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Part I

THE CONTEXT OF BRITISH POLITICS

Politics is a controversial subject, which is what makes it fascinating. Those who like a good argument should enjoy the study of politics. Yet politics is also a social science, requiring a thorough detached analysis of political institutions, processes and behaviour. This book aims to provide scientific analysis without neglecting the controversy. Both elements of the study of politics are introduced in the first part of the book.

We begin in Chapter 1 with some big questions to which there are conflicting answers. What is politics? How is political power distributed, and who has power in Britain? What is democracy, and how far is British government and politics democratic? Should our central focus still be on the British state in these days of globalization and European integration on the one hand, and devolution and decentralisation on the other? Will the United Kingdom stay united? These questions, introduced at the start of the book, will be examined further in later chapters.

If political disagreement and conflict reflect divisions in the economy and society, it is important to examine their nature and extent. Chapter 2 therefore focuses on the social and economic context of British politics, and explores national, ethnic, religious, gender and class divisions within what is becoming a multi-cultural Britain. This chapter inevitably draws heavily on statistical analysis, but also points, more speculatively, to some of the implications for British politics and government.

Politics is dynamic rather than static. To understand the present and make plausible predictions of possible futures it is necessary to

know something of the recent past. In Chapter 3 we identify some of the main themes and trends in British politics since 1945. This time dimension helps illuminate some of the key political issues of today: the management of the economy, the distribution of income and wealth, the delivery of public services, the relations of Britain with Europe and the wider world, and the relationship between the government in Whitehall and Westminster and the nations, regions and local communities that make up the United Kingdom. Many of the issues with which the Blair Labour government has been grappling since 1997 have been recurring themes in Britain's post-war history.

The fourth and final chapter of this opening part reflects the importance we attach to conflicting ideas, interests and values in the study of politics. While some assume that modern politics is all about presentation and 'spin' rather than substance, and that all politicians and parties are much the same, we maintain that widely different assumptions and interests continue to underlie contrasting perspectives on politics and to influence political attitudes and behaviour. We explore a range of ideological perspectives, including not only the 'mainstream' ideologies of liberalism, conservatism, socialism, which are loosely associated with political parties, but also nationalism, racism, feminism and green thinking, all of which underpin different ways of looking at politics. They help to explain not only party preferences and allegiances, but differing attitudes to political involvement, conflicting views on the scope and purpose of government, and widely varying positions on a wide range of policies.

Chapter 1

Politics, Democracy and Power

What is politics?

Authority, power and influence

Democracy – power to the people?

Power in Britain

Perspectives on power

British politics?

Multi-level governance

Policies – who gets what, when, how?

- 3 they should be provided and paid for are political
- 5 questions, which cannot be ‘taken out of politics’
- 5 because they have massive consequences for indi-
- 7 viduals and communities. Even the privatisation
- 8 in Britain of some activities which were formerly
- 11 state owned and run (such as rail transport) has
- 12 not succeeded in depoliticising them.
- 13

Politics is a subject that arouses conflicting emotions. Some are intensely interested in political issues and follow politics keenly. For others politics involves distant institutions, remote politicians and obscure complex issues with little direct relevance for immediate everyday life. Others again show a strong distaste towards political parties and politicians who are ‘all the same’ or ‘on the make’, and ‘only interested in what they can get out of it’. Unsurprisingly such critics argue it would be much better if education, or health, or agriculture could be somehow ‘taken out of politics’.

Yet politics is inescapable. Everyone is affected by it whether they like it or not. At the very least people have to pay taxes and obey laws, or suffer the penalties. They are obliged to register births, marriages and deaths, and fill in forms for countless other purposes. They can only drive their cars, exchange their houses or travel abroad if they fulfil the necessary requirements. In some states citizens are still liable to conscription into the armed forces. All this emphasises what may appear to be the downside of politics – the restraints on individual freedom, although of course these same restraints on others might help communities to enjoy peace, security, and the pursuit of their own lives without fear. More positively people receive various services provided or financed through the state in some form or other. Mostly these services are regarded as beneficial, although some may seem irksome or extravagant. Indeed, precisely what services should be provided by the state, the level of those services and how

What is politics?

Various answers have been given to the simple question ‘What is politics?’ Some of them are given in Box 1.1.

The first definition links politics and government in a common sense way. Clearly politics is about government, and this book analyses at some length the institutions of government. Yet this definition does seem to imply that politics is a rather remote activity, not for ordinary people. How far does politics include the governed as well as those doing the governing? And does it just imply the government of states? Some definitions of politics suggest that it is not only a universal human activity, as the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle argued, but can take place at very different levels and in different spheres. Thus some talk of the politics of the golf club, or the

BOX 1.1

What is politics?

‘The science and art of government.’ (Shorter Oxford English Dictionary)

‘Who gets what, when, how.’ (H. Lasswell, American political scientist)

‘The authoritative allocation of values.’ (David Easton, another American political scientist)

‘The art of the possible.’ (R. A. Butler, British Conservative politician)

BOX 1.2**Politics, conflict and coercion**

'Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun.' (Mao Zedong, Chinese Communist leader)

'War is nothing but a continuation of politics by other means.' (Von Clausewitz, Prussian military strategist)

'Every state is founded on force.' (Leon Trotsky, Russian Communist politician)

'The state is a human community that (successfully) claims the *monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory*.' (Max Weber, German sociologist)

board room, or the university. However, the study of politics does in practice focus largely on government and public policy rather than what is sometimes called 'micro-politics'.

The two crisp American definitions suggest (in rather different language) that politics is about choosing between alternatives. Individuals, communities and governments cannot have everything they want, but must determine their priorities. Butler hints at the constraints involved in the political process. Compromise is often necessary because different sections of the community want different and often conflicting things. It is not possible to please everyone all the time. Decisions commonly produce winners and losers. Indeed some have seen disagreement and conflict as the essence of politics, and have emphasised the role of coercion and physical force. (See Box 1.2.)

All these quotations emphasise the coercive and violent side of politics, which is only too obvious in the modern world. Might matters more than right. Indeed, those who have physical force on their side may determine what is right. Justice appears to be merely 'what is in the interests of the stronger party' (as the sophist Thrasymachus declared in Plato's *Republic*, one of the earliest and most celebrated analyses of politics).

Yet such interpretations of politics do not tell the whole story. Power may be used for constructive as well destructive purposes. Politics may arise out of

disagreement and conflict, which may some times take a violent form, but it also involves the search for a peaceful resolution of conflict through compromise. Indeed a 'political solution' is commonly seen as an alternative to violence. Winston Churchill, famous largely as a great war leader, once observed, 'Jaw jaw is better than war war', while a noted French political scientist, Maurice Duverger (1972: 221), defined politics as 'a continual effort to eliminate physical violence'. Politics, he claimed, 'tends to replace fists, knives, clubs and rifles with other types of weapons', although he added sadly, 'it is not always successful in doing so'.

There are disagreements also over the scope of politics. Some liberals and conservatives would draw a clear distinction between the state and civil society, between a public or political sphere and a private sphere of life from which politics should be excluded – the family and other voluntary associations. Champions of the free market would seek to exclude the state and politics from much economic activity, and place firm limits on government intervention. By contrast, many socialists have sought to establish a political system in which the state controlled the economy. Fascism was associated with a totalitarian theory of the state, under which the state was all-embracing and excluded from no sphere of activity.

While some of these approaches to politics have become less fashionable, other contemporary political ideologies have involved a radical reinterpretation of the scope of politics. Thus feminists insist 'the personal is political'. They are not concerned just with formal legal equality in the public sphere, but with gender relations in the family, home and bedroom, because these are seen as central to the injustice and oppression suffered by women. Consequently, interpersonal relations,

Definitions

The state is a political and governmental unit – a compulsory association which is sovereign over a particular territory.

Civil society refers to the part of social life outside the control of the state, e.g. clubs, groups and associations, private business, the family.

sexual relations, and the division of labour within the home are not purely private matters but a legitimate sphere for political engagement. At another level Green ideas have politicised a whole range of issues which at one time were not seen as having much, if anything, to do with politics.

Authority, power and influence

Politics is clearly about power, but this key concept is difficult to define. Power suggests a capacity to achieve desired results, and compel obedience. It may be lawful or unlawful. An armed criminal may compel his victims to do things that they would not choose. He or she is clearly exercising power, although unlawfully. Others, such as a government minister, or a judge, may also wield effective power, but power that is generally recognised as rightful and legitimate. The term 'authority' is widely used to describe the rightful use of political power, or legitimate power. Power may compel obedience, while authority is widely accepted by those over whom it is exercised. We voluntarily obey those in authority because we accept the legitimacy of their power.

Why do we obey them? The German sociologist Max Weber distinguished between three main types or sources of authority: traditional, charismatic and legal-rational. Traditional authority rests on long-established custom – the authority of a tribal chief or hereditary monarch for example. Charismatic authority derives from the compelling personal qualities of an individual – the authority exercised by a Napoleon, Hitler or (more positively) Nelson Mandela. They are obeyed because of who they are, rather than because of what they are. Legal-rational authority is authority based on formal rules. Elected politicians and appointed government officials may be obeyed, not because of custom, nor because of their personal qualities, but because it is acknowledged that they legitimately hold their offices under accepted rules and procedures. It is the office or post rather than the person who occupies the post whose authority is obeyed. Weber considered that legal-rational authority is the characteristic form of authority in the modern world.

BOX 1.3

Power, authority and influence

Power is the capacity to achieve desired goals.

Authority is the rightful or legitimate use of power.

Influence involves the ability to shape a decision or outcome through various forms of pressure.

Both modern bureaucracy and representative democracy involve legal-rational authority.

Power is sometimes also distinguished from influence. While 'power' implies a capacity to determine outcomes directly, 'influence' suggests the ability to shape outcomes indirectly, to exert pressure on those who are taking the decisions, persuading them to change their opinion and behaviour. The study of politics involves examining not just the formal institutions and offices directly involved in government, but also the influences on government and the policy process, the role for example of business organisations and trade unions, voluntary bodies and cause groups. Many political decisions taken by politicians or civil servants may have their origin and explanation in the successful influence of particular pressure groups or interests in society.

Democracy – power to the people?

Britain, along with most states in the modern western world, and many others elsewhere, claims to be a democracy. This near universal approval of democracy as a system of government is relatively recent. A form of democracy flourished in ancient Athens nearly 2,500 years ago, but from then until at least the late 18th century democracy scarcely existed anywhere, and was regarded as a remote and essentially impractical theoretical model. While direct rule by all the people themselves was just about possible in a small city state like ancient Athens, it was impractical for the extensive empires and large nation states that have flourished subsequently. Democracy became more feasible with the development of representative democracy rather than direct democracy.

Definitions

Direct democracy involves the direct and continuous participation of citizens in government.

Representative democracy involves indirect government by the people through representatives elected by the people.

Instead of the people themselves, the elected representatives of the people would rule.

Representative democracy has become so universally popular that even some of the most tyrannical and corrupt regimes lay claim to the title 'democratic' for form's sake. Even so, democracy has often been accorded only faint praise by some influential modern thinkers and politicians.

Whether modern representative democracy does ensure real government by the people, as Abraham Lincoln asserted, is far from clear. Indeed it does not even invariably result in a government chosen by the majority of the people (see Chapter 6). Yet at a minimum in mature democratic systems it does offer an element of real choice between rival parties and programmes, it does render opposition respectable rather than treasonable, and it does provide for the peaceful transfer of power between governments. These are very considerable benefits which should not be under-

rated, particularly when the alternatives are considered.

While the British like to think they invented modern representative democracy, the Americans and the French have a rather better claim. The American rebels against the British state and crown, through their successful Declaration of Independence of 1776, and the constitution they devised for the United States of America soon afterwards, effectively created the first modern democracy (despite the institution of slavery and the effective exclusion of black Americans from political rights long after the abolition of slavery). It was in France, following the revolution of 1789, that the ideas of popular sovereignty and liberty, equality and fraternity were substituted (initially only briefly) for the autocracy of the old French monarchy.

Britain only came to terms with democracy rather later. Although England boasts an ancient Parliament with over 700 years of near-continuous existence since it was established in 1265, even the lower house of that Parliament, the House of Commons, was not democratically elected until recently. Only a small proportion of adult males could participate in elections until a series of Reform Acts extended the vote to most men in the course of the 19th century. Even so, women could not vote until 1918, and they only obtained the vote on the same terms as men in 1928. Even today

BOX 1.4**Democracy – some definitions and observations**

'Our constitution is called a democracy because power is in the hands not of a minority but of the whole people.' (Pericles of Athens, 431 B.C., as reported in Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* (Penguin edn,; 145)

'Government of the people, by the people, for the people.' (President Abraham Lincoln, Gettysburg address, 1863)

'Were there a people of gods, their government would be democratic. So perfect a government is not for men.' (Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, 1762)

'Democracy substitutes election by the incompetent many for appointment by the corrupt few.' (George Bernard Shaw, *Man and Superman*, 1903)

'Democracy is the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.' (Winston Churchill, speech in House of Commons, 11 November 1947)

'So two cheers for democracy: one because it admits variety and two because it permits criticism. Two cheers are quite enough: there is no occasion to give three.' (E. M. Forster, *Two Cheers for Democracy*, 1951)

BOX 1.5**Conditions for representative democracy**

- Full adult franchise – that is, all adults have the right to vote.
- A secret ballot – helps ensure voting without intimidation or bribery.
- Regular elections – governments and parliaments must not be able to postpone elections.
- Fair elections – each vote should count equally.
- An effective choice of candidates and parties for voters.
- A level playing field between rival parties and candidates contesting elections.
- A free and diverse media enabling a wide expression of views.

it is questionable how far Britain satisfies all the conditions to qualify as a full and fair system of representative democracy.

How far and fully Britain satisfies the conditions outlined in Box 1.5 will be discussed in more detail later in this book (particularly in Part II), although it would be generally conceded that British elections do involve a real choice and they are not patently rigged (as they are in some countries). Yet regardless of the extent of the right to vote and the mechanics of the electoral system, there are many who would question whether government ‘of the people, by the people, for the people’ is a reality in Britain. First, are the elected representatives of the people the real rulers of Britain? Second, and more importantly, how far do the right to vote, and other rights associated with the political system, give the people or the majority of the people real power?

Do elected politicians make the real decisions that affect the British people? Perhaps the real decision makers are not the politicians who tend to dominate the news but relatively faceless civil servants or advisers. Alternatively, more real power and influence may be exercised by individuals who are not part of the formal political process at all – businessmen (and they are usually still ‘men’!), bankers, or owners of newspapers, television companies and other media, some of whom may not

even be British. Yet perhaps it is a mistake to think in terms of individual personalities, no matter how apparently influential and colourful. Real power may reside in organisations regardless of who currently appears to control them – corporate power. Again, many of these organisations transcend national boundaries.

However, if democracy is the rule of the many not the few, a more fundamental question is whether ordinary people have any real control or influence over these powerful individuals and organisations. Those who bother to use their vote may determine which of two or three rival teams of politicians occupy government posts for the next four or five years, but does this give voters significant influence over key government decisions and policies? What other opportunities do citizens have to participate in the political process? How far can ‘ordinary people’ hope to have a real voice in the many decisions that affect them? These questions will be addressed throughout this book, but particularly in chapters on elections and voting, parties and pressure groups, the media and public opinion, and the legislative process.

Power in Britain

While it may be possible to determine who has authority in a political system by examining the constitution, laws, written regulations and lists of office holders, it is much more difficult to assess power and influence. Newspapers and magazines sometimes attempt to compile lists of the most powerful people in Britain. These may generally be headed by the prime minister, as one might expect, but often include prominent businesspeople, media magnates and even sports personalities and pop idols, interspersed among some other elected politicians. Such lists are hardly scientific and may reflect little more than the highly subjective views of the journalists who compose them, but they do suggest that power is not just confined to those who hold some formal position in government, and that business tycoons such as Rupert Murdoch or Sir Richard Branson have more power than some Cabinet ministers.

One cynical conclusion might be that ‘money talks’: those with substantial wealth and income can

use it to buy (sometimes literally) political influence. Yet there is no simple correlation between wealth and power. Newspapers also sometimes list the wealthiest people in Britain, but some of the names near the top of such lists, such as the Duke of Westminster or the Queen, do not figure prominently if at all in the lists of those with power. There are others, such as leading footballers and pop stars, who avoid any formal association with politics and lack significant economic power, but yet may have enormous influence as role models on behaviour, and perhaps contribute more to changing political attitudes on key issues than professional politicians. Yet again, it is possible that real power and influence is exercised by many who are not celebrities – ‘faceless bureaucrats’, or political advisers.

However, this whole approach may make too much of the power of particular individuals. Ministers and company chairs come and go, but the organisations they head generally last much longer. Perhaps we should be looking at the power of institutions. Perhaps the civil service, or the City of London, or multi-national corporations exercise far more effective power and influence in the British political process than any single personality. Alternatively, power may not lie with particular institutions but with more amorphous interests or elites, such as ‘the ruling class’ or ‘the establishment’, or ‘big business’ or ‘the military-industrial complex’ or ‘global capitalism’. The implication behind such notions is that the individuals who hold formal positions of power, the official rulers, are driven by forces outside their control.

Definitions

Elite – an elite is a small dominant group. Elite theorists argue that power is inevitably exercised by the few (or by an elite or elites) even in nominally democratic organisations or states.

The establishment is a term sometimes used to describe the British elite, an unaccountable dominant social group largely educated at leading public schools and ancient universities.

The ruling class is a term used particularly by Marxists to describe those who own and control capital, and whose economic power gives them political power.

Definitions

Pluralism involves the belief that power is widely dispersed through society, rather than heavily concentrated in the hand of an elite or ruling class.

Neo-pluralism is a modified version of pluralism which still emphasises the dispersal of power while acknowledging the influence of key interests (e.g. business).

Democratic elitism is a modified form of elitism which still emphasises the importance of elites or leadership in politics, while acknowledging that competition between elites (e.g. through elections) encourages them to be responsive and accountable to the masses.

Alternatively we can seek to identify those who are effectively excluded from power. Thus it is often suggested that certain groups or interests might be marginalised in the political system – the unemployed, or ethnic minorities, or teenagers, or women, or those who live and work in the countryside. There may be sub-cultures, an underclass, or possibly a whole gender largely excluded from the political process.

All this implies that power may be rather or very unevenly distributed. Some, perhaps a small minority, appear to have a great deal of power, others relatively little influence, while others again may be virtually excluded from any effective participation in the decisions that affect their lives. Yet not everyone would agree that power is so narrowly concentrated; some would argue that ordinary people do have the capacity to influence and even determine key outcomes, in accordance with notions of democracy.

Perspectives on power

Who then rules Britain? It is a simple question, to which a variety of simple answers may be given: Britain has cabinet or prime ministerial government, Parliamentary sovereignty, an elected dictatorship, government by bureaucracy, business or corporate power, the dominance of an ‘establishment’ or ‘ruling class’. All these answers, and others

besides, have a certain plausibility and are worth giving serious consideration. Yet although it is certainly possible to provide a wealth of relevant information and analysis which should help towards an appreciation of who rules Britain, it should be acknowledged right away that it is impossible ultimately to give an authoritative and definitive answer to the question. Those answers that are given inevitably reflect different interpretations of the facts, and ultimately fundamentally different perspectives on politics, and different underlying ideological assumptions.

The term 'model' is often used in social science to describe a simplified version of reality. We try to make sense of a wide range of possibly relevant information by constructing simple hypotheses about the relationship between key variables, and see how far the real world fits the resulting models. Some simple models of the possible distribution of power in society are given in Table 1.1. The crucial question is how far power is dispersed or concentrated in the political system, but the different

models also provide alternative explanations of the institutions and mechanisms involved.

They are not the only possible models, and indeed, different names or versions of these models may be encountered elsewhere. Moreover, not all the models are mutually exclusive. 'Pluralism', 'liberal capitalism' or 'liberal democracy' are the names often given to a composite version of the first three models listed in Table 1.1, suggesting a model where power is dispersed through a mixture of the ballot box, the free market and the influence of group interests on the policy process. Certainly these institutions and processes can be seen as playing a mutually reinforcing role. Yet they also reflect different and sometimes competing perspectives. Some old-fashioned liberals or those on the modern New Right place far more emphasis on the free market than the verdict of the ballot box, particularly if that results in interference with free market forces. Similarly, they may fear that group influences represent selfish sectional interests and illegitimate power which

Table 1.1 Models of the possible distribution of power

<i>Name of model</i>	<i>Key players</i>	<i>Power</i>	<i>Evidence</i>	<i>Thinkers</i>
Representative democracy model	individual voters through the ballot box	dispersed	formal political mechanisms, electoral system, written constitutions	Bentham, J.S. Mill
Market model	individual consumers and producers through the free market	dispersed	classical economic assumptions – evidence of working of market	Adam Smith, Hayek, Friedman
Pluralist model	interest groups	relatively dispersed	influence of groups in case studies of decision making	Bentley, Truman, Robert Dahl, neo-pluralists (e.g. Lindblom)
Elitist model	elites (e.g. social, business, military, bureaucratic, professional elites)	concentrated	reputation of key figures and relationships between them	Pareto, Mosca, Michels, Wright Mills
Marxist model	ruling class ('bourgeoisie' in a capitalist society)	highly concentrated	distribution of income and wealth – working of capitalist system	Marx, Lenin, Trotsky, Gramsci, Miliband, Poulantzas



Photograph: PA Photos.

IN FOCUS 1.1 Representative democracy in action!

Nigel Farage enjoys a pint and a game of shove ha'penny with the landlady after voting in the 2001 general election at his local polling station, the Tichborne Arms, near Winchester. Making polling stations more accessible to voters is part of an initiative to boost turnout in elections (Representation of the People Act, 2000). Perhaps coincidentally, Winchester had the highest turnout in the UK. Mr Farage, we assume, paid for his pint. There are no plans for a return to the widespread 19th-century custom of 'treating' voters to alcoholic beverages.

may distort the market. Similarly, while pluralists assume a role for elections and representative institutions, they tend to regard these as only providing a very limited, occasional and blunt instrument for popular political participation, and place much more emphasis on the continuous pressure of countless groups on the policy process.

How persuasive are these models? Which is the most convincing? The obvious answer is to look at the evidence, but the problem here is that each model begins from rather different assumptions, employs different methodologies and looks at different sorts of evidence. The representative government model largely assumes that political power lies where the constitutions, laws and other official documents say it does, so here it is important to examine the theory and practice of the key institutions. The market model derives its key assumptions from classical economics. It is countless individual producers and consumers operating through the market who determine the crucial questions of who gets what, when, how. The role of politics in this economic process is (and, they argue, should be) strictly limited, as government intervention can only distort the operation of the free market and lead to a less efficient allocation of resources. Evidence in support of these assumptions comes from analysis of market forces and government intervention in practice. Pluralists cite case studies in decision making to demonstrate the role of large numbers of different groups in the process. Elitists by contrast identify key individuals or groups who dominate decision

making in their communities. Marxists infer political power from economic power. They document the massive inequalities in income and wealth in modern capitalist society, and assume that it is those who control the means of production who will also control the political process.

At this point an intelligent reader coming to the study of politics for the first time might think, 'Hold on! Is this description or prescription? Science or ideology?' The answer is, inevitably, both. While writers on politics are conscientiously striving to provide an accurate picture of the way in which the political process actually operates, they are inevitably influenced by their own fundamental assumptions, and sometimes also by their ideals. Marx believed he was providing a dispassionate analysis of the underlying forces within capitalism, but it is difficult to divorce this analysis entirely from his condemnation of capitalism and hopes for a future socialist revolution. He wrote, 'Philosophers have only interpreted the world, the point however is to change it' (*Theses on Feuerbach*). There is a similar mixture of analysis and prescription among modern free marketeers. Like Marx, they too want to change the world, although in a quite different direction. Moreover, while much of the debate between pluralists and elitists apparently involves dispassionate social scientific research into the distribution of power, most of those involved are also defending or advancing theories of democracy, and implicitly or explicitly criticising or defending the processes they describe.

British politics?

This is a book that focuses primarily on British politics, although it is not wholly confined to Britain. Wherever relevant, comparisons with other countries will be made, particularly with the USA and with some of the leading European states. Many features of British politics are found elsewhere, although some are relatively rare or even unique. Both the similarities with and the differences from other states can be instructive. It is, for example, virtually impossible to discuss the system of voting in Britain, its advantages and disadvantages, and proposals for reform, without some reference to voting systems in other countries (see Chapter 6).

Nor does a focus on Britain preclude some discussion of politics both above and below the level of the British state. While many of the crucial decisions that affect British citizens are still resolved within Britain's central government around Whitehall and Westminster, other decisions are taken elsewhere, some above the level of the British state – for example, by the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Organisation, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation or the European Union – while some are taken by devolved government within the United Kingdom, by local councils, by appointed agencies, or particular institutions such as hospital trusts, schools and universities.

Needless to say, the level at which decisions should be taken is often an acutely controversial political question. Some would like to devolve or decentralise power as far down as possible to local councils or communities, to give people more say in those decisions that affect them. Others would stress the need for more cooperation between nations to resolve essentially global problems – peace and security, world poverty, population growth and resources, the future of the planet – that imply the need for decisions and compromises above state level. This raises some questions about the whole future of independent sovereign nation-states in an apparently increasingly interdependent globalized world. Perhaps formerly powerful and independent states like Britain are inevitably losing real power and influence in a new global or European politics.

The European Union raises some particularly important questions about levels of decision

Definitions

An independent sovereign state is a state that has a monopoly of supreme (or sovereign) power within its borders, not subject to interference in its internal affairs by any outside power.

Globalization is a term that emphasises the increasing interdependence of people, organisations and states in the modern world, and the growing influence of global economic, cultural and political forces or trends. It implies limits to state sovereignty.

making and indeed the whole future of British politics. Britain's membership of what is now the EU has been acutely controversial since the British government first applied to join in 1961, and more particularly from 1973, when the Heath government signed the treaty of accession (Young, 1998). Some see the European Union as providing Britain with an opportunity to exert more political and economic influence, in cooperation with other member states, over decisions that affect all Britons. Others fear the absorption of Britain into a European superstate, which they see as a threat to British independence and identity. Whatever view is taken it is clear that the institutions and processes of the European Union are now an important element of the politics that affect us all. Indeed, the impact of Europe on British government and politics will be a running thread throughout this book (but see especially Chapter 16).

Yet the future of British politics is not just affected by the threat (real or exaggerated) of a European superstate. The very term 'Britain' and the notion of British politics are themselves increasingly contested (Davies, 2000: 853–86). The official title of the state (since 1922) is 'the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland'. It is often described more simply as 'the United Kingdom' or by the acronym 'UK'. 'Britain' or 'Great Britain' is simply the largest of those islands still often referred to as 'the British Isles', although the second largest of this group of islands, Ireland, is politically divided. Most of Ireland constitutes the Irish Republic, an independent sovereign state which is a member of the United

Nations and the European Union. Northern Ireland remains part of the United Kingdom, although its inhabitants are fiercely divided in their political allegiance. The majority insist they are 'British', rather more passionately than most people who live across the Irish Sea in 'Great Britain'. A large minority consider themselves Irish rather than British, and wish to belong to the Irish Republic rather than remain within the UK or British state. The political future of Northern Ireland remains acutely controversial.

Even without the long-running problem of Northern Ireland, the future of Britain and the British state is an open question. England is the largest of the constituent parts of Britain in territory and by far the largest in population. Many of those who live in England describe themselves almost interchangeably as 'English' or 'British', a confusion which can infuriate those who live in Scotland or Wales. Wales was absorbed by the English crown in the Middle Ages and was formally politically united with England in 1536. Scotland was an independent state until James VI of Scotland became also James I of England in 1603, although this union of the crowns did not involve full political union until 1707. The notion of a British state and the image of 'Britannia' effectively date from then. Some inhabitants of Scotland and Wales consider themselves to be both Scots or Welsh and British. Others consider themselves primarily or exclusively Scots or Welsh, and a significant minority would prefer to be part of an independent Scotland or Wales (see Chapters 2 and 17). Indeed, some have forecast the imminent 'break-up of Britain' (Nairn, 1981, 2000). This could happen. If the majority of those in Scotland and/or Wales clearly wished to be part of a separate state it would be impossible to maintain the union and 'Britain' would no longer exist as a meaningful political entity (although it would probably survive as a useful geographical term to describe the island). 'British politics' would be confined to the history books, to be replaced by the study of English (or Scottish or Welsh) politics (see Chapter 17).

Multi-level governance

However, the break-up of Britain has yet to take place and may never happen. For the present, and

for the immediate future, the British state survives, although it has become more complicated. Scotland and Wales remain in a political union with England, although since 1999 Scotland has had its own Parliament and Executive, and Wales an Assembly and Executive. This involves what is described as a 'devolution' of power, rather than the total separation sought by nationalists or a fully federal system of government (as exists in the USA or Germany). Some people in England would like to see a similar devolution of power to English regions, leading to directly elected assemblies for the North East or South West, for example. This trend to devolve power away from central government to the regions is a feature of several other European states.

Whatever the future of devolved government, there has long been some form of local government in Britain, and there remains a complex system of elected local authorities in England, Wales and Scotland, that continue to employ large numbers of people, spend considerable amounts of public money, and preside over important public services, although it is widely alleged that local government has less discretion and effective control of services than it used to (Wilson and Game, 2002). Local councils are now increasingly expected to enable others to provide services that they previously provided themselves. Thus alongside elected local authorities there is a bewildering range of more specialist appointed public agencies, publicly funded partnerships and voluntary organisations. Yet this new and more complicated world of 'local governance' still has massive implications for the quality of people's lives (see Chapter 18, and also Leach and Percy-Smith, 2001).

Thus government and politics operate at a number of levels, both above and below the more familiar world of Whitehall and Westminster. These levels are far from self-contained, as is evident from any major policy area. For example, there is a significant local, regional, devolved national, UK and European input into British transport policy, as well as cross-cutting inputs from specialist government agencies, business interests, political parties, pressure groups and advisers. Here we are concerned with the whole political process that affects public policy and the delivery of public services in Britain. For most

policies and services it is still the UK government that is particularly crucial in determining policy and allocating resources (see Part III). Thus it is inevitably still Whitehall and Westminster, rather than Brussels or Edinburgh or Cardiff or the local town hall, that remain the principal focuses of a book on British politics. Yet British politics involves them all and more besides.

Policies – who gets what, when, how?

Older books on politics concentrated on political institutions and processes, but often neglected the decisions, policies and services that are the product of the political process. This is like watching a game but ignoring the result. Who wins and who loses is crucial, in politics even more than in sport. So a study of politics must include not just the policy making process, but the outputs and outcomes of that process.

'It's the economy, stupid!' was the catchphrase of former US President Bill Clinton's Democrats, suggesting that politicians and governments are judged by how they run the economy. Of course it is possible that some of the most important economic developments are outside politicians' control, the consequence of national or global trends which may not be fully understood. Governments claim credit for the good times or pay the price for failure, when they may sometimes have little to do with either. Yet governments by their actions or inactions can help or hinder national prosperity. Political decisions are being taken regularly and routinely that may have critical implications for British industry, British jobs, prices and incomes and the standard of living. Governments can get things right, and sometimes they may get them badly wrong. Almost everyone may gain if the national economy prospers, and almost everyone may lose if there is a serious recession. However, within the country there will be relative winners and losers from national economic policy. This is most obvious at Budget time, when the media examine how various kinds of households (e.g. childless couples, one-parent families, pensioners) will be affected by changes in tax and spending. Over time some sections of the community may become progressively better off, while others become worse off. Inequality in the country as a whole may

grow or lessen. Economic policy clearly helps determine who gets what, where, how, and must be an important focus of any account of politics (see especially Chapter 21).

Health, education, transport, law and order: public services are now at the centre of political debate in Britain. Upon the quality of these services depends an important element of the quality of life of individuals and communities. Poor education in schools, colleges and universities ultimately affects everyone, not just the unfortunate recipients. People's lives can be blighted by crime. Thus it has long been recognised that such services cannot be left to the free market. Yet how far the state should intervene, the level of service, and the method of control, delivery and finance of services remain acutely controversial. Improvements may perhaps be possible by reforms in the delivery of services without additional resources, by eliminating waste, or introducing incentives, or making use of the private or voluntary sector. Yet ultimately it is a matter of how much governments (and ultimately citizens and taxpayers) are prepared to pay. Inevitably there is fierce competition arising from these demands on the public purse. More money for health may mean a lower priority for education or fighting crime. Behind the ministers, departments and agencies fighting for a higher share of public spending are all kinds of special interests: trade unions, professions, patients, consumers and clients, as well as the general mass of voters and taxpayers. Yet there may be important differences in the quality of services people obtain, depending on who they are or where they live. Some sections of the community may seem to get less than their fair share of vital services. A Briton's chance of finding a good school, or effective treatment for a medical condition, or any kind of NHS dentist, may depend on the 'postcode lottery'. Thus not just the management of the economy but specific policies on public services create winners and losers (see Chapter 22).

Can governments eradicate poverty? If the rich are getting richer, is that necessarily a bad thing? How far is it the role of government to promote equality and social justice? Such questions are at the centre of debate between socialists, liberals and conservatives, and the answers depend inevitably on ideological assumptions as well as economic

analysis. Yet clearly the relative poverty of some can affect people generally: obviously and directly from the payment of taxes to fund social security benefits; less directly from the possible knock-on effects on national economic prosperity, health, education and crime. Child poverty, the problems of low income and one-parent families, run-down housing estates and deprived urban areas are problems that successive British governments have tried to tackle in different ways. The proposed remedies often reflect different perspectives on the nature of the problem (see Chapter 23).

Whole categories of people may be more systematically excluded from power and a share of general prosperity as a result of blatant or more subtle forms of discrimination, injustice and prejudice. British women were long excluded from the most basic civil and political rights, and from the opportunity to enter the main professions or compete on equal (or sometimes any) terms with men. Although women now enjoy formal political equality, they remain under-represented in Parliament and government, and despite equal pay and anti-discrimination legislation, women generally still earn less than men, and find it difficult to rise to the highest positions. They continue to shoulder a disproportionate share of domestic and child care duties. Some suffer physical violence, or constraints on their lives arising from the fear of violence. Feminists argue that women remain grossly unequal in a male-dominated society (see Chapter 24).

The rising number of black and Asian Britons often suffer more blatant forms of discrimination and prejudice. Most of the ethnic minorities have lower levels of pay and higher levels of unemployment than among the majority white community. Although they are far more liable to be stopped by the police, they are more likely to be victims of many forms of crime than whites. They remain grossly under-represented in politics, higher professional and managerial jobs. Ethnic divisions are often further complicated by religious differences. The attack on the World Trade Center in New York on 11 September 2001 exacerbated what has come to be called Islamophobia. As a consequence, some feel excluded from British society and have problems with their political identity. In some urban areas this has resulted in tension, a breakdown in community

relations, and sometimes violence. It remains a serious and potentially explosive political problem (see Chapter 24).

11 September 2001 provides a sharp reminder, if a reminder is needed, that politics transcends national boundaries. Any country may be profoundly affected by remote events and crises in far corners of the world. While Britain has not been involved in a major war since 1945, British troops have been engaged in active combat in Korea, the South Atlantic, the Persian Gulf, Kosovo and Afghanistan. British foreign policy has been guided by three main associations and interests; the 'special relationship' with the USA, the continuing (though declining) association with the Commonwealth, and the steadily increasing importance of the European Union. Balancing the cross-Atlantic ties with the USA and the cross-Channel ties with nearer neighbours in an expanding EU is likely to remain a dilemma for future British foreign policy. Yet a more fundamental problem for Britain and other advanced capitalist countries is the gross and intensifying differences in living standards across the world. It is global inequality rather than inequality within Britain that could now threaten a political explosion (see Chapter 26).

It is no longer only the threat of violent conflict between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots' that endangers the future of the planet. The relationship of humankind with its environment has only been widely recognised as a serious issue in relatively recent times, but for some this has become the supreme political problem facing this country and the world generally. Finite resources are being used up, and various forms of environmental pollution threaten irreversible changes to soil and climate. At best, future generations may suffer a heavy burden from our extravagance. At worst, 'spaceship earth' could be heading for catastrophe. There are some awkward ethical questions also. Much previous political debate has been about a fair division of resources between classes or categories of humans alive today – fair shares for the working class, women, or blacks. Yet the notion of inter-generational equity requires consideration of the needs of generations yet unborn. Moreover, many Greens would demand justice not just for humans yet unborn but for other species with whom humankind shares the planet, and indeed the earth itself. The

politics of the environment has added a new dimension to ethical and political debate (see Chapter 25).

All this is politics. All these issues are on the agenda of British politics, whether the problems originate in Britain or elsewhere. They are all addressed further in the last part of this book. The issues are far from trivial. Indeed they may appear so frighteningly large and intractable that some may prefer to cut themselves off from politics and concentrate on their immediate lives and concerns. Yet ultimately we cannot exclude politics, unless we deny our common humanity, for we are political animals, as the philosopher Aristotle maintained. There is no subject more difficult, more important and ultimately more fascinating.

Further reading

There are few good accessible general introductions to the study of politics that can be recommended.

Crick (1993) is thought-provoking, if a little idiosyncratic. The French political scientist, Maurice Duverger's *The Study of Politics* (1972) is still worth reading.

Anthony Arblaster provides a readable short introduction to *Democracy* (1987). C. B. Macpherson's almost as brief *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy* (1977) might also be consulted. Fuller and more ambitious is David Held's *Models of Democracy* (1987).

The rest of this book explores some of the themes discussed briefly in this chapter, and reading on each topic is recommended at the end of each chapter. However, anyone wishing to explore further some of the issues associated with the British state and the future of British politics might try looking at chapter 10, 'The post-imperial isles' of *The Isles: A History*, by Norman Davies (2000). This provides a thought-provoking non-Anglocentric perspective on the history and politics of the British Isles.

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