

What is politics?

The term 'politics' has come a long way since it was coined by the classical Greeks. Originally it was little more than a description of how states were governed. In the modern world, however, 'politics' suggests *conflict* — that is, conflict between ideas, conflict between sections of the community and conflict between individuals.

The alternative to peaceful political activity can involve physical conflict. This may take the form of general disorder and/or terrorist activity (as in Northern Ireland from 1968 to the mid-1990s, in the Middle East or racial tensions in American cities), revolution (as in Russia in 1917, Libya in 2011) or civil war (China in the 1930s and 1940s; Syria, Somalia and Sudan more recently). Such violence can be viewed as a *failure* of politics. If conflict cannot be resolved peacefully within political institutions and processes, groups often resort to violence. In Northern Ireland in the 1990s and 2000s, for example, successive British governments and leaders sought to persuade political leaders — even those who led extreme groups such as Sinn Fein and the Democratic Unionists — to renounce violence and pursue their goals through conventional, peaceful politics instead. In the event, peaceful politics was finally and happily restored to the province after 2007.

Professor Bernard Crick, in his celebrated work *In Defence of Politics* (4th edn, 1992), summed up the meaning and importance of politics thus:

Politics arises from accepting the fact of the simultaneous existence of different groups, hence different interests and different traditions, within a territorial unit under a common rule.

So we can summarise that the term 'politics' refers to three main activities concerning the state. These are the conflict of ideas, the conflict of interests and the struggle for power. Below we examine each of these in turn.

The conflict of ideas

Modern politics would not be politics unless those who take part in it adopt and promote ideas as to how the state should be run and how society should be shaped. When individuals go to the polling station they generally have political ideas in their minds, however mild and unformed these may be, when they vote. The ordinary members of political parties presumably join their party in the first place because they have political ideas and hope to further them through their chosen party. Politicians themselves, whether they be local councillors, members of regional assemblies, national Members of Parliament (MPs) or ministers, are continuously involved in promoting political ideas. At all levels of politics, therefore, we see and hear the clash of ideas. Indeed in 2015–16 the UK was engaged in perhaps the biggest clash of ideas in its modern history — whether to leave or stay in the European Union (EU). This was politics at its most intense.

On a grand scale, political ideas become ideologies. An **ideology** can be defined as a collection of ideas that propose social change and include some 'blueprint' for a future idealised society. These ideas are also based on one or several specific principles such as equality, common ownership of property or individual liberty. Ideologies are often radical, and so those who support them usually flourish on the extremities of moderate Western politics. The most influential and successful ideologies have included, for example, socialism, fascism, feminism and radical forms of liberalism and nationalism. Conservatism is also often described as an ideology, although many

Key term

Ideology A coherent set of well-established ideas that propose specific changes in society and which imply some kind of vision of what kind of society is desirable. Ideologies are also based on certain fixed values and principles such as freedom, equality, order and justice.

Activity

Research the following current political issues. What are the main points of conflict?

- Policy concerning energy generation in the UK
- Policy concerning conflicts in the Middle East
- How the government should tax the very wealthy

The conflict of interests

When we use the term 'interests' we mean sections of the community that have an interest in their own concerns. Various groups may feel they need special protection, that they do not receive their fair share of the national wealth, or are not treated fairly by government. The nature of such groups, or interests, varies considerably. They may be occupational groups, such as firefighters, students or junior doctors; they may be regional, such as those who live in the countryside, or inhabitants of regions that are economically depressed; they may be representatives of industries such as tobacco manufacturing, brewing or horse-racing. An 'interest', as far as politics is concerned, is any group that seeks to act to achieve some improvements in its own circumstances. Most groups believe that politics can provide a solution to their concerns.

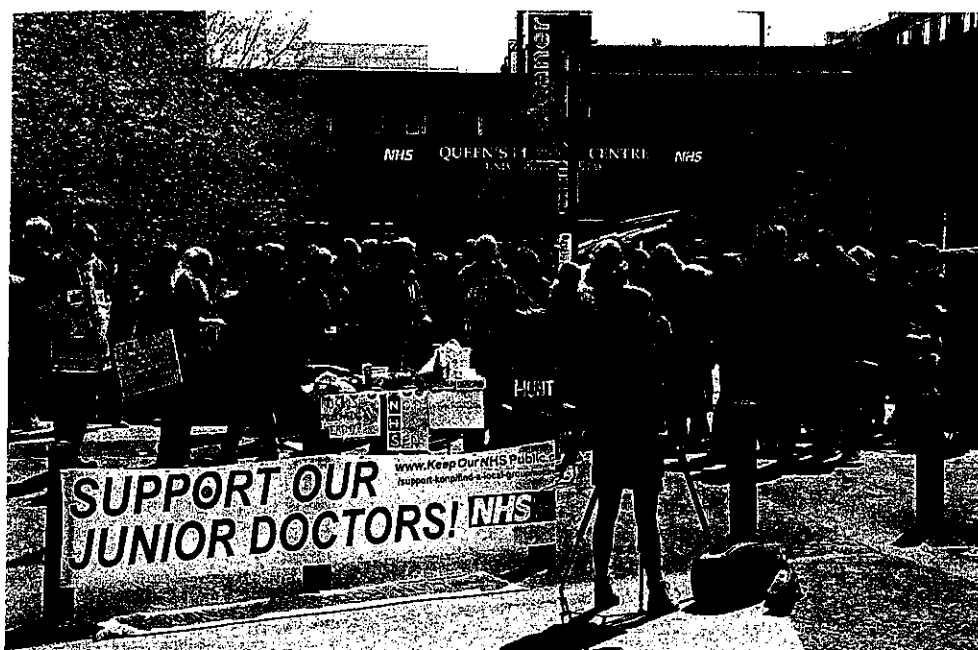
Proposal	Opposing idea
Britain should renew its Trident nuclear submarine fleet despite its very high cost.	Britain should abandon its nuclear deterrent on the grounds of both cost and morality.
A system of selective grammar schools should be introduced in various areas to allow the most able pupils to study in a more challenging environment.	All schools should be open to pupils of all abilities and be genuinely comprehensive.
The level of income tax should be systematically reduced to create more disposable wealth and create more incentives to growth in incomes.	Income taxes should be relatively high, especially on the wealthy, to reduce the income gap between rich and poor and to be able to pay for better public services.
Immigration should be strictly controlled to protect jobs and public services in Britain and to avoid social conflict.	Britain should remain open to immigration to boost the economy and make society culturally more diverse.

Table 1 The conflict of ideas – some political conflicts in the UK in 2016-17

people who call themselves conservatives are *opposed* to change. When ideologies come into conflict, politics can become extremely volatile. This occurs because ideologically motivated groups tend to have firmly held views and are especially determined to bring about their political goals. It is for this reason that ideological conflict often breaks out into violence, as described above.

A good example of *ideological* conflict occurred within the UK Labour Party in 2015. Having suffered two consecutive election defeats, the party needed to elect a new leader to succeed Ed Milliband. To everyone's surprise Jeremy Corbyn, a radical socialist candidate, emerged as a front runner. The leadership election within the party became a bitter ideological conflict. Corbyn won, so socialism triumphed in this case against a more moderate form of social democracy that had dominated the Labour Party since the mid-1990s.

On the whole, however, in the stable, well-established 'democracies' of the world, politics remains a more moderate, and certainly peaceful, activity. Most political activists wish to create changes in society which are not fundamental. Jeremy Corbyn and his followers were an unusual exception to this reality. Such moderate changes may be based loosely upon ideological thinking, but they may also be viewed as ways of improving the general welfare and security of the people. Table 1 identifies a number of political ideas that have emerged in the UK in recent years, together with their opposing beliefs.



Junior doctors on strike in Nottingham, April 2016

Interests use the political system and members of the political community to further their own cause. They sometimes attach themselves to a political party. Trade unions, in particular, used to work closely with the Labour Party (indeed, Labour emerged from the trade union movement at the start of the twentieth century). More recently the Countryside Alliance, which defends the interests of members of rural communities, saw the Conservative Party as its most traditional supporter. In more general terms, interests will use a variety of methods to further their aims. This may involve public demonstrations, internet and media campaigns, influence in Parliament and so on. Their methods will be explored further in Chapter 1.

So, part of politics is about the clash of such interests. Often their aims conflict with each other and, when this happens, politics becomes the process of resolving these conflicts. Examples of the conflict of interests are shown in Table 2.

Table 2 Examples of the conflict of interests, 2016–17

Interest(s)	Counter-interest(s)
Business groups and the North of England region support the development of HS2, high-speed rail links between London and the north.	Environmentalists oppose the destruction of the countryside, while rural communities on the routes fear they will suffer.
Oil companies seek government permits to allow 'fracking' in various locations.	Environmentalists and local communities oppose fracking on the grounds that it may be dangerous.
Current old-age pensioners wish to preserve the value of their pensions.	Younger people believe their living standards are being eroded to pay for the older generation and so wish to see a more balanced provision between them and the older generation.
Junior NHS doctors opposed reform to their working hours.	Groups representing patients wished to see a more comprehensive, 7-day health service.
Representatives of poorer sections of society support a more generous welfare benefits system.	Representatives of taxpayers resist higher benefits to keep down the tax burden.

In cases like those described in Table 2, politicians face the difficult task of mediating between conflicting interests.

The struggle for power

Arguably, the desire for power is a natural human characteristic. This is a contentious view and some ideological groups, anarchists in particular, may deny it. However, we need not concern ourselves with psychology or philosophy here. What matters to us in our study of political behaviour is that modern society clearly produces many people who do have a drive to achieve and exercise power. Many will say, of course, that their motives for achieving power are altruistic. They have a desire to improve society in some way and must therefore gain power to be able to do so. Yet some may seek power *for its own sake*. Which ever is true — and perhaps both are true — there can be no doubt that politics is about the struggle for power between individuals and groups.

This struggle takes many forms, some of which are shown below:

- Parties compete against each other for power at national, regional and local elections.
- Individuals compete at elections to become representatives in local councils, regional assemblies or the Westminster Parliament itself.
- Individual politicians compete to be appointed to senior positions, either in the government or on the opposition front bench.
- At the very highest level of power, there is a struggle to be prime minister within the governing party.

These struggles for political power are what many of us think of when we use the term 'politics'. This is partly because the media tend to concentrate on such issues when reporting on politics and partly because the struggle for power does, to some extent, reflect the other conflicts we have described. Clearly, which party wins an election will determine to a degree which political ideas become dominant and which interests are more likely to be favoured.

When Margaret Thatcher was elected leader of the Conservative Party in 1975 the policy direction of her party began to change and the nature of British society was transformed during her premiership in the 1980s. The election to power of the Labour Party in 1997 after 18 years of Conservative government also began to change the balance of power in the UK. Under Thatcher, for example, financial and business interests found themselves more influential, while trade unions lost much of their political impact. Under Labour, after 1997, Britain became more closely integrated within the EU and the interests of the poor were more favoured.

In 2010 a new kind of struggle emerged when the UK saw its first coalition government since the Second World War. This meant that the struggle between parties was taking place both *inside* and *outside* government. The two coalition partners — Conservatives and Liberal Democrats — were forced to compete with each other to have their policies adopted.

The struggle to become party leader is also a permanent feature of British politics. When David Cameron resigned as Conservative leader and prime minister in 2016, following his defeat in the EU referendum, there was an immediate contest to replace him within the Conservative Party, ultimately won by Theresa May. Jeremy Corbyn replaced Ed Miliband as Labour Party leader in 2015 and Tim Farron replaced Nick Clegg as Liberal Democrat leader in the same year.

So, when individuals seek political power, the effects of the outcome can be far reaching. At the same time, however, the struggle for power is, to some extent, merely a reflection of a natural desire of some individuals to gain status and influence.

Activity

Research the following former prime ministers. In each case establish why they lost power and who replaced them:

- James Callaghan
- Margaret Thatcher
- Tony Blair

What is government?

Before we attempt definitions of government and the state, it may be useful to consider a number of concepts that are related to such institutions. In particular, it is important to understand the principles that lie behind the activity of governing. These are legitimacy, power, authority and sovereignty.

Legitimacy

Here we are asking the question: what gives any government the *right* to rule? This refers both to the *system* of government — for example, monarchy, single-party rule, parliamentary democracy etc. — and to the individuals who hold office within the government. It is a difficult question to resolve because it has a number of answers, all of which are plausible.

There are several possible ways in which legitimacy can be claimed.

- **Tradition** is the first option. It suggests that a system of rule is legitimate if it has existed for a long period of time. This is a form of legitimacy often claimed by hereditary monarchies. Such monarchies still flourish in the Gulf States in the Middle East.
- **Force** is a more controversial basis for rule. The argument here is that *any* government, no matter how it is constituted, could be seen as legitimate if it is able to maintain peace and security within a country. This is sometimes described as 'might is right'. In the democratic world, however, this kind of legitimacy is not normally acceptable.
- **Consent** has become the most important criterion for legitimacy. Indeed, where power is exercised with the broad consent of the people, expressed specifically through elections, we can describe it as **democratic legitimacy**. The principle itself is simple: if a regime enjoys the broad consent of its people, it can be considered to be legitimate. Consent can be shown by widespread peaceful participation in politics as well as by a lack of open dissidence.

Power

In a general sense, *power* can mean the ability to make other people or groups do what one wants them to do, even if this is against their will. But this is too simple a definition. We use the term 'power' to signify a whole variety of means by which one individual or institution is able to exert its will over others. In particular, we need to consider different *levels* of power. These are set out below.

- **Coercive power** is the strongest form. This can also be described as *force*. Coercion involves the use of physical force, or at least the threat of physical force. In extreme cases, coercion can involve the use of execution, torture, terror and imprisonment of opponents, as has occurred in many totalitarian regimes. Of course, most states do not need to go to such extremes. It is sufficient to reserve the use of force against those who refuse to conform to the laws or who threaten the security of the state itself.
- **Political power** is perhaps how we generally understand the concept of power. This is the power exercised by members of the political community, including parties, their leaders and other institutions. Political power includes the ability to persuade, but it normally involves the use of rewards and sanctions. Thus prime ministers in the UK have power because of their use of patronage. Since a prime minister controls the appointment of all ministers and many other senior positions

Key terms

Consent In democratic politics consent means that government is founded upon the authority of the people. Normally consent is demonstrated in free elections. However, it can also be indicated by widespread support for the institutions of government.

Democratic legitimacy

A key principle in modern democratic life — government may be considered legitimate if, first, it is elected and, second, it is accountable to the electorate. In this way the consent of the people is implied.

in the apparatus of the state, such as top civil servants and judges, he or she is able to exercise power. This is particularly true when we consider the way in which the party whips in Parliament are able to control MPs. By making it clear that loyalty to the party line may improve an individual's career prospects, power is effectively being exercised.

The strongest form of political power, however, is that which is granted by Parliament — the ultimate source of all political power in the UK. Thus, government departments, their ministers, devolved governments in Scotland and Wales, local authorities and other public bodies have all been granted powers by Acts of Parliament. The powers of the prime minister, meanwhile, have been established largely by tradition or *convention*, as such traditions are often known. This means that a prime minister exercises power simply because everybody in the political community accepts that he or she has the traditional right to do so. **Influence** is the weakest form of power. We often use the word 'power' when we really mean influence. Thus it is said that the newspapers have power, or that public opinion is powerful, or that trade unions have power within the Labour Party. In each of these cases it is *influence* that is being referred to. In such examples, the press, the people and the unions may have some influence over what government and Parliament do, but they cannot enforce their wishes. In 1974 Steven Lukes also identified three forms of political power which mirror these distinctions. The first is power is exercised *openly* (through cabinet and parliament, for example); the second is *secretive* power (behind closed doors in negotiations among ministers, officials and outside parties); and the third is *manipulative* power (which involved persuasion and the use of incentives). Both secretive and manipulative power may involve links between decision makers and the media, as described in Chapter 4 of this book.

Authority

Authority is a more difficult term than power. Often the terms 'power' and 'authority' are used interchangeably, but in politics it is essential to distinguish between them. Put simply, authority is the *right* to exercise power, it is not power itself. When we say a teacher has authority, for example, we mean that he or she has been granted power over the students by the head teacher and, more indirectly, by the parents and the wider community. Thus, the source of the authority allows the teacher to exercise power. In pure democracies all political authority has its source in the people. The situation in the UK, however, is more complex. While it is true that many of those working in the political system exercise power because they have been directly or indirectly elected by the people, this cannot be said of either the prime minister or the monarch. Their sources of authority have been described as *charismatic* or *traditional*. The ruling party, meanwhile, rules because it has won a general election. This is known as *elective* or *rational* authority. The German sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920) clarified the nature of political authority by identifying its nature in three ways:

- **Traditional authority** The right to govern exists because authority has existed over a long period of time. This applies particularly to hereditary monarchies, such as the sheikhdoms of the Middle East. It can be assumed that if the people have allowed such monarchies to exercise power over a long period of time, they are, by implication, consenting to such rule.
- **Charismatic authority** The term 'charisma' refers to an individual's ability to inspire and persuade, and attract a following, by the force of their personality.

Key term

Authority Authority is the right to exercise power. It is closely associated with the idea of legitimacy. In a democracy, authority is normally granted by the electorate or by the legislature.

Synoptic link

This section on power should be revisited when you read Chapter 7, where the sources of prime ministerial power are explored.



Members of the Saudi Royal family enjoy traditional political authority

Here authority is granted by acclaim, because the people wish to be governed by a particular leader. Charismatic authority is typically combined with other forms and so increases the quantity of authority, allowing more power to be exercised. We can say, for example, that President John F. Kennedy in the USA enjoyed charismatic authority in addition to his elective authority (US presidents are directly elected, so enjoy direct elective authority). Donald Trump was elected US president in 2016 to some extent because, to his supporters at least, he was a charismatic figure.

- **Legal-rational authority** This refers to any rational way of granting authority. In practice, in modern democracies, this is always by election and so is best described as 'elective authority'. In current politics, elective authority is the most powerful justification for the exercise of power.

Table 3 shows the relevant sources of authority of four UK governing institutions.

Table 3 Sources of authority in the UK

Parliament	The authority (which is limited) of the House of Lords is traditional. The Commons' main source of authority is by election and, therefore, the people. However, the fact that Parliament as a whole is sovereign has its origins in tradition.
The government	Clearly the government's authority is elective.
The monarch	Though the power of the monarchy is very limited, the Crown enjoys considerable traditional authority.
The prime minister	Much of the PM's authority is traditional, but he or she also enjoys indirect elective authority in terms of being the leader of the ruling party. Some prime ministers, such as Winston Churchill and Margaret Thatcher, were also said to enjoy charismatic authority to reinforce the other two sources.

As with many political concepts, the terms 'state' and 'government' can be misunderstood and used as if they have the same meaning. In reality they are very different and should be employed with great care.

The state and the government

The answer is that everybody in the political system pays lip service to the authority of the monarch out of traditional respect, but everybody also understands that this does not really mean anything. The monarch exercises no power and is not permitted to involve herself in politics at all. She is a figurehead who represents the *idea* of the United Kingdom, but not the substance, a symbol of unity and strength, but not of political direction.

We cannot leave government without referring to the position of the monarchy in the UK. Historically, of course the monarch *was* government in England and indeed Scotland. This was the case until the seventeenth century. Since then, gradually but inexorably, the monarch has ceased to be the government and has ceased to have any political role at all. Yes, the monarchy and all that goes with it *seems* to be important, but, in a political sense, it is not. How does this come about?

A note on the role of the monarchy

at work.

the EU in the 2016 referendum was a perfect example of popular sovereignty is in the early stages of development. The UK's momentous decision to leave polls and petitions, it could be argued that a new form of popular sovereignty. Referendums are another obvious example. With the increasing use of internet governments and representatives, and grant a mandate to a government. At elections, the people become sovereign for a day, when they choose occasions when the people themselves seem to be making ultimate decisions. ● **Popular sovereignty** is a form of political sovereignty. It relates to those sovereign.

realistic to think of the prime minister and the government as being politically they decide who will form the next government. Between elections it is more *reality (de facto)*. Thus, at elections, the people are politically sovereign because sovereignty allows us to consider who ultimately makes political decisions in of thinking only about where legal power lies in theory (*de jure*), political ● **Political sovereignty** refers to the location of real political power. Instead it amounts to the ultimate source of all laws and of all legal power.

● **Legal sovereignty** means the ultimate source of all legal authority. In practice, popular:

It is useful to divide sovereignty into three main types — legal, political and out of tradition. We must, therefore, ignore this anomaly.

longer the case. However, although the term is no longer valid, it is often still used sovereign power, a situation which held true up to the seventeenth century, it is no holds supreme power. While in the past, historically, the monarch was indeed the 'Sovereign' or even the 'Sovereign Lord'. This appears to indicate that the monarch point of potential confusion. The monarch of the UK is sometimes described as the Before we examine the meaning of **sovereignty**, it is important to note and avoid a

Sovereignty

The concept of sovereignty is explored in Chapter 8.

Synoptic link

Sovereignty Ultimate power that cannot be overruled. Sovereignty can be either legal or political, depending on whether it is legally enforceable or whether it is a political reality.

Key term

The state

If we refer to 'a state' or 'the state' we mean different things. A state is a country, a territory within which sovereignty can be identified and is widely recognised both within the country and abroad. There is no doubt that France, Italy, the USA and Nigeria are 'states'. Other countries recognise them as states and understand who represents their government.

When we say 'the state', however, we are referring to institutions within the country. The state normally refers to the permanent collection of institutions that administers a territory. Normally we would include the following within the state:

- The armed forces and the security and intelligence establishment
- Law enforcement agencies, including judges, courts, the police and the prison service
- The bureaucracy or civil service — politically neutral bodies which may stay in office even when political governments change
- Other institutions that may or may not be parts of the permanent apparatus of the state, depending on the arrangements within the country (in the UK, the National Health Service, most educational organisations, the BBC and the Benefits Agency are all parts of the state; in the USA, healthcare is largely in the private sector and there is no state-run broadcasting; in France, the railways are part of the state, while in the UK they are not)
- Bodies that exist at sub-central level, such as local authorities and devolved administrations

So, we can make two assertions about the state: first, it is normally politically neutral and, second, it is permanent.

Government

The government is a collection of individuals and bodies that are political in nature and that are not permanent. In the UK the government consists of the prime minister, cabinet, junior ministers and political advisers. Should the governing party lose power, all these individuals will cease to be the government and will be replaced by a new team. Normally we expect the government to give political direction to the state. Indeed, the senior members of the state are usually appointed by members of the government.

MPs, peers and Parliament in general do not fit neatly into either the 'state' or the 'government'. Instead they form the legislature (see below), whose role is to provide consent and accountability to government.

Branches of government

It is customary to divide the activity of government into three branches.

Legislature

In broad terms the legislature means the law-making body. However, this can be misleading, especially in the UK. Parliament, the UK's legislature (known as Congress in the USA, the *Chambre de Députés* in France and the *Bundestag* in Germany), does not normally make law. This is the responsibility of the government. In the UK, the legislature is primarily concerned with providing formal consent to

Synoptic link

Parliament, the UK legislature, is described and analysed in Chapter 6.

proposed laws — an activity known as 'promulgation'. Parliament also has limited powers to amend proposals and may, on rare occasions, reject proposed legislation. Legislatures in other countries sometimes *do* develop their own laws, notably the US Congress, but governments are usually more significant than legislatures in this law-making role.

Executive

The executive branch has three main roles.

- The first is to develop new legislation and present it before the legislature for approval (this includes identifying the need for new legislation and drafting the laws themselves).
- The second is to arrange for the implementation of the laws.
- Finally, the executive runs the state and so administers the country, making decisions when they are needed and organising state-run services.

Judiciary

The judiciary refers to the legal system and the judges in particular. Most of the judiciary is not concerned with politics but rather with criminal matters and disputes between individuals and organisations. But at the high levels of the judiciary — in the UK this includes the High Court, the Court of Appeal and the Supreme Court — some legal cases involve politics. When there are disputes about the meaning of laws, when citizens' rights are in jeopardy, or when there are disputes concerning the behaviour of the government or the state, the judiciary has political significance. Nevertheless, as we shall see below, judges are expected to adopt a neutral stance, even though they are concerned with political matters.

The evolution of the UK political system

Magna Carta, 1215

Though Magna Carta is an ancient document it was an important landmark in the development of the political culture and constitution of the UK. This was the establishment of the rule of law — in particular, the principle that the monarch (the government in modern times) cannot act above the law. Though often abused in the centuries since 1215, the rule of law still persists as a cornerstone of UK democracy.

The Glorious Revolution and the Bill of Rights, 1688–89

In 1688 the unpopular Catholic king, James II, was removed from the English throne. He was replaced by the Dutch Protestant prince, William of Orange, and his wife Mary. It was known as the 'Glorious Revolution' though it was largely peaceful. Part of the price to be paid by William and Mary for the throne was a number of restrictions on their power. These were contained in the **Bill of Rights of 1689**.

Five terms of the bill, which was an Act of Parliament, were especially important:

- that the king would rule alongside a *permanent* Parliament
- that Parliament would be the result of *regular, free elections*
- that members of Parliament would enjoy *freedom of speech*

Key term

Bill of rights A general name given to any codified set of citizens' rights. Many countries have a bill of rights attached to their constitution. The most famous bill of rights is made up of the first ten amendments to the US Constitution. The UK Parliament passed a bill of rights in 1689, but this was mostly concerned with the rule of law together with the sovereignty of Parliament and freedom of speech for its members.

Activity

Research Magna Carta. Identify any rights referred to in it that are still relevant today.

Synoptic link

The UK judiciary is described and analysed in Chapter 8.

Synoptic link

The UK executive branch is described and analysed in Chapter 7.

- that the monarch would require the *consent* of Parliament to levy taxes
- that the monarch would *not* have the power to repeal or set aside any laws without the *consent* of Parliament

As well as establishing parliamentary government and constitutional monarchy, the Bill of Rights was the main practical result of the political ideas of the great English philosopher and early liberal thinker, John Locke (1632–1704).

The events surrounding the Glorious Revolution also saw the early development of the traditional two-party system in England. The supporters of monarchical power were described as Tories, while the Protestant supporters of parliamentary power were called Whigs. Most Tories were members of the aristocracy and landed gentry while the Whigs tended to be members of the new capitalist middle classes. By the nineteenth century most Tories formed the Conservative Party, while most Whigs turned into Liberals.

Students of the government and politics of the USA should also note that several of the principles established in the English Bill of Rights were replicated in the American Constitution, written a century later. In particular, two clauses were almost exactly reproduced in the early amendments to the US Constitution in 1791, both of which remain controversial to this day. These are the *right of the people to bear arms* (second amendment), and the protection of the people from *cruel and unusual punishment* (eighth amendment). Certainly the English Bill of Rights of 1689 can be seen as a precursor of the US Constitution of 1787.

The Great Reform Act 1832

It is fair to say that, in the early eighteenth century, general elections in the United Kingdom ranged from being irregular at best to corrupt at worst. Constituencies varied in size, with some so small — just a handful of registered voters (mainly wealthy property owners) — that it was a simple task for a wealthy candidate to buy enough votes to win. These were often described as ‘rotten boroughs’. Many of the small rural seats were effectively in the hands of wealthy members of the aristocracy, who controlled the voters. The rural parts of the country were over-represented, while urban, newly industrialised parts still had few constituencies. In short, representation in Britain was corrupt and uneven.

This had the effect of bringing the House of Commons into disrepute. Far from representing the people, the Commons was full of wealthy members of the upper and middle classes, many of whom saw being an MP as a useful status symbol rather than as a civic duty. Real power lay in the hands of the monarch, his or her courtiers, plus a few wealthy members of what was known as the ‘governing class’. Many MPs rarely attended the chamber and few were concerned with the interests of their constituents. Britain was a parliamentary democracy effectively in name only.

Following a long campaign, mostly fought by the Whigs, a bill was finally brought before Parliament in 1832 to try to eliminate these problems. After fierce debate it was passed. Among its many clauses, two stand out:

- The franchise (right to vote) was extended. There was a qualification to voting which involved ownership and tenancy of property. This restricted the electorate to about 500,000. The Act reduced the property qualification to allow a further 3% of the population to vote. This may not seem radical, but it did begin the

Synoptic link

John Locke, who influenced the Glorious Revolution, is a key figure in the history of liberalism. Indeed, Locke is seen as one of the founding fathers of liberalism. He will become a key element in the study of liberalism in the ‘political ideas’ section of this A-level specification.

process of widening the right to vote (the right to vote is known as **suffrage**). Once the principle was established, it was inevitable that, before the end of the century, all adult men would have the right to vote.

- The Act redrew the electoral boundaries so that the rotten, or very small, boroughs were removed and parts of the country which were previously under-represented (mostly industrialised areas) were awarded new constituencies. This meant that few parliamentary seats could now be 'bought' and there was more even representation of the people.

The development of the two-party system

We saw above the development of an early two-party system during the Glorious Revolution of 1688–89, with Whigs and Tories emerging. However, it was not until the nineteenth century that anything like the modern two-party system arrived.

- During the second half of the century, the Conservative Party emerged. Many historians count Sir Robert Peel as founder of the party. He was prime minister in both the 1830s and 1840s. This party tended to represent the interests of the wealthier 'gentrified' classes and stood for good order, the preservation of traditional institutions and values, and opposition to the new radical ideas being promoted by liberals and socialists. Though the Conservatives (still often described as 'Tories') were usually members of the wealthy classes, they claimed to represent the interests of the mass of the working people against the evils of the growing capitalist system.

- The Liberal Party was largely formed from politicians described as Whigs and other radical thinkers. The date of its founding is a little vague but is generally put at 1859. Its first leader was Lord Henry Palmerston, who was prime minister twice between 1855 and 1865. Liberals were mainly made up of members of the fast-rising middle classes. They represented small independent farmers, merchants, tradesmen, industrialists and the professions. They campaigned to extend democracy, to preserve free markets and free trade, and to pursue the interests of small property owners and the business classes in general.

The two-party system that emerged in the nineteenth century reflected the division of society into two ruling classes — the upper classes and the middle classes. At that time, the working classes, though numerically superior to the other classes, were not represented by a political party of their own. In the nineteenth century there was no sizeable socialist party in the UK. The principal reason was, of course, that the working classes did not have the right to vote for most of the century. They had no property and so were excluded from the franchise. Propertyless male members of the working class had to wait until 1884 for the right to take part in elections.

The electoral system

The electoral system was a second factor in the formation and retention of a two-party system. The first-past-the-post system makes it difficult for smaller parties to establish themselves, so the Conservatives and Liberals were able to dominate general elections until the emergence of the Labour Party in the early twentieth century.

Key term

Suffrage Suffrage means the right to vote. Universal adult suffrage, finally established in the UK in 1928, means that all adults 18 and over have the right to vote unless disqualified on the grounds of criminality or insanity.

Knowledge check

From the results of elections between 1992 and 2010, in what ways did the two-party system begin to erode?

The early Labour Party was led by a charismatic figure, Keir Hardie. As the party developed and began to gain parliamentary seats in the early years of the twentieth century, it found it difficult to make headway because the electoral system discriminated against it. The party won just two seats in 1900 and this had increased only to 42 by 1910. In 1922, however, when it won 142 seats, the Labour Party finally demonstrated that it was about to replace the Liberals.

It had taken time for the newly enfranchised working classes to realise their interest lay in voting for Labour rather than one of the two established parties. When they did, in the 1920s and 1930s, the Liberal Party was doomed to decline. Instead of a three-party system developing, as was occurring in the rest of the European democracies, the Liberals were largely replaced by Labour so a new two-party system arrived to replace the old one.

Two reasons are usually suggested for this. One is the electoral system, while the other is the division of British society in the twentieth century into two distinct and cohesive classes, middle and working, each represented by its own political party.

The creation of the welfare state, 1940s

In the 1940s, at the end of the Second World War, the Labour government that won the 1945 general election set out to create a system of state-run, publicly-financed welfare that was so extensive it became known as the **welfare state**.

The welfare state was a comprehensive system, to be financed from taxation and run by the state, both central and local government, covering people's needs 'from the cradle to the grave'. At its centre lay the National Health Service (NHS), set up in 1946, but the welfare state also included a system of benefits covering such needs as unemployment, disability, income support, sickness, maternity and care of the elderly. The state old-age pension was extended to all, and an increasing quantity of subsidised rental housing was made available through local government.

Issues surrounding the welfare state, how it is financed and run, what it should include and whether the private sector should be involved in supplying its services, have dominated British politics ever since. It has affected government and politics in a number of ways, including the following:

- The scope and powers of the UK state were expanded greatly. Put simply, government became bigger; it became responsible for a whole range of new services.
- The welfare state raised many political issues, often the centre of conflict between the parties. These have included how much should be spent on services, who should be entitled to benefit from them, how they should be run and who should run them.
- In recent decades the issue of which services can be supplied by private-sector organisations, as opposed to the state, has become a matter of intense political conflict.

Britain joins the European Community, 1973

At the end of the Second World War many European politicians put their minds to the future of the continent. They were mainly concerned with two issues — economic reconstruction and the preservation of continental peace.

Key term

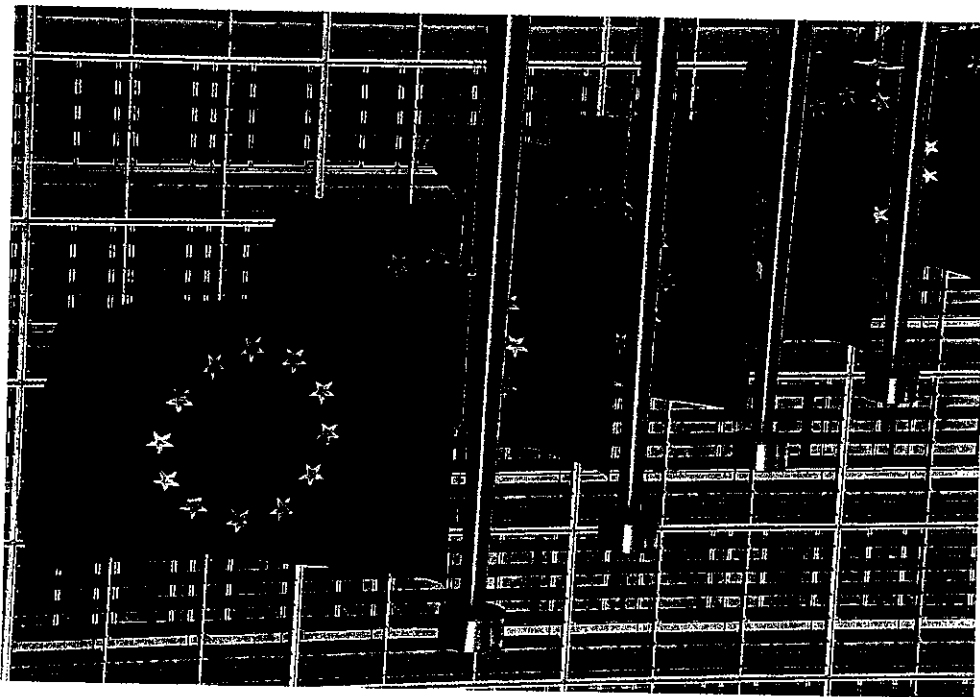
Welfare state A collective title given to those services that are run by the state and financed out of general taxation, and to which all citizens are entitled, mostly free of charge at the point of delivery. It includes the state education system, the NHS, social care services, the benefits system, subsidised local authority housing and state pensions.

Activity

Research the Beveridge Report. What were the five great evils that Beveridge identified and that his scheme was designed to address?

The main plan to deal with postwar Europe was based in France and was developed by two politicians there, Jean Monnet and Robert Schuman. This was the European Community (EC), which has since become the European Union (EU). The plan was to invite European countries to form a customs union or free-trade area so that trade would grow and, with it, economic cooperation. The longer-term plan was to turn this economic union into a political one. At first just six countries were members, but in the years since it has grown to 28 members in 2016. The UK joined on 1 January 1973.

Flags in front of the European Union building in Brussels



UK membership has had a number of influences on government and politics, including the following:

- The very issue of whether the UK should remain a member has twice created a major rift in British politics. At various times both the Conservative and Labour parties have been internally divided on the issue. On two occasions, in 1975 and 2016, this issue was settled by referendums, in 1975 to remain and in 2016 to leave.
 - Because EU laws and regulations are binding on members, all government decisions must take European law into consideration.
 - The UK Parliament was no longer fully sovereign. It had to comply with European law.
 - UK courts had to enforce European law.
- In general, therefore, Britain, while remaining an independent state, had to accept that it was also part of a wider political community. Following the 2016 referendum, UK membership of the EU is now coming to an end (see below).

Study the historical section of this introduction. Identify which historical events and developments have shaped the following:

- The establishment of the rule of law
- The establishment of parliamentary sovereignty
- The rise in the status and importance of the House of Commons
- The growth in the responsibilities of the state
- The erosion of parliamentary sovereignty
- The restoration of some parliamentary sovereignty

Activity

Synoptic link
The details of UK membership and its significance are described in Chapter 8.

The UK leaves the European Union

The historic referendum vote of 23 June 2016 that began the process of bringing the UK out of the EU changed the landscape of UK politics. It saw the end of the career of a prime minister — David Cameron — and caused a major upheaval within the Labour Party. More permanently, though, it changed the whole nature of parliamentary sovereignty and the way in which UK government goes about making policy. How it will affect the UK economy and society remains to be seen, but the very masonry of UK politics has been severely loosened by the event. The formal process of leaving begins in 2017 and is expected to be completed in 2019.

Summary

Having read this introduction, you should have knowledge and understanding of the following:

- The fundamental nature of politics
- The fundamental nature of government in the UK
- The distinctions between government and state
- The main principles behind the status and operation of government in the UK
- How the UK system of government and politics has evolved, with key historical landmarks
- An appropriate vocabulary to be used when discussing government and politics

Practice questions

AS and A-level

These are not necessarily exam-style questions, but they will help to reinforce what you have learned. Write answers to the questions, using the approximate number of words suggested in each case.

- 1 Distinguish between the concepts of government and the state. (50 words) ✖
- 2 What is democratic legitimacy and how can it be achieved? (100 words) ✖
- 3 The UK monarch has no political power. Why, therefore, is it so crucial to the way in which government operates? (100 words) ✖
- 4 How and why is Parliament sovereign in the UK? (100 words) ✖
- 5 In what ways is politics about conflict? (150 words) ✖
- 6 What are the main historical events that have shaped government and politics in the UK? (500 words) ✖

