

## **The Political System of the United Kingdom**

Are the islands called the United Kingdom or just Britain? And what about England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland – are they separate countries?

These questions are often asked by bemused internationals, and, depending on whom you ask, you will most likely get a different answer. The ‘countries’ of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have distinct cultures and proud independent histories that identify them. Acts of Union passed centuries ago brought these countries into one political union.

This union is what is formally known as the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland – which is often considered a bit of a mouthful. The historical significance of the Union is important because it underpins some of the political dynamics of the country and possibly contributes as to why it has become so multi-cultural.

Norman Tebbit, once Member of Parliament, voiced a controversial opinion in 1990 that suggested that a person’s origins were indicated by which national sports team they supported.

If you put this to the test today and ask a Scot which rugby team they support, their answer likely won’t be England or Wales. Such proud differences are friendly, but the reasons for them stretch back across centuries of historical conflict.

The politics in the United Kingdom operate within a ‘constitutional monarchy’ similar to some other countries like Spain, Sweden, Thailand, Denmark, Japan, and the Netherlands to name a few. Whilst the Queen is head of state, the Prime Minister is head of government. Since 1999, the UK government has shared executive powers with the devolved governments of the Scottish Parliament, Welsh Assembly and Northern Ireland Assembly.

Each of the United Kingdom parliaments or assemblies has elected political parties.

In England, the most dominant are the Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democratic parties. Meanwhile in the other regions notable parties are: The Scottish National Party in Scotland, Plaid Cymru in Wales, and various unionist parties and Sinn Fein in Northern Ireland.

The UK Parliament in London is at the heart of the political system in Britain and is the legislative body for the UK and British overseas territories. Parliament has two legislative parliamentary bodies, the House of Lords and the House of Commons.

The House of Lords includes three types of members, Bishops from the Church of England, nobility (British honours system) and Law Lords (Judges). Its members are not elected and appointed by the Queen on the advice of the Prime Minister. The House of Commons consists of democratically elected Members of Parliament from various different political parties. Elections are held every five years.

Below are brief introductions to the most well-known political parties in the United Kingdom.

#### Political parties in England

The Conservative Party (or Tory party) was in government for two-thirds of the twentieth century, but it has been in opposition since losing the 1997 election to the Labour Party. Its modern politics are considered to be 'centre-right'.

The Labour Party was founded at the start of the twentieth century. In 1997 it won the general election under Tony Blair, its first since 1974. The Party describes itself as the 'democratic socialist party' and is considered to be 'centre-left'.

The Liberal Democrats (Lib Dems.) are the third-largest party in the UK parliament. However the Party has never been in government. Their ideology is described as giving 'power to the people' with politics considered to be 'centre/centre-left'.

United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) has had a growing influence in the United Kingdom. The party's principal aim is the withdrawal of the UK from the European Union.

British National Party (BNP) is a 'far right' political party which is hugely controversial in the United Kingdom. It aims to protect native British homogeneity by reducing UK immigration.

The Green Party's radical politics are underpinned by core values to do with ensuring we look after the natural environments around us.

#### Political parties in Scotland

Parties represented in Scottish parliament are, the Scottish National Party, Labour, Conservatives, Liberal Democrats and the Scottish Green Party.

The Scottish National party is the largest party in the Scottish Parliament since elections in 2007. It is a 'centre-left' political party.

#### Political parties in Wales

Parties represented in the Welsh Assembly include, Welsh Labour, Plaid Cymru, Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats.

Currently Plaid Cymru and Welsh Labour work together as a coalition government.

#### Political parties in Northern Ireland

The Northern Ireland Assembly elects the Northern Ireland Executive which consists of a number of key ministers, including the First Minister. Each party has a share of ministerial positions.

Key political parties are: The Ulster Unionist Party, Democratic Unionist Party, Sinn Féin and Social Democratic and Labour Party.

For up to date in-depth news coverage on British and international politics it is worth watching *Panorama* on the BBC or alternatively tuning into Radio Four's *Today* programme, broadcast every morning. Meanwhile if you are more into reading, *The Spectator* is a good read and a highly rated magazine for coverage of both British and world politics.

British politics is rarely boring. It is said a week is not long in politics especially with the British media's speed in creating spins on new dramatic stories.

([https://www.expatica.com/uk/about/The-political-system-of-the-United-Kingdom\\_103179.html](https://www.expatica.com/uk/about/The-political-system-of-the-United-Kingdom_103179.html))