Chapter 1

Taking in the Political Universe

In This Chapter

- Differentiating between local and national politics
- Building a very British democracy
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- Gauging the strength of the democracy
- Scrutinising politicians and the media
- Defining Britain's place in the world

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Those who are too smart to engage in politics are punished by being governed by those who are dumber.

– Plato, Greek philosopher

Plato's quote highlights one – very cynical – way of looking at the wacky (and not so wacky) world of politics. But whatever your view of politics (or, for that matter, politicians), one thing's for sure: the laws made by politicians have a direct impact on your life.

In this chapter I take a speed-of-light trip around the political universe, through the town hall, the newspaper rooms, Buckingham Palace and the UK Houses of Parliament, to the outer reaches of big international bodies such as the European Union and United Nations.

Time to set out on a political journey of discovery!

Understanding the Difference between Local and National Politics

How many politicians do you think you can name? Five, ten, twenty? Well, there are literally thousands of politicians in the UK and many times that number around the globe. The fact that you and I may only be able to name a handful

isn't because we're not very bright; it's because most of the politicians out there have a very low profile in the public eye. They may be big figures in their local community but they don't make any sort of splash on the national stage.

You can divide politicians into local and national ones. Local politicians get to decide what goes on in a particular village, town or city, whereas national politicians have a say in the laws that govern all our lives. Politicians who're elected to the House of Commons and the European Parliament are national ones because they make laws that apply to the whole country, not just to a particular village, town or city.

Here are some of the other key differences between local and national politicians:

- National politicians receive a salary from the state, whereas local politicians are volunteers with normal lives and everyday jobs.
- The national media, such as national newspapers and television/radio networks, covers the actions of national politicians, whereas local politicians gain coverage in local newspapers and on local radio and regional television news.
- The UK is a highly centralised state, which means that the national politicians have lots of power, including the main tax-raising powers, whereas local politicians have to do roughly what the central government says and have much smaller tax-raising powers.

The overwhelming majority of politicians in the UK are local councillors and parish councillors, often elected by a few hundred or thousand voters.

An election for membership of the House of Commons is called a *general election*, a European parliamentary election is called an *election to the European Parliament* and a local council election is called – guess what? – a *local election*.

Usually, voter turnout (the percentage of eligible voters actually going to the polls to vote) is much higher for general elections than for local or European elections. General elections tend to get much greater media coverage and voters are more interested in who wins. (Chapter 7 talks about the other factors influencing voter turnout.)

Splitting the Difference: The Devolved Parliament and Assemblies

The British are noted around the globe for a few things: producing great rock music, drinking too much (but let's not put that one on the tourist brochures!), writing great literature, creating great art and providing a world

centre for financial services. But ask any foreigner to name a word that sums up Britain and the British, and 'tradition' would come fairly high up the list. Put simply, we're not supposed to do change.

But over the past decade we've gone in for political change in a big way. The Labour government of Tony Blair in 1999 set up the Scottish parliament and Welsh and Northern Ireland assemblies.

The big idea was to move some power away from the government in Westminster and hand it to the peoples – through an elected parliament or assembly – in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. This process was called *devolution* and some say it's the biggest constitutional change in the UK for 100 years.

Why introduce devolution? Well, the Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish have different identities and traditions, and many in these parts of the UK felt that these had been swamped over many hundreds of years by the more populous English.

Every four years the people of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland get to elect who they want to sit in their own parliament or assembly. These representatives then make the laws in the policy areas that have been devolved from the UK parliament; for example, health care, education or the environment. Plans are afoot to increase the number of powers devolved to the Scottish parliament and Welsh and Northern Ireland assemblies. (For a full rundown of which parliament or assembly does what, check out Chapter 17.)

Why do the Scottish have a parliament, while the Welsh and Northern Irish have an assembly? Well, this situation reflects the number of devolved powers that each institution has. A parliament is considered a more important and august body than an assembly. So the Scottish, who have more devolved powers than the Welsh and Northern Irish, thus have a parliament rather than an assembly.

In Wales and Scotland, nationalist movements want either greater autonomy from the UK or full-blown independence. This nationalism is most developed in Scotland. The Scottish National Party became the governing party and used that position to call a referendum on whether Scotland should be independent. The referendum was held in September 2014, with the Scottish people voting to stay within the UK. The result was very close, with 45% of votes cast in favour of full independence. In the final few days of the campaign the leaders of the UK's three main political parties – Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat – promised the Scottish people even greater devolution (in other words more power for the Scottish parliament) should they choose to remain in the UK. This promise won the day and now politicians in Westminster are looking at ways of delivering it. See Chapter 18 for full details on the great independence debate.

Evolving to Democracy: A Very British Story

Each democratic nation has trodden its very own path to the political system it has today. The US democracy was born when rebels beat the British in the American Revolution, and the French democracy can trace its roots back to the deposition and execution of Louis XVI in 1793 and the revolution that followed.

The UK too has had its fair share of strife – the odd bloody civil war – and has even chopped one king's head off (the singularly useless Charles I). But instead of one cataclysmic event, such as a war or revolution, leading to democracy, the UK has progressed more gradually to the modern liberal democratic society we have today. In fact, the UK is one of only a handful of countries to get rid of its monarch (between 1649 and 1660) and then decide to reinstate it.

Put simply, the British prefer political evolution to revolution, and the web of government is built up through a combination of laws, traditions and customs. For example, in legal terms the monarchy is hugely important in the British state; in fact, the government itself is there to serve the monarch. However, through custom and tradition the monarch actually plays a very minor role in the government of the country. Much of the power is vested in the hands of the prime minister (PM) and the cabinet.

The UK – unlike the US, for instance – doesn't have a written constitution. Instead, the government works through laws, traditions and customs. This situation is referred to as the UK's *unwritten constitution*, which I discuss in Chapter 5.

An unwritten constitution may sound weak and impracticable, but the UK system has stood the test of time. In fact, the UK was one of the few major European countries not to have seen its democracy suppressed by a dictatorship during the 20th century.

Assessing the Health of British Democracy

Some experts suggest that Britons are becoming less interested in politics and the following evidence does seem to bear that analysis out:

- **Falling voter turnout:** At election time fewer and fewer people are turning out to exercise their democratic right to vote.

- **Falling party membership:** The three nationwide major political parties – Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrat (and by *major* I mean these parties always have Members of Parliament elected) – have seen their membership numbers plummet over the past decade. Politicians who stand as party candidates rely on help from party members but fewer members exist to offer help.

However, evidence suggests that people aren't bored with politics in itself; just with politicians and the main political parties. Some say that media training and the whips' control over what MPs say in public have made politicians increasingly bland. Smaller political parties like the Green Party and the UK Independence Party (UKIP) have done much better at election time in recent years, however, while pressure groups and trade unions continue to enjoy high levels of membership.

Glancing at the alternatives to democracy

Sitting in a strong democratic country like the UK, it's easy to think that democracy is a given around the globe. Surely, everyone must see how well it works and can't live without the freedom of speech and personal liberty, the two hallmarks of democracy.

But much of the population of the world doesn't live in a democratic state. In fact, a large number live under regimes where to be an opponent of the government is to risk liberty and even life and limb.

China, for example, is the world's most populous nation – roughly one in four people on the planet are Chinese – yet its people live in a one-party state. All the politicians are drawn from just one party, so people can only vote for the candidates representing it. Ostensibly, the party in government in China is communist, which means it's supposed to adhere to communist ideals such as common ownership of property and a society free of class or social divides. However, in reality the Chinese Communist Party promotes individual property ownership and individual wealth creation (two very Western and democratic ideals) as means to improve the national economy. In effect, China now practises communism-lite.

This situation hints at a fundamental truth of political systems around the globe: that nearly all of them, to a greater or lesser degree, have some measure of what we recognise as Western democratic ideals, such as free speech and the right to make and spend money without huge interference from the state.

A truly democratic society has to guarantee freedom of the press and the right to protest, as well as hold regular contested elections for government office. The UK, fortunately, ticks all of these boxes and so can be classed as a fully fledged democracy.

Many different forms of government operate around the globe, from communist regimes to Western democracies. Religious leaders even run the show in some countries, such as Iran – a system called *theocracy*. Check out Chapter 4 for more on different types of government.

The expenses scandal of 2009 was a key factor in undermining public confidence in politics and politicians. A host of MPs had claimed for expenses they shouldn't have and worked the system for all they could possibly get. An enormous public furore resulted, which led to scores of MPs deciding to stand down as candidates for the next general election. (Chapter 24 covers this major political scandal and others to boot.)

Some academics suggest that the way to reverse low voter turnout is to make it easier to vote. They probably have a point. At present, electors usually have to attend a polling station in person in order to cast their ballot, and elections are generally held on a work day. Allowing more postal or online ballots would make voting easier and hopefully encourage more people to do so. Making not voting illegal is another possible solution to low turnout. In Australia, for instance, people who don't vote are fined. (Chapter 7 has more on reversing falling voter turnout.)

Paying Homage to the 'Mother of Parliaments'

Standing at the very centre of British democracy is the Houses of Parliament in Westminster, London. This great gothic masterpiece, along with the many government ministries within a short walk, is the fulcrum of British political life. Many of the big government policy decisions and laws that affect all Britons' lives are made in Westminster by the politicians who work there.

The Houses of Parliament are divided into two distinct parts – the House of Commons and the House of Lords. Although they sit in chambers only a few hundred yards apart and have both been in existence for centuries, the houses are quite different in terms of who gets to sit in them and the powers and responsibilities of those who do so. Table 1-1 is a quick guide to some of the main differences between the two chambers.

The biggest party – in terms of number of seats – in the Commons forms the government, with that party's leader as prime minister.

Within the UK's unwritten constitution, the House of Commons is considered far more important than the House of Lords because most laws start their life there and the government is drawn from members of the biggest party in the Commons. What's more, under the Parliament Act of 1911, the House of Lords can only halt a law that has passed through the Commons for one year, whereas the Commons can kill laws that have passed through the Lords stone dead. Check out Chapter 13 for more on the House of Commons' supremacy in Britain's parliamentary democracy.

Table 1-1 Comparing the Houses of the UK Parliament

House of Commons	*House of Lords*
Members are elected by public vote, called a general election.	Members are either appointed by the monarch (on the advice of the prime minister) or have the right to sit as a result of an inherited title.
Laws are proposed, amended and voted down by a majority of members.	A majority of members can vote to amend or oppose legislation but ultimately they can't go against the wishes of the Commons.
Most of the members belong to a particular political party.	Members stay in place for life and tend to be more independent-minded.

When many people in the UK and around the world think of the Houses of Parliament they don't picture great debates and dramatic votes on whether or not a law should be passed. They probably think about some of the traditions of the place, such as splendid set-piece occasions like the monarch's official opening of parliament, the archaic language used by Members of the Lords and Commons when addressing one another, and even the tights-wearing and sword-carrying of some of the staff! Chapter 13 lifts the lid on some of the strange goings on and traditions followed in the UK parliament.

Both members of the House of Commons, called *MPs* (short for *Members of Parliament*), and members of the House of Lords (called *peers*) can introduce new legislation. However, without the support of MPs, peers have zero chance of seeing their legislative proposals become law. MPs have a better chance of getting their policy proposals made into law, but only if they belong to the biggest party in the Commons. (See Chapter 13 for more on how the UK's complex legislation process actually works.)

Politicians need civil servants to carry out their policies and the UK has one of the most extensive and highly trained civil services in the world. The civil service has a long history, with members following a well-defined code of ethics that's supposed to guarantee impartiality, integrity and honesty. Check out Chapter 15 for more on the inner workings of the civil service.

Westminster may be the beating heart of UK politics, but thanks to devolution and membership of the European Union (EU), it's no longer quite as important as it once was to the making of laws that actually affect your daily life.

Introducing the Players in the British Political System

Britain's long-standing democracy relies on the nation's politicians, judges and the monarch. Each of these key figures has jobs to do – big and small – in drawing up the laws of the land, running the government of the country, and preserving the freedoms of British citizens and the integrity of our democracy. The effective working of the British political system is based on co-operation between the politicians (elected by you and me), the judges and the monarch.

Here's a rundown of the big hitters in the British political system and what role they play in delivering effective democratic government to some 60 million Britons.

Gazing at the political summit: The central role of the prime minister

One of the major changes in the UK's political landscape over the past couple of centuries has been the concentration of a great deal of power in the hands of one person – the prime minister.

After a general election the monarch asks the leader of the political party with the most members elected to the House of Commons to form the government of the country. That party leader becomes prime minister, and it's up to him to ensure that the party governs the country and follows the policies his party told the electors they'd carry out during the general election campaign.

In the run-up to a general election every party publishes a *manifesto* – a collection of policy pledges that the leadership of the political party says it will carry out, if elected.

In order to be able to govern, the PM has at his disposal lots of powers, such as to

- Select politicians to be in charge of government departments. I cover these ministers and their powers in depth in Chapters 14 and 15.
- Draw up a list of potential people for appointment by the monarch to the House of Lords.
- Chair meetings of the *cabinet*, which comprises the heads of government departments. The cabinet has the say over which legislation is introduced into parliament with the aim of making it into law.
- Decide whether the country goes to war and, during wartime, tell commanders what to do.

The PM's power derives not only from the office but also from his role as the leader of the biggest party in the House of Commons. Party leaders have the power to throw badly behaving politicians out of the party and even to say who should or shouldn't stand for election as a party candidate.

The PM is far and away the most important politician in the country, which means that media attention centres on what he gets up to. Often the PM represents Britain at international conferences and gets to meet up with other world leaders. In fact, some say that the PM has transformed into a president in recent years and many see the PM as effectively the head of state rather than the monarch.

Declining importance of the MP

In politics, when one individual becomes more important it usually means that another has become less so. This state of affairs is certainly true when considering the relative importance of the PM and MPs. As more and more power is concentrated in the hands of the PM, the humble MP finds she has less and less influence over what's going on. This change in the balance of power has occurred for a number of reasons, including:

- **Whipping:** Although it sounds very rude, a *whip* is actually someone appointed by the party leader to ensure that the party's MPs vote the way the leader wants. Over the past few decades whips have become more important, keeping a tight grip on how individuals vote and even their public utterances.
- **Public apathy:** In the past, individual MP's speeches were widely reported and even backbench MPs were household names. This is no longer the case, with the press reporting far more of what the PM says or does than individual MPs.
- **Legislative squeeze:** The UK government is a big old institution and the PM and the cabinet take up the overwhelming majority of parliamentary time for debates and votes on new laws they want to see introduced. As a result, individual MPs are finding it harder than ever to get their own bills made into law.

An MP who isn't also a minister or a member of the opposition shadow cabinet team – in effect, opposition party leaders whose specific job is to confront an individual minister – is referred to as a *backbench MP*.

Some 650 MPs sit in the House of Commons. A vote held in an individual parliamentary constituency decides each MP. The first-past-the-post system decides who wins the seat, which simply means that the candidate who polls the most votes wins and takes her seat in parliament. (Chapter 6 has more on first-past-the-post and the myriad other voting methods used in elections across the UK.)

Some people call for electoral reform because they feel that the current system is unfair. Often those elected as MPs haven't actually polled a majority of votes cast – all they've done is attract the most votes. It's possible under first past the post to win a seat in the House of Commons by getting just one more vote than the candidate finishing second.

Checking the power of the politicians: The judiciary

The UK judiciary is independent. Judges are servants of the monarch and their job is to uphold and interpret the law of the land. The judiciary, through the new UK Supreme Court, provides an important check on the power of government, particularly in the area of civil liberties.

Parliament sets the laws of the land, but they don't cover every eventuality, and the judiciary has its powers in interpreting particular laws. The web of hundreds of years of judgements in different cases – called *legal precedent* – in effect sets out what's legal and what isn't. However, a new law passed by parliament can wash away legal precedent set by the courts.

Laws made by the UK parliament are called *statute law*, and form the premier law of the land. However, laws passed by the European Parliament have equal standing with statute law.

The UK doesn't have one or two legal systems; it actually has three. England and Wales share the same legal system, and Scotland and Northern Ireland each have their own. The patchwork of laws and courts in the UK is highly complex, but if you want the inside track, check out Chapter 16.

The UK's three legal systems all operate according to a hierarchical system. This system means that the decision reached by the highest court in the land – now the UK Supreme Court in most cases – is binding on all lower courts and also sets a future legal precedent.

The European Convention on Human Rights was adopted in UK law in the 1998 Human Rights Act. As a result, if someone feels their human rights have been violated they can go to a UK court and have it decide on the matter, rather than go to the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg. If that court decides that the individual's human rights have been violated, that violation has to stop!

Mixing in the monarch

The monarchy has been of crucial importance in British history. The first kings of England came to the throne over a thousand years ago, and although their descendants have found their powers reduced, modern monarchs still have their role to play in British life and politics. As head of state, the monarch isn't just a tourist attraction! In the UK's unwritten constitution, the monarch's powers include opening and dissolving parliament, appointing the prime minister, giving consent to bills passed by parliament (without this consent a bill can't become law) and appointing bishops and members of the House of Lords.

The monarch appears to have a lot of power, but in reality it's largely ceremonial. For example, the power to appoint the prime minister sounds great, but it's a constitutional convention that the monarch must appoint the leader of the biggest party in the House of Commons. Likewise, the power to appoint members of the House of Lords is curtailed by the fact that the monarch only does so in accordance with the advice of the prime minister.

Under a convention of the UK's unwritten constitution, the monarch must always take the advice of her ministers – that is, the elected government.

Most Britons, when asked, support the idea of the monarchy but a substantial minority (usually around a quarter) would prefer it to be abolished. They argue that the monarchy is outdated, elitist and costs too much. However, the UK shows no signs of becoming a republic (a state that doesn't have a monarch) anytime soon; all the main political parties – even the Scottish Nationalists – support the idea of a monarchy.

Coming under Greater Scrutiny: Politics in the Media

You wouldn't guess that widespread apathy towards politics existed in the UK if you turned on the TV, radio or opened up a newspaper. Politics is a major talking point on the airwaves and in the columns of most of the newspapers. In fact, as voter turnout has fallen, the actual coverage of politics has increased, thanks in particular to the advent of 24-hour TV news stations. With so much time to fill, the media pores over even the slightest piece of political gossip or smallest policy proposal. Likewise, the private lives of many politicians have

been held up to the bright lights of media scrutiny and, as far as some of the general public are concerned, when it comes to politicians, familiarity breeds contempt. (See Chapter 10 for more on politics and the media.)

Despite the march of blogs and the Internet, the newspaper industry is still hugely important in the UK media. What's written in the papers can have quite an influence on the behaviour of politicians. For example, in October 2009 the UK's best-selling daily newspaper, *The Sun*, came out in support of the Conservative party and its leader David Cameron – abandoning in the process the Labour government and PM Gordon Brown – and caused quite a stir.

In the UK, each of the national newspapers supports one of the main political parties. For example, the *Daily Mail* and *Daily Telegraph* support the Conservative Party, and the *Daily Mirror* and *Guardian* support the Labour Party. Sometimes, a paper switches its allegiance; for example, prior to the 1997 general election the *Financial Times* declared its support for Labour but in 2005 it switched back to the Conservatives.

As with everything else in life, the Internet is playing a more important role in politics, particularly in the US but in the UK too. Politicians are increasingly using social networking sites, Twitter and blogs to get their message across to large numbers of eager readers. Political pundits and the average citizen can bypass the main media outlets and counteract what they see as biased reporting or just say what they want without journalistic scrutiny! (Chapter 11 talks about the burgeoning role of the Internet in politics.)

Sites like Twitter and Facebook and even messaging services like Blackberry have become increasingly important to individuals and groups looking to bring about political change through direct action such as street protest. In recent years several revolutions have taken place in the Middle East with protestors organising and spreading their message through social media and Blackberry messenger. See Chapter 11 for more on this very 21st-century political phenomena.

Britain: Making Its Way in the European Union

Few Britons probably understood just what they were getting into when the UK joined the European Economic Community (now called the European Union, or EU) in 1973.

The EU has metamorphosed from a group of west European nations trying to create a free trade area and improve economic co-operation into what many see as a super state of 28 countries and 500 million people. The EU has its own flag, anthem and parliament. What's more, the laws made by the EU

apply in the UK and other member countries. This situation has changed the legal landscape in the UK and means that the government has to always consider whether or not its actions are in accord with European law.

But the EU has been changed by Britain's membership too. It was the British government that pushed for greater powers for the EU parliament within the constitution of the EU (see Chapter 21 for more on this) and for the entry of poorer countries from eastern Europe.

The EU has its own currency – the *euro*. In under a decade the euro has become the second most used currency in the world behind the US dollar. The recent global financial crisis led to fears among financial experts that the fledgling euro currency could collapse; fortunately, that hasn't happened yet!

Many say that EU membership has been a good thing for the UK. For example, the overwhelming majority of UK exports go to member states of the EU. Likewise, Britons are free to travel and work in any EU country of their choosing.

Looking Further Afield: The UK and the Wider World

The EU is crucial to the UK and its trade but it's not the only game in town. The UK has a major advantage in international commerce – the English language. Combined with strong historic ties with former colonies that now form the Commonwealth and the so-called 'special relationship' with the United States, the UK is a major economy and international power.

Looking east, the rise of China and India presents huge challenges and opportunities for British government policymakers and business.

On the international stage, the UK is a member of the United Nations and one of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, along with China, France, Russia and the US. This membership gives the UK the right to veto UN resolutions, which are basically international laws. (Chapter 19 covers the work of the UN Security Council.) It's also a member of the G8 (the group of the eight most-developed economies) and the G20 (the G8 nations plus a dozen nations whose economies are developing fast), as well as countless other international organisations.

The UK isn't just a major economic power; it's also a key member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), a military body that can deploy well-equipped armed forces nearly anywhere in the world. NATO was originally set up to defend western Europe against the threat of a Soviet invasion in the aftermath of the Second World War.