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Quick Guide to British Politics

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The next Prime Minister Gordon Brown (left) listens to Tony Blair

Democracy started in Britain in 1928 when every adult was given the right to vote. Whether this has led to good government is open to debate. Before that, the biggest event in British political life happened in 1066 when William the Conqueror invaded. So, all in all, things have been pretty quiet for about a thousand years.

Britain is a constitutional monarchy. That means that the Brits have a queen to keep the tourists happy and to impress minor visiting politicians. But the real power lies with the British Constitution. The only problem there is that the British Constitution doesn't exist. It's what's called an "unwritten constitution". They make it up as they go along.

Britain has a rich and varied multi-party political system. The current government comes from The Labour Party, a centre-right group, led by Tony Blair who introduced the revolutionary "one member, one vote" system of electing a leader. The Labour Party believes in lower taxes, cleaner hospitals, school discipline, more police and controlled immigration.

The official opposition is provided by the Conservative Party which was once run by the Iron Lady herself, Margaret Thatcher. As Blair's Labour Party has moved more to the right, the Conservative's found themselves homeless, as it were. They believe in lower taxes, cleaner hospitals, school discipline, more police and controlled immigration.

The Liberal Democrats are the third major party in British politics with 62 Members of Parliament. The Liberals, of course, believe in lower taxes, cleaner hospitals, school discipline, more police and controlled immigration.

The youngest party is called Respect and has been started by disaffected ex-Labour Party members who opposed the invasion of Iraq.

Other parties include the Communist Party (who think that Britain should follow the teachings of Karl Marx), The United Kingdom Independence Party (who think Britain should follow the spirit of Winston Churchill) and the Green Party (who like flowers). There is even the Official Monster Raving Loony Party who propose to reintroduce fox hunting on a "one fox, one dog" basis to make it more fair.

The intellectually challenged are also represented in the political landscape by the British National Party. They really, really believe in controlled immigration. So much so, they propose to pay immigrants to go away.

Laws are made by Parliament in the Palace of Westminster. The legislature comprises The House of Commons, whose 646 members are elected by the people of Britain; and the House of Lords whose 731 members are rich landowners, bishops, retired ex-members of the House of Commons or people who are good at something. Lord Sebastian Coe, for example used to be able to run very fast indeed.

The real power in Britain, however, is in Whitehall, a street just around the corner from Westminster, where the government offices are. Tony Blair lives just off Whitehall in a small cul-de-sac called Downing Street.

The British Prime Minister is proportionally more powerful than the North American President. His powers of patronage are immense. To put it simply, if you want a good job, you do what he says.

Tony Blair has announced that he will resign in the next four years. The Chancellor of the Exchequer (finance minister) Gordon Brown will be the next Prime minister.

Nothing else will change. The British don't like change very much. Well, maybe once every thousand years or so.