

English for Life in the UK

Episode Twelve: Government and the British Constitution

So today's episode is concerned with government and the British constitution. It does include quite a lot of technical, specialist vocabulary and in the section of the pad.. podcast at the end I've provided some additional help and definitions with some of the most difficult words. But don't feel that you need to understand every word in this podcast, the idea is that you listen and gradually become more familiar with some of the language that we are using. We do have transcripts, that is a written document with all of the content of this podcast in it, and we recommend that you both listen to the podcast and also follow it in the transcripts. You can get hold of the transcripts through our website that is:

www.staugustinescentrehalifax.org.uk

And again there is more information about this at the end of this podcast. One other thing I wanted to say at the outset, which is true of all of our podcast episodes, is that these are not scripted. So we haven't .. we are not following a detailed script and this is deliberate because we want these podcasts to introduce you to natural conversation in English. So Christine, John and myself, we talk informally on the subject of that particular episode. It does mean we sometimes don't complete our sentences, we interrupt each other, we sometimes say things that are technically grammatically incorrect but we are using everyday speech and that's because we think that is what will be most helpful to you so that you get used to listening to everyday English being spoken by native speakers and in our case with three quite different accents. Anyway, back to today's episode which is brought to you by myself and Christine. John was not able to join us this week.

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Christine: Well the topic this week was government and the British constitution and we started by looking at different forms of government across the world. I wonder, Mark, would you like to tell us about the different categories that you identified, that we discussed?

Mark: Yeah. Obviously this to some extent, there is not a... a list of governments that's officially agreed or anything, so it's people's interpretation really, but the sort of things that we had there was: we started with **pure democracy**, the notion that you could, in theory at least, have a .. a state where all the people took part in all the decisions. That's really theoretical and is unlikely to happen in practice although the original Greek forums and Roman forums were based on that principle. Although actually it meant men (it was only men) and slaves weren't allowed to take part so even there it wasn't pure democracy at all. But we talked about that and then we went on to things like **constitutional democracy** where you have a written constitution and which is a democratic system. We talked about ...**parliamentary democracies** and **presidential democracies**. **So you can have** a presidential system where you elect a president and usually alongside that, there is another body which is, well which we could call a legislature that is a place where they make the laws and that would be elected as well as the President. And then you have ... in Britain where you normally we would call ours a.. a .. **a constitutional monarchy** so we have a monarch that is a King or Queen as it is at the moment but .. but within a constitutional framework which is

democratic where we have a parliament, which is actually where decisions are made and laws are passed but there is officially a head of state who is the monarch.

Christine: There are a lot of complex words and difficult to pronounce there, words there. I remember we talked about the **parliamentary constitutional monarchy** (yes), a bit of a tongue twister for some people.

<: Yes. For ... for those of you, as most of our listeners are relatively new to the English language, some of these words are quite difficult but hopefully with practice and experience you'll get used to them. .. We talked about other systems as well like **dictatorship**, where you have a single person, or sometimes a family that controls everything, is not democratically chosen by the people. We looked at **military dictatorships** where the army controls the country and the head of the army is usually then the head of the country in that case. We talked about **one party states** so that's a country where there is a single political party and they may have elections but it's only for positions within that party and the leader of that party is usually very powerful and is the leader of the country. So we looked at a number of those different systems of government, if you like, that there are around the world. And of course they change over time and even within any one of those, like if you took a presidential system then there are differences in which those .. those systems run in practice.

Christine: Yeah. Almost as many different systems as there are countries.

Mark: Yes, yes yes. Well, and then we have we had an interesting discussion with the students about how they would classify the governments of their country. (Yes). And we had a number of .. different types of government but we also had disagreements even from people within the same country about how they would describe the government of their country. I think that's quite quite ... understandable.

Christine: Yes, I wasn't surprised, I wasn't surprised. Well it's quite complicated. (Yeah) It's not always obvious

Mark: I suppose one of the key things we were trying to cover was the notion of there being different types of government but also then what is it that makes a government a **democratic government**. (Yes) And we come up, .. we came up .. we asked the students to come up with ideas about what.. what is it that makes a democracy.

Christine: It was interesting, it was interesting there were quite .. quite a lot of different suggestions and the first word I heard was freedom. So it's very strongly associated in people's minds, democracy and freedom. No doubt because they come from countries which are undemocratic and where they didn't have, the sense of freedom is not there at all (Yeah) . But when we talked about the freedom of expression, freedom of the press, it makes sense.

Mark: So obviously other elements were: some kind of voting process by which a free and fair voting system whereby the government of the day is selected by the people; we talked also about the ... the idea of the rule of law so that whatever decisions are then made by the democratic process of that country that those rules, those laws apply to everybody in that country and that there .. they are treated fairly on those laws and that there is a fair system, system of courts .. the **judicial system** you could call it, for deciding whether people have been treated fairly according, to according to the laws.

Christine: And we discussed how ... how in voting for someone you are voting for someone to represent you and your views and your interests in parliament. So that representational..

Mark: Yes. That's right. so sometimes we would describe that as a **representative democracy**. So that's where you have people who've been elected on behalf of other people and who then together make the decisions and that that is the most common form probably of democracy is a representative form of democracy. And.. and the differences really are around whether there is a president that is separate from the parliament and with separate election systems, for the... systems for the president and the parliament and then what the balance of powers are between a president and the parliament. And we had some examples around the world of .. elected presidents who become extremely powerful in their own right and make make lots of decisions without reference to the parliament ... and then you have others where there is much more of what's called a balance of power between different elements of the government.

Christine: Yeah... and it is a complex subject and quite interesting and we talked also specifically about constitutions and the difference between a written and an unwritten constitution and we .. we discussed, well we looked at the difference between the US and the UK (yes) in that respect.

Mark: So a constitution is a set of rules that determines the rights and responsibilities of the individual, each individual who's a member of that state, that country, and ... the government.

Christine: And Britain has an unwritten constitution unlike most countries in the world and its quite difficult.. a difficult concept

Mark: Yeah so, if we.. let's start with the simple idea of a written constitution so America is often used as the classic example so the United States have had a written constitution since 1776. It clearly states what the roles and responsibilities are at different parts of the government and the rights of citizens and it's clearly written down and there are mechanisms for changing that constitution but it can't be changed easily and there are over time different interpretations of the constitution. So that might be a court, particularly the Supreme Court in the United States for example might, over time, interpret the Constitution in slightly different ways but broadly the constitution is there ,it's written down, it's simple for everybody to see and to operate but not easy to change. The British system is different. We don't have a single written constitution in one place. We have a whole series of documents: laws that have been passed; judgements that are being made in courts of law; we have interpretations of the law and we have simple traditions that have built up over time and collectively those create what is a .. an unwritten, informal constitution .. which develops over time. And the advantage of that is the fact that it is more flexible and can change over time relatively easily if the government of the day wishes to change things. But on the other hand the difficulty is it's not as clear and precise, you can't find it in one place. And so those are the..the differences really between... Most countries have a written constitution. We are fairly unusual in.. in having an .. a constitution that's been developed over time and is in lots of different places.

Christine: And I was interested when this country leaves the EU there is the suggestion sorry the suggestion that .. we might bring in a Bill of Rights.

Mark: Yeah. There's been a discussion of that because we don't currently have a Bill of Rights (No) in this country and if there were to be such a thing that would become a very important new document which would be part of Britain's developed constitution. The other interesting thing about coming out of Europe, as we have decided we are now going to do, is that we have actually been subject to a number of laws and of judgements made by European courts and by the European Parliament and once we come out of Europe then that will change, so that's another example of our constitution changing over time.

Christine: Interesting.... So the other aspect of the session today was the monarchy because, as you said, it's a constitutional monarchy and we looked at the role of the Queen. And it..it's interesting because suddenly the students seemed very interested .. because, I don't quite understand why, but the royal family attracts a lot of interest across the world. Wherever I go it's common to see on the front page of newspapers some gossip about the royal family. Can you .. can you explain that Mark? Do you understand?

Mark: I'm not sure I can completely I think it's .. a lot to do with the press, the media who are very interested in the Royal family because it's very high profile because it's, it's.. it goes back a long time through history and because it's a .. a because people had these titles of king queen and princess and prince and people are interested in those things and I suppose the British monarchy is far and away the best known and most prominent in the world, one of the longest lasting,.. and so there has been a lot of attention given to it and you're right, people abroad ... I often think people abroad know more about our king and queen.. our queen than we do. I guess that depends. There are people in our country who know an awful lot about the Royal family .. so..

Christine: But actually the role of the Royal family is quite minor in this country isn't it? And even the role of the monarch, the Queen herself.

Mark: Yeah. This is one of the things I think people find it very difficult to understand. We can say difficult to 'get your head round', that means something that it's difficult to understand, it's very complex because, in theory, so, there is a lot of power that the Queen has. The Queen officially is the head of the Army, she is the head of the church, the Church of England, she gets to sign every single law before it becomes a law, she opens Parliament, she closes Parliament, she has the power to appoint lots of people into lots of different positions, so in theory, that is according to historical documents and precedents, the Queen has a lot of official power but in practice she doesn't have many, if any, of those powers because she has to do what the government of the day .. asks her to do in almost all of those cases. So the .. the powers that the Queen has, the monarch has, in this country are actually severely limited and very often people say that the role is largely ceremonial. That is, it's to appear and to .. be a public face.

Christine: ..to kind of, lend authority and gravity to the .. to the actions of the state to the events yeah

Mark: Yeah. That's right. However there is a way in which the Queen probably does have influence, she's been on the throne for a long time in fact I think she is now the longest reigning (yes) monarch we've ever had

Christine: I have known nothing else and I'm well into my 60s and I have .. and she was on the throne when I was born.

Mark: Not quite true for me but almost. Within a year of me being born she was on the throne as well. So she has seen governments come and go, Prime Ministers come and go. She keeps up-to-date In fact one of the things that happens is she has a regular audience with the Prime Minister. That means the Prime Minister goes to meet her on a regular basis to keep her informed. So, given that experience over the years, she does have a certain influence by the kind of questions she might ask the Prime Minister, by the suggestions she might make, although a Prime Minister would never follow the suggestions of the monarch unless they felt that it was something that was in keeping with where their government were intending to go. But .. so there is an informal power that the Queen undoubtedly does have but it's not a formal power and most of the powers that she technically has in practice she simply follows the advice, or indeed instructions, of the government of the day.

Christine: Indeed and it's interesting, other members of the Royal family are also discouraged from having views or having their views known. But they .. they don't have the same restrictions so those views are often sought out by the press and discussed.

Mark: Now you did an exercise, Christine, today with the students to get them to identify the members of the Royal family and it was interesting wasn't it?

Christine: It was very interesting because there was a series of pictures and they knew who they were. There were some 16 different members of the current Royal family and apart from a couple of people who mistook Prince Charles for Prince Philip because they are, to them in particular, both old men, .. you know apart from getting them muddled up they knew who was who. And we looked at the official titles, you know, the Duke of Cambridge, the Prince of Wales, the Duke of Wessex, the Duchess of Sussex and we looked at the difference between that and the names they were commonly known as.

Language support

This is the part of the podcast where I am going to go over some of the key vocabulary points from this lesson. There were a number of quite complex terms used so I thought it would be useful just to go through some of the key ones again.

So if we start with **democracy** and, in particular, **representative democracy**, that is a system of government where the people elect representatives to make decisions on their behalf, to make decisions for them. In the UK we elect MPs, members of parliament. The largest grouping, or party, in parliament forms the government and makes the decisions until the next election when the people can decide whether to change or keep the government.

Monarchy: Monarchy is a form of government with a **monarch** usually called a King or Queen as head of state. In the United Kingdom, Queen Elizabeth is the head of state and her family is called the Royal family. The Queen's role is largely advisory and ceremonial. That is she has certain duties and ceremonies to undertake, for example, the opening of Parliament.

Constitution: a constitution is a set of rules about the relationship between individual citizens and the state or the government. It sets out the ... roles and responsibilities of different parts of the government. Most countries have a formal written constitution. However in the United Kingdom we have a constitution which has developed over time and is not written down in any one place. So our system of government is a **constitutional monarchy** within a **parliamentary democracy**. That is we have a monarch, the Queen, as head of state but over time our constitution has developed so that the Queen's role is advisory and ceremonial and it is the government of the day and the elected parliament that makes the key decisions.

That's it for this week. There will be more on the role of Parliament in next week's episode. Don't forget that the transcript of this episode is available on our website. If you google 'St Augustine's Centre Halifax' you will find that. You will also find there a link to all the previous podcasts and to our Twitter account where additional material is made available.

Thank you for listening.