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Mastering

British Politics

Fourth edition

F.N. Forman

and

N.D.J. Baldwin

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*To the memory of
J.F.R.F. and D.A.M.B.*

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Preface

This book is a general introduction to the British system of Government and politics. It is an attempt to convey clear information about every significant aspect of the subject and to facilitate an understanding of the British political system and contemporary British politics.

Since the third edition of this book was published in 1996, a great deal of consequence has happened in British politics. Most noticeably, the Conservative Party finally met its Waterloo and was swept out of office at the 1997 General Election by a bored and contemptuous electorate. It was replaced by a new Labour Government led by Tony Blair with the largest Parliamentary majority ever achieved in the history of the Labour Party. Combined with the psychological effects of the looming millennium, this seems to have had a substantial impact upon the public mood and possibly on British political culture, long considered to be one of the most stable and admirable aspects of British society.

The new public mood appears more than ready to give Tony Blair and his colleagues a considerable amount of latitude within which to take forward their project of 'modernisation' – a long word which can evidently be stretched to encompass everything from turning the Labour Party into a highly professional election winning machine with the minimum of ideological baggage to reforming Britain's age-old Parliamentary institutions and, in due course perhaps, even its electoral system. At the same time the Nationalist parties in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have all benefited from the willingness of 'New Labour' to make some timely and historic concessions to the Nationalist pressures emanating from all parts of the Celtic fringe; and the Liberal Democrats enjoyed New Labour's willingness to explore, albeit rather tentatively, various ways of narrowing the gap between the two parties of the centre-Left in Britain – a gap which became a chasm in the early years of this century when labour gradually replaced the fragmented and increasingly marginalised Liberals as the principal opponent of the Tories.

Another large theme which is evident in British politics at the turn of the century is the accelerating erosion of the nation state and all its works; such that its political institutions are challenged from above and below, its jurisdiction is challenged from within and without, and its traditional competences are challenged by new power centres principally to be found in the global media and financial markets. Both the process of political competition and the substance of political culture are inevitably

affected by these formidable forces which owe their allegiance to no particular territory, jurisdiction or state. The result is that it is becoming harder to speak of 'British politics' as an authentic and recognisably distinct area of study or social experience; and people living in these islands, as elsewhere, are increasingly seeing themselves as individuals rooted essentially in their immediate localities but identifying also with the wider communities of Europe and the world.

For this edition of the book the practical consequences are that we have felt it necessary to emphasise: the considerable changes in Britain's evolving constitution (Chapter 2); the sea-change in voting behaviour which was reflected in the result of the 1997 General Election (Chapter 4); the transformation of all the institutions of Parliament to a greater or lesser extent (Chapters 9–11); the shrinking role and capacities of the nation state (Chapter 15); the changing structures of sub-national government (Chapter 16); and the softer, fuzzier nature of governance in Blairite Britain. Of course, not everything has changed in a few years. Britain and its political system will be as recognisable to students and practitioners of politics in the early years of the twenty-first century as they are at the tail end of the twentieth century. Nevertheless we hope it will be apparent to those who read this book, whether they are already familiar with the subject or come new to it, that British politics are an endlessly fascinating subject which repays close study by experts and laymen alike.

As in previous editions, many people have helped in the preparation and development of the text. We would particularly like to thank Sheila Tofts and Amanda Mabbitt for their typing skills (and endless patience), Suzannah Tipple and her colleagues at Macmillan for their encouragement and support, and Sally Vince for her editorial assistance. We must record our gratitude to those who have over the years helped with the content through general discussion or through reading and commenting upon various draft chapters: Charles Anson, Mary Baber, Sir Robin Butler, Lord Lawson, Lord Merlyn-Rees, Richard Mottram, Sir Patrick Nairne, Professor Lord Norton of Louth, Chris Pond, Professor Rod Rhodes, Peter Riddell, Michael Welsh and David Willetts. Our thanks are also due to all those individuals – in Government Departments, Agencies, public bodies and other groups – who provided us with information.

Any insights achieved in this edition – and indeed in earlier editions – owe a great deal to these individuals. Any errors of fact or opinion are, of course, entirely our responsibility.

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F.N. Forman
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