CHAPTER 1

The Setting of British Politics: British Society and the British People

Contents

Overview

In this opening chapter, we examine the background against which the British political system operates. By understanding the nature of British political development and society, and the values shared by many of the island's peoples, we can better appreciate key institutions and practices in British politics, and the attitudes and behaviour of British citizens.

Key issues to be covered in this chapter

- Aspects of the historical development of Britain, in particular national unity and the preference for peaceful change
- The traditional cohesion of British society and the absence of divisions based on ethnicity, language or religion
- The forces that have contributed to its growing diversity, including the rise of nationalism in Scotland and Wales, immigration and the impact of growing support for Islamic religious beliefs
- The meaning of the term 'political culture'
- Characteristic British political attitudes and habits, and the changes affecting them in recent decades

Introduction

Our study of British politics is primarily concerned with the way in which our representative democracy functions. But political systems do not operate in a vacuum. They are shaped by the society in which we live and reflect the assumptions, habits and values of our people. This is as true of Britain as any other country, so that some analysis of the social basis of our political life and of the history and outlook of the British people, seems to be an appropriate place to begin our study of British government and politics.

The historical background

Most of the 196 countries in the world today are relatively recent creations, brought about by a struggle for independence in wars or revolutions from those powers which previously controlled their destiny. However, Britain has a very long tradition of independent nationhood, free from successful invasion for nearly a thousand years. Our institutions have evolved gradually over centuries, change usually coming about not as a result of civil upheaval or warfare, but by a process of adaptation. Generally speaking, they have maintained their name and much of their original form, but the way in which they operate has been modified in response to particular circumstances. For this reason, two writers were able to describe the situation as one of 'new wine in old bottles'.[1]

Our largely unbroken history of political independence has been matched by a long history of national unity. Wales was conquered in Tudor times and has since the Act of Union (1535), been governed via decisions taken at Westminster. Scotland, an independent country until the Act of Union (1707), was governed in the same way until it gained its parliament in 1999. Scots have long been aware of their sense of nationality and proud of their different administrative and legal systems, but over recent centuries the relationship between the two countries has generally been a good one, their fortunes interwoven.

Ireland is a different case. Relations with our neighbouring island have been turbulent and often unhappy. Twenty-six counties gained their independence from the rest of the UK in 1922, but the majority

of inhabitants in the six counties of Northern Ireland have been keen to retain their allegiance to Great Britain. The province of Northern Ireland has had a troubled history. It had its own parliament until the era of prolonged disturbance and political violence that culminated in the imposition of Direct Rule from Westminster in 1969. As a result of the **Belfast ('Good Friday') Agreement** reached in 1998, it once again acquired an elected assembly.

There have at times been tensions between the component countries of the United Kingdom, but – leaving aside the substantial problems surrounding Ireland – for most of the time it has been a cohesive political unit, marked by a lack of serious conflict. As we shall see, such a portrayal of British political development may seem complacent and inaccurate in the light of some changes in recent decades. But if this book had been written thirty or forty years ago, few would have questioned the essential accuracy of the description.

The traditions of national independence and broad political unity owe much to the facts of geography. Britain is an island, the Channel offering protection from invasion and insulating the country from any revolutionary movements of the Continent. Indeed, one of the other important characteristics of British political development has been the preference for peaceful change.

Britain has evolved primarily by non-revolutionary means and has enjoyed a remarkable historical continuity. There has been no major break or upheaval, such as the American, French and Russian revolutions, nor much in the way of civil war or conflict. Certainly, riots and rebellions were common in both the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Moreover, the latter provided disruption to the traditional pattern of constitutional evolution, witnessing as it did 'a civil war, a royal decapitation, an abdication and an Interregnum generally regarded by our European neighbours as a radical horror, much as the Bolshevist regime in Russia was regarded by the other European powers in the 1920s and 1930s'.[2] But over the following centuries, the British reputation for peace and stability was restored. Although there has been violence at times in British history, there has been a degree of continuity that is unusual in comparison with most other countries. As a result, there has been institutional continuity. Britain has made fewer efforts than most countries to erase the political past

and start again. The essential structure of our constitutional arrangements has been bent and bruised, but not broken.

Since the late 1960s, the picture of Britain as a united nation has been under threat as a result of the continuing troubles in Northern Ireland, and the developing strength of the nationalist movement in Scotland and Wales. In Scotland, the impetus to intensified national feeling has come from a variety of factors, including its distinctive historical traditions and institutions, the economic potential of 'Scotland's oil' and a feeling of remoteness from and neglect by Westminster. The resurgence of nationalism has led to strong support for the Scottish National Party that is committed to national independence from England. In Wales, the desire for separatism is much weaker and the growth of nationalism has a stronger cultural and linguistic dimension. Support for Plaid Cymru, the nationalist party, has been largely concentrated in five constituencies in rural mid-north Wales, although since the advent of devolution it has broken out of its rural Welsh-speaking heartland and captured traditionally strong Labour areas in industrial South Wales.

Today, the picture of national unity has to be qualified. Political diversity is now a feature of the United Kingdom. So too the **homogeneity** of British society has come under challenge. There is greater social diversity than in the Britain of fifty years ago.

British society and the British way of life

It was until a few decades ago a common-place in books relating to British society for writers to point out that Britain has been relatively free from much of the internal disorder that occurs when different sections of the community are pitted against each other. In a description of the social fabric of British politics, Blondel[3] described Britain as a relatively homogeneous society. Society was seen as cohesive, there being none of the important divisions of **ethnicity**, religion, language and culture to be found in other European states and the USA. We were portrayed as an integrated community in which values did not differ radically between different social groups.

In the absence of such distinctions, **social class** is the phenomenon that attracted particular attention. Continentals have long portrayed the British as unduly obsessed by social class and seen this

as the explanation for an assortment of our economic and political problems. By comparison with countries such as Australia and the United States, considerations of class have been important and the British have been conscious of their social status in relation to others. But although at times this has led to feelings of envy and resentment, it has not usually provoked substantial tensions between different sections of the community of the type that threaten social harmony and cohesion.

Neither has that overall homogeneity been challenged by any town and country divide. Britain is a highly urbanised and industrialised country in which almost 40 per cent of the people live in seven large conurbations, rather more in towns of over 10,000 inhabitants and only 20 per cent living in the rural areas, in small towns and villages. There have never been the strong clashes of interest between town and country that characterise countries such as France with its powerful agrarian lobby.

The changing nature of British society in recent decades

Over the last four or five decades, British society has been transformed in several respects. Social class is less important and there is greater social mobility than in the early post-1945 years. Whereas in the 1960s, two thirds of the population were categorised as working class and a third middle class (based on such considerations as occupation, income, location, housing, accent, spending habits and general lifestyle), today the two categories are broadly equal. Education has been a great leveller, providing new opportunities for vast numbers of young people born into relatively poor circumstances, allowing them to acquire qualifications and improve their job prospects and earning capacity.

If divisions based on class have become less significant, in other respects Britain is now much more socially diverse. Britain has always had minority populations and successive bouts of immigration have modified the national character and shaped our national development. But until the 1950s, this did not significantly challenge broad social cohesion or ethnic unity. Since then, the situation has changed considerably. In spite of the introduction of controls, the onset of **New Commonwealth immigration** led to a substantial increase in numbers of Afro-Caribbean, Asian and other immigrants.

More recently, the entry of **refugees** and **asylum seekers** (whether as genuine seekers after political freedom or **economic migrants** in search of a better way of life) and the arrival of people from new member states of the European Union have further added to the diversity of the British population. The term 'super-diversity' is now sometimes used to describe the UK social composition.

Immigration and religion: their impact

The 2001 Census revealed that the UK was more culturally diverse than ever before. It showed that overall, the million or so non-white population of 1970 had become 4.6 million (7.9 per cent). Of those who belonged to other ethnic groups, Indians were the largest group, followed by Pakistanis, those of mixed ethnic backgrounds, black Caribbeans, black Africans and Bangladeshis. The remaining minority ethnic groups each individually accounted for less than 0.5 per cent of the UK population and together accounted for a further 1.4 per cent. More than half of the non-white inhabitants were born in Britain. Four out of five Afro-Caribbeans under thirty five had begun their life here and there were as many Afro-Caribbean Britons under thirty with a white parent as there were with two black parents.

Table 1.1 The ethnic mix of the United Kingdom, 2001			
Nation	**Total population**	**Asian and black**	**% Asian and black**
England	49,138,931	4,459,470	9.1
Northern Ireland	1,685,167	12,569	0.7
Scotland	5,062,011	101,677	2.0
Wales	2,903,085	61,580	2.1
Total	**58,789,194**	**4,635,296**	**7.9**

Figures provided by the Office for National Statistics and based on the 2001 Census

NB The proportion of minority ethnic groups in England rose from 6% to 9% between 1991 and 2001, partly as a result of the addition of a new category, mixed ethnic groups.

Box 1.1 Recent immigration: asylum seekers, economic migrants and EU citizens

An estimated 567,000 people arrived to live in the UK in 2009, which was consistent with levels for the previous five years. Non-British citizens accounted for 83 per cent of all immigrants; a third were from EU countries. Immigration for formal study was the most common reason stated for entry (37 per cent), followed by work-related reasons (34 per cent).

Asylum seekers and non-EU economic migrants
As a signatory to the United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, the UK has a responsibility not to return refugees to a country where they would face hunger and/or persecution. Some immigrants of the last decade or so have fled from war zones in which the British have been fighting, in particular Afghanistan, Iraq and the Balkans, following the particularly brutal wars after the break-up of Yugoslavia in the 1990s. Others claiming asylum include economic migrants seeking a better and perhaps freer way of life in Britain. They have come from countries such as Iran, Somalia, Sri Lanka and Turkey.

Immigration from 'new' EU countries of Central and Eastern Europe
Since the expansion of the EU from fifteen to twenty-five countries in May 2004, the UK has accepted immigrants from several new member states of Central and Eastern Europe. More than a million people from the eight **accession countries** in that region had arrived by April 2008. In particular, Poles (a majority of those who registered under the Worker Registration Scheme) have made a big impact on the composition of several towns and cities. Other groups have derived from Slovakia, Lithuania and (in smaller numbers) from the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia and Slovenia.

Those who belong to the **ethnic minorities** are not evenly distributed across the country, tending to live in the large urban areas. The different groups share some characteristics, but there are often greater differences between the individual ethnic groups than between the minority ethnic population as a whole and the white British people.

Table 1.2 The ethnic mix of England and Wales, 2009		
Ethnic group	**% of population**	**% rate of annual growth**
White	87.9	0.1
Mixed	1.3	4.7
Asian or Asian British	5.9	4.7
Black or black British	2.9	3.4
Chinese	0.4	3.8
Other ethnic group	1.6	13.7
Source: Office for National Statistics (ONS).		

The distinctive feature of entrants from the New Commonwealth (and, more recently, of many asylum seekers from elsewhere) was that in many cases they were highly visible, because of a different skin colour. Migrants from Ireland or Central and Eastern Europe could blend in more easily with the way of life of the native population, whereas the negative attitudes and sometimes evident hostility experienced by new black immigrants made it more difficult for them to adapt to Britain's traditional culture.

Immigration has had a particular impact upon some towns and cities. Nearly half of Britain's non-white population lives in Greater London. The area of the country with the second largest proportion of the minority ethnic population is the West Midlands (nearly 14 per cent), followed by Yorkshire (8 per cent). **Multiculturalism** and **multiethnicity** have arrived and are here to stay. In fewer than thirty local authorities do ethnic minorities make up more than 15 per cent of the population. Leicester has the highest proportion of any city outside London, with 22.3 per cent (mainly Indian).

Tensions surrounding immigration

Immigration and race relations have been subjects of political controversy for several decades. At times there have been serious tensions between the white and non-white populations, on occasion disturbances and rioting. Immigration has provoked a sharp reaction

Box 1.2 The non-white population of England and Wales, 2009

The non-white population of England and Wales has grown from 6.6 million in 2001 to 9.1 million in 2009 nearly one-sixth of the population. There are in addition almost a million mixed-race people in the two countries. Data revealed by the ONS in 2011 reveal also that:

- The white British population has remained almost the same since the last census, an increase in births being broadly balanced by a similar number of people migrating.
- The white Irish population has declined by more than 70,000, because of falling birth rates and migration.
- The increase in the 'other white' population from 1.4 to 1.9 million is largely accounted for by immigration from Eastern Europe, but there have also been greater numbers arriving from Australia, Canada, New Zealand and South Africa.
- The non-white population has increased by more than 2.45 million, two thirds of the increase due to net migration, the rest mainly to higher birth rates among ethnic minority groups.
- The Chinese population has the highest growth rate of any of the ethnic groups, growing at an estimated 8.6 per cent per year.
- The increasing numbers of the four Asian groups has been in part due to immigration but also due to natural change – young age profiles result in a strong birth rate and a low number of deaths. The black African group has increased much more rapidly than the black Caribbean, largely because of Africans seeking asylum from the democratic Congo, Eritrea, Somalia and Zimbabwe.
- In 225/423 local authorities, the population comprises more than 90 per cent of white people, the 'whitest' being Blanaeu Gwent in Wales (96.5 per cent) and Copeland in Cumbria (96.3 per cent).
- The size of the non-British element has remained stable in London, but risen substantially in other areas, more than doubling in the North East and the South West. Brent, in London, is the most ethnically diverse borough, only just over a third of its population (38.1 per cent) qualifying as white British, the rest being predominantly mixed-race, Asian, black and Irish.

Source: 2001 census and ONS statistical bulletin, 'Population Estimates by Ethnic Group 2002–2009', 18 May 2011.

from the political **Far Right**, which has gained in electoral support in a number of northern towns and cities and itself been involved in civil conflict. The issues of asylum seekers and illegal immigrants arriving in substantial numbers arouses particular anxiety, when it seems that controls in place can be evaded.

Within ethnic minority groups, there are some more radical members who are alienated from the rest of society (see Box 1.3 on The diversity of Muslim attitudes). Others feel disaffected, perhaps conscious of the discrimination they still experience. But many have enriched the British culture and lifestyle, by the contributions they can make to the economy and society. When they can gain acceptance, they are contented with their lot and as integrated as they wish to be into the British way of life. They may well to different degrees wish to retain their heritage and identity, but still consider themselves as British.

At best, the relations between the different communities have been generally harmonious and problems that arise are ones that can be accommodated. Discrimination and sometimes intimidation do occur and such wrongs pose a challenge to white society. The majority of white people, particularly those whose routine brings them into contact with others of all ethnic backgrounds, have been tolerant and fairly comfortably embraced change. There has not been anything like the recurrent ethnic and racial problems that beset some other countries. Politicians – with a few prominent exceptions – are keen to promote good race relations and do or say nothing to endanger social cohesion.

Religious diversity

Religion has been a greater source of division than in the past. Religious rivalry has not been a traditional feature of the United Kingdom, except as part of the complex of problems associated with Northern Ireland. In countries ranging from Canada to France, religion has been an important factor in political life, but in Britain tolerance of religious differences – often based on indifference to the topic – has been the norm. But again, religion has been a cause of diversity in recent years.

In particular, immigration has been a key factor associated with religious diversity, leading to a rapid increase in support for Islamic beliefs

Table 1.3 The religious mix of the United Kingdom, 2001

Religion	England	Scotland	Wales	Northern Ireland	UK total	UK %
Buddhist	139,046	6,830	5,407	533	151,816	0.3
Christian	35,251,244	3,294,545	2,087,242	1,446,386	42,079,417	71.6
Hindu	546,982	5,564	5,439	825	558,810	1.0
Jewish	257,671	6,448	2,256	365	266,740	0.5
Muslim	1,524,887	42,557	21,739	1,943	1,591,126	2.7
Sikh	327,343	6,572	2,015	219	336,149	0.6
Other religions	143,811	26,974	6,909	1,143	178,837	0.3
Total all religions	38,190,984	3,389,490	2,131,007	1,451,414	45,162,895	76.8
No religion	7,171,332	1,394,460	537,935		9,103,727	15.5
Not stated	3,776,515	278,061	234,143		4,288,719	7.3
Total no. religion not stated	10,947,847	1,672,521	772,078	233,853	13,626,299	23.2

Figures provided by the Office for National Statistics and based on the 2001 Census. The no religion/not stated figures are not listed for N. Ireland and this accounts for the slight discrepancy in the final percentages.

Box 1.3 The diversity of Muslim attitudes

British Muslims derive from many different countries. They cannot be lumped together as a homogeneous group. They number some 1.6 million, many of whom were born in this country. Like everyone else, they have different personalities, different interests and different opinions. In religious matters, some are strict and devout, others less so.

Muslims have been in Britain since the 1950s. Specific Muslim groups originally settled in specific British cities. Those from Kashmir settled in Birmingham and Bradford, to be joined by others from the Punjab and North Western Pakistan. Indians Muslims from Gujarat settled in northern cities such as Huddersfield, Bangladeshis flocked to East London whilst North Africans and other Arabs went to live in West London. Many of these immigrants belonged to groups of Sunni Islam, but Britain also received small Shia groups from countries such as Iraq. In other words, Muslims from different places often had religious leanings that reflected different shades of Islamic belief.

The first generation of Muslims to arrive in Britain were often victims of racist attitudes and could do little but accept them. The second generation was more willing to challenge them and sometimes this led to fierce confrontations with the police and other authorities. But many members of Muslim communities still wanted to find and share a common set of values, hopes and aspirations that united whites and non-whites, and not to separate themselves from the rest of society. In the last decade, a more radical Islam has found a hearing in Britain.

(see Table 1.3 for an indication of the multi-faith society that Britain has become). This has had political repercussions. On the one hand, there have been demands from some Muslims for their own schools, raising issues about the desirability of allowing or encouraging separatist tendencies. On the other, the attack on the World Trade Center in 2001 (also known as 9/11) has had an impact, at the very least alerting us to changes that had already taken place in British society. A few months before, disturbances in the north of England had laid bare the grievances of British Muslims, forcing recognition of the fact that community relations were no longer just about race relations, but

about faith as well. The post-Iraq War situation has led to developing antagonism among some Muslims for the actions taken by Britain and America against their fellow believers in that troubled country. In the 2005 election, some Muslim associations advised their followers not to support the Blair government that took Britain into war.

The position of Muslims in Britain has been the subject of much discussion since the outbreak of **terrorism** in London on 7 July 2005, better known as the London bombings. Fifty-six were killed and some 700 injured in the explosions. A fortnight later, further attacks again brought the capital to a halt, but this time they were bungled and no casualties resulted. The attacks were not the activities of foreign extremists brought up in oppressive states abroad and suffering from severe deprivation. They were the work of people brought up in multiracial Britain and thus posed a challenge not just for ministers, but for **civil society** too.

Political change

In recent years, diversity and tension have characterised aspects of the social scene. There has also been political change. We have seen that in response to growing national feeling the Scots have gained their own Parliament. So too has Wales gained a National Assembly. Such moves have been part of a developing interest in **devolution**, the decentralisation of power from Westminster. Some who opposed devolution feared a Balkanisation of the United Kingdom, believing that it would inevitably lead to eventual separatism. Devolution again raises the issue of what it means to be British, Scottish, Welsh or English.

The debate about identity has been given another twist by a further development of the last three decades or so, British membership of the European Community, now Union (see Chapter 10). Since the signing of the **Maastricht Treaty**, British people have become citizens of the European Union, although surveys suggest that the overwhelming majority do not consider themselves to be European in the way that inhabitants of France or Holland might do. The issue of Britain in Europe has posed challenges for politicians of all parties, for as yet there is little sign that the British feel enthusiastic about being part of the Union. They may perceive some advantages

Box 1.4 The debate about Britishness and being British

As a result of the issues surrounding ethnicity and to a lesser extent devolution there has been much discussion of national identity and the nature and values of Britishness in recent years. Today, the term 'Britishness' is used particularly in relation to the attempt to define what it means to be British. In a legal sense, people who were born in Britain or who are legally recognised as citizens can be described as British. According to this view, differences of ethnic background, language or religion are irrelevant. There are black Britons and white Britons, Hindu and Christian Britons. In a broader sense, Britishness is a term that refers to the common culture and national identity of the people of the United Kingdom, particularly those on the mainland.

In this wider sense, there is no prescribed list of qualities or characteristics that make up 'Britishness', but a recent CRE poll found that 86 per cent of those interviewed agreed that you do not have to be white to be British.[4] In June 2005, religious leaders debating 'Islam and Muslims in the World Today' at a London conference, discussed what they believed being British involved. Their views encompassed core values such as freedom of expression and religious practice, participation in the democratic system, valuing education and respect to and tolerance for others. But other speakers felt that Britain had a long way to go before all its communities could be united in a single purpose. One noted the lack of national cohesion in Britain, observing that 'people have more allegiance to football teams than they have to Great Britain' and went on to ask: 'Where is the glue that is going to hold society together?'

for the country in membership, but perhaps because of their proud traditions as an island race, and differences of language and culture, they are not yet convinced of the merits of closer involvement with our European partners.

Underlying British ideas and values

We use the term 'culture' in referring to the way of life that people experience, to describe the sum of their inherited and cherished ideas, knowledge and values. Their beliefs and values, and the things

that they care about, are based on the experiences to which they are exposed throughout their lives. They may also derive from their class, ethnic group, language, gender or religion.

In assessing the attitudes and way of life of a people, it is easy to fall back on generalisations as a shorthand means of describing what they are like. Sometimes, these are related to ideas about national or group character. When in the 1960s the Beach Boys referred to 'California girls', the image they intended to convey was of a sun-tanned, lithe, fun-loving and easy-going category of young women. The term is a stereotype, but many members of their audience probably had a clear impression of what such girls were like. However, such generalisations have obvious limitations and are insufficient for those who want to analyse the culture of a country. They want a more reliable tool and turn to survey research. They find out the responses of a selected sample of the population to a series of questions about beliefs and actions, and then assess the overall findings.

Political culture refers to culture in its political aspect. It is the term given to those widely shared political beliefs, values and norms most citizens share concerning the relationship of citizens to government and to one another. Pye[5] describes it as 'the sum of the fundamental values, sentiments and knowledge that give form and substance to the political process'.

These long-term attitudes, ideas and traditions are passed on from one generation to the next. Usually, we think of the political culture of a country such as Britain, France or the United States, but it may be the citizens of an ethnic or religious community who are under consideration – perhaps the people living in a geographic community such as Londoners or Europeans, or those with a shared identity such as French Canadians or Sikhs in the subcontinent.

Political culture is different from public opinion. The term **public opinion** refers to the cluster of attitudes and beliefs held by people about a variety of issues, in our case those concerning politics and policy issues. It will vary on and across the issues of the day. By contrast, political culture – in Heywood's terminology[6] – 'is fashioned out of long-term values rather than simply people's reactions to specific policies and problems'.

In attempting to understand and categorise the political culture of any country or group, we often fall back upon references to

national character and come out with generalised, impressionistic observations such as the observation that Italian politics are unstable, because of the volatile Mediterranean temperament of the Italian people. However, attempts have been made in several surveys to investigate the idea of political culture more closely. By taking a selected sample of the electorate and questioning those chosen about their political actions and beliefs, and then aggregating the findings, researchers have been able to search for patterns and produce a profile of the political culture of the sample. By inference, because the sample was a representative one, then the survey can inform us about the political culture of the entire population.

Research findings in a particularly country cannot be regarded as applicable for all of the people for all of the time. They inevitably focus on what the majority of the people appear to think and feel. However, some of the surveys carried out since the 1960s have pointed to the differences in the political beliefs of individuals within the same society. It has also shown that political culture is not an unchanging landscape, a fixed background against which the political process operates. Attitudes can evolve and change over time, for there are in society often a number of forces at work which serve to modify popular attitudes, among them migration and the emergence in a number of liberal democracies of a substantial underclass. Both can be a cause of greater diversity in popular attitudes, for immigrants and those alienated from majority lifestyles may have a looser attachment with prevailing cultural norms. In the words of one author, 'culture moves'.

Survey work is geared to improving our understanding of the political values of citizens in democratic countries. It enables us to make comparisons about the attitudes that characterise their inhabitants. Some surveys have pointed to the similarity of people's concerns across the globe. In 1965, an American, Hadley Cantril[7] found that they want a happy family life, a decent standard of living and good health and – in politics – they like conditions of stability and fear warfare.

More recently, Ron Inglehart[8] in research published in 1989 and 1997, has separately detected a shift of emphasis. Whereas older citizens emphasise materialist attitudes and values, preferring economic growth, a stable society based on respect for law and order and strong national defence, members of younger generations are more **post-materialist** in their thinking. They are concerned

about the importance of ensuring a healthy environment, freedom of expression and more personal power in their social and political life. Writing in 2000, Russell Dalton[9] noted that whereas the proportion of citizens with post-materialist attitudes in Britain and the United States has been around 20 per cent over the last couple of decades, it has grown rapidly in other countries, notably Germany and the Netherlands where it is 36 and 39 per cent respectively.

Almond and Verba: The Civic Culture, 1963[10]

In writing of the British political culture, commentators have often pointed to long-standing features such as the commitment to the democratic process, majority rule and the **rule of law**. They note the preference for strong and effective government, which is equated in the minds of many voters with single party administrations. Yet alongside the importance attached to strong government based on a parliamentary majority, there is also a broad tolerance for the expression of alternative and minority opinions. There is in addition a deep attachment to personal liberty and the rights of the citizen, inroads into which are regarded with considerable mistrust. Excessive regulations, the use of speed cameras and the abandonment of trial by jury in some types of criminal cases make people uneasy, although at a time when the threat of terrorism is widely recognised inroads such as greater airport vigilance and more searches of personal possessions are widely accepted as inevitable and necessary.

Two American political scientists, Almond and Verba, attempted to probe more the attitudes and values that underpin the British political system in a landmark study published in 1963. They found that the British people were proud of and attached to their political institutions, were generally satisfied with what government did for them and combined deference (respect) towards the system with confidence and competence in participating and using it. As a result of the good fortune of historical development, they had reached an ideal mix of active and participant citizen and deferential and passive subject. This made Britain a distinctly manageable country to govern.

More recent survey evidence

In their 1980 update, Almond and Verba[11] noted that some of the attitudes and problems of the 1960s and 1970s had left their mark

Box 1.5 Trust in governments and politicians, 2010

The British Social Attitudes survey (2010)[13] collected data on trust in politicians and government. Following the **parliamentary expenses scandal** of 2009, this was an opportunity to assess the scale of the damage. It found that four in ten people no longer trusted politicians to put the national interest first and the majority of voters believed MPs never told the truth.

The study – charting social attitudes over the last three decades – found that mistrust in politics was now four times higher than it was in the mid '80s. Researchers insisted confidence in the political system had never been particularly high, but the MPs' expenses scandal appeared to have 'helped erode trust yet further'.

Trend data over the last twenty years shows that trust in MPs has remained at consistently low levels. In 1994 half of people (49 per cent) said they would almost never trust a politician to tell the truth when they were 'in a tight corner'. In 2007, this figure was exactly the same and has barely fluctuated.

Trust in government does, however, show decline. In 1987 between 37 per cent and 47 per cent of people trusted the government to put the interests of the country above their political party, but this figure had dropped off significantly by 1996 to just 22 per cent. The figure has only got above 30 per cent in one study since. Trust in politics has hit an all time low in the wake of the MPs expenses scandal as Britain adopts a 'straightforwardly cynical' attitude towards the workings of government.

on the political cultures. Britons had become less deferential and more sceptical of government, their trust in its essential benevolence having seriously declined. More recent research by Curtice and Jowell[12] suggested that the number of British people who trusted government to put the needs of the nation above the interests of party 'just about always/most of the time' fell steadily from 39 per cent in 1974 to 22 per cent in 1996, and 75 per cent trusted the government 'only some of the time/almost never'.

The original Almond and Verba view of British attitudes has been under challenge over recent decades. As we have seen, they themselves later detected signs of a growing distrust of government that has characterised recent decades. More seriously, the emphasis on the peaceful

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Box 1.6 Forces that have shaped British society and popular attitudes: a summary

Traditional features pointing to a 'moderate' political culture

- The long history of national independence and unity
- The absence of successful invasion of the British Isles
- Broad historical continuity, the absence of upheaval, the preference for gradualism and peaceful change
- Traditional pride in and respect for governing institutions
- The absence of fundamental social divisions
- Strong attachment to democratic values, the rule of law and personal freedom

The challenge to traditional attitudes and modes of behaviour in recent years

- Increased dissatisfaction with governing institutions
- Decline of deference: less trust in government and of politicians
- Less commitment to peaceful change
- Greater willingness to resort to forms – including violence – of direct action to register protest
- Developing nationalism in parts of the UK
- Doubts about national identity, made more apparent by growing social diversity and EU involvement
- The development of a multiracial society, but increased tension between different communities

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nature of British society and agreement about what needs to be done can no longer be taken for granted. There have been increasing levels of recorded crime, sectarian street violence in Northern Ireland, and urban rioting in several large towns and cities. The 'moderate' political culture, with its support of parliamentary government and preference for the rule of law does not command universal consent.

Public dissatisfaction with political institutions and the unwritten constitution has increased and more people seem willing to break the law when their consciences tell them that it is wrong. Support for unconventional forms of protest such as strikes, sit-ins and motorway protests has been on the increase. The activities of animal rights and fuel protesters and the support for countryside marches and anti-war

demonstrations suggest a greater willingness to resort to **direct action**, made all the easier in today's society with its ease of communication via new means of technology such as mobile phones.

Broadly, there is still a preference for orderly, peaceful protest and little sympathy for methods that involve violence against people or property. But some of the long-held and generalised comments on British attitudes need to be updated as some traditional features have lost their former relevance. The portrayal of Britain in the early 1970s as a country based on homogeneity (sameness), consensus (broad agreement) and deference (respect for one's social superiors) now seems very outdated and complacent. Such features may have once been established features of British life, but all three characteristics have been under strain since the era when Blondel[14] and Punnett[15] first observed them.

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✔ What you should have learnt from reading this chapter

- A description of British history, society and attitudes written a few decades ago would have probably read something like this. Continuity and tradition have been significant elements of British political development. Change has come about gradually, by evolutionary rather than revolutionary means. There has been a high degree of national unity in the United Kingdom. British society has been cohesive, not marked by conspicuous ethnic, linguistic or religious differences. It has been characterised by consensual attitudes, citizens generally showing a preference for agreement rather than division, and being willing to defer to and trust those who rule over them.

- Today, this picture seems unduly complacent and in some respects distinctly inaccurate. The preference for moderation and peaceful change has been challenged by some groups willing to resort to direct action to achieve their goals. Many people are much less trusting of government and more cynical about politicians, the more so in the light of the expenses scandal.

- The unity of the United Kingdom cannot be taken for granted, under pressure as it has been from the forces of nationalism in Scotland and Wales. British society has become markedly more diverse, as a result of the impact of Commonwealth and other immigration. This has had a profound impact on some communities, not least in terms of religious belief.

Glossary of key terms

Accession countries Accession is a term that strictly refers to those that join an organisation, but is usually employed in the context of the enlargement of the European Union. In this case, it refers to countries that joined in the Fifth Enlargement, namely eight Central and European countries, plus Cyprus and Malta that entered in May 2004.

Asylum seekers Refugees who seek asylum in a foreign country in order to escape famines, persecution, terrorism, war and other associated conditions that threaten their existence.

Belfast ('Good Friday') Agreement Signed in April 1998 by the British and Irish governments and the parties in Northern Ireland, the Agreement created the machinery for devolved government and a mechanism for resolving the troubles that had long beset the province.

Consensus Broad agreement about fundamental policies and goals.

Deference Respect: in this case, the willingness of many people to accept the views of their political and social superiors.

Devolution The process of transferring significant power from passing duties and powers from a higher authority to a lower one – e.g. from a central government to subordinate regional forms. The transfer stops short of any cession of sovereignty, so that powers devolved can always be taken back by the higher authority.

Direct action Political action outside the constitutional and legal framework, covering a huge variety of activities, many of which are militant but legal, although some of them are illegal or may be violent. It is essentially an attempt to coerce those in authority into doing something that otherwise they would not do.

Economic migrants Those who leave their own country in order to find a better standard of life in another one. Critics of immigration sometimes suggest that many asylum seekers are in reality economic migrants who want a better life in Britain.

Ethnic minorities All groups that have different national or cultural traditions from the main population; e.g. in British society, those who are not indigenous white people.

Ethnicity A mixture of different social characteristics that may include common origin, culture, geography, history, language and religion that give a social group a common consciousness and separates them from other social groups.

Far Right Far Right refers to the position occupied by individuals or groups on the political spectrum. Usually the term is used to imply support for extremist policies. Such individuals and groups tend to be xenophobic and believe in supremacist policies on racial issues – e.g. in Britain, a racist approach based on white supremacy.

Homogeneity Made up of similar elements, sameness.

Maastricht Treaty The Treaty on European Union which was negotiated

at Maastricht (Holland) in December 1991, signed in February 1992 and operative since November 1993. It led to the creation of the EU in its present form, after agreement had been reached on issues such as steps towards further monetary and political union.

Multiculturalism Refers to the diverse range of ethnic groups and cultures that make up society. Multiculturalists argue that all people of goodwill – whatever their background – can live together, celebrate diversity, each community preserving its culture whilst respecting that of others.

Multiethnicity Refers to the diverse range of ethnic groups that make up society.

New Commonwealth immigration Immigration from members of the British Commonwealth that joined as a result of decolonisation (e.g. often poor, predominantly non-white countries in the developing world, in Asia, Africa and the Caribbean).

Parliamentary expenses scandal A major political scandal triggered by the publication by the *Telegraph* group in 2009 of expense claims made by MPs over several years. Public outrage was caused by disclosure of widespread abuse of the allowances and expenses system, following failed attempts by Parliament to prevent disclosure under Freedom of Information legislation.

Political culture The collective expression of the fundamental attitudes, beliefs, values and ideas that dispose people to react in a particular way in their approach to political issues. All societies have a political culture that gives form and substance to political processes.

Post-materialism A theory that explains the nature of political concerns and values in terms of levels of economic development. Whereas conditions of material scarcity mean that politics is dominated by economic issues, conditions of relative affluence and prosperity make people more concerned with the search for a better quality of life. This includes interest in issues such as animal rights, environmentalism, feminism, racial harmony and world peace.

Public opinion The opinion of the majority of the population on a particular issue, at a particular time and place. There can be no single public opinion. Rather, there are several opinions held by members of the public.

Refugees People who flee from some danger or problem, especially persecution. They leave their home without having a new home to go to.

Rule of law Government based on the idea of the supremacy of the law, which must be applied equally and through just procedures. The rule of law protects individuals from arbitrary government and requires that governments act in accordance with the law.

Social class The division of the population into categories on the basis of their economic and social status, determined by their background,

occupation, income and other aspects of their lifestyle. The usual distinction is into manual (working class) and non-manual (middle and upper class) groups, although there are many sub-strata within these categories.

? Likely examination questions

As this is essentially a background chapter, few questions are likely to be asked on the material here presented. But it is useful in informing your understanding of government and politics in Britain and elsewhere. A possible question might be:

What do you understand by the term 'political culture'? What are the characteristics of the British political culture?

Helpful websites

www.data-archive.ac.uk UK Data Archive (University of Essex). Evidence on British social attitudes and public opinion.

www.natcen.ac.uk National Centre for Social Research.

www.statistics.gov.uk Useful source of up-to-date information on economic and social features of British life.

Suggestions for further reading

The *British Social Attitudes* surveys, produced almost every year since 1983, provide valuable insights into the nature of national identity and analyses of changes in the British political culture. See especially J. Curtice and R. Jowell, 'The Sceptical Electorate', in R. Jowell, J. Curtice, A. Park, L. Brook and D. Ahrendt (eds), *British Social Attitudes: The 12th Report*, Dartmouth, 1995.

R. Inglehart, *Modernisation and Postmodernisation: Cultural, Economic and Social Change in 43 Societies*, Princeton University Press, 1997.

B. Jones (ed.), *Politics UK*, Prentice Hall, 2007. Chapters 2–4 provide introductory but useful coverage of the historical, social and economic contexts of British politics and chapter 5 covers political culture and political participation.

S. Vertovec, 'Super-diversity and its Implications', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 30:6, 2007.