

Summer work – UK Government – How did the UK political system evolve?

Read the following text and answer the questions throughout.

Magna Carta, 1215

Though Magna Carta is an ancient document it was an important landmark in the development of the political culture and constitution of the UK. This was the establishment of the rule of law – in particular,



the principle that the monarch (the government in modern times) cannot act above the law. Though often abused in the centuries since 1215, the rule of law still persists as a cornerstone of UK democracy.

The Glorious Revolution and the Bill of Rights, 1688-89



In 1688 the unpopular Catholic king, James II, was removed from the English throne. He was replaced by the Dutch Protestant prince, William of Orange, and his wife Mary. It was known as the 'Glorious Revolution'

though it was largely peaceful. Part of the price to be paid by William and Mary for the throne was a number of restrictions on their power. These were contained in the Bill of Rights in 1689.

Five terms of the bill, which was an Act of Parliament, were especially important:

- that the king would rule alongside a *permanent* Parliament
- that Parliament would be the result of *regular, free elections*
- that members of Parliament would enjoy *freedom of speech*
- that the monarch would require the *consent* of Parliament to levy taxes

- that the monarch would *not* have the power to repeal or set aside any laws without the *consent* of Parliament

As well as establishing parliamentary government and constitutional monarchy, the Bill of Rights was the main practical result of the political ideas of the great English philosopher and early liberal thinker, John Locke (1632-1704).

The events surrounding the Glorious Revolution also saw the early development of the traditional two-party system in England. The supporters of monarchical power were described as Tories, while the Protestant supporters of parliamentary power were called Whigs. Most Tories were members of the aristocracy and landed gentry while the Whigs tended to be members of the new capitalist middle classes. By the nineteenth century most Tories formed the Conservative Party, while most Whigs turned into Liberals.

It is also noteworthy that several of the principles established in the English Bill of Rights were replicated in the American Constitution, written a century later. In particular, two clauses were almost exactly reproduced in the early amendments to the US Constitution in 1791, both of which remain controversial to this day. These are the *right of the people to bear arms* (second amendment), and the protection of the people from *cruel and unusual punishment* (eighth amendment). The English Bill of Rights of 1689 can be seen as a precursor of the US Constitution of 1787.

The Great Reform Act 1832

It is fair to say that, in the early eighteenth century, general elections in the United Kingdom ranged from being irregular at best to corrupt at worst. Constituencies varied in size, with some so small – just a handful of registered voters (mainly wealthy property owners) – that it was a simple task for a wealthy candidate to buy enough votes to win. These were often described as ‘rotten boroughs’. Many of the small rural seats were effectively in the hands of



wealthy members of the aristocracy, who controlled the voters. The rural parts of the country were over-represented, while urban, newly industrialised parts still had few constituencies. In short, representation in Britain was corrupt and uneven.

This had the effect of bringing the House of Commons into disrepute. Far from representing the people, the Commons was full of wealthy members of the upper and middle classes, many of whom saw being an MP as a useful status symbol rather than as a civic duty. Real power lay in the hands of the monarch, his or her courtiers, plus a few wealthy members of what was known as the ‘governing class’. Many MPs rarely attended the chamber and few were concerned with the interests of their constituents. Britain was a parliamentary democracy effectively in name only.

Following a long campaign, mostly fought by the Whigs, a bill was finally brought before Parliament in 1832 to try to eliminate these problems. After fierce debate it was passed. Among its many clauses, two stand out:

- The franchise (right to vote) was extended. There was a qualification to voting which involved ownership and tenancy of property. This restricted the electorate to about 500,000. The

Act reduced the property qualification to allow a further 3% of the population to vote. This may not seem radical, but it did begin the process of widening the right to vote (known as suffrage). Once the principle was established, it was inevitable that, before the end of the century, all adult men would have the right to vote.

- The Act redrew the electoral boundaries so that the rotten, or very small, boroughs were removed and parts of the country which were previously under-represented (mostly industrialised areas) were awarded new constituencies. This meant that few parliamentary seats could now be 'bought' and there was more even representation of the people.

The development of the two-party system

Despite the move to a two-party system beginning with the Glorious Revolution, it was not until the nineteenth century that anything like the modern two-party system arrived.

During the second half of the century, the Conservative Party emerged. Many historians count Sir Robert Peel as founder of the party. He was prime minister in both the 1830s and 1840s. This party tended to represent the interests of the wealthier 'gentrified' classes and stood for good order, the preservation of traditional institutions and values, and opposition to the new radical ideas being promoted by liberals and socialists. Though the Conservatives (still often described as 'Tories') were usually members of the wealthy classes, they claimed to represent the interests of the mass of the working people against the evils of the growing capitalist system.

The Liberal Party was largely formed from politicians described as Whigs and other radical thinkers. The date of its founding is a little vague but is generally put at 1859. Its first leader was Lord Henry Palmerston, who was prime minister twice between 1855 and 1865. Liberals were mainly

made up of members of the fast-rising middle classes. They represented small independent farmers, merchants, tradesmen, industrialists and the professions. They campaigned to extend democracy, to preserve free markets and free trade, and to pursue the interests of small property owners and the business classes in general.

The two-party system that emerged in the nineteenth century reflected the division of society into two ruling classes – the upper classes and the middle classes. At that time, the working classes, though numerically superior to the other classes, were not represented by a political party of their own. In the nineteenth century there was no sizeable socialist party in the UK. The principal reason was, of course, that the working classes did not have the right to vote for most of the century. They had no property and so were excluded from the franchise. Property-less male members of the working class had to wait until 1884 for the right to take part in elections.

The electoral system

The electoral system was a second factor in the formation and retention of a two-party system. The first-past-the-post system makes it difficult for smaller parties to establish themselves, so the Conservatives and Liberals were able to dominate general elections until the emergence of the Labour Party in the early twentieth century.

The early Labour Party was led by a charismatic figure, Keir Hardie. As the party developed and began to gain parliamentary seats in the early years of the twentieth century, it found it difficult to make headway because the electoral system discriminated against it. The party just two seats in 1900 and this had increased only to 42 by 1920. In 1922, however, when it won 142 seats, the Labour Party finally demonstrated that it was about to replace the Liberals.

It had taken time for the newly enfranchised working classes to realise their interest lay in voting for Labour rather than one of the two

established parties. When they did, in the 1920s and 1930s, the Liberal Party was doomed to decline. Instead of a three-party system developing, as was occurring in the rest of the European democracies, the Liberals were largely replaced by Labour so a new two-party system arrived to replace the old one.

Two reasons are usually suggested for this. One is the electoral system, while the other is the division of British society in the twentieth century into two distinct and cohesive classes, middle and working, each represented by its own political party.

The creation of the welfare state, 1940s

In the 1940s, at the end of the Second World War, the Labour government that won the 1945 general election set out to create a system of state-run, publicly-financed welfare that was so extensive it became known as the welfare state.



The welfare state was a comprehensive system, to be financed from taxation and run by the state, both central and local government, covering people's needs 'from the cradle to the grave'. At its centre lay the National Health Service (NHS), set up in 1946, but the welfare state also included a system of benefits covering such needs as unemployment, disability, income support, sickness, maternity and care of the elderly. The state old-age pension was extended to all, and an increasing quantity of subsidised rental housing was made available through local government.

Issues surrounding the welfare state, how it is financed and run, what it should include and whether the private sector should be involved in

supplying its services, have dominated British politics ever since. It has affected government and politics in a number of ways, including:

- The scope and powers of the UK state were expanded greatly. Put simply, government became bigger; it became responsible for a whole range of new services.
- The welfare state raised many political issues, often the centre of conflict between the parties. These have included how much should be spent on services, who should be entitled to benefit from them, how they should be run and who should run them.
- In recent decades the issue of which services can be supplied by private-sector organisations, as opposed to the state, has become a matter of intense political conflict.

Britain joins the European Community, 1973



At the end of the Second World War many European politicians put their minds to the future of the continent. They were mainly concerned with two issues – economic reconstruction and the preservation of continental peace.

The main plan to deal with post-war Europe was based in France and was developed by two politicians there, Jean Monnet and Robert Schuman. This was the European Community (EC), which has since become the European Union (EU).

The plan was to invite European countries to form a customs union or free-trade area so that trade would grow and, with it, economic cooperation. The longer-term plan was to turn this economic union into a political one. At first just six countries were members, but in the years since it has grown to 27 members in 2020. The UK joined on 1 January 1973.

UK membership has had a number of influences on government and politics, including the following:

- The very issue of whether the UK should remain a member has twice created a major rift in British politics. At various times both the Conservative and Labour parties have been internally divided on the issue. On two occasions, in 1975 and 2016, this issue was settled by referendums, in 1975 to remain and in 2016 to leave.
- Because the EU laws and regulations are binding on members, all government decisions must take European law into consideration.
- The UK Parliament was no longer fully sovereign. It had to comply with European law.
- UK courts had to enforce European law.

In general, therefore, Britain, while remaining an independent state, had to accept that it was also part of a wider political community. Following the 2016 referendum, UK membership has come to an end, with the process completing on 31 January 2020 at 11pm UK time.

The UK leaves the European Union

The historic referendum vote of 23 June 2016 that began the process of bringing the UK out of the EU changed the landscape of UK politics. It saw the end of the career of a prime minister – David Cameron – and caused a major upheaval within the Labour Party. More permanently, though, it changed the whole nature of parliamentary sovereignty and the way in which UK government goes about making policy. The full impact of the decision on the UK economy and society remains to be seen, but the very masonry of UK politics has been severely loosened by the event.

Task – Using the information above, complete the questions below.

1) When was the Magna Carta signed?

2) What is meant by the 'rule of law'?

3) Summarise the five key points from the 1689 Bill of Rights below.

4) What were the two political parties established out of the Glorious Revolution and who did they support?

5) What were 'rotten boroughs'?

6) Who were these 'rotten boroughs' fixed through the Great Reform Act 1832?

12) What were the two concerns at the end of the Second World War?

13) When did the UK join the European Community?

14) When were the two referendums held on membership to the EC/EU?

15) Which UK prime minister lost his job as a result of the most recent referendum on EU membership?
