

## Lecture 7 – Politics: the Process

IL

The British political system is much like any other Western European one. Factors in the political decision-making process are found both inside and outside of Westminster:

- 1) the political parties
- 2) interest and pressure groups
- 3) public administration
- 4) the media

**NB:** The fact that Britain has a very old parliament but was late in systematising parliamentary representation is the reason for **an electoral system that favours few and big parties**

The Electoral System:

- The British electoral system is **non-proportional**
- There are **659 single-member constituencies**
- To be a candidate one needs **10 signatures + £500 deposit + 21-year-old British national + NOT a peer**
- The winner is the candidate who gets the biggest number of votes (**first-past-the-post**)

This system has been increasingly criticised in recent years as '**undemocratic**' due to DISPROPORTIONAL representation of voter support in the House of Commons (**NB:** see the election results table p.153)

The result is **rigid**:

- 1) few parties – with broad political spectra
- 2) no political substitution – (By-elections)
- 3) big difficulty in gaining a parliamentary representation of new parties

**NB:** reform towards some kind of **proportional representation** started in mid-90s

Political Parties:

Main Parties:

The **Conservatives** have been a 'mass' party since 1860s and go back to '**the Tories**' (supporters of the Royalty) of 17<sup>th</sup> + 18<sup>th</sup> centuries

**Labour** has been a WC party since 1906 (being created first as '**the Labour Representation Committee**' in 1900) + with a **socialist party constitution** since 1918

Centre Parties:

The **Liberal Democrats** (formed when the **Liberal Party** and the **Social Democratic Party** merged in 1987)

Regional Parties:

**Plaid Cymru** (Welsh Nationalist Party) established in 1925

**Scottish Nationalist Party (SNP)** established in 1933

**NB:** Northern Ireland has (since 'Home Rule' in 1922) had a wholly local political culture

**Ulster Unionist Party (UUP)** established in 1921

**Democratic Unionist Party (DUP)** formed in 1971 from a split in **UUP**

**Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP)** established in 1970

**Sinn Fein** established in 1905

Minor Parties:

**NB:** these are usually "one-issue" parties

The **Green Party** established since 1973 (until '85 - the Ecology Party)

**UK Independence Party**

**Socialist Alliance**

**Socialist Labour Party**

**British National Party**

Fringe Parties:

**NB:** these are usually established as 'publicity stunts' (see p.174)

e.g. Lord Such's Monster Raving Loony Party - established in 1967

Pressure (Interest) Groups:

Today these groups often use professional political consultants and give financial support to political parties

They **lobby** MPs, local councillors and civil servants

There are two main kinds:

1) **sectional groups** that are 'job-related' and aim to protect their members economic and professional interests

2) **promotional groups** that support 'causes'

**NB:** sectional groups have traditionally had 'inside access' to politicians through committee work

It is now becoming more and more usual for promotional groups (with special expertise) to sit on committees and have 'inside' contact – as well as continuing 'outside' contact through the Media

- In 1995 the Nolan Committee was set up to fight "sleaze" (MP corruption)

Public Services/Bureaucracy:

Britain has **6.4 million** public employees

- of these ca **460,000** are civil servants (i.e. "a servant of the Crown" who is NOT in political or judicial office)

Civil servants are found both inside and outside Westminster, from top bureaucrats such as Permanent

Secretaries of government departments to employees of tax- and social welfare offices

Governmental civil servants are today expected to be political "special advisers"

Quangos (QUasi Autonomous Non-Governmental Organisations):

**Quangos** are non-departmental public bodies/extra-governmental bodies that get governmental monetary support

**NB:** they are NOT proper public corporations with people elected by the populace