

C. Political parties, pressure groups, trade unions.

British political parties go back centuries but they only became recognisable as such in the 19th century with the extension of the franchise. By then they needed to attract electors with a distinct programme. They developed a strong leadership, which is supposed to become a strong executive once elected, all the more so as it can rely on a disciplined majority in the Commons. There is a two-party system and politicians tend to be suspicious of coalitions.

The most successful party since 1950 has been the Conservative party. Under their other name, the Tories go back to the 17th century. The organisation is made up of constituency parties, a central office and a parliamentary party. Its leader has been elected since 1965 and since 2001 both MPs and party members take part in the election. It tends to mirror a fairly broad range of opinions from the far to the centre-right, which is usually the case for Britain's two major parties. In the past 30 years, a distinction could be made between more socially minded (paternalistic) One-Nation Tories and a large Thatcherite strand. In the 1990s, it was weakened by its divisions over the European issue. Most Conservative Members of Parliament now seem to be eurosceptics but there are still issues of degree and policy that can cause trouble to the leadership. The leader D. Cameron was elected in 2005 (PM 2010). He has tried to give the « nasty » party a more modern and attractive image by supporting green policies and gay marriage, but this is not always to the taste of the rank-and-file. Numerous pressure groups within the party defend a wide variety of views. They range from Bright Blue greens to a Cornerstone group opposed to gay marriage;

The second party in the duopoly is Labour. It developed outside parliament. In 1900 some Trade Unions and Socialist groups set up the Labour Representation Committee to defend working class interests at Westminster. It became the Labour Party in 1906. The first time it led a government with a very strong majority was in 1945 with Clement Attlee. After a lost election in 1979 it turned very radical, which proved unpopular. Voters did not like the growing influence of militant trade unions and the insistence on more nationalisation and taxation. Electoral support collapsed in 1983, which led to a change of policy, bringing the party to the centre-left. In 1994, T. Blair reformed the party further to show Old Labour had become New Labour. It was no longer socialist as could be seen when clause IV of its constitution was revised in 1995. This proved Labour was no longer committed to the nationalisation of means of production, distribution and exchange. The influence of trade unions was also reduced and the leadership tried to diversify its source of funds. T. Blair led the party to three successive electoral victories, which was a first. However, even with a new leader (Brown) the party was no longer attractive to voters by 2010. The current leader, Ed Miliband, is less closely associated to New Labour than Blair or Brown.

Liberal leaders often headed governments in the 19th and early 20th centuries but by the 1920s they had lost electoral support. As a party of the left they were replaced by Labour, although some of their ideas were also taken up by the Conservatives. In the 1980s, a group of moderates left Labour to set up the Social Democratic Party. They formed an alliance with the Liberals, the two groups merged in 1988, creating the Liberal Democrats. They were fairly successful in the 21st century, with a peak of 62 seats in 2005. After the election of 2010 they opted for a coalition with the Tories and N. Clegg is now Deputy Prime Minister. However, this was not popular among their usual supporters and their poll ratings have dropped.

Small parties are disadvantaged by the electoral system and by the fact that broad-based major parties encompass divergent opinions. However, this is less true for regionally focused (sub)national parties. Far right organisations like the 1967 National Front and the British National Party, which split up from the former in 1982 have gained some representatives at the local level. A right-wing populist europhobic one-issue party, the United Kingdom Independence Party has been fairly successful at elections for the European parliament, it got 13 MEPs elected in 2009. The Conservatives, in particular, are said to be rather worried about losing voters to the UKIP. It is now up to 17% in opinion polls.

Major parties have noted a worrying evolution in the last decades. Citizens seem to lose faith in the ability of politicians to act meaningfully in a globalised world. Turn-out at elections has dropped. There has been a huge fall in party membership. Only 1.1% of the electorate has a party card now,

as against 10% in the 1960s. Citizens feel disconnected from politicians. It has an impact on the funding of parties. They have become increasingly dependent on a small number of donors representing vested interests. Yet the public is still ready to play a part in civil society. People tend to be interested in single issues and belong to various organisations. It has often been noted that the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds has more members than all three main parties together.

There are different types of interest and pressure groups. Sectional ones represent professional bodies, like the British Medical Association. Others are linked to a specific cause, like Greenpeace. Some organisations are only occasionally interested in lobbying on a particular issue. Thus, in 2011, the National Trust, with its 3.9m members gained access to the PM and some changes in a planning reform it was campaigning against. A distinction is made between insider groups, recognised as authorities on some questions and with easier access to Whitehall or Downing Street and outsider groups which tend to have to attract public and media attention through imaginative campaigning. New types of public involvement have developed with new technologies such as the use of online petitions and tweets or the possibilities offered of organising demonstrations quickly.

Among economic pressure groups are those that represent business interests, such as the Confederation of British Industry, set up in 1965. They also include Trade Unions. They developed in the 19th century. In 1868, the Trades Union Congress was set up. Most large Trade Unions belong to it. They defend their members' interests when bargaining with employers on wages or working conditions. They also play a political role and are closely linked to the Labour Party. They became increasingly influential after World War 2 and particularly in the 1960s and 1970s. Their membership was large, at about 13.2 million in 1979. Crises between governments and unions provoked the fall of a Conservative government in 1974 and a Labour one in 1979. By then, series of strikes (the 1978-79 « Winter of Discontent ») had made them unpopular. In the 1980s Mrs Thatcher's governments reduced their power through a series of laws. They became liable to be prosecuted for damages during strikes, voting by secret ballot was made compulsory for elections and before industrial action. Secondary picketing and sympathy strikes were no longer legal. Both membership and influence declined. There were about 7.6 million members in 2006. However the evolution of employment from the secondary to the tertiary sector, the increasing numbers of white-collar, female and part-time workers also played a part. The public sector (Unison for example) tends to be more unionised (60% to 17%) than the private sector.

D. The judiciary

Law. As we have seen, there are different systems in Scotland, Northern Ireland and England / Wales. The Scottish system is closer to the Continental (Roman law) one. In England and Wales, legislation consists in statute law, common law and equity. Common law is made up of the rulings of judges throughout the centuries. It can be superseded by statute law while in many cases EU law prevails over those acts of parliament. In 1998, the European Convention on Human Rights was incorporated into British law with the Human Rights Act which became effective in 2000. British judges have thus been given a political role, they can be asked to decide whether legislation is compatible with the convention. If not, they can make a « declaration of incompatibility ». Parliament can then decide whether to modify the law or not. Some judges and many Conservatives are opposed to this development.

Courts. Reforms have been carried out to separate the judiciary from the executive and the legislative. The different roles of the Lord Chancellor have been devolved to a Secretary of State for Justice, the Lord Chief Justice (highest-ranking judge) and a Lord Speaker. The law lords have been replaced by a Supreme Court of the United Kingdom (act 2005, implemented 2009). It is the final court of appeal for civil cases in the UK and for criminal cases in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Cases presented by the police are checked by the Crown Prosecution Service. It advises the police on whether there is enough evidence to prosecute, reviews and prepares cases for courts. A large number of cases are dealt with by Magistrates' Courts. Magistrates are Justices of the Peace. Many are volunteers but salaried, legally-qualified district judges are to be found in urban areas. Civil matters can be sent to County Courts and to the High Court. Criminal ones go to the Crown Court. Further appeals would reach the Court of Appeal and then the Supreme Court.

Judges are selected among experienced lawyers, most are former barristers but some were solicitors (legal advisers). They used to be chosen by the Lord Chancellor but, since 2006 (Constitutional Reform Act, 2005), the job has been done by an independent Judicial Appointments Commission. Women and minorities are underrepresented. Jury trial seems to be increasingly criticised.

Policing. The police is overseen by the Home Secretary but there is no national police force. London has a Metropolitan Police Force and a City of London Police Force. There are 41 other forces in England and Wales. Since November 2012, elected Police and Crime Commissioners have been in charge of the agenda, the budget and the hiring/firing of Chief Constables. The latter are the senior officers and in charge of operations. The Home Office monitors agendas and spending. Due to a 20% cut in police budgets, the workforce dropped by 11,500 between May 2010 and September 2011. Several services are to be outsourced to the private sector.

The image of the unarmed « bobby on the beat » used to be rather popular but this is no longer the case. Scandals in the 1980s and 1990s were linked to the fabrication of evidence and the extortion of false confessions. In 1993, a black teenager Stephen Lawrence was murdered in a racist killing. The case was inadequately handled by the Metropolitan police. A public inquiry led by Sir William Macpherson was set up in 1997. It stressed the incompetence and « institutional racism » of the Met. (Two suspects were convicted in 2012). Attempts to increase the number of officers belonging to minorities has not proved very successful. There have been complaints in the 21st century about the use of tasers, the shooting of a Brazilian electrician in the aftermath of the 2005 London bombings and the treatment of demonstrators which caused the death of a bystander in 2009.

Furthermore, governments have been accused of endangering private liberties to fight terrorism. The public is not entirely at ease with the multiplication of CCTV cameras or the huge DNA database. Indeed the current government has abandoned the very unpopular -and expensive- idea of ID cards. Yet a new bill providing for secret court hearings in some national security cases is also criticised.

There has been a fall in crime in the past decades. However the jail population is fairly high by European standards. It peaked at 88,179 in 2011 due to the summer riots and has now dropped to about 83,500. There are plans to develop privately run industrial workshops in prisons. This could lower reoffending rates and help finances at a time of large budget cuts.

Sources, see bibliography.