

# British Politics Today: Towards a New Political Science of British Politics?

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For much of the postwar period, British politics was characterized, by mainstream and radical commentators alike, in terms of continuity, stability and the replication of long-enduring traditions. Concepts such as consensus, settlement, bipartisanship and, indeed, ‘the British political tradition’ featured prominently in the political science of British politics. As Peter Kerr has recently suggested, postwar British politics has conventionally been recounted in terms of an ‘established narrative’. As he explains,

the story which is told is one in which two principal protagonists, the Labour government of 1945 and the Conservative governments under Mrs Thatcher, succeeded in their respective attempts radically to reconstruct the nature of the British state. Between these two periods, British politics is said to have been dominated by a long period of consensus and relative stasis during which government policy exhibited an overall degree of continuity. (2001: 1)

In recent years, however, the internal grammar of that narrative has been challenged, as has the language in which that narrative was couched. That challenge has come from two quarters. The first is from revisionists, such as Kerr himself, critical of the account it offers of postwar British political development (see also Marsh et al. 1999). The second comes from those, somewhat greater in number, more favourably disposed towards such a narrative but nonetheless keen to emphasize the extent

to which British politics today marks a departure from that which characterized the postwar period (see, for instance, Giddens 1994, 1998; Kavanagh 1997; Mulgan 1994; Seldon 2001; for a critical commentary see Fielding 2000). In recent years, then, attention has focused to a much greater extent on discontinuity, flux and change and the means by which to adjudicate between continuity and discontinuity, stability and flux, stasis and change (for a review see Hay 1999a). In the process the political science of British politics has become more reflexive theoretically as, arguably, its agenda has broadened. The contemporary political science of British politics is thus characterized by its references to discontinuity, transformation, novelty and crisis – in short, by its focus on the question of change.

Yet the greater awareness of and sensitivity to change is not all that sets the contemporary political science of British politics apart from its postwar counterpart. If anything, rather more significant has been the far greater extent to which British political dynamics have come to be contextualized (historically, comparatively and, above all, internationally) in the ‘new’ political science of British politics. Thus, while the established narrative described by Kerr tended to depict a hermetically sealed domestic politics whose evolutionary dynamic (such as it was) could be derived to a considerable extent from endogenous (or internal) factors such as the conduct of domestic political actors, recent analyses have tended by contrast to point to the significance of exogenous (or external) factors. The end of the Cold War (and the attendant need for a new international security architecture) and the contested processes of both European integration and globalization loom ever larger in accounts of contemporary British political dynamics.

While things were, arguably, ever thus, few self-respecting commentators on British politics today now fail to acknowledge the complex web of international interdependencies in which Britain is embedded. This has brought a welcome (and long overdue) recognition of the artificial and unhelpful polarization of international relations and domestic political analysis, with a growing recognition of ‘the international conditions of existence of domestic political and economic dynamics’ and ‘the domestic conditions of existence of international/global political and economic dynamics’ (Hay and Marsh 1999: 14).

This is the context in which the present volume should perhaps be situated. Its aim has been to bring together a distinguished array of internationally renowned scholars in the area of British politics (broadly conceived). Though given a substantial degree of latitude within the confines of the overall project, each author has been invited to present an assessment and critical commentary on key developments, both sub-

stantive and theoretical, in our understanding of British politics in recent years. They have been encouraged not only to summarize and reflect critically on recent work in their areas of expertise, but also to propose fruitful avenues for future empirical scrutiny and theoretical development.

### Continuity, discontinuity, change and stability

As already indicated it is the question of change – its nature, extent, direction, reversibility and temporal characteristics – that emerges as the key and unifying theme of the present volume. In this sense the title *British Politics Today* is perhaps somewhat anomalous. For in so far as it implies a static snapshot of the condition of British politics at a particular, if nonetheless crucial, juncture, it does not capture well the contribution made by the following chapters. Indeed, not one chapter in this collection confines itself to a dehistoricized mapping of the present; each contextualizes contemporary dynamics historically and, in many cases, internationally (see, in particular, the chapters by Coates, Rosamond and Croft). Taken together, then, they make a significant contribution to the attempt to identify, describe and explain the processes and mechanisms linking British politics yesterday, today – and tomorrow. In so doing, they might be seen as contributing to a reconception of political analysis as an exercise in capturing the dynamism of an ongoing process of change rather than an attempt to map, detail or model an essentially static object of analysis.<sup>1</sup>

Given the centrality of questions of change to the analysis and, indeed, the discourse of contemporary British politics,<sup>2</sup> it is not surprising that assessments of change are highly contested – not least by the contributors to the present volume. It is thus important at the outset that we establish what we mean by terms such as change, continuity and discontinuity.<sup>3</sup>

### Conceptualizing change

It is perhaps appropriate to begin by introducing two key conceptual distinctions frequently deployed within the analysis of institutional and/or behavioural change yet all too often conflated: that between *change and stability* (or *dynamism and stasis*) on the one hand, and that between *continuity and discontinuity* on the other. It is certainly tempting to use these conceptual pairings interchangeably (and in so doing to confuse them); that temptation should be resisted.

Since the former is the more general it will be dealt with first. To do so requires that we consider what it is that we mean when we refer to change. Like many frequently used and taken-for-granted lay concepts, 'change' is difficult to define. We all know it when we see or experience it and, since we do, we do not spend very much time worrying about its definition. For current purposes, change implies a contrast between states or moments of a common system, institution, relationship or entity – a difference between the structuring of relations *then* and the structuring of relations *now*. Yet as Hermann Strasser and Susan Randall note, in order to identify change, 'the unit of analysis must preserve a minimum of identity' (1981: 16). This raises a crucial point. To speak of change is to imply some measure of continuity – it is, in short, to imply change *in* or *of something* and hence a common point or system of reference. The disintegration or termination of a system and its replacement by another is then not strictly an instance of *change* but one of *substitution*. Thus, if our system of reference is the feudal state, bourgeois revolutions represent not change but a substitution of the feudal state by the capitalist state; if our system of reference, on the other hand, is the state itself, then we can talk of institutional, ideational and behavioural change. To identify change over a given time frame is then, strangely perhaps, to make the simultaneous claim that the system exhibits some degree of continuity over this time frame; it is to suggest that it is indeed still the same system at the end of the time frame considered as it was at the start (even if its specific form may have altered).

Yet if change, despite being frequently conflated with *discontinuity*, does in fact imply a degree of *continuity*, it should not be regarded as synonymous with either. The distinction between continuity and discontinuity, though often mistaken for that between stability and change, in fact refers to types or modalities of change and, more specifically, to different *temporalities of change*. If we can then differentiate between issues relating to the extent of change on the one hand and those relating to the temporal characteristics of particular periods of change on the other, the distinction between continuity and discontinuity is concerned exclusively with the latter. While each chapter in this collection is concerned with identifying mechanisms and processes of change, opinions vary as to the temporal characteristics of that change – its continuous or discontinuous nature.

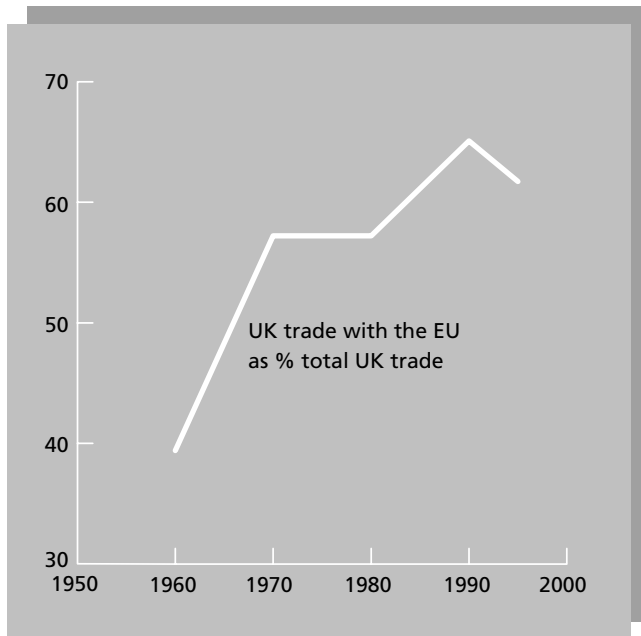
*Continuity* implies that whatever change occurs is incremental, iterative, cumulative and unidirectional.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, it implies that all moments in this gradual or *evolutionary* process are of equal significance. It implies, in short, an even unfolding of events over time. By contrast, *discontinuity* implies rupture, transformation and an altering of

trajectory (whether periodic, cyclical or random) – a process or processes of change punctuated by reversals, tipping points, turning points or other strategic moments of heightened significance. It implies an uneven conception of political time. Change is a necessary but not in itself sufficient condition of discontinuity.

Like the issue of change itself, whether we identify continuity or discontinuity will depend, essentially, on the system with respect to which we choose to assess such temporal characteristics of change. To return to our earlier example, if our system of reference is the feudal state, bourgeois revolutions will constitute a significant discontinuity (since arguably they destroy all that is distinctively feudal about such a regime). If, however, our system of reference is the state itself we may tend to emphasize significant elements of continuity – the national form of the state, its continued monopoly over the means of violence, its patriarchal character, its centralized nature and so forth.

### The contested nature of change in contemporary British political discourse and analysis

Preliminaries aside, we are now in a position to examine in more detail some of the common conceptual and empirical issues raised in the chapters which follow. The first, and perhaps most striking, is the contested nature of change. For some commentators 1997 was a watershed election as significant as that of 1906, 1945 or 1979 (Seldon 2001). For others it marked little more than a return to consensus politics (Kavanagh, chapter 4 below) and a confirmation of the consolidation of much of the neoliberal economic legacy of Thatcherism (Heffernan 2000). Still others have argued that a growing process of either European integration or globalization – or both – has served to render domestic political interventions (and hence domestic electoral politics) essentially redundant as ever more potent external economic imperatives have flooded over Britain's increasingly porous borders (for instance, Giddens 1999; Gray 1997). This latter issue is especially contested, with yet others suggesting that globalization and European integration in fact pull in very different directions. For such authors, Britain's external trading relations have been Europeanized (more accurately EU-ized) not globalized, to reveal globalization as in fact little more than a convenient political excuse for a self-imposed path of political impotence in the face of rather more parochial constraints (Hay 2002a; see also Hirst and Thompson 1999, 2000). The evidence they present is stark indeed,



**Figure 1.1** UK trade: a story of globalization or EU-ization?

*Source:* Based on Eurostat data.

and would seem to stand in marked contrast to the conventional orthodoxy (see for instance, figure 1.1).

What this serves to indicate is a staggering lack of consensus among commentators and political scientists alike about the significance of contemporary British political dynamics and the nature and severity of the external constraints which may serve to condition or even circumscribe the realm of domestic political choice. Clearly not all of the above interpretations can be accurate. Arguably they are mutually exclusive. And the above list merely scratches the surface of ongoing dispute and debate. In this context it is perhaps important to state that the purpose of this volume is not to resolve such disputes but to bring together a range of acknowledged experts who have written on such issues in the hope that together they might clarify the nature of the issues at stake and the extent to which they can be adjudicated empirically.

Were things not already complicated enough, they are only further confused by the discourse in which much contemporary political debate is conducted – a discourse which, again, places epochal change at centre-stage. As I have elsewhere suggested,

No self-respecting critical analyst or commentator can possibly but shudder at the proliferation of entities, processes, institutions, theories, disciplines and now parties to which the prefix 'new' has been appended in recent years. We inhabit, variously, a 'new world order', a 'new world disorder' or 'new times'. Our politics exhibits all the characteristics of a new consensus fashioned around the ideas of the new right and reflected in the spirit of 'new realism' espoused, embodied and internalised most vigorously by New Labour. Should we require yet further evidence of the ubiquity of novelty, we need look no further than the world of political discourse. Here we discover, once again, New Labour leading us tirelessly and inexorably down the road to New Britain, armed with its post-neo-classical [or, simply, 'new'] endogenous growth theory, to find a new place within a new Europe aided and abetted by a renewed special relationship with Blair's fair-weather cousins across the pond, the New Democrats. (Hay 1999b: 1–2)

True, the New Democrats may now have departed the scene, taking with them the prospect of a renewed special relationship, but the point is surely made. In such a discursive environment it is perhaps difficult not to be taken in by talk of novelty. If we are to resist this natural tendency, it is perhaps useful to differentiate between a series of rather different subjects and objects of change. It is this that I attempt in the sections that follow.

### Change: actual, claimed and projected

The key issue, and one addressed directly by each chapter in the present collection, is the extent of observed, empirical change in the light of that claimed, whether by commentators or politicians. Here three consistent themes emerge. The chapters by Croft, Mitchell, Rhodes and Rosamond, but also (if less directly) O'Leary and Sanders, point to the growing salience of political deliberations at spatial levels other than the national and hence to the emergence of multilevel governance as a significant determinant of contemporary political dynamics. A combination of constitutional reform and changing external relations, they suggest, presents a clear challenge to modes of political analysis, such as those that have tended to dominate the political science of British politics, which take as their starting point the notion of a bounded polity or 'unitary state'. As James Mitchell is surely right to point out, this was always something of a myth, but one that has become ever more cruelly exposed in a context of devolution and European integration. Similar arguments are made with respect to the changing exposure of the British economy in international, indeed global, markets by David Coates.

A second theme is changes in patterns of political representation, mobilization and participation and the relationship between such outcomes and existing patterns of structural inequality. Pippa Norris's important chapter examines in rich empirical detail the mechanisms underpinning the remarkable progress in the representation of women in British politics in recent years. It details the extent and nature of attitudinal and behavioural differences between women and men in the Commons, assessing the implications for legislative priorities and political debates. It is cautiously optimistic about the emergence – over time – of a process of political deliberation which gives voice to, and hence comes both to address and represent, the interests of women. The chapters by David Marsh and Ruth Lister also deal with these issues. In the midst of an impassioned critique of the legacy of pluralism for the practice and study of British politics, Marsh draws attention to the persistent structural inequalities which continue to characterize the British social and political system. He examines the uneven distribution of political resources and the implications for patterns of political mobilization and participation. Lister, too, focuses on issues of structural inequality, interrogating the distributional asymmetries associated with an emergent new welfare settlement in which welfare rights are rendered increasingly contingent on the (demonstrable) exercise of the claimant's responsibilities.

A third theme which emerges from a number of the chapters concerns the changing nature of political competition in Britain. This is addressed most directly in the chapters by Dennis Kavanagh and David Sanders, though it is a consistent theme of the volume as a whole. Kavanagh examines in detail the paradoxical nature of party competition in Britain which, in the space of a few years, has seen an almost unprecedented reversal of political fortunes. He assesses the extent to which contemporary British politics marks a return to bipartisan consensus, albeit on terms very different from those which characterized its postwar counterpart and examines the mechanisms which might have selected for such an outcome. Sanders, too, seeks to identify the key mechanisms driving party competition in contemporary Britain. He charts the growing electoral significance of emerging consumer and regional identities and the longer-term implications of such novel forms of identification in the context of ongoing constitutional reform.

Yet it is not only the extent of substantive change which concerns the contributors to this volume. Political rhetoric, as a growing number of commentators have suggested in recent years, may play an independent and causal role in the creation of social, political and economic outcomes (for useful reviews of this literature see Blyth 1997; Campbell 1998). This



makes an assessment of changes in political discourse, such as that evidenced in the chapters by Stuart Croft and Ruth Lister, particularly significant. What both of these chapters draw attention to is the gulf between (invariably strategic) political rhetoric and the political reality to which the rhetoric purportedly refers. To be fair, there is nothing particularly unprecedented about a rhetoric–reality gulf in political discourse – indeed, for many, it is precisely to the duplicitous appeal to convenient myths that the adjective ‘political’ refers! Yet two points should perhaps be noted. First, historical examples of the gulf between political rhetoric and reality notwithstanding, political discourse has only recently come to feature prominently in the political analysis of British politics (see, for instance, Fairclough 2000; Hay 1999b). Second, what Croft and Lister also draw attention to is the way in which maintaining such a gulf presents both strategic opportunities but also potential legitimization problems to elected politicians. For Croft the substantive focus of attention is the ‘ethical dimension’ of Labour’s foreign policy since 1997 and, specifically, the difficulties of reconciling such an unobjectionable discourse with the invariably habitual and institutionalized conduct of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. If Croft points to the dangers of raising an undoubtedly laudable standard against which conduct might be judged in a context in which conduct may be difficult to reform, Lister’s argument is rather different. For she demonstrates how a gulf between political rhetoric and political reality has opened up as a new welfare settlement has emerged and the role this has played in legitimating what might otherwise be seen as unpalatably inegalitarian and exclusionary welfare reforms. A similar observation is made by David Marsh, when he refers to the frequently strategic use made of ideas about globalization incompatible with the empirical evidence in justifying what might otherwise be seen as regressive social and economic reforms (see also Hay 2001).

As the above paragraphs suggest, it is not difficult to point to significant and ongoing shifts in political discourse and substantive political outcomes. Altogether more complex is the question of projected change. Few contemporary political analysts now hold out much hope for a science of the political capable of fashioning firm political predictions in the form of testable hypotheses. And, interestingly, those who do tend to confine themselves to post hoc rationalizations in the form of predictions of events that have already occurred! In the former respect, though thankfully not in the latter, this volume is no exception. Readers may well be disappointed not to find out whether New Labour is capable of becoming the natural party of government in the first half of the present century, or whether the Belfast Agreement of April 1998 will be successfully

implemented. However, what they will gain is a series of detailed and measured assessments of the conditions of such outcomes (and a host of others) being realized. This is what a new and more modest and reflexive political science of British politics can offer – and, perhaps, all that it can *legitimately* offer (see also Rhodes, chapter 6 below).

That this is so is largely due to a growing recognition in contemporary political analysis (possibly to a rather greater extent in Europe than in North America and in international relations than in political science) of the inherent indeterminacy of political processes (on which see Hay 2002b). The future, for a growing number of political analysts, is necessarily unpredictable since, whether New Labour will become the natural party of government in the next forty years, for instance, is conditional on events which have yet to occur. Lest this be seen to qualify the extent to which political analysis might be regarded as a science, it is perhaps worth pointing to the implications of chaos theory for the natural sciences. For similar arguments are now made about the forecasting of meteorological outcomes – it now being widely accepted that the weather cannot be forecasted in the long term since the formation of weather systems is in fact contingent upon short-term events (famously, the flapping of a butterfly's wings). Of course, what sets political analysis apart from the natural sciences, rendering it all the more complex, is the indeterminacy injected into social and political dynamics by human agents. The recognition of this has led to a far greater emphasis on contingency and a far greater hesitation about the prediction of events yet to unfold (whose causal determinants have, arguably, yet to form).

Of course, some future outcomes are rather more contingent than others. At the time of writing, less than two weeks from polling day in the 2001 general election, that Labour will win seems a pretty safe bet. Yet the point is that such a prediction is not likely to discriminate well between contending accounts of contemporary British political dynamics. As such, it is not a very useful prediction. Altogether more helpful is to suggest the conditions of Labour's (presumed) success. It is this latter form of analysis which characterizes the contributions to the present collection.

### A new political science of British politics?

It is perhaps premature to suggest, certainly on the basis of this volume alone, the emergence of a new political science of British politics. Indeed, the label is undoubtedly one which almost all of the present contributors would refuse. As the chapters which follow attest all too well, the

contemporary political science of British politics is characterized by diversity and intellectual pluralism rather than conformity. Nonetheless, as I have been at pains to suggest in this brief introduction, a series of common themes do nonetheless emerge. Together they constitute a challenge to the modes of political analysis which have tended to dominate the political science of British politics in the postwar period. Among these, the following stand out.

- 1 A greater tendency to contextualize contemporary dynamics, both historically (temporally) and internationally (spatially).
- 2 A greater emphasis on institutional and ideational mediations and a concern to trace the process of political change from inputs to outcomes.
- 3 A greater recognition of the contingency and indeterminacy of political outcomes and an associated emphasis on the significance of unintended consequences.
- 4 An acknowledgement, linked to point 1 above, of the need to locate Britain comparatively.
- 5 An associated blurring of the once rigid demarcation of the domestic and the international and a growing recognition of the significance of processes of multilevel governance.
- 6 A broadening and respecification of the legitimate terrain of political analysis and a growing recognition of extrapolitical variables (such as cultural and/or economic factors) in the determination of political outcomes.
- 7 A greater recognition of the importance of ideational variables (values, paradigms, ideologies, rhetorics) in the causation of political outcomes and of the need to consider such ideational factors not in isolation but in their relationships to the material contexts in which they arise and on which they impact.

Some of these concerns are genuinely novel, others mark more of a return to older traditions of analysis. Yet together they map out the analytical terrain of British politics today. Their salience is amply illustrated in the chapters which follow.

## NOTES

- 1 As this perhaps suggests given the theoretical diversity of the contributors to this volume, though frequently associated with the new institutionalism (par-

- ticularly in its more historical variants), such developments are by no means confined to self-declared institutionalists. David Sanders's chapter is perhaps an important case in point. Though written by a prominent defender of behaviouralism (see, for instance, Sanders 1995), it provides an important assessment of the implications of constitutional-institutional change (current and potential) for party political dynamics (present and future).
- 2 Blair's first speech to the Labour Party Conference as leader, for instance, contained no fewer than thirty-seven references to the party's novelty (Butler and Kavanagh 1997: 64).
  - 3 The following sections draw from a similar discussion of mine elsewhere (Hay 1999a: 25–7).
  - 4 It should be noted that to identify continuity is not to imply that any change is taking place or to suggest that no change is occurring. The concept, unlike that of discontinuity, is neutral with respect to the identification of change.

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