CITIZENS, SOCIETY, AND THE STATE

In many ways, Britain is a homogeneous culture. English is spoken by virtually all British citizens, and only about 5% of Britain's 60 million people are ethnic minorities. For much of British history, the major **social cleavages** that shape the way the political system worked were based on multi-national identities, social class distinctions, and the Protestant/Catholic split in Northern Ireland. In recent years a major cleavage has developed based on race and ethnicity, with tensions regarding Muslim minorities increasing, as evidenced in race riots in May 2001 in the northern town of Oldham, and similar disturbances in Burnley, Leeds, and Bradford a few weeks later. In more recent years, terrorist activities have deepened the divisions, a situation that many advanced democracies of Europe and North America have faced.

MULTI-NATIONAL IDENTITIES

The "United Kingdom" evolved from four different nations: England, Wales, Scotland, and part of Ireland. England consists of the southern 2/3 of the island, and until the 16th century, did not rule any of the other lands. By the 18th century, England ruled the entire island, and became known as "Great Britain." In the early 20th century, Northern Ireland was added, creating the "United Kingdom." These old kingdoms still have strong national identities that greatly impact the British political system.

- **England** – The largest region of Great Britain is England, which also contains the majority of the population. Throughout most of the history of the British Isles, the English have dominated other nationalities, and they still have a disproportionate share of political power. Today the challenge is to integrate the nationalities into the country as a whole, but at the same time allow them to keep their old identities.

- **Wales** – west of England – became subject to the English king in the 16th century, and has remained so till the present. Modern Welsh pride is reflected in the flag – the **Plaid Cymru** – and in the fact that the language is still alive and currently being taught in some Welsh schools. Even though Wales accepted English authority long ago, some resentment remains, as well as some feelings of being exploited by their richer neighbors.

- **Scotland** – For many years the Scots resisted British rule, and existed as a separate country until the early 1600s. Ironically, Scotland was not joined to England through conquest, but through intermarriage of the royalty. When Queen Elizabeth I died without an heir in 1603, the English throne went to her nephew James I, who also happened to be king of Scotland. A century later both countries agreed to a single Parliament in London. However, Scots still have a strong national identity, and tend to think of themselves as being very different from the English. The Scots too have their own national flag, and the Scottish Parliament has recently been revived.

- **Northern Ireland** – England and Ireland have a long history of arguing about religion. After Oliver Cromwell won the English Civil War in the mid 17th century, he tried to impose Protestantism on staunchly Catholic Ireland to no avail. English claims to Irish lands were settled shortly after World War I ended, when Ireland was granted **home rule**, with the exception of its northeast corner, where Protestants outnumbered Catholics by about 60% to 40%. Home rule came largely because of pressure from the **Irish Republican Army (the IRA)**, who used guerilla warfare tactics to convince the British to allow Irish independence. Finally, in 1949, the bulk of Ireland became a totally independent country, and Northern Ireland has remained under British rule, but not without a great deal of conflict between Protestants and Catholics.

The British Settlement with Ireland, 1922. In December 1922, after intense guerilla warfare in Ireland, the Irish parliament sitting in Dublin proclaimed the existence of the Irish Free State, a self-governing dominion which included all of Ireland except the six northern counties of Ulster, where Protestants outnumbered Catholics by about 60% to 40%. These counties formed Northern Ireland, which still sent representatives to the British Parliament.

SOCIAL CLASS DISTINCTIONS

Distinctions between rich and poor have always been important in Britain, with the most important distinction today being between working and middle-class people. The two classes are not easily divided by income, but psychologically and subjectively, the gulf between them is still wide. German sociologist Ralf Dahrendorf explains the divide in terms of **solidarity**, particularly among the working class. The point is that keeping the old job and living in the old neighborhood – the sense of family and friends – is more important than individual success.

British social classes have traditionally been reinforced by the education system. "**Public schools**" were originally intended to train boys for "public life" in the military, civil service, or politics. They are expensive, and they have educated young people to continue after their parents as members of the ruling elite. A large number of Britain's elite have gone to "public" boarding schools such as Eton, Harrow, Rugby, St. Paul's, and Winchester. Middle-class students commonly attend private grammar schools, where students wear uniforms but do not live in. Only 65% of British seventeen-year-olds are still in school, the lowest level of any industrialized democracy.

The most important portal to the elite classes is through Oxford and Cambridge Universities, or **Oxbridge.** Nearly half of all Conservative Members of Parliament went to Oxbridge, as have about one quarter of all Labour MPs. Percentages in cabinet positions are even higher, and prime ministers almost always graduate from one or the other school. Since World War II, more scholarships have been available to Oxbridge, so that more working and middle-class youths may attend the elite schools. Also, the number of other universities has grown, so that higher education is more widespread than before. Still, university attendance in Britain is much lower than in other industrialized democracies.

ETHNIC MINORITIES

According to the 2001 census, only about 7.1% of the British population is of non-European origin, with most coming from countries that were formerly British colonies. However, the minority ethnic population grew by 53 percent between 1991 and 2001, from 3 million in 1991 to 4.6 million in 2001. The main groups are:

- **Indian** – 23% of all non-European population
- **Pakistani** – 16%
- **Afro-Caribbean** – 12.2%
- **Black African** – 10.5%

Because of tight immigration restrictions in the past, most ethnic minorities are young, with about half of the population under the age of 25. The growth in percentages of minorities has grown despite the restrictions that were placed on further immigration during the Thatcher administration of the 1980s. Immigration restrictions are currently under debate, but the Labour government has allowed the restrictions to remain in place.

The British have often been accused of adjusting poorly to their new ethnic population. Reports abound of unequal treatment by the police and physical and verbal harassment by citizens. The May 2001 race riots in several cities increased tensions, and new fears of strife have been stoked by post 9/11 world politics. Today

there is some evidence that whites are leaving London to settle in surrounding suburban areas, resulting in a higher percentage of minority population living in London. Despite this segregation, the mixed-race population appears to be increasing, with the census of 2001 offering for the first time in British history a category for mixed-race people.

Muslim Minorities

Terrorist attacks, successful and attempted, have occurred in Britain over the past few years, with a major attack in 2005, schemes foiled by the government in the summer of 2006, and car-bombings in 2007. Other advanced democracies have suffered attacks and plots as well. Of course, the United States was attacked on September 11th, 2001, and the Madrid bombings in 2004 were Europe's most lethal terrorist outrage. In Canada 17 people were arrested in June 2007 on suspicion of scheming to blow up buildings there. However, Britain's risk for home-grown terrorist attacks may be greater than many other countries. Several problems for Britain are:

- **Distinct minority/majority cleavages** – Muslims have an identity of being a minority distinct from a well-established majority, such as the English in Britain, the French in France, and the Germans in Germany. In contrast, many people in the United States are immigrants, and the "majority" ethnicity of white Americans in many U.S. cities has already become a minority. With so many different ethnic and racial identities, the majority identity in the United States is not as clearcut as it is in most European countries.

- **Social class differences of Muslims** – In the United States, many Muslims tend to be relatively well-off, while many British Muslims are disaffected and unemployed. Many British Muslims are the children of illiterate workers slipped in as cheap industrial labor, and their childhood experiences have not endeared them to British culture.

- **Pakistani Muslims** – Many Muslims in the rest of Europe came from Turkey and Africa, but the largest group of British Muslims comes from Pakistan. Since Osama bin Laden and his companions are believed to be under the protection of Pakistanis, some scholars think that the links of British Muslims to al-Qaeda (bin Laden's group) are stronger than they are in other European countries.

- **Opposition to the Iraqi War** – The fact that many British citizens are very hostile toward the war may have helped to radicalize young Muslims, who appear to believe that the British government was supporting the U.S. in a war against Islam. The withdrawal of British troops in 2009 may mitigate this factor.

- **Lack of integration of minorities** – Polls suggest that alienation of minorities in Britain may be higher than it is in other countries because the national culture has not absorbed the groups into mainstream culture. This problem is apparent in France as well, where girls may not wear headscarves at school. In Britain they may attend classes in full *hijab*, but minorities still appear to feel as if they are treated as second-class citizens.

Immigrants from Eastern Europe

Another major change in British demographics is an influx of about one million immigrants from the eight central eastern European countries that joined the European Union in 2004. Poles, who have made up about two-thirds of the newcomers, are now the largest group of foreign nationals in Britain, up from 13th place in 2004. The main draw has been better job opportunities in Britain than in eastern Europe, but the recession in 2008 placed some doubt as to whether or now the newcomers would stay, since the British job market has withered. However, since the job market is even worse in eastern Europe, at least some of the new workers

will probably stay in Britain. Gordon Brown reacted to the job squeeze by calling for more "British jobs for British workers," a rallying cry that once only the far right used. Eastern Europeans have also been more likely to settle in areas outside London, with only about 21% living in London, compared with 41% of other foreign nationals. Many are migrant workers who pick crops in rural areas or fill other low-paying jobs that British workers shun, although with unemployment rates going up, the potential for labor conflict is real.

POLITICAL BELIEFS AND VALUES

In the early 1960s political scientists Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba wrote that the "**civic culture**" (political culture) in Britain was characterized by trust, deference to authority and competence, pragmatism, and harmony. The economic crisis of the 1970s and the continuing conflicts regarding Northern Ireland have challenged this view of citizenship in Britain, but the overall characteristics seem to still be in place today.

British citizens reflect what Almond and Verba saw as good qualities for democratic participation: high percentages of people that vote in elections, acceptance of authority, tolerance for different points of view, and acceptance of the rules of the game. However, social and economic changes during the 1970s altered these characteristics so that today British citizens are less supportive of the collective consensus and more inclined to values associated with a free market economy. Many observers believe that the "**politics of protest**" – or the tendency to disagree openly and sometimes violently with the government – have become increasingly acceptable.

Some manifestations of changing political beliefs and values include:

- **Decreasing support for labor unions** – British labor unions have strong roots in the Industrial Revolution, and class solidarity supports union membership. However, when unions staged crippling strikes during the 1970s, public opinion turned against them, as people began to view unions as "bullies" to both the government and the general population. Margaret Thatcher's tough stance against the unions intensified strife between unions and the Conservative government.
- **increased violence regarding Northern Ireland** – The issues surrounding British claims to Northern Ireland intensified during the early 1970s after British troops killed thirteen Catholics in a "bloody Sunday" incident in January 1972. The IRA and Protestant paramilitaries stepped up their campaigns of violence. Although in recent years the groups have consented to negotiate with the government, the threat of violent eruptions remains strong today.
- **Thatcherism** – The Conservative Party controlled British government from 1979 until 1997. Although later modified by Prime Minister John Major, Margaret Thatcher's "revolution" toward a free market economy certainly affected political attitudes. She rejected collectivism and its emphasis on the redistribution of resources from rich to poor and government responsibility for full employment. Thatcherism fostered entrepreneurial values of individualism and competition over the solidarity of social classes and the tradition of *noblesse oblige.*
- **New Labour** – Despite these radical changes of the 1970s and 80s, Britain has not deserted its traditional political culture. **Tony Blair** led a Labour Party that loosened its ties to labor unions, and a new "Good Friday" Agreement on Northern Ireland was reached in 1998. Thatcherism has been incorporated into political attitudes, but in the early 21st century, both parties are more inclined to a middle path, or "**third way**."
- **Protests Over the Iraq War** – Not only did ordinary citizens vocally protested Britain's involvement in the Iraq War, many political leaders openly criticized it as well. In a political system where party loyalty is valued above all, many Labour MPs (Members of Parliament) withdrew their support for

Blair's policy in Iraq. Their resistance to the party leadership extended to the cabinet, with several party leaders resigning their posts, despite the strong tradition of collective consensus. The ill will spread into domestic affairs as well, so that Blair had little choice but to resign in June 2007.

VOTING BEHAVIOR

Like most other Europeans, British citizens have relatively high percentages of qualified voters who go to the polls. Although there was a notable decline in the elections of 2001 and 2005, more than 70% of eligible citizens normally vote in parliamentary elections. Today voters have less party loyalty than they once did, but voting behavior is still clearly tied to social class and region.

- **Social class** – Until World War II, voting in Britain largely followed class lines. The working class supported the Labour Party, and the middle class voted Conservative. However, today the lines of distinction are blurred, partly because the society and the parties themselves have changed. For example, some middle-class people who grew up in working-class homes still vote the way their parents did. On the other hand, many in the working classes have been attracted to the Conservative platform to cut taxes, and to keep immigrants out. In recent years, both parties have come back to the center from the extreme views of the 1970s and 1980s, as reflected in Labour leader Tony Blair's program to provide a "third way," or a centrist alternative. However, the Labour victories of 1997, 2001 and 2005 show that the party is strongest among people who feel disadvantaged: the Scots, the Welsh, and the poor. In the post-Blair years, the distinctions between Labour and Conservative Parties have continued to blur, leaving room for other parties, particularly the Liberal Democrats, to compete for votes in all social classes.

- **Regional factors** – The Labour Party usually does well in urban and industrial areas and in Scotland and Wales. The industrial cities of the north – around Liverpool, Manchester, and Newcastle, and in Yorkshire – almost always support the Labour candidates, as do people that vote in central London. The areas where Conservatives usually win are mostly in England, especially in rural and suburban areas. These voting patterns are tied to social class, but they also reflect urban vs. rural values.