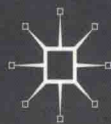




CONTEMPORARY

BRITAIN

John McCormick



Contemporary Britain

Third Edition

John McCormick



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Preface and Acknowledgements

This is a book about Britain, written for anyone looking for a brief and accessible guide to this remarkable country. Like others in the *Contemporary States and Societies* series, it makes no assumptions about prior knowledge: it provides the key facts and figures that are needed to place Britain in context with other countries – especially its European neighbours – but it also ties the facts together with explanatory analysis. It is deliberately short and concise, the goal being to help its readers better appreciate the key themes and concepts in British political, social and economic life, dispel some of the myths that too often interfere with an understanding of the country and its people, and offer suggestions for further research.

I am a political scientist, but I have tried to make sure that all the key dimensions of life in Britain are covered, from history to geography, economics, society, culture and politics. My background and credentials will shed light on the approach, and on my arguments and conclusions. I was born in Britain and am still a British citizen, but I have spent most of my life living somewhere else. I was brought up in Kenya, went to school in Britain, attended university in South Africa, and then lived in London from the winter of discontent in early 1979 to the height of Thatcherism in 1986. Since then I have lived in the United States, although I return to Britain regularly, spent the second half of 2005 on sabbatical at the University of Sussex, and still closely follow developments in Britain. I see Britain both from near and from far, and because I come and go I have a different perspective on the changes that have come to Britain than if I lived there full-time. My approach is also inevitably coloured by my experiences in the United States, by the fact that I specialize in comparative politics, and by my interest in the European Union.

The first edition of this book was published in 2003, and was bought by readers in many countries around the world, especially in

Europe and North America. The second edition came out in 2007, and this third edition duly follows. As well as taking account of new scholarship published since 2007, it has been thoroughly updated and amended to take account of the fallout from the 2008–10 global financial crisis, developments in the European Union (including passage of the Treaty of Lisbon in 2009 and the eurozone crisis) and the 2010 general election. The arguments have been refined, new data have been inserted (most of them from the Office of National Statistics), new boxes and tables have been added, and the book has been lengthened overall by about six per cent.

I would like to thank my publisher Steven Kennedy for his usual excellent judgement and guidance, Stephen Wenham and Helen Caunce and the rest of the team at Palgrave Macmillan for their professional guidance, Juanita Bullough for her work on the editing, and three anonymous reviewers for their comments and suggestions. And my thanks and love to Leanne, Ian and Stuart – they may not actually read my books, but they make it much easier to write them.

JOHN MCCORMICK

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List of Abbreviations

BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
CAP	Common Agricultural Policy
EEC	European Economic Community
EFTA	European Free Trade Association
ESDP	European Security and Defence Policy
EU	European Union
EUFOR	
Althea	European Union Force Althea (formerly SFOR)
GDP	gross domestic product
IRA	Irish Republican Army
ITV	Independent Television
KFOR	Kosovo Force
MP	Member of Parliament
NAFTA	North Atlantic Free Trade Association
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NHS	National Health Service
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
OSCE	Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe
PR	proportional representation
RRF	European Rapid Reaction Force
RUC	Royal Ulster Constabulary
SDP	Social Democratic Party
SDR	Strategic Defence Review
SFOR	Stabilization Force (Europe) now EUFOR Althea
SNP	Scottish National Party
TUC	Trades Union Congress
VAT	value added tax
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
WTO	World Trade Organization

Notes: For convenience, the terms ‘Britain’ and ‘British’ are used throughout, even though the book is about the United Kingdom. Currency conversions are made at the rate of €1.15 and \$1.60 to £1, the prevailing figures in late 2011.

Contents

<i>List of Illustrative Material</i>	vii
<i>Preface and Acknowledgements</i>	x
<i>List of Abbreviations</i>	xii
Introduction	1
1 The Historical Context	7
The Emergence of the British State	8
Postwar Adjustment, 1945–79	18
The Thatcher Revolution, 1979–90	26
From Blair to Cameron	28
2 Land and People	35
The Geography of Britain	36
Natural Resources	40
The Environment	43
The People of Britain	47
Nationalism and Regionalism	52
Immigration and Race	58
3 The Social System	64
Social Class	65
The Changing Family	72
Social Services and Health Care	74
Education	80
Law and Order	87
4 Government and the Political System	92
Principles of Government	93
The Constitution	97

	The Monarchy	100
	Prime Minister and Cabinet	104
	Parliament	110
	The Judiciary	116
	The Bureaucracy	117
	Local Government	119
5	Politics and Civil Society	121
	Political Culture	122
	Elections	130
	Political Parties	136
	Interest Groups	142
	The Media	145
6	The Economy	150
	The Structure of the Economy	151
	From Hands-off to Hands-on, and Back Again	160
	Britain in the Global Economy	168
	The Economic Implications of Europe	172
7	Culture and Lifestyle	180
	Culture	181
	The Changing Identity of Britain	185
	The Arts	189
	Sports and Leisure	197
	Religion	202
8	Britain and the World	208
	The Changing British Role in the World	209
	The Commonwealth	211
	The Atlantic Alliance	215
	Britain and the European Union	219
	The Changing Role of the British Military	231
	Conclusions	237
	<i>Recommended Reading</i>	241
	<i>Britain Online</i>	246
	<i>Bibliography</i>	249
	<i>Index</i>	261

List of Illustrative Material

Illustrations

1.1	York Minster	11
1.2	The Suez crisis	21
1.3	Tony Blair	29
2.1	Exmoor, England	42
2.2	Congestion	47
2.3	People of Britain	60
3.1	The National Health Service	76
3.2	Education	83
4.1	A cabinet meeting	96
4.2	Queen Elizabeth II	103
4.3	David Cameron	109
4.4	The Houses of Parliament	113
5.1	Nationalism	128
5.2	Elections	132
5.3	A demonstration	143
6.1	Urban decay	163
6.2	Public transport	167
6.3	Britain and the European Union	175
7.1	Broadway, Worcestershire	188
7.2	Colin Firth	194
7.3	England win the Ashes	201
8.1	The Commonwealth	215
8.2	The European Parliament	222
8.3	The British army in Afghanistan	235

Maps

0.1	Political features of the UK	5
2.1	Physical features of the British Isles	38
8.1	Political map of the European Union	221

Figures

1.1 Public opinion on the euro	31
2.1 British population growth	49
2.2 Ethnic minorities in Britain	61
2.3 Countries of birth of foreign-born legal residents of the UK	62
3.1 Numbers of doctors in selected OECD states	78
3.2 Life expectancy in selected OECD states	79
4.2 Floor plan of the House of Commons	115
5.1 Turnout at British general elections	127
6.1 The British economy	153
6.2 The national budget	154
6.3 British economic performance	157
6.4 Median household incomes compared	159
6.5 Britain's major trading partners	171
7.1 The Union Jack	187
7.2 World's top ten tourist destinations	189
7.3 Belief in God	205
8.1 British public opinion on the European Union	225

Tables

0.1 Quick facts about Britain	4
1.1 Key dates in British history	17
2.1 The four nations compared	54
3.1 Social class in Britain	67
4.1 Referendums in Britain	99
4.2 British Prime Ministers since 1945	105
5.1 Recent general election results	131
6.1 Britain's major imports and exports	170
7.1 Britain's main sporting events	199
8.1 Members of the Commonwealth	213
8.2 The British military	233

Boxes

1.1 Britain or the UK: what's in a name?	12
1.2 The British Empire	15
2.1 Britain: love it or leave it	51
2.2 The dominating role of London	57
3.1 Poverty and affluence	69
3.2 The 2011 riots	88
4.1 Queen Elizabeth II	102
4.2 David Cameron	108

5.1	The disappearing British voter	126
5.2	The <i>News of the World</i> hacking scandal	148
6.1	The exploding cost of living	158
6.2	The euro: to join or not to join?	177
7.1	English: the global language	183
7.2	The revival of British cuisine	203
8.1	The Anglo-American relationship: special, essential, or neither?	216
8.2	Is Britain European?	227

Introduction

Britain is one of those few countries that has quite literally changed the world. Out of a small cluster of islands off the north-west coast of the European continent came three developments with global impact: the industrial revolution, the parliamentary system of government, and the English language. It is impossible to talk of economic change without referring back to the inventions that spawned the industrial revolution, and the impact of the writings of Adam Smith on our ideas about capitalism. It is impossible to talk of political change without referring back to the origins of the British democratic model, and the impact of the writings of Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, John Stuart Mill, and others. And it would be difficult for the citizens of different countries to exchange their views without the help of English, the international language of business, communications, diplomacy and – increasingly – everyday conversation.

For these reasons alone, Britain is an important subject of study. But there are other motives as well: life is all about change, and few societies have seen such dramatic changes in the last 200 years as Britain. It has one of the oldest continuously functioning political systems in the world, yet the character of that system has been altered in response to philosophical and popular pressures. It once had the world's biggest economy, yet has found itself having to adapt to a post-imperial economic environment coloured by competition from the United States, Japan and its bigger European neighbours. It has a long history of social stability, yet British society has undergone a fundamental reordering in the last two generations. The signs of change continue to be found everywhere:

- in the growing racial, religious, national and cultural diversity of British society.
- in the redefinition of the class system that for so long determined how Britons related to each another, but which has been diluted by improved education, the rise of the middle class, the growth of the

2 *Introduction*

consumer society, and by new levels of affluence and social mobility.

- in demographic shifts as the British live longer, as the idea of the family is redefined, and as Britons move away from the old assumptions of the welfare state towards a stakeholder society in which benefits are determined by the extent to which individuals have played by the rules.
- in the altered balance of power among government institutions as the executive becomes more powerful and Europe becomes more influential.
- in the changing relationship between local and national government, and in the rebirth of Scottish, Welsh, Irish and even English nationalism, which has redefined the meaning of 'Britain' and 'Britishness'.
- in the new attitudes of voters towards government, in the questions raised about the nature of the electoral system and the balance among the major political parties, and in the rise of alternative channels through which citizens can express their views on politics.
- in dramatic developments in communications technology, with satellite, cable and digital options changing the character of television, and the internet revolutionizing the way that people communicate.
- in shifts in the direction of economic policy, from the interventionist approaches of the postwar years to the free-market approaches introduced in the 1980s by the Thatcher government, and perpetuated by her successors, who have recently faced the additional problems of having to respond to the global financial crisis and the troubles in the eurozone.
- in the redefinition of Britain's place in the world as it has moved from being a global and imperial power to a regional and European one, and as it asks itself questions about whether its future lies with the European Union, the Atlantic Alliance, or both.

In the chapters that follow, the causes of these changes will be examined, and an attempt made to understand the effects on contemporary Britain. Along the way, the book makes two core arguments. First, it rejects claims of the decline of Britain as overstated. Since the 1960s and 1970s, there has been a bandwagon effect among academics, journalists and political leaders, who often bemoan the loss of Britain's pre-eminent economic position in the world, complain that the British political system has failed to meet the needs of the citizens of a modern democracy, and find evidence of decline in everything

from lowered educational standards to inefficient public services, challenges to law and order, threats to the environment, and even the failure of British sports teams to win international competitions. Studies of postwar Britain are littered with words such as *angst*, *melancholy* and *discontent*.

Adjustments were certainly needed following world war and the end of empire. Where Britain was once the world's dominant military and imperial power, the world's richest country, the biggest creditor nation in the world, and the self-appointed standard-bearer for Western culture and civilization, it inevitably had to self-reflect as conditions changed. But what the doomsayers usually failed to point out was that most of the change was relative rather than absolute. It is also important to make a distinction between short-term events and long-term trends. Britain today is in trouble, thanks mainly to the global economic downturn that has meant austerity measures and less than healthy economic prospects. But it was not so long ago that Britain could be described as having one of the biggest and freest economies in the world, and one of the most responsive governments and bureaucracies. The British live longer and healthier lives, they have more access to education than ever before, they are on average much wealthier, their environment is cleaner, and their individual rights are better protected than at any time in their history. As this book goes to press there are deep concerns about British economic and social prospects, but those concerns are just as great – and in some cases greater – in other European states and across the Atlantic.

The second core argument is that the British must wake up to the reality that they are Europeans, and that Britain's future lies with the European Union (EU). Britain was slow to appreciate the possibilities of European integration, was late joining what was then the European Economic Community, and has developed a reputation – not always deserved – as a reluctant European. The sentimental British attachment to the United States continues to cast its spell, in spite of a growing chorus of questions about just how much Britain benefits from the 'special relationship'. Britain, argues Hugo Young (1999), has struggled for two generations 'to reconcile the past she could not forget with the future she could not avoid'. Even if it were to leave the EU, Britain would remain politically, economically and socially bound to its European neighbours. Rather than resisting that partnership, it would be better for all concerned if Britain was to finally leave behind its past, help shape the European agenda, and acknowledge that its future lies in a partnership with the rest of Europe.

Table 0.1 Quick facts about Britain

Official name:	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland
Capital:	London
Area:	244,103 sq km (94,249 square miles)
Population:	62.3 million
Population density:	255 per sq km (661 per square mile)
Population growth rate:	0.6%
Languages:	Overwhelmingly English, with some regional languages (Welsh, Gaelic)
Religions:	Predominantly Christian (mainly Anglican, Catholic and Presbyterian), with growing Muslim and Hindu minorities
GDP (2010):	\$2,250 billion (€1,580 billion, £1,380 billion)
Per capita GNP:	\$36,100 (€25,370, £22,145)
Distribution of GNP:	70% services, 29% industry, 1% agriculture
Urban population:	89%
Literacy:	99%
Infant mortality:	5 per 1,000 live births
Life expectancy:	80.4 years
Government type:	Parliamentary democracy with a constitutional monarchy
Administration:	Unitary
Executive:	Prime Minister and Cabinet
Legislature:	Bicameral Houses of Parliament; House of Lords (currently undergoing structural reform) and House of Commons (650 members). Lords are appointed; MPs are elected for renewable terms of a maximum of five years
Party structure:	Multiparty, with two dominant parties (Labour and Conservative) and several smaller parties
Judiciary:	Supreme Court is highest court of appeal
Head of state:	Queen Elizabeth II (1952–)

These and other arguments are explored in the chapters that follow. Chapter 1 provides the historical background. Beginning with the early invasions from the continent, it surveys the rise and fall of feudalism, the rise of the United Kingdom, political and economic changes, and the rise and fall of the Empire. It focuses in particular on postwar history, looking at key political, economic, social and cultural developments, notably the impact of Thatcherism, of membership of the EU, and of the policies of the Blair and Cameron administrations.



Map 0.1 Political features of the UK

Chapter 2 deals with the geography and resources of Britain – both natural and human. The first half discusses the geography, natural resources and environment of Britain, and the second half looks at the people of Britain, focusing on recent demographic changes, and on the impact of immigration, nationalism, regionalism and race.

6 *Introduction*

Chapter 3 looks at the British social system, beginning with a discussion about the evolution of the class system, then looking at the changing structure of the family. It examines the welfare system, the structure and state of British education, and ends with a review of the performance of the criminal justice system in maintaining law and order.

Chapter 4 examines the British system of government and its major institutions: the monarchy, the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Parliament, the judiciary, the bureaucracy, and local government. It explains how they relate to each other, assesses their relative influence over the political process, and offers a critical review of the nature of British democracy.

Chapter 5 looks at politics and civil society in Britain, beginning with a discussion of the main features of British political culture, then looking at how Britons engage in politics through elections, political parties, interest groups and the media.

Chapter 6 turns to the structure and performance of the British economy. It begins with an overview of the structure of the economy, then assesses economic developments since 1945, contrasting the boom years of the 1950s with the crises of the 1970s, examining the changes wrought by Thatcherism, assessing the renewed economic successes of the 1990s, and reviewing the causes and possible effects of the recent downturn. It then looks also at the place of Britain in the international system and at the economic implications of Europe.

Chapter 7 provides a survey of British culture, beginning with a general outline and an analysis of the meaning of 'Britishness'. It then examines the state of the arts in Britain, with an emphasis on theatre, film, television and popular music. It looks at how the British spend their spare time, and ends with an examination of the role of sports and religion in national life.

Chapter 8 looks at Britain's changing place in the world. It examines key relationships, including those with the Commonwealth, within the Atlantic Alliance, and with the European Union, and argues that the first is weak, the second is deeply troubled, and the third is where Britain's future lies. It finishes with an assessment of the changing status of the British military.