

GV311 - Introduction

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British government – Term 1

To provide an embedded understanding of key aspects of:

- Principles underpinning British government and politics
- Political parties, elections and representation
- The origins and operation of institutions
- Modern historical developments
- The policy-making process
- Public finance (taxation and spending)
- Criticisms and proposals for reform

Major themes – Term 2

Party politics

The decline of mass party memberships
Britain's move to a multi-party system

The role of the media

Traditional vs 'new' media
Ownership, Regulation

Accountability and financial responsibility

Parliament's role in scrutinising the Executive
Possible reforms and improvements

British government's relations with Europe

'Can't live with, can't live without' relationship
Federalism vs the threat of withdrawal

This week: introduce some key themes

The British 'Constitution'

Parliament and the Executive

The Civil Service

The Welfare State

Local government and centralisation

Devolution

Britain and Europe

The Constitution

Has Britain's long-evolved system of government and politics, with no written constitution, left it with a system that is not fit for purpose?

The 'unwritten' constitution

Ad hoc and precedent-based progress

Head of State/Monarchy?

Reform of the second chamber/House of Lords?

No formal 'separation of powers' between the legislature and the executive

From: The British Constitution A Very Short Guide, Loughlin, 2014

“It might be the case that the British way of muddling through is best suited to the challenges ahead. This, though, will never satisfy constitutional modernizers. If Britain is a democracy in which power is exercised in the name of the people, can the crown still offer an adequate symbol of state? This is precisely the question which is now to be tested in a referendum on independence for Scotland scheduled for autumn 2014...The Treaty of Lisbon of 2009, it might be noted, requires the EU to respect the ‘constitutional identity’ of its member states. But do the British still possess the confidence to specify that identity”
[p86]

Discuss...

Should Britain move to a written constitution and make its remaining unelected State offices fully democratic and, more importantly, creating a 'constitutional identity' for the country?

Parliament and the Executive

As government has become a bigger and more complex activity and prime ministers have become more 'presidential', Parliament has, arguably, become less important

The media concentrate on Cameron, Miliband and Clegg (and Salmond and Johnson)

MPs have had to spend more and more time with constituents' problems

centralisation of power, decline of local government

However, more recently, Select Committees (and their chairs) have been able to provide Parliament with 'teeth'

From: Selective Influence The Policy Impact of House of Commons Select Committees, Russell and Benton, 2011

“Recent years have been characterised by scepticism – sometimes verging on cynicism – about the effectiveness of the British House of Commons. Particularly during the time of large government majorities following the 1997 and 2001 elections, MPs came to be characterised as ‘poodles’, and doubt was expressed about the extent to which the Commons could have a genuine impact on government policy. This was reinforced by the fact that during the entire period of Tony Blair’s premiership, the government was defeated only four times in the House of Commons”. [However...]

”select committees are taken increasingly seriously by government, and have become an established and respected part of the system”.

Discuss....

Should Parliament be given greater powers to act as a 'check' on the executive, eg, by increased support for the Opposition, Committees and individual MPs?

The Civil Service

Britain has developed a large, politically independent civil service to run the business of government. 'Generalised' competence has been prized over professional skills

Cabinet ministers have increasingly appointed 'special advisors'

Some ministers would like to move towards having senior officials who were appointed by the government of the day

The civil service can be seen as lacking in management, financial and other expertise

From: Accountability and responsiveness in the senior civil service, IPPR, 2013

“The report makes six recommendations for reform:

Giving the prime minister the power to appoint permanent secretaries without politicising the civil service

Providing secretaries of state and ministers who run their own departments with an extended office of ministerial staff that they personally appoint and who work directly on their behalf in the department

Strengthening the role of the head of the civil service to hold permanent secretaries to account

Introducing fixed-term, four-year contracts for new permanent secretaries

Strengthening the external accountability of senior civil servants in key operational roles

Enabling the civil service to better support opposition parties by allowing officials to be seconded into opposition parties to help them with policy development”

Discuss...

Has the time come to move to a politically-appointed civil service of people with professional expertise?

The Welfare State

Britain has developed a large 'Welfare State' (NHS, education, welfare etc) in the years since 1945 which now appears to face a number of challenges, eg:

The public will not pay taxes sufficient to fund the full Welfare State

Consumerism has created impossible demands

Some households, it is argued, have become 'dependent'

?

From: Understanding the Finance of Welfare, Glennerster, 2003

“Users of public services seem increasingly dissatisfied, despite the fact that the quality of services has improved since 1950. The level of consumer expectations seems to be rising faster. Discontent may be put down to a malevolent press or professions who continuously talk of ‘crisis’ as a way of gaining more resources from the Chancellor. The NHS has been in ‘crisis’ ever since it was created. However, there is a more structural explanation for this continuing dilemma. Claus Offe, a German Marxist sociologist, comes closest to capturing it, although there is an equivalent New Right explanation. In a pure market economy the price mechanism manages individuals’ expectations. They may desire a Mercedes or a holiday in the Bahamas but they know their capacity to afford such luxuries is determined by their own worth in the labour market. They do not blame the government. In health and education, where no price is charged, expectations are not managed downwards by the market. Supply and demand have to be managed by the political process. [We need to consider] the way in which scarce resources are managed and allocated in a non-market system. The dilemmas should not blind us to the fact that all scarce resources have to be rationed”

Discussion...

How could the government change the Welfare State in order to ensure it was sustainable (ie to ration resources) and also so that it did not generate unintended consequences?

Local government and centralisation

Britain is a 'unitary', not federal, state with no written constitution. It has a highly centralised form of taxation and political control, particularly in England

95% of taxation is determined by the Chancellor

England has seen no devolution

New forms of local 'governance' have emerged

From: *Local Democracy and Local Government*, Pratchett & Wilson, 1996

“...A vital element of the constitutional mix – the local element – has withered and is in danger of disappearing altogether. The centralisation of many services, the circumvention of local government and the diminution of local politics have all compounded to foster a democracy that increasingly ignores and belittles all things local and which gives excessive emphasis to national politics. The persistently low turn-out at local elections and the tendency for them to be used as indicators of national party preferences are symptomatic of this trend. The practice and habits of democracy at local level, which remains the foundation of our national democratic culture, are in retreat”. [Simon Jenkins in ‘Foreword’]

Discussion...

Does the centralisation of power in England weaken local government in ways which, in turn, undermine local politics and thus the basis for national political parties?

Devolution

Scotland and Wales have been given their own Parliament and government

Virtually all domestic policy is handled by Edinburgh and Cardiff

Major taxation powers are being handed over to Scotland

Referendum on possible independence will take place in September 2014

From: SNP website, 2013 and *Scotland Analysis* *Devolution and the implications of Scottish* *independence*, UK Government, 2013

“Independence is about making Scotland more successful. At its most basic, it is the ability to take our own decisions, in the same way as other countries do. Scotland is a society and a nation. No one cares more about Scotland's success than the people who live here and that, ultimately, is why independence is the best choice for our future. With independence we can work together to make Scotland a more ambitious and dynamic country...And instead of many young people having to leave Scotland to fulfill their ambitions, they would be able to stay and take advantage of the increased opportunities here. (SNP, 2013)

“The UK Government, along with many others, believes that both Scotland and the UK are better served by maintaining their partnership. A strong Scotland is good for the whole of the UK, and a strong UK is good for Scotland. For three centuries the economic and social dynamism of Scotland has flourished as part of the UK family of nations within a single state. Scotland has played a significant role in the historical success of the UK, to the benefit of people in Scotland and the rest of the UK” (UK Government, 2013)

Discuss...

Would it be good or bad for Scotland – and in which ways – if the Scots vote for independence next year?

And would it be good or bad for England?

Issues and challenges – Britain and Europe

Britain's relationship with the EU and other European institutions is a complex and often difficult one

1975 Referendum did not stop debate

Euroscepticism drives a number of Conservative and UKIP politicians (and some Labour ones)

The British media are often highly critical of the EU and other European institutions

Public opinion appears to be split on whether the UK should stay in the EU

Some parties are committed to holding an 'in-out' referendum after the next UK general election

From: David Cameron, speaking at Bloomberg, 23 January 2013

“[We face] A real choice between leaving or being part of a new settlement in which Britain shapes and respects the rules of the single market but is protected by fair safeguards, and free of the spurious regulation which damages Europe’s competitiveness. A choice between leaving or being part of a new settlement in which Britain is at the forefront of collective action on issues like foreign policy and trade and where we leave the door firmly open to new members. A new settlement subject to the democratic legitimacy and accountability of national parliaments where Member States combine in flexible cooperation, respecting national differences not always trying to eliminate them and in which we have proved that some powers can in fact be returned to Member States. In other words, a settlement which would be entirely in keeping with the mission for an updated European Union I have described today. More flexible, more adaptable, more open - fit for the challenges of the modern age. And to those who say a new settlement can’t be negotiated, I would say listen to the views of other parties in other European countries arguing for powers to flow back to European states...”

Discuss...

What are the issues and history that lie beneath Britain's strained relationship with the EU and might renegotiation and an in-out referendum finally sort things out ?

Adopt an issue...

The British 'Constitution'

Role of the Monarch

House of Lords

House of Commons

Legislation, the legislative process

Select Committees

Conservative Party

Labour Party

Liberal Democrat Party

Manifestos

Lobbyists

Elections, turnout, voting

Opinion Polls and pollsters

Civil Service

No 10 Downing Street

HM Treasury

Scotland, Wales, devolution

Northern Ireland

London, mayors

Local Government

Think-Tanks

Next week

- Philosophical influences and the history of ideas (Prof Paul Kelly)
- An introduction to the philosophy and ideas that have underpinned British politics, government and constitutional development
- Recent and contemporary influences on today's political leaders

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