British political institutions

1. The Prime Minister and the Cabinet

The seat of the government is in Whitehall, a London avenue leading to the Houses of Parliament. The Prime Minister himself resides at 10 Downing Street (off Whitehall), in a relatively modest-looking residence in contrast to the Republican splendour of the Elysée or Matignon palaces in France. The Cabinet, which meets at 10 Downing Street weekly, comprises about twenty senior ministers such as the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Foreign Secretary, the Home Secretary, or the Secretary of State for Education and Skills, and is presided over by the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister is by convention always the leader of the majority party in the House of Commons, the legislative and executive branches of government being as a result less clearly separated than in France or in the United States. This makes the government – the Prime Minister in particular – extremely powerful :

1. He defines national (domestic as well as foreign) policies, the ways of implementing them and controls the Cabinet agenda.
2. He coordinates the work of the various departments, or ministries.
3. He has the power to create or abolish new ones.
4. He appoints the members of his cabinet who are mostly drawn from the House of Commons (with the exception of the Lord Chancellor), as well as under secretaries and 'whips' whose role is to discipline MPs in the House of Commons. Top civil servants, top members of the judiciary and the armed forces, the leader of the House of Commons, the director of the BBC and a number of chairpersons at the head of public sector industries are also appointed by the Prime Minister.

- Towards presidential status

The Prime Minister's double position as head of the executive and leader of the majority party in Parliament gives him some sway over the House of Commons, but 'backbench' revolt is always possible and might sometimes lead to a Prime Minister being forced out of office, as was the case in 1990 (Margaret Thatcher) and in 2007 (Tony Blair).
Originally, the Prime Minister was merely a mere coordinator of governmental policies and acted as an intermediary with the Monarch. Cabinet government has now given way to a more individual form of leadership in which the Prime Minister is all powerful and relies increasingly on the advice of his personal staff (unelected, unaccountable aides), a change initiated by Margaret Thatcher's autocratic style in the 1980s, and which media exposure seems to reinforce.

- The Shadow Cabinet

The opposition party chooses senior spokespeople to **shadow** the activities of the government. The member of the Shadow Cabinet, who are frontbenchers (see Part 5, House of Commons), are appointed by the leader of the Conservative Party, or elected by the MPs of the Labour Party. Each minister thus has a Shadow Minister. The Shadow Ministers scrutinize the activities of the government, hold it to account during *question time* and offer alternative policies. Each member of the shadow cabinet is appointed to lead on a specific policy area for their party and to question and challenge their counterpart in the Cabinet. In this way the Official Opposition seeks to present itself

as an alternative government-in-waiting, which has developed policies which are ready to be implemented, should there be a change of government.

2. The civil service

The British civil service employs about 450,000 highly-trained civil servants, 4000 of whom hold senior positions. The main function of the civil service is to carry out the policies decided by ministers, but it also plays a major role in advising the government in office as civil servants often possess the skills and expertise ministers often lack.
Traditionally, the civil service has functioned according to three interlocked principles : **permanence** (civil servants serve the Crown), **impartiality** (their freedom of expression and political activities are limited, for example they can't be Mps), and **anonymity** (only ministers are answerable to Parliament).
The British civil service is reputed fir its efficiency and expertise and is often regarded as a model abroad, but its reputation is not quite as good at home. A number of problems have strained the relations between the service and the government, with for example leaks to the press, or to the opposition, or accusations of delaying on purpose the implementation of some policies.
Major changes were introduced by M.Thatcher's government, whose well-known dislike of the public sector was reflected in drastic cuts in the number of civil servants, and a transfer of most departmental activities to independent (but also more accountable) agencies delivering services directly to the public with specific goals in terms of quicker delivery of services and cost effectiveness.

3. Political parties

a) origin of the two-party system

The United Kingdom has a two-party system which is in some respects similar to that of the United States. It doesn't mean that there are only two political parties in Britain, but that political life is (and has always been) **dominated by two main parties**. It dates back to the 17th century. *Tories* and *Whigs* held very different views on the Monarchy : for the *Tories* the principle of monarchy and the values associated with it had to prevail, whereas the Whigs believed that the monarch derived its power from the people, so much so that any abuse on his part should necessarily lead to his removal from the throne.
The dispute was finally brought to resolution in 1688 during the Glorious Revolution when the sovereign renounced absolute monarchy. The *Tories* were traditionalists who defended the interests of rural England and were the staunch allies of the Monarchy and the Church (the party of *the Establishment*, in other words). The *Whigs* were by contrast the party of progress, they were in favour of free trade, social reform, religious tolerance, and they defended the interests of a then triumphant middle class.
Today's *Liberal party* is the direct heir of the *Whigs*, but it has gradually declined with the emergence of the Labour Party at the beginning of the Xxth century.
The two main government parties today are the **Conservative Party** and the **Labour Party**, which share power alternately (the Conservative Party wielding power most of the time).

b) The Conservative Party (*Tory Party* or *Tories*)

The Conservative Party is a right-wing party : its members believe in the **central role of the individual**, and **support limited government intervention in the economy and free enterprise** ; according to them, the private sector should prevail over the public one. Hierarchy and traditional values such as **private property, self-**

reliance, family, law and order, religion and monarchy. The Conservatives tend to support business interests and more generally those of the upper and upper-middle classes. Prominent figures of the Party include Winston Churchill and Margaret Thatcher.

c) The Labour Party

The Labour Party emerged not long after the Reform Act, which extended the franchise to upper middle-class men, and therefore gave the people more weight in the elections, and started the development of a party system. It started initially as a grassroots movement, taking its influence from trade unions and working-class movements. Unlike the Conservative Party, whose written constitution was drawn up in 1998 only, the Labour Party adopted a constitution as early as 1918, even though it was created in 1834.
The Labour Party is based on very different beliefs and principles : according to its members, **the state should seek to reduce inequalities between people and achieve social justice ; it should provide for the poorest citizens through welfare support and public sector jobs**. However, its agenda was never as radical or as confrontational as those of some socialist parties in Continental Europe, so that Labour's brand of socialism always remained pragmatic and rather vague ideologically. It is just as committed to free enterprise and the market economy as the Conservatives.
The recession of the 1970s dealt a severe blow to the party, and newly elected prime minister Tony Blair understood the need to reshape it and to move away from some of its old tenets. He **completely revamped the party, turning it into a modern social democratic party** (« *New Labour* »), with **centrist policies** until Jeremy Corbyn's election in September 2015.

d) the other political parties

Several smaller parties also exist but their influence is limited in this two-party system.

- The Liberal Democrat Party or Lib Dem : The Lib Dem form the third largest party in the UK, but is undermined by the tension between pro-business liberals and socio-democrats. The LDP is **a progressive, middle-ground party which defends all forms of liberties (economic as well as civil). They are staunchly pro-Europe, for the adoption of the single currency, and in favour of constitutional reform** (proportional representation in particular), but their influence remains limited because of the electoral system.
- UK Independence Party (UKIP) : a single-issue, right-wing, populist party created by Alan Sked in 1993 (Nigel Farage took over in 1997), whose limited agenda includes **severe restrictions on immigration, as well as Britain's withdrawal from the European Union**. It had its hour of glory in 2014 , with the election of 24 MEPs and 2 MPs in by-elections the same year. Since 2016 and the Brexit referendum, UKIP saw its vote share and membership heavily decline, losing most of its elected representatives amid much internal instability and a drift toward a **far-right, anti-Islam message**.
- Small, local or regional parties : *the Scottish National Party* (Scotland), *Plaid Cymru* (Wales), *Sinn Féin*, *Democratic Unionists* (Northern Ireland), *the Greens* (ecology), *British National Party* (far right), etc... which only win seats in local or regional elections.

4. Elections

- The FPTP system

The two-party system hinges on an electoral system known as First Past the Post (FPTP) in which each constituency returns only one MP. Unlike in France, there is **only one round in an election** and t**he winner is the candidate who gets the most votes** (i.e. A simple majority is required). This means an MP can be elected with only 26% of the votes (it actually happened in 1997). The party that has the largest number of Mps nationally forms a government.
In practice, this results in most British governments being minority governments. It was the case in 2005 when Labour obtained 55% of the seats with a mere 35% of the popular vote. As a result the party in office is always over-represented in Westminster and is supported by a strong majority that allows it to **introduce new policies quickly and effectively**. FPTP is also an element of stability as coalition governments (which are by nature unstable) are rare in Britain – apart from the Conservative-Lib-Dem pact of 1997 when Labour didn't have enough seats to remain in power ; FPTP therefore allows governments to implement long-term policies and reforms. On the other hand, it is **not fair to smaller parties** which are systematically underrepresented (or not represented at all) and virtually excluded from government. This explains the recent calls for electoral reform and the introduction of *Proportional Representation* (PR) which, admittedly, is a fairer, more representative system than FPTP. However, it is difficult to imagine a party in office introducing a change that would significantly weaken its chances of re-election.

- Voting habits

Traditionally, **the Conservative vote has been a rather upper and upper-middle class vote, as opposed to a mostly lower-middle and working class Labour vote**. This is understandable as the Tories were historically the party of the establishment, in contrast to the Labour Party which was from the outset a federation of trade unions and various workers' associations created to defend workers' rights. The South, traditionally more prosperous and middle class than the North, has always favoured the Conservatives, Labour votes being for the most part concentrated in an essentially deprived, working-class north.
In recent decades, however, voting patterns have changed significantly. During the Thatcher years, many working class voters were attracted by the Prime Minister's blend of xenophobia and populism and shifted their allegiance to the Conservative party. Conversely, in the 1990s, Labour's move to the centre of the political spectrum attracted lots of middle-class voters wooed by Tony Blair's modern and dynamic image.
Britain's sociological make-up has undergone a number of changes owing to the expansion of the middle-class and the concurrent decline of a traditional, strongly unionized working class ; this has entailed **a global change of values from – roughly speaking – solidarity to individualism** with a corresponding shift from socialist to centrist votes. As a result of all these factors, **voter loyalty has got rather blurred** in recent years, a trend reflected in – but also amplified by – the increasingly fuzzy ideology of the main parties. Another point deserves mention : it is the emergence of 'single-issue' activists, i.e. militants in protest groups concerned with such issues as gay rights, the protection of the environment or animal rights, who have no particular party loyalty. Their vote being totally opportunistic, politicians obviously have to reckon with them.
A rather worrying trend today is the **apathy of British voters** reflected both in declining party membership (since 1945, the main parties have lost on average 75% of the members) and in low levels of voter turnout, especially among young people. The reasons for that relative electoral apathy are various : there is of course a lack of trust in politicians whose image has been tarnished by various scandals (sleaze), the feeling that there is after all little difference between the main

government parties, and the fact that in a context of globalization, politicians seem increasingly powerless to address the nation's issues (all of which might explain the success of UKIP, or the Brexit vote).

5. The political system

- The Constitution

Although Britain is a constitutional monarchy, there is **no British constitution** in the formal sense so that, unlike in France or the United States, no single written document in Britain can be referred to as *the* Constitution. It is a partly unwritten constitution in fact, in which conventions, customs, traditions and a few landmark documents play a major part.
The history of the constitution has been **evolutionary**, **with a gradual shift in the balance of power** from King to Parliament and then, at a later stage, from the House of Lords to the House of Commons until Britain became a parliamentary democracy in the early 20th century (by contrast, France has adopted a brand new constitution with each change of regime).
The two basic principles of the British Constitution were established at the time of the Glorious Revolution of 1688-89 : the first one is clearly **the supremacy of Parliament**, which represents the people, over the King, the second principle, which is derived from the first, is **the rule of law** (a principle actually asserted before the 'Glorious Revolution' with, for example, the passing of the *Habeas Corpus Act* of 1679 protecting citizens from arbitrary arrest).
The rule of law entails that **no one should be sanctioned unless they have broken the law** and that **everyone in Britain** – whatever their rank and position – **is subject to the law**, including ministers, Members of Parliament or top civil servants who are not immune from prosecution.
It has been observed that British citizens are as a rule **law-abiding citizens** and the law is probably more respected in Britain than in France. The main reason is that the law emanates from the people (this is why Parliament is so powerful in the British system), combined with a sense that if everybody respects the law (and rules in general) society will be a better place. This nevertheless seems to be changing antisocial behaviour and disrespect for the law becoming increasingly common in the UK.
British judges often assert their independence from both the Executive and the Legislature, although the separation between the executive and the legislative branches of government is not as clear-cut as in the USA since members of the *British Cabinet* also sit in Parliament and the *Speaker of the House of Lords* was until recently the *Lord Chancellor* (Ministre de la Justice), a senior member of the Cabinet in charge of the judiciary.

Constitution is thus made up of 3 traditional components :

- *statute law* or written legislation passed by Parliament such as the *Bill of Rights* (1689), the *Act of Settlement* (1701), and the various *Reform Bills* (voted in the 19th century).
- *Common law* which deals mostly with individual rights and liberties and whose authority is derived from customs and previous decisions taken by the judiciary, or case law. It is a very pragmatic, 'bottom-up approach to the law based on the study of concrete cases. It has the 'binding force of precedent'. Common law is sometimes as old as Britain itself.
- A number of conventions which are *traditional practices* having to do with the attributions of the Monarch or the relations between the government and Parliament.
- *European Law* which was applied until January 2020 with, to the displeasure of many Britons, systematically overrided British law.

The British Constitution could thus be described as both **cumulative and flexible** : it is indeed the result of an accumulation over the centuries of various traditions, cases and statutes (by comparison, amending the French constitution is a long, formal and heavy procedure requiring the summons of

both houses of Parliament). No system is perfect however, and there have been **calls for reform of the constitution** (new Bill of Rights, new electoral system based on proportional representation, an extensive reform of the House of Lords, devolution (i.e. a less centralized form of government) and an entirely written constitution clearly delineating the respective powers of Parliament and government). Some of these changes have been either implemented (devolution), or initiated (the reform of the House of Lords is under way) by Tony Blair and New Labour. Others have either never been seriously considered by the executive or simply failed.

- Parliament

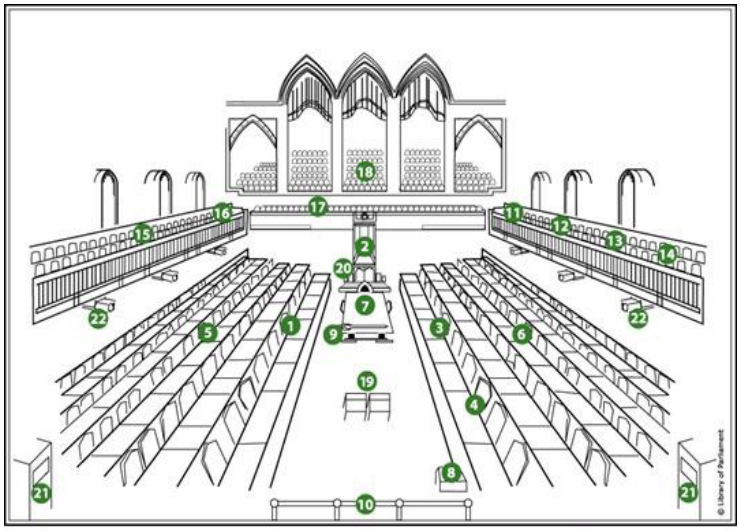
The seat of Parliament is the palace of Westminster, a world-wide famous neo-gothic building erected on the North bank of the river Thames in Victorian times. Parliament is one of Britain's most ancient institutions which has been in existence since the end of the 14th century. Like many parliaments around the world, it is a bicameral assembly (i.e. made up of two chambers, the House of Commons (lower House) and the House of Lords (Upper House).

- the House of Commons

The House of Commons is roughly the equivalent of the French *Assemblée Nationale*. **It is a representative assembly of 650 *Members of Parliament***, or *M.P.s,* each representing a constituency (533 for England, 59 for Scotland, 40 for Wales and 18 for Northern Ireland). According to the *Fixed -term Parliament Act* 2011, **general elections are held every five years on the first Thursday in May**, but Parliament can be dissolved at an earlier date if the Prime Minister loses a vote of confidence or if a majority of two-thirds in the House of Commons vote in favour of an early election. Whenever an MP dies or resigns, a by-election is held to elect a new member.

The House of Common is theoretically all-powerful, but in practice it has surrendered most of its powers to the government and its role today consists for the most part of implementing the government's policies. **The functions of the House of Commons are threefold** : its main business is to vote legislation, most bills being introduced by the government, vote the annual Finance Bill (budget annuel), and control the action of the government.
In order to become an Act, a bill has to go through several stages including an examination by a parliamentary committee. Amendments can be introduced by the House before a final debate and a vote are held. If the bill passes, it is sent to the House of Lords where it goes through a similar

procedure. If the bill passes, the Queen gives her assent and it becomes an Act of Parliament.
Members of the House can question ministers and criticize the government 4 times a week, but Prime Minister's *Question Time* only takes place once a week on Wednesday. The House of Commons sits about 160 days a year and its debates are chaired by a ***Speaker***, an MP elected by the House whose role is to keep order and make sure rules are respected, who also must remain impartial and only votes in case of a tie. Another prominent figure is the ***Leader of the House of Commons***, an MP appointed by the Prime Minister and a member of the Cabinet whose role is to plan and supervise the government's legislative programme and more generally to liaise between the executive and Parliament.
The proceeding of the House of Commons are **public** (including question time) and have been **televised on the BBC since 1989**.



- La Chambre des Lords

It's a **non-elected, non-representative assembly** of currently around 790 members, or *peers*, which was reformed in 1999. Until recently, it was made up of four categories of peers :

- ✗ *Hereditary peers* : male senior members of the British aristocracy whose titles are passed on to their heirs ; they were a majority until 1999.
- ✗ *Life peers* : since 1958, whose titles are not hereditary. Life peerages can be awarded to women and are created by the government to honour people who have given outstanding service to the nation (ex-Prime Ministers, trade unionists, prominent scientists or, less frequently, artists).
- ✗ Twelve *Law Lords* (sorte de juges suprêmes) : who formed the highest court of appeal in the

kingdom.

- ✗ *Lords Spirituals* : 24 senior bishops and the two archbishops).

Proceedings in the House of Lords are conducted in much the same way as in the House of Commons and party organisation is similar, but the Lords are more independently minded than Mps who are bound to respect party discipline. A significant number of peers, known as crossbenchers (or independent peers), do not even support a particular party. **The role of the House of Lords is now extremely reduced** : the Lords can propose amendments to laws and delay legislation, but not actually prevent it as **they lost their right of veto in 1911**.
Even if the House of Lords has retained **limited powers**, it is increasingly regarded as **anachronistic** in a modern democracy : it has for example been argued that the Lords represent only themselves – or aristocratic interests – and that they are a male-dominated assembly whose members do not even attend regularly. Their delaying tactics have often been branded as undemocratic, but the Lords can also be viewed as a safeguard against the reforming zeal of powerful governments not necessarily representative of voter opinion. Since the *House of Lords Act* of 1999, **the number of peers has been reduced by half,** and the majority are currently *life peers* who are arguably more representative of today's society than members of the aristocracy. There are now 92 *hereditary peers* – as opposed to about 750 in 1998 – who will remain members until the next stage of the reform. Further reforms have been suggested by successive governments but they were all rejected or abandoned.
In 2005, however, a major reform for a stricter separation of the judiciary from the legislature and the executive was introduced, with the passing of the *Constitutional Reform Act*.
The constitutional changes included the election of the Speaker of the House (an office previously held by the *Lord Chancellor* whose judicial function was furthermore transferred to the *Lord Chief Justice*) and the establishment of a new Supreme Court separate from the *House of Lords* (which entailed the removal of the Law Lords from the legislature). Another important change was the creation of an independent Judicial Appointments Commission for the appointment of judges.
In the absence of a consensus, **it will take several more years if not decades, before the sweeping constitutional overhaul undertaken by New Labour in 1997 is fully carried through**.

6. The Thatcher years

> "Margaret Thatcher was not merely the first woman and the longest-serving Prime Minister of modern times, but the most admired, most hated, most idolised and most vilified public figure of the second half of the twentieth century. To some she was the saviour of her country who ... created a vigorous enterprise economy which twenty years later was still outperforming the more regulated economies of the Continent. To others, she was a narrow ideologue whose hard-faced policies legitimised greed, deliberately increased inequality ... and destroyed the nation's sense of solidarity and civic pride. There is no reconciling these views: yet both are true."
>
> Campbell (2011b, p. 499)

The year 1979 and the election of ultra-conservative Margaret Thatcher, by all accounts a turning point in the history of 20thcentury politics.

- Thatcherism

The 'Thatcher years' were a period of confrontational politics, ideological conflict and radical reform. The new Prime Minister, who had been raised in a Methodist home, wanted to restore such Victorian values as **hard work, thrift, duty and self-reliance – individualism in shor**t. She was a staunch enemy of the Welfare State and of anything that smacked even faintly of collectivism. A strong advocate of the free market, she was influenced by such liberal economists as Friedrich A.Hayek and the American Milton Friedman.
The Thatcher revolution was twofold : it was first **a cultural revolution** as the Prime Minister was doggedly set on reviving **the spirit of entreprise while combating the 'dependency culture'**

which, she believed, was induced by the *Welfare State*. It was also **economic**, with a genuine commitment to **reduce state intervention**, which in practice meant dismantling the welfare state, cutting back public spending, privatising state-run industries and refusing to subsidize ailing private-sector industries. Moreover, in order for the laws of the market to operate freely, it was necessary to curb the excessive power of the trade unions. M.Thatcher also reinforced the power of the central government, which was rather a paradox for someone so deeply committed to liberalism and reduced state intervention.

- A mixed balance sheet

As often in politics, the balance sheet of the Thatcher years is **a mixed one** with a number of good as well as bad sides. Over the years, the various Conservative governments have succeeded in **revitalizing the British economy**. Living standards rose significantly, inflation was finally curbed thanks to strict monetarist policies, and at the end of the period the labour market showed definite signs of improvement. The 'entreprise culture' and its concomitant values – competition, risk-taking, hard work and individual responsibility – took root, the British economy being a lot more dynamic as a result. Income tax levels were reduced significantly, and Margaret Thatcher can also be credited for transforming the country into a nation of home owners and shareholders. Furthermore, due to the introduction of anti-union legislation, the number of days lost through strike action fell.
On the other hand, despite the global prosperity, **the gap between the rich and the poor widened dramatically as nothing was done to redistribute the wealth equitably**. With massive unemployment in the manufacturing sector, poverty increased and the period even saw the emergence of an underclass of homeless, destitute people sometimes living in cardboard boxes in the streets of British cities (a frequent sight in London in the 1990s). The number of people living under the poverty line actually rose from 5 to about 14 million, children being more particularly hit by that upsurge in deprivation. According to her detractor, M.Thatcher should also be held accountable for the current difficulties of the National Health Service (NHS) as she reduced public investment in that sector while favouring private initiative. She can also be reproached with strengthening the power of central government at the expense of local government which was partly dismantled when she was in office.
Lastly, her autocratic style of government was often criticized – even by her own ministers – her legendary inflexibility having earned her the nickname of 'Iron Lady'. Eventually, Margaret Thatcher, whose popularity had by 1990 reached unfathomable depths, was ousted out of office by her own party and replaced by John Major, a moderate, lacklustre Thatcherite who, contrary to all expectations, remained in office until 1997.

7. The New Labour Years

In 1997, after 18 years of Conservative rule, a Labour Prime Minister, Tony Blair, is elected. What permitted the election of a labour majority was the transformation of the Labour Party along reformist, social democratic lines. The confrontational atmosphere and ideological battles of the early 1980s had resulted in the radicalization of Labour. In order to woo 'Middle England' back, **New Labour clearly had to distance itself from Old Labour left-wing policies and discard all socialist references to the profit of a commitment to free enterprise**. The State should play a role in limiting the worst excesses of a free-market economy ; but the equalitarian ideal of old labour has clearly given way to a **meritocratic philosophy in which each individual is should be given the opportunities to succeed.**

- An uneven record

An admittedly dynamic, intelligent and skillful politician, Tony Blair was often accused by his detractors of relying a little too much on 'spin' (or political propaganda) and of favouring style over content.
Tony Blair won three general elections, and his balance sheet when he left office was in several ways positive. He successfully **reversed the centralizing process initiated by Thatcher** (directly elected mayors in big cities, devolution...), **implemented constitutional reform, and can be credited for the signing of the *Good Friday Peace Agreement*** (accord de paix en Irlande du Nord) in 1998. **Significant progress was made in such sectors as primary education, law and order, and the economy** : until 2007, Britain enjoyed sustained growth, low rates of inflation and a dynamic job market.
However, **serious problems persisted**, especially **in the health sector**, whose performance, despite massive public investment, remained to say the least disappointing. The same could be said of **transport**, with intractable road congestion problems and a rail network performing so poorly that the government even considered renationalization. On the social front, despite genuine effort to combat exclusion, **the gap between the rich and the poor remained wide**. But Blair's weakest point was probably **foreign affairs**, an area that was largely dominated by the unpopular decision to invade Iraq with the United States in 2003.
Strangely enough, this didn't prevent Blair from being re-elected in 2005, in part thanks to the lack of a credible opposition. Under mounting pressure from the party to step down, **he finally resigned in June 2007** and Gordon Brown, the *Chancellor of the Exchequer*, who had no rival in the party leadership election, immediately took over. The period 2007-2010 was marked by serious economic difficulties in great part due to the major financial crisis that first hit US financial institutions in 2007 before reaching the UK.Some major British banks being in the verge of bankruptcy, the government had no choice but to bailout these institutions to avoid a chain reaction and the collapse of the whole economy. The result was a massive budget deficit, followed by a serious economic downturn with a long period of negative growth, and high levels of unemployment. The grim economic outlook explains in part Labour's defeat in the 2010 general election.

- <u>The Coalition years</u>

If the Conservatives won the 2010 general election, they didn't gain an absolute majority of seats in the House of Commons,. They had no choice, therefore, but to form a coalition with the Lib Dems – a first since 1945 – who, paradoxically, were in many ways closer to Labour ideologically. The agreement reached by the Conservatives and Lib Dem remained a rather vague one and conspicuously avoided dealing with thorny issues such as Europe or the environment in detail. It was focused on such core, consensual values as 'freedom, fairness and responsibility'. Besides economic recovery, the main priority for the new government was the reduction of the deficit implemented through 'reduced public spending rather than increased taxes'. The cut in public spending (one of the most drastic since World War II) aimed for an £81 billion cut aver the next 4 years (for instance a 40% reduction in the teaching budget, or 7% cut for local councils). By 2013, 631,000 public sector jobs had disappeared, half of them in local town halls. The consequences were often disastrous especially in the North where some local communities are heavily dependent on public sector to support their economies. Some essential
The creation of 1.3 million new private sector jobs in the first three years of the coalition compensated some of the job losses. The economic recovery which began in the wake of the London Olympic Games in 2012, combined with a Welfare reform aiming at making work more profitable than welfare, has allowed unemployment to fall back to its pre-crisis level. However, reality is far less glorious than it seems with rising job insecurity and poverty.

8. Politics since 2010

- David Cameron

The major event during the last decade is without a doubt **the United Kingdom European Membership referendum, to ask the electorate whether the country should remain a member of the European Union, which resulted in a major political crisis in Great Britain.**
In January 2013, faced with the growing electoral success of the British eurosceptic party UKIP, David Cameron, the Prime Minister elected in 2010, delivered the Bloomberg speech and promised that, should the Conservatives win a parliamentary majority at the 2015 general election, the British government would negotiate more favourable arrangements for continuing British membership of the EU, before holding a referendum on whether the UK should remain in or leave the EU.
When the Conservative Party won a majority of seats in the House of Commons, Cameron reiterated his party's manifesto commitment to hold an in-out referendum by the end of 2017, but only after « negotiating a new settlement for Britain in the EU. » He had just one year to do so but failed. **The day after the referendum, David Cameron, who had campaigned for Remain, announced that he would resign in October.**

- Theresa May

On 13 July, almost three weeks after the vote, Theresa May, who served as Home Secretary in the Cameron government from 2010 to 2016 , was elected Conservative Party leader and became **the second female Prime Minister after Margaret Thatcher**. She is the first, and to date, the only woman to hold two of the Great Offices of State.

She **began the process of withdrawing the UK from the European Union**, triggering Article 50 in March 2017. The following month, she announced a snap general election with the aim of strengthening her hand in Brexit negotiations and highlighting her « strong and stable » leadership. This resulted in a hung parliament in which the number of Conservative seats had fallen from 330 to 317, despite the party winning its highest vote share since 1983. The loss of an overall majority prompted her to enter a confidence and supply arrangement with the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) to support a minority government. May survived a vote of no confidence from the Conservative Mps in December 2018 and a vote of no confidence tabled by Opposition Leader Jeremy Corbyn.

As Prime Minister, she also oversaw a £20 billion increase in funding to the National Health Service, established the first ever Race Disparity Audit and launched a 25-Year Environment Plan, amending the Climate Change Act 2008 to end the UK's contribution to global warming by 2050. Unemployment in the United Kingdom fell to record lows, the lowest jobless rate since 1975.

In 2019, after versions of her draft withdrawal agreement were rejected by Parliament three times, she resigned and was succeeded by Boris Johnson, her former Foreign Secretary. She was reelected as MP the year after and remains in the House of Commons as backbencher.

- Boris Johnson

The former mayor of London (2008-2016) was elected Leader of the

Conservative Party in 2019 and was appointed Prime Minister when Theresa May resigned. He promised the UK would leave the EU by October 31st, 2019. His September 2019 his prorogation of Parliament was ruled unlawful by the Supreme Court. He called for general elections in December 2019, and led the Conservative Party to its biggest parliamentary victory since 1987, winning 43.6% of the vote – the largest share of any party since 1979. **The United Kingdom withdrew from the EU under the terms of a revised Brexit withdrawal agreement on January 31st 2020, entering into a transition period and trade negotiations leading to the *EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement*.**

Since March 2020, Johnson has led the United Kingdom's ongoing response to the COVID-19 pandemic. After playing down the importance of the pandemic, he was forced to impose a general lockdown on March 23rd, before being himself contaminated a few days after.

Boris Johnson, sometimes nicknamed BoJo by the media, is seen by his supporters as optimistic, humorous and entertaining while his critics have accused him of elitism, cronyism and prejudice. His actions, that are viewed by his supporters as **pragmatic** tend to be viewed by opponents as **opportunistic**.

The general elections made Boris Johnson's victory complete, but it was **the worst defeat for Labour since the 1930s and for Jeremy Corbyn, the Leader of the Labour Party and Leader of the Opposition since 2015**. Taking the party to the left, he advocated renationalising public utilities and railways, a less interventionist military policy, and reversals of austerity cuts to welfare and public services. Although critical of the European Union, he supported continued membership in the 2016 referendum. Corbyn has condemned antisemitism but has been criticised for his alleged past associations with individuals accused of antisemitism.

Following the Labour Party's unsuccessful performance in the 2019 general election, **Corbyn conceded defeat** and stated that he intended to step down as leader following the election of a successor and that he would not lead the party into the next election. According to polling by Lord Ashcroft, Corbyn was himself a major contribution to the party's defeat.

On 4 April 2020, the results of the 2020 Labour Party leadership election were announced, with **Sir Keir Starmer – a self-proclaimed socialist a lot more moderate than his predecessor – winning the election and succeeding Corbyn as the leader of the Labour Party.**

Sources :

Substance & Style, coord. Fabien Fichaux, Optimum, Ellipses 2018.
A Handbook of British Civilization, Introduction à la civilisation britannique, 2ème édition, Hervé Picton, Optimum, Ellipses, 2016.
Wikipedia, consulté en mai 2020 et avril 2021.

Chapter 12 Democracy

UK : Government and Politics

1. Give a brief definition of common law.
2. What are the three main functions of the House of Commons ?
3. What is the role of the House of Lords ?
4. What shows the separation of powers in Britain is not as strict as in France or the USA ?Is the British Prime Minister elected ?
5. What does 'cabinet government' mean ? When did it give way to a more Prime-Minister-centered form of government ?
6. What are the main political parties in the UK ? Which is the most pro-Europe ? The most Eurosceptic ?
7. Explain the meaning of 'FPTP'.
8. Why was 1979 a turning point in the history of British politics ?
9. What is Tony Blair's legacy (main successes, failures?).
10. How did today's government come to be formed ? Is it popular ?