

GOVERNMENT AND POLITICS IN BRITAIN

GREAT BRITAIN OR LITTLE ENGLAND?

Britain clearly has had one of the most influential and powerful political systems in world history. It was the first country in Europe to develop a limited monarchy, achieved gradually so as to maintain stability. Modern democratic institutions and modern industrialization have their roots in English soil, and English influence spread all over the world during the 18th and 19th centuries throughout a far-flung empire. At the beginning of the 20th century, Britain was undoubtedly the most powerful country in the world. Truly the name “Great Britain” applies to its many accomplishments.

Yet many British subjects refer to their homeland affectionately as “Little England.” Perhaps there is something of the “David and Goliath” appeal – the little island that conquered the world! At any rate, the two names aptly define Britain’s dilemma in the early years of the 21st century. As a precursor in the development of modern democracy, industrialization, and imperialism, it is now a model in the art of growing old gracefully. Britain has lost much of its empire and has slipped out of the front rank of the economies of western Europe, and yet the country is still a major player in world politics.

The world watches as Britain helps define the meaning of progress. Perhaps it is not unilateral – onward ever, backward never. Instead, Britain is adjusting to its new reality as one European country among many, and yet the nation’s influence remains strong. Many believe that regeneration is in the making – politically, economically, and socially – despite the challenges presented by the recent global economic recession.

SOVEREIGNTY, AUTHORITY, AND POWER

Great Britain has the oldest democratic tradition of any country in the world, and as a result, has many sources of authority and power that provide stability and legitimacy. This section is divided into three parts:

- Social Compacts and Constitutionalism
- Historical Evolution of National Political Traditions
- Political Culture

SOCIAL COMPACTS AND CONSTITUTIONALISM

The legitimacy of the government has developed gradually, so that today tradition is a primary source of stability. Like so many other advanced democracies in Europe, **traditional legitimacy** for many years was based on the belief that an hereditary ruling family had the right to rule. Although the tradition includes a monarchy, the limitation of the king’s power began early, until the power of Parliament gradually eclipsed that of the king by the end of the 17th century. Today most British citizens accept democracy as a basic component of their government. With the notable exception of Protestant/Catholic conflicts in Northern Ireland, most British citizens accept a church/state relationship in which the church does not challenge the authority of the government.

Ironically, the country that influenced the development of so many other modern democracies has never had a written constitution as such. Instead, the “constitution” has evolved over time, with important documents, common law, and customs combining to form what is often called the **“Constitution of the Crown.”**



CHANGE OVER TIME: KEY FEATURES IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF CONSTITUTIONALISM IN BRITAIN

By the end of the 17th century, Britain's political system was clearly based on **rational-legal authority** – a system of well-established laws and procedures. Despite Britain's beginnings centuries before in the traditional legitimacy of an hereditary monarch, the country had gradually developed a "Constitution of the Crown" through many important documents and legal principles, including these:

- **Magna Carta** – In 1215 King John signed this document, agreeing to consult nobles before he made important political decisions, especially those regarding taxes. Magna Carta, then, forms the basis of limited government that placed restrictions on the power of monarchs.
- **The Bill of Rights** – This document lists rights retained by Parliament, not by individual citizens. William and Mary signed this document in 1688, giving important policymaking power to Parliament, including the power of the purse.
- **Common Law** – This legal system is based on local customs and precedent rather than formal legal codes. It developed gradually in Britain, and today is found in Great Britain, the United States, and other countries with a strong English influence. Common law allows the decisions that public officials and courts make to set precedents for later actions and decisions, eventually forming a comprehensive set of principles for governance.

HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF NATIONAL POLITICAL TRADITIONS

The British political system is influenced by many traditions from the country's long history. Britain's political culture has developed for the most part gradually and consensually, although not totally without conflict. However, many current political conflicts result from unresolved issues from the dramatic changes brought by the Industrial Revolution in the late 18th and 19th centuries. The evolution of British political traditions may be analyzed in these historical categories:

- **The shaping of the monarchy** – The British monarchy has been in place for many centuries and has survived many transformations. Britain established a limited monarchy as early as the 13th century when nobles forced King John to sign the Magna Carta. During the English Civil War of the 1640s, the monarch, Charles I, was beheaded, but the monarchy was brought back later in the 17th century with powers seriously restricted by Parliament. Today, the monarchy has no decision-making power but plays an important symbolic role in British society.
- **The ascendancy of Parliament** – The English Civil War was a conflict between the supporters of the king, Charles I, and those of Parliament (the Roundheads). Parliament won, the king was executed, and the Roundhead leader, Oliver Cromwell, took over the country. However, the "Protectorate" that followed was short-lived, and the monarchy was restored when Parliament brought Charles II, the

beheaded king's son, to the throne. Succeeding kings did not always respect the power of Parliament, so the balance of power was decided by the Glorious Revolution of 1688. This bloodless revolution established the constitutional monarchy when William and Mary agreed to written restrictions on their power by signing the Bill of Rights. Parliament and its ministers continued to gain strength as the monarchy lost it through succeeding kings. The power of the king's prime minister was firmly established in the 18th century by Robert Walpole, minister to Kings George I and George II.

- **Challenges of the Industrial Revolution** – During the 18th century, two very important economic influences – colonial mercantilism and the Industrial Revolution – established England as a major economic power. The results radically changed traditional English society and its economic basis in the feudal relationship between lord and peasant. The brisk trade with colonies all over the world and the manufacture of goods created unprecedented wealth held by a new class of merchants and businessmen. Lives of peasants were transformed as they left rural areas, moved to cities, and went to work in factories. New merchants, businessmen, and workers all demanded that the political system respond by including them in decision-making. The 19th century reforms reflect their successes.
- **Colonialism** – During the era from about 1750 to 1914 the forces of nationalism and industrialization made it possible for European nations to build global empires that stretched across the continents. The famous statement that “the sun never sets on the British Empire” describes the huge network of control that Britain was able to establish during the 19th century, making it among the most powerful empires in all of world history. Nationalism enabled the government to rally their citizens' support for overseas expansion. Industrialization allowed Britain to produce goods to sell in foreign markets, and it encouraged them to look for raw materials not available at home. Claiming lands far away increased the country's ability to create wealth and assert power. Industrialization also made communications and transportation so much more efficient that it became possible to link lands together across the globe under one imperial banner. Just as Britain's democratization was gradual, so too was the erosion of the British Empire. It began with the loss of the American colonies in the late 18th century, although Britain actually gained in stature and wealth during the 19th century, with expansion in Asia and Africa.
- **Britain in the 20th and early 21st centuries** – At the dawn of the 20th century, Britain was the greatest imperialist nation in the world. By the early 21st century, her power had been diminished by two world wars, serious economic problems of the 1970s, and the rising power of the United States. After World War II, Britain developed a strong welfare state, which was curtailed during the 1980s by a wave of “**Thatcherism**,” a conservative, capitalist backlash led by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. In more recent years, Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair charted a course toward what he called “A Third Way.” Modern Britain, then, is adjusting to a new level of world power, and is trying to find the right balance between the benefits of the welfare state and the trend toward greater reliance on a market economy.

POLITICAL CULTURE

“This fortress built by Nature for herself,
Against infection and the hand of war,
This happy breed of men, this little world,
This precious stone set in the silver sea,
Which serves it in the office of a wall,
Or as a moat defensive to a house,

Against the envy of less happier lands;
This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England.”

Richard II
William Shakespeare

This famous quote from Shakespeare tells us a great deal about the political culture of Great Britain. It reflects a large amount of **nationalism**, or pride in being English. It also reflects **insularity**, or the feeling of separation from the continent of Europe. In modern times, insularity has caused Britain to have a cautious attitude toward participation in the European Union. When most of the EU members accepted the euro as a common currency in January 2002, Britain refused, and instead kept the English pound. However, despite Shakespeare’s joy in this “fortress” state, his country has been far from isolated and has spread its influence around the world.

England’s geographic features have shaped her political culture through the years. Important features include:

- **An island** – Britain is far enough away from mainland Europe to protect her as long as it has had a good navy. Yet the island is close enough to the mainland to allow interaction.
- **Small size** – As a result, its resources are limited. This geographical fact shaped its efforts to colonize other lands and become an imperial power.
- **A short supply of fertile soil, short growing season** – Britain’s ability to feed its population is limited as a result.
- **Temperate climate, but cold, chilly, and rainy** – Britain’s population density is one of the highest in the world, but it is considerably lower in northern areas.
- **No major geographical barriers** – No mountains, deserts, or raging rivers hamper transportation/communication within the country.

Other characteristics of the political culture include:

- **Noblesse oblige and social class** – Although the influence of social class on political attitudes is not as strong as it has been in the past, a very important tradition in British politics is *noblesse oblige*, the duty of the upper classes to take responsibility for the welfare of the lower classes. The custom dates to feudal times when lords protected their serfs and their land in return for labor. Today, *noblesse oblige* is reflected in the general willingness of the British to accept a “**welfare state**,” including the National Health Service. The “welfare state” gained support in many other European nations in the period after World War II, with a common acceptance of the government’s responsibility to provide public benefits, such as education, health care, and transportation. However, during the 1980s, Margaret Thatcher’s government brought Britain’s acceptance of the welfare state into question by cutting social services significantly. *Noblesse oblige* also supported the building of Britain’s colonial empire as the country extended its paternalism to the tending of its overseas possessions.
- **Multi-nationalism** – Although Britain has a relatively large amount of **cultural homogeneity**, its boundaries include England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, all of which have been different nations in the past, but are united under one government today. Although English is a common language, it is spoken with different dialects, and religious differences between Catholics and Prot-

estants in Northern Ireland remain a major source of conflict today. These national identities are still strong today, and they greatly impact the way that the political system functions.

The legitimacy of the British government is evidenced by the willingness of the English people to obey the law. Britain's police force is smaller than that of most other advanced democracies, and crimes tend to be based on individual violence, and not on strikes against the state, such as assassinations. Until relatively recently, the only notable exception was Northern Ireland, where many crimes have been carried out with the political objective of overturning an elected government. In more recent years Britain has experienced terrorist acts as part of the larger wave of terrorism that has swept over many advanced democracies in the post-9/11 world.