



SYLLABUS

CONTEMPORARY BRITISH POLITICS

Instructor: Andrew Whitehead

Hours: 40

Language of Instruction: English

LONDON

COURSE DESCRIPTION:

British politics is in turmoil. By the time you read this, Britain is likely to have a new Prime Minister – a democratic socialist from the north of England, Andy Burnham. That's not the result of a general election, or a corruption scandal, or an unpopular war. The Labour Party has decided that the outgoing Prime Minister doesn't have the political instincts and communication skills to fend off the rising force in British politics, the anti-immigration, populist right.

Just two years ago, in July 2024, the Labour Party won an emphatic election victory. Its moderate, pragmatic leader Keir Starmer became Britain's first left-of-centre Prime Minister since 2010. But his party's popularity has since fallen steeply because of concerns about low economic growth, high legal and illegal immigration and a sense of national decline - and also reflecting low levels of trust in the Starmer and in mainstream political parties.

For more than a century, British politics has been dominated by two political parties: the right-of-centre Conservatives and the social democratic Labour Party. But in local government elections this May, these two parties each gained just 17% of the projected national share of the vote. Nigel Farage's right-wing Reform UK was comfortably ahead of other political parties and (at the time of writing) has led every UK-wide opinion poll for fifteen months.

Labour has also lost support to parties to its left – to the radical populist Greens, the pro-independence Scottish National Party, and the progressive nationalist Plaid Cymru (Party of Wales). Political opinion in Britain is more fragmented than ever before – in part a consequence of the Brexit referendum outcome a decade ago – and the key test of the new Prime Minister is whether he can roll back the populist tide.

This course takes place as Britain's new leader will be establishing his policy priorities – what a marvellous time to look at politics on this side of the Atlantic. We will hear from representatives of the main political parties who will also respond to your questions. We will

explore how Britain has ended up with seven PMs in the last ten years and consider the consequences of this tumult. This course will also look at points of similarity and contrast with the United States.

We will **take a guided tour round the Houses of Parliament** - the heart of Britain's deeply adversarial form of party politics – and a **stroll around Westminster**. We will also make a **day trip to Manchester**, which sees itself as England's second city and is the power base of the likely new PM, Andy Burnham. And your instructor will accompany you on a walk through the **Brick Lane** locality of London's East End, the home of successive generations of migrants to Britain.

COURSE OUTLINE:

The principal elements of the course will be:

- **Week One – what just happened?** Why did the Labour Party decide to chuck out the leader who took them to a spectacular election success just two years ago? Who is Andy Burnham? We'll be hearing from a Labour Party representative.
- **Week Two – how did we get here?** What was Brexit all about and how has it reshaped politics? Why has Reform UK grown so sharply in support over the past two years? Are they really a credible party of government? A Reform UK local official will come to the class to answer your questions?
- **Week Three – what happens next?** Is two party politics dead? Can parties to the left of Labour continue to gain ground? Could Britain even rejoin the European Union? Or is the country likely to see the continuing rise of ethno-nationalism? A former Green Party staff member will visit us.
- **Week Four - a dis-United Kingdom?** All three UK nations with devolved powers – Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland – have First Ministers who want to break the political link with England. Could the United Kingdom be about to break-up? We will also look at how well women and people of colour are represented in the top level of politics.

The scope of this course is open to revision to ensure that it remains fully topical and the timetabling may alter to allow for the availability of guest speakers.

SPEAKERS:

Speakers are subject to confirmation and are expected to include: **Martin Plaut**, a Labour Party activist in the Parliamentary constituency of the outgoing Prime Minister; **Candice McElroy**, the chair of a London branch of Reform UK; and **Joanna Mills** who has worked in the private office of two leaders of the Green Party.

RECOMMENDED READING:

Much of the reading required for the course will be topical reportage and analysis and initial readings will be shared before the course starts.

You are also asked to read a commentary released in May (so a few weeks before Keir Starmer announced his intention to resign) by the former Prime Minister, Tony Blair, the only Labour leader ever to win three successive general elections. It's available here:

<https://institute.global/insights/politics-and-governance/the-labour-party-is-playing-with-fire-over-its-future-and-the-future-of-the-country>

The projected national share of the vote based on the May 2026 local elections are here:

<https://electoral-reform.org.uk/how-would-each-party-have-done-if-mays-elections-were-across-all-of-britain/>

The House of Commons Library has compiled an authoritative account of the result of the 2024 general election: <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-10009/>

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 make a presentation to the class during the course, which will account for 20% of your overall grade, and to submit a written assignment (30% of overall grade). A written examination in the final week of the course will be worth 40% of your overall grade. The balance of 10% will be awarded to reflect participation and attendance.

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.

ACADEMIC MISCONDUCT

Students are prohibited from committing or attempting to commit any act that constitutes academic misconduct. By way of example, students should not give or receive (or attempt to give or receive) unauthorized help on assignments or examinations without express permission from the instructor. Students should properly acknowledge and document all sources of information (e.g. quotations, paraphrases, ideas) and use only the sources and resources authorized by the instructor. If there is any question about whether an act

constitutes academic misconduct, it is the students' obligation to clarify the question with the instructor before committing or attempting to commit the act.

GENERATIVE AI POLICY

Students can use GenAI tools in this class to help with certain aspects of course work and assignments. This includes brainstorming ideas, creating a paper outline, or summarizing research findings of articles. However, you cannot use content such as text or graphics created by GenAI tools in your work; rather, you must be the author/creator of your work submissions. For example, you can use a GenAI tool to suggest a paper outline based on a draft you provide it, but you cannot submit a paper with text generated by GenAI as if the text is your own writing. If I believe you've handed in work created whole or in part by GenAI tools, I may submit a report of suspected academic misconduct to the GEO London office. They will work with your home institution's Office of Student Conduct to make a determination of responsibility and any resultant sanctions

***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.*