



# Auditing the UK's changing democracy

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# 1

## Auditing the UK's changing democracy – Patrick Dunleavy

The UK is one of the world's oldest and leading liberal democratic states. So the fortunes and performance of democracy in these shores matters intensely not just to the citizens of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland but to the wider world as well. By liberal democracy we denote a complex balance between four key goals:

- ◆ (large) majority control of government via free and fair elections, genuine party competition, a vivid interest group process, and diverse other forms of political participation;
- ◆ the maintenance and development of human rights and civil liberties for all citizens, ensuring equal treatment even for unpopular minorities or causes;
- ◆ the conscious development and pursuit of greater political and social equality; and
- ◆ widespread political legitimacy for the state, in part based on the existence of multiple (plural) centres of power, information and influence within society.

We seek to give a thorough-going review of how well British government is now performing in meeting these criteria across all the salient aspects of the political process.

I begin by establishing a wider context for liberal democracy globally, where prospects have generally been deteriorating in recent times, for varied reasons. Many disturbing trends elsewhere provide important pointers to possible grounds for concern within the UK itself. The factors that are currently going wrong for democratic advance across the world mostly have their counterparts in modernisation changes within Britain itself.

**Chapter 1.2** then describes how the Audit implements a detailed and disaggregated (section-by-section) analysis of the current performance of UK institutions and of recent developments in how they operate. We have undertaken a qualitative analysis, assessing various kinds of evidence and argument across a wide range of key topics. Readers will also find numerous charts and tables allied to a systematic effort to present different perspectives within each chapter.

The final section considers the 'British political tradition', or the so-called 'Westminster system', which continues to define the almost unique political and institutional development of the UK. With the 2016 Brexit referendum decision to 'take back control' of all aspects of nation state operations, the UK public voted essentially to revivify one-nation practices,

turning our back on many processes of converging towards a more general 'European' pattern of working that had previously seemed in train. For some observers, the UK's unique features and lengthy constitutional traditions and history are unquestionable sources of strength. Yet for others (as we shall see) the legacy of the UK's long imperial history and lagged transition to modernity are the origin of much that remains problematic and flawed in contemporary democratic politics.

# 1.1

## The worsening context for liberal democracy

When the UK's Democratic Audit was established, in 1989, the prospects for liberal democracy globally seemed very encouraging. The Berlin Wall had fallen and countries in eastern Europe and within the former Soviet Union itself were beginning to separate out from the previous Communist bloc in ways that held out great hopes for a transition to democracy in many of them. In other continents too, like Latin America, decades of authoritarian dictatorship seemed to be crumbling, with democratic constitutions emerging and attracting popular enthusiasm. The 1990s indeed saw one of the largest and most sustained increases in the proportion of the world's population under democratic rule since the late 1940s.

Yet in the last two decades evidence of further liberal democratic advances has dried up. The new period began with the 9/11 massacre in the USA and the wars that followed, and intensified after the global financial crisis of 2008 struck with devastating force in many (but not all) advanced capitalist countries. Since then, worrying signs of democratic stagnation or malaise have multiplied across a wide range of countries, including some of the 'core' established democracies themselves.

One of the most disturbing of these trends occurred in countries that are mostly far from being liberal democracies, with the rise of versions of extreme Islamic jihadism in some Muslim-majority countries, and in other areas where conflicts have occurred between Muslims and Christians, or between Islamic zealots and more secular groups (often including moderate Muslims). The new jihadist movements reject western civilisation in many aspects, but with particular force for democracy and human rights. Through a 'wicked' cycle of terrorism and counter-response invasions and military actions by the USA, UK and other western powers in Arab countries and Afghanistan/Pakistan, Islamic jihadist movements in varying forms and strengths have spread across many countries. Their influence now extends from northern Nigeria in western Africa, throughout north Africa, the Middle East and across through Syria, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan and into parts of Pakistan, even reaching Bangladesh. Jihadist movements reject liberal democracy, civil liberties and all respect for human rights in perhaps a more thoroughgoing way than any other political movement since European fascism in the 1930s. This change has serious consequences too for the domestic security of the UK and other European states, dramatised by the three major terrorist outrages undertaken by home-grown jihadist supporters in Britain in the run-up to the 2017 election.

A second key trend has been the growth of 'semi-democracies' where authoritarian governments undermine political competition from non-incumbent parties. They erode political equality, the rule of law and civil liberties behind a veneer of rigged elections and manipulated media that confer repeated popular endorsements on the regimes involved. Often closely allied with the development of **macro-level political corruption**, this disguised authoritarian pattern has been exemplified in the decades-long domination of Russian politics by Vladimir Putin. Long regarded with a degree of complacency by western governments, the evidence is now mounting that semi-democracies are dangerous for their neighbours and for world peace. For instance, Russia began by seizing tiny enclaves of territory by force from Georgia, but then moved on to lead a covert (if bloodless) occupation of Crimea. Later Putin backed a covert civil war that has wrecked much of eastern Ukraine and caused the deaths and ethnic-cleansing of thousands of people there. This return to naked power politics has been allied with overt Russian efforts to disrupt liberal democracies in the USA and western Europe that go far beyond the defence of national interest by covert means. Russian threats to frontiers along the entire eastern borders have also triggered a large-scale rearmament process in NATO's European countries, but met with only constrained responses by western democracies.

The rapid economic and social development of China under overtly authoritarian government, with one-party control and no elections beyond highly constrained contests in Hong Kong and at village level in some areas, has also powerfully eroded the association between economic improvement and liberal democracy. As something like 350 million people have **moved out of poverty** and into reasonably prosperity in each of the last two decades under Communist Party strategies, so China has become the second largest economic power globally. Its powerful state apparatus has used its new taxation resources to rebuild the foundations for a traditional Chinese foreign and defence policy, focused on achieving 'suzerainty' **over its immediate neighbours**. This has involved a degree of limited military expansion, seizing islands in the South China Sea to establish a maritime zone, and investing heavily in resource-rich developing countries to secure materials (ironically mirroring decades of similar 'realist' US policies). Yet China has also broadly maintained support for international political, trade and economic institutions that have facilitated its recent rapid growth.

The examples offered by the Russian and Chinese regimes have been influential for many other incumbent authoritarian elites needing to engage the support of rising middle class groups in industrialising countries. Semi-democratic ways of running the political system have been adopted in many countries and have spread back into some newly democratised countries. For example, in Thailand a military coup overthrew civil government after a long period of rancorous inter-party conflict. And in Turkey the popularly elected Prime Minister used his electoral majority to convert his office into an apparently near-permanent presidency, restricting press freedoms and civil liberties for his opponents and skewing election processes in his favour.

Some observers detect behind these changes a wider '**revolt of the middle classes**' in industrialising countries. These economically important groups were previously prepared to take action against legacy authoritarian regimes in their countries, in order to secure

economic liberalisation and the security of their private property, along with legal protections of civil rights and free movement across borders for themselves and their families. But as democratisation has extended so the middle classes became much less keen on securing genuine rights for trade unions or for workers (especially migrants), or on taking action to improve the living standards of the poorest sections of their societies, especially in the booming favelas and slums of the world's mega-cities. The thesis can draw some support too from the growth of mass, '**bourgeois**' protest movements, often against newly elected governments and corruption in countries like Venezuela, Thailand and Brazil, with de-stabilising consequences. In many industrialising countries there has been an increased conditionalisation of support for liberal democracy. The ideals of majority control and political freedom continue to be endorsed by sizeable majorities of public opinion, but criticism of democracy's operations in specific party-competition and public-policy contexts threatens to weaken core processes in practice.

An **additional argument** points out that: 'Over two-thirds of countries that have transitioned to democracy since World War II have done so under constitutions written by the outgoing authoritarian regime'. This often creates 'hangover' problems and anomalies somewhat similar to those still affecting former authoritarian or imperial states in western Europe (see below).

In the longer-established liberal democracies of western Europe, north America and Australasia for a long time both the governing elites and much of the public at large seemed to regard the adverse trends in the rest of the world as something remote and external to them. They affected 'far away' geographical areas, or regions at earlier stages of economic and political development, or countries that broadly lacked long-lived and firmly founded liberal democratic traditions. These problems proved how hard it was to become an established liberal democracy, but on this view they did not represent any great internal threat within the 'core' countries of the democratic bloc.

Yet modern insights into '**how democracies die**' suggest a different picture. Past complacency has been pretty comprehensively shattered within the last five years by the growth of very large and successful populist movements in many countries across western Europe, the UK and the USA itself – exemplified most dramatically in the Brexit referendum decision of 2016, the election of President Trump on a radically populist platform in 2016 and its subsequent chequered implementation, and the decisive rejection of all established Italian parties by voters there in 2018, in favour of both left- and right-leaning populist parties.

A key source of popular support for right-wing populists has been the increased salience of immigration issues. The whole world land-surface has solidified into an apparently now-immutable geographical arrangement of 186 states claiming sovereignty, and seizures of terrain have become a thing of the past (apart from Putin's adventures). So the political salience of defence has generally declined, while regulating the still large movements of peoples across the immutable borders has increased in importance.

Right-wing populism has been sustained by a reaction against 'foreigners', plus the 'securitisation' of immigration because of jihadist Islamism (especially strong in Europe),

and because of extreme drugs-related violence in Mexico (a strong fear factor in the USA). Reactions to increasing public fears focusing on migration have amply demonstrated the potential 'lynch law' qualities of populism, with measures appropriate for tiny minorities of people being extended to whole categories. The **'naïve statism'** that often fuels populism is also well demonstrated in the 'build a wall' reaction of President Trump, who is apparently committed to constructing a 1900-mile long set of southern frontier defences for the USA.

These developments have culminated in some liberal democracies moving sharply downwards on international democracy league tables and seeming vulnerable to a long-term democratic malaise. The USA is the most prominent country affected. Its former 'city on the hill' ideals have been tarnished by clear evidence of prisoner torture, redaction and imprisonment without trial, with a disdain for international law shown in the 2000s 'war on terror', and again since 2017. The 2003 invasion of Iraq on a pretext; drone assassinations of opponents deemed terrorists in Afghanistan and elsewhere (without trial); apparent mass intelligence surveillance of allies' citizens; and deals to monitor even US citizens, enacted outside the rule of law, have all seemed to create a modern apparatus of 'imperial' rule (despotic overseas and on state security, but democratic at home). (Many of the same charges can be made in a minor key about the UK's roles as American ally in the 2000s.)

The intensification of **acrimonious partisan controversies** in the USA marks a key change. The **integrity of US elections** has sharply declined due to the rise of systematic 'voter suppression' policies, especially practised by Republican state legislatures against poor and black voters whom they expect to be Democrat supporters. Shockingly, these administrative practices (such as removing non-voters from the electoral roll altogether) have been endorsed by the conservative-dominated Supreme Court. Their range has multiplied so greatly that an international project on electoral integrity in 2018 rated North Carolina as **no longer a liberal democracy**.

A weakening of the two major US parties' appeals seems to have stimulated more unprincipled elite efforts to retain control by bidding up the intensity of partisan advocacy. Politicians have sought to engage populist supporters via ever-more vitriolic campaigning that converts into **more polarisation** amongst voters themselves, rancorous legislative obstructionism and a collapse of previous bipartisan co-operation. The USA remains the only liberal democratic country where a two-party system as predicted by Duverger's Law still operates, but increasingly without providing the strong and stable government that 'majoritarian' arguments always said would be its corollary. The stalemate over any form of restrictive limits on who can buy guns – despite successive US school and other massacres carried out by anomic gunmen – is one of the most prominent symptoms of political over-polarisation. Little wonder then that one prominent index of democracy (**V-Dem**, Figure 1, and see below) has the USA dropping from a score of 85% in 2015 to one of 72% in 2017, making it the fifth most prominent democracy 'backslider' in that period.

Amongst political scientists the implications of these disturbing developments remain quite strongly disputed. An 'old guard' of analysts, who place their trust in the study of long-run responses to 'values' questions about liberal democracy, argues that in the USA and other established democracies public opinion remains broadly stable, with only small declines in the numbers of survey respondents agreeing with pro-democracy statements. However,

another group of analysts point to sharp increases in support for clearly 'undemocratic' responses (such as favourable attitudes to military rule or government by non-elected experts) in the USA, and in some other European democracies including the UK. Similarly, the proportion of the population who say that it is essential to live in a democracy has fallen markedly since the 1990s, in the US, UK and some other established democracies. These responses perhaps cannot be taken at face value, but the increasing proportions of citizens prepared to endorse them is worrying.

At the least, then, the global context for liberal democracies has clearly worsened radically since 2000, semi-democracies and authoritarian regimes show few signs of transitioning to democratic norms, and many liberal democracies have shown signs of 'backsliding' and distortion of the political process to favour incumbents. Even in previously 'core' liberal democracies, like the USA, respect for essential civil liberties has apparently declined, and the proportion of citizens impatient with party politics and elections as the means for settling policy disputes has apparently increased substantially. Thus the context for our Audit of the UK is a darkening one, and the number and range of threats to democratic performance have multiplied.

# 1.2

## Evaluating UK democracy and the Democratic Audit's choice of methods

These developments are one reason why this book offers a detailed, section-by-section evaluation of the changing state of UK democracy, and not the simplifying, summative assessment that has been widely offered by quantitative assessments and rankings or 'league tables' of democracy. The changes involved are subtle ones, and their effects cumulate and interact in ways that the aggregate indices find difficult to capture.

However, there are now quite a number of these indices and before explaining our methods in more detail, it is useful to look at the alternative treatment they provide. Figure 1 shows some of the main indices and how they currently rate the UK, plus any overall classifications they give, together with a brief note on the methods used to compile them. The indices covered here are up to date or relatively recent. They are orientated to measuring relatively fine-grain changes, and have reasonably sophisticated methodologies. They are arranged in Figure 1 in a rough descending order of their influence, with the EIU's Democracy Index much the most widely quoted, although its methods are not entirely clear. The next three are academic productions, with better explained methods. The IDEA index has been adopted by the UN. The Zurich 'Democracy Barometer' accords a lot of influence to the proportionality of the electoral system, which other measures more or less ignore. The 'Democracy Ranking' has not been updated and is relatively obscure compared to the others.

**Figure 1: Some current quantitative rankings of liberal democracies and how they rate the UK in 2017–18**

Name of index	Produced by	Rating of the UK	UK rank	Lowest scoring elements	Methods (linked to UK data page)
Democracy Index	<b>Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU)</b>	8.5 out of 10 Classed as 'Full democracy'	14	'Functioning of government' = 7.5 out of 10	Varied, not entirely clear
Varieties of Democracy	<b>V-Dem</b> at University of Gothenburg	87% on the Liberal Democracy Index	16	68% on the 'Participatory component'	Quantitative data analysis, aggregated into six components
Global State of Democracy	<b>International IDEA</b>	83% average score across 16 political/institutional dimensions	not given	17% on 'direct democracy'; 60% on electoral participation	Varied, but <b>data-heavy</b>
Democracy Barometer	<b>University of Zurich</b> (in 2014)	58% on overall 'democratic quality' index, across 9 political/institutional dimensions	2014 rank not given, but was <b>26 in 2011</b>	49% on representation dimension; 53% on popular control and social equality	Quantitative <b>data analysis</b> , aggregated into six components
Democracy Ranking	Austrian NGO, <b>Democracy Ranking</b> (in 2014)	75% across seven political, economic and other dimensions	14	62% on the economy; 64% on knowledge of democracy	Varied indices, but <b>uses data</b>

*Note: URL links to all sources are included above (see also [References](#) section).*

What picture do these scorings give about UK democracy? All agree that the UK is one of the world's top group of democracies, but none of them put it within the top ten positions. However, the top-scoring countries tend to be small or very small countries, especially the Scandinavian countries with some tiny additions (like Estonia). Arguably it is much easier to run a liberal democracy with (say) six million people than with the UK's current 66 million. And, of course, it is harder still to run a democracy with 300 million people (as in the USA), and very hard to do so with 1.2 billion people (as in India). Smaller states are more straightforward to operate, and organising public participation and consultation is simpler. So perhaps this explains the UK's absence from the top ten. Five of the six rankings score participation-related aspects as the UK's weakest area. However, EIU scores it lowest on how well government operates.

(*Side note for geeks:* In addition to the indices above, there are literally hundreds of different classification schemes that are of no use to us here, because they are primarily orientated towards the comparative classification of countries over time [for example, across the last century]; use simplistic typologies [where the UK is just always in the top/best 'democracy' category], or are very out of date. They have been discussed extensively by **political scientists** and **development economists**, but they are useless for our purposes because the UK achieves a 'ceiling' score in them. A well-known example is the **Polity IV score**, which updates every year but always gives the UK a 'perfect' 10 out of 10 score [along with the USA] – whereas other democratic countries [like France] are often scored 9 out of 10. It is produced by a **US think tank**, and funded by the CIA.)

In addition to the overall democracy rankings, there are a large number of other measures of single aspects that are highly relevant to democratic performance. Figure 2 shows how the UK compares with other countries on some key institutional criteria: freedom of speech and media, civil service effectiveness and corruption. Their importance for democratic performance is clear-cut – with corruption and media manipulation by political leaders especially emerging as central means of contemporary democratic decline.

**Figure 2: Some current rankings of partial institutional aspects of liberal democracy, and how they rate the UK in 2017–18**

Name of index	Aspect of democracy covered	Rating of the UK	UK rank	Methods
<b>Freedom House Index</b>	Freedom, political rights, civil rights	94% out of 100% Also: Score = 1 ('fully free') on a seven-point scale	16	<b>2018 rating</b> Both Press and Net freedom status = free
<b>Transparency International</b>	Corruption, bribery etc.	81% out of 100	10	Survey evidence of <b>perceptions of corruption</b>
<b>INCISE</b> Index of Civil Service Effectiveness	How well national bureaucracies operate, using objective indicators and expert judgements. Produced by UK think tank, the Institute for Government (with UK civil service funding).	Implied average score of 87% across three macro-indices	4 out of 31 countries assessed	76 metrics aggregated into 12 <b>component scores</b> (see p.63). UK ranked top for 3, but below 50% for capabilities and digital services.

On both freedom measures and the absence of corruption the UK does well, but does not score exceptionally highly. The INCISE measure of civil service effectiveness gives the UK its highest ranking of any comparative measure, at fourth out of 71 countries covered. However, INCISE could be seen as generous to the UK – for example, in giving the UK top marks in regulatory effectiveness for 2017, despite the crisis of building regulations revealed by Grenfell Tower, and the earlier neglect of macro-prudential regulation of bank liabilities.

Another relevant set of partial criteria to consider for liberal democracies are shown in Figure 3, which covers output-related measures – in terms of meeting people’s basic needs, achieving well-being or happiness for citizens, and levels of social equality (or inequality). Their relevance for democratic performance lies in the salience of including all citizens in political life on relatively equal terms, which clearly requires that some measure of social equality is maintained. Again, the UK is placed in a rather familiar ‘good but not outstanding’ category, except on social inequality where it is placed in the bottom group of OECD countries, alongside the USA.

**Figure 3: Some current rankings of output/political equality aspects of liberal democracy, and how they rate the UK in 2017–18**

Name of index	Aspect of political equality covered	Rating of the UK	UK rank	Methods
<b>Social Progress Index</b>	Index of how far society meets people’s basic needs, creates well-being foundations and offers opportunities	89% out of 100	12	Index aggregated from 12 underlying indicators, then normalised
<b>World Happiness Report</b>	Happiness index based on healthy life expectation, social support, generosity, choices	6.7 out of 10 (top country’s score = 7.6)	<b>19</b>	Mix of survey data and country statistics
<b>OECD late 2000s</b>	Inequality after taxes and transfers (GINI coefficient)	0.345 (Best country = 0.25. Worst country = 0.48)	27 (out of then 34 OECD countries)	Country statistics on income levels across social groups

Summing up, quantitative assessments and league tables of democratic performance tend to have a problem with ‘ceiling’ effects, with ‘advanced’ countries bunching near the top. Even allowing for this, the UK rarely makes the ‘premier league’ of excellent performers, coming in instead in the ‘first division’ of good but at times somewhat flawed democracies.

For any one ranking it is always possible to make an argument that the measures being considered are problematic in some degree, or have been put together into component indices in ways that reflect value judgements – which indeed are inevitable in this field of work. However, the UK’s recurring placement across multiple rankings is not so easily dismissed – for the inaccuracies or potentially questionable features of indices tend to wash out when we look at many different measures. Aggregated quantitative indices are also rather ill-adapted to assess the democratic quality of advanced countries, especially where they take the established democracies as an unproblematic standard for the assessment of developing countries, which is potentially a rather smug assumption.

## Democratic Audit's disaggregated approach

One of the founders of Democratic Audit (along with Stuart Weir) was the philosopher David Beetham. He claimed that:

*'Our conception of democracy is more comprehensive, and our assessment criteria more rigorous, than those employed in other democracy assessments. We have not limited democracy to the two areas of electoral competition and inclusiveness and civil and political freedoms that have become standard since Dahl's Polyarchy... In addition, we have used the principle of political equality as a key index of democratic attainment throughout our assessment of political rights and institutions.'* (Beetham, 1999, p.569).

And he rejected trying to define an overall ranking:

*'because aggregation into a single score is inappropriate to the distinctive purpose of a democratic audit, which is to help differentiate between those aspects of a country's political life which are more satisfactory from a democratic point of view and those which give cause for concern. For this purpose, keeping the different aspects separate, and making a discursive assessment of each in turn, is both a more appropriate and a more defensible procedure.'* (Beetham, 1999, p.569).

This approach was an influential one, and **adapted well to comparative use** in different countries.

In addition, we need multiple criteria because we are assessing a democratic *state* – and modern political theory emphasises that a state is never a single unity (as both Marxists and neo-liberals used to claim), nor ever just a ragbag of miscellaneous institutions (as pluralist liberals used to claim). Instead states are composed of multiple connected parts, all of which must work harmoniously together if the state is to survive and work effectively. In one perspective **the state is a 'multi-system'** – like the human body, composed of multiple partly independent systems (muscles, bones, nervous system, respiratory and blood supply systems) that must work jointly within narrow limits if effective operation is to be maintained. A more post-structuralist view sees the **state as 'many things'**, so operating in a differentiated way, but also strongly unifying.

For our purposes, though, the key implication is the same – namely that a disaggregated or bit-by-bit evaluation can offer many more useful and differentiated insights into the UK's changing democracy. In each chapter that follows in sections 2 to 7, we look at one of 32 components that we identify as critical building blocks of a liberal democratic polity. And because democracy is a local thing we devote nine of these chapters to following this analysis through into the devolved governments of Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and England at sub-national level.

In the qualitative methods we have used throughout our analysis:

*'Popular control and political equality comprise our two key democratic principles and provide the litmus test for how far a country's political life can be regarded as democratic.'* (Beetham, 1999, p.570).

However, we have also made two innovations on the original Democratic Audit schema for evaluation, so as to develop and make fully transparent the basis on which we have made judgements of performance and assessed recent trends and changes.

First, for each of the topics that we analyse we seek to specify clearly and comprehensively what are the *democratic criteria* applying in that area. We set out these bases for judgement in a box at the start of every chapter. All of these evaluations:

- ◆ relate to core liberal or democratic (majority rule and popular control) principles;
- ◆ are sufficiently generic to apply across all (or a viable sub-set) of countries;
- ◆ are ranked, so that we would expect established liberal democracies to pass all criteria that more recent democracies pass;
- ◆ are realistic (i) in recognising that perfect or utopian principles always conflict, and so how they are reconciled is critically important;
- ◆ and realistic (ii) in recognising that liberal/democratic principles and state viability/efficacy must sometimes conflict.

Many philosophers have also expressed these last two 'realism' requirements as the problem of '**dirty hands**'. Any leader or government will sometimes face choices where one ethical principle must be violated if another ethically desirable goal is to be achieved. Some choices are necessarily dilemmas (with undesirable costs attaching to whatever course of action you take). To be useful (and not just utopian) the criteria for democracy must acknowledge such conflicts, where needed.

Second, we have used a framework called *Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT)* to provide clearly visible overall judgements of the UK's performance against the democratic criteria. The 'strengths' section sums up how many aspects of the UK's arrangements conform with democratic requirements, explaining why it is a leading democracy in these respects. The 'weaknesses' section considers where democratic criteria are not currently being met, briefly tracing their causes and effects. (We also expand on some strengths and weaknesses in the discussions of key topics that follow the SWOT analysis.)

Because democracy is a living, changing focus of many different people's practices, hopes and aspirations, our SWOT analysis also covers future trends and developments. 'Opportunities' are areas where current strengths can be expanded or deepened in future, or where new approaches might extend the value of current democratic practices. 'Threats' are adverse possible developments, where democratic performance may worsen in future – either because of wider trends (for example, digital social media eroding 'legacy' media's coverage of politics), or because of distinctive UK state actions that inhibit or damage existing freedoms or democratic practices. (These two parts of the analysis are also discussed more empirically, either in the 'recent developments' sections that come just before the SWOT analysis, or in one or two sections that follow it.)

# 1.3

## The ambivalent legacies of the 'British tradition'

Central to the UK's strengths as a democracy is its stability, with constitutional changes and democratisation both happening gradually and in manageable increments, so creating a long political tradition on which voters and elites can draw in resolving new problems. Yet the recurring mirror weakness in British democracy is that for much of its history, the UK state was first oligarchic (run by an aristocracy) – and later a mixed imperial state. From the late 19th century, the political system was in part (slowly) democratising at home, but at the same time it operated in essentially despotic ways across India and colonies with hundreds of millions of (non-white) subject peoples.

Political scientists assign a lot of importance to a phenomenon called '**path dependency**': once a country starts off with a given set of core institutions, it tends to move down a particular direction of change that is influenced by the initial conditions. So a country usually cannot go back and do something different. Nation states cannot (easily, without some unusual crisis) reset their constitutions or established institutions into a fresh or modernised set-up adapted to a new age with new problems. Instead political systems mainly **adapt the institutions** they already have, or make only those changes that seem feasible from their previous direction of travel. Sometimes the influence of earlier stages of development is benign, providing key foundations for new responses, with changes then happening in peaceful increments. But at other times 'legacy' institutions endure into very different conditions despite operating poorly or in non-democratic ways, and here citizens and politicians are forced simply to accept that 'this is the way things are' and that a majority will for change is not sufficient to be effective.

### The Westminster tradition as an asset

British political historians have overwhelmingly taken a strongly favourable view of what's called the *Westminster tradition*, summed up by **Anthony King** as 'Britain's power-hoarding constitution' [p.81]. Its central elements combine the apparently different doctrines of parliamentary sovereignty (there is no constitutional or judicial or any other limit on what Parliament can legislate), with the actual subordination of Parliament almost all the time to the executive elites of the two main, highly disciplined parties. In practice, a single-party government with a solid Commons majority was the normal peacetime situation in the late

19th and 20th centuries. Thus Parliament in fact became dominated by the Prime Minister, ministers and the executive. In this set-up, as King [p.49] aptly remarked: '[Walter] Bagehot [the leading constitutional commentator of the 1860s] and most of his successors... were right to observe that there is one and only one crucial institution in the British system: the government of the day'. Yet the mighty executive has marched under the apparently paradoxical banner of parliamentary control, reconciling the two by claiming to embody the electoral will of the people.

The allegedly positive features and consequences of the Westminster tradition have also been expounded by dozens of political science, and constitutional and legal commentators. The UK has an unfixed constitution, written down only haphazardly in numerous different documents. Its operations are subject to a lot of interpretation. And how things work in practice often depends on the existence of limiting conventions, which sustain a degree of consensus on the rules of politics between the competing major party elites. (Conventions are akin to 'rumble strips' on the sides of roads, but they are not crash barriers. You can easily drive over or through them, if you don't care about the ugly noise created.) The constitution can be easily changed – sometimes by a single vote in the Commons, as with the 2015 introduction of 'English votes for English laws' (EVEL). This change brought in novel legislative procedures at Westminster for processing laws only relating to England, from which non-English MPs were excluded (see [Chapter 4.1](#) on the House of Commons).

The unfixed and uncodified constitution is said to be adaptable, to facilitate elite consensus on fundamental values and norms that conduce to effective government, and yet to respond sensitively to (most) public demands. These claims are often allied with a macro-narrative of steady democratic progress, first in the 19th century towards limited democracy from a liberal monarchical constitution, and then in the modern era towards universal franchise, the full extension of civil liberties, a welfare state and (since 1997) a more devolved and participatory democracy.

Gradual change amidst strong traditions is said to have developed a 'civic culture' engendering benevolent habits and instinctive actions amongst citizens that support democratic debate without rancorous divisions. This is something like a political equivalent of [fast/slow thinking](#) as analysed by Daniel Kahnman, with the 'fast' impulse here being an almost instinctive closure to extremism amongst British voters, and recognition of the need for collective decisions to respect the rights of all. For example, UK civic attitudes are said to shut down (most) rancorous political extremism before it flowers, and to be successful in attracting new generations of citizens and also inward migrants to operate within the existing institutions via 'soft power' and rational logics.

## More differentiated accounts

The key danger of the literature justifying 'the British political tradition' and the Westminster model is that it becomes a myth-building exercise, positing a smooth linear development that ignores repeated disjunctures and crises that have shaped the UK's political evolution. Many modern political science accounts claim to be sensitive to the dangers of 'meta-narratives', which often end up justifying the status quo as something like Voltaire's

'Everything is for the best in the best of all possible worlds'. These revisionist accounts assign more significance to the persistence of strong disagreements about how the political system does and should work between different parties and political groupings within parties. For example, Mark Bevir and R.A.W. Rhodes argue that four main 'narratives of governance' have contested the nature of the UK's polity for a century or more, shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1: Four alternative traditions/interpretations of the UK polity**

	Contesting traditions			
	Liberal (to neo-liberal)	Tory	Whig	Socialist
<b>Core locations</b>	Conservative Party, right-wing Liberal Democrats	Traditionalist Conservatives, House of Lords, legal profession	Traditionalist Conservative and Labour elites	Labour Party, trade unions, public services
<b>'Governance narrative'</b>	Markets and communities need careful husbanding	Intermediate institutions have been eroded or wrecked	An 'organic' constitution and polity is needed and can be returned to via reforms	Government needs to be joined-up to serve welfare needs
<b>'Storyline'</b>	Markets need to be restored and state overload reduced	Preserving traditional authority and institutions is vital for stability	Evolutionary change in institutions	Reconfiguring the bureaucratic/administrative state is key

Source: Derived from [Bevir and Rhodes, 2004](#), Table 1.

These positions are not just academic creations (although each has many academic exponents). Rather Bevir and Rhodes claim that these traditions are live and current elements in the thinking of UK political and administrative elites. Their effects can be observed at work in debates and controversies over constitutional and policy issues. They are **embedded in the everyday practice** of ministers and civil service elites. According to these authors they can be seen threading through elite behaviours when observed by ethnographic techniques, like shadowing top officials or ministers through their daily activities.

## The legacies of imperialism

There is a singular omission in the accounts of both the conventional defenders of the Westminster tradition, and the more recent culturalist accounts of its enduring role. Both are strongly selective in their historical picture of the UK state, with their focus narrowly drawn *only* on the core UK territories and processes that relate to them.

Most conventional descriptions (especially by modern political scientists) include nothing more than isolated, passing references to the British empire. A few fuller accounts stress instead that the empire always had only minimal effects on the core institutions of Westminster, Whitehall and intra-UK government. For instance, in describing 'Britain's traditional constitution', **King (2007)** wrote [p.47]:

*'The traditional constitution was also remarkably self-contained. So long as the British Empire existed, important British institutions, notably the Colonial Office, the India Office, the Dominions Office, and the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council (which acted as the empire's supreme court), did intersect with the outside world; but the constitutional traffic was, so to speak, almost entirely one way. It was overwhelmingly outwards... In constitutional terms, inbound traffic was almost non-existent. Britain felt no need to learn from the institutions and practices of other countries.'*

The empire appears in most recent UK political histories chiefly as an aberrant episode of history – one that should never have happened, was always destined to disappear, and anyway was relatively benign by the standards of the times. It therefore has only a limited significance for the development of the home UK state and polity, chiefly confined to the (predictable) loss of Empire in the period 1945–70, with its main impact on voters and public opinion being that 'by the mid 1960s the British were no longer special. They were ordinary, very ordinary'. (King, 2007, p.65). The implications for UK elites were (as Dulles put it) that the country had 'lost an empire but not yet found a role'. Similarly, despite their stress on understanding political and administrative cultures, Bevir and Rhodes' works (**such as 2010**) actually mention the UK's imperial recent past only once, to note how nostalgia for empire was an integral part of Enoch Powell's anti-immigration stance. Thus, most conventional accounts and the culturalist analyses of political traditions both practice a kind of UK 'nativism' in which they ignore or marginalise anything in the path development of UK governance not relating directly to the British heartland.

The key thing about organisational and institutional cultures, however, is that they are very long-lasting, and also very hard to change. Developed over decades, they may last centuries. So is it really credible that the imperial state which lasted in the UK for more than three hundred years, and which existed in a recognisably modern form as a consistently and strongly unified apparatus from the 1860s to 1970, has so few implications for the modern UK?

One interesting pointer to an answer is that the Brexit referendum and the rejection by voters of 43 years of pro-EU policy-making was apparently closely linked amongst older voters with a nostalgia for times past, **including the imperial period**. In January 2016, **YouGov** found that 44% of UK respondents were proud of Britain's history of colonialism while only 21% regretted that it happened; 23% held neither view. The same poll also asked about whether the British empire was a good thing or a bad thing: 43% said it was good, while only 19% said it was bad; 25% responded that it was 'neither'. A **2014 YouGov poll** found 59% of respondents supporting the view the British empire was 'more something

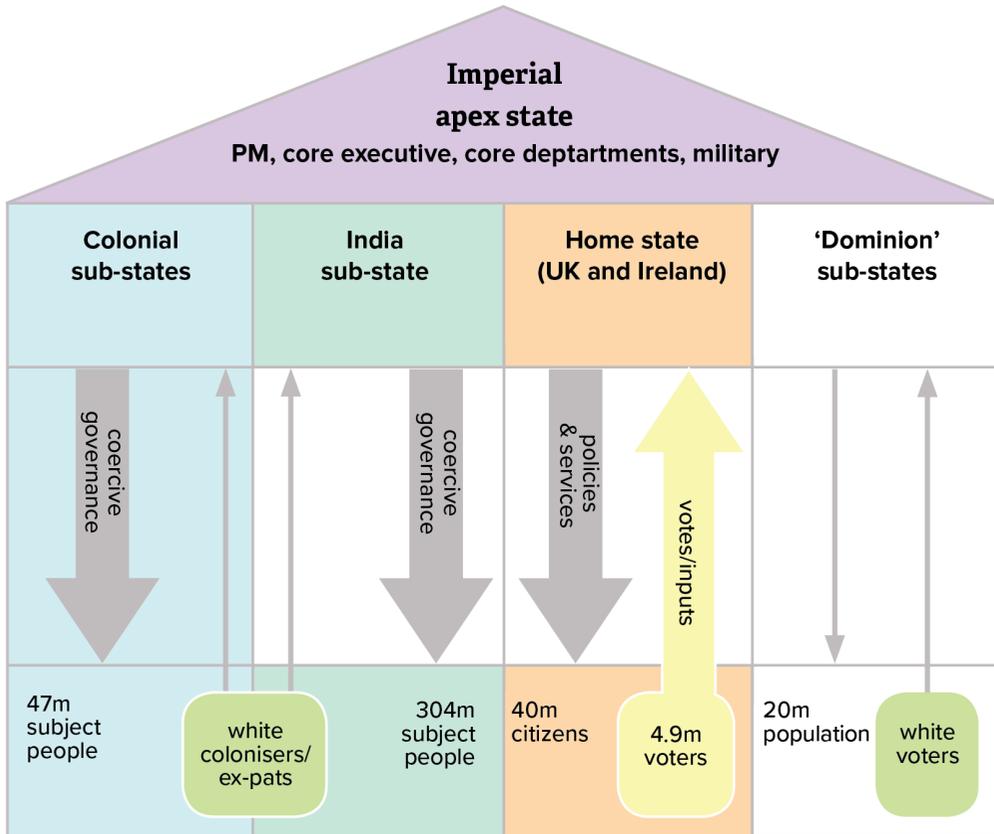
to be proud of', compared to 19% feeling it was 'more something to be ashamed of'. **One columnist** observed that: 'The sun may never set on British misconceptions about our empire'.

And surely one of the most salient facts about the modern UK state is that throughout its most formative century (1850 to 1950) it was not just a liberal constitutional state, still less just a slowly evolving liberal democracy. It was instead a *mixed polity*, where the liberal and democratic parts co-existed with a huge apparatus of overseas empire that was for the most part governed despotically (and on racist lines). Figure 2 shows how these arrangements operated in 1910, with four very different kinds of political system all channelled through the same Westminster Cabinet system and Whitehall civil service.

(i) Perhaps the dominant part of the system was the home or 'island' state (shaded orange in Figure 2). Inside the UK's 'metropolitan territories' of Britain and Ireland a recognisably democratic political process operated. It still involved only a small minority of male voters, but already the UK elites had worked out how to do peaceful political succession as strong parties alternated in government, and they in turn created a well-organised home civil service. By 1900 there were even the beginnings of a welfare state. Of course, the home state dominated much of the business of the apex state, shown shaded purple, and many of the issues that preoccupied politicians and parties.

Even in the 'metropolitan core', however, the inclusion of Ireland caused huge anxieties to UK elites – with the elite (and mass) fearing that Irish nationalists might come to hold a balance of power at Westminster and use that leverage to advance their independence cause. To stop this from happening, from the 1870s onwards Tory and Liberal party elites agreed a whole range of restrictive practices limiting the power of the Westminster Parliament in favour of the government of the day. These included the ability to close down and guillotine Commons debates, force votes and, very significantly, a ban on MPs proposing *any* new public spending without a certificate from ministers (which was never given). These measures consolidated major party elites' ability to dominate their MPs, but they also meant that, with some cross-party agreement at leadership level, Irish MPs' influence could be minimised. This was a key reason why MPs' influence was so radically reduced at just this time, and why the executive and opposition came to so thoroughly dominate the Commons.

Figure 2: The British imperial state in 1900



(ii) A second, rapidly growing element in Figure 2 (shaded white) consisted of the white settler states that would later evolve into 'dominions' (chiefly Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa), plus the white settler minorities in India and in other colonies. It is rarely appreciated in the UK now how vast was the scale of emigration from Britain and Ireland to the imperial territories:

*'Between 1815 and 1914 around 20 million Britons left the country, a massive exodus relative to the total population. By 1900 the British population was about 41 million; without emigration it would have been over 70 million.'*  
(Kennedy, 1992, p.6).

Some of this out-migration was voluntary, but much was not, especially in Ireland. There, compared to 1800: 'By the 1840s starvation and emigration had reduced the population by one-fifth [on its 1800 level]' (Kennedy, 1992, p.10). Nevertheless, by 1900 white populations in the countries that later became the 'white' dominions were organising and operating their own democratically elected governments. Hence, as Figure 2 shows, their political elites were accorded a measure of influence by the UK's imperial command.

In (iii) India (shaded green) and (iv) the other UK colonies (shaded blue), the white populations exerted an important if less direct and formalised influence on imperial officials – who relied a good deal on their support and co-operation in regulating sometimes

turbulent local politics. All colonies were expected to be self-supporting in budgetary terms, and to contribute when needed to 'imperial defence'. In return, they knew that the same UK protective naval and military umbrella could apply to them if ever needed, and that they would enjoy the benefits of imperial trade preferences. So for the white populations only the rightmost columns in Figure 2 included channels of influence that were also liberalising (albeit in a revenue-constrained way) and moderately responsive to local opinion.

However, for the non-white populations, the same two leftmost columns in Figure 2 show that governance was run on entirely despotic lines, with native populations coercively governed and policed. Beyond law-and-order roles, almost nothing by way of state services was organised for the non-white population (let alone any form of welfare services). The 350 million people governed in this way dwarfed the 60 million home island and later dominion populations, creating a huge military/policing tensions. Managing them required constant attention from the centre and its pro-consuls in each territory.

The main difference between the two rightmost columns in Figure 2 was that India and its surrounding regions were recognised as the chaotic legacy product of multiple past civilisations, whereas in Africa especially native peoples were seen as uncivilised and prone to purely tribal reactions. Accordingly, law was seen as an important weapon for maintaining imperial predominance in India, so that UK despotism there was always somewhat more constrained. For Weiner (2009) 'Law lay at the heart of British imperial enterprise'. As James Fitzjames Stephen observed in the early 1870s:

*'British Power in India is like a vast bridge... One of its piers is military power: the other is justice, by which I mean a firm and constant determination on the part of the English to promote impartially and by all lawful means, what they (the English) regard as the lasting good of the natives of India. Neither force nor justice will suffice by itself... Strike away either of its piers and it will fall, and what are they?' (Porter, 2010, review of Weiner, 2009).*

(Of course, no Indian court had any jurisdiction over the UK officials operating the imperial apparatus in India for any act done in a public capacity, from the Viceroy down to the lowest district administrator.)

In the era of free trade, none of this could protect the Indian economy from opening up to UK trade, however devastating the consequences of imperial globalisation were for the domestic economy:

*'whereas the British and Indian peoples had roughly similar per capital levels of industrialisation at the outset of the Industrial Revolution (1750), India's level was one hundredth of the United Kingdom's by 1900... India imported a mere one million yards of cotton fabric in 1814, but that figure had risen to 51 million yards by 1830 and to a staggering 995 million yards by 1870'. (Kennedy, 1992, p.11).*

Some revisionist historians have recently argued that the theme of British **exploitation of India** can **be undone**, and that some economic change did occur. But the basic picture is at best a severely mixed one.

The idea that the development of the UK state was largely uninfluenced by the imperial period historically relied on a range of other supportive beliefs – such as that the British empire was distinctively liberal, benign and interested in the welfare of its subjects (at least by comparison with contemporary empires); or the equally powerful ‘myth of effortless control’ whereby hundreds of millions of Indians were ruled by a few hundred thousand (white) British officials and troops. In fact, **estimates by Subrahmanyam** (2006) show that at its peacetime peak around 1910 the imperial state involved more than 2.5 million people – in a period when world populations were a fraction of their current levels.

And recent studies of the millions of lives lost in repeated and perfectly avoidable Indian famines (**the last in 1943**) and of ‘barbed-wire imperialism’ have demonstrated that (whatever the self-beliefs of the officials involved) the UK empire could not escape the worst consequences of despotic rule. Concentration camps, for instance, were invented in British India to warehouse otherwise itinerant **victims of famines**, long before their more notorious use against a complete (white) people during the Anglo-Boer war. **Forth notes:**

*‘The scale of internment is shocking: in the final decades of the nineteenth century, Britain interned more than ten million men, women and children in camps during a series of colonial, military, medical and subsistence crises.’*

The increasing demands of the imperial state often lead the way in British officials developing all the varied technologies of modern government, including the management of extended chains of command, military and political intelligence systems, and modern, centralised communications:

*‘The number of telegrams and dispatches at the Foreign Office rose markedly – from 9,060 in 1825 to 91,430 in 1895 – as did registered papers at the Colonial Office. The number of papers handled by the Colonial Office doubled between 1868 and 1888. Its telegraph bill rose more than twelvefold between 1870 and 1900–1, and the number of telegrams it dispatched rose sevenfold between 1907 and 1915.’ (Harrison, 1996, p.63).*

The imperial state provided a template for the modern UK civil service (which developed from an Indian civil service blueprint) and its technologies defined some of the most advanced governance practices of the era:

*‘In the case of the nineteenth-century British high civil service, the code of “honorable secrecy”, maintained by a whole new technology of “administration”, reasserted aristocratic, part-patrimonial, powers within government and the often highly dishonorable exchanges of information and favors by which political work gets done by state agents.’ (Joyce and Mukerji, 2017, p.16, quoting Vincent [1998]).*

Above all, the routing of all imperial issues through the Westminster apparatus of Prime Minister, Cabinet and Parliament, and the Whitehall apparatus, created a radically bifurcated situation in the policy-making environment – where one item on the agenda for decision-makers involved domestic, democratically influenced politics, and the next would relate to the despotic government of other races. Keeping both ways of thinking and proceedings going in tandem required that decision-makers develop a kind of ‘split

personality' culture. Little wonder then that over 150 years a cross-pollution of each sphere occurred. Imperial policy was increasingly infected by the myths of a 'white man's burden' creating ethical issues for imperial administrators. And the exigencies of repeated imperial crises required the development in the apex state of a culture of secrecy, cross-party elite 'bloc' rule, the suppression of all parliamentary initiative in spending or legislation, and the insulation of much of government from any effective popular control.

These effects were most apparent amongst the aristocratic 'pro-consuls' who kept the imperial state's multiple contradictions in working order:

*'[Lord Alfred] Milner's private correspondence is peppered with scorching comment on the problems resulting from "this rotten assembly in Westminster" where "the whole future of the Empire may turn upon the whims of men who have been elected for their competence in dealing with Metropolitan tramways or country pubs".'* (Harrison, 1996, p.62).

Similarly, Lord Selborne told Lord Curzon in 1907: 'One of the great problems you and I have to try to solve is how to develop the constitution so as to remove things really imperial from the control of the House of Commons.'

The safe operation of the empire, insulated from destabilising, democratic politics, required increasing deformations in how the executive and legislative branches acted in order to reconcile contradictory impulses. While these changes could be more easily accommodated within the uncodified constitution, the reliance on restrictive political and administrative cultures changed the purely 'island state' history of the UK polity into something far more onerous and with adverse legacy effects. The American conservative thinker George Santayana wrote in his 1922 *Soliloquies from England*:

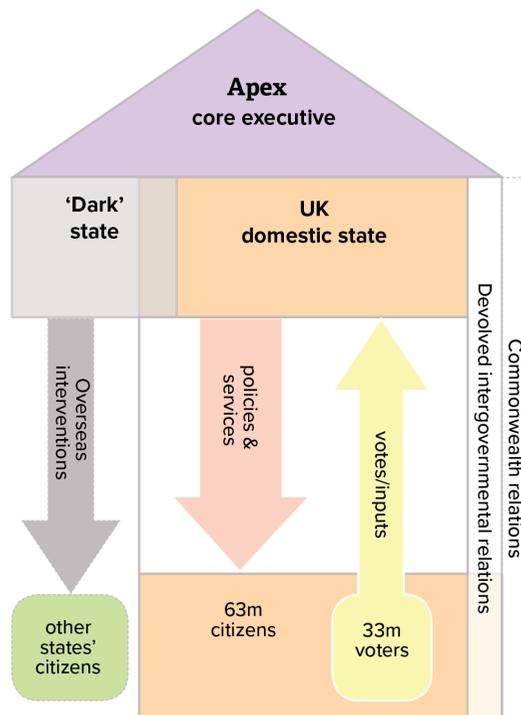
*'When a people exercises control over other peoples its government becomes ponderous even at home; its elaborate machinery cannot be stopped, and can hardly be mended; the imperial people becomes the slave of its commitment.'* (quoted Kirk, 1982, p.468).

Did all this change from 1947 with Britain's overly delayed and badly botched retreat from empire in India (where decades of earlier 'divide and rule' policies contributed to millions killed in Hindu and Muslim ethnic riots)? Not much, in fact, because as Harrison (pp.64–65) noted:

*'The administrative consequences [of empire] for Whitehall of Britain's world role persisted well into the 1960s and were wound down less from inclination or design than in response to economic crises... The empire in decline made greater bureaucratic demands than in its days of prosperity.'*

Of course, the imperial state overseas shrank back progressively. Yet if we consider the contemporary structure of the UK state in 2018 (half a century after the colonial dream was finally given up in the retreat from Aden) there are some substantial continuities still with the earlier imperial period, as Figure 3 shows. The almost complete dominance of the UK domestic state is clearly shown, although the development of devolved governments and inter-governmental relations is beginning to qualify it. The old apparatus of empire lingers on only in the vestigial form of the Commonwealth.

Figure 3: The UK state in 2018



However, there is a more substantial relic of imperialism in the persistence of a substantial 'dark state' that encompasses:

- ✦ the UK's nuclear defences and facilities (created and retained by a post-war Labour and Conservatives elite 'bloc' as a substitute for empire in international affairs);
- ✦ an extensive apparatus of fighting 'small wars' (for example, now including special forces and drone warfare) that has seen UK forces involved in overseas conflicts (as well as in Northern Ireland) in every post-war year, often in ex-colonies – most recently in Libya, Iraq and Syria;
- ✦ a 'cold war' alliance-state legacy, including a 'special relationship' with the USA;
- ✦ a highly developed intelligence state (forming part of the 'Five Eyes' linkage of the USA and the UK and three former dominion states);
- ✦ a highly developed procurement state, which requires that the UK be a leading armaments exporter in order to survive, and which increasingly underpins the UK's dwindling manufacturing and high-tech sectors.

This part of the state is 'dark' not because its activities are necessarily nefarious or directed to wrong purposes, but because so much of its operations are kept away from Parliament and public debate, shrouded still in a pervasive secrecy that is yet another enduring legacy of decades of imperial rule.

Now, just as in the past, a whole series of conflicts inside the UK's political parties can be traced to 'dark state' operations – such as the status of the Trident missile programme in

Labour's policy; or the operation of the Faslane nuclear base in the Scottish independence debates); or the August 2013 Tory–Liberal Democrat government move to start bombing Syria, which was the first foreign policy case where a majority of MPs rejected a Prime Minister's war-making initiative in the **post-war period**.

The continuities in state practices and modes of decision-making between the imperial state in its heyday and the contemporary 'dark state' are striking. For instance, **Ledwige's 2017** book *Losing Small Wars: British Military Failure in the 9/11 Wars* is strongly reminiscent of **Callwell's classic** (1896) treatise on *Small Wars* (still in print), and different from the still 'business as usual' gloss in **Mockaitis**. The UK's failures in Basra, Afghanistan and Libya show an almost spooky continuity with the UK's imperial past – both within the UK armed forces and Ministry of Defence, and in the very heart of the state in the core executive as it authorised repeated, failed overseas interventions. And the burdens of managing an overwhelmingly democratised polity while masking the continuation of the 'dark state' from the public's gaze, still continuously creates deep-lying structural and institutional tensions.

These cloud and obstruct the impulse for democratic reforms to 'normalise' the institutions of UK democracy. For instance, the UK has been a consistent laggard on recognising international human rights issues, partly because of fears that UK armed forces' actions overseas would trigger claims – just as in the imperial era the UK shunned any declaration of 'human' rights, and any clear specification of citizenship rights, lest they should be thought applicable within their territories by the empire's subject peoples.

This history of split democratising/despotic government co-management within the same institutions, and its diminished but still substantial implications even half a century later, is one of the primary factors sustaining islands of undemocratic practice across UK government. These legacy 'dark state' effects largely account for why the UK typically ranks outside the top 15 liberal democracies. They also explain why the institutional landscape of UK government is so jumbled and capable of generating almost simultaneously evidence of strong responsiveness to public opinion and extensive influence over policies by citizens, and strongly centralising and coercive initiatives whenever governments come under pressure from new issues – as with the recent 'securitisation' of immigration issues.

One recent danger of these contradictory impulses lies in their interaction with populist movements of public opinion and with media campaigns feeding on them. The 2016 Brexit referendum result was driven in part by a populist nostalgia amongst older voters for a return to imperial times. All populist movements tend to advocate complex mixes of **'anti-state' policies, but also 'naïve statist' policies** (like Brexit), where a crude assertion of state power is used in 'lynch law' ways that (could) ride roughshod over the rights of socially unpopular minorities. After the decision to leave the EU, 3.2 million non-British European citizens living in the UK faced not only an uncertain future, but also a social backlash from a minority of voters who apparently saw their anti-foreigner prejudices as 'validated' by the referendum outcome. To be sure, state authorities took action to clamp down on any serious threats, yet still the livelihoods and families of those affected seemed for a long time no more than a bargaining chip in the UK state's Brexit negotiations.

Thus contemporary political cultures at both elite and popular levels continue to be shaped by the 'British political tradition' in diverse long-lived ways, both benign (from the slow evolution of democratic practices with deep roots) and malign (from the legacy effects of the 150 year traumas of imperial rule routing through the same UK apex state as democratising impulses).

## Conclusions

Liberal democracy is a complex construct. Its operations require many different components to work together, mesh with, and be able to control a wider state apparatus that is arguably essential to modern civilisation. In the rest of this book we provide a detailed, section-by-section coverage of the UK's changing democracy. From the wider, worsening context of modern political changes (discussed in [Chapter 1.1](#)) we are alert to the many ways in which democratic decay or backsliding can set in, and to the wider (often global) trends that are transforming political processes across many countries. From the qualified recognitions of the UK as a stable but not clearly excellent liberal democracy covered at the start of [Chapter 1.2](#) we take the lesson that Britain's patchy achievements contain strengths and weaknesses that may translate into opportunities to improve what is currently failing, or threaten to initiate wider decay if left un-tackled. And from the UK's highly mixed inheritance of gradual and peaceful democratisation, combined with prolonged institutional and political culture deformations from the imperial era (covered in [Chapter 1.3](#)), we trace why the UK's unusual constitutional and political arrangements have persisted into the 21st century, with many lacunae, gaps and lapses from democratic practices that are otherwise hard to explain. 'Never before has the British political tradition been more contested', [according to some critics](#).

Our analytic approach is a qualitative one, but with the developed criteria for democratic practices made explicit, and our key evaluations summarised in our SWOT analyses. Our analyses start from the premise that democracy within the UK is far from fully realised:

*'[T]o assume perfection is to cast serious doubt on the conception of democracy and the assessment criteria being employed.... An [underlying] assumption we have made in our work is of an inertial tendency inherent in social and political systems towards oligarchy and inequality, unless it is being actively resisted. This means that the work of democratisation is never finished and that established democracies are as much in need of critical assessment as developing ones.'* ([Beetham, 1999, pp.568–569](#)).