

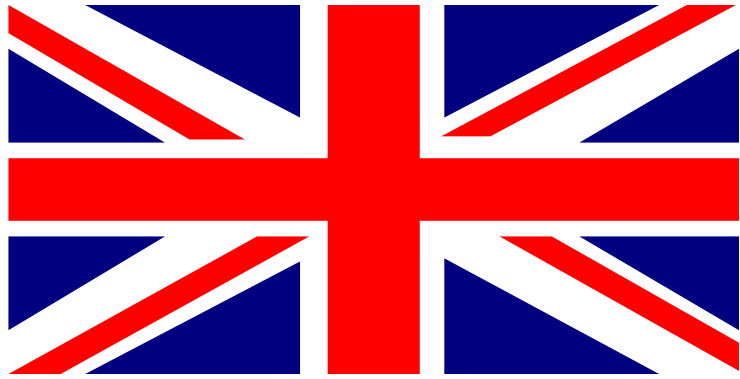


The United Kingdom



Introduction

The United Kingdom was once able to claim the title of being the most powerful nation on earth. The phrase “the sun never sets on the British Empire” was once often repeated, but is no longer true. The United Kingdom has been stripped of many of her colonies, the source of her wealth. Yet the U.K. remains today one of the key players on the international stage and is a relatively powerful force, both economically, and politically.



The Union Jack, official flag of the UK

The Name

The United Kingdom is officially the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. It is also often referred to as England, Great Britain, or Britain. Even those living in the U.K often confuse these names. England is the southern part of the principal island in the British Isles and is only one country in the kingdom. Great Britain includes England, Wales, and Scotland. The United Kingdom is used to refer to England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland. Britain is often used as a short reference to refer to the United Kingdom as a whole.

Unification

England and Wales were historically separate regions, but were unified as early as the 16th century by acts of union in 1536 and 1542. Scotland did not partake in the unified parliament until 1707. However, the countries had previously shared a monarch. Even though Scotland had shared a monarch with England and Wales for a period of time, the Scottish highlanders maintained their own language, Gaelic, and were distrusted as barbarians by the rest of the Kingdom. Gaelic today is almost a dead language. Only about 2 percent of the Scottish people are able to speak it and it is no longer a national language. Welsh has fared a little better with about one fifth the total population of Wales able to speak it. But it too is diminishing in appeal and number of speakers.

In this sense the United Kingdom has become increasingly homogenous. But each of the ethnic groups, while often indistinguishable to outsiders, maintains their own culture, beliefs, opinions, and identity. There is still a strong pride in being Scottish, Welsh, English, or Irish. Probably the best example of this is Ireland, which is in constant conflict. While a recent peace agreement between the British Government and the Irish Republican Army (IRA) separatist group has decreased the amount of bloodshed, some IRA splinter groups continue the violence. In the absence of a declared war against the enemy, both the IRA and the Protestants have taken to infighting, fighting their own in a quest for power and neighborhood control.

Governmental System

The United Kingdom has a parliamentary system composed of two houses. The upper house is the House of Lords and the lower house is the House of Commons, in which the majority of power resides. The House of Commons elects a Prime Minister from among its ranks who acts as the head of government (the monarch now holds mostly a ceremonial position. Members of the

House of Lords are called Peers. There are hereditary peers who pass their titles (and the right to sit in the House of Lords) on to their children and life peers who only hold the title for their lifetime, but may not pass it on. Members of the House of Commons, commonly referred to as MPs (members of parliament), are elected directly by the people and serve five-year terms.

The Monarchy in the Government

Officially, the Queen is the head of state. However, she no longer has much real political power and instead functions in much more of a ceremonial role. The change from a government with a monarch holds the majority of power and that of a Prime Minister in charge was a rather slow one instead of a dramatic overthrow. Gradually Parliament was able to force more and more concessions out of the monarch until finally it was the Prime Minister who held the true strings of power. The current monarch is Queen Elizabeth II. As chief of state she has visited other countries in shows of goodwill, but does not conduct negotiations for treaties and such.



Parliament

Since the Prime Minister must hold a majority in parliament in order to be elected, most measures proposed by the Prime Minister make their way through parliament. However, if the majority party loses an important vote, it is considered a sign of no confidence in the current government (the British use “government” in the same way Americans use “administration”). Parliament is dissolved and new elections are called. The Prime Minister may also dissolve parliament and call for new elections at any time. This is often done when public opinion has shifted heavily in favor of the governing party so that new elections would result in an even larger majority in the House of Commons.

One of many Royal Crowns

The House of Lords

The House of Lords was once a powerful body in parliament. It used to have a very strong say in the deciding of policy and legislation. The relationship between the House of Lords and the House of Commons used to be much like the relationship between the House of Representatives and the Senate in the United States. But as the monarchy has been pushed to the sidelines and had most of its policy making power shifted away, so has the House of Lords, largely for the same reason as the monarchy: it is a hereditary title that is simply passed on rather than being selected by the people. The House of Lords is currently being reorganized, although the new format has not been finalized. One thing is that many of the peers will lose their positions. Peers who before had never had to run for anything were forced to write out why the other members of the House of Lords should select them to one of the few who keep their current position. Whatever happens, it

will be yet another step away from tradition of royalty that used to be Britain itself.

Ancient History

Recorded British history begins with the Romans. While before that historians are able to draw some conclusions regarding Britain, they are mostly from archeological evidence left by those living there at the time. The Romans invaded Britain around 55 BC under the command of Julius Caesar. Britain at the time was far from unified, and the Romans played into this fighting. The Romans allied themselves with the Atrebatian kings and assisted them in resisting the Catuvellaunian expansion. The Romans created a wall called Hadrian's Wall along the frontier of their expansion into Britain. The Roman Caesars were content to maintain their frontier and showed little interest in conquering the entire island and subduing the tribes.



Despite the fact that they are no longer under its rule, the United Kingdom still maintains contact with many of its former territories. Here, a member of the Royal Canadian Regiment does guard duty at Buckingham Palace.

Roman influence in Britain came to a gradual end. The island became almost completely separate around AD 410 when the emperor Honorius authorized cities to provide for their own defense against Pictish and Saxon raids instead of sending Roman troops. Eventually power began to fall into the hands of dictators.

Eventually the spread of Christianity to Britain led to the establishment of a monarchy, who ruled by divine right. In general this was not too much of a problem and was not contested because one of the monarchy's duties to God was to govern well and wisely.

Parliament at first was just another one of the advisory bodies for the monarch. Other bodies included the King's court, various ministers, the dukes and other such persons. However, Parliament began to take on a life of its own. In the beginning Parliament's role was loosely defined. But its increased power began in the 17th century with the passage of a bill that made it mandatory for Parliament to meet once every three years. Parliament showed itself as the primary power in the kingdom when it went to war with the sovereign, Charles I, and won. The king was forced to accept the terms that Parliament had set.

After that there were various monarchs and parliamentary leaders, but leaders began to increase in power. The king could no longer appoint a Lord Chancellor that parliament did not like. There were various calls for reform to allow all males to vote (initially only males holding a certain amount of property were allowed to vote). These initiatives were slowly accepted as there were less and less requirements to vote and hold office. Parliamentary districts were equalized to give equal representation. Before some districts had contained as few as a dozen eligible voters and other over 50,000. Slowly power began to shift from the King to the Prime Minister, who was the head of parliament.

Political History

The United Kingdom today has two political parties — the Conservative Party and the Labour party. Britain after World War II had many socialist elements. Many industries were nationalized, meaning that the government had to negotiate with labor unions to prevent the country from shutting down. This became a problem when unions demonstrated their willingness to embarrass both the conservatives and their traditional allies, the liberals (factories would run one day a week and the civilian population was reading by candlelight). In the 1980s the Conservative Party came power under Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. Thatcher (whose ascension to power coincided with a similar conservative rise in the United States with Ronald Reagan) set out with the goal of ending socialism in Britain. She began by pushing through a series of measures that denationalized every industry that Labour had nationalized in the last 40 years and some that had been under government control for more than a century, such as telecommunications. Her most important accomplishment was winning the power struggle with trade unions. Instead of trying to put it all in one bill as earlier Prime Ministers had done, she put each measure in an individual bill and rapidly pushed them through parliament in succession. Thatcher won an unprecedented three general elections and became the longest serving Prime Minister. Thatcher was forced to resign when she alienated even fellow conservatives and was on the verge of receiving a no confidence vote. Conservative Party popularity waned, but they still managed to stay in power for the next five years. In May 1997 the Labour Party won a landslide victory and Anthony Blair become Prime Minister.



Prime Minister Tony Blair

Modern Politics

Britain is also having an election around the same time as the United States. Since Britain has a parliamentary system the party that receives the majority in the House of Commons will get to pick who becomes the next Prime Minister. The two candidates for PM are Tony Blair from the Labour Party and William Hague from the Conservative Party. The Labour Party is the one responsible for the reorganization of the House of Lords (the House of Lords is in general more conservative than the House of Commons). One of the biggest reasons for public discontent with the Labour Party is Mr. Blair's haughty way of dealing with the fuel crisis. The United Kingdom currently has fuel prices that average above \$4.25 a gallon; over 70% of that price is tax imposed by the government. Recently there was a strike by small businessmen and truckers across the nation that shut down fuel distribution. Eventually, the strikers decided to allow fuel distribution to start again, but ended their strike with strong public support and discontent over the failure of the Labour government to do something about the problem.



William Hague

Fact Sheet

Population: 59.5 million

Population Growth Rate: 0.25%

Ethnic Groups: English 81.5%, Scottish 9.6%, Irish 2.4%, Welsh 1.9%, Ulster 1.8%, West Indian, Indian, Pakistani, and other, 2.8%

National holiday: Celebration of the Birthday of the Queen (second Saturday in June)

Constitution: unwritten; partly statutes, partly common law and practice

Legal System: common law tradition with early Roman and modern continental influences; no judicial review of Acts of Parliament; British courts and legislation are increasingly subject to review by European Union courts.

Suffrage: 18 years of age; universal

GDP: \$1.29 trillion

GDP growth rate: 1.9%

GDP per capita: \$21,800

GDP composition by sector:

agriculture: 1.7%

industry: 25.3%

services: 73%

Population below poverty line: 17%

Inflation rate: 2.3% (1999)

Labor force: 29.2 million

Labor force by occupation: services 68.9%, manufacturing and construction 17.5%, government 11.3%, energy 1.2%, agriculture 1.1%

Unemployment rate: 6%

Budget:

revenues: \$541 billion

expenditures: \$507.5 billion, including capital expenditures of \$35.1 billion

Exports: \$271 billion

Imports: \$305.9 billion

Exchange rate: \$1 equals £0.6092 (January 2000)

Televisions: 30.5 million

Military branches: Army, Royal Navy (includes Royal Marines), Royal Air Force

Military manpower — fit for military service:

males age 15-49: 12.1 million

Military expenditures — dollar figure: \$36.884 billion

Military expenditures — percent of GDP: 2.7%

Bibliography

The CIA World Factbook. www.cia.gov

“The United Kingdom.” Encyclopedia Britannica. www.britannica.com

I have also gathered some of this information by following the news through daily reading of the NY Times. Unfortunately, at the time I read the articles I was not aware that I would be doing a project on this topic and threw them away after reading. So while I am able to cite “The New York Times” as a source, I cannot cite article titles, author names, or dates.

The Labour Party web site. www.labour.org.uk

The Conservative Party web site. www.conservative-party.org.uk