



GEO

Study Abroad

SYLLABUS

CONTEMPORARY BRITISH POLITICS

Instructor: Andrew Whitehead
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Hours: 40

Language of Instruction: English

REMOTE/LONDON

COURSE DESCRIPTION:

Even as recently as the end of January this year, Brexit - Britain's departure from the European Union - entirely dominated the British political landscape. Two months later, no one was talking about Brexit - the only issue was the coronavirus pandemic and the economic and social issues arising from the nationwide 'lockdown' intended to restrict the spread of the virus. Britain's handling of the pandemic was not helped when the prime minister, the health minister and the heir to the British throne all fell victim to the virus.

Pointed questions are being asked about the policy decisions taken by Boris Johnson and his ministers in the early stages of the emergency. At issue: is the government culpable for the scale of the pandemic that Britain has suffered?

Paradoxically, Johnson's right-of-centre Conservative government has presided over the biggest ever expansion in public spending to try to keep the economy afloat. Some have called this 'corona socialism'. Among politicians of all parties, the role of the state in supporting the economy, providing welfare, regulating people's lives and maintaining their health has risen to the top of the agenda. The state run and funded National Health Service - which broadly provides free medical treatment for all based simply on need - was already well-regarded by voters (and politicians) across the political spectrum. Now the NHS and those who work in it enjoy the status of national heroes because of their dedication in treating COVID patients.

There are, however, other issues which are returning to centre stage - including the protracted talks about an abiding trade deal between Britain and the rest of Europe. Brexit has also greatly intensified divisions within the United Kingdom - above all in Scotland, where the governing party in the devolved administration supports independence and advocates continued membership of the EU.

At the time the coronavirus pandemic struck, neither of Britain's two main nationwide opposition parties - the left-of-centre Labour party and the centrist, pro-Europe Liberal Democrats - had an established leader in place. Labour now has a new leader, Keir Starmer, and his victory in a ballot of the membership suggests that the party is turning back from the 'hard left' approach associated with the outgoing leader, Jeremy Corbyn, in favour of a more pragmatic, consensual and social democratic style of politics.

So - there's an awful lot happening in British politics and this course will explore all these key themes and look at points of similarity and contrast with the United States. This is a virtual course. The instructor will be in London and classes will be conducted on Zoom or similar software. A range of guest speakers will talk to you, and respond to your comments and questions, using this software. The intention is to hold a one-to-one tutorial with each student during the course.

COURSE OUTLINE:

The principal elements of the course will be:

- **Week One - politics in a time of pandemic**: how Britain's system of governance coped with a national emergency - and what happened to the normal and deeply adversarial functioning of party politics; how the country fared without a prime minister as the crisis hit a peak while Boris Johnson was being treated for the virus in an intensive care unit; what will be the lasting impact of the pandemic on attitudes towards public spending and the role of the state?
- **Week Two - how Boris Johnson - and Brexit - has remodelled the Conservative Party**: five years ago most Conservative Members of Parliament supported continued EU membership; now almost all back Brexit. Dissidents and critics have been purged. Boris Johnson combines social liberalism and advocacy of inclusive 'One Nation' Conservatism with a bombastic nationalism. In the December 2019 general election, he won a commanding victory with the slogan 'Get Brexit Done'. How has the party been transformed, and is this a permanent change?
- **Week Three - the battle for the soul of the Labour Party**: in April, Keir Starmer was elected as the leader of the Labour party, taking over from the left-wing Jeremy Corbyn. Labour under Tony Blair once seemed to be Britain's natural party of government. Now it has been out of power for ten years and has lost four successive general elections. Can Labour bounce back? Is there any other party in a position to replace it as the main opposition force, such an essential part of any healthy democracy
- **Week Four - the dis-united United Kingdom**: Brexit has sharpened tensions between the four nations of the United Kingdom (England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland). In Scotland in particular, pro-independence nationalists are now dominant and they oppose Scotland's departure from the EU. Is the United Kingdom likely to break up? Will the country move to a federal structure, including devolution within England?

The scope of this course is open to revision to ensure that it remains fully topical.

'Contemporary British Politics' is designed to complement Professor Ronald Mitchell's course on 'International Conflict and Cooperation: Britain, the European Union and Brexit' - these are also self-standing courses and there is no obligation to sign up to both.

SPEAKERS:

Speakers are subject to confirmation - the intention is for there to be at least one guest speaker every week. Among those to speak at previous courses have been: **Sir Craig Oliver**, director of politics and communications under the Conservative prime minister, David Cameron, at the time of the 2016 Brexit referendum; **Olivia Utley**, a political journalist and former head of communications at the centre right think-tank [Bright Blue](#); **Sally Gimson**, a Labour party politician who has stood for Parliament; and **Martin Upham**, author of *Britain Explained*, and an expert on the rise of Scottish nationalism.

ESSENTIAL READING:

Martin Upham (2017) *Britain Explained: Understanding British Identity* - an excellent book by a former director of GEO London. This was written after the 2016 Brexit referendum and takes full account of its outcome - and while it was published before the rise to power of Boris Johnson, it provides an engaging introduction to British politics and public life.

Iain Macwhirter (2014) *Disunited Kingdom: how Westminster won a referendum but lost Scotland* - an accessible account of the slow rise of Scottish nationalism [print copies of this title are available at modest cost online](#)

The 'instant' books about the December 2019 general election and about the political fall-out of the COVID pandemic are not yet published - one or two of them may feature in your required reading, details to be advised.

Much of the essential reading will be topical reportage and analysis - details will be shared with the class closer to time.

CATCH THE NEWS:

This is essential. The BBC's news website is a good place to start www.bbc.co.uk/news - but you also need to read more partisan news platforms. The *Guardian* www.guardian.co.uk tends to take a left of centre view - while the *Telegraph* www.telegraph.co.uk (a subscription website but you can get a flavour of its coverage without subscribing) is right of centre. The *Spectator* is a right-wing weekly journal with an excellent website which has a (currently free) daily political newsletter sent by email: <https://www.spectator.co.uk/evening-blend/>.

METHOD OF EVALUATION (GRADING)

You will be required to complete two assignments each of about 1,000 words - subjects to be advised - to be submitted in the second and fourth weeks of the course. Each assignment will

be worth 45% of your overall grade - the balance of 10% will be awarded to reflect participation and attendance.

COURSE OBJECTIVES:

The course aims to analyze key cultural, social, economic and political developments and so provide students with a context for their study options. It will provide students with the grounding and analytical tools to compare and contrast contemporary Britain with the United States.

LEARNING OUTCOME:

Students who undertake this course and participate fully can expect to gain a thorough knowledge of the Britain's political process, as well as its key cultural, social and economic challenges.

RULES AND PROCEDURES:

Attendance at all classes is obligatory. In some sessions, students will be asked to participate in debates and to prepare and deliver group presentations. You are expected to prepare actively for and contribute to all classes.

Dr Andrew Whitehead is an honorary professor at the University of Nottingham. He has been a senior news journalist and editor in BBC News, including four years as a correspondent specialising in British politics. He teaches 'Britain Today' to Global Education Oregon students in London as well as teaching news journalism at GEO's communications summer school.