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2nd Edition

by Julian Knight

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Table of Contents

Introduction

[About This Book](#)

[Foolish Assumptions](#)

[Icons Used in This Book](#)

[Beyond the book](#)

[Where to Go from Here](#)

Part I: Getting Started with British Politics

Chapter 1: Taking in the Political Universe

[Understanding the Difference between Local and National Politics](#)

[Splitting the Difference: The Devolved Parliament and Assemblies](#)

[Evolving to Democracy: A Very British Story](#)

[Assessing the Health of British Democracy](#)

[Paying Homage to the 'Mother of Parliaments'](#)

[Introducing the Players in the British Political System](#)

[Gazing at the political summit: The central role of the prime minister](#)

[Declining importance of the MP](#)

[Checking the power of the politicians: The judiciary](#)

[Mixing in the monarch](#)

[Coming under Greater Scrutiny: Politics in the Media](#)

[Britain: Making Its Way in the European Union](#)

[Looking Further Afield: The UK and the Wider World](#)

Chapter 2: Understanding Why Politics and Politicians are Important

[Looking at Different Types of Authority](#)

[Deciphering the Ultimate Purpose of Politics](#)

[Gauging the Role of Politicians](#)

[Making the law](#)

[Changing the constitution and the way government works](#)

[Ensuring a more stable state](#)

[Galvanising the country in times of crisis](#)

[Listening to constituents](#)

[Working for the good of the country](#)

[Tackling the Big Issues: Current Challenges Facing Politicians](#)

[Keeping up living standards - it's the economy, stupid!](#)

[Saving the planet](#)

[Bringing an end to world poverty](#)

[Fighting terrorism](#)

[Reckoning with the decline of Western dominance](#)

[Becoming Active in Politics](#)

[Playing your part](#)

[Taking up the paint brush: Political social action](#)

[Chapter 3: Looking at Participatory Democracy](#)

[Understanding What Qualifies as a Democracy](#)

[Starting with Athenian direct democracy](#)

[Getting into representative democracy](#)

[Homing in on British Democracy](#)

[Putting the monarchy in its place](#)

[Expanding the franchise](#)

[Throwing digital democracy into the mix](#)

[Understanding the Rights that Come with British Citizenship](#)

[Evaluating the Pros and Cons of UK Democracy](#)

[Looking at the strengths](#)

[Recognising the weaknesses](#)

[Being a Citizen](#)

[Getting involved](#)

[Gauging voter apathy](#)

[Chapter 4: Examining Political Ideologies](#)

[Understanding What an Ideology Is](#)

[Moderating ideologies: The British way](#)

[Liberalising the world: The march of the Western democratic model](#)

[Focusing on Freedom with Liberalism](#)

[Joining Together for the Greater Good: Socialism in the UK](#)

[Focusing on the successes of socialism](#)

[Rebranding socialism: New Labour](#)

[Stirring things up: Revolutionary socialism](#)

[Looking far left: Marxism and communism](#)

[Keeping with Tradition: Conservatism](#)

[Uniting under one nation conservatism](#)

[Reforming with a small 'r'](#)

[Changing conservatism: The Thatcher revolution](#)

[Modernising the Conservatives](#)

[Examining Alternative Politics](#)

[Focusing on the far right: Fascism](#)

[Looking into the darkness: Totalitarian regimes](#)

[Looking to the heavens: Theocracy](#)

[Pulling everything apart: Anarchism](#)

[Releasing the bonds: Feminism](#)

[Saving the planet: Environmentalism](#)

[Understanding Why the UK Doesn't Do Extremism](#)

[Chapter 5: Forming the British Political State](#)

[Getting to Grips with the Normans: From Conquest to Magna Carta](#)

[Doing the Splits: Church and State Clash](#)

[Gearing Up for Revolution: Parliament Takes on the King and Wins](#)

[Working hand in hand](#)

[Chafing under Charles I and enduring Cromwell](#)

[Reaping the benefits of the Glorious Revolution](#)

[Throwing Political Parties into the Mix](#)

[Ending the Power of the Lords](#)

[Expanding the Franchise: Democracy Arrives in Britain](#)

[Earning a stake](#)

[Recognising the rights of women](#)

[Switching Parties: The Ebb and Flow of Party Influence](#)

[Making a play for power: The Labour Party is born and thrives](#)

[Playing musical chairs: Labour and the Tories swap power](#)

[Leaving out the Lib Dems](#)

[Concentrating Power in the Hands of the Prime Minister](#)

[Breaking Up the Union: Scotland and Wales to Go It Alone?](#)

[Encroaching on Britain's Turf: The European Union](#)

[Part II: Elections and Britain's Parties](#)

[Chapter 6: Counting the Votes: Differing Electoral Systems](#)

[Listing the Big UK Elections](#)

[Coming Up On the Rails: The First-Past-the-Post System](#)

[Looking at the advantages](#)

[Taking in the disadvantages](#)

[Securing Over 50 Per Cent of the Vote: Majority Electoral Systems](#)

[Laying bare the two-ballot system](#)

[Playing the alternative vote system card](#)

[Throwing in the supplementary vote system](#)

[Perusing Proportional Representation](#)

[Refining PR: Single transferable vote](#)

[Varying PR: Candidate list system](#)

[Dividing in the D'Hondt method](#)

[Looking North and West to the Additional Member System](#)

Chapter 7: Voting Behaviour and Trends

[Looking at Who Can and Can't Vote](#)

[Understanding Voter Turnout](#)

[Counting declining voter turnout](#)

[Observing the reduction in local democracy](#)

[Reversing the decline in voter turnout](#)

[Considering What Sways Voters](#)

[Taking in the big issues](#)

[Throwing personality into the mix: The leadership wild card](#)

[Looking at the voters themselves](#)

[Enticing Voters to Vote: Party Strategies](#)

[Appealing to the core vote](#)

[Broadening party appeal](#)

[Gazing at Election Campaigning](#)

[Glancing at the Effects of Media Bias](#)

Chapter 8: Homing in on Political Parties

[Understanding Political Parties and How They Operate](#)

[Recognising the role of the major UK parties](#)

[Forming party policy: The approach of the Conservatives, Labour and the Lib Dems](#)

[Choosing and following the leader - and other senior party figures](#)

[Whipping up discipline: Keeping party members on the same page](#)

[Looking at the role of the whips](#)

[Living it up at party conferences](#)

[Forgoing party to form a national government](#)

[Looking at the Benefits of the Party System](#)

[Exploring the Tories](#)

[Re-inventing the Tories: Cameron's conservatism](#)

[Tapping natural Tory supporters](#)

[Looking at the Labour Party](#)

[Forming the Labour Party](#)

[Gauging Labour's followers](#)

[Breaking with the unions: Hard to do](#)

[Taking in the Lib Dems](#)

[Understanding the balance of power](#)

[Supporting proportional representation](#)

[Looking at Lib Dem supporters](#)

[Tearing up the Establishment: The Rise of UKIP](#)

[Focusing on the Minor Parties](#)

[Taking a Look at the Nationalists: SNP and Plaid Cymru](#)

[Dipping into Northern Irish Politics](#)

Chapter 9: Piling on the Pressure Groups

[Taking in the Universe of Pressure Groups](#)

[Sorting out sectional pressure groups](#)

[Seeing to cause-related groups](#)

[Going Inside, Outside, Up and Down with Pressure Groups](#)

[Differentiating between inside and outside](#)

[Watching the political ups and downs of pressure groups](#)

[Looking at How Pressure Groups Exert Influence](#)

[Getting the ear of ministers and civil servants](#)

[Focusing on backbench MPs](#)

[Courting public opinion](#)

[Joining the throng at party conferences](#)

[Taking it to the streets: Direct action](#)

[Appealing over the heads of politicians](#)

[Placing Pressure Groups in the System](#)

[Looking at the downsides of pressure groups](#)

[Taking in the plus points of pressure groups](#)

[Identifying the UK's Big Pressure Groups](#)

[Bossing for business](#)

[Charting the influence of charities](#)

[Advocating human rights](#)

[Pulling for the planet](#)

[Promoting professions](#)

[Working for the workers](#)

[Working on a Bigger Stage: Pressure Groups and the EU](#)

[Pushing the Intellectual Envelope: Think Tanks](#)

[Chapter 10: Scrutinising Politics and the Media](#)

[Exposing an Uneasy Relationship: Politics and the Media](#)

[Wheeling out the sound bite](#)

[Being media savvy: Special advisers](#)

[Reading the UK's Newspapers](#)

[Detecting a waning influence – or not?](#)

[Taking in the qualities](#)

[Meeting the mid-markets](#)

[Checking out the red-tops](#)

[Digging into the grass roots: Regional newspapers](#)

[Balancing Politics at the BBC](#)

[Offering News around the Clock](#)

[Looking at the Media in an Election Campaign](#)

[Testing the Temperature: Opinion Polling](#)

[Chapter 11: Taking Politics to the Masses: Social Media](#)

[Understanding that Politics Is Now Mobile](#)

[Climbing aboard the social media express](#)

[Reaching out: How politicians can bypass mainstream media](#)

[Treading carefully: the political gaffe](#)

[Putting Your Thoughts in Writing: Political Blogging](#)

[Talking 'bout a Revolution: Twitter and Street Protest](#)

[Part III: The Ins and Outs of Parliament](#)

[Chapter 12: Examining Britain's Constitution](#)

[Focusing on Why Countries Need a Constitution](#)

[Exploring Differing Types of Constitution](#)

[Recording the differences between written and unwritten constitutions](#)

[Taking in unitary and federal constitutions](#)

[Changing the rules: Rigid and flexible constitutions](#)

[Celebrating Britain's Constitution](#)

[Granting parliamentary sovereignty](#)

[Limiting parliamentary sovereignty](#)

[Quantifying the success of the UK's constitution](#)

[Moving towards a written constitution](#)

[Crowning the Constitution: The Monarchy](#)

[Stirring Things Up: Republicanism](#)

Chapter 13: Britain's Parliamentary Democracy

[Honouring the Mother of Parliaments](#)

[Taking It to the Top: The House of Commons](#)

[Aiming for a seat in parliament](#)

[Looking at the job of MPs](#)

[Recognising that the House of Commons holds the power](#)

[Lording It Up: The Job of Peers](#)

[Inherited power: Hereditary peers](#)

[Nominating peers for life](#)

[Introducing Bills](#)

[Explaining government bills](#)

[Introducing private members' bills](#)

[Getting Bills Passed: The Process](#)

[Detailing the passage of bills](#)

[Talking it over: Debating](#)

[Icing the legislative cake: Receiving royal assent](#)

[Poring Over the Detail: Parliamentary Committees](#)

[Looking at standing committees](#)

[Examining select committees](#)

[Keeping Order: The Role of the Speaker](#)

[Tying Up the Loose Ends: The Other Parliamentary Players](#)

[Climbing the Greasy Pole to the Top Jobs in Government](#)

Chapter 14: Gazing at the Summit: The PM and Cabinet

[Going Straight to the Top: The Prime Minister](#)

[Getting to be the PM](#)

[Gauging whether the PM is really 'first among equals'](#)

[Limiting the power of the PM](#)

[Concentrating on the Cabinet](#)

[Taking in the great offices of state](#)

[Observing the big beasts of the cabinet jungle](#)

[Looking down the political food chain to other ministerial posts](#)

[Assuming Cabinet Responsibilities](#)

[Explaining collective cabinet responsibility](#)

[Taking in individual responsibility](#)

[Working Behind the Scenes: Cabinet Committees](#)

[Shaking Up the Cabinet](#)

[Falling on their sword: Ministerial resignations](#)

[Shifting the seats: Cabinet reshuffles](#)

[Whispering in the PM's Ear: Special Advisers](#)

[Turning to the Opposition: The Shadow Cabinet](#)

Chapter 15: Assessing Ministers and Civil Servants

[Examining What Government Departments Do](#)

[Ranking the Departmental Hierarchy](#)

[Oiling the Wheels of Government: The Civil Service](#)

[Becoming a civil servant and doing the job](#)

[Behaving as a civil servant](#)

[Climbing the Ranks to the Senior Civil Service](#)

[Running the day-to-day: The permanent under-secretary of state](#)

[Serving as a link: The cabinet secretary](#)

[Evaluating the Good and Bad Points of the UK Civil Service](#)

[Reforming the Civil Service](#)

[Ignoring the Ibbs Report](#)

[Reducing head count: The Gershon Review](#)

[Calling the civil service to account](#)

Chapter 16: Taking in the Courts and Judiciary

[Explaining the UK's Three Legal Systems](#)

[Recognising the Difference between Civil and Criminal Law](#)

[Committing crimes against the state](#)

[Suing your neighbours in civil court](#)

[Examining the Basic Rights of the British Citizen](#)

[Focusing on the Criminal Courts of England and Wales](#)

[Starting off in a magistrates' court](#)

[Advancing to a crown court](#)

[Making your way to the Court of Appeal](#)

[Hearing Civil Cases in England and Wales](#)

[Gazing at the civil law process](#)

[Appealing civil cases](#)

[Taking in the Scottish Court System](#)

[Considering the Courts in Northern Ireland](#)

[Introducing the UK Supreme Court](#)

[Looking at the Role of the Judge](#)

[Glancing at Courts and the Constitution](#)

[Throwing the European Union into the Mix](#)

[Fighting the Good Fight: Courts and Civil Liberties](#)

Chapter 17: Laying Bare Local Government and Devolution

[Understanding that All Politics Is Local](#)

[Looking at what local government does](#)

[Funding local government](#)

[Taking in the structure of local government in England](#)

[Heading north: Scottish local government](#)

[Heading west: Wales and Northern Ireland](#)

[Re-energising local government](#)

[Policing the police: The advent of police and crime commissioners](#)

[Granting Power from the Centre - Devolution](#)

Chapter 18: Focusing on Devolution and the Independence Debate

[Looking at the United Kingdom](#)

[Considering each member of the union](#)

[Forming the United Kingdom](#)

[Understanding the success of the union](#)

[Breaking down of the union?](#)

[Devolution Defined: Granting Power from the Centre](#)

[Deciding to devolve](#)

[Focusing on the Scottish parliament](#)

[Welcoming in the Welsh Assembly](#)

[Priming the peace process: The Northern Ireland Assembly](#)

[Paying for it all: The Barnett Formula](#)

[Treading the Path to Scottish Independence](#)

[Deciding to hold a referendum](#)

[Voting for 'Better Together' rather than 'Yes'](#)

Part IV: Politics Worldwide

Chapter 19: Understanding Britain's Place in the World

[Declining Fortunes: From Empire to the Middle Ranks](#)

[Forging a New Role in Europe](#)

[Assessing the Special Relationship with the United States](#)

[Looking Further Afield to the Rise of China](#)

[Leading the Commonwealth of Nations](#)

[Ruling the Waves: British Overseas Territories](#)

[Playing the Role of World Police Officer](#)

[Sitting at the Top Table: The UN Security Council](#)

Chapter 20: Taking In the International Stage

[Starting at the Top: The United Nations](#)

[Delving into how the UN works](#)

[Taking in UN agencies](#)

[Bringing Out the Big Guns: The Role of the G8 and the G20](#)

[Starting small with the G8](#)

[Changing times: G8 morphing into G20](#)

[Looking at the Regional Trading Blocs](#)

[Factoring in the World Trade Organisation](#)

[Playing the Power Game: China Taking Over from the United States](#)

[Providing the Military Might: NATO](#)

Chapter 21: Expanding Horizons: Europe and the EU

[Understanding the EU and How It Works](#)

[Checking the goals of the EU](#)

[Examining EU institutions](#)

[Looking at law-making and the legal system](#)

[Forming Relationships Within and Outside the EU](#)

[Looming giant: Russia on the doorstep](#)

[Testing question: Is Turkey really part of Europe?](#)

[Bringing peace to the Balkans](#)

[Pigging out: Financial crisis causes fault lines in EU](#)

[Understanding Britain's thorny relationship with the EU](#)

[Putting Pen to Paper: Major European Treaties](#)

[Holding the Purse Strings: EU Budgets](#)

[Accounting for the Common Agricultural Policy](#)

[Getting a rebate](#)

Chapter 22: Leading the Free World: US Politics

[Understanding US Influence in the Wider World and in the UK](#)

[Being buddies: The US-UK special relationship](#)

[Growing apart? Recent problems with the special relationship](#)

[Looking at the US System of Government](#)

[Building the houses of Congress](#)

[Establishing the presidency](#)

[Judging disputes: The US Supreme Court](#)

[Passing a Bill into Law](#)

[Throwing Political Parties into the Mix](#)

[Voting with the Democrats](#)

[Siding with the Republicans](#)

[Rallying the religious right](#)

[Linking up: UK and US political parties](#)

Part V: The Part of Tens

Chapter 23: Ten Great Prime Ministers

[Our Finest Hour: Winston Churchill \(1940-45 and 1951-55\)](#)

[The Welsh Wizard: David Lloyd George \(1916-22\)](#)

[The Iron Lady: Margaret Thatcher \(1979-90\)](#)

[The Trailblazer: Robert Walpole \(1721-42\)](#)

[The Great Reformer: Clement Attlee \(1945-51\)](#)

[The First Spin Doctor: Benjamin Disraeli \(1868 and 1874-80\)](#)

[The Grand Old Man: William Gladstone \(1868-74, 1880-85, 1886 and 1892-94\)](#)

[Shaking Things Up: Robert Peel \(1834-35 and 1841-46\)](#)

[The Second Master of Spin: Tony Blair \(1997-2007\)](#)

[Wiser than His Years: William Pitt the Younger \(1783-1801 and 1804-06\)](#)

Chapter 24: Ten Major Political Scandals

[A Very British Sex Scandal: John Profumo](#)

[From Moats to Maltesers: The MPs' Expenses Scandal](#)

[Running Out of Control: The Westland Affair](#)

[Scandal of Mass Destruction: The David Kelly Affair](#)

[Roll Up, Roll Up: How Much for This Knighthood?](#)

[How the Mighty Fall: Jonathan Aitken and Jeffrey Archer](#)

[Murder Plot? The Jeremy Thorpe Affair](#)

[The Fall of a President: Watergate](#)

[More Sordid Scandal Stateside: The Monica Lewinsky Affair](#)

[Murder in the Orient: The Neil Heywood Affair](#)

Chapter 25: Ten Political Events That Shaped the Modern World

[Hell on Earth: The Second World War](#)

[Breaking Down the Barriers: Nixon and China](#)

[Ending Communism in Europe: The Fall of the Berlin Wall](#)

[Coming Together: The March of the European Union](#)

[Pulling Aside the Bamboo Curtain: China's March to Superpower Status](#)

[Long Wait for Freedom: The Release of Nelson Mandela](#)

[Terror from the Skies: 9/11](#)

[Bringing Down a Dictator: War in Iraq](#)

[Gazing Over the Brink: The Great Credit Crunch](#)

[Crazy for You: Obama-Mania](#)

Chapter 26: Ten Political Trends for the Future

[Broadening Democracy: Internet Voting](#)

[Rising Power: Indian Modernisation](#)

[Loosening the Shackles: Chinese Democracy](#)

[Securing Natural Resources: Chinese Control of Africa](#)

[Out with the Old: Replacing the Dollar](#)

[Constructing a Super-State: Expanding the European Union](#)

[World Going Dry: Shortages of Water](#)

[Black Gold: Scrambling for Oil](#)

[Risking Our Future: Climate Change](#)

[Upping Sticks: Global Population Moves](#)

About the Author

Cheat Sheet

More Dummies Products

Introduction

Welcome to the fascinating world of British politics. Whether you're a student wanting to boost your chances of getting that A grade or just want the inside track on the big issues that face not just the UK but also the wider world, this is the book for you.

I wrote this book for newcomers and students alike so that you can have a one-stop shop to get to know everything you need to know without feeling overwhelmed or intimidated. I explain how Britain became the modern liberal democracy it is today. Thanks to this book, the next time you hear someone say at a dinner table, on the bus or down the pub that 'politics is all the same', you'll be able to tell them why they're wrong, and why politics and politicians make a fundamental difference to our lives.

About This Book

To make your reading experience a little easier, *British Politics For Dummies* follows certain rules. For example, every time I use a new term or important phrase, I *italicise* and explain it. The key word or term in a bulleted list is in **bold** so that it stands out. Occasionally, you see text in grey boxes. These sidebars are full of what I consider interesting information, but they're not essential to understanding the topic at hand, so you can read them or not as you choose. I explain everything very clearly and try to avoid political gobbledygook.

When reading a discussion of a particular aspect of politics in one chapter, I refer to another chapter when the information there ties into the issue I'm discussing.

You can turn immediately to that chapter or just tuck the number away in your memory and decide to read it next.

Foolish Assumptions

Don't feel intimidated if you know nothing about politics. This book will bring you up to speed, fast. Politics can be complex, and even some seasoned commentators have difficulty grasping some aspects. But before long - after reading this book - you're going to be transformed into a nailed-on political expert.

Icons Used in This Book

To help you navigate through this book, keep an eye out for the icons - the little pictures that sit in the margin. They guide you to particular types of information. The icons in this book mean the following things:



This icon is unique to this book. Every so often I look in depth at a great politician or quirky character from past or present. Politics is full of interesting people!



Politics is chock-full of jargon. Fortunately, this book's mission is to bust it. Whenever you see this icon, you find an explanation of political terms that help you understand just what's going on in the game.



This icon is also unique to this book and you won't see it often. It draws your attention to some of the behind-the-scenes stuff that goes on in the cut and thrust of daily politics. Here's the info the media managers in the big political parties don't want you to know!



Paragraphs with this icon attached contain information that's especially useful to remember.



This icon indicates a technical discussion is underway. You can skip this stuff if you want to, because it isn't necessary for an understanding of the basics. If you read it, though, you can boost your political know-how.

Beyond the book

Your dummies reading experience doesn't stop here – between the covers of this book or when it flashes up 100 per cent on your digital e-reader. There is a whole extra layer of free online content to entertain and educate you, just a click of the mouse or a touch of a tablet away. Here is a brief description of this treasure trove of free digital content and crucially where it's hidden, just for you to discover.

- ✓ **Cheat sheet** This is bite size text which lets you know some of the key points contained in *British Politics For Dummies* but in an ultra-condensed form. Want to impress your friends in the run-up to an election with

your political knowhow or simply want to grasp one or two key facts? This cheat sheet is there to give you the basics. All dummies books have a cheat sheet and they allow readers to quickly refer to a fact without having to carry the book around with you or power up the e-reader. Cheat Sheets are fast, fun and full of useful info and you can find them at www.dummies.com/cheatsheet/britishpolitics.

- ✓ Dummies.com online articles. There is information that I think it is really useful for you to have but is not contained in this book. I may be looking to expand on a particular point or explain something in ever more detail. Perhaps something has happened very recently in British politics and I want to let you know more. If you go to www.dummies.com/extras/britishpolitics) you will find several articles penned by me which I hope will add to your knowhow and enjoyment. For instance, you will find an extra Part of Tens just for you. In it I turn the ten great British Prime Minister theme on its head and name and shame those who I think are the ten worst British PMs in history - and believe me there were some real stinkers. In addition, there is a special article on the rise of the UK Independence party (UKIP) and what it means for the present and future of British politics. I have also reflected on the result of the momentous Scottish independence referendum and I let you know why I think the result went the way it did. Finally, I look at the Presidency of Barack Obama, who assumed office riding a tide of international goodwill. I ask whether or not the first US black president has been a success or failure? So there's plenty of bonus content to be getting along with - check it out!

Where to Go from Here

Don't be restricted by the order in which the contents of this book appear. This book is designed to be read in several ways. It's a reference book, so you don't have to read the chapters in chronological order, from front to back. Of course, if you want to, you can read it from cover to cover like a novel - and there are quite a few heroes and heroines in politics. Alternatively, you can pick a topic that you're doing at school or university or you just want to know much more about and read up on it. Or you can just flip through this book, and read whatever catches your interest.

But my favourite way of reading this book - and my editor has made sure I've read it a few times now - is to go to Part [I](#) outlining the basics of how politics works and then to the sections which interest you or are relevant to your studies. Whatever draws you to politics, *British Politics For Dummies* has something for you.

- ✓ What does all the jargon mean? What on earth is a spin doctor? (Chapter [7](#) explains.)
- ✓ Why is Britain a democracy and not a dictatorship? (Check out Chapter [5](#).)
- ✓ Who is Black Rod and what on earth does he do? (Turn to Chapter [13](#).)
- ✓ What does all the jargon mean? What on earth is a spin doctor? (Chapter [10](#) explains.)
- ✓ What's so important about the United Nations Security Council? (Head to Chapter [20](#).)

In short, it's up to you how you get to know the world of politics!

Part I
**Getting Started with
British Politics**



For Dummies can help you get started with lots of subjects. Visit www.dummies.com to learn more and do more with *For Dummies*.

In this part ...

- ✓ Find out all the things you always wanted to know about British Politics.
- ✓ Discover what is so special about democracy and why politicians are considered to be so important.

Chapter 1

Taking in the Political Universe

In This Chapter

- ▶ Differentiating between local and national politics
 - ▶ Building a very British democracy
 - ▶ Legislating within the parliament
 - ▶ Gauging the strength of the democracy
 - ▶ Scrutinising politicians and the media
 - ▶ Defining Britain's place in the world
-

Those who are too smart to engage in politics are punished by being governed by those who are dumber.

- Plato, Greek philosopher

Plato's quote highlights one – very cynical – way of looking at the wacky (and not so wacky) world of politics. But whatever your view of politics (or, for that matter, politicians), one thing's for sure: the laws made by politicians have a direct impact on your life.

In this chapter I take a speed-of-light trip around the political universe, through the town hall, the newspaper rooms, Buckingham Palace and the UK Houses of Parliament, to the outer reaches of big international bodies such as the European Union and United Nations.

Time to set out on a political journey of discovery!

Understanding the Difference between Local and National Politics

How many politicians do you think you can name? Five, ten, twenty? Well, there are literally thousands of politicians in the UK and many times that number around the globe. The fact that you and I may only be able to name a handful isn't because we're not very bright; it's because most of the politicians out there have a very low profile in the public eye. They may be big figures in their local community but they don't make any sort of splash on the national stage.

You can divide politicians into local and national ones. Local politicians get to decide what goes on in a particular village, town or city, whereas national politicians have a say in the laws that govern all our lives. Politicians who're elected to the House of Commons and the European Parliament are national ones because they make laws that apply to the whole country, not just to a particular village, town or city.

Here are some of the other key differences between local and national politicians:

- ✓ National politicians receive a salary from the state, whereas local politicians are volunteers with normal lives and everyday jobs.
- ✓ The national media, such as national newspapers and television/radio networks, covers the actions of national politicians, whereas local politicians gain coverage in local newspapers and on local radio and regional television news.

- ✓ The UK is a highly centralised state, which means that the national politicians have lots of power, including the main tax-raising powers, whereas local politicians have to do roughly what the central government says and have much smaller tax-raising powers.



The overwhelming majority of politicians in the UK are local councillors and parish councillors, often elected by a few hundred or thousand voters.



An election for membership of the House of Commons is called a *general election*, a European parliamentary election is called an *election to the European Parliament* and a local council election is called – guess what? – a *local election*.

Usually, voter turnout (the percentage of eligible voters actually going to the polls to vote) is much higher for general elections than for local or European elections. General elections tend to get much greater media coverage and voters are more interested in who wins. (Chapter [7](#) talks about the other factors influencing voter turnout.)

Splitting the Difference: The Devolved Parliament and Assemblies

The British are noted around the globe for a few things: producing great rock music, drinking too much (but let's not put that one on the tourist brochures!), writing great

literature, creating great art and providing a world centre for financial services. But ask any foreigner to name a word that sums up Britain and the British, and 'tradition' would come fairly high up the list. Put simply, we're not supposed to do change.

But over the past decade we've gone in for political change in a big way. The Labour government of Tony Blair in 1999 set up the Scottish parliament and Welsh and Northern Ireland assemblies.

The big idea was to move some power away from the government in Westminster and hand it to the peoples - through an elected parliament or assembly - in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. This process was called *devolution* and some say it's the biggest constitutional change in the UK for 100 years.

Why introduce devolution? Well, the Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish have different identities and traditions, and many in these parts of the UK felt that these had been swamped over many hundreds of years by the more populous English.

Every four years the people of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland get to elect who they want to sit in their own parliament or assembly. These representatives then make the laws in the policy areas that have been devolved from the UK parliament; for example, health care, education or the environment. Plans are afoot to increase the number of powers devolved to the Scottish parliament and Welsh and Northern Ireland assemblies. (For a full rundown of which parliament or assembly does what, check out Chapter [17](#).)



Why do the Scottish have a parliament, while the Welsh and Northern Irish have an assembly? Well, this situation reflects the number of devolved powers that each institution has. A parliament is considered a more important and august body than an assembly. So the Scottish, who have more devolved powers than the Welsh and Northern Irish, thus have a parliament rather than an assembly.



In Wales and Scotland, nationalist movements want either greater autonomy from the UK or full-blown independence. This nationalism is most developed in Scotland. The Scottish National Party became the governing party and used that position to call a referendum on whether Scotland should be independent. The referendum was held in September 2014, with the Scottish people voting to stay within the UK. The result was very close, with 45% of votes cast in favour of full independence. In the final few days of the campaign the leaders of the UK's three main political parties - Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat - promised the Scottish people even greater devolution (in other words more power for the Scottish parliament) should they choose to remain in the UK. This promise won the day and now politicians in Westminster are looking at ways of delivering it. See Chapter [18](#) for full details on the great independence debate.

Evolving to Democracy: A Very British Story

Each democratic nation has trodden its very own path to the political system it has today. The US democracy was born when rebels beat the British in the American Revolution, and the French democracy can trace its roots back to the deposition and execution of Louis XVI in 1793 and the revolution that followed.

The UK too has had its fair share of strife - the odd bloody civil war - and has even chopped one king's head off (the singularly useless Charles I). But instead of one cataclysmic event, such as a war or revolution, leading to democracy, the UK has progressed more gradually to the modern liberal democratic society we have today. In fact, the UK is one of only a handful of countries to get rid of its monarch (between 1649 and 1660) and then decide to reinstate it.

Put simply, the British prefer political evolution to revolution, and the web of government is built up through a combination of laws, traditions and customs. For example, in legal terms the monarchy is hugely important in the British state; in fact, the government itself is there to serve the monarch. However, through custom and tradition the monarch actually plays a very minor role in the government of the country. Much of the power is vested in the hands of the prime minister (PM) and the cabinet.



The UK - unlike the US, for instance - doesn't have a written constitution. Instead, the government works through laws, traditions and customs. This situation is referred to as the UK's *unwritten constitution*, which I discuss in Chapter [5](#).

An unwritten constitution may sound weak and impracticable, but the UK system has stood the test of

time. In fact, the UK was one of the few major European countries not to have seen its democracy suppressed by a dictatorship during the 20th century.

Assessing the Health of British Democracy

Some experts suggest that Britons are becoming less interested in politics and the following evidence does seem to bear that analysis out:

- ✓ **Falling voter turnout:** At election time fewer and fewer people are turning out to exercise their democratic right to vote.
- ✓ **Falling party membership:** The three nationwide major political parties – Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrat (and by *major* I mean these parties always have Members of Parliament elected) – have seen their membership numbers plummet over the past decade. Politicians who stand as party candidates rely on help from party members but fewer members exist to offer help.

However, evidence suggests that people aren't bored with politics in itself; just with politicians and the main political parties. Some say that media training and the whips' control over what MPs say in public have made politicians increasingly bland. Smaller political parties like the Green Party and the UK Independence Party (UKIP) have done much better at election time in recent years, however, while pressure groups and trade unions continue to enjoy high levels of membership.



The expenses scandal of 2009 was a key factor in undermining public confidence in politics and politicians. A host of MPs had claimed for expenses they shouldn't have and worked the system for all they could possibly get. An enormous public furore resulted, which led to scores of MPs deciding to stand down as candidates for the next general election. (Chapter [24](#) covers this major political scandal and others to boot.)

Some academics suggest that the way to reverse low voter turnout is to make it easier to vote. They probably have a point. At present, electors usually have to attend a polling station in person in order to cast their ballot, and elections are generally held on a work day. Allowing more postal or online ballots would make voting easier and hopefully encourage more people to do so. Making not voting illegal is another possible solution to low turnout. In Australia, for instance, people who don't vote are fined. (Chapter [7](#) has more on reversing falling voter turnout.)

Glancing at the alternatives to democracy

Sitting in a strong democratic country like the UK, it's easy to think that democracy is a given around the globe. Surely, everyone must see how well it works and can't live without the freedom of speech and personal liberty, the two hallmarks of democracy.

But much of the population of the world doesn't live in a democratic state. In fact, a large number live under regimes where to be an opponent of the government is to risk liberty and even life and limb.

China, for example, is the world's most populous nation - roughly one in four people on the planet are Chinese - yet its people live in a one-party state. All the politicians are drawn from just one party, so people can only vote for the

candidates representing it. Ostensibly, the party in government in China is communist, which means it's supposed to adhere to communist ideals such as common ownership of property and a society free of class or social divides. However, in reality the Chinese Communist Party promotes individual property ownership and individual wealth creation (two very Western and democratic ideals) as means to improve the national economy. In effect, China now practises communism-lite.

This situation hints at a fundamental truth of political systems around the globe: that nearly all of them, to a greater or lesser degree, have some measure of what we recognise as Western democratic ideals, such as free speech and the right to make and spend money without huge interference from the state.

A truly democratic society has to guarantee freedom of the press and the right to protest, as well as hold regular contested elections for government office. The UK, fortunately, ticks all of these boxes and so can be classed as a fully fledged democracy.

Many different forms of government operate around the globe, from communist regimes to Western democracies. Religious leaders even run the show in some countries, such as Iran – a system called *theocracy*. Check out Chapter [4](#) for more on different types of government.

Paying Homage to the 'Mother of Parliaments'

Standing at the very centre of British democracy is the Houses of Parliament in Westminster, London. This great gothic masterpiece, along with the many government ministries within a short walk, is the fulcrum of British political life. Many of the big government policy decisions and laws that affect all Britons' lives are made in Westminster by the politicians who work there.

The Houses of Parliament are divided into two distinct parts – the House of Commons and the House of Lords. Although they sit in chambers only a few hundred yards apart and have both been in existence for centuries, the houses are quite different in terms of who gets to sit in