

Introduction to Britain

The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland consists of four geographical and historical entities – England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Together, England, Wales and Scotland (Great Britain) constitute the larger of the two principal islands, while Northern Ireland together with the Republic of Ireland make up the second largest. The UK included Ireland until 1922, when the Irish Free State ceased to be part of the Union. Wales and England were unified politically, administratively and legally by the Acts of Union of 1536 and 1542. The 1707 Act of Union joined Scotland with England and Wales and established a single parliament for Great Britain, although the three countries had previously shared a monarch. In 1801, a further Act of Union created the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Apart from the land border with the Irish Republic, the United Kingdom is surrounded by the sea. The surface area of the UK is 94,251 square miles (244,110 square kilometres). At its widest the UK is 300 miles across, and from the top of Scotland to the southern coast of England it stretches about 600 miles. The capital city is London, situated on the River Thames in the south-eastern corner of England.

The United Kingdom is characterised by a long history and by political and cultural links with other areas of the world, the latter mostly a legacy of its large former empire. Even though the United Kingdom is a medium-sized and middle-ranking industrial country, it still has close ties with the 53 nations of the Commonwealth, of which the Monarch is the Head of State.

Britain is a constitutional monarchy with the monarch as Head of State. The monarchy and the House of Lords belong to the “dignified part of the Constitution”, as Walter Bagehot wrote in *The English Constitution* (1867), whereas the Prime Minister, the Cabinet and the House of Commons belong to the “efficient part of the Constitution”. The monarchy is the oldest institution of government, dating back to the 9th century and the sovereign and the royal family are both a source of unity and an element of continuity. Owing to its first-past-the-post electoral system, Britain has a two-party system in which the Conservative Party (or “Tories”) and the Labour Party have shared power since 1922. This latter date marked the decline of the Liberal Party, a situation which lasted until 2010 when the Lib Dem leader Nick Clegg negotiated with both Labour and Conservatives, leading to the first coalition government since the war years.

Margaret Thatcher became the defining figure in postwar British politics and the three successive election victories of the “Iron Lady” proved that she had a deep understanding of the mood of the British electorate in the late 1970s and 1980s. She understood that the British public were dissatisfied

with an economy that failed to create prosperity and reward enterprise, and with public services (and public industries) characterised by scandalously poor quality. The results of her reforms were both spectacular and largely popular. Tony Blair understood this and acknowledged the achievements of Margaret Thatcher, consistently using Thatcherite rhetoric to strengthen his credentials.

From 1997 to 2007, Blair launched ground-breaking reforms, ranging from Welfare-to-Work to devolution. His greatest success was the peace process in Northern Ireland, but the Iraq war is seen as a stain on his premiership. Blair resigned in May 2007 and Gordon Brown took over as the new PM and Labour leader. The 2010 general election led to a hung parliament and after five days of negotiations, the Leader of the Conservative Party, David Cameron, became Prime Minister and appointed the Liberal Democrat Nick Clegg Deputy Prime Minister in a coalition government. The Conservatives' resounding victory in the May 2015 general elections put an end to this power-sharing agreement, while the landslide victory of the Scottish National Party in Scotland (winning 56 of the 59 seats, mainly at the expense of Labour) further altered the balance of power in the House of Commons.

As in every modern democracy, the media play an important part in both Britain's daily life and political landscape, providing information and education, entertainment and communication. Since 2010, television has enabled voters to assess the prime ministerial candidates during live debates, and the internet is also widely used by all political parties as a way to stay in touch with grass-roots voters.

Education in the UK is free, full-time and compulsory between the ages of 5 and 16, although school is not compulsory and children can be taught at home. Around 93% of pupils in the UK attend publicly-funded state schools, and 57% of state-funded secondary schools are academies (2014 figures). The remaining 7% attend fee-paying schools and the number of pupils at UK independent schools is currently at the highest level since records began in 1974.

Many of these private schools still use the somewhat misleading epithet "public" schools and, although almost one in three pupils receive some sort of assistance with fees in terms of bursaries or scholarships, annual fees there can reach £35,000. The most prestigious establishments such as Eton, Harrow, Westminster, Winchester and Roedean thus attract some of the nation's wealthiest and brightest children, as well as numerous foreign pupils from all over the world. A National Curriculum was introduced in 1992 and all schools, be they state or privately-funded, must adhere to it.

Higher education in the UK developed rapidly after the Second World War. There are currently over 200 universities and higher education institutions, which enjoy significant academic freedom. Although a change in undergraduate

funding strategy in 2012-2013 led to an initial drop in the number of pupils going on to study at university, that figure currently stands at nearly 50% of pupils.

Britain is predominantly Christian, but most of the world's religions are represented in the country. Muslims are the second largest group and there are also thriving Hindu, Jewish and Sikh communities.

Britain is also a strong sporting nation and the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games were a high point for the country's sporting reputation. Britain competes at the highest international level in popular sports such as rugby, golf and athletics, while England's Premier League ranks among the wealthiest and most watched football leagues on the planet.

Britain is committed to environmental protection and has set ambitious targets for reducing emissions of greenhouse gases. Several government agencies and institutions such as the National Trust and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds are involved in protecting Britain's natural heritage, supported by many local foundations.

1 – Population

The English people is descended from earlier Britons and Germanic tribes, including Angles, Saxons and Jutes, and from later Vikings and Normans. In mid-2014, the United Kingdom reached 64.6 million inhabitants (compared to 38.2 million in 1901), with a net migration figure of 318,000 and a global population ranking of 18th. Britain is more densely populated than France, but its inhabitants are unequally distributed over England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. 84% of the British population live in England, 8.2% in Scotland, 4.8% in Wales and less than 3% in Northern Ireland.

Throughout the twentieth century, Britain both diversified ethnically and aged, and there were numerous changes in demographic patterns. Between the two world wars, the country experienced a period of decreasing fertility characterised by delayed marriage, relatively high bachelordom and spinsterhood and virtually non-existent divorce and illegitimate births. Since 1945, family ties have weakened with rising rates of divorce, separation, cohabitation and single motherhood. The end of the twentieth century was characterised by an ageing population with low mortality rates and still lower fertility.

The age structure of the population reflects this increasing longevity. Life expectancy for all British people is increasing (79 for men and 83 for women) but the gap between the best and the worst districts continues to rise. Health inequalities widened over the Blair years, reflecting growing disparities in wealth and income. In 2010, inequalities in mortality were even greater than during the Depression years of the 1930s. The infant mortality rate in

Britain (where many women delay motherhood) is worse than in many other European countries and hovers around 4 deaths/1,000 live births. These high rates are strongly associated with deprivation, and the poorest members of society are significantly more likely to die prematurely than the most affluent.

Apart from the increasing number of old people and the decreasing number of children, patterns of immigration have changed and transformed major cities into racially and linguistically mixed populations. Since 1945, waves of immigration have arrived from the Caribbean and South Asia, and non-white people currently make up around 14% of the population, a share that is set to rise to between 20 and 30% by 2050. The expected growth in the non-white population is largely due to a higher birth rate among ethnic minority Britons. A quarter of children aged under 10 in the UK are from ethnic minorities, compared to 5% of people aged over 60.

Throughout the 1990s, many eastern Europeans such as Poles were attracted to the UK by jobs in the “grey economy” and this phenomenon was amplified in the wake of the successive enlargements of the European Union. 2011 census results showed that some 521,000 Polish-born immigrants were living in the UK. In 2015, attempts by thousands of non-European migrants (Iraqis, Eritreans, Syrians...) to reach Britain illegally by stowing away in lorries at Calais were treated almost as a national emergency in Britain, dominating the front pages of newspapers and sparking a debate in parliament.

Internal geographical distribution has also evolved in the UK. The North West has seen the largest net loss of people due to internal migration while the South West has witnessed the largest net gain. Overall, the population is highly urbanised with over 70% of British people living in urban areas. London has the greatest population density, with around 8.6 million people living in the Greater London area in 2015.

The occupational composition of the population has also seen changes, with the number of men in the professional, managerial and supervisory grades and the number of women in higher socio-economic occupations increasing. There are now more women in the workforce but men are more likely than women to be in the professional group and women tend to prevail in clerical and secretarial jobs, and in part-time positions.

2 – National Income and Wealth

The UK is a wealthy country – the per capita GDP (Gross Domestic Product), last recorded at just under US\$41,000 in 2014, is equivalent to around 300% of the world’s average. However there is still a very high level of income inequality compared to other developed countries. In 2015 those in the bottom 10% of the population had a net income of £8,628 on average, while the top 10% had net incomes almost ten times that (£80,240).

Nearly all direct taxes (such as income tax and national insurance) are progressive – that is to say they take a larger proportion of income from higher-earning households. However, the bottom 10% of households pay much more of their gross household income in indirect taxes (council tax, taxes on consumption like VAT...) so both groups end up paying a similar percentage of their gross income. The National Minimum Wage came into effect on 1st April 1999.

The components of household income have changed over the past three decades, with the proportion from wages and salaries falling in favour of a rise in social benefits. Figures released in 2014 by the Office for National Statistics show that in 2012/13 cash benefits made up over half (56.4%) of the gross income of the poorest fifth of households, compared with 3.2% of the richest fifth. During the 1990s, the growth in average earnings was more important than that of retail prices, but since the economic crisis of 2008 the rise of inflation has impacted the purchasing power of British families. Patterns of expenditure have also evolved over the past fifty years and households now spend more money on services than on food, clothing and power.

Some 30 million British people are income tax payers, yet in spite of the Equal Pay Act of 1970 and the Sex Discrimination Act which established the principle of equal pay for work, the income of women is still lower than that of men. In 2014, official figures showed that the average full-time pay gap between men and women was at its narrowest (9.4%) since comparative records began in 1997.

Moreover, there is a huge discrepancy in income distribution across British regions. Whereas London and the South East of England offer high potential earnings for those working in the service industry or in financial services, the North of England, the Midlands, Scotland and Wales have provided fewer opportunities since the decline of their traditional manufacturing industries. In these regions more households rely on benefits than in the rest of the country. Wealth in the UK is even less fairly distributed than income, with ONS figures confirming both a growing wealth disparity and a sharp north-south divide. The nation's top 10% own 44% of household wealth and, according to the charity Oxfam, five billionaire families control the same wealth as 20% of the population.

3 – Figures on the Economy from 1979 to 2015

When Margaret Thatcher became Prime Minister in May 1979, her main aim was to control inflation, cut public expenditure and reduce taxation. The cornerstone of government policy was to curb inflation, that is to say the rise in prices, which reached 21.9% in May 1981 and had fallen to 3.7% by May 1983, before rising again to 10% in 1990. The years after 1983 brought

a continuing economic recovery but, largely as a consequence of policies designed to limit inflation, the rate of unemployment did not fall until 1986.

The economic policy of the Thatcher government was two-fold: on the one hand, the market should expand and on the other hand, the role of the state should contract. It rested on cutting public expenditure, deregulation and privatisation. Reducing public expenditure was intended to pave the way for cuts in taxation, while deregulation was meant to encourage competition. It involved the removal of exchange controls and allowed the producer more freedom of action and the consumer more freedom of choice. From 1983 onwards, privatisation developed and some 50 major public sector businesses were privatised, including gas and electricity supply, railway services, coal and telecommunications. By 1987, this denationalisation and deregulation policy had raised about £25 billion through privatisation and 1 million jobs had been transferred from the public to the private sector.

Government policy towards the unions after 1979 weakened collectivism and reduced union power, and over the past three decades the nature of the labour market has changed radically, as Britain has shifted away from an old regulated market with high unionisation and secure jobs. This new deregulated labour market is characterised by low levels of unionisation and a flexible employment market but also by job insecurity, epitomized by so-called “zero-hours contracts”.

From the early 1970s until 2015 the UK’s unemployment rate averaged out at around 7% and in September 2015 stood at 5.3%. This figure reached a historic high of 11.9% in 1984 and a record low of 3.40% in 1973. 2014 figures show that some 25 million people were in private sector employment, compared to 5.9 million who work in the public sector i.e. just under 20% of total employment, lower than at any point in at least the last 40 years.

Over the same period, Britain also witnessed a significant growth in employment among women, although almost half have part-time jobs (compared to 13% of men). A greater proportion of men than women of working age were in employment and in 2015 the employment rate was 77.6% for men and 67.6% for women, figures which have remained largely unchanged since 1999, but which show a significant evolution since the largest gap in 1971, when 92.1% of men worked compared to only 52.8% of women.

The Thatcher years saw a general improvement in standards of living, an increase in spending and sharp growth in trade. However, by the 1980s imports were rising twice as fast as exports and a large balance of payments deficit emerged. Tony Blair inherited a golden legacy from previous Conservative governments, but the Labour party left the country in a state of economic decline after thirteen years of rule. Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown kept public spending within limits during Blair’s first term in office,

but increased public spending on areas such as the NHS from 2001 onwards. Moreover, the Afghanistan and Iraq wars hit the British taxpayer's purse hard.

The UK economy was severely hit by the global financial crisis and by the collapse of the US subprime market in 2007. Several British banks went to the wall, starting with Northern Rock in August 2007, and later the Royal Bank of Scotland and Lehman Brothers in September 2008. Prime Minister Gordon Brown tried his best to limit the repercussions of the crisis and injected money into British banks (except HSBC and Barclays which refused and remained independent).

From early 2009, the British economy picked up again and one key priority of the 2010-2015 coalition government led by Prime Minister David Cameron and Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg was to reduce the gaping public deficit which reached 11.5% of GDP in 2010. Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne has launched successive waves of austerity measures since 2010, cutting funding of Whitehall departments, squeezing the social security budget, and introducing crackdowns on tax avoidance.

British inflation dropped to 1.6% in March 2014 – the lowest level since October 2009 – boosting the spending power of households, while the change from a coalition to a Conservative government in May 2015 restored the financial markets' confidence in the British economy.

4 – Politics

The House of Commons and the House of Lords are the two chambers of Parliament. The House of Commons is the dominant chamber and a fundamental institution of British government but Blair's reform of the House of Lords paradoxically strengthened the institution. The State Opening of Parliament remains the yearly ceremony which marks the beginning of the parliamentary year.

The House of Commons is the efficient part of the Constitution together with the Prime Minister and the Cabinet. It consists of 650 Members of Parliament (MPs) elected as representatives of the two dominant parties (Conservatives and Labour), and other smaller parties such as the Liberal Democrats, the Scottish National Party (SNP) and the right-wing UKIP, or UK Independence Party. The so-called "lower house" has a legislative and scrutinizing function, acts as a representative body and as a forum for national debate. The official opposition and its leader have formal standing, as illustrated by the presence of the so-called "Shadow" Cabinet.

Most legislation originates from government and emerges from its passage through Parliament. The House of Commons provides the legitimacy of law and the machinery for the making of law derived from its legislative sovereignty. Legislation and the proceedings of government are scrutinized

in detail, clause by clause, by several organs: the official opposition, the Standing Committees and the Select Committees. Standing Committees assess legislation and can make amendments. Select Committees, usually comprised of 11 MPs, have an absolute right to demand any information they require for the purposes of their enquiry and have some influence on both short- and long-term policy.

Secondly, the House of Commons' representative function reflects the attitudes of the English people on all matters. An MP is at once the representative of a party, of common interests and of his region of election and as such has the duty to express the grievances of the members of public in his constituency.

Thirdly, the House of Commons is the focus of national attention at the beginning and end of major debates and during the Prime Minister's Question Time (or "PMQs"). The focal point of these weekly Wednesday sessions is the rhetorical jousting between the two main party leaders. Questions are put to the Prime Minister by Shadow Cabinet ministers and MPs during Question Time, which helps to maintain an investigatory control over the government in power and also provides a chance to judge ministerial dexterity.

The key to understanding the powers of the Commons lies in the relationship between government and the House of Commons as the representative body. Yet, during the Blair years, the growing executive powers of the PM and the functions of the Cabinet came to dominate the powers of the House of Commons and government ministers tended to monopolize proceedings in the Commons. The lower house thus has less capacity to challenge the actions of government than in the past and it no longer uses its powers to control financial and administrative matters. The function of initiating legislation also belongs firmly in the hands of the government in power, although every year the 20 MPs whose names are chosen in a ballot get a chance to bring their own bills forward and have them debated in Parliament. Some MPs use these Private Member's Bills to highlight controversial positions or key issues (eg the abolition of the death penalty), while others try to make small changes to the law or to solve an under-appreciated problem.

Thus the House of Commons has become the forum in which the struggle is fought between great political machines. This is an unusual arrangement in democratic legislatures which are mostly based on the principle of the separation of powers. A 2009 scandal concerning MPs who bent the rules in order to claim inflated expenses severely dented the British public's confidence in the system.

The House of Lords is the upper house of the UK parliament and plays an important role in the elaboration of legislation and as an amending chamber. It also holds the government to account and acts as a forum of independent expertise. Contrary to the lower house, members of the House of Lords are not elected, but obtain a seat by appointment, by inheritance, or by virtue