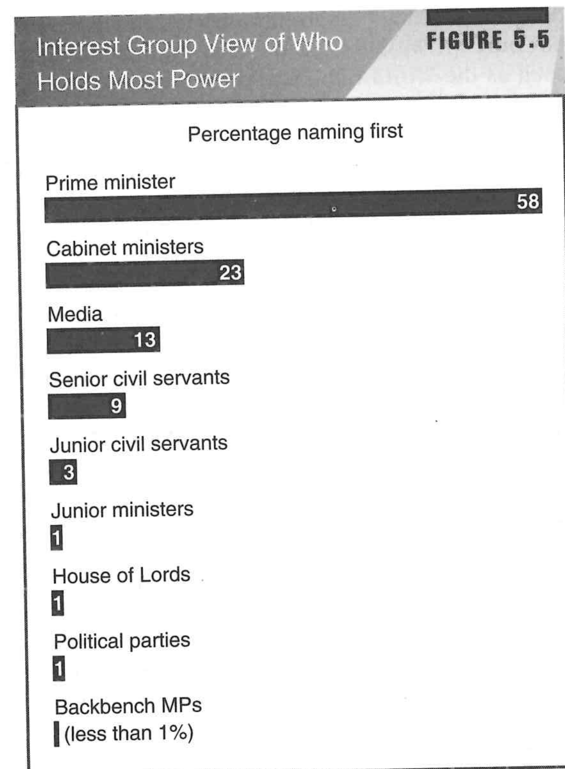
Party politicians seek to distance themselves from interest groups. Conservatives know that they can win an election only by winning the votes of ordinary citizens, as well as prosperous businesspeople. Tony Blair sought to make the Labour government appear business friendly and reaped large cash donations from very wealthy businesspeople. However, this led union leaders to attack his government as unsympathetic, and a few small unions have left the Labour Party.

To lobby successfully, interest groups must be able to identify those officials most important in making public policy. They concentrate their efforts on Whitehall. When asked to rank the most influential offices and institutions, interest group officials named the prime minister first by a long distance; Cabinet ministers came second, the media third, and senior civil servants fourth (see Figure 5.5). Less than 1 percent thought MPs outside the ministerial ranks were of primary importance. However, interest groups do not expect to spend a lot of time at Downing Street. Most of their contacts are with officials within a government department concerned with issues of little public concern, but of immediate interest to the group.

What Interest Groups Want

Most interest groups pursue four goals:

1. Sympathetic administration of established policies
2. Information about government policies and changes in policies



Source: Survey of officials of business, labor, and campaign groups, as reported in Rob Baggott, "The Measurement of Change in Pressure Group Politics," *Talking Points* 5, no. 1 (1992): 19.

3. Influence on policy making
4. Symbolic status, such as being given the prefix "Royal" in their title

Whitehall departments are happy to consult with interest groups insofar as they can provide government officials with reciprocal benefits:

1. Cooperation in administering and implementing policies
2. Information about what is happening in their field
3. Evaluation of the consequences of policies under consideration
4. Support for government initiatives

As long as the needs of Whitehall and interest groups are complementary, they can bargain as professionals sharing common concerns. Both sides are ready to arrive at a negotiated agreement.

Organizing for Political Action in Civil Society

The more committed members are to an interest group's goals, the more confidently leaders can speak for a united membership. Consumers are more difficult to organize because they have no social contacts with people who buy what they buy. Drivers of Ford cars are a category, rather than a social group. Changes in the economy, in class structure, and in the lifestyles of generations have resulted in a decline in the "dense" social capital networks of coal mining villages and textile mill towns. Individuals are now free to belong to a much wider range of institutions or to none.

Whitehall civil servants find it administratively convenient to deal with united interest groups that can implement agreements. But decades of attempts to plan the British economy demonstrate that business and union leaders cannot guarantee that their nominal followers will carry out bargains that leaders make. Group members who care about an issue can disagree, too, about what their leaders ought to do.

Individuals usually have a multiplicity of identities that are often in conflict—for example, as workers desiring higher wages and as consumers wanting lower prices. The spread of mass consumption and decline in trade union membership has altered the balance between these priorities. As a trade union leader has recognized, "Our members are consumers too."[30]

Even if a pressure or interest group is internally united, its demands may be counteracted by opposing demands from other groups. This is normally the case in economic policy, where interests are well defined, well organized, and competing. Ministers can play off producers against consumers or business against unions to increase their scope for choice and present their policies as "something for everybody" compromises.

The more a group's values are consistent with the cultural norms of society as a whole, the easier it is to equate its interest with the public interest. But in an open society such as Britain, the claims of one group to speak for the public interest can easily be challenged by competing groups. The centralization of authority in the British government means that interest groups must treat as given the political values and priorities of the governing party.

Insider pressure groups usually have values in harmony with every party. These groups are often noncontroversial, such as the Royal National Institute for the Blind. Insiders advance their case in quiet negotiations with Whitehall departments. Demands tend to be restricted to what is politically possible in the short term, given the values and commitments of the government of the day.[31]

Outsider pressure groups are unable to negotiate because their demands are inconsistent with the party in power. If their demands are inconsistent with the views of the Opposition as well, then outsider groups are completely marginalized. Outsider groups without any influence in Whitehall often campaign through the media. To television viewers their demonstrations appear as evidence of their importance; in fact, they are often signs of a lack of political influence. Green pressure groups face the dilemma of campaigning for fundamental change in hopes that eventually Whitehall departments will turn their way or of becoming insiders working within the system to improve the environment to some extent, but not as much as some ecologists would like.

Keeping Interest Groups at a Distance

For a generation after World War II, ministers endorsed the corporatist philosophy of bringing together business, trade unions, and political representatives in tripartite institutions to discuss such controversial issues as inflation, unemployment, and the restructuring of declining industries. Corporatist bargaining assumed that there was a consensus on political priorities and goals and that each group's leaders could deliver the cooperation of those they claimed to represent. In practice, neither Labour nor Conservative governments were able to maintain a consensus. Nor were interest group leaders able to deliver their nominal followers. By 1979 unemployment and inflation were both zooming upward out of control because government could not manage the national economy and trade union and business association leaders were unable to get their nominal followers to stick to agreements that their leaders had made with government.

The Thatcher administration demonstrated that a government firmly committed to distinctive values can ignore group demands and lay down its own pattern of policy. It did so by dealing at arm's length with both trade unions and business groups. Instead of consulting with interest groups, it practiced state-distancing, keeping the government out of everyday marketplace activities such as wage bargaining, pricing, and investment.

A state-distancing strategy concentrates on policies that government can implement without the agreement of interest groups. It emphasizes the use of legislation to achieve goals, since no interest group can defy an Act of Parliament. Laws have reduced the capacity of trade unions to frustrate government policies through industrial action. The sale of state-owned industries has removed government from immediate responsibility for the operation of major industries, and Labour Chancellor Gordon Brown transferred to the Bank of England responsibility for monetary policy.

State-distancing places less reliance on negotiations with interest groups and more on the authority of government. Business and labor are free to carry on as they like—but only within the pattern imposed by government legislation and policy. Most unions and some business leaders do not like being "outside the loop" when government makes decisions. Education and health service interest groups like it even less because they depend on government appropriations to fund their activities and cannot effectively turn to the market as an alternative source of revenue.

PARTY SYSTEM AND ELECTORAL CHOICE

British government is party government. A general election gives voters a choice of parties competing for the right to govern. Parties nominate parliamentary candidates and elect their leaders; one leader is the prime minister and the other leaders head Opposition parties.

A Multiplicity of Choices

A general election must occur at least once every five years; within that period the prime minister is free to call an election at any time. The most recent general election was held in May 2005; the next election is therefore due no later than Spring 2010. Although every prime minister tries to pick a date when victory is likely, often this aim is frustrated by events. The winner nationally is the party that gains the most MPs. In 1951 and in February 1974, the party winning the most votes nationally did not win the most seats; the runner-up party in the popular vote formed the government.

An election offers a voter a very simple choice between parliamentary candidates competing to represent a constituency in the House of Commons. Within each constituency the winner is the candidate who is first past the post—that is, the candidate who

has a plurality (the largest number) of votes, even if this is less than half the vote.

If only two parties contest a constituency, the candidate with the most votes will have an absolute majority. But since at least three candidates now contest almost all of the 646 constituencies, a candidate can often win with less than half the vote, thanks to its division among multiple competitors. For example, in a hard-fought contest among four parties in Inverness in 1992, the Liberal Democrats won the seat with only 26 percent of the constituency vote.

Between 1945 and 1970, Britain had a two-party system; the Conservative and Labour parties together took an average of 91 percent of the popular vote and in 1951 as much as 97 percent (see Figure 5.6). The Liberals had difficulty fielding candidates to contest a majority of constituencies and even more difficulty winning votes and seats. Support for the two largest parties was evenly balanced; Labour won four elections and the Conservatives won four.

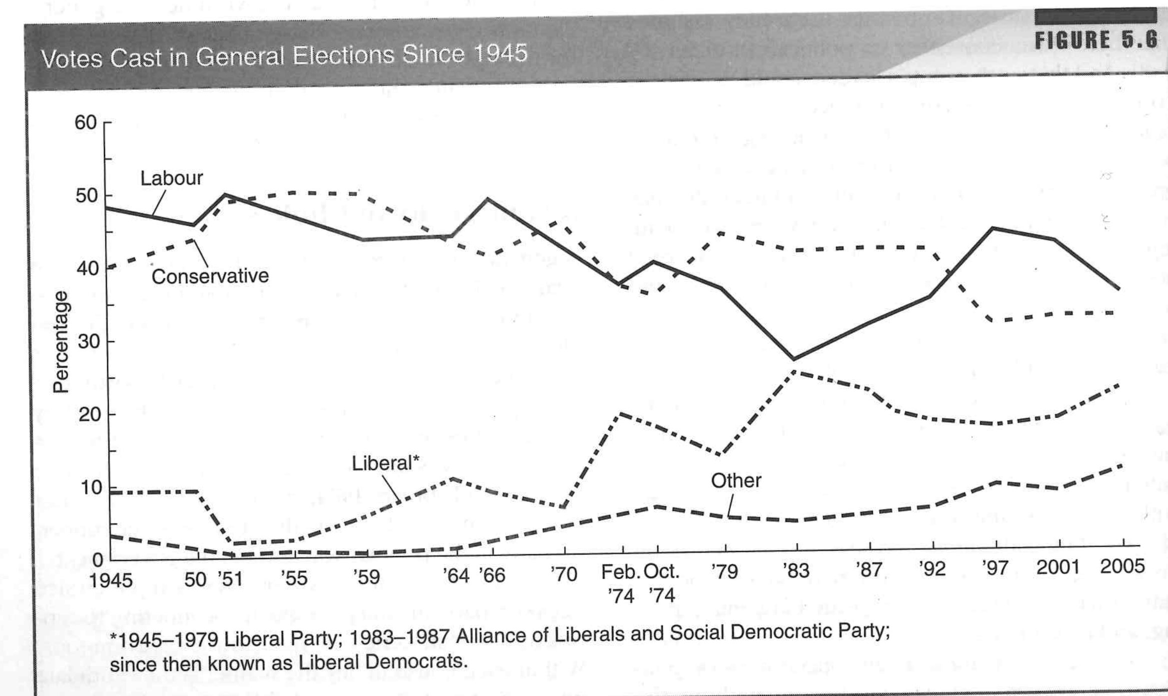
In a two-party system, the failure of one party tends to benefit its opponent. However, when both the largest parties are discredited, this gives other parties an opportunity to gain support. A **multiparty system** emerged in the elections of 1974. The Liberals won nearly one-fifth of the vote, and nationalist parties did well in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. Together, the Conservative and Labour parties took only 75 percent of the vote. The Liberal Democratic and the nationalist parties have maintained their strength, as the results of the 2005 election show (see Table 5.5). The number of parties in the system today depends on the measure used.

1. The number of parties competing for votes varies from three to five in different parts of the United Kingdom. In England, three parties—the Labour, Conservative, and Liberal Democratic parties—compete for votes. In 2005 the United Kingdom Independence Party fought for a majority of seats, too, campaigning in opposition to the EU. In Scotland and Wales there are normally four parties, and the Scottish National and Plaid Cymru (Welsh Nationalist) parties elect MPs, too. In Northern Ireland at least five parties contest seats, two representing Unionist and Protestant voters, two Irish Republican and Catholic voters, and the weakest a cross-religious alliance of voters.
2. The two largest parties do not monopolize votes. Since 1974, the Conservative and Labour parties together have won an average of three-quarters of the vote and in the 2005 election together gained just 67.6 percent of the total vote. No party has won half the popular vote since 1935.
3. The two largest parties in the House of Commons often are not the two leading parties at the constituency level. During the 2005 election in more than one-quarter of constituencies, one or both of the two front-running parties were neither Labour nor Conservative.
4. More than half a dozen parties consistently win seats in the House of Commons. In 2005 so-called third parties won 93 seats in the Commons.
5. Significant shifts in voting usually do not involve individuals moving between the Labour and Conservative parties, but in and out of the ranks of abstainers or between the Liberal Democrats and the two largest parties.

To win a substantial number of seats in the House of Commons, a party must either gain more than one-third of the popular vote nationally or concentrate its votes in a limited number of constituencies. For this reason the distribution of seats in the House of Commons is different from the distribution of the share of votes. In 2005 the Labour Party won more than 55 percent of the seats in the House of Commons with 35 percent of the popular vote (cf. Figures 5.6 and 5.7). The total vote for the Conservatives in England was actually higher than Labour's vote, but it won 92 fewer seats than Labour because more of its votes were where it finished second, whereas Labour candidates tended to come in either first or third.

FIGURE 5.6

Votes Cast in General Elections Since 1945



*1945–1979 Liberal Party; 1983–1987 Alliance of Liberals and Social Democratic Party; since then known as Liberal Democrats.

TABLE 5.5

The 2005 Election

Party vote percentages by nation in 2005

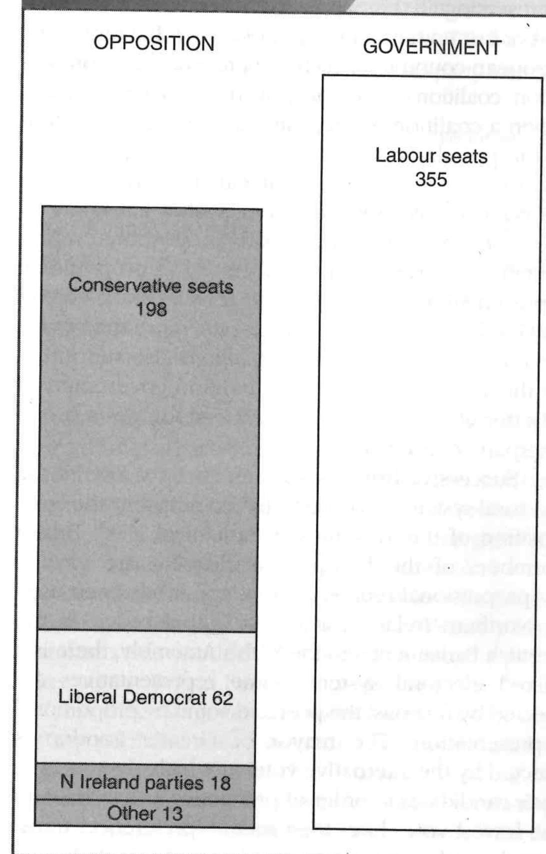
	England	Scotland	Wales	Northern Ireland	United Kingdom
Labour	35.5	38.9	42.7	0	35.2
Conservative	35.7	15.8	21.4	0.1	32.4
Liberal Democratic	22.9	22.6	18.4	0	22.0
Nationalists*	0	17.7	12.6	93.3	4.6
Others	5.9	5.0	4.9	6.6	5.8

Source: *Colin Rallings and Michael Thrasher, ELECTION 2005: The Official Results. Plymouth LGC Elections Centre on behalf of the Electoral Commission, p. 178.* Official statistics.

*Scottish National Party; in Wales, Plaid Cymru; and in Northern Ireland, the Democratic Union and Ulster Unionist parties and the pro-Irish Republic Sinn Fein and Social Democratic and Labour Party.

FIGURE 5.7

Distribution of Seats in Parliament, 2005 Election



Sitting in Opposition to the Labour government in the House of Commons are MPs whose parties have collectively won almost two-thirds of the popular vote. However, they have less than half the MPs because that vote is divided among more than eight different parties plus independents. Nationalist parties in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland win seats because they concentrate their candidates in one part of the United Kingdom. Although the Liberal Democrats often win more than one-fifth of the popular vote, their support is spread relatively evenly across the country, making it far more likely that their candidates will finish second or third, rather than first.

The first-past-the-post electoral system manufactures a House of Commons majority for a party with two-fifths or less of the popular vote. Defenders of the British electoral system argue that proportionality is not a goal in itself. The first-past-the-post system is justified because it places responsibility for government in the hands of a single party. This justification is used in the United States, where the president can be described as representing all the people, whether he wins just over half or just under half the popular vote. In continental European countries, which use proportional representation, coalition or minority governments are the norm. When a coalition is necessary, a party finishing third in the popular vote can determine who governs by choosing the party that came in either second or first in the popular vote as its partner in creating a majority.

The strongest advocates of proportional representation are the Liberal Democrats. In a proportional representation system, the Liberal Democratic vote in 2005 would have given it 142 seats, more than twice what it actually received. A change is also supported by those who believe that a coalition government is a better government because it encourages a broad interparty consensus.

Successive British governments have altered the electoral system for contests that do not affect the composition of the Westminster Parliament.[32] All British Members of the European Parliament are elected by proportional representation, and it has been used in Northern Ireland for almost four decades. In the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly, there is a mixed electoral system: Some representatives are elected by first past the post and some by proportional representation. The mayor of Greater London is elected by the alternative vote, in which electors rank their candidates in order of preference and those with the fewest votes have their second preferences transferred to other candidates until one candidate has an absolute majority of preferences. The system for the Westminster Parliament remains unaltered because the decision about what kind of voting system to have is determined not by reasoning from abstract principles, but by the interests of the party that won power under the first-past-the-post system.

Political parties are often referred to as machines, but this description is very misleading, for parties cannot mechanically manufacture votes. Nor can they be commanded like an army. Parties are like universities; they are inherently decentralized, and people belong to them for a variety of reasons. Thus, party officials have to work hard to keep together three different parts of the party: those who vote for it, the minority active in its constituency associations, and the party in Parliament. If the party has a majority in Parliament, there is a fourth group, the party in government. Whether the party leader is the prime minister or the leader of the Opposition, he or she must maintain the confidence of all parts of the party or risk ejection as leader (see Box 5.5).

The headquarters of each party provides more or less routine organizational and publicity services to constituency parties and to the party in Parliament. Each party has an annual conference to debate policy and to vote on some policy resolutions. Constituency parties are nationally significant because each selects its own parliamentary candidate. The decentralization of the selection process has allowed the choice of parliamentary candidates with a wide variety of political outlooks and abilities. Under Tony Blair the Labour Party introduced more central direction in choosing candidates. It was justified on the grounds of promoting more women MPs by restricting the selection of the candidate in a safe Labour constituency to a short list consisting exclusively of women.

The Liberal Democrats have a small central organization; they have sought to build up the party's strength by winning council seats in local government elections. In parliamentary elections it targets seats where the party is strong locally. This strategy has paid off; it has more than tripled its number of MPs, from 20 in 1992 to 62 in 2005, while its share of the vote increased by only 0.5 percent. The candidates for leadership are nominated by Liberal MPs, and the leadership is determined by vote of the party's membership.

Party Images and Appeals

While the terminology of *left* and *right* is part of the language of elite politicians, it is rejected by the great majority of British voters. When asked to place themselves on a left-right scale, the median voter chooses

Electing and Ejecting a Party Leader

BOX 5.5

British voters decide which party has a majority in Parliament, while the majority party decides which of its MPs is its leader, and therefore prime minister. Opposition parties elect a leader in the hope that he or she will lead the party to election victory. The governing party wants its leader to win the next election, as well as the election that has given him or her office. If a party leader is unpopular and the party is trailing in opinion polls, MPs can try to eject their leader, even if he or she is prime minister.

A party leader is strongest when he or she is also prime minister. Constitutional principles and Cabinet patronage strengthen a prime minister's hand. Moreover, an open attack on a prime minister threatens electoral defeat as a result of conflict within the party. However, Margaret Thatcher lost the prime ministership by a vote of Conservative MPs in 1990. In 2006 Labour MPs were threatening to force a vote on Tony Blair's tenure if he did not leave office sooner rather than later. The following year Gordon Brown became unpopular and has faced demands to resign or be ejected after Labour began losing by-elections.

The Labour Party leadership is determined by an electoral college composed of three groups: Labour MPs, trade unions, and constituency party members. Each group has a very different number of members and method of deciding which candidate to back. In order to call a vote of confidence in a serving party leader, one-fifth of Labour MPs must sign a request for a vote on the leadership, and this must be endorsed by a party conference. This is difficult to achieve. If a vacancy results from the voluntary resignation of the leader or a resignation forced by Cabinet members calling for him or her to go, then there is an acting prime minister for several months while candidates compete for the party leadership.

Until 1965 the Conservative Party leader was not elected, but "emerged" as the result of consultation among senior MPs and members of the House of Lords. Since then the Conservatives have elected their leader in a two- or three-stage process. An election can be called if 15 percent of the party's MPs record their dissatisfaction in writing; their names are not supposed to be revealed. Alternatively, a leader can create a vacancy by resigning. Either way there is an initial ballot among Conservative MPs. The two MPs with the most votes are then voted on by the party membership at large, whose choice is decisive.

After Conservative Party members chose three leaders who were failures as vote-getters, it chose 39-year-old David Cameron in autumn 2005. They hoped that his youth would distance him from past Conservative defeats and his openness to change would appeal to middle-of-the-road voters needed for a Conservative election victory.

---

the central position, and only a tenth place themselves on the far left or far right. Consequently, parties that veer toward either extreme risk losing votes.

When public opinion is examined across a variety of issues, such as inflation, protecting the environment, spending money on the health service, and trade union legislation, a majority of Conservative, Labour, and Liberal Democratic voters tend to agree. Big divisions in contemporary British politics often cut across party lines; for example, attitudes toward the EU divide both Labour and Conservative MPs, and so has the Iraq War. Any attempt to impute a coherent ideology to a political party is doomed to failure, for institutions cannot think and are not organized to debate philosophy,

Instead of campaigning by promoting an ideology or by appealing to collectivist economic interests, increasingly parties stress consensual goals, such as promoting prosperity and fighting crime. They compete in terms of which party or party leader can best be trusted to do what people want or on the basis of whether it is time for a change because one party has been in office for a long time. The titles of election manifestos are virtually interchangeable between the Conservative and Labour parties. In 2005 one party's manifesto was entitled "It's Time for Action," and the other urged "Britain Forward not Back."[33]

In office the governing party has the votes to enact any parliamentary legislation it wishes, regardless of protests by the Opposition. However, most of the legislation introduced by the government is meant to be so popular, and often noncontroversial, that the Opposition dare not vote against the bill's principle. For every government bill that the Opposition votes

against on principle in the House of Commons, three are adopted with interparty agreement.[34]

Most policies of government are not set out in party manifestos; they are inherited from predecessors of the same or a different party. When the Thatcher administration entered office in 1979, it inherited hundreds of programs enacted by preceding governments, including some on the statute books since 1760.[35] It repealed some programs inherited from its predecessors—and it repealed some of its own programs that were quickly recognized as mistakes. When Margaret Thatcher left office, two-thirds of the programs for which the government was responsible had been adopted before she had taken office 11 years earlier.

Prior to the 1997 general election, the Labour Party pledged that in its first term it would be prudent with public money, maintaining public expenditures at the same level as the Conservative government. Tony Blair initiated major measures to reform the delivery of public services in his second term. By the time Gordon Brown entered office in 2007, the legacy left behind by Blair—and by his own taxing and spending policies in a decade in the Treasury—made it difficult to come up with fresh policies.

The freedom of action of the governing party is limited by constraints embedded in the obligations of office. Once in office ministers find that all the laws enacted by their predecessors must be enforced, even if the government of the day would not have enacted them. A newly elected government also inherits many commitments to foreign countries and to the EU. As a former Conservative minister said of his Labour successors, "They inherited our problems and our remedies."[36]

CENTRALIZED AUTHORITY AND DECENTRALIZED DELIVERY OF GOVERNMENT POLICIES

In a unitary state, political authority is centralized. Decisions made by central government are binding on all public agencies through acts of Parliament and regulations prepared in Whitehall. In addition, Whitehall controls taxation and public expenditures to a degree unusual among other member states of the EU, where coalition government and federalism encourage decentralization.

For ordinary individuals the actions of government are tangible only when services are delivered locally at a school or a doctor's office or when rubbish is collected at their doorstep. However, Whitehall departments usually do not deliver policies themselves. Most public goods and services are delivered by agencies headquartered outside Whitehall. Moreover, five-sixths of public employees work for non-Whitehall agencies.[37] Thus, making and delivering public policies involves *intra*governmental politics.

Whitehall

Running the *Whitehall obstacle race* is the first step in intragovernmental politics. Most new policies must take into account the effects of existing policies in a crowded policy "space." Before a bill can be put to Parliament, the Cabinet minister sponsoring it must determine with ministers in other departments how the new measure will affect existing programs and negotiate the terms of cooperation between departments to implement it. Such negotiations are time consuming. Often a department will begin work on a new initiative under one minister and complete it under another, or even under a different party in power.

The Treasury controls public expenditures. Before a bill can be put to Parliament, the Treasury must authorize the additional expenditure required because increased spending implies increased taxation. Ministers in charge of spending departments dislike constant Treasury reminders that there are strict limits on what they can spend. In the words of a veteran Treasury official, "the Treasury stands for reality."[38]

A minister anxious to gain attention by sponsoring a new policy must secure the approval of the prime minister's office before a bill can be put to Parliament. If the bill looks like it will produce favorable headlines and fit into Downing Street's overall strategy, it will be given a priority. Even if a measure is controversial, it can still go ahead as long as it will unite the governing party against attacks from Opposition parties and as long as public opinion will be on the government's side.

Once a bill becomes a law, there are many reasons why ministers do not want to be in charge of delivering services. Ministers may wish to avoid charges of political interference, allow for flexibility in the market, lend an aura of impartiality to quasi-judicial activities, allow qualified professionals to regulate technical matters, or remove controversial activities from Whitehall. The prime minister prefers to focus on the glamorous "high-level" politics of foreign affairs and economic management. However, since "low-level" services remain important to most voters' lives, ministers are under pressure to do

something—or at least say something in response to media demands—when there is evidence of declining standards in schools, queues for hospital admission, or an increase of crime on the streets.

Local Government

Within England, *local government* is subordinate to central government. Westminster has the power to write or rewrite the laws that determine what locally elected governments do and spend—and even to abolish local authorities and create new units of government with different boundaries. Changes in local government boundaries have reflected a vain search to find a balance between efficiency (assumed to correlate with fewer councils delivering services to more people spread over a wider geographical area) and responsiveness (assumed to require more councils with a smaller territory and fewer people).

Local council elections are fought on party lines. In the days of the two-party system, many cities were solidly Labour for a generation or more, while leafy suburbs and agricultural counties were overwhelmingly Conservative. The Liberal Democrats now win many seats in local elections and, when no party has a majority, introduce coalition government into town halls. However, being a councillor is usually a part-time job.

The Blair government introduced the direct election of the mayor of Greater London, citing New York and Chicago as positive examples. However, it has refused to give London the independence in taxing and spending that large U.S. cities enjoy.[39] Nevertheless, the office is a political platform that attracts media attention. London's first mayor, a left-wing independent, and its second, a Conservative eccentric, used their legitimacy as elected officials to challenge the views of government at Westminster.

Local government is usually divided into two tiers of county and district councils, each with responsibility for some local services. The proliferation of public-private initiatives and special-purpose agencies has reduced the services for which local government is exclusively responsible. Today there is a jumble of more or less local institutions delivering such public services as education, police protection, refuse collection, housing, and cemeteries (see Box 5.6). Collectively, local institutions account for about a fifth of total public expenditures.

Delivering Public Services on the Doorstep — BOX 5.6

Government on the scale that the British people know it today could not exist if all its activities were concentrated in London, for five-sixths of the country's population lives elsewhere. As the demand for public services has increased, government has grown, chiefly through the multiplication of familiar institutions such as schools and hospitals. Devolution to Scotland and Wales has added to decentralization.

Education is an example of how different institutions relate. It is authorized by an Act of Parliament and principally financed by central government. Two Cabinet ministers divide responsibility: One is responsible for schools and another for universities. Both are Members of Parliament. However, the delivery of primary and secondary education is the responsibility of classroom teachers who are immediately accountable to the head of their school and not to Parliament. Dissatisfaction with the management of schools by local government has led Whitehall to establish city academies, secondary schools independent of local government, but dependent on Whitehall for funding.

Increasingly, central government seeks to monitor the performance of schools in nationwide examinations and set targets that teachers and pupils are expected to achieve. But since the Whitehall department responsible for schools employs only 1 percent of the people working in education, success depends on actions taken by others. Conservative Minister of Education Lord Hailsham contrasted his position with that of a defense minister: As the latter, "You say to one person 'come' and he cometh and another 'go' and he goeth"; with the former, "You say to one man 'come' and he cometh not, and another 'go' and he stays where he is."

Sources: *See Richard Rose, "The Growth of Government Organizations," in C. Campbell and B. G. Peters, eds., *Organizing Government, Governing Organizations* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1988), pp. 99–128. Lord Hailsham is quoted in Maurice Kogan, *The Politics of Education* (Harmondsworth: England: Penguin, 1971), p. 31.

Grants of money from the central government are the largest source of local government revenue. There is no local income tax, since the central government does not want to give local authorities the degree of fiscal independence that U.S. local governments have. The Thatcher government replaced the local property tax with a poll tax on every adult resident of a local authority, believing it would make voters more aware of the costs of local government and keep spending down. In practice, the tax produced a political backlash and was replaced by a community charge (tax) on housing, which the central government tends to control.[40] How to fund services that the local government delivers remains a contentious issue.

Centralization is justified in terms of **territorial justice**—that is, the same standards of public policy ought to apply everywhere in the country. For example, schools in inner cities and rural areas should have the same resources as schools in prosperous suburbs. This can be achieved only if tax revenues collected by the central government are redistributed from well-to-do to poorer parts of the country. In addition, ministers emphasize that they are accountable to a national electorate of tens of millions of people, whereas local councillors are accountable only to those who vote in their ward. Instead of small being beautiful, a big nationwide electorate is assumed to be better. The centralist bias of Westminster is illustrated by the statement of an activist law professor: "Local councillors are not necessarily political animals; we could manage without them."

Devolution to Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland is an extreme form of **decentralization.** Westminster delegates authority in different measures to elected assemblies. The Scottish government, accountable to a Parliament in Edinburgh, has the right to enact legislation on a broad range of social and public services of direct concern to individuals and communities, such as education, health, and roads. It is also responsible for determining spending priorities within the limits set by its block grant of money from the British Treasury. With the Scottish National Party in government, it has political incentives to challenge the authority of Westminster. The Welsh Assembly has administrative discretion, but no legislative or taxing powers. Northern Ireland is exceptional because the key service is police and security—and this is being kept under the control of British ministers until agreement is achieved under a power-sharing government that includes participants active in organizing its decades of civil war.

Nonelected Institutions

Executive agencies are headed by nonelected officials responsible for delivering many major public services. The largest, the National Health Service (NHS), is not one organization, but a multiplicity of separate institutions with separate budgets, such as hospitals and doctors' offices. Access to the NHS is free of charge to every citizen. But health care is not costless. Public money is allocated to hospitals and to doctors and dentists that must work to guidelines and targets established centrally. Because the central government picks up the bill, the Treasury, as the monopoly purchaser, regularly seeks to cut costs in providing increasingly expensive health care.

Public demand for more and better health care has increased with the aging of the population and the development of new forms of medical treatment. The government's rationing of the health care supply has led to lengthening queues, involving months of waiting before a person can see a medical specialist or have a hospital operation. British government has sought to deal with this problem through administrative changes intended to increase efficiency—that is, measures that will keep the total health care expenditure relatively constant by cutting the cost of individual services, while expanding the total number supplied. It has not adopted the practice common in most EU countries of asking patients to make a co-payment to cover part of the cost of seeing a doctor or getting hospital treatment.

British government sponsors more than a thousand **quasi-autonomous nongovernmental organizations (quangos)**. All are created by an Act of Parliament or by an executive decision; their heads are appointed by a Cabinet minister, and public money can be appropriated to finance their activities. Some quangos deliver services. When things go wrong, Parliament has difficulty assigning responsibility for decisions. Advisory committees draw on the expertise of individuals and organizations involved in programs for which Whitehall departments are nominally responsible. Ministry of Agriculture officials can turn to advisory committees for detailed information about farming practices; the department responsible for trade and industry can turn to business associations for information about a particular industry. Because they have no executive powers, advisory committees usually cost very little to run. Representatives of interest groups are glad to serve on such committees because this gives them privileged access to Whitehall and an opportunity to influence policies in which they are directly interested.

Administrative tribunals are quasi-judicial bodies that make expert judgments in such fields as medical negligence or handle small claims, such as disputes about whether the rent set for a rent-controlled flat is fair. Ministers may use tribunals to avoid involvement in politically controversial issues, such as decisions about deporting immigrants. Tribunals normally work much more quickly and cheaply than do the courts. However, the quasi-judicial role of tribunals has created a demand for independent auditing of their procedures to ensure that they are fair to all sides. The task of supervising some seventy tribunals is in the hands of a quango, the Council on Tribunals.

Turning to the Market

The 1945–1951 Labour government turned away from the market because its socialist leaders believed that government planning was better able to promote economic growth and full employment. It nationalized many basic industries, such as electricity, gas, coal, railways, and airlines. State ownership meant that industries did not have to run at a profit; some consistently made money, while others consistently lost money and required big subsidies. Government ownership politicized wage negotiations and investment decisions.

The Thatcher government promoted privatization by selling shares of nationalized industries on the stock market. Profit-making industries such as telephones, electricity, and gas were sold without difficulty. Selling council houses to tenants at prices well below their market value was popular with tenants. Industries that were losing money, such as British Airways, British Steel, and the coal mines, had to be reorganized, and unprofitable activities were shed to make them attractive to buyers. Industries needing large public subsidies to maintain public services, such as the railways, have continued to receive subsidies after privatization.

Privatization has been justified on grounds of economic efficiency (the market is better than civil servants at determining investment, production, and prices), political ideology (the power of government is reduced), service (private enterprise is more consumer oriented than are civil servants), and short-term financial gain (the sale of public assets can provide billions in revenue for government). Although the Labour Party initially opposed privatization, it quickly realized it would be electorally disastrous to take back privatized council houses and shares that people had bought at bargain prices.

Since many privatized industries affect the public interest, new regulatory agencies have been established to monitor telephones, gas, electricity, broadcasting, and water. Where there is a substantial element of monopoly in an industry, the government regulatory agency seeks to promote competition and often has the power to fix price increases at a lower rate than inflation. Even though it no longer owns an industry, government ministers cannot ignore things that go wrong. As an extreme example of government intervention, when several fatal accidents occurred on railway track maintained by a privatized transport company, the Blair government took it back into public ownership.

From Trust to Contract

Historically, the British civil service has relied on trust in delivering policies. British civil servants are much less rule bound than are their German counterparts and less threatened with being dragged into court than are U.S. officials. Intragovernmental relations between Whitehall departments and representatives of local authorities were characterized by consensual understandings upheld by all sides on the basis of trust as well as law. However, the Thatcher government preferred to constrain local government through its use of law and its control of finance and to promote competition by establishing new agencies or contracting for public services with private-sector companies. Since 1997 the Labour government has continued this practice and has intensified the use of targets that agencies receiving public money should meet.

Trust has been replaced by contracts with agencies delivering such everyday services as automobile licenses and patents. In addition, the government has sought to keep capital expenditures from visibly increasing public debt through private finance initiatives. Banks and other profit-making companies loan money to build facilities that will be leased by government agencies or even operated by profit-making companies. The theory is that government can obtain the greatest value for its money by buying services from the private sector, ranging from operating staff canteens in government offices to providing

prison services. However, the government's experience with cost overruns and failure to meet targets for information technology services costing hundreds of millions of pounds indicates that government officials often lack the skills to negotiate procurement contracts for large purchases involving expensive technology.

Government by contract faces political limits because departmental ministers must answer to Parliament when something goes wrong. The Prison Service is a textbook example. It was established as an executive agency separate from Whitehall in 1993 to bring in private management to reduce unit costs in the face of a rising "demand" for prisons brought about by changes in crime rates and sentencing policies. However, when prisoners escaped and other problems erupted, the responsible Cabinet minister blamed the business executive brought in to head the Prison Service. The Prison Service head replied by attacking the minister's refusal to live up to the terms of the contract agreed to between them.

The proliferation of agencies, each with a distinctive and narrow responsibility for a limited number of policies, tends to fragment government. For example, parents may have to deal with half a dozen different agencies to secure all the public services to which they are entitled for their children. Tony Blair promoted "joined up" government, linking the provision of related services so that they could more easily be received by individual citizens. To many public agencies, this looked like a device to increase Downing Street's power. In fact, it had little effect and demonstrated the limits that result when a few dozen people at Downing Street determine what is done by millions of people delivering public services.

The Contingency of Influence

The theory of British government is centralist: All roads lead to Downing Street, where the prime minister and the chancellor of the Exchequer have their homes and offices. The Foreign Office and the Treasury are only a few steps away. In practice, policy making occurs in many buildings, some within Whitehall and others far from London. Those involved can be divided horizontally between ministries and executive agencies and vertically between central government and local authorities and other nondepartmental public bodies that deliver particular services.

Influence is contingent: It varies with the problem at hand. Decisions about war and peace are made at Downing Street by the highest-ranking political and military officials. With respect to the decision to support the Iraq War, the prime minister's media advisor was also heavily involved. By contrast, the decisions as to whether a particular piece of land should be used for housing is normally made by local authorities far from London.

Most political decisions involve two or more government agencies and therefore require discussion and bargaining before decisions can be implemented. The making of policy is constrained by disputes within government much more than by differences between the governing party and its opponents. Many tentacles of the octopus of government work against each other, as public agencies often differ in their definition of the public interest. For example, the Treasury wants to keep taxes down, while the Ministry of Defence wants more money for expensive equipment.

While the center of central government has been pressing harder on other public agencies, Whitehall itself has been losing influence because of its obligations in the EU. The Single Europe Act promotes British exports, but it also increases the potential for EU decisions to regulate the British economy. Whitehall has adopted a variety of strategies in its EU negotiations, including noncooperation and public dispute. Ironically, these are just the tactics that local government and executive agencies use when they disagree with Whitehall.

WHY PUBLIC POLICY MATTERS

However a citizen votes, she or he does not need to look far to see the outputs of government. If there is a school-age child or a pensioner in the house, the benefits to the family are continuous and visible. If a person is ill, the care provided by doctors and hospitals is an important output of public policy; so, too, are police protection and tight controls on land use that maintain green belts and reduce suburban sprawl around cities.

To produce the benefits of public policy, government relies on three major resources: laws, money, and personnel. Most policies involve a combination of these resources, but they do not do so equally. Policies regulating individual behavior, such as marriage and divorce, are law intensive; measures that pay benefits to millions of people, such as social security, are money intensive; and public services, such as health care, are labor intensive.

Laws are the unique resource of government, for private enterprises cannot enact binding laws and contracts are effective only if they can be enforced by courts. The British executive centralizes the power to draft laws and regulations that can be approved without substantial amendment by Parliament. Moreover, many laws give ministers significant discretion in administration. For example, an employer may be required to provide "reasonable" toilet facilities, rather than having all features of lavatories specified down to the size and height of a toilet seat.

Public employees are needed to administer laws and deliver major services. The number of people officially counted as civil servants and public employees has been reduced by privatization. Nonetheless, more than a fifth of the entire British labor force depends on public spending for their jobs. The largest public employer is the National Health Service. The top civil servants who work in Whitehall are few in number.

To meet the costs of public policy, British government collects almost two-fifths of the gross national product in taxation. Income tax accounts for 29 percent of tax revenue; the top rate of taxation is 40 percent. Social security taxes are paid by deductions from wages and additional contributions of employers; these account for an additional 19 percent of revenue. Since there are no state or local income taxes, a well-to-do British person can pay taxes on income at a lower total rate than does an American subject to federal, state, and local taxation in New York City.

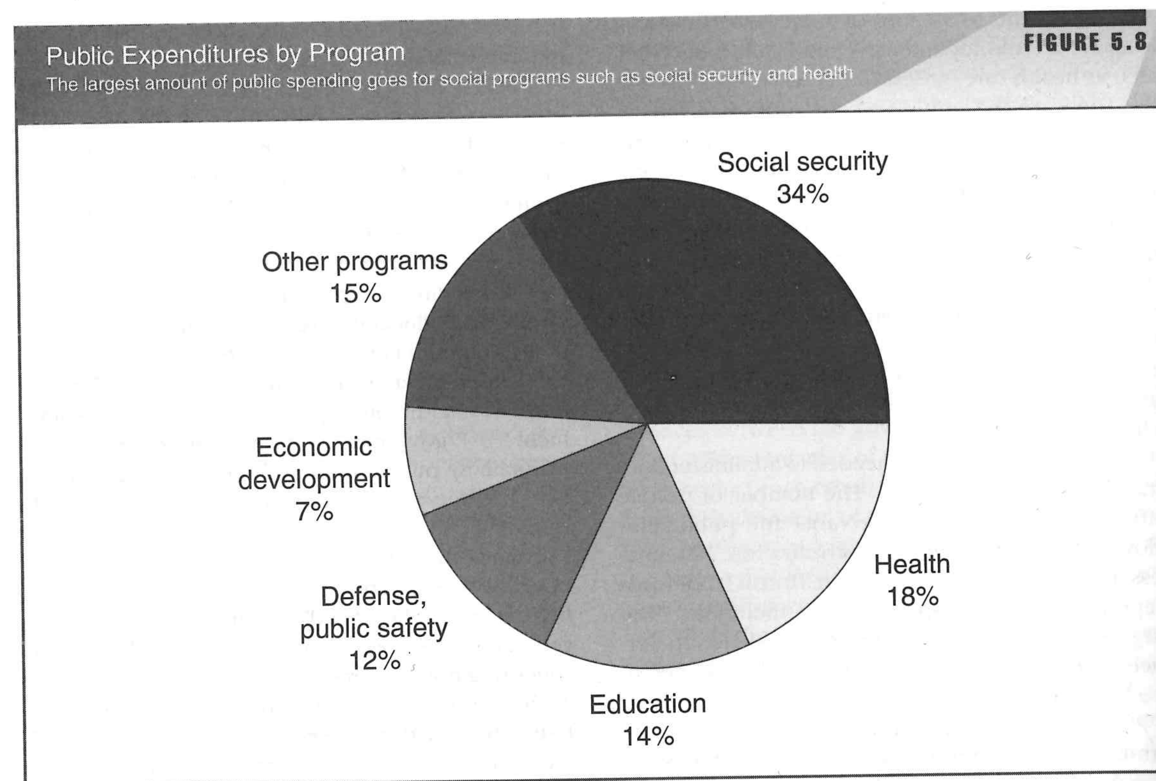
Taxes on consumption are important, too. There is a value-added tax of 17.5 percent on the sale of almost all goods and services. Gasoline, cigarettes, and alcohol are taxed very heavily, too. Taxes on consumption in total account for one-quarter of all tax revenue. Since profits fluctuate from year to year, the government prefers businesses to pay taxes on their gross revenues through a value-added tax and on their total wages bill through the employer's contribution to social security. Taxes on the profits of corporations provide under a tenth of tax revenue. Additional revenue comes from "stealth" taxes that ordinary citizens rarely notice and from taxes that do cause complaints, such as the council tax on houses. The government also raises money by taking a big cut from the National Lottery; more people play the lottery than vote in a general election.

Social security programs are the most costly government policies; they account for more than one-third of total public expenditures (Figure 5.8). They are also the most popular, transferring money from government to more than 10 million older people receiving pensions, plus millions of invalids, the unemployed, women on maternity leave, and poor people needing to supplement their limited incomes. Health and education are second and third, respectively, in their claims on the public purse. Together, these three social welfare programs account for two-thirds of total public expenditures. A classic commitment of government—providing defense and maintaining public order and safety through the police, fire service, courts, and prisons—is fourth in spending importance.

Since there is no item in the public budget labeled as "waste," any government wanting to make a big cut in public spending must squeeze existing programs—and big savings can be made only by squeezing popular programs. But doing so would go against public opinion. When Margaret Thatcher entered office in 1979, the public divided into three almost equal groups: those wanting to spend more and tax more, those wanting to cut taxes even if it meant a reduction in public services, and a large middle group wanting to leave things as they were. Thatcher's campaign to cut taxes and public spending initially produced a reaction in favor of increasing public expenditure. By the time she left office, a majority favored increased spending even if it meant increased taxes. However, since a Labour government took office in 1997, the pendulum has swung back to an almost equal division between those who want to cut taxes and spending and those who want to increase both, with the median group wanting to keep both as they are (Figure 5.9).

Policy Outcomes in Society

Public policies are meant to influence how people live, but only a totalitarian government would claim responsibility for everything that happens in society. In an open society such as Britain, social conditions reflect the interaction of public policies, the national and international economy, the not-for-profit institutions of civil society, and the choices that individuals and households make. Thus, the term *welfare state* is misleading to the extent that it implies that



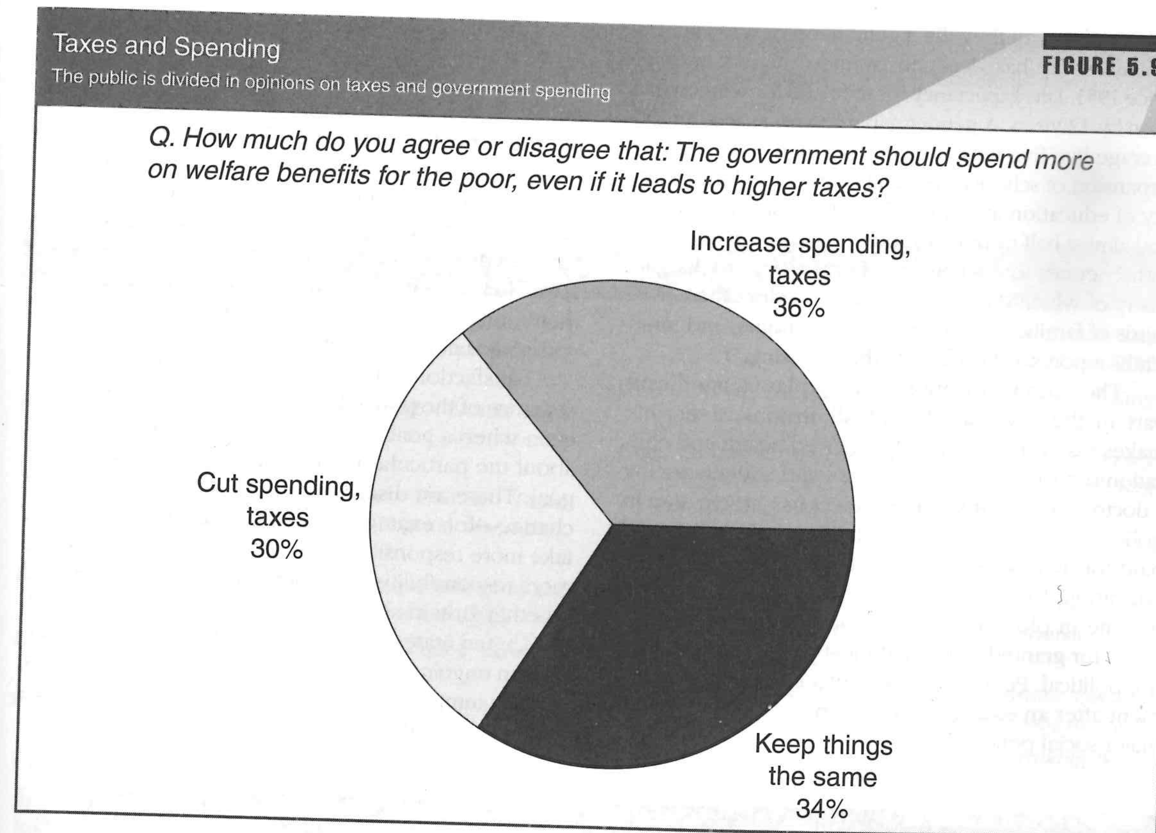
Source: Her Majesty's Treasury, *Public Expenditure Statistical Analyses 2008*. London: Stationery Office, HC 489, Table 5.1.

the state is the exclusive supplier of welfare. Total welfare in society is the sum of a "welfare mix," combining actions of government, the market, and the nonmonetized production of welfare in the household.[41]

Although commentators on British society often bemoan the country's decline relative to the much more populous United States and to continental European countries that have experienced dynamic economies, ordinary people do not compare their lives with those of people in other countries. The most important comparison is with their own past. Evaluating change across time shows great improvements in the living conditions of most people, as compared with their parents or grandparents. The longer the time span, the greater the improvement. Furthermore, in the production of such political "goods" as freedom from the state, confidence in the honesty of public officials, and administrative flexibility, British government remains an international leader. The great majority of people are proud of the achievements of Britain and would not want to be citizens of any other country.

Defending the population against threats to security at home and abroad is a unique responsibility of government. In an interdependent world, British government participates in international alliances. Since World War II it has been a founding member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and has fought alongside the United States from the Korean War to the Iraq War. Maintaining order within the United Kingdom is a unique responsibility of Westminster. In Northern Ireland Whitehall has created a power-sharing government after very lengthy negotiations with Irish Republicans about giving up the use of arms.[42]

Since terrorist attacks by jihadists in London in 2005, the British government has pursued a multiplicity of measures in an attempt to identify, isolate, and, as appropriate, arrest and jail those planning violence. One strategy has been to encourage moderate Muslim groups to engage in the "self-policing" of



Source: Secondary analysis British Social Attitudes Survey, 2006. Number of respondents: 2,812.

their communities. Another has been to maintain surveillance on individuals and groups voicing fanatical opinions, including the endorsement of violence. A third has been to use extraordinary police powers to arrest and interrogate suspects.

Conservative as well as Labour governments accept responsibility for the economy. Most firms are profit-making, consumers can spend money as they like, and wages and prices are principally decided in the marketplace. Government influences the market through taxing and spending policies, interest rates, and policies on growth and unemployment. Increasingly, what happens to the British economy is also influenced by what happens elsewhere in the EU and on other continents, too, for British government cannot isolate the country from the global economy.

In each decade since World War II, the British economy has grown; compounding a small annual rate of growth over many decades results in a large rise in living standards. Per capita national income has more than tripled since 1945. Many consumer goods that were once thought of as luxuries—such as owning a car or a home or spending holidays abroad—are now mass-consumption goods. In addition, things unknown in 1945—such as color televisions, home computers, and mobile phones—are now commonplace. In the past decade the British economy has grown by one-third. Its growth rate has been higher than the average for the EU and for the G–7 nations.

Poverty can be found in Britain; the extent depends on the definition used. If poverty is defined in relative terms, such as having less than half the average wage, then about 10 percent of Britons are living in relative poverty. If poverty is defined as being trapped at a low income level for many years, then less than 4 percent are long-term poor.

Looking at all the major indicators of social well-being, the British people enjoy a higher standard of

living today than they did a generation or two ago. Infant mortality has declined by more than four-fifths since 1951. Life expectancy for men and for women has risen by 12 years. A gender gap remains, as women on average live five years longer than men. The postwar expansion of schools has significantly raised the quantity of education available. Classes are smaller in size, and almost half of British youths go on to some form of further education, whether in universities or colleges, many of which did not exist in 1950. More than two-thirds of families now own their own home, and nine-tenths report satisfaction with their housing.

The outputs of public policy play a significant part in the everyday life of all Britons. Everyone makes major use of publicly financed health and education services. Children at school and patients seeing a doctor do not think of themselves as participating in politics. Yet, the services received are controlled and paid for by government. Social benefits such as free education, free health care, and the guarantee of an income in old age or during unemployment are so taken for granted today that most people see them as nonpolitical. People do not want a change in government after an election to result in radical changes in major social policies.

British people do not hold government responsible for what is most important in their lives; life satisfaction is evaluated very differently from public policy. When opinion polls annually ask what people think next year will be like for themselves and their family, nine-tenths of the time a majority say they expect the coming year to be all right for themselves, even when many expect economic difficulties for the country as a whole. When people are asked to evaluate their lives, they are most satisfied with their family, friends, home, and job and least satisfied with major political institutions of society.[43]

Satisfaction with the present goes along with acceptance of the principle of political change. However, even when a goal is agreed on, there are differences about the particular policy that can best achieve that goal. There are disagreements about the direction of change—for example, whether Westminster should take more responsibility for public services or devolve more responsibilities to regions and municipalities, and whether Britain should align itself more closely with the United States or with the EU. Politics in Britain is thus an ongoing debate about the direction, the means, and the tempo of adapting old institutions and inherited policies to the twenty-first century.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

- How would you describe the unwritten constitution of Britain?
- What are the similarities and differences between being a president and being a prime minister?
- How many nations are there in the United Kingdom, and what are they?
- What are the continents and countries with which Britain has the closest links?
- How would you describe the different parties that have seats in the House of Commons?
- What policies claim the largest portion of public expenditures and why?
- What will be the main challenges facing the winning government after the next general election?

KEY TERMS

Cabinet
centralization
class
collectivist theory of government
Conservative Party
core executive
Crown
decentralization
devolution
Downing Street
first-past-the-post electoral system
government
individualist theory
insider and outsider pressure groups
Irish Republican Army (IRA)
Labour Party
Liberal Democratic Party
multiparty system
New Labour Party
Northern Ireland
official secrecy
Parliament
prime minister
privatization

quasi-autonomous nongovernmental organization (quango)
Scotland
territorial justice
Thatcherism
trusteeship theory of government
United Kingdom
unwritten constitution
Wales
Westminster
Whitehall

SUGGESTED READINGS

Bache, Ian, and Andrew Jordan, eds. *The Europeanization of British Politics.* Basingstoke, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.

Butler, D. E., and Geraint Butler. *British Political Facts Since 1979.* Basingstoke, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.

______. *Twentieth Century British Political Facts, 1900–2000.* 8th ed. Basingstoke, England: Macmillan, 2000.

Flinders, Matthew. *The Politics of Accountability in the Modern State.* Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2001.

Hazell, Robert, ed. *The English Question.* London: Constitution Unit, 2006.

Ingle, Stephen. *The British Party System.* 4th ed. London: Routledge, 2008.

Jordan, Grant, and William A. Maloney. *Democracy and Interest Groups.* Basingstoke, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

Kavanagh, Dennis, and David Butler. *The British General Election of 2005.* Basingstoke, England: Palgrave Macmillan., 2005

McGarvey, Neil, and Paul Cairney. *Scottish Politics: An Introduction.* Basingstoke, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.

Moran, Michael. *The British Regulatory State: High Modernism and Hyper-Innovation.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.

Norris, Pippa, and Joni Lovenduski. *Political Recruitment: Gender, Race, and Class in the British Parliament.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

Norris, Pippa, and Christopher Wlezien, eds. *Britain Votes 2005.* Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2005.

Oliver, Dawn. *Constitutional Reform in the United Kingdom.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.

Page, Edward C., and Bill Jenkins. *Policy Bureaucracy: Government with a Cast of Thousands.* Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2005.

Park, Alison, ed. *British Social Attitudes Survey: The 24th Report.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2008.

Pattie, Charles, Patrick Seyd, and Paul Whitely. *Citizenship in Britain.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

Rallings, Colin, and Michael Thrasher. *British Electoral Facts, 1832–2006.* Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2007.

Rose, Richard. *The Prime Minister in a Shrinking World.* Boston: Polity Press, 2001.

Rose, Richard, and Phillip L. Davies. *Inheritance in Public Policy: Change Without Choice in Britain.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994.

Seldon, Anthony. *Blair.* New York: Free Press, 2004.

Seldon, Anthony, Peter Seldon, and Daniel Collings. *Blair Unbound.* New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007.

Smith, Martin J. *The Core Executive in Britain.* London: Macmillan, 1999.

Social Trends. London: Stationery Office, annual.

Whitaker's Almanack. London: J. Whitaker, annual.

Wilson, David, and Game, Chris. *Local Government in the United Kingdom.* 4th ed. Basingstoke, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

INTERNET RESOURCES

Site of British government departments. **www.gov.uk.**

Site of the House of Commons and of the House of Lords. **www.parliament.uk.**

Prime Minister's site. **www.pm.gov.uk.**

Comprehensive coverage of United Kingdom and global news. **www.news.bbc.co.uk.**

Commentaries on current proposals to reform government. **www.ucl.ac.uk/constitution-unit.**

Reports results of its frequent public opinion polls. **www.ipsos-mori.com/polls.**

Official site of the Political Studies Association, the professional body of British political scientists. **www.psa.ac.uk.**

ENDNOTES

1. See Richard Rose, *What Is Europe? A Dynamic Perspective* (New York: Addison Wesley Longman, 1996), ch. 3.
2. *Gallup Political and Economic Index* (London) no. 390 (February 1993): 42.
3. Quoted in Krishna Guha, "Labour Escapes from Its Bloody Tower," *Financial Times*, August 24, 2002.
4. Quoted in John Kampfner and David Wighton, "Reeling in Scotland to Bring England in Step," *Financial Times*, April 5, 1997.
5. See Richard Rose, "England: A Traditionally Modern Political Culture," in *Political Culture and Political Development*, ed. Lucian W. Pye and Sidney Verba (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1965), pp. 83–129.
6. Quoted in Richard Rose, *Do Parties Make a Difference?* 2nd ed. (Chatham, NJ: Chatham House, 1984), p. xv.
7. Andrew Dilnot and Paul Johnson, eds., Election Briefing 1997 (Commentary 60) (London: Institute for Fiscal Studies, 1997), p. 2.
8. John Kampfner and David Wighton, "Blair Seals Labour's Switch to Low Tax Party," *Financial Times*, March 27, 1997.
9. Quoted in Peter Hennessy, "Raw Politics Decide Procedure in Whitehall," *New Statesman* (London), October 24, 1986, p. 10.
10. Winston Churchill, *Their Finest Hour* (London: Cassell, 1949), p. 14.
11. See Richard Rose, *The Prime Minister in a Shrinking World* (Boston: Polity Press, 2001), fig. 6.1.
12. Lord Butler of Brockwell, quoted in George Jones, "Blair Savaged on Spin," *Daily Telegraph* (London) December 11, 2004.
13. For transatlantic comparisons of presidents and prime ministers, see Richard Rose, "Giving Direction to Government in Comparative Perspective," in *The Executive Branch*, ed. Joel Aberbach and Mark A. Peterson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 72–99.
14. Walter Bagehot, *The English Constitution* (London: World's Classics, 1955), p. 9.
15. David Leppard and Robert Winnett, "Blair Blames Ministers for Policy Gaffes," *Sunday Times* (London), April 18, 2004.
16. Careers in the Civil Service. London: First Division Association, 1987, p. 12.
17. Quoted by David Leppard, "ID Cards Doomed, Say Officials," *Sunday Times* (London), July 9, 2006. See also an interview with Sir Robin Butler, "How Not to Run a Country," *Spectator* (London), December 11, 2004.
18. Quoted in "Whitehall Remains Closed to Outsiders and Needs Radical Change, Report Says," *Times* (London), August 7, 2006.
19. Eric Varley, quoted in A. Michie and S. Hoggart, *The Pact* (London: Quartet Books, 1978), p. 13.
20. Hugh Heclo and Aaron Wildavsky, *The Private Government of Public Money* (London: Macmillan, 1974).
21. Bernard Ingham, press secretary to Margaret Thatcher, quoted in Richard Rose, "British Government: The Job at the Top," in *Presidents and Prime Ministers*, ed. R. Rose and E. Suleiman (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute, 1980), p. 43.
22. See Samuel H. Beer, *Modern British Politics*, 3rd ed. (London: Faber and Faber, 1982).
23. House of Commons, *Hansard* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office), November 11, 1947, col. 206.
24. The words of former Conservative Prime Minister John Major, "The Threat to Liberty Is Graver than Terrorism," Times (London), June 6, 2008.
25. Colin Bennett, "From the Dark to the Light: The Open Government Debate in Britain," *Journal of Public Policy* 5, no. 2 (1985): 209.
26. Quoted in Sean O'Neill, "Too Sensitive to Reveal, Minister," *Times* (London), October 3, 2005.
27. See Richard Rose and Ian McAllister, *The Loyalties of Voters* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1990), ch. 3.
28. Quoted in Maurice Kogan, *The Politics of Education* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1971), p. 135.
29. See the Fulton Committee, Report, vol. 1, pp. 27ff., and Appendix E, especially p. 162.
30. Sir Ken Jackson, quoted in Krishna Guha, "Engineers and Electricians Turn Away from Moderate Traditions," *Financial Times*, July 19, 2002.
31. See W. A. Maloney, G. Jordan, and A. M. McLaughlin, "Interest Groups and Public Policy: The Insider/Outsider Model Revisited," *Journal of Public Policy* 14, no. 1 (1994): 17–38.
32. See Ministry of Justice, *Review of Voting Systems* (Cm. 7304) (London: Stationery Office, 2008).
33. The Conservative Party used the first title and the Labour Party the second.
34. For details, see Denis Van Mechelen and Richard Rose, *Patterns of Parliamentary Legislation* (Aldershot, England: Gower, 1986), tab. 5.2, and more generally, Rose, *Do Parties Make a Difference?*
35. Richard Rose and Phillip L. Davies, *Inheritance in Public Policy: Change Without Choice in Britain* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), p. 28.
36. Reginald Maudling, quoted in David Butler and Michael Pinto-Duschinsky, *The British General Election of 1970* (London: Macmillan, 1971), p. 62.
37. See *Better Government Services: Executive Agencies in the 21st Century* (London: Office of Public Service Reforms and the Treasury, 2002).

38. Sir Leo Pliatzky, quoted in Peter Hennessy, "The Guilt of the Treasury 1000," *New Statesman* (London), January 23, 1987.
39. See Paul Peterson, "The American Mayor: Elections and Institutions," *Parliamentary Affairs* 53, no. 4 (2000): 667–679.
40. David Butler, Andrew Adonis, and Tony Travers, *Failure in British Government: The Politics of the Poll Tax* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1994).
41. See Richard Rose, "The Dynamics of the Welfare Mix in Britain," in *The Welfare State East and West*, ed. Richard Rose and Rei Shiratori (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 80–106.
42. Jonathan Powell, *Great Hatred, Little Room: Making Peace in Northern Ireland* (London: Bodley Head, 2008).
43. Richard Rose, *Ordinary People in Public Policy: A Behavioural Analysis* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1989), pp. 175ff.