British Political Facts Since 1979

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and

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Contents

<i>Introduction</i>	xiv
I Ministries	1
Conservative Government 1979–90	1
Conservative Government 1990–97	8
Labour Government 1997–	12
Ministerial Salaries	18
Opposition Salaries	19
Ministerial Offices 1979–2005	20
Holders of Ministerial Offices 1979–2005	22
Ministerial Statistics	26
Biographical Notes	29
Index of Ministers	32
II Parties	46
Conservative Party	46
Party Leaders	46
Conservative Party Leadership Elections	46
Deputy Leaders	47
Leaders in the House of Lords	47
Principal Party Officials	47
Conservative Research Department	50
Chief Whips in the House of Commons	50
Chief Whips in the House of Lords	50
Chairmen of the 1922 Committee	50
Conservative Shadow Cabinets	51
Party Membership	51
Party Finance	52
Party Structure	52
National Union of Conservative and Unionist Associations	52
Labour Party	53
Party Leaders and Deputy Leaders	53
Leadership Elections	53
Leaders in the House of Lords	56
Chief Whips in the House of Commons	56
Chief Whips in the House of Lords	56

Labour Party – National Executive Committee	56
Parliamentary Labour Party – Parliamentary Committee	58
Party Conferences	60
Party Membership	60
The Labour Party – Organisation and Constitutions	61
Sponsored M.P.s	62
Party Finance	62
Liberal Party	63
The Alliance and the Merger	63
Leaders and Deputy Leaders of the Party	63
Leaders in the House of Lords	63
Principal Office-holders	63
Chief Whips in the House of Commons	64
Chief Whips in the House of Lords	64
Annual Conferences 1979–88	64
(Social and) Liberal Democrats	64
Leaders and Deputy Leaders of the Party	64
Principal Office-holders	65
Party Conferences	65
Party Finance	66
Minor Parties	66
Co-operative Party	66
Green Party	66
Irish Parties	67
Alliance Party of Northern Ireland	68
Militant	69
The National Front and British National Party	69
Natural Law Party	70
Plaid Cymru (Welsh Nationalist Party)	70
Referendum Party	71
Scottish National Party	71
Social Democratic Party	72
United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP)	73
Independent M.P.s	73
Minor Parties – Representation in the House of Commons	74
Other Minor Parties Contesting Parliamentary Elections	74
Political Pressure Groups	75
Registration of Political Parties	75
III Parliament	76
House of Commons	76
Speakers and Their Deputies	76

Officers of the House of Commons	76
Parliamentary Sessions	77
Commons Hours of Sitting	77
Westminster Hall	77
Emergency Recalls of the House of Commons	77
Broadcasting of Parliament	78
Main Occupations of Members of Parliament 1979–2005	79
Education of Conservative and Labour M.P.s 1979–2005	79
House of Commons Business	80
Fathers of the House of Commons	81
Long-service M.P.s	81
Oldest and Youngest M.P.s	81
Family Connections of M.P.s	82
Spouse's Succession	83
Filial Succession	83
Dual Mandates	84
Critical Votes in the House of Commons since 1979	84
Government Defeats on the Floor of the House of Commons 1979–	85
Confidence Motions since 1979	85
Guillotine and Programme Motions since 1979	86
M.P.s' Suspension	86
Select Committees	87
Chairmen's Liaison Committee	88
Committee of Selection 1840–	88
Committee of Public Accounts, 1862–	88
Public Accounts Commission, 1984–	88
Committee on European Secondary Legislation 1974–76; European Legislation etc. 1976–98; European Scrutiny Committee 1998–	89
Procedure (Sessional) Committee 1976–	89
House of Commons Services Committee 1965–92	89
House of Commons Commission 1978–	90
Domestic Committees	90
Other Committees	90
Committee of Privileges c.1630–1995	91
Committee on Standards and Privileges 1995–	92
Parliamentary Commission for Standards	92
Statutory Instruments 1947–	93
Committee on Parliamentary Commission for Administration 1967–97	94

Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration (Ombudsman)	94
Select Committees since 1979	95
Payment of M.P.s	97
House of Lords	98
Lord Chairmen of Committees	98
Officers of the House of Lords	99
Composition of the House of Lords	99
Creation of Peerages	100
Party Strengths in the House of Lords	100
House of Lords Sitings and Business	101
Critical Votes in the House of Lords	102
Landmarks in the Reform of the House of Lords since 1997	103
Royalty	104
Royalty and Politics	104
Private Secretaries to the Sovereign	105
Lord Chamberlains	105
Civil List of the Crown	105
Total Head of State Expenditure	106
IV Elections	107
General Election Statistics	107
General Election Results by Regions	110
Referendum on E.E.C. Membership	111
Party Changes between Elections	111
M.P.s' Changes of Allegiance	112
M.P.s Elected under New Label	114
M.P.s Denied Party Renomination	114
By-elections	116
Seats Changing Hands at By-elections	116
Notable Retentions of Seats in By-elections	117
M.P.s Resigning to Fight By-elections	118
Electoral Administration	118
Redistribution	119
Election Expenses	119
Central Party Expenses	120
Lost Deposits	120
Women Candidates and MPs 1974–2005	121
Election Petitions and Challenges	121
Sources on Electoral Matters	121
Public Opinion Polls	122
Gallup Poll	122
National Opinion Polls (NOP)	122

Marplan Ltd/ICM Research	123
Opinion Research Centre (ORC)	123
Louis Harris Research Ltd/Harris Research Centre	123
Market & Opinion Research International (MORI)	123
YouGov	124
Populus	124
Polling Archives	124
Polls on Voting Intentions	124
Opinion Poll Accuracy in General Elections	132
V Civil Service	134
Heads of Departments and Public Offices	134
Salary of Permanent Secretary in the Civil Service	138
Prime Minister's Principal Private Secretary	138
Chief of Staff	138
Appointments Secretary	138
Prime Minister's Staff	138
Special or Political Advisers to Ministers	139
Size of Civil Service	140
Number of Civil Servants	140
Civil Service Agencies	142
Next Steps	142
VI Justice and Law Enforcement	148
Major Criminal Justice Legislation 1979–	148
Major Legislation Relating to the Administration of Civil Justice 1979–	150
Cases of Political Significance	150
Principal Judges	152
Other Legal and Law Enforcement Officials	155
Royal Commissions, Committees of Inquiry and Tribunals	156
Investigatory Process	156
Royal Commissions	157
Permanent and Operating Commissions	157
Departmental Committees	158
A Select List of Departmental Committees	158
(Political) Honours Scrutiny Committee 1924–2005	160
Intelligence Services	160
Security Commission	161
Number of Judges	161
The Growth of Judicial Review	162
Recorded Crime 1980–2004	163

British Crime Survey 1981–2004	164
England and Wales	164
Prison Population in England and Wales	165
Parole Board 1967–	166
Police Force	166
VII Population, Health and Employment	167
UK Population and Migration 1979–	167
Geographical Distribution	168
Births, Deaths and Marriages in the UK	169
Causes of Death	169
Racial Composition of the UK Population	169
Education Spending – England and Wales	171
Maintained Secondary Schools by Religious Character	171
Pupils in Full-time Education (000s) England	172
Higher Education Statistics	172
Transport	173
Employment	176
Major Employment Legislation	176
Major Employment Litigation	177
Advisory Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS) 1974–	178
Low Pay Commission 1997–	178
Disability Rights Commission 2000	178
Earnings and Hours Worked	179
Labour Force	179
Employees in Employment by Industry	180
Trades Union Congresses 1900–	181
The Largest Unions	181
Membership of the Largest Unions	186
Unemployment, Industrial Disputes and Trade Union Statistics	187
VIII The Treasury and the Economy	188
Some Landmarks in the British Economy	188
Sources of Government Economic Advice	190
Head of Government Economic Service (1964–)	190
Chief Economic Adviser to the Treasury (1999–2004)	191
Bank of England (1696)	191
Monetary Policy Committee of the Bank of England (1997)	191
National Economic Development Council (1961–92)	191
Commission on Pay Comparability (1979–80)	191
Council of Economic Advisers (1997–)	191

Economic Interest Groups	192
Select Statistics	193
Retail Price Index	193
Inflation rate	193
Gross Domestic Product, Taxes and Prices	194
Production and Interest Rates	195
Base Rates of Major Clearing Banks	196
Government Borrowing and National Debt	197
Balance of Trade	198
Central Government Revenue: Inland Revenue	198
Customs and Excise Duties, 1993– (£m)	199
Public Spending as a Percentage of GDP	199
UK Domestic Household Consumption Expenditure (£m)	200
Concentration of Marketable Wealth Among Adult Population	201
Shares of Total Income Tax Liability	202
Consumer Credit	202
Budget Dates	203
Privatisation 1979–97	204
Nationalised Industries	208
External Financing Requirements of Nationalised Industries	216
Regulators of Privatised Industries	217
Central Government Trading Bodies	220
Other Quasi-governmental Organisations	220
IX Devolution and Local Government	223
The British Isles	223
Scotland	223
Scottish Parliament Election	224
Wales	225
Welsh Assembly Election	226
Northern Ireland 1972–	227
The Channel Islands	229
The Isle of Man	231
Devolution: Main Landmarks	231
Local Government	232
Structure	232
Major Legislation Affecting Local Government	233
Local Authority Interest Groups	235
Local Government Elections	236
Local Government Elections 1973–	237
London Government	242
National vote share in local elections	243

X International Affairs	244
Major Treaties and Documents Subscribed to by Britain since 1979	244
International Organisations	244
World Bank and International Monetary Fund	245
United Nations (UN)	245
North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO)	245
General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT)	245
World Trade Organisation (WTO)	245
G8 (G7)	245
British Ambassadors to Leading Powers	246
European Union	247
The European Union (Communities)	247
A Chronology of Events since 1979	248
Summits	251
Net UK Payments to European Community Institutions (£m)	252
European Parliament	252
Leaders of the British Party Delegations	253
Referendum on EEC Membership	254
Direct Elections to European Parliament	254
European Court of Justice	256
Non-EU European Organisations with British Membership	257
Commonwealth	260
Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings, 1979–	260
Independent Self-Governing Members of the Commonwealth	260
British Colonies and Dependencies	261
Defence	263
Major Military Operations	263
XI The Media	268
The Press	268
National Daily Newspapers	268
National Sunday Newspapers	270
London Evening Newspapers	273
Partisan Tendencies and Circulations of National Daily	
Newspapers in British General Elections 1979–2005	273
Partisanship in Elections	274
Circulations of National Newspapers	274
Circulation of National Sunday Newspapers	274
Provincial Morning Daily Newspapers	275
Main Political Weeklies	275
The Press Council, 1953–90	276
Press Complaints Commission 1991–	277

Broadcasting	277
British Broadcasting Corporation	278
BBC Radio	279
BBC Local Radio	280
BBC Television	280
Broadcast Receiving Licences and BBC Expenditure	281
Independent Broadcasting	282
Independent Broadcasting Authorities	283
Channel 3 – ITV Programme Contracting Companies	284
The ITV Network Centre	285
Channel Four	285
S4C	286
Channel 5	286
Cable Television	287
Multichannel Television	288
Channel Share of Viewing	289
Independent Local Radio	290
Broadcasting Complaints Commission 1981–96	291
Broadcasting Standards Council 1988–96	291
Broadcasting Standards Commission 1997–2003	291
The Internet as a News Provider	291
Inquiries into Broadcasting	292
XII Political Allusions	293
Political Place-Names	293
Political Quotations	295
Political Scandals	302
Major Civil Disturbances and Demonstrations	303
Political Assassinations (Members of the House of Lords or House of Commons)	303
<i>Bibliographical Note</i>	304
<i>Internet Addresses</i>	306
<i>Index</i>	310

Introduction

British Political Facts 1900–2000 was the eighth edition of a work started in 1960. It was an endeavour to set out in compact and accessible form the essential facts and statistics of recent politics. The book grew as more years were covered and as government became more complicated.

The time has come to start again. The twentieth-century volume will, it is hoped, stay in print. But a new approach is needed for the twenty-first century. In the pages that follow all the essential elements of the old work are preserved but often arranged in a new format. However new material and time series, not available to a work that tried to treat 1900 and 1999 equally, are offered here.

Government and Local Authorities now produce much more material about their activities – although some non-government organisations, notably the political parties, produce rather less. But the preparation of reference works has been transformed in recent years by the arrival of the internet. Scholars can now call up from their computers a vast body of data. The great bulk of the information in this book is publicly available on the internet, for those who know where and how to look. We have tried to include appropriate source references.

Because we are starting the book only in 1979, we have been able to include much new information which was not in the old book. The new *British Political Facts* records the share of GDP spent on health, and the percentage of school-leavers going on to university. We now provide information about occupations of politicians in the index of ministers, for example, and much more detailed economic data – the book now sets out the rate of inflation in October 1988, and the growth rate in June 1992.

We have not been rigorously consistent on the starting date for this volume. In many cases we have included names and statistics relating to the period of the 1974–79 Labour Government, even though the rationale for the 1979 start date is of course the election of Mrs Thatcher as Prime Minister on 3 May. We took the view that few readers will be offended if we include a little extra information.

Many of the other rules which applied to previous editions have survived intact. We continue to confine ourselves to *British* material; although there is an expanded chapter on International Relations, our consideration of other countries is seen through the prism of British government policy. There is very limited international comparison in the social and economic statistics.

Equally, we confine ourselves to the *Political*. In the 1979–2005 period, we have taken the view that religious institutions played virtually no part in politics, and we have jettisoned that chapter (influenced, also, by the fact that the

statistics on religious affiliations provided by different churches and faiths are extremely suspect, and not really comparable with each other). Monarchy has survived, but in a very limited form, appended to the Parliament chapter.

Facts remain sacrosanct. While we have doubtless made some mistakes, we have done our best throughout to confine ourselves to demonstrable fact. As far as possible we have tried to avoid making subjective judgements (although it is impossible to avoid them in the Allusions chapter). In the 1900–2000 book, some of the statistical time series were creaking with the effort to align the figures on a comparable basis over the whole century. The 1979–2005 statistics are much more robust, drawing as ever on the excellent *Annual Abstract of Statistics* and other Office of National Statistics publications.

In many areas the time frame of the new book allows us to adapt to the changing political agenda. Health and education statistics are improved, while the Commonwealth takes a less prominent place. Finding data on the use of the internet as a news provider has proved difficult, but it takes its place in the new Media chapter. In the Public Sector pages, now part of the Economy chapter, government regulators now take up more space than heads of nationalised industries – another sign of the times.

The old book was organised into four or five very meaty chapters at the front (which we believe were the most heavily used), and a long ‘tail’ of shorter and shorter chapters with less and less substance. Though very few sections have been lost – apart from Royalty and Religion, mentioned above – we have tried to rationalise the book into a smaller number of weightier chapters, while preserving the early chapters in much the same format. It makes sense to combine local government with devolution, for example, because the London Mayor sits squarely across both; and there is little logic to maintaining a distinction between Britain’s relations with Canada or Australia (previously in the Commonwealth chapter) and relations with France or Turkey (in the old International Relations).

In previous editions we have included acknowledgements to all the many librarians, scholars and others who have helped and advised us on compiling this book. We are starting again with a clean slate in 2005, so we hope those who have contributed to previous editions will forgive their omission from the acknowledgements this time. The House of Commons Library and the BBC’s Political Research Unit remain the most invaluable sources of data. Much of their material already has at least limited public circulation but we are grateful for their help in enabling us to locate what we need. The government departments and political parties have been most helpful. Colleagues at Nuffield College, Oxford and particularly in the Nuffield College library have always been generously supportive. But we should end by thanking the many readers of past editions who have sent in corrigenda. Since error is inevitable in a work of this sort, may we urge them to continue in their friendly monitoring.