

# The illusionary norm of political stability: the unruly democratic politics of the United Kingdom

*Democratic politics in the UK is currently rife with conflict because this multi-national state encourages it, writes **Helen Thompson** (University of Cambridge). Maintaining political stability has historically required prudence and pragmatic restraint. Minority governments and more frequent elections have occurred when the UK's economic and political relationships with the rest of the world are disputed, and at times of tension within the union.*



Theresa May and Jeremy Corbyn at the State Opening of Parliament, 2017. Photo: [UK Parliament](#), via [CC BY-NC 2.0](#)

By recent standards, democratic politics in the UK looks rather extraordinary. A minority Conservative government, held in power by a confidence and supply agreement with a party from Northern Ireland, is endeavouring to implement a decision made by the electorate to change the constitutional order with profound economic and international consequences. Meanwhile, the Scottish government has promised a second referendum on independence, and there has been no devolved government in Northern Ireland for a year. Yet these times are less exceptional than they appear.

Historically, governing the polity of the UK has been fraught with difficulty. The UK is a multi-national state in which the articulation of a common British nationhood was forged in a now-ended imperial world, and is inherently weak in regard to Catholics in Northern Ireland. Yet, despite the presence of national fault-lines, the political tradition that endured from constitutional monarchy to full-franchise representative democracy made serious political change relatively easy through the conjunction of the sovereignty of Parliament and the electoral system. Consequently, maintaining political stability put a high premium on prudence, even whilst offering quite the opposite temptations to those who won power at Westminster. This reality encouraged a sharp distinction between matters of high politics – mainly foreign policy and macro-economics – that were contested in democratic politics via elections and changes of party leadership, and those policy areas to be depoliticised, at least in partisan politics, even if that meant accommodating preferences (as with immigration control in the 1960s and 1970s) that caused unease.

Prudence is a scarce quality in any politics and is always at the mercy of events and changes in external conditions. When either the position of Ireland and then Northern Ireland in the union, or the UK's economic and political relations with the rest of the world, generated substantive difficulties that divided the principal political parties, the UK has historically seen minority governments and more frequent elections. The period between 1972 and 1979 was an acute example of such turbulence, when the breakdown of the post-war economic order, divisions between and within the parties over accession to the European Community, a rise in Scottish and Welsh nationalism, and the introduction of direct rule in Northern Ireland produced three general elections, three referendums, two periods of minority government, and the separation of the Ulster Unionists from the Conservative party.

By contrast, from 1982 to 2005 politics became relatively easy for governing parties, with the exception of the Major government after September 1992 when it became easy for the opposition. As a consequence, long-lasting governments became cavalier. The Thatcher governments indulged in an 'enemy within' approach to the trade unions, and were particularly reckless about Scotland. The Blair government pushed constitutional change that would inevitably produce a problem of the multi-national polity once Labour was no longer in power at Westminster and in Edinburgh and Cardiff. It also made significant changes to immigration policy without much worrying about the electoral consequences, and Blair pushed the Iraq war with a cavalier disregard for the discontent it aroused. Only in Northern Ireland did overt problems of governing remain. Although the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 ended the violence, direct rule was re-established in 2002 and lasted for five years. Yet even then, the size of Labour's majorities kept Northern Irish matters out of Westminster parliamentary politics.

The reasons for this period of stability came from within UK politics and without. When in opposition, neither principal party, except Labour under Blair's leadership, could offer a credible alternative government. From the mid-1990s, meanwhile, a decade of relatively benign international circumstances prevailed, providing an escape from the sterling crises that had dogged UK politics since 1918. Instead of the relative decline that prevailed from the 1960s to the 1980s, the UK economy generally performed better than its European counterparts. Just as importantly, sterling's relative stability from 1995 allowed non-membership of the euro to remain a relatively settled issue. The treaty opt-out that secured the retention of national monetary sovereignty also served as a template for dealing with the further integration otherwise required by the Amsterdam Treaty, whilst membership of the European Union depoliticised some economic issues beyond macro-economic policy.

The beginning of the return of domestic conditions of turbulence was the 2005 general election, even whilst the electoral system allowed Labour to form another majority government on only 35% of the vote. In the wake of the 2004 European Parliament elections, which saw UKIP win 16% of the vote and Labour and the Conservatives fall to their lowest shares of the national vote since 1918 and 1832 respectively, all three principal Westminster parties were sufficiently worried about the EU issue to include in their manifesto a promise to hold a referendum on the proposed constitutional treaty. The Conservatives also politicised immigration policy in party terms, making the issue their primary campaign message. In Northern Ireland, the Ulster Unionist vote collapsed, leaving the Democratic Unionists the largest party in the province for the first time.

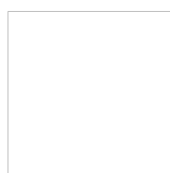
When, after the 2005 election, the Conservatives elected themselves in David Cameron a plausible alternative Prime Minister they were unable to establish another period of one-party dominance, even after the economy entered its deepest recession since 1930–1. Instead, the next general election brought back a coalition government at Westminster with a policy pledge on immigration that could not be implemented inside the EU and a pledge on referendums for further EU integration that would ensure that the UK became an effective impediment to new EU treaties. Meanwhile, a minority nationalist government won power in Scotland in 2007, promising a referendum in the event of securing a majority, and the executive restored to Northern Ireland in the same year was run by the Democratic Unionists and Sinn Féin.

Democratic politics in the UK is now rife with conflict because this politically awkward multi-national polity encourages it, especially when politicians have not found clear and sustainable answers to the questions of what the UK's external economic and political relations should be. It may not be an edifying sight, but the recent absence of serious democratic competition appears to have eroded the pragmatic restraint on which the survival of the UK as a multi-national democratic polity depends.

*This post represents the views of the author and not those of Democratic Audit. This article was first published on [In The Long Run](#), the blog of the Department of Politics and International Studies (POLIS) at the University of Cambridge, available [here](#).*

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## About the Author



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