

Topic: Comparison between politics in Britain and politics in USA

(Chicago style. British English)

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Course

Teacher's name

2018

On a structural level at least, Britain and the US would appear to have a lot in Common. Both have what are generally accepted to be democratic structures in place. Both are “free” societies where it is possible, in theory at least, to express an opinion without fear of reprisals from the state, along with a free press. Both enjoy an electoral system with universal suffrage. Both have a two tier system of government – in Britain, the Houses of Commons and Lords and in the US, Congress made up of the Senate and the House of Representatives – although, given the power of the president, it could be argued that the Americans have a three tier system. Executive power in Britain is in the hands of the government which can be formed from members of any political persuasion but, as a rule will be made up mainly of members of the party with a majority in the House of Commons. The Commons, the elected House in Parliament, holds legislative power but the Lords can slow down the passage of a bill before it becomes law. In the US, legislative power is divided between the Senate and the House of Representatives, but it is fair to say that the Senate enjoys more prestige and more power because any bill passed by the House of Representatives must get the assent of the Senate (and the president) before becoming law. And both systems do not discriminate against individuals on the basis of colour, creed or race so that each individual is, in theory, able to enjoy the same rights as others and each is subject to the same obligations.¹

There are, however, differences which are immediately obvious to even the least political observer. Britain has a constitutional monarchy, the head of state being an unelected monarch with very little power to exercise political power. The US has a presidential system with a president who is elected regardless of the political party which dominates Congress or the House of Representatives. Representatives of British citizens are elected to Parliament as

¹ Darlington, “Contrasts between American and British Political Systems.”

representatives of their counties. The party which gains the most votes in an election will then be asked by the monarch to form a government. This particular system means that, as some counties are larger than others, it is possible for certain counties to wield power which is disproportionate to their size. In other words, a county with x electors may have the right to xy members of Parliament while a county with $x + z$ members may only have the right to xy members or even less. This has been, historically, a bone of contention for hundreds of years and most notably came into view when the first reforms of Parliament were enacted in the 19th century. Although the House of Commons contains one branch of the legislature whose members are elected by universal suffrage, the other half, the House of Lords, contains members who are not elected. The lords occupy their seats because they have inherited their titles from their families or because they have been awarded the title of Peer of the Realm by the monarch. This is another bone of contention in the British Parliament. Traditionally, the lords were the original advisers to the monarch. When the monarch held political power the lords, one might argue were an extension of his power. The first reform of Parliament in 1832 is recorded as the first real constitutional attempt by the elected members of Parliament to wrestle power from the monarch – it was an uphill battle against the House of Lords.... Nowadays, there are compelling arguments in favour of abolishing the House of Lords because it no longer represents either the monarch or the people who had no right to elect it. It is in fact a relic of a medieval past but, traditionalists would argue, plays a role in revising parliamentary bills that might be flawed or might even violate the unwritten constitution.

The absence of a written constitution is another structural difference between Britain and the US and a source of wonderment to many foreigners who cannot understand how it is possible to talk of a constitution when nothing is written on paper. Britain is dominated by customary law, which means that custom and precedent often fill in the gaps where formal written laws would normally apply. Tradition dictates that the monarch must sign a bill before

it becomes law after it has been approved by both Houses of Parliament. Tradition also dictates that having lost an election the prime minister must present his or her resignation to the monarch who will then ask the leader of the winning party to form a new government.

In the US the constitution forms a fundamental building block for American politics. We hear, for example, a lot about the Second Amendment to the Constitution. Americans believe that their fundamental rights are protected by the Constitution and many of them know what the Second Amendment actually states (unlike the British, many of whom will not know that there is an unwritten constitution). The Constitution of the US was written in 1776 and it contains much of the ideology which has dominated American political discourses ever since. It must be remembered that it was written by colonialists who were trying to free themselves from the yoke of British imperialism. It is no coincidence that one of the parties to the far right of the political spectrum, the Tea Party, named itself after the famous rebellion against British power when, rather than pay taxes on tea to a foreign country, Americans threw barrels of it into Boston Harbor. The political discourse of all right wing parties in the US and most of the left leaning ones (the Americans would use the word “liberals” to describe them) is peppered with clichés that invoke the concept of freedom. Free speech is such an important concept for the Americans that it would be difficult to sue anybody for insulting anybody else in the US. The Second Amendment guarantees citizens the “right to bear arms”. This may have made some sense in the late 18th century, but the US is a gun-toting country where something like 80% of citizens have at least one firearm at home.² The frequent senseless massacres of people going about their daily lives, schoolchildren, shoppers, etc., drive home the fact that the US is armed to the teeth and any political attempt to control the ownership of guns will come up against the powerful gun lobby and an ideology which

² Kleck and Gertz, “Armed Resistance to Crime.”

refuses to accept the idea that citizens are safer if there is gun control. Murder by firearms in the US has been estimated as being thirty times that number registered in the UK.³

Ideology is an intangible concept but it, nonetheless, plays an important part in separating British from American politics. The Americans may be overly concerned with their right to own firearms, but the British are more worried about their relationship with the European continent and, in particular the relationship with the European Union (EU). The topic is extremely contemporary. In June 2016, the British went to the polls to decide on whether Britain should stay in or leave the EU. President Obama wanted Britain to stay in the EU not because it would benefit the British people but because the Americans see Britain as a geostrategic partner “across the pond”. As Britain has traditionally enjoyed good relations with the US, Britain in the EU was seen by the American Government as being a way to exercise influence over an otherwise inaccessible community of 500 million inhabitants. These traditional ties between the two countries are based on decades of long standing cooperation between Britain and the US. Without going too far into the past, the most notable collaboration was that made between the British and the Americans to create the allied forces which defeated Hitler. More recently Margaret Thatcher’s association with Ronald Regan was what heralded in the era of the neoconservatives, marked by the liberalisation of the banks, which led to the 2008 world economic crisis from which we are only now recovering. Tony Blair’s collaboration with George W. Bush in the defeat of Saddam Hussein also comes to mind. However, with the Trump administration, political analysis has become a guessing game. It is hard to predict how relationships between Britain and the US will change.

Ideology is what distinguishes an American political perspective from a British one, but ideology does not fall from the sky. It is rooted in the historical experiences of a nation. Just as we could argue that the ideological discourse of American politicians is peppered with

³ BBC News, “Guns in the US.”

catch-phrases that have their grounding in the aspirations of what they call “the founding fathers”, ideology in Britain has been shaped by a long history. Ideology has to be taken into account when politicians present proposals to change laws in Parliament. A current example is the leader of the opposition, Jeremy Corbyn, a declared republican. It is generally recognised that the pursuit of a genuinely republican political strategy with the abolition of the monarchy as the prime target in the present British political climate would be tantamount to political suicide. The Queen is not just a person who lives in Buckingham palace, she is a political institution and generally recognised as being immensely popular with the electorate.

An example of the embodiment of ideology which differentiates American and British institutions is the National Health Service (NHS). The NHS was set up in 1948 mainly as a result of the struggles of the Labour Minister of Health, Aneurin Bevan, a former miner who called the Conservative opposition “vermin”. The main idea behind the NHS was to provide a free health service to every citizen in Britain. It was to be financed by national insurance contributions which already provided a safety net for the unemployed. The late Anthony Wedgwood Benn once argued that the NHS is so dear to the hearts of the British people that even Margaret Thatcher did not have the courage to dismantle it entirely. Although inroads have been made by political attempts to derail the NHS by encouraging private enterprise in the “health market”, the NHS is still there, and it is difficult to imagine any party trying to impose an American health system on the British.⁴

In fact, the opposite is more likely to be true. “Obamacare” (the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act) was a pet project by President Obama to try to establish universal healthcare as a right for all US citizens. Unlike the British NHS, the American system is based on private enterprise and private insurance provided either through the place of work or through the Health Maintenance Organizations (HMOs), which are basically insurance

⁴ Moore, *Sicko*.

companies out to make a profit. The main reason why a national health system failed to get off the ground in the US is that, in times of relatively high demands for labour, employers would entice workers with fringe benefits such as health insurance. The problem that ensued was that workers would not want to pay into some national insurance scheme as they were already benefitting from health benefits in their workplace. Surprisingly though it might seem, major opposition to the setting up of a national health service in the US came from union leaders. The American Federation of Labor leader, Samuel Gompers, famously criticised attempts by the American Association for Labor Legislation to create health insurance for workers as being “anti-democratic” e “repugnant to free-born citizens”.⁵ This is an example of a touchy political point in the US which is completely incomprehensible to the British. The political right, typified by their TV channel, Fox News, with all their rhetoric borrowed from the flag-waving founding fathers, defends, tooth and nail, the private health system because it supposedly offers the sick (read consumer) the right to choose. The problem is that, as healthcare is run as a business in the US, prices of medical treatments have soared as powerful pharmaceutical companies hike up their prices to make ever larger profits.

But the ideology which has led to the creation of major difference between US and British institutions is explicable if the history of the parties that vie for power is examined. In Britain the parties which dominated Parliament in the early 19th century were the Tories and the Whigs, both of which can be characterised as representing the interests of the capitalist class. By the time the 20th century had arrived, the Whigs had become transformed into the Liberals and the Tories were now Conservatives. The new century had galvanised the antagonisms between the working class and the owners of industry and the Labour party, which was founded in 1920, became the new opposition to the Conservatives. The Labour party was funded by contributions from the class that it represented through the unions and,

⁵ Gordon, *Dead on Arrival*, 275.

even though Lloyd George tried to win the support of workers by introducing the welfare state, the Liberal party was doomed to disappear in the years following the First World War. With the exception of the Tony Blair years, Labour has ideologically been linked to working class aspirations. This is possibly one of the reasons why the Labour party finds it difficult to get into government, as the working class does not necessarily identify itself with traditional working class values. In the US, the two major parties have never been clearly identified with class interests. While it is true that social reforms are more likely to be instigated by the Democrats, it should not be forgotten that, in the 19th century, the Democrats had strong electoral support from the white plantation areas of the Deep South.⁶

If money dictates the state of the health services in Britain and the US, it also defines a major difference between American and British politics. It is not easy to compare expenditure on elections in two different countries because public and private financing is hidden in a complex web of disclosed and undisclosed financial accounting. It is possible, however, to compare them anecdotally. In Britain for a person to stand as a candidate to be elected as a member of parliament, he or she must deposit the princely sum of £500, which will be returned if the candidate obtains 5% or more of the votes. In the US, Donald Trump's political campaign for the presidency cost him, initially, \$10.8 million, a sum which is considered frugal in American terms.⁷ Who knows how much the total costs of American elections are, but one would assume that they are astronomical. The implications are, of course, that in the US you have to be rich to be in politics, which in turn means that the American political institutions are more likely to favour the well-to-do than those in Britain.

There is in Britain a long tradition of allowing constituents to lobby their MP. Basically, this means that constituents from a specific county will ask for an audience with

⁶ "Democratic Party, United States."

⁷ Pramuk, "Here's What Trump Is Spending on His Campaign."

their local MP in the hope that some local issue might be raised in Parliament. The new procedures of televising prime minister's question time show that this process has now died out. Members from all sides of the House will use this time to ask the PM what is being done about a local issue which is of absolutely no interest to the majority of MPs present. Lobbying in the American context takes on a whole new dimension. An army of professional lobbyists from an economic interest will hang around the corridors on Capitol Hill seizing any chance they get to influence the delegates. Marcia Angell describes how, even back in 2002 the pharmaceutical industry employed 675 lobbyists (that is more than the number of representatives in Congress), which was costing the industry over \$91 million.⁸

There are some similarities and some differences between the organs of decentralised power in Britain and in the US. Britain refers to the three countries, England, Scotland and Wales, which have representation in the Houses of Parliament. Until 1921, Irish constituencies were also represented but with the establishment of Home Rule, the Irish Free State (now the Irish Republic) was born. In the present situation Northern Ireland is still represented in the Commons but also enjoys a degree of autonomy in the Northern Irish Parliament in Stormont. Scotland too has a certain amount of autonomy and recent events have seen a concerted effort on the part of many Scottish residents to gain an independent Scotland as the Irish did almost a century ago. The separatists were however defeated in a national referendum which has probably put an end to such aspirations for a good many years. In the US, each individual state has its own state legislature, which can at times come into conflict with the federal government. One of the most striking cases of this took place in the early 1960s when the Kennedy Administration passed a law guaranteeing equal rights to American citizens independently of race. In Alabama, the practice of "bussing" black American schoolchildren to black schools came into conflict with federal law. The conflict

⁸ Angell, *The Truth About the Drug Companies*, 198.

came to a head, however, when two black students tried to become enrolled at the University of Alabama. The governor of Texas, George Wallace, vowed to stand on the steps of the University of Alabama and physically prevent the students from getting in. The institutional crisis was finally resolved when Kennedy ordered the army to step in and guarantee the admission of the students. Wallace backed down without a fight. This incident and the fact that only in 2008 was a black man elected to the presidential office serve to show how important the issue of race is in American politics. Race is also important in British politics, but the cultural make-up of Britain has changed radically since the influx of immigrants, mainly from the sub-Indian continent, started in the post-colonial era after the Second World War. Tensions are always present, but it is hard to imagine how the basic social services such as the NHS would function without the presence of doctors and nurses hailing from the former colonies. The present generation is a melting pot of ethnicities who are now British and can make their voices heard in politics.

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