Politics and Society in Britain

Also by Michael Moran

The Union of Post Office Workers: a study in political sociology

The Politics of Industrial Relations

The Politics of Banking

Politics and Society in Britain

An Introduction

Michael Moran

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**For my mother and
in memory of my father**

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Victoria University of Manchester

Michael Moran

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Preface

This book is designed to give an introduction to the social fabric of British politics. Its range is therefore narrower but its intended penetration deeper than is usual with introductory texts. The ideal reader will already be studying Britain at an elementary level – for instance, on the early stages of a degree or in the later stages of ‘A’ level – and will thus know something of the bare institutional outlines of the British system of government. The book largely ignores these familiar outlines, concentrating instead on organisations and processes beyond the range of formal institutions. The work is conventionally organised to cover conventional topics. Chapter 2 examines the changing shape of popular political values in Britain, the connection between those values and political stability, and the particular problem of political stability in Northern Ireland. Chapter 3 examines the changing structure of the electorate, the changing influences shaping individual electoral choice, and the way individual choice, the composition of the electorate and electoral rules combine to produce election results. Chapter 4 describes organisation, ideology and membership of the three main party institutions now dominant in Britain – Conservative, Labour and the ‘Alliance’ of Liberals and Social Democrats. Thumb-nail sketches are also offered of a range of minority parties. Chapter 5 offers a definition and classification of groups, describes how groups operate and estimates the power of different groups. Chapter 6 examines the social composition and political culture of elites in Britain. It begins by defining elites as small minorities occupying prominent positions in institutions, and then discusses the case for studying their social and educational origins. This is followed by an examination of the

changing pattern of recruitment at the top of political parties, administrative institutions and elites in the economy.

These chapters form the political core of the book. But it is a truism that the politics of a country are deeply influenced by the social context in which they are conducted. The first and last chapters examine this context. States are surrounded by two very different social environments. The more immediate and noticeable is provided by domestic society. Chapter 1 examines the changing structure of British society. It looks at the historical development of the economy, the changing scale of organisation, the balance between equality and inequality, and the social impact of developing economic markets. But the British state operates not only in British society; it is also a member of a world society populated by other states and by international institutions. This second social context is often neglected in the study of British politics, yet the changing organisation of world society and Britain's altered place in it are central to the condition of our country today. Just over a century ago Britain dominated world society; now she has been relegated to a position of comparative insignificance. The decline of the British state in world society, and its domestic implications, are the concern of the last chapter.

Arguments about the relationship between politics and the wider social context raise some of the most intractable and abstract issues in the social sciences. To what degree, for instance, are political institutions shaped by economic structures? Do political ideas exercise an independent force on political action? Is political change determined by broad historical forces or by the decisive intervention of outstanding personalities? These issues are neglected in this book, not because they are unimportant but because they are too important to be tackled as a subsidiary part of a work whose main purpose is to provide a bread-and-butter summary of evidence about changing values and organisations. The book does not pretend, however, to be plainly descriptive. Although part of the purpose of studying politics is to encourage dispassionate assessment of evidence, 'facts' in politics rarely point decisively to particular conclusions. A body of evidence only begins to make sense when we try to fit it to alternative theories or models. One aim of the succeeding chapters is to describe some of the available alternative models: to ask, for instance, how far changing political values in Britain are the product of the rise of a 'post-affluent' or of a 'populist' culture; how far the 'class model' of

British voting behaviour has been superseded; how far a 'corporatist' model makes sense of the changing organisation of pressure groups.

All these questions raise the issue of how far British politics has altered and continues to alter. This fascination with change is the product of our present political condition. The extensive academic study of British politics dates only from the 1950s and 1960s. Most of those now teaching and writing either began work in those decades or were educated by people and books formed by the experience of that time. Tranquillity, continuity with the past, and decisive government were the most commonly noticed features of British politics in those innocent years. The succeeding decades have been dominated by images of violence, the decay of established institutions, and the multiplication of government failures. These are the images; the succeeding pages examine how far they fit reality.