

United Kingdom

The United Kingdom of Great Britain is one of the largest members of the European Union, with a population of approximately 62 million people. It is made up of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, which has a land border with the Republic of Ireland. The national languages are English and Welsh. Britain also has several Crown dependencies and overseas territories, including Gibraltar and the Falkland Islands. Britain is the world's sixth largest economy and has a permanent seat on the United Nations' Security Council.

Recent History

In recent decades, British politics has undergone repeated transformations. The election of a centre-right Conservative Government led by Margaret Thatcher in 1979 started a process of reform marked by the *privatisation* of many state industries and the rapid decline of the trade union movement. In 1990, Thatcher was replaced as Prime Minister by John Major who continued the same broad programme.

After 18 years of Conservative power, a centre-left Labour government, led by Tony Blair, was elected in 1997. Labour came to power pledging reform of public services and closer relations with the European Union. Labour won re-election in 2001 and again in 2005. Gordon Brown succeeded Tony Blair as Prime Minister in June 2007. Following 13 years of Labour government, an indecisive General Election in May 2010 resulted in a coalition government between the Conservative and Liberal Democrat Parties, led by Conservative Party Leader David Cameron. It is the first coalition government to lead the UK since 1945. In recent years, issues of particular importance have included reform of the National Health Service (NHS) and education system, the war in Iraq, and the question of 'Britishness'.

Government Structure

Britain is a parliamentary constitutional monarchy. The Head of State is the Monarch, currently Queen Elizabeth II, however her political powers are largely symbolic. She appoints the leader of the largest party in Parliament as Prime Minister and meets with him or her on a regular basis. Although she has the power to refuse assent to an Act of Parliament, this power is unlikely to be used. Most executive power rests with the Prime Minister, the Cabinet and the other ministers who make up the Government. The Government is answerable to Parliament. The British Parliament has two chambers – the House of Commons and the House of Lords. The first is directly elected while the second is appointed.

Britain also has several different forms of regional and local government. Since 1999 there has been a separate *devolved* Parliament in Scotland and National Assemblies in Wales and Northern Ireland. In England, there are no regional assemblies, except in London, and local government is divided between County Councils and District or Borough Councils. British voters also elect 72 MEPs.

The United Kingdom and the EU

The United Kingdom joined the European Community in 1973, following two unsuccessful applications for membership. Since joining, the UK has often had a strained relationship with the rest of the EU, particularly under Prime Ministers Margaret Thatcher and John Major. Having joined the European Community in 1973 under Conservative Prime Minister Edward Heath, the question was put to a referendum in 1975 by the incoming Labour government. The British people voted to stay in the European Community. However, when Margaret Thatcher and the Conservative Party returned to power in 1979, they took a more sceptical attitude toward UK membership. This reached a showdown in 1985, when the Prime Minister demanded the repayment of part of the UK's budget contribution. Having won this battle, the British government played a more constructive role in developing the European project.

It was the British Commissioner, Lord Cockfield, who pushed forward the reforming Single European Act (1986). In 1992, Europe erupted as a pressing political issue when Britain was forced to leave the Exchange Rate Mechanism (ERM). A fierce debate also raged about the Maastricht Treaty (1992). The divisions over Europe were so powerful that they nearly caused the collapse of the Conservative Government.

When Tony Blair came to power in 1997, he proposed a friendlier attitude toward the EU. Although Britain showed more willingness to accept EU legislation, the decision was soon taken that the UK would not adopt the Euro as its currency at the same time as other member states. The government promised that a referendum would be held on the issue. However there was controversy in 2008 when the government refused to hold a referendum on the Lisbon Treaty, which was due to come into force in 2009. Despite criticism that the Lisbon Treaty is identical to the failed EU Constitution, (which the government did promise a referendum on) a referendum was denied and the British Parliament ratified the Treaty in July 2008.

The European Union Bill which is expected to be passed through Parliament in 2011 promises referenda on any future EU Treaty change.

Facts and Figures

- Britain is a world leader in services, such as banking and insurance, which account for 72% of GDP.
- Britain is a highly popular tourist destination, attracting 30 million visitors every year.

Technical Terms

Privatisation: the transfer of companies from state ownership to private control.

Devolution: the transfer of decision-making power from national to regional government.

Links

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