


POLITICS UK

THIRD EDITION



Bill Jones · Andrew Gray · Dennis Kavanagh
Michael Moran · Philip Norton · Anthony Seldon

Politics UK

Third edition

Bill Jones (Editor)

Andrew Gray

Dennis Kavanagh

Michael Moran

Philip Norton

Anthony Seldon

*With additional material by Simon Bulmer, Andrew Flynn, Bill Jenkins, Jonathan Tonge,
The Rt Hon. Lord Biffen, David Coates, The Rt Hon. Lord Mackay of Clashfern, Peter Riddell,
David Vincent and David Walker*



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Peter Riddell, political columnist and commentator of *The Times* and author of two books on the policies of the Thatcher governments and one on career politicians; he also has a book on parliament appearing in autumn 1997.

David Vincent, Deputy Vice Chancellor and Professor of Modern History, University of Keele.

David Walker, principal leader writer for *The Independent* and co-author of *The Times Guide to the New British State*.

Preface

The three years since the second edition of *Politics UK* have been full of political incident and developments, all of which have been digested and are reflected in this new edition. All chapters have been substantially rewritten, many completely so, and a number of new features have been introduced. Firstly, we have reined in the historical content in favour of increased emphasis on the social context. Secondly, we have reorganised the ideology section and included a chapter on concepts. Thirdly, we have a new chapter on Northern Ireland, by guest author Jonathan Tonge. Fourthly, we have developed the Concluding Comments at the end of each major section by inviting well-known guest writers, such as: Peter Riddell, columnist on *The Times*; former minister Lord Biffen, and Professor David Vincent of Keele University.

Nor have we neglected the presentational side of the book, which from the outset has been so important in making it accessible and fun to read. We retain and supplement our innovative practice of plentiful boxes, tables, photographs and diagrams but have added something new: two colours. Since the first edition appeared in 1991 other publications have adopted some of our style; this flatters us and suggests the book has been influential in publishing terms as well as useful to students. We sincerely hope this major rewrite will prove as useful and popular as the earlier two editions have been.

Bill Jones
January 1997

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PART ONE

Context

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction: Explaining politics

BILL JONES AND MICHAEL MORAN

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- To explain and illustrate the concept of what politics is.
- To discuss why politicians become involved in their profession.
- To explain the essence of decision-making in political situations.
- To discuss the kind of questions political science addresses and the variety of approaches that exist.
- To introduce some of the main political relationships between the state and the individual.
- To look at the rationales for studying politics together with some of the major themes and issues in the study of British politics.

INTRODUCTION

This opening chapter is devoted to a definition of 'politics' and the way in which its study can be approached. In the first section, we discuss decision-making and identify what exactly is involved in the phrase 'political activity'. In the second section we examine the critical political questions. We then go on to describe how the more general activity called 'politics' can be distinguished from the workings of 'the state'. In the fourth section, we describe some of the most important approaches used in the study of politics and examine the chief reasons for its study in schools and colleges. The fifth section explains the purpose of studying politics and the final section sketches some of the themes raised in the study of British politics.

'There has never been a perfect government, because men have passions; and if they did not have passions, there would be no need for government.'

Voltaire, *Politique et legislation*

Definitions and decision making

Is politics necessary?

'A good politician', wrote the American writer H.L. Mencken, 'is quite as unthinkable as an honest burglar.' Cynical views of politics and politicians are legion. Any statement or action by a politician is seldom taken at face value but is scrutinised for ulterior personal motives. Thus, when Bob Hawke, the Australian Prime Minister, broke down in tears on television in March 1989, many journalists dismissed the possibility that he was genuinely moved by the topic under discussion. Instead they concluded that he was currying favour with the Australian electorate – who allegedly warm to such manly shows of emotion – with a possible general election in mind.

Given such attitudes it seems reasonable to ask why people go into politics in the first place. The job is insecure: in Britain elections may be called at any time, and scores of MPs in marginal seats can lose their parliamentary salaries. The apprenticeship for ministerial office can be long, hard, arguably demeaning and, for many, ultimately unsuccessful. Even if successful, a minister has to work crippling long days, survive constant criticism – both well and ill informed – and know that a poor debating performance, a chance word or phrase out of place can earn a one-way ticket to the back benches. To gamble your whole life on the chance that the roulette wheel of politics will stop on your number seems to be less than wholly rational behaviour. Why, then, do politicians put themselves into the fray and fight so desperately for such dubious preferment?

In some political cultures, especially the undemocratic ones, it seems clear that politicians are struggling to achieve and exercise power, power for its own sake: to be able to live in the best possible way; to exercise the power of life and death over people, to be in fact the nearest thing to a god it is possible for a human being to be. We see that some early rulers were actually deified: turned into gods either in their lifetimes or soon after their deaths.

The Serbian leader, Slobodan Milošević fought hard to retain control of Serbia during the cruel civil war which racked the country from 1989 onwards. Someone who knows him well explained: 'I do not think he believes in anything, only in his own power. It is even possible he could be a peacemaker

if he thinks that is what he has to do to hold on to power' (*Sunday Times*, 4 July 1993). George Orwell suggested in his famous novel, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, that the state had potentially similar objectives (see quotations).

George Orwell suggested that for the totalitarian state, power was potentially an end in itself. Towards the end of his famous *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the dissident Winston Smith is being interrogated under torture by O'Brien, a senior official of 'The Party'. O'Brien asks why the Party seeks power, explaining:

George Orwell and the abuse of power

“Now I will tell you the answer to my question. It is this. The Party seeks power entirely for its own sake. We are not interested in the good of others; we are interested solely in power. Not wealth or luxury, or long life or happiness: only power, pure power. What pure power means you will understand presently. We are different from all oligarchies of the past, in that we know what we are doing. All the others, even those who resembled ourselves, were cowards and hypocrites. The German Nazis and the Russian Communists came very close to us in their methods, but they never had the courage to recognize their own motives. They pretended, perhaps they even believed, that they had seized power unwillingly and for a limited time, and that just round the corner there lay a paradise where human beings would be free and equal. We are not like that. We know that no one ever seizes power with the intention of relinquishing it. Power is not a means, it is an end. One does not establish a dictatorship in order to safeguard a revolution; one makes the revolution in order to establish the dictatorship. The object of persecution is persecution. The object of torture is torture. The object of power is power.”

Later on he offers a chilling vision of the future under the Party:

“There will be no loyalty, except loyalty towards the Party. There will be no love, except love of Big Brother. There will be no laughter, except the laugh of triumph over a defeated enemy. There will be no art, no literature, no science. When we are omnipotent we shall have no more need of science. There will be no distinction between beauty and ugliness. There will be no curiosity, no enjoyment of the process of life. All competing

pleasures will be destroyed. But always – do not forget this, Winston – there will be the intoxication of power, constantly increasing and constantly growing subtler. Always, at every moment, there will be the thrill of victory, the sensation of trampling on an enemy who is helpless. If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face – for ever.

Orwell, 1955, pp. 211–15



In developed democratic countries the answer is more complex, although one, somewhat cynical school of thought insists that naked power is still the chief underlying motivation (see below: ambition and the career politician). These countries have realised the dangers of allowing politicians too much power. Checks and balances, failsafe constitutional devices and an aware public opinion ensure politicians, however much they may yearn for unlimited power, are unable realistically to expect or enjoy it. We have instead to look for more subtle motivations.

Biographies and interviews reveal an admixture of reasons: genuine commitment to a set of beliefs, the desire to be seen and heard a great deal, the trappings of office such as the official cars, important-looking red boxes containing ministerial papers and solicitous armies of civil servants. Senator Eugene McCarthy suggested politicians were like football coaches: 'smart enough to understand the game and dumb enough to think it's important'. A witty remark, but true in the sense that politics is an activity which closely resembles a game and which similarly exercises an addictive or obsessive hold upon those who play it. Tony Benn cheerfully admits to being consumed with politics and I remember once asking an exhausted ex-Labour minister, David Ennals, why he continued to work so hard. 'Ah, politics', he replied 'is just so fascinating you see.' But is the game worth playing? Words like 'betrayal', 'opportunism', 'exploitation', 'distortion' and 'fudge' are just some of the pejorative terms frequently used in describing the process. Would we not be better off without politics at all?

In his classic study *In Defence of Politics* (1982), Bernard Crick disagrees strongly. For him politics is 'essential to genuine freedom ... something to be valued as a pearl beyond price in the history of the human condition'. He reminds us of Aristotle's view that politics is 'only one possible solution to the

problem of order. It is by no means the most usual. Tyranny is the most obvious alternative, oligarchy the next.' Crick understands 'politics' as the means whereby differing groups of people with different, often conflicting, interests are enabled to live together in relative harmony. For him 'politics' describes the working of a pluralist political system 'in advanced and complex societies' which seeks to maximise the freedom and the power of all social groups. The system may be far from perfect but it is less imperfect than the various authoritarian alternatives.

This line of thinking provides an antidote to overly cynical analyses of politics. The compromises inherent in the process tend to discredit it: few will ever be wholly satisfied and many will feel hard done by. Similarly politicians as the imperfect practitioners of an imperfect system receive much of the blame. But without politicians to represent and articulate demands and to pursue them within an agreed framework we would be much the poorer. Whether Crick is right in reminding us to count our democratic blessings is a question which the reader must decide, and we hope that this book will provide some of the material necessary for the making of such a judgement.

Ambition and the career politician

'Politics is a spectator sport,' writes Julian Critchley (1995, p. 80). An enduring question which exercises us spectators is: 'Why are they doing it?' Dr Johnson, in his typically blunt fashion said politics was 'nothing more nor less than a means of rising in the world'. But we know somehow this is not the whole truth. Peter Riddell of *The Times* in his wonderfully perceptive book, *Honest Opportunism* (1993), looks at this topic in some detail. He quotes Disraeli, who perhaps offers us a more rounded and believable account of his interest in politics to his Shrewsbury constituents: 'There is no doubt, gentlemen, that all men who offer themselves as candidates for public favour have motives of some sort. I candidly acknowledge that I have and I will tell you what they are: I love fame; I love public reputation; I love to live in the eye of the country.'

Riddell also quotes F.E. Smith, who candidly gloried in the 'endless adventure of governing men'. For those who think these statements were merely expressions of nineteenth-century romanticism, Riddell offers the example of Richard Crossman's

comment that politics is a 'never ending adventure... with its routs and discomfitures, rushes and sallies', its 'fights for the fearless and goals for the eager'. He also includes Michael Heseltine whom he heard asking irritably at one of Jeffrey Archer's parties in 1986: 'Why shouldn't I be Prime Minister then?' The tendency of politicians to explain their taste for politics in terms of concern for 'the people' is seldom sincere. In the view of Henry Fairlie this is nothing more than 'humbug'. William Waldegrave agrees: 'Any politician who tells you he isn't ambitious is only telling you he isn't for some tactical reason; or more bluntly, telling a lie... I certainly wouldn't deny that I wanted ministerial office; yes, I'm ambitious.' As if more proof were needed, David Owen once said on television – and 'he should know', one is tempted to say – that 'Ambition drives politics like money drives the international economy.' Riddell goes on in his book to analyse how the ambitious political animal has slowly transformed British politics. He follows up and develops Anthony King's concept of the 'career politician', observing that a decreasing number of MPs had backgrounds in professions, or 'proper jobs' in the Westminster parlance, compared with those who centred their whole on politics and whose 'jobs' were of secondary importance, merely supporting the Westminster career. In 1951 the figure was 11 per cent; by 1992 it was 31 per cent. By contrast, the proportion of new MPs with 'proper jobs' fell from 80 per cent to 41 per cent. Many of this new breed begin life as researchers for an MP or in a party's research department, then proceed to seek selection as a candidate and from there into parliament and from then on ever onwards and upwards. The kind of MP who enters politics in later life is in steep decline; the new breed of driven young professionals has tended to dominate the field, proving firmer of purpose and more skilled in execution than those for whom politics is a later or learned vocation. The kind of businessman who achieves distinction in his field and then goes into politics is now a rarity rather than the familiar figure of the last century or the earlier years of this one.

Some silly quotations by politicians

“Politicians pride themselves on being fluent and always in control, but however powerful and mighty they

might be, they can say some seriously stupid things as the examples below illustrate:

I would have made a good Pope.

Richard Nixon

OK we've won. What do we do now?

Brian Mulroney upon being re-elected Prime Minister of Canada

Outside the killings we have one of the lowest crime rates in the country

Marion Barry, former Mayor of Washington DC

I have opinions of my own – strong opinions – but I don't always agree with them

George Bush

I didn't go down there with any plan for the Americas or anything. I went down to find out from them and learn their views. You'd be surprised. They're all individual countries.

Ronald Reagan on how his Latin American trip had changed his views

An obscene period in our nation's history

Dan Quayle in 1988 on the Nazi Holocaust

The real question for 1988 is whether we're going forward to tomorrow or past to the – back!

Dan Quayle

Hawaii has always been a very pivotal role in the Pacific. It is part of the United States that is an island that is right here.

Dan Quayle (again)

What a waste to lose one's mind – or not to have a mind. How true that is.

Dan Quayle

And finally (though there are many more): I stand by all the mis-statements.

Dan Quayle

Oliver, 1992



Defining politics

Politics is difficult to define yet easy to recognise. To some extent with the word 'politics' we can consider current usage and decide our own meaning, making our own definition wide or narrow according to our taste or purposes. From the discussion so far politics is obviously a universal activity; it is concerned with the governance of states, and (Crick's special concern) involves a conciliation or harmonisation process. Yet we talk of politics on a micro- as well as a macro-scale: small groups like families or parent/teacher associations also have a political dimension. What is it that unites these two levels? The answer is: the conflict of different interests. People or groups of people who want different things – be it power, money, liberty, etc. – face the potential or reality of conflict when such