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British civilisation and institutions

Politics and government **(2 sessions)**

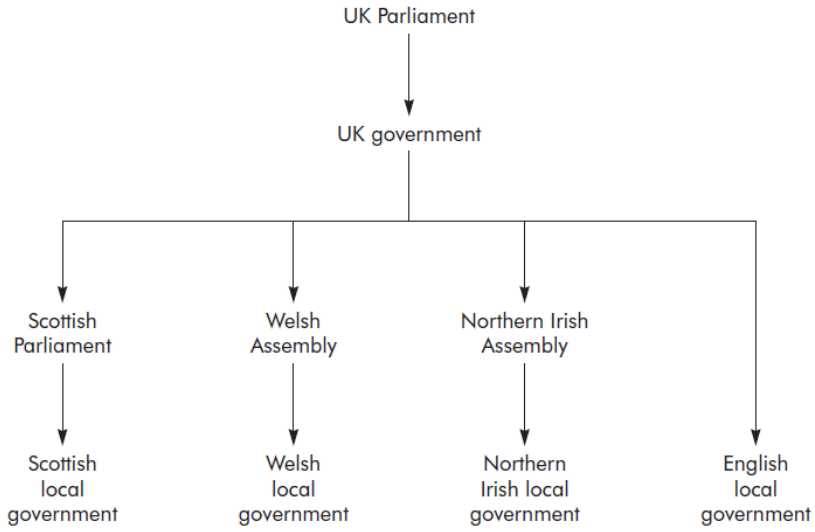
POLITICAL HISTORY IN THE BRITISH-IRISH Isles over the past eight hundred years illustrates the developing identity of the British state and evolutionary changes in its composition. The slow weakening of non-democratic monarchical and aristocratic power led to political and legislative authority being transferred to UK parliamentary structures, a central UK government and a powerful Prime Minister. Changing social conditions resulted in a growth of political parties, the extension of the vote to all adults, the development of local government, and a twentieth-century devolution (transfer) of some political power to Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. These historical processes have been accompanied by political, social and religious conflicts and constitutional compromise.

The political framework

Contemporary politics operate on UK, devolved and local government levels (see figure). The UK Parliament and government in London organize the UK as a whole. A Parliament in Scotland, Assemblies in Wales and Northern Ireland and a London Authority have varying degrees of devolved self-government. Local government throughout Britain organizes society at local level.

Devolution

Devolution (self-government or transfer of some powers from the Westminster Parliament) was first adapted in Ireland. Growing nationalist feelings in the nineteenth century led to calls for Home Rule for Ireland with its own Parliament in Dublin. Devolution provides a tier of decentralized government. It allows these countries (with their Executives and First Ministers) to decide more of their own affairs, such as education, health, transport, environment, home affairs and local government. The Westminster Parliament still has reserved powers over UK matters such as defense, foreign affairs, Social Security, taxation, broad economic policy and immigration. Devolution does not mean independence for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland nor a British federal system, although it is argued that a form of 'quasi-federalism' has been created.



Constitution and monarchy

The constitution

The constitutional system has experienced relatively few upheavals since 1688, despite devolution. Rather, existing principles have been pragmatically adapted to new conditions. Britain is described either as a constitutional monarchy (with the monarch as head of state) or as a parliamentary system, which is divided into legislative, executive and judicial branches.

Britain has no written constitution contained in any one document. Instead, the constitution consists of statute law (Acts of Parliament); common law or judge-made law; conventions (principles and practices of government which are not legally binding but have the force of law): some ancient documents such as Magna Carta; and the new addition of European Union law.

The monarchy

The constitutional title of the UK Parliament is the 'Queen-in-Parliament'. This means that state and government business is carried out in the name of the monarch by the politicians and officials of the system. But the Crown is only sovereign by the will of Parliament and acceptance by the people.

The monarchy is the oldest secular institution in Britain and there is hereditary succession to the throne, but only for Protestants. The eldest son of a monarch currently has priority over older daughters. The monarchy's continuity has been interrupted only by Cromwellian rule (1653–60). Royal executive power has disappeared. But the monarch still has formal constitutional roles and is head of state, head of the executive, judiciary and legislature, 'supreme governor' of the Church of England and commander-in-chief of the armed forces. Government ministers and officials are the monarch's servants, and many public office-holders swear allegiance to the Crown. The monarchy is thus a permanent fixture in the British system, unlike temporary politicians. It still has a practical and constitutional role to play in the operation of government.

The monarch is expected to be politically neutral; is supposed to reign but not rule; and cannot make laws, impose taxes, spend public money or act unilaterally. The monarch acts only on the advice of political ministers, which cannot be ignored, and contemporary Britain is therefore governed by Her Majesty's Government in the name of the Queen.

The monarch performs important duties such as the opening and dissolving of Parliament; giving the Royal Assent (or signature) to bills which have been passed by both Houses of Parliament; appointing government ministers and public figures; granting honours; leading proceedings of the Privy Council; and fulfilling international duties as head of state.

UK Parliament

The UK Parliament is housed in the Palace of Westminster in London. It comprises the non-elected House of Lords, the elected House of Commons and the monarch. The two Houses contain members from England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland and represent people with varied backgrounds and traditions.

Parliament gathers as a unified body only on ceremonial occasions, such as the State Opening of Parliament by the monarch in the House of Lords. Here it listens to the monarch's speech from the throne, which outlines the UK government's forthcoming legislative programme.

The party-political system

British elections at parliamentary, devolved and local levels depend upon the party political system, which has existed since the seventeenth century. For UK parliamentary general elections, the parties present their policies in the form of manifestos to the electorate for consideration during the few weeks of campaigning. A party candidate (chosen by a specific party) in a constituency is elected to the Westminster Parliament on a combination of party manifesto and the personality of the candidate. But party-activity continues outside the election period itself, as the politicians battle for power and the ears of the electorate at all levels.

Since 1945 there have been eight Labour and eight Conservative UK governments in Britain. Some have had large majorities in the House of Commons, while others have had small ones. Some, like the Labour government in the late 1970s and the Conservatives in the 1990s, had to rely on the support of smaller parties. Most of the MPs in the House of Commons belong to either the Conservative or the Labour Party. This continues the traditional two-party system in British politics, in which power alternates between two major parties.

The Labour Party has historically been a left-of-centre party with its own right and left wings. It emphasized social justice, equality of opportunity, economic planning and the state ownership of industries and services. It was supported by the trade unions (who had been influential in the party's development), the working class and some of the middle class.

The Conservative Party is a right-of-centre party, which also has right- and left-wing sections. It regards itself as a national party and appeals to people across class barriers. It emphasizes personal, social and economic freedom, individual ownership of property and shares and law and order.

Smaller parties are also represented in the House of Commons, such as the Scottish National Party; Plaid Cymru (the Welsh National Party); the Ulster Unionists and the Democratic Unionists (Protestant Northern Irish parties); the Social Democratic and Labour Party (moderate Roman Catholic Northern Irish Party); and Sinn Fein (Republican Northern Irish party). Other small parties, such as the Greens and fringe groups, may also contest a general election.

The party which wins most seats in the House of Commons at a general election usually forms the new government, even if it has not obtained a majority of the popular vote (the votes actually cast at an election). A party will have to gather more than 33 per cent of the popular vote before winning a large number of seats, and 40 per cent in order to expand that representation and form a government with an overall majority (a majority over all the other parties counted together). This majority enables it to carry out its election manifesto policies (the mandate theory).

UK government

The UK government is elected by and serves the whole of Britain. It is centred on Whitehall in London where its ministries and the Prime Minister's official residence (10 Downing Street) are located. The *Prime Minister* is appointed by the monarch and is usually the leader of the majority party in the Commons. His or her power stems from majority support in Parliament; the authority to choose and dismiss ministers; the leadership of the party in the country; and control over policy-making.

The Prime Minister has great power within the British system of government and it is suggested that the office has become like an all-powerful executive presidency, which bypasses Parliament and government departments. But there are checks on this power, inside and outside the party and Parliament.