

# ***THE INSTITUTE OF ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL STUDIES***

## **SUPERVISION: CONTEMPORARY BRITAIN**

**Fall 2015**

**Professor James Mayall**  
University of Cambridge

Since 1997 British society has undergone a major transition, the long term consequences of which are still unclear. The victory of the Labour Party in the general election of May 1997 ended an eighteen year period of Conservative rule which had dramatically changed the political landscape. In the final Conservative parliament (1992-97) a long series of economic and political crises eroded the government's popularity, leading eventually to the party being buried under Labour's landslide victory. Four years later Labour won an unprecedented second term, with only a slightly reduced majority. In 2005 it won a third term, again unprecedented, but this time with its majority slashed to just over eighty. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the financial crisis of 2008 and the MP's expenses scandal (even though it affected all parties) continued to undermine the government's standing with the public.

In May 2010 the Labour government was defeated, but no party gained an overall majority. After a period of intense speculation and negotiation the Conservative Party, which had the most seats, formed a government in coalition with the Liberal Democrats. In May 2015, against all expectations the Conservative Party won a narrow overall majority. The other major surprise was that the Scottish National Party, which had lost a referendum on Scottish independence in September 2014, won a huge majority in Scotland, virtually eliminating all its rivals. It is early days in the new parliament but British politics look set to be dominated by three issues for the foreseeable future: (a) the credibility of the government's economic strategy; (b) the country's relationship with the EU, which many in the Conservative Party want to see terminated; and (c) the consequences of the Scottish victory north of the border.

This course this semester will start by examining how Britain is governed, both formally and informally, and then go on to discuss the key relationships: Britain and its constituent parts (England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland); Britain and Europe; Britain and the United States; and Britain and the wider world. So far as is possible, in order to encourage participation, discussions will be organized in a way which will compare government and society in Britain and the United States.

As this is a supervision, there will be no formal lectures. I will start each supervision with a short introduction of the broad topic after which students will give short presentations (no more than 30 minutes) on topics chosen from the list below. A discussion will then follow in which students are required to contribute actively. In addition, students will submit a mid-term and a final paper, each of not less than 2,500 words, and a short book report on Tony Judt's book *Ill Fares the Land*, copies of which are held in the INSTEP library. The papers can either be developed from one of your presentations or on a relevant topic to be agreed in advance.

## Topics

1. Introduction – looking at Britain from the United States.

### Part I: An overview of the British political system

2. The British Political System. *Discussion question: What are the arguments for and against combining the executive and legislature in the British system and the division of powers in the American?*

3. British political culture: ideology and pragmatism. *Discussion question: What are the main similarities and differences between British and American political culture.*

4 The political agenda in Britain and the United States. *Discussion question: What determines political priorities in Britain and the United States? Are there important differences?*

5 Two Party systems and coalition government in the UK and the US. *Discussion questions: Is there a crisis of democracy in both countries. If so what is its nature and does it have similar or different causes and consequences for British and American society?*

### Part II issues and relationships

6. The Crisis of the Welfare State. *Discussion question: Why is the British Welfare state said to be in crisis and why is health ref orm such a political minefield in the United States*

7. Multiculturalism, immigration and security in Britain and the US. *Discussion question: Both the UK and the US claim to be multicultural nations. Is this claim credible and what are its political and social implications?*

8. The state of the Union. *Discussion questions: What are the implications of the Scottish referendum for the rest of the UK and Northern Ireland? And what are the prospects for Irish unification?*

9. Britain and the United States: a Special Relationship? *Discussion question: Is it real or imagined?*

10. Britain and Europe: deepening or widening? *Discussion question: Is a United States of Europe inevitable and/or desirable, and should Britain be part of it?*

11. Britain and the wider world: post-imperial relations. *Discussion question: Does the decline and fall of the British Empire have any lessons for the United States?*

## Readings

Amongst the books that you will find most useful are:

Peter Hennessy - *The Hidden Wiring: unearthing the British constitution* (1996)

Peter Hennessy - *Secret State: Preparing for the Worst* (2010)

Peter Hennessy, *Distilling the Frenzy, Writing the History of One's Own Times* (2012)

Andrew Marr - *A History of Modern Britain* (2007)  
Patrick Dunleavy et al. - *Developments in British Politics 7* (2003)  
Anthony Sampson - *Who Runs This Place?* (2004)  
Tony Judt – *Ill Fares the Land: a treatise on our present discontents.* (2010)  
Nicholas Abercrombie and Alan Warde – *Contemporary British Society* (3rd ed., 2000)  
Bill Jones and Philip Norton – *Politics UK* (7th ed., 2010)

Further recommended texts in the INSTEP library are Peter Clarke's *Hope and Glory: Britain 1900-1990* (1996) and Hugo Young's *This Blessed Plot: Britain and Europe from Churchill to Blair* (1998).

### **Term papers**

Book report due on Monday 19 October  
The mid-term paper is due on Monday 2 November  
The final paper is due on Thursday 10 December