



THE UNITED KINGDOM TODAY

COMPRENDRE
LE ROYAUME-UNI
AUJOURD'HUI

Manuel de civilisation britannique



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The Conservative and Labour Parties

Parti conservateur et Parti travailliste

MAIN POINTS

• ORIGINS OF POLITICAL PARTIES

This may seem surprising, but political parties* did not really exist in the UK until the 1680s. Before then, political alliances* revolved around the personality and ideas of individual politicians. So, what changed this? As often in British history, the question of succession to the throne was key. Many people were afraid that a pro-Catholic sovereign would upset the religious and political stability of what was now a Protestant country. The experience of the counter-reformation under Mary Tudor, also known as “Bloody Mary”, had been especially traumatic (*see chapter on “Religion”*).

As a result, a group of politicians **wanted to pass laws to exclude non-Anglicans from the succession to the throne**. These reformists formed the **Whig party***. Their opponents were **legitimists**, who wanted to follow the **traditional order** of succession, no matter what the religion of the sovereign was. They became known as the **Tories***. The Tories won the initial battle and a Catholic sovereign, James II, was able to succeed. However, this led to the Glorious Revolution (*see chapter*

on “The Monarchy”), and, ultimately, to the exclusion of Catholics from the succession, with the 1701 Act of Settlement (*see chapter on “The Constitution”*). Kings who benefited from this arrangement, notably George I and George II, tended to favour the Whig party. As a result, the first Prime Minister as we know it, Robert Walpole (PM 1721-1742), was a Whig.

Overall, the Whigs tended to favour reforms*, whereas the Tories sought to preserve the *status quo** and the interests of the upper class. When the Whigs managed to increase the number of voters to include members of the middle class, with the 1832 Reform Act, the Tories lost much electoral ground*. As a result, they reinvented themselves under the leadership of statesman Robert Peel (PM 1834-35, 1841-46). **The Tories thus became the “Conservatives*” in 1834**. The term “Tory” is still sometimes used today, notably by party members.

The Whig party also evolved with the times. In the 1860s, **Whigs allied with some dissatisfied Conservatives to become the Liberals***. As the name indicated, they favoured a liberal economic model based on free trade* rather than protectionism. They also

frequently, in particular once large numbers of working-class people had the vote, pushed a reformist social agenda*, notably with the first retirement pensions in 1908 (*see chapter on “The Welfare State and the NHS”*).

However, the Liberal party lost ground, especially after the mid-1920s. Its role as a party of government was taken over by the **Labour Party***, a new party born of Trade Union movements* in the early 20th century (*see below*). In all general elections since 1922, Labour has been either the governing party or the main party of opposition. In 1988, the **Liberals** merged with the **Social Democratic Party** (created in 1981) and took the name **Liberal Democrats*** the following year.

Today, the UK remains largely a **two-party system***, due to the non-proportional, **first-past-the-post** electoral system (*see previous chapter on “Voting Rights and Elections”*). There are rare exceptions, for example when the Lib Dems were part of David Cameron’s **coalition government** (2010-2015). In wartime, Churchill, a Conservative, ran a government of **national union*** including all major party leaders. Further, there are occasional party **alliances**, such as when Theresa May enlisted the support of the Democratic Unionist Party (a conservative party specific to Northern Ireland, *see below*) to compensate her loss of absolute parliamentary majority in the spring 2017 General Election.

But overall, the **parties of government*** today are the **Conservatives** and **Labour**. Since 1922, all Prime Ministers have belonged to one of these two parties. Note that **Republicans*** exist in the UK but are **not a political party** (unlike in the USA). The term designates

people (from any political party or none) who would like the monarchy to be abolished in favour a republic.

• THE CONSERVATIVES

Historically, Conservatives have tended to preserve the **established order***. They used to be the party of the **aristocracy and the upper class**, controlling the House of Lords and, frequently, the House of Commons as well. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, they were sometimes considered to govern in the interests of the elite, for instance by opposing legislation unfavourable to **landowners***. However, their policies were greatly influenced by **Robert Peel** (PM 1834-35, 1841-46), who tried to stir the party towards **economic liberalism** and **free trade**.

From the 19th century onward, much of the party’s **social policy*** was influenced by **Benjamin Disraeli** (PM 1868, 1874-1880), a Conservative leader and ideologist (who also happened to be, historically, the first British Prime Minister of Jewish descent). Before heading the government, **Benjamin Disraeli** had written social novels regarding the “Condition of England” question. In *Sybil or the Two nations* (published in 1845), he denounced social inequalities and the fact that the UK was divided into **two nations: the rich and the poor**. He considered that the privileged classes had a duty and responsibility towards the less fortunate. They should find solutions to alleviate poverty and try to bring the nation together into “one nation”. This rather paternalistic concept of “**one-nation conservatism***”, sometimes called “one-nationism” or “Tory democracy” is still influential today. It was taken up by **Winston Churchill** (PM 1940-45, 1951-55),

who had much admiration for Disraeli. More recently, **Theresa May** (PM 2016-2019) and **Boris Johnson** (PM 2019-2022) also referenced the notion in their political speeches.

To this day, Conservative politicians tend to emphasize **economic prosperity, individual endeavour, and entrepreneurship**. Margaret Thatcher (PM 1979-1990) famously aimed to “**roll back the frontiers of the state***”, meaning that there should be less state intervention* and a smaller, cheaper form of government. This way, people would save on taxes and retain more money to invest in the economy or spend on themselves and their families. David Cameron (PM 2010-2016) later developed the compromise notion of a “**Big Society**” that, he claimed, would take power away from politicians and give it to people, combining free market and social solidarity.

Overall, Conservatives have aimed to **cut public spending***. They have been criticized for doing so in the fields of health (NHS funding), education and social benefits. The idea of **self-help** (that people should, as much as possible “help themselves” through hard work) is now considered dated, but the notion that people should not rely on state help unless strictly necessary remains. David Cameron sought to curb what he called the “**culture of entitlement***”, namely the fact that people considered themselves entitled to a certain amount of money from the State. More recently, Boris Johnson (Prime Minister from 2019 to 2022) introduced a “**levelling up***” agenda to try and reduce inequalities between geographic areas, and between different social groups.

The Conservative party is the party with the **highest number of years in power in the 20th and 21st centuries**. Famous Conservative politicians include:

- **Winston Churchill** 🔗 (PM 1940-45, 1951-55), war leader.
- **Harold Macmillan** (PM 1957-63), nicknamed “supermac”, facilitated decolonization and governed during a period of prosperity which led him to declare, in 1957, “Most of our people have never had it so good”.
- **Edward Heath** (PM 1970-74), pro-Europe, got the UK to join the EEC in 1973.
- **Margaret Thatcher** (PM 1979-1990), known for her neoliberal economic policies, spending cuts and tough stance* on Trade Unions.
- **John Major** (PM 1990-1997), moderate and cautiously pro-EU.
- **William Hague** (party leader 1997-2001), author of historical biographies and long-time member of the European Parliament.
- **David Cameron** (PM 2010-2016), had to form a coalition government with the Lib-Dems (2010-2015); agreed to the 2014 referendum on Scottish independence (which he won); promised a EU referendum in order to win the 2015 election, won the election but lost the 2016 referendum and resigned.
- **Theresa May** (PM 2016-2019), unsuccessfully tried to pass a Brexit deal through Parliament.
- **Boris Johnson** (PM 2019-2022), managed to push through a Brexit Deal after he won the December 2019 election by a landslide*; was forced to resign in July 2022, because his authority and credibility were challenged, even within his own party (senior ministers resigned). This was largely due to a series

of scandals, including the “partygate” (Johnson lied about hosting and attending parties at 10 Downing Street during pandemic lockdowns).

KEY PLAYER

Winston Churchill's name is commonly used by politicians, especially those from the Conservative Party. He was quoted in many of David Cameron's speeches, and frequently mentioned by Boris Johnson, who wrote a book about him.

However, Churchill **belonged to different political parties**. Although his change of party may be viewed as opportunism, there was a significant ideological component. Being the descendent of the Dukes of Marlborough, he **started off as a Conservative**. But aspirations to social reform, present already in his early speeches, led him **to switch to the Liberal party**. He was part of Herbert Asquith's reformist Liberal government which came to power in 1908. As President of the Board of Trade (1908-1910), Churchill played a key role in setting up the first **minimum wage*** in the UK.

Churchill **re-joined the Conservatives in 1924**, after it became clear that he could not win an election as a Liberal or independent candidate. Although he was for a time the Conservative Chancellor of the Exchequer (1924-1929), the top job after Prime Minister, he was not always well regarded by other leading Conservative figures. He was called to form a government of **national union** in 1940 not so much because he was the most popular choice in his party, but rather because he was the most likely to generate consensus* from all sides, including **Labour**. Also, his type of rhetoric, which had previously seemed somewhat outdated, struck the right note in wartime Britain.

• THE LABOUR PARTY

The Labour Party was born from **Trade Unions and socialist groups** which developed in the second half of the 19th century. It was influenced by movements like the **Fabian Society** (a group of authors and thinkers

that included the playwright George Bernard Shaw). It was initially designed to defend the **interests of the working class***, especially as workers gained increased electoral power with the 1884 Representation of the People Act (which essentially gave the vote to all male householders – who owned or rented property – over the age of 21).

The party first came into existence in 1900 as the Labour Representation Committee. It only **gradually became a party of government***. It significantly gained in popularity after the decline of the Liberal Party, becoming the main party of opposition (or government) from 1922 onwards. **Ramsay Macdonald** (PM 1924, 1929-35) was able to form the first Labour governments, but the party did not have a majority in Parliament and relied on others to support the passage of legislation*. The real breakthrough came in the wake of the second World War. People aspired to more class solidarity. The Labour Party's electoral Manifesto, called **“Let us Face the Future”**, resonated with them. Also, the war cabinet included several Labour ministers who had proved their worth and competence. One of them, **Clement Attlee**, beat Churchill to the premiership* in the 1945 General election, to many people's surprise.

The Labour government of Clement Attlee (PM 1945-1951) was able to engage in a program of **ambitious social reforms**, which included the creation of the National Health Service (**NHS**) in 1948 (*see chapter on “The Welfare State and the NHS”*). Generally, the party still takes credit for setting up the NHS and the Welfare State. Emphasis is put on social justice, healthcare and education. During the Cold War, Conservative leaders

(Margaret Thatcher in particular) tended to associate the Labour party with “the Socialists and the Communists” to dissuade people from voting Labour. In fact, only a part of Labour party members (to the left of the party) would consider themselves “Socialists” (note that today, most party members do not identify with the term). But Thatcher’s argument and the choice of leaders from the left of the party led to bad electoral results for the party, notably in the 1983 General Election (the worst result between 1935 and 2019).


In 1997, Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair (PM 1997-2007) put an end to 18 consecutive years of Conservative government. He did so essentially by adopting centrist policies and renaming the party “**New Labour***”. He drew inspiration from the **liberal economic agenda** of his Conservative predecessor, Margaret Thatcher. But he added more **compassionate, modern social policies**, emphasizing education and multiculturalism. He also promised a referendum on devolution for Scotland and Wales, and a reform of the house of Lords, which he delivered respectively in 1997 and 1999 (*see chapters on “Devolution” and on “Parliament and Government”*). His approach, known as the “**Third Way**”, enabled him to win three consecutive General Elections. 🗡️ He stepped down* in 2007 due to mounting criticisms over his decision to involve the UK in the Iraq war. His ally Gordon Brown (who had been Chancellor of the Exchequer in his governments) succeeded him (2007-2010) but did not win re-election.

FUN FACT

Televised debates between major political leaders before a General Election are a relatively **new phenomenon** in the UK. The first ones took place in **2010**, whereas presidential debates started as early as 1960 in the US (Nixon vs Kennedy) and 1974 in France. This can be explained by two factors. First, the General Election is not a presidential election. **Voters do not elect the Prime Minister directly**. They elect Members of Parliament, and the number of seats determines which party (and party leader) will govern. The role of the Prime Minister has, however, become increasingly close to that of a president (especially after Tony Blair, Labour Prime Minister from 1997 to 2007). Second, **Prime Ministers seeking re-election often had little to gain by taking part in televised debates**. It was better for them, strategically, to stay above the fray. **However, in 2010, Gordon Brown (Prime Minister from 2007 to 2010) was lagging so much behind in the polls that he had nothing to lose and agreed to take part in the first televised debates**. This did not prevent him from losing the election, but televised debates have since been part of General Election campaigns. **Labour and Conservative leaders tend to get most of the spotlight**, with few exceptions (notably the Lib Dems in 2010), and there are occasional disputes about which other, smaller parties get to participate.

Since 2010, the Labour party has been struggling to get back to power*. Its successive leaders (Ed Milliband, 2010-2015 and Jeremy Corbyn, 2015-2020) tended to be from the left of the party and did not attract the centrist vote as much as Tony Blair. The 2019 General Election yielded the worst results* for the party since 1935. Famous Labour politicians include:

- **Keir Hardie**, founder of the party in 1900.
- **Ramsay Macdonald** (PM 1924, 1929-35), leader of the first ever (minority) Labour governments.

- **Clement Attlee** (PM 1945-1951), known for social reforms and the creation of the NHS.
- **Harold Wilson** (PM 1964-70, 1974-76), led the party through difficult times, and formed the most Labour administrations (4).
- **James Callaghan** (PM 1976-1979), the only person to have served as Chancellor of the Exchequer, Home Secretary and Foreign Secretary as well as Prime Minister, saw the country through a critical time with widespread strikes.
- **Tony Blair** (PM 1997-2007), modernized the party's image as "New Labour*" and won 3 successive General Elections on a centrist agenda .
- **Gordon Brown** (PM 2007-2010), Tony Blair's Chancellor of the Exchequer who took over but lost the election to David Cameron.
- **Ed Milliband** (party leader 2010-2015), beat his brother David to the party leadership; lost the 2015 election to David Cameron.
- **Jeremy Corbyn** (party leader 2015-2020), the most leftist Labour leader in recent decades, supported by the grassroots* of the party but less so by other leading figures.
- **Keir Starmer** (party leader from April 2020), a former human rights lawyer, generated high hopes but has yet to make a breakthrough* in elections or polls.

NOTEWORTHY QUOTATIONS

In 1987, in an interview for the magazine *Women's Own*, Margaret Thatcher famously declared: "**there's no such thing as society**". She then explained: "There are individual men and women and there are families. And no government can do anything except through people, and people must look after themselves first. It is our duty to look after ourselves and then, also, to look after our neighbours."

This is an example of Thatcher favouring individual endeavour and wishing to cut back on public spending by encouraging people to be autonomous. She had also said, in her 1980 speech to the Conservative Party conference, "**If spending money like water was the answer to our country's problems, we would have no problems now.**"

By comparison, the Labour Party generally advocates more public spending, in particular on health, education and social justice. At the 1996 Labour Party conference, party leader (and future Prime Minister) Tony Blair named his three top priorities: "**education, education, and education**". He was elected on the following year by a landslide*.

QUESTIONS (spécial concours)

- Is the identity of political parties closely linked to a specific social class?
- Are centrist policies always the best path to electoral success?
- Can the left always claim credit* for social measures and the right for economic prosperity?

GOING FURTHER

- **On the internet: Political parties** have their own websites, as well as an increasingly strong presence on social media. The potential dangers of "**digital campaigning***" and disinformation have been pointed out by both media organisations and watchdogs.

- **In popular culture:** British humour extends to the sphere of politics. Politicians are frequently made fun of or even parodied. This is especially true of cartoons, and also political podcasts, including the **BBC Radio 4's Friday Night Comedy Programme**. It offers series such as *Dead Ringers* (a mocking impersonation of leading political figures) or *The News Quiz* (where guests have to guess which news or political figure is referenced in cryptic – often critical – questions). Downloads and subscriptions are free: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p02pc9pj/episodes/downloads>
- **Related chapters:** *Parliament and Government; Voting Rights and Elections; Other Political Parties; Religion; Building Europe; Brexit.*

VOCABULARY

USEFUL BASICS		TECHNICAL TERMS	
Political parties	Les partis politiques	A two-party system	Un système à deux partis
Political alliances	Les alliances politiques	To be a party of government	Être un parti de gouvernement/susceptible de gouverner (car susceptible d'avoir suffisamment de députés au Parlement)
To lose electoral ground	Perdre du terrain (sur le plan) électoral	The Whigs, the Whig party	Les Whigs, le parti whig (parti réformiste qui fut un des principaux partis entre 1680 et 1860)
To step down from power	Se retirer du pouvoir/quitter le pouvoir /passer la main	The Tories, the Tory Party	Les Tories, le party tory (ancien nom du parti conservateur, encore utilisé, notamment par ses membres)
To get back to power	Revenir au pouvoir	The Conservatives, the Conservative Party	Les Conservateurs, le parti conservateur (nouveau nom du parti Tory après 1834)
To win (an election) by a landslide	Gagner (une election) de manière écrasante (/par un raz-de-marée)	The Liberals, the Liberal party	Les Libéraux, le parti libéral (un des deux grands partis entre les années 1860 et 1920, qui fusionna avec le parti social-démocrate SDP en 1988)
To attract the centrist vote	Attirer le vote centrist	The Liberal Democrats, the Lib Dems, the Liberal Democrat Party	Les Libéraux démocrates, le parti libéral démocrate (nom datant de 1989, suite à la fusion du parti libéral et du parti social-démocrate)
To yield good (or bad) results	Donner de bons (ou de mauvais) résultats	Ø Labour, The Labour Party	Les Travailleurs, le parti travailliste
To make a breakthrough (in opinion polls)	Faire une percée (dans les sondages)	Trade Unions	Les syndicats
To cut public spending	Réduire les dépenses publiques	Trade Union movements	Les mouvements syndicaux

To oppose legislation unfavourable to landowners	S'opposer à une législation défavorable aux propriétaires fonciers	A Republican	(UK) Un républicain, qui souhaite abolir la monarchie (≠ US, un membre du parti républicain)
≠ to defend the interests of the working class	Défendre les intérêts de la classe ouvrière	One-nation Conservatism,/ One Nationism,/ Tory Democracy	Le Conservatisme social
The first minimum wages	Les premiers salaires minimaux	The premiership	La fonction de Premier ministre
To create, to generate consensus	Créer, générer le consensus	A government of national union	La Grande Charte (qui contenait les revendications des Chartistes et fut présentée sans
To support the passage of legislation	Soutenir le passage d'une loi (au Parlement)	New Labour	Les « Nouveaux Travillistes » (nom donné aux Travillistes sous l'impulsion de Tony Blair, leader du parti de 1994 à 2007)
To claim credit for something	S'attribuer les mérites de quelque chose/s'attribuer des lauriers pour avoir réalisé quelque chose	The Third Way	La Troisième Voie (politique centriste du Premier ministre Tony Blair visant à combiner des idées de gauche et de droite)
Digital campaigning	La campagne (électorale) numérique/ sur internet	The grassroots of the party (also spelled "grass roots" or "grass-roots")	La base du parti (les militants plutôt que les leaders)

FOOD FOR THOUGHT	
To be a party member	Être membre d'un parti politique
To be apolitical	Être apolitique (sans affiliation politique)
To favour reforms	Privilégier (/être pour) les réformes
To push a reformist social agenda (/policy)	Porter un projet (/une politique) de réforme sociale
To (want to) preserve the status quo (/the established order)	(Souhaiter) préserver le status quo (/l'ordre établi)
(To advocate) a liberal economic model (based on free trade)	(Préconiser) un modèle économique (néo)libéral (basé sur le libre-échange économique)
To roll back the frontiers of the state/ to limit state intervention	Faire reculer le contrôle de l'état (<i>littéralement</i> , repousser les frontières de l'état – terme associé à Margaret Thatcher)/ limiter l'intervention de l'état
To emphasize social justice (or social solidarity)	Mettre l'accent sur la justice sociale (ou la solidarité entre classes sociales)
To come up with modern social policies	Concevoir des politiques sociales modernes