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**Index**
1 Why politics matters and why British politics matters

Political Issue 1

Liberal freedoms under pressure: torture and the war on terror

A defining feature of the state is its ability to impose coercion. But coercion is supposed to be limited by the rules of liberal democracy. Torture, whatever precise definition it is given, is acknowledged to be ‘out of bounds’ under the rules of liberal democracy. But what happens in a world where terror threats are global and are addressed through cooperation between states, some of which are liberal democracies and some of which are not? ‘Rendition’ illustrates the problem. It refers to the practice of a liberal democracy, the US, ‘rendering’ suspects to jurisdictions where there are no liberal safeguards against torture, and then using the evidence gained. The US admits that it has used rendition; the UK has now admitted that it assisted the US in the process of despatching suspects for rendition; there are allegations by suspects that they were tortured with the complicity of the UK authorities.

The case illuminates three key issues about state power:

▶ It shows the critical connection between national citizenship and the exercise of power: the state makes a distinction here between the rights of British nationals and foreigners.

▶ It illuminates in a particularly clear way the heart of coercive state power.

▶ It illuminates one of the central dilemmas of a liberal democracy, such as Britain claims to be: how far the safeguards conventional in a liberal democracy, like those against imprisonment without trial, can defensibly be violated.

Chapter Aims

▶ To explain why we study politics
▶ To explain why we study the politics of a special sort of institution, the state
▶ To explain why we study British politics
▶ To sketch some of the main themes that we encounter when we study British politics
▶ To anticipate some of the ways we can ‘frame’ British politics theoretically
WHY STUDY POLITICS?

Why study politics? Indeed, why be concerned with political life at all? For most citizens – including citizens of the UK – the answers to these questions are pretty obvious: there are no good reasons either to study politics or to take an active part in political life. Politics is a popular subject in most universities and in further education, but beyond these places the study of politics really is a minority interest – more accessible, say, than the study of theoretical physics, but not able to attract more interest among the wider population. The reader of this book is engaged in a minority activity. And the reader of this book who is involved actively in politics is engaged in a more unusual activity still. There are perhaps no more than 100,000 really committed political activists in this country – by which I mean people for whom, beyond work and the immediate demands of family life, politics is a seriously time-consuming activity. By contrast, surveys tell us that apparently marginal activities like dressmaking and knitting are actually engaged in by 3 per cent of all men over the age of 16 – about 700,000 in all. About double that number of people regularly play skittles or ten-pin bowling. So one way to put politics into perspective is to realize that it is less popular than either knitting or skittles.

But if politics is a minority interest, even in a democracy, it is nevertheless a matter of the utmost importance – in a quite literal sense, a matter of life and death. We soon start to see this if we consider some of the commonest definitions of politics and political life, such as those illustrated in Documenting Politics 1.1. There are important differences in emphasis in the different definitions collected in that box, but we can nevertheless find in there a common theme. Politics is about trying to choose between competing views and interests in institutions. It is immediately obvious that politics can happen in any of a variety of institutions: there is politics in families, in colleges and in business firms. It is also immediately obvious why politics is so important: the failure to make these choices by peaceful means, and to carry them out effectively and peacefully, has catastrophic results. Consider, for instance, the life of people unfortunate enough to live in poverty-stricken countries of Africa, like the Democratic Republic of Congo. What single thing would transform their life: a great medical advance, a great advance in biotechnology which would make farming more productive? Neither of these things: their lives would be transformed for the better by peace and the creation of a stable system of government, because since the then Belgian Congo achieved independence nearly 60 years ago it has been racked by civil wars. Understanding politics, if we want to make the world a better place for our fellow human beings, is more urgent even than understanding medicine, biology or physics.

WHY BRITONS STUDY POLITICS

Because Britons – the most likely readers of this book – usually live in peace and security, we naturally take the contribution of politics to our well-being for granted. But this does not apply to all Britons, for when these conditions disappear we see immediately how important they are. That...
WHY STUDY THE STATE?

We began above by defining politics in very general terms—essentially as an activity which could be carried out in many different institutions. That is why we speak of the internal politics of a college or a tennis club. But in Europe from the seventeenth century—most observers, if pressed for a single date, would choose the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648—a very particular institution began to take on responsibility for managing the political process in societies. That institution we normally call ‘the state’. Many social sciences study politics across a range of institutions, but the study of the politics connected with the state is usually done within the field of political studies or political science. That is just a matter of the convenient division of labour in academic work. Courses conventionally called ‘politics’ or ‘government’ are mostly concerned with this state-focused system of politics, and books like this one share the same preoccupation. The state is not the whole of politics; but since the seventeenth century it has been a very important part of politics.

Why is this, and why is so much of modern political studies preoccupied with the state? What emerged out of the Treaty of Westphalia was a particular political form, the essence of which is contained in the most famous definition of the state, one offered by a founding father of the social sciences, the German sociologist Max Weber: ‘the state is a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory’ (see Briefing 1.1).

Notice three things about this definition. First, the state is a territorial entity, as indeed a glance at a weather map of the UK in your morning paper will show. Second, the state claims to monopolize the means of coercion in this territory. This does not mean that physical coercion by other means does not take place; but it does mean that the state claims that coercion can only legitimately take place with its consent. The word ‘legitimacy’ gets at the third feature of the state: the claim to monopoly is tied to a claim to be the legitimate supreme power in a given territory.

What does ‘legitimacy’ mean? It involves the state making a special kind of claim to the loyalties of the population. The idea is once again well conveyed by Max Weber, who linked the idea of legitimacy to the idea of authority. If I have power over you, that means I have the capacity, whether you like it or not, to get you to do something you would not otherwise do. But if I exercise authority, I command you, not simply through fear or money, but because you recognize my moral right to demand your obedience: I have a legitimate right to get you to obey. This idea of legitimate authority conveys a key claim of the modern state.

The notion of legitimate authority opens up another key feature of the state: why and how states are in practice obeyed. States have great powers of coercion: they can take away our property, our liberty and even our lives, by war or execution. But if we only obeyed the state through fear of coercion, its power would be quite limited. We would disobey whenever we thought the state might not discover our disobedience, and that in turn would entail the state investing huge resources in spying on and controlling its population. Some famous modern dictatorships have indeed done exactly that, and as a result they have turned out to be quite inefficient. The states most effective in commanding obedience have ruled by legitimate authority rather than fear.

Legitimate authority can rest on various grounds. Weber again made a famous distinction between three sorts of authority. Traditional authority rests on custom, often based on right of succession; for instance, the kind of authority claimed by a hereditary monarchy. Leaders with some extraordinary personal quality that commands obedience claim charismatic authority. Rational–legal authority is claimed on the grounds that the person or institution wielding it does so because of certain agreed rules and procedures.

One reason Weber’s classification is so important is that it throws light on the changing nature of legitimate authority in the state. Traditional authority was typically in the past claimed by monarchs. We can see faint traces in the case of the present British monarchy: the Queen is monarch through right of succession, even though the line of succession was often falsified. The original charismatic leader was the Pope, who claims to wield authority as the anointed successor of Christ. ‘Charisma’ is a word of Greek origins, and its original literal meaning conveys the idea of being an anointed one, marked with divine qualities. As a sign of this,
WHY POLITICS MATTERS AND WHY BRITISH POLITICS MATTERS

### BRIEFING 1.1

**Max Weber’s definition of state and of authority**

Weber on the state: ‘the relation between the state and violence is an especially intimate one … the state is a human community that (successfully) claims the *monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force* within a given territory’.

Weber on the three grounds that can confer the legitimacy for domination:

- **Traditional**: ‘the authority of the eternal yesterday … traditional domination exercised by the patriarch and the patrimonial prince of yore’.
- **Charismatic**: ‘the authority of extraordinary and personal gift of grace (charisma)’ exercised by ‘the great demagogue, or the political party leader’.
- **Rational–legal authority**: ‘by virtue of the belief in the validity of legal statute and functional competence based on rationally created rules’.

Max Weber (1864–1920) was a key figure in the development of modern social science. But like all great social observers his apparently universal statements grew out of particular historical experiences. His most often quoted statements on the state and authority, summarized above, come from a lecture entitled ‘Politics as a Vocation’ delivered in 1918. The Great War (1914–18) had led to the collapse of three empires: Germany, Austro-Hungary and Tsarist Russia. Weber had been a supporter of the monarchy in Germany; now he lived through upheaval, civil war, dictatorship and the threat of Communist revolution. His view of the state as an institution that secured authority in a territory was inseparable from this experience of collapse and turmoil.


at the coronation of a Pope the new Pontiff is anointed with an oil called chrism; and an even fainter sign can be seen in the fact that the coronation of a monarch in Britain also involves being anointed with oil of chrism. The genius of Weber’s notion of charisma lay not in the way it interpreted the past, but how it anticipated a terrible future. Elaborated at the start of the twentieth century, it anticipated the kind of authority claimed by the most notorious dictatorships of the twentieth century: both Hitler in Nazi Germany (1933–45) and Stalin in Soviet Russia (died 1953) were pictured as having superhuman, god-like qualities of leadership.

The other great form of authority in our age is rational–legal authority, which is now closely associated with the modern democratic state such as exists in Britain. From the core notion of rational legality – that the exercise of authority is rule bound – come several key ideas in modern politics, especially democratic politics. As our example of the British monarchy shows, there are faint traces of both traditional and charismatic authority in modern British government. But the most important source of authority claimed by the state in Britain is rational legality: it is to be obeyed because what it does is governed by explicit rules covering both the substance of what it can do and the ways it can do it. (To help make the point, Documenting Politics 1.2 provides an everyday example of the exercise of rational–legal authority in Britain.) This idea that state authority is rule bound is also, as we will now see, central to an equally important claim made by the state in Britain: that it is democratic.

**WHY STUDY DEMOCRACY?**

Until the twentieth century democracy was usually spoken of in hostile terms. That hostile tradition began at the very dawn of political theory. The Greek political philosopher Aristotle classified democracy as a form of tyranny because it was a system of class rule, in the interests of the poor, propertyless masses in a society. That is why, until the twentieth century, it was viewed with hostility or suspicion, at least by anyone with property. But it is now most commonly thought of in procedural terms: democratic governments are democratic because they have been chosen by particular rules, usually involving winning some sort of majority in elections where all or most adults have the right to take part. In Britain, although formally we still speak of Her Majesty’s Government, implying that authority is traditional, in reality the government’s authority rests on the fact that it won a general election and has a majority in the House of Commons. ‘Democracy’, in this meaning, has shrunk to something quite narrow: it refers to a procedure (periodic elections involving most of the adult population) which selects the government.

Commanding a majority in the House of Commons is also critical to another aspect of rational–legal authority.
A majority gives the capacity, in most cases, to pass laws, and a government’s ability to command obedience only stretches to those areas where it is backed by properly enacted laws. Not only do we not feel obliged to obey the government if it makes demands beyond the law; we are entitled to, and often do, challenge it in the courts. In short, in Britain, the rational–legal authority of government is not only bound up with the fact that it has won a majority under defined rules of political competition, but that its claims to obedience rest on properly passed laws. This notion of the rule of law is thus central to claims to authority. That is why in our illustration (Documenting Politics 1.2) rational–legal authority is illustrated by a tax demand received by me. If I do not pay the tax the authorities have the legal authority to seize my property to the value of the demand (plus an additional fine). But I can successfully appeal against the demand if I can show that the authorities have not acted in accordance with the law – for instance, if they have not applied the legally stated tax rate in calculating my bill. (This is the theory; later in the book, especially in Chapters 20 and 21, we will examine how far this optimistic view of British government as constrained by law fits the reality.)

In some political systems, but not yet in Britain, this notion of government under law is given a special force by a written constitution. A constitution lays down the most important rules of political procedure: for instance, how elections are to be organized, the powers of different branches of government and the rights of citizens against government. As we will see, one of the peculiarities of Britain is that, while it undoubtedly has a constitution, it does not have it in the form of a single written document.

The theory of modern democracy thus involves two principles: that government should be selected by some majority rule; and that government can only exercise authority when sanctioned by law. This theory in turn entails another key idea: accountability. Periodic elections are of course one important way in which governments are obliged to be accountable – literally, to give an account of their stewardship over the preceding period. But one of the marks of democratic government is the existence of a wider range of formal and informal practices and institutions designed to ensure that government is held accountable for its actions. We shall see that the different meanings of accountability, and the tests of accountability, are central to debates about whether we do indeed have effective democracy in Britain.

Weber’s famous definition of the state opened up for us the important idea of authority. But two other linked elements in his definition open up another key political concept: his notion that the state claims a monopoly of authority, and claims it in a bounded territory. These are encapsulated in the idea of sovereignty – a concept that was central to the emergence of the state as a key political unit after the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648. In legal theory, sovereignty – the idea that a state commanded supreme authority in its own territory – was at the core of statehood. As we will see, it has turned out to be one of the most difficult and contested ideas in modern British politics.

States in the seventeenth century could make these Weber-like claims, but in practice they often had very little impact on the daily lives of the populations over whom they ruled. The state in the twenty-first century is a very different matter – as the example of Britain below will show.

### WHY STUDY BRITISH POLITICS?

Why should anyone be interested in the study of British politics? There are two linked answers: they partly have to do with the importance of Britain, and they partly have to do with the lives of those who live in Britain. Imagine first posing the question to someone who did not live in Britain. The British political system would nevertheless be highly relevant. Britain is an important member of the international state system because it is one of a small number of rich and powerful states that belong to what is sometimes called the ‘first world’
The tax demand as rational–legal authority

(see Table 1.1.) It is also a member, in the European Union, of an organization which, as we shall see, is one of the most important economic and political players in world politics.

Britain also has a special historical significance in the development of the wider global system. The Industrial Revolution, which Britain pioneered in the eighteenth century, created the first industrial society, clearing a path in economics and politics which many other leading nations have followed. In short, you do not have to be particularly interested in Britain for its own sake to find the study of British politics important; you just have to be interested in our modern world and how we got here.

For those who live in Britain the importance of politics is greater still. At the start of the twentieth century most people who lived in Britain could go through their daily lives without being significantly touched by the state: if you had wandered round a British town then the only big public employer you would have seen evidence of, for example, would have been the Post Office (it was then publicly owned). But during the twentieth century the British state, like the states of other democracies, emerged as a major influence on the lives of all citizens. The typical reader of this book is probably a student at a university or at a college for 16- to 19-year-olds, and most of his or her contemporaries...
will profess themselves entirely uninterested in government and politics. Yet their lives are profoundly shaped by what goes on in the political arena and by what government does. Just consider some of the ways. They will almost certainly have been born in a hospital run by the National Health Service, a state funded and state controlled body. Bar a small minority they will have been educated in state schools – schools largely funded by government and, over the last three decades, subjected to close control by central government as to what they teach and how they teach. And now, if in further or higher education, the story will be repeated. Although students in higher education in England pay an annual fee, that fee nowhere near covers the cost, most of which comes from taxation raised by central government. And as in schools, what is taught, and how it is taught, is increasingly prescribed by agencies of central government.

This sketch is just a miniature of the way government now looms large in the life of all of us. Figure 1.1 presents a summary measure of the long-term growth in the scale of government spending over this last century. (More recent changes are examined later, especially in Chapter 19.)

British politics is an important subject of study because of its size and historical significance, so we try to make sense of it for academic reasons. But there are also reasons why as citizens we should study it. Those reasons are summarized below.

**Understanding.** Anyone who follows the daily arguments that go on in British politics – in the House of Commons or in the media – will know that they are highly charged. They resemble more the argument of a courtroom, where competing prosecutors and defenders do battle, than the atmosphere of a scientific laboratory or a seminar room. But politics also needs to be understood in a manner just as dispassionately as we try to understand the workings of the natural world. The study of politics thus needs to be ‘scientific’, in the broadest sense of that term. This does not mean that the key elements we study in politics – who are after all human beings – are like the key elements that a chemist or

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1.1 Britain as a rich and privileged country: the British and the poorest on earth, 2012–13</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Life expectancy (years)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Infant mortality rates (per live 1,000 births)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gross national income, per head (US$)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet users (per 100 people)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* The figures are for the poorest countries identified by the World Bank for its ‘low income’ set – a collective portrait of the poorest countries on earth; for Internet usage the set is ‘least developed countries’ by UN classification. The table heading reflects the fact that some figures are for 2012, some for a year later.

The table summarizes the single most important feature of social and economic life in Britain: it is one of a small number of fabulously rich countries by the standards of most of the world’s population (and by the standards of most Britons of earlier generations). The figures compare Britain with the poorest countries as identified by the World Bank in its country profiles.


**Figure 1.1 The growth in the scale of government over a century (% gross domestic product accounted for by general government spending)**

The chart highlights the changing scale of spending by government at various points over the course of the twentieth century. It measures ‘general government spending’ – a broad measure – as a proportion of gross domestic product, the commonest measure of the size of the wider economy. It thus measures both the growing absolute scale of government and also its changing relative importance in the wider economy. It is a summary of why studying British government is so important: government is easily the biggest institution in British society. The chart takes the long view. The more immediate issue of what happened to the scale of the state in the early years of the twenty-first century is examined in Chapters 2 and 19.
Why politics matters and why British politics matters

An astronomer studies. Nor does it mean that we expect to be able to develop the sort of highly formal, mathematically expressed theories common in the physical sciences. (Nevertheless in some areas, like the most sophisticated study of elections, mathematical formality is quite well advanced.) ‘Science’ is a word with a root in Latin and by origin it denotes only knowledge and its systematic study. To speak of the need to study British politics scientifically is thus only to speak of the need to study it as systematically and dispassionately as possible; to develop accounts of how the various parts of the system operate; and to debate the accuracy of those accounts, not by reference to our subjective views, but by reference to agreed bodies of evidence.

Effective citizenship. Britain is run, we will discover, by an activist minority numbered in tens, rather than hundreds, of thousands. Some readers of this book will eventually form a part of that minority. There are many ways of getting knowledge about how the system of government operates in order to have an effective say in government, and practical participation in politics is one. But that sort of knowledge only comes with long experience. Not everyone wants to wait 20 years to pick up the hard truths about the realities of political power; systematic study is a way of short-circuiting protracted learning through experience.

Making government effective. Governments make decisions and put those decisions into effect. Nothing guarantees that they are wise decisions or, if they are, that wise decisions actually take effect. One of the main lessons of the study of British government in recent years, we will see in these pages, is that good government is more than a matter of good intentions or good people. It also depends on how government is run. Getting things wrong can be catastrophic. Northern Ireland, for instance, was very badly run between the 1920s and the 1960s, and part of what was bad about how it was run lay in the way government in the province was organized. Between the end of the 1960s and the 1990s several thousand people paid with their lives for that bad history. Lesser, but still great, fiascos occur every day. Government manages the economy, sometimes for better, sometimes for worse. Look around your neighbourhood. Is the way it is laid out – the amount of green space, the safety of the roads, the quality of the buildings – satisfactory? If not, at least some of the blame can be laid at the door of government in its role as the planner of our local environment. Understanding how government is organized, and how it fails or succeeds in particular policies, does not guarantee that we can produce more effective government; but without this knowledge we have no chance at all of improving the quality of our governing institutions.

THREE BIG QUESTIONS ABOUT BRITISH POLITICS

We have been answering questions about the reasons for studying politics, and studying British politics in particular. It is time to turn to more particular questions: those that focus on British politics itself. These anticipate the most important themes that recur throughout the rest of

BRIEFING 1.2

Why we cannot take success in government for granted

▶ Northern Ireland was ruled from the 1920s to the 1960s by sectarian devolved government which systematically discriminated against Catholics and Irish nationalists (whom it mostly treated as the same). Governments of both parties in Westminster turned a blind eye. At the end of the 1960s civil strife resulted. Since then governments of both parties have struggled with the consequences, the most disastrous of which has been the loss of over 3,000 lives.

▶ The Poll Tax was introduced in the 1980s by Mrs Thatcher’s government, and almost as quickly abandoned. It was intended to be a new way of levying taxes by local government. It led to large-scale civil disobedience, did huge damage to local government finance and wasted about £1.5 billion in public money.

▶ In 2007–08 the British banking system came close to complete collapse because regulators, especially the Bank of England and the Financial Services Authority, incompetently regulated the business practices of banks, who made huge, grossly imprudent loan commitments. The complete collapse was avoided; but we all continue to bear the price both in paying for huge financial support for the banks and in the way the failed banking system has damaged the rest of the economy, leading, for instance, to high levels of unemployment.

Government successfully carries out many complex tasks. But when things go wrong, they often go wrong in a spectacular fashion.
Who has power in Britain and under what conditions do they exercise that power?

This is the most fundamental of all questions about British government, and for very obvious reasons. The struggle for power lies at the heart of all political life, and it bears in particular on the most important moral claim made about British government: that it is democratic. As Briefing 1.3 illustrates, there are many meanings that can be attributed to democracy, and many ways of conceiving ‘power’. But at the very minimum the theory that Britain is democratic demands two things: that power be widely distributed, and that those who exercise power should do so in an open way according to clear rules and be held accountable for its exercise. In terms of the theories outlined in Briefing 1.3, power in Britain should at least match the requirements of the ‘pluralist’ model of power distribution.

An equally important claim about British government concerns not the direct question of the distribution of power, but the conditions under which it is exercised: that the system of government is constitutional. What this amounts to is the claim that government is constrained by law and that the liberties of citizens are protected by the independent power of law. It is easy to see that we could all live under such a system of limited, constrained

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**BRIEFING 1.3**

### Theories of democratic government

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How are decisions made?</th>
<th>Class rule</th>
<th>Direct democracy</th>
<th>Elitist democracy</th>
<th>Pluralist democracy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>By direct participation of the poor and propertyless.</td>
<td>By direct participation of all people, either in assemblies or through devices like referenda.</td>
<td>By political and administrative elites; the former elected through competition by parties for the popular vote.</td>
<td>By political and administrative elites, and by numerous competing organized interests and opinion groups.</td>
<td></td>
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| In whose interests? | Those without property. | Decisions reflect the general will of the community, as expressed by choices made after collective deliberation. | Decisions reflect the balance of power between competing elites, modified by the need to compete for the popular vote every four or five years. | Decisions reflect the balance of power between different groups at different times; no one interest dominates and no interest has a monopoly of the different means of exercising power over decision. |

| Influence in Britain. | Almost nil. | Historically nil; some growth in the use of referenda, public opinion polling and a few experiments with mass electronic voting allowing direct popular say in particular decisions. | Was the dominant form of democratic rule in Britain throughout the twentieth century following the creation of near universal adult voting rights after 1918. | Is the commonest ‘official’ approved account of how Britain has been, and continues to be, governed. |

'Democracy' comes in many forms. Before the twentieth century most people thought of democracy as ‘class rule’, and were fearful of it. 'Direct democracy' was long associated with small communities since it was believed that only when numbers were small was real direct participation in decisions possible. ‘Elitist democracy’ was the dominant academic theory of how democracy functioned for most of the second half of the twentieth century. Its intellectual father is the great Austrian social scientist Joseph Schumpeter (1883–1950): his masterpiece, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (1943), offered a vision of democracy as the competitive struggle for the popular vote by elites. ‘Pluralist democracy’ is a close cousin of elitism, but it stresses the importance of popular participation through the web of organized (and unorganized) interests and opinions in society, and sees group organization and participation and voting in elections as complementary.
government even if the system were not democratic: constitutional government and democratic government are not the same. The claim that the British system is constitutional in this sense is intensely debated. The preference for imposing constitutional limitations on government goes alongside a powerful apparatus – through, for instance, Official Secrets legislation – ensuring secrecy in the operation of a large part of the state machine. In institutions like the security services the state has bodies that can seriously infringe the liberties of citizens. In at least one part of the kingdom – Northern Ireland – many of the established mechanisms for ensuring liberty, such as jury trial for some categories of offence, were suspended for a generation on the grounds that this suspension was needed to combat the bigger threat to liberty posed by terrorism. Some claim that in the ‘war against terror’ the British government colluded in the torture of citizens (see Political Issue 1). Britain is also quite special in not having a written constitution that incorporates a bill of rights for citizens – one of the main legal mechanisms used in other democratic countries to try to ensure that citizen liberties are protected. But we will also see that Britain has undergone a constitutional revolution in recent years, and we will want to discover how far this has made the exercise of power more open and accountable.

Can the British state manage competently?

In the middle of the twentieth century this question would hardly have occurred to observers of British government, or indeed to any leading politician or administrator. Britain emerged from the Second World War with prestigious governing institutions, by contrast to the catastrophes suffered by other leading West European states like Germany, France and Italy. And in the few years after the war she built a welfare state whose key institutions, like the National Health Service, were widely admired. But the decades since then have dispelled any complacency about the competence of the system. As we have already seen in this chapter (see Briefing 1.2) there have been some spectacular instances of policy fiascos in recent decades. Moreover, these are only a small sample; the bigger picture of policy failure is examined in Chapter 18. All governments fail at times, but the history of fiasco has led some observers (for instance, Dunleavy 1995; King and Crewe 2013) to argue that the institutions and culture of the British state are, so to speak, programmed for failure. It might be, of course, that British government has long been prone to incompetence – even the heroic efforts in the Second World War were often marked by disasters – but that we are now more sensitive to failure, less deferential in the face of incompetent governing elites, and more likely to criticize this failure. As we shall see in Chapter 7, there has been a considerable increase in the capacity and willingness of parliamentary committees to criticize executive failures. Hardly a week seems to go by without a media appearance by the chair of the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee highlighting some example of a wasteful, failed spending project. Moreover, as confidence in the competence of governing institutions has declined, government itself has become increasingly concerned with the search for greater efficiency and effectiveness. The analysis that the system was traditionally over-centralized was one reason behind the devolution measures which are described in Chapters 8 and 9. Disillusion with the system based on central departments located in London has also, regardless of which parties have been in office, resulted in a dismantling of much of the system that formulated and delivered policy for most of the twentieth century. Privatization, deregulation and the ‘outsourcing’ of many public services to private firms have fundamentally changed the shape of the state. As we shall see, especially in Chapters 19 and 20, the search for greater governing competence has led to the creation of what might be called a ‘contractual state’: that is, to the delivery of an ever wider range of public services by private firms contracted for delivery. The theory behind this great shift is that the state can mobilize the skills of the private sector to achieve its aims, and can use competitive bidding for contracts to impose more efficient forms of delivery. But the contractual state has in turn raised new questions about competence: are the contracts indeed truly awarded by an impartial process that identifies the most competent deliverer; can the search for more economy in delivery really be equated with greater competence in delivery; and can the wide range of often highly complex contracts by which services are now delivered be efficiently monitored by the state to ensure that private contractors are indeed delivering as promised?

Can the British state reverse long-term economic decline?

At the end of the nineteenth century Britain was still the world’s premier economy. Most of the twentieth century, however, was a story of relative economic decline as the country was surpassed by first the United States and then by a range of competitors like Germany and Japan. The dominant issue in economic policy since the Second World War has been whether the state could reverse this history. To some it seemed for a time that the election of a new Conservative government under Margaret Thatcher in 1979 marked a turning of the tide. Mrs Thatcher remained Prime Minister for over 11 years, the longest tenure of any Prime Minister of modern times. The 1980s were the decade of ‘Thatcherism’: unusually, a whole political programme was identified with a leading politician. Thatcherism produced revolutionary changes in Britain. It transformed economic life: it greatly reduced the power of trade unions; it sold off many large publicly owned industries, like gas and telecommunications, and disposed of over a million council house dwellings to sitting tenants; it forced numerous industries
to abandon restrictions on competition. Thatcherism also led to a wider transformation of political life. The Labour Party spent the 1980s trying to work out how to cope with Mrs Thatcher, suffering three successive election defeats at her hands (in 1979, 1983 and 1987). It ended up accepting most of the elements of the Thatcher revolution.

But there was a more fundamental strategic importance in the victory of Thatcherism which went beyond everyday struggles between the parties. Thatcherism involved embracing the full forces of globalization – something that is described more fully in the next chapter. New Labour after 1997 fully accepted the idea that the only successful economy was an economy that competed in a lightly regulated fashion in world markets – especially in world financial markets. And for much of the 1990s and the early years of the new millennium it seemed that this prescription worked: at any rate successive British Prime Ministers and Chancellors of the Exchequer lectured foreigners and Britons alike about the need to embrace freely competitive global markets. The great world financial crisis of 2007–09 brought that era to an end. It was succeeded by a world recession which has been particularly severe in the UK. A complete collapse of the banking system was only narrowly averted in 2008. Since then policy has been dominated by the struggle to manage the economy in this recession. For most people the period has seen an unprecedented drop in living standards. For the economy it has been an age of high unemployment and spectacular bankruptcies. The formulas that seemed to work from the 1990s up to 2007 no longer seem effective. Much rests on the ability of the state to solve the problem of managing the economy in the new great recession. The very future existence of the British state may be at issue, for economic pressures put enormous strain on the Union of the United Kingdom. Recession and decline are not felt evenly throughout the Union. A growing gap is opening between the south-east, and particularly London, and other regions, especially those in the north of England and in Wales and Scotland. As London pulls away in prosperity from the rest of the UK, the critical question for the state then becomes not just whether the global recession can be weathered, but whether the long historical decline of the regions outside London can be reversed.

FRAMING BRITISH POLITICS THEORETICALLY

The issues sketched here are many and complicated, and in our concluding chapter we will see that they intersect with a variety of competing accounts of how British politics has been changing over the last generation. One reason they are complicated is that the way we think about British politics, and the way we investigate it, is a product of a series of usually barely articulated assumptions that we make about the social world. These are sometimes summarized as arising from positions of ontology and epistemology. Ontology refers to a fundamental position which we all hold, but about which we hardly ever think: is there a world ‘out there’ which exists independently of us, or is ‘reality’ fundamentally a construct of our subjective understanding of the world? Epistemology is related to this, but bears much more directly on the kind of evidence we can rely on about the social world, of which course the political world is a part. One position is that we can indeed gather evidence about social/political worlds in much the same way as we can gather evidence about the natural world. An alternative position is that, since we are, as human beings, embedded in social and political worlds, the kind of knowledge we can have is different from the kind of knowledge that can be gathered about a physical world which is not marked by human consciousness. When we study politics, not only are we studying it as political beings, but the political ‘world’ consists of other human beings like ourselves.

These abstractions may seem a long way from the everyday conduct of British politics, but they soon lead to very concrete conclusions – and to very different conclusions. For instance, if ontologically we accept that there is indeed a ‘real’ world out there that exists independently of our perceptions, and if we accept that it is possible to understand that political world in much the same way as a scientist understands nature, then we are very quickly led to the conclusion that we can study British politics ‘scientifically’: that we can offer statements about British political ‘reality’ that can stand independently of our own individual preferences, just as the statements of the chemist or physicist about the physical world can stand independently of the scientific researcher’s individual preferences. But if we ontologically doubt an objectively existing reality, and if we doubt that we can separate our nature as social beings from the way we experience the social world, we are led in a very different direction: to the one made influential by Bevir and Rhodes, in which the point of studying British politics is to explicate competing interpretations of the world of British politics held by the actors in the political system. Hence that alternative direction is usually labelled ‘interpretivism’ (Bevir and Rhodes 2003, 2006, 2010.) In one direction, therefore, we are led, ultimately, to the attempt to construct scientific laws of political behaviour in Britain; in the contrary direction we are led to the exploration of the subjective perceptions of those engaged in politics, and indeed to the intersection between those perceptions and our own.

It may seem alarming to the beginning student to be confronted with these radically different choices, and it would indeed be alarming if the beginner were required to make some initial decision between them. Fortunately, the implications are much less drastic; indeed, the worst thing to do would be to decide to ‘plump’ for or against the notion of,
Why politics matters and why British politics matters

The study of politics: practically useful or practically useless?

THE STUDY OF POLITICS IS OF PRACTICAL IMPORTANCE

- Most of the big sources of human misery are political in origin: wars, revolution, poverty. Curing or alleviating these would immeasurably benefit humanity.
- Governments frequently perpetrate policy disasters and it is important to understand the causes of those disasters.
- British democracy demands informed citizens – and being informed about how government operates is a vital kind of information.
- The study of politics in a university or college provides valuable training for a political career.

THE STUDY OF POLITICS IS PRACTICALLY USELESS

- After more than 2,000 years of studying politics we are still no nearer remedying the political causes of human misery.
- Understanding disasters after they have occurred is like locking the stable door after the horse has bolted.
- Most citizens get by, and get active in politics, without opening a single academic text or attending a single politics lecture.
- None of the greatest British Prime Ministers studied politics at university: Mrs Thatcher studied chemistry; neither David Lloyd George nor Winston Churchill studied at a university.

say, a science of British politics. What we can draw from these discussions is the importance of being conscious from the beginning about what we are doing. It is important, in reading any study of British politics, to ask oneself: what are the ontological and epistemological assumptions that underpin this study? More simply: what is assumed in the study about the nature of political reality and how can knowledge of it be gathered?

The reader might reasonably respond: suppose it is not clear what the assumptions are in any particular study? Indeed, they often will not be clear, or may indicate confusion and contradiction in ontology and epistemology. But this is precisely why we need to learn to interrogate accounts of British politics. Indeed, just about the most striking feature of the study of British politics until recently was the lack of any consciousness about issues of ontology and epistemology. It was a decidedly untheoretical part of the discipline of political studies and had grown out of a highly practical interest in the workings of British government – indeed many of its leading authors had direct experience of government. That practical orientation had its strengths: it kept the author’s feet on the ground, so to speak, by emphasizing the importance of engaging directly with the world of government. But it also meant that the perceptions and preoccupations of the powerful and well placed were often taken at face value. For instance, since the powerful and well placed in Britain are mostly to be found in London, the overwhelming preoccupation of the academic study of British politics has been with the world of central government in London: with what, in this book, is described as the Westminster system. Students of the subject tended to equate British politics with this system – to work, quite unconsciously, with a ‘Westminster model’ of politics to the exclusion of much else. That covered not only the substance of the subjects studied, but also the problems identified: the ‘problems’ of British politics tended to be the problems that preoccupied those who dominated at the metropolitan centre.

We need to be conscious about the ontological and epistemological assumptions that underpin our own study of British politics; and we need to be particularly conscious about how far our understandings are taken unthinkingly from the world view of the powerful. That applies to this book as to everything else. While in the following pages I have tried to escape the dominance of the Westminster model, I can offer no guarantee of success. Thus for the beginning student embarking on this book a very useful exercise is to read the following pages with an attitude of interrogating scepticism about its treatment of the British political world.
Key themes of this chapter

- The importance of politics as an activity for securing for any community the basics of a peaceful and prosperous life.
- The importance of the state as an arena where the most vital political issues are contested.
- The importance of the British system of government, both for anyone interested in government across the rich industrial nations and for anyone who actually lives in Britain.
- The importance of studying British government in the light of hotly contested questions about the nature of power and democracy, the nature of decision making in Britain and the problem of long-term economic decline.
- The importance of reading accounts of British politics in a spirit of interrogation and scepticism.

Further reading

**Essential**

If you read only one book for this chapter it should be Dryzek and Dunleavy (2009) which comprehensively surveys theories of the democratic state and of the nature of politics.

**Recommended**

The classic introduction to the nature of politics is Crick (2000). A standard American work which is particularly strong on the study of power and authority is Dahl and Stinebrickner (2002). Professor Crick chaired a committee on the teaching of citizenship: its report (Crick 1998) is a very good introduction to the study of the subject in a British setting. Harrison (1996) provides a clear, compressed, thematic introduction to British politics covering more than a century. The whole of section 1 of Flinders et al. (2009) surveys the history of the study of British models. A very good introduction to the historically controversial meaning of democracy is Macpherson (1971). Bevir and Rhodes (2010) is advanced but very rewarding. Furlong and Marsh (2010) is the best entry to the often highly abstract debates about ontology and epistemology. One of the best ways to keep up to date with the academic study of British politics is to follow the quarterly issues of the leading journal on the subject, *British Politics*, published by Palgrave.
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