

*The* **BRITISH**  
**POLITY**

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*Philip Norton*

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## **THE BRITISH POLITY**

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# Preface

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WHEN IN THE UNITED STATES, I have always been struck by the interest, sometimes the fascination, shown in Britain and its history, politics, and culture. However, for the serious student of British politics, a desire to understand and know more about the subject is difficult to satisfy because of limited sources. Coverage of British events by television and newspapers in the United States is extremely limited and often superficial. There are a number of introductory texts on British politics, but the most popular and most recent are texts by British scholars written primarily for British students. When I was invited to write the volume on British politics in Longman's *Polity* series, I avidly grasped the opportunity to produce a book that appeared to be much needed: an introductory text on British politics written primarily for American students. Although I hope that the book may prove of interest to British readers as well, not least because of the comparisons it introduces, it has been written principally for the American reader.

The plan of the work is simply stated. The first three chapters (Part I) provide an introduction to Britain and its political culture and history. Parts II through V identify and analyze the main features of the contemporary British polity. Governments do not operate in a political vacuum. Part II considers the political environment created by the constitution, the electoral system, political parties, and interest groups. Part III dissects and studies the different levels of government: central government, local government, and the institutions of the European Communities. Government in Britain is politically accountable to Parliament and legally accountable to the monarch. Both institutions constitute the focus of Part IV. The assent of both is necessary for the enactment of legislation. Once passed, legislation is interpreted

by the courts and enforced by the different agencies of the state, most notably by the police in the case of criminal law. The effects of law and of government activities are communicated to the lawmakers through various channels. The most important media of communication are television and newspapers, and by their reporting they can have a significant impact on political behavior. The courts, the police, and the mass media constitute the concern of Part V. The final chapter draws out the themes of the book and comprises my own analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the contemporary British polity.

In each of the chapters in Parts II through V I have tried to provide a common structure. As far as possible, each embodies an illustrative comparison with the equivalent United States institution, a brief historical sketch, an analysis of the current position, and a discussion of the debate that surrounds the institution. Because the book is designed as a student text for class use, I have sought to construct chapters that are sufficiently self-contained to be read independent of one another. Where necessary, important points are repeated or a cross-reference is provided. I have avoided terms that are probably unfamiliar to American readers or, where unavoidable, I have provided an explanation of them. Also, important terms are defined in the glossary that is located at the end of the text. Where financial figures are mentioned, the sterling amount is followed by the approximate dollar equivalent, based on the July 1983 exchange rate of £1 = \$1.50, unless otherwise stated.

In writing the book, I have incurred a number of debts. My intellectual debts will be apparent from the footnotes. For reading and commenting on all or part of the manuscript, my thanks are due to John Vanderoef, Jorgen Rasmussen, Ed Page, and Ken Batty. Irving Rockwood of Longman not only read and commented on the text but also provided valuable and considerate editorial guidance. Catherine Davies, Enid Tracy, and Melanie Bucknell provided much-appreciated help in typing the manuscript. It would not have been possible for me to write a work of this nature, designed for American students, without my own experiences of the United States. For these experiences my gratitude goes to the Thouron family and Scholarship Committee for the award of a Thouron Scholarship, allowing me to study at the University of Pennsylvania in 1974–1975, to Fairleigh Dickinson University for the opportunity in 1977 to teach American students, and to Mr. and Mrs. Robert Bradel for their unstinting hospitality on my regular visits to the United States. On this side of the Atlantic, my thanks go to colleagues and friends for continued support. Many of my ideas on British politics have been developed and refined as a result of teaching the subject at the University of Hull. The comments of students have proved an invaluable stimulus to my thoughts and have served to reinforce my long-held view that teaching and research are complementary rather than conflicting pursuits. I have

learned a great deal myself through writing this book. Doubtless I shall learn more from student reaction to it.

My thanks are also owing to Professor Samuel H. Beer for his recent work *Britain Against Itself*. As will be clear from my conclusion, I profoundly disagree with his analysis. However, the appearance of his work has provided me with the opportunity to develop and think through my own analysis, and for that I am grateful.

Although I have drawn on the help and work of others, no one else can be held responsible for any faults, misguided interpretations, or omissions that follow. That responsibility is mine alone. I would be pleased to hear from any reader who spots errors or wishes to express comment on the work.

**Philip Norton**

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# Introduction

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# 1

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## The Contemporary Landscape

### *British Society and Political Socialization*

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CONTINUITY AND CHANGE are features of every political system. What makes each significant is the nature and the extent of that change. Some systems are characterized by rapid and sometimes revolutionary change. Others are noted for continuity with past experience and structures. The task of the student of politics is to discern the distinctive features of that continuity and change, to generate concepts, and, if possible, to construct models and theories that will aid understanding of and serve to explain those distinctive features and the relationship among them.

The distinctive features of a political system can be recognized by comparing that system with another or, better still, with many others. In discussing the merits of comparative politics, a student in a class of mine once objected to the whole exercise. "There's no point in comparing one country with another," he argued. "Every country is unique." As others in the class were quick to respond, the only way by which one knows that a country is unique is by comparing it with others. Just as one can know whether one is short or tall only by comparing oneself with others, so one can know whether one's own political system is "short" or "tall" only by putting it alongside other systems and noting the differences.

Space and resources preclude an exhaustive or even an extensive comparative study in this work. Instead, I propose to illustrate the distinctive nature of the British polity by comparing it, where appropriate, with the American. They are similar in many respects, with a shared language; advanced industrial economies; similar but not always identical political, social, and economic values; and some mutual needs. Each has a sense of affinity with the other. As we shall see, however, there are significant dissimilarities: dissimilarities that make a comparative exercise useful. Such an exercise will serve not only to sensitize the American reader to the distinctive features of the British polity but also to make readers more aware of the features of their own polity. That, at least, is the hope.

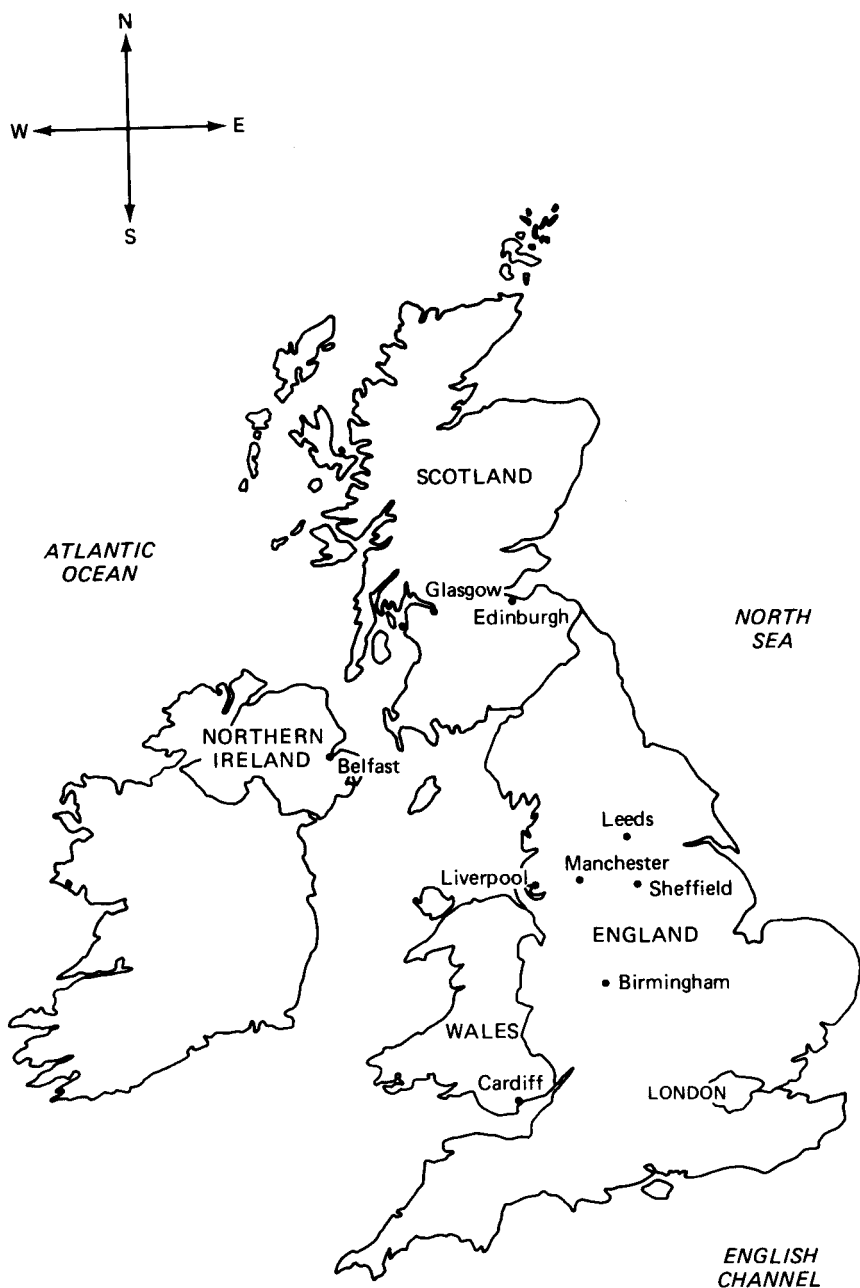
In order to understand continuity and change within the British polity, I propose to stress the significance of the political culture. This emphasis will form the basis of the next chapter as well as the book's conclusion. Before we proceed to an analysis of that culture, a brief sketch of the salient features of contemporary Britain is necessary. This outline is especially pertinent for comparative purposes. There are important dissimilarities between the United States and Britain in terms of geography, demography, and social history. Britain is a small, crowded island, largely oriented in terms of industry and population to England (and especially the Southeast of England), with a class-based society that has superseded but by no means discarded the characteristics of a status-based feudal society. The purpose of this chapter is to highlight those features and, for convenience, consider also the media of political socialization in Britain. Such a study is prerequisite for a consideration of the political culture and the institutions and processes that culture nurtures.

## CONTEMPORARY BRITAIN

### Land and Population

Looked at from the perspective of land distribution and usage, Great Britain could be described as a predominantly agricultural kingdom based on the three countries of England, Scotland, and Wales. (The United Kingdom comprises these three countries plus Northern Ireland: see Map. 1.1.) In terms of the distribution and activities of the population, it is predominantly English, nonagricultural, and town- or suburban-based.

Great Britain occupies a total area of 88,798 square miles. This compares with an area of 3,615,123 square miles for the United States. (The USSR occupies more than 8 million square miles. The small principality of Monaco, by contrast, comprises but a modest 368 acres.) Within the United States, 10 states each have a greater land area than Britain: Alaska (586,412



MAP 1.1 The United Kingdom.

square miles), Texas (267,339 square miles), and California (158,693) being the most notable. England has approximately the same land area as New York State, Scotland the same area as South Carolina, and Wales the same as Massachusetts.

The disparity in population size is not quite so extreme. In 1980, the United Kingdom population was 56 million, up from 19.7 million at the turn of the century. The United States population in 1980 was 226 million, up from just under 76 million in 1900 (see Table 1.1). There is a more significant difference, however, in population growth. In the 1970s, the United Kingdom population increased by a mere 0.5%, a figure matched only by West Germany. The increase in the United States was one of 10.4%. In the USSR it was 8.8%, in China 13.9%, and in Brazil, nearly 30%.

When the population is put in the context of land size, Britain emerges clearly as a crowded island. The number of people per square kilometer in 1980 was 229. By European standards, this is not exceptional: Belgium, the Netherlands, and West Germany are even more densely populated. The number of people per square kilometer in the United States in 1980 was a modest 24. By worldwide standards, this is a low but not exceptional density. The USSR, Brazil, New Zealand, Australia, and Canada were among the nations with lower population density. In Australia and Canada there were 2 people per square kilometer.

Within the United Kingdom, the population is heavily concentrated in one country. In 1980, more than 46.5 million people lived in England,

**TABLE 1.1**  
**United States and United Kingdom Populations, 1900–1980**

<i>Year*</i>	<i>United Kingdom Population (Millions)</i>	<i>United States Population (Millions)</i>
1900/1901	38.2	75.99
1910/1911	42.1	91.97
1920/1921	44.0	105.7
1930/1931	46.1	122.77
1940/1941	48.3	131.67
1950/1951	50.6	150.69
1960/1961	53.0	179.2
1970/1971	55.7	203.2
1980	56.0	226.5

\*0, United States; 1, United Kingdom.

SOURCES: Adapted from Central Statistical Office, *Social Trends 12* (Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1981) and *New Statesman's Year Book 1981–82* (Macmillan, 1981).



compared with a little over 5 million in Scotland, 3 million in Wales and 1.7 million in Northern Ireland. The number of people per square kilometer in England in 1980 was 356—the highest population density of European countries and greater even than that of Japan. Within England, the greatest concentration of inhabitants was in the southeast of the country (that is, Greater London and the surrounding counties), with a population of nearly 17 million.

The population resides predominantly in areas classed as urban for local government purposes. Nearly 80% of the population in England, and more than 70% in Scotland and Wales, live in urban areas.<sup>1</sup> The shift from rural to urban areas has been marked in England, the proportion of the population living in nonurban areas declining from a little over 35% in 1951 to not much more than 20% 20 years later.

Although more than three-quarters of the land surface is used for agriculture, very few people are employed in the agricultural industry. There has been a persistent drift from land work since industrialization in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a trend that continues. More than 700,000 people were employed in agriculture, forestry, and fishing in 1961. By 1979, the figure was down to 367,000. Increased efficiency and greater mechanization have in part facilitated this development. (Britain has one of the heaviest tractor densities in the world.) There are more than 250,000 "statistically significant farming units" in Britain,<sup>2</sup> with three-fifths of the full-time farms being devoted mainly to dairying or beef cattle and sheep. Farms devoted to arable crops are predominant in the eastern part of England. Sheep and cattle rearing is a feature of the hills and moorland areas of Scotland, Wales, and northern and southwest England.

Despite the importance and extent of agriculture, nearly half of Britain's food supply has to be imported. Indeed, Britain is heavily dependent on imports for its raw materials. Compared with other large industrialized (and some developing) nations, Britain is notably lacking in natural resources. It is largely self-sufficient in coal, chemicals, and fish, and the recent discovery and exploitation of oil in the North Sea has made it a net exporter of the substance. Other than that, though, it is dependent on other nations either wholly or in part for products such as bauxite, copper, lead, tungsten, tin, nickel, phosphates, potash, rice, corn, cotton, silk, coffee, tobacco, and forestry products, among others. The United States, by contrast, is self-sufficient in most of these products, with surplus supply in several cases. Only in coffee and silk is it wholly dependent on imports. The USSR is even better served in its natural supply of raw materials. France, Germany, Canada, Japan, and India are also more self-sufficient than Britain. This lack of raw materials not only is important for an understanding of British industry but also provides a partial explanation for some of Britain's internationalist and imperial history.