**Faculty of Letters and Languages – M’sila**

**Department of English**

**Level:** Master 01

**Course:** British Civilization.

**Lecture**: Government and Politics.

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**INTRODUCTION:**

The political history in the British-Irish Isles over the past eight hundred years illustrates the developing identity of the British state and evolutionary changes in its composition. The slow weakening of non-democratic monarchical and aristocratic power led to political and legislative authority being transferred to UK parliamentary structures, a central UK government and a powerful Prime Minister. Changing social conditions resulted in a growth of political parties, the extension of the vote to all adults, the development of local government, and twentieth-century devolution (transfer) of some political power to Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. These historical processes have been accompanied by political, social and religious conflicts and constitutional compromise. Political structures are still vigorously debated. The UK government in London is accused of being too secretive, too centralized and insufficiently responsive to the needs of the diverse peoples of the United Kingdom.

**The Political Framework**

The UK is described either as a constitutional monarchy (with the monarch as head of state) or as a parliamentary system, which is divided into legislative, executive and judicial branches. The Westminster Parliament possesses supreme legislative power in UK matters. The executive UK government governs by passing its policies (many of which are applicable to most of Britain) through Parliament as Acts of Parliament and operates through ministries or departments headed by Ministers or Secretaries of State. The judiciary is independent of the legislative and executive branches of government. The judges of the higher courts determine the law and interpret Acts of Parliament and European Union law.

Britain has no written constitution contained in any one document. Instead, the constitution consists of statute law (Acts of Parliament); common law or judge-made law; conventions (principles and practices of government which are not legally binding but have the force of law): some ancient documents such as Magna Carta; and the new addition of European Union law.



**I-The Monarchy**

The monarchy is the oldest institution in Britain and there is hereditary succession to the throne, but only for Protestants. The eldest son of a monarch currently has priority over older daughters. The monarchy’s continuity has been interrupted only by Cromwellian rule (1653–60), although there have been different lines of descent such as the Tudors and Stuarts.

Royal executive power has disappeared. But the monarch still has formal constitutional roles and is head of state, head of the executive, judiciary and legislature, ‘supreme governor’ of the Church of England and commander-in-chief of the armed forces. Government ministers and officials are the monarch’s servants, and many public office-holders swear allegiance to the Crown. The monarchy is thus a permanent fixture in the British system, unlike temporary politicians.

**Roles of the Monarch**

The monarch is expected to be politically neutral; is supposed to reign but not rule; and cannot make laws, impose taxes, spend public money or act unilaterally. The monarch acts only on the advice of political ministers, which cannot be ignored, and contemporary Britain is therefore governed by Her Majesty’s Government in the name of the Queen.

The monarch performs important duties such as the opening and dissolving of Parliament; giving the Royal Assent (or signature) to bills which have been passed by both Houses of Parliament; appointing government ministers and public figures; granting honors; leading proceedings of the Privy Council; and fulfilling international duties as head of state. A central power still possessed by the monarch is the choice and appointment of the UK Prime Minister. By convention, this person is normally the leader of the political party which has a majority in the Commons. However, if there is no clear majority or if the political situation is unclear, the monarch could in theory make a free choice. In practice, advice is given by royal advisers and leading politicians in order to present an acceptable candidate.

The monarch has a right to be informed of all aspects of national life by receiving government documents and meeting regularly with the Prime Minister. The monarch also has the right to encourage, warn and advise ministers. The impact of royal advice on formal and informal levels could be significant and raises questions about whether such influence should be held by an unelected figure who could potentially either support or undermine political leaders.

Much of the cost of the royal family’s official duties is met from the Civil List (public funds which are approved by Parliament). Following concern over expense, the Civil List has now been reduced to a few members of the immediate royal family. Other costs incurred by the monarch as a private individual or as sovereign come either from the Privy Purse (finance received from the revenues of some royal estates) or from the Crown’s own investments, which are very considerable and on which the monarch now pays income tax.

**II-The Privy Council**

The ancient Privy Council is still constitutionally tied to the monarchy. Historically, it developed from a small group of royal advisers into the executive branch of the monarch’s government. But its powerful position declined in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as its functions were transferred to a parliamentary Cabinet and new ministries. Today, its members (such as cabinet ministers) advise the monarch on government business which does not need to pass through Parliament and may serve on influential committees.

**Roles of the Council**

There are about four hundred Privy Councillors, but the body works mostly through small groups. A full council is summoned only on the death of a monarch and the accession of a new one or when there are constitutional issues at stake.

Apart from its practical duties and its role as a constitutional forum, the most important tasks of the Privy Council today are performed by its Judicial Committee. This is the final court of appeal from some Commonwealth countries and dependencies. It may be used by some bodies in Britain and overseas and its rulings can be influential. It also rules on any conflicts between Westminster and the Scottish Parliament.

**III-The Westminster Parliament**

The UK Parliament is housed in the Palace of Westminster in London. It comprises the non-elected House of Lords, the elected House of Commons and the monarch. The two Houses contain members from England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland and represent people with varied backgrounds and traditions. Parliament gathers as a unified body only on ceremonial occasions, such as the State Opening of Parliament by the monarch in the House of Lords. Here it listens to the monarch’s speech from the throne, which outlines the UK government’s forthcoming legislative program.

In constitutional theory, Parliament has legal sovereignty in all matters and can create, abolish or amend laws and institutions for all or any part(s) of Britain. In practice, this means the implementation of the government’s policies. All three parts of Parliament must normally pass a bill before it can become an Act of Parliament and law. Parliament also votes money to government; examines government policies and administration; scrutinizes European Union legislation; and debates political issues. It consists of two chambers:

**1-The House of Lords**

The *House of Lords* consists of Lords Temporal and Lords Spiritual. Lords Spiritual are the Archbishops of York and Canterbury and 24 senior bishops of the Church of England. Lords Temporal comprise (1) some 92 peers and peeresses with hereditary titles elected by their fellows; (2) about 577 life peers and peeresses, who have been selected by political parties and an independent Appointments Commission; and (3) the Lords of Appeal (Law Lords).

**2-The House of Commons**

The *House of Commons* comprises 650 Members of Parliament (MPs). They are elected by voters (from age eighteen) and represent citizens in Parliament. There are 533 parliamentary seats for England, 40 for Wales, 59 for Scotland and 18 for Northern Ireland.

**IV-Politics and the Two-Party System**

British elections at parliamentary, devolved and local levels depend upon the party political system, which has existed since the seventeenth century. For UK parliamentary general elections, the parties present their policies in the form of **manifestos** to the electorate for consideration during the few weeks of campaigning. A party candidate (chosen by a specific party) in a **constituency** is elected to the Westminster Parliament on a combination of party manifesto and the personality of the candidate. But party-activity continues outside the election period itself, as the politicians battle for power and the ears of the electorate at all levels.

Since 1945 there have been eight **Labor** and eight **Conservative** UK governments in Britain. Some have had large majorities in the House of Commons, while others have had small ones. Some, like the Labor government in the late 1970s and the Conservatives in the 1990s, had to rely on the support of smaller parties, such as the Liberals and more recently **UKIP**, the **far-right** party, to remain in power. Most of the MPs in the House of Commons belong to either the Conservative or the Labor Party. This continues the traditional two-party system in British politics, in which power alternates between two major parties.

**The Labour Party** has historically been a **left-of-centre** party with its own right and left wings. It emphasized social justice, equality of opportunity, economic planning and the state ownership of industries and services. It was supported by the trade unions (who had been influential in the party’s development), the working class and some of the middle class. Its electoral strongholds are historically in Scotland, south Wales and the Midland and northern English industrial cities.

**The Conservative Party** is a **right-of-centre** party, which also has right- and left-wing sections. It regards itself as a national party and appeals to people across class barriers. It emphasizes personal, social and economic freedom, individual ownership of property and shares and law and order. The Conservatives became more radical in their eighteen years of government power (1979–97). But splits in the party on policy (particularly Europe, the Euro and immigration) have deepened.



**Exercises**

**1-Explain and examine the following terms:**

Devolution-Parliament-Sovereignty-Constitutional Monarchy-Legislature-Judicial

**2-In a short essay discuss one of the following topics:**

Discuss the position and powers of the monarch in the British constitution.

Explain the difference between the two MAJOR political parties in the UK Parliament.

**References**

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