

Political Challenges and Changing Agendas

As our democratic idea theme suggests, no democracy, however secure it may be, is a finished project. Even in Britain, with its centuries-old constitutional settlement and secure institutional framework, issues about democratic governance and citizens' participation remain unresolved.

Constitutional Reform

Questions about the role of the monarchy and the House of Lords have long been simmering on Britain's political agenda. Why should the House of Commons share sovereignty with the House of Lords? What is the role of the monarchy—a very expensive institution and one subject to periodic scandals—in a modern political system? In addition, the balance of power among constitutionally critical institutions raises important questions about a democratic deficit at the heart of the Westminster model. Britain's executive easily overpowers parliament. Its strength in relation to the legislature may be greater than in any other democracy. Add to these concerns the prime minister's tendency to bypass the cabinet on crucial decisions and the bias in the electoral system that privileges the two dominant parties. Consider how tumultuous and volatile the contemporary political moment in Britain has become. The British have very little experience with coalition governments, and yet they presently have one. Moreover, not only is the capacity of the party system to produce the familiar one-party leadership in doubt, but the electoral system is under scrutiny and subject to potential change. The May 2011 referendum on the voting system—a key element in the coalition agreement—produced a decisive vote to preserve the UK's current system for electing MP's, but managed to upset the apple cart anyway. The Labour leader, Ed Miliband, who supported the "Alternative Vote" system was chastened by its resounding defeat by the electorate, and by losses in Scotland in local government elections. But the outcome was even worse for Liberal Democrat leader, Nick Clegg, for whom electoral reform was a calling card issue and a key part of the Liberal Democrat rationale for joining the coalition government. As the dust settled on the referendum on the UK voting system, held on the same day as local elections throughout the UK, the fate of Clegg and the ultimate future of the coalition remained uncertain.

Identities in Flux

The relatively small scale of the ethnic minority community limits the political impact of the most divisive issues concerning collective identities. It is probably in this area that rigidities in the British political system most severely challenge principles of democracy and tolerance. Given Britain's single-member, simple-plurality electoral system, and no proportional representation, minority representation in Parliament remains very low. There are deep-seated social attitudes that no government can easily transform.

The issues of immigration, refugees, and asylum still inspire a fear of multiculturalism among white Britons. Since the London bombings by British Muslims on 7/7 that killed 56 people, intense scrutiny has been focused on the Muslim community, which faces endless finger pointing and harassment. According to police, the number of hate crimes primarily affecting Muslims soared 600 percent in the weeks after the bombings. Then, in 2007, Salman Rushdie, whose book, *The Satanic Verses*, had offended many Muslims around the world and forced him into hiding in the face of a formal death threat from Iranian religious leaders, was knighted by the Queen. The honor accorded Rushdie was widely held to be an affront to the Muslim community

in Britain. There is increasing concern across the political spectrum that Britain needs to find a way to deepen the ties of shared political culture and values that hold society together as well as to ensure security.

But finger pointing at the Muslim community has intensified since 9/11 and 7/7, and positions are hardening against multiculturalism. In February 2011, Prime Minister Cameron explicitly challenged the longstanding cross-party support for multiculturalism at a high-visibility security conference in Munich. Cameron condemned a culture of “hands-off” tolerance in the UK and in Europe. He criticized immigrants, and particularly Muslims (whom he seemed to define as immigrants whatever their immigration status) for leading lives apart from mainstream society. In strong terms, he warned of the dangers of multicultural policy, which made it possible for Islamic militants to radicalize Muslim youth, some of whom were likely to become terrorists. And he concluded that Europe had to defeat terrorism at home, not exclusively by the use of force elsewhere, for example, in Afghanistan.

British Politics, Terrorism, and Britain’s Relationship with the United States and the Rest of the World

In the immediate aftermath of the terror attacks on the United States, Blair’s decisive support for President Bush struck a resonant chord in both countries and boosted Britain’s influence in Europe. But by the spring and summer of 2002, Blair’s stalwart alliance with Bush was looking more and more like a liability.

As Britons’ instinctive support for America after September 11 faded, many wondered whether Tony Blair had boxed himself into a corner by aligning himself too closely with George W. Bush, without knowing where the president’s foreign policy initiatives might lead in the Middle East and Asia. Yet Blair persevered in his staunch support for Bush’s decision to go to war—despite Blair’s strong preference for explicit Security Council authorization for the use of force and his strong preference that significant progress in resolving the Israeli-Palestinian dispute be made before any military intervention to topple the Saddam Hussein regime.

Blair refused all advice to make support of the war conditional on achievement of these ends. Blair was convinced that the threats of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), Al Qaeda terrorism, and rogue states justified the invasion of Iraq and that Britain should and must support the United States in its leadership of a global war against terrorism. Despite initial denials by the prime minister, most Britons instinctively drew a connection between the war in Iraq and the bombs that exploded in London on 7/7.

Tony Blair came to office as a modernizer offering a “third way” alternative to the tired Tory and Old Labour recipes for governing the economy. But he left office likely to be remembered most (especially in America) for his foreign policy. Gordon Brown tried to distinguish his premiership from Blair’s in this regard, by providing an accelerated schedule for withdrawing British troops from Iraq and through his key foreign policy appointments. Brown appointed Mark Malloch Brown, a vociferous critic of the UK’s role in the war in Iraq as a high-profile minister with broad international affairs responsibilities. More importantly, Brown appointed David Miliband as foreign minister, a young rising star in the party known to have reservations about aspects of Blair’s policy in the Middle East. Brown quickly made clear that useful lessons could be learned from the experience of the war in Iraq, leaving few in doubt that he would

GLOBAL CONNECTION



Britain and the Legacies of Empire

At its height during the reign of Queen Victoria (1837–1901), the British Empire encompassed fully one-quarter of the world's population and exerted direct colonial rule over some four-dozen countries scattered across the globe. In a stunning reversal of Britain's global status and fortunes, the empire fell apart in the half-century of decolonization between the independence of India in 1947 and the return of Hong Kong to China in 1997. Apart from a few scattered dependencies, the sun finally set on the British Empire, but the legacies of empire lived on to shape its relationship to the world of states in important ways.

The end of Empire did not bring the end of great power aspirations for Britain, but it shifted the emphasis as the British role in the world of states has been shaped by its determination to view its **"special relationship"** with the United States even at the expense of a full commitment to economic integration with and leadership in the European Union.

With the end of Empire it was inevitable that the special relationship between the UK and the United States would become a relationship between unequal partners. As a result, U.S. interests have tended to exert a tremendous magnetic pull on British foreign policy, to the relative neglect of European partnerships and broader international influences.

Before 9/11 New Labour stood for a coherent and progressive foreign policy framework, one that linked globalization to a growing UK commitment to narrow the development gap and in the words of Robin Cook, Blair's first foreign secretary, "to be a force for good" in the world. The Kosovo War created the context for Blair's explicit linkage of globalization with foreign and security policy.

Blair's "doctrine of international community" gave new weight to the notion of global interdependence by asserting a responsibility to use military force when necessary to achieve humanitarian objectives and contain catastrophic human rights abuses. This doctrine, as well as Blair's Atlanticist leanings, conditioned his response to 9/11 and subsequently his determination to bring the UK into the war in Iraq.

Instinctively, Tony Blair recognized the need (as he himself put it) to "stand shoulder to shoulder" with the United States, thus cementing his privileged relationship with George W. Bush and raising his international profile. In the days immediately after the terror attacks of September 2001, Blair played an important role in tamping down fears that 9/11 was demonstrating the validity of Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilizations" thesis.¹³ Blair made clear that Al-Qaeda did not represent Islam and expressed his belief in a liberal

and multicultural Britain in which the government had no concerns about the allegiance of Muslims.

But in the days following 9/11, the powerful attraction of the Atlantic Alliance, with Blair's distinctive inflections, took an irresistible hold over British foreign policy. At this critical juncture, several elements came together to forge the decision to support the US administration, even when the venue of the war on terror changed from Afghanistan to Iraq:

1. A fear that if the United States were left to fight the war on terror by itself, then unilateralist forces in Washington would be strengthened, and the world would be worse off.¹⁴
2. Blair's conviction that Iraq should be understood, like Kosovo, as an exercise in humanitarian intervention to save Muslims from catastrophic human rights abuses.¹⁵
3. A particular reading of the special relationship that made it imperative that the UK support the U.S. war in Iraq, viewing it as a necessary part of the global war on terror.

In Blair's doctrine of international community, the reverberations of empire were unmistakable. The civilizing mission of empire and the right of the metropolitan power to use force against the weaker dependent or failed states were both understood as an exercise of humanitarian intervention. And the use of force, however it was justified, represented an exercise in great power politics. How will the Conservative–Liberal government under the leadership of David Cameron recast the UK's role in the world of states? It seems likely that the Liberal Democrats will be more inclined to align British interests with Europe, while the Tories will remain in the Eurosceptic camp, aloof from further integration with Europe, especially so long as many of the European economies remain troubled. Perhaps to allay European concerns as well as that of his coalition partners, Cameron's first trip abroad as prime minister was to Paris and Berlin. Equally revealing, to emphasize his concerns about security, Afghani president Hamid Karzai was the first foreign leader to meet Cameron as prime minister, and at a joint press conference with Karzai at the White House, President Obama was quick to confirm "the extraordinary special relationship between the United States and Great Britain." As a sign of the times and the shifting power among British allies, Cameron has also made clear that he regards a "new special relationship with India" as a critical element in UK foreign relations and trade policy. With a proliferation of "special relationships" it may be time to wonder if the U.S. is still the UK's BFF (Best Friends Forever) or just one of several special relationships.

be reluctant to repeat such an exercise anytime soon. And in the early going, Cameron tried hard to recalibrate the special relationship by broadening its meaning to extend beyond its historic U.S.-UK definition to include other key allies and critical trading partners with special historic ties to the UK, for example India.

special relationship

Refers to relations between the United States and Britain and is meant to convey not only the largely positive, mutually beneficial nature of the relationship but also the common heritage and shared values of the two countries.

British Politics in Comparative Perspective

Until the Asian financial crisis that began in 1997, it was an axiom of comparative politics that economic success required a style of economic governance that Britain lacks. Many argued that innovation and competitiveness in the new global economy required the strategic coordination of the economy by an interventionist state. But the United Kingdom escaped the recession that plagued the rest of Europe for much of the 1990s. Britain also outperformed most major world economies until the “Great Recession” of 2008 signalled a decisive downturn in Britain’s economic fortunes.

In many countries throughout the world, politicians have been looking for an economic model that can sustain competitiveness while improving the plight of the socially excluded. For this reason, New Labour’s third way—a political orientation designed to transcend left and right in favor of practical and effective policies—was carefully watched for more than ten years. Observers saw in New Labour a historic intellectual and political realignment, not only in Britain, but in Clinton’s America and Cardoso’s (and later Lula’s) Brazil. Ten years is a very long time in politics, and for ten years it looked as if New Labour had found a way to mould a new political orientation that combined a sophisticated approach to competitiveness in the global economy with a pragmatic anti-ideological approach to governance. But in time, the bloom most decidedly came off the rose of New Labour, which could never recover from the war in Iraq. The electorate grew tired of Blair and never warmed up to Brown. When the financial and economic crisis struck in 2008, Britain was among the hardest hit of the core European economies. With the decline of its economic model, its refusal to participate in the Eurozone, unresolved legacies of empire, and its surprising constitutional uncertainty, it is fair to say that in comparative perspective the UK has joined the pack of middle-level European powers and, like its counterparts, faces daunting challenges across all of the four themes that frame our analysis of comparative politics.

Summary

Since 2008, Britain has been facing daunting challenges. Almost inevitably, economic downturn produces political challenges, but it also creates opportunities for change and renewal. A new generation of untested leadership in all the major political parties and, most importantly, at the helm of the coalition government will produce new political challenges, innovative policy directions, new approaches to solving old problems, and occasional policy U-turns. Will the coalition hold or will the strains and challenges of governing shatter the coalition of convenience between the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats? Across the globe, many electorates are asking for effective pragmatic leadership in hard times. If the UK’s coalition government, which came to office almost by accident and in very difficult times, stays intact and effectively manages from the center, it may last long enough to benefit both from the resourcefulness of an electorate and a country that is not easily daunted and from a rising economic tide. If that happens, it may build on the New Labour legacy of government judged on effectiveness, not ideology, and enjoy a long run in office. If not, the British distaste for coalition government will be confirmed.

Key Terms

Industrial Revolution	Keynsianism	fusion of powers
hegemonic power	monetarism	cabinet government
welfare state	foreign direct investment	constitutional monarchy
laissez-faire	gender gap	quangos
Westminster model	parliamentary sovereignty	judicial review
neoliberalism	parliamentary democracy	hung parliament
macroeconomic policy	unitary state	special relationship

Suggested Readings

- Beer, Samuel H. *Britain Against Itself: The Political Contradictions of Collectivism*. New York: Norton, 1982.
- Brown, Gordon. *Beyond the Crash: Overcoming the First Crisis of Globalization*. New York: Free Press, 2010.
- Coates, David. *Prolonged Labour*. London: Palgrave/Macmillan, 2005.
- Coates, David, and Joel Krieger. *Blair's War*. Cambridge, UK, and Malden Mass.: Polity Press, 2004.
- Coates, David, and Peter Lawler, eds. *New Labour in Power*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000.
- Cook, Robin. *The Point of Departure*. London: Simon & Schuster, 2003.
- Cronin, James E. *New Labour's Pasts*. Harrow, UK: Pearson Longman, 2004.
- Driver, Stephen, and Luke Martell. *New Labour*, 3rd ed. Cambridge: Polity, 2006.
- Dunleavy, Patrick, et al. *Developments in British Politics 7*. New York: Palgrave/Macmillan, 2003.
- Elliott, Francis, and James Hanning. *Cameron: The Rise of the New Conservative*. Harper: 2009.
- Gamble, Andrew. *Between Europe and America: The Future of British Politics*. London: Palgrave/Macmillan, 2003.
- George, Bruce. *The British Labour Party and Defense*. New York: Praeger, 1991.
- Giddens, Anthony. *The Third Way: The Renewal of Social Democracy*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998.
- Gilroy, Paul. "There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack": *The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991.
- Hall, Stuart, and Martin, Jacques, eds. *The Politics of Thatcherism*. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1983.
- Hobsbawm, E. J. *Industry and Empire*. Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin/Pelican, 1983.
- Howell, Chris. *Trade Unions and the State: The Construction of Industrial Relations Institutions in Britain, 1890–2000*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005.
- Jones, Bill, and Philip Norton. *Politics UK*, 7th ed., Essex, UK: Pearson, 2010.
- Kampfner, John. *Blair's Wars*. London: Free Press, 2003.
- Kavenagh, Dennis, and Anthony Seldon. *The Powers Behind the Prime Minister: The Hidden Influence of Number Ten*. London: Harper-Collins, 1999.
- Keegan, William. *The Prudence of Mr Gordon Brown*. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2004.
- Krieger, Joel. *British Politics in the Global Age. Can Social Democracy Survive?* New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Krieger, Joel. *Globalization and State Power*. New York: Pearson Longman, 2005.
- Landes, David S. *The Unbound Prometheus: Technological Change and Industrial Development in Western Europe from 1750 to the Present*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969.
- Lewis, Jane, and Rebecca Surrender, eds. *Welfare State Change: Towards a Third Way?* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Lewis, Philip. *Islamic Britain: Religion, Politics and Identity among British Muslims*. London and New York: I. B. Taurus, 2002.
- Marsh, David, et al. *Postwar British Politics in Perspective*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999.
- Marshall, Geoffrey. *Ministerial Responsibility*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.
- Middlemas, Keith. *Politics in Industrial Society: The Experience of the British System Since 1911*. London: André Deutsch, 1979.
- Modood, Tariq. *Multicultural Politics: Racism, Ethnicity, and Muslims in Britain*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005.
- Norton, Philip. *The British Polity*, 5th ed. New York: Longman, 2011.
- Parekh, Bhiku, et al., *The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain: The Parekh Report*. London: Profile Books, 2000.
- Riddell, Peter. *The Thatcher Decade*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989.
- Särlvik, Bo, and Ivor Crewe. *Decade of Dealignment: The Conservative Victory of 1979 and Electoral Trends in the 1970s*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.

Username: Emily Jacobs **Book:** Introduction to Comparative Politics, 6th Edition. No part of any book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form by any means without the publisher's prior written permission. Use (other than pursuant to the qualified fair use privilege) in violation of the law or these Terms of Service is prohibited. Violators will be prosecuted to the full extent of the law.

Seldon, Anthony, and Dennis Kavanagh, eds. *The Blair Effect 2001–5*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

Shaw, Eric. *The Labour Party since 1945*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996.

Thompson, E. P. *The Making of the English Working Class*. New York: Vintage, 1966.

Thompson, Noel. *Political Economy and the Labour Party*, 2nd ed. London and New York: Routledge, 2006.

Suggested Websites

The official UK Government website
www.direct.gov.uk

The UK Parliament
www.parliament.uk

BBC
www.bbc.co.uk

The UK cabinet office
www.cabinet-office.gov.uk

Ipsos-Market & Opinion Research International (Mori)
Britain's leading polling organization

<http://www.ipsos-mori.com/>

The Scottish Parliament
www.scottish.parliament.uk

The Welsh Assembly Government
<http://wales.gov.uk/>