

THE INSTITUTE OF ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL STUDIES

London

CONTEMPORARY BRITAIN

British society is undergoing a major transition. 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. The turnout, however, was very low and there has been much debate since the election about the health of British democracy and the possibility that it is being undermined by mass apathy. During its first term, the Blair government embarked on a major programme of constitutional reform, including devolution in Scotland and Wales and the abolition of hereditary rights in the House of Lords.

The main focus of attention during the government's second term was intended to be the provision of public services, particularly transport, education and health. The government continues to be vulnerable on these issues and the opposition will try to exploit them in the run up to the next general election, probably sometime next year. Since the last election, however, much of the government's energy has been devoted to foreign policy, in particular relations with the United States following the events of September 11 2001 and with the rest of the European Union in the wake of the introduction of a common currency, the Euro and the debate over a European constitution. Prime Minister Blair's decision to join the US in the invasion of Iraq proved hugely controversial in his own party as well as with the general public. It remains to be seen what the final political price will be.

This course 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; Britain and the wider world. So far as possible, in order to encourage participation, class discussions will be organised in a way which will compare government and society in Britain and the United States.

Topics

- 1 Introduction -- looking at Britain from the United States
- 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 Parliament and Parties I: the political agenda
Discussion question: What determines political priorities in Britain and the United States? Are there important differences?
- 4 Parliament and Parties II: ideology and pragmatism
Discussion question: What role do ideas play in politics?
- 5 The Thatcher Revolution and the Blair government: continuities and contrasts

Discussion question: How accurate is the picture of the Republican Party as the US equivalent of the Conservative Party and of the Democratic Party as the equivalent of the British Labour Party?

6 The Crisis of the Welfare State

Discussion question: Are there any public goods that should not be privatised?

7 Homeland security: the domestic fallout from 9.11 in Britain and US compared

Discussion question: Is the erosion of civil liberties an acceptable price for security?

8 Britain and Ireland: will the break-up stop there?

Discussion question: Should Ireland be united?

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?

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

Detailed readings for each week will be given out during the previous week's meetings. Most will be taken from Peter Hennessy's *The Hidden Wiring: unearthing the British constitution* (1996) and Patrick Dunleavy et al. *Developments in British Politics 5* (1997), but Anthony Sampson's *Who Runs This Place?* (2004) is also a key text.

Everyone will be encouraged to take part in class discussions, and to get things going there will be a short written exercise at the beginning of each class. Two other very useful books are Peter Clarke's *Hope and Glory: Britain 1900-1990* (1996) and *This Blessed Plot: Britain and Europe from Churchill to Blair* (1998) by Hugo Young. Copies of all these titles are available in the INSTEP library.

Methods of Assessment

Seminar discussion

Two essays of at least 2500 words

The first to be submitted at the end of week 5

The second at the end of week 12

Note: If enrolment for this particular course is too low for it to be held as a two hour seminar with two required essays per semester it may be possible to run it as a one hour supervision with three essays per semester.