Lecture 5

BRITISH ELECTORAL SYSTEM

PLAN

1. British constitution
2. The party system
3. British Prime Ministers
4. Electoral system

pedsovet.su

1. British constitution.

- no written constitution

British Constitution □ not a single document

BC = rules, regulations,

- **Sources**:

- some written down as laws agreed by Parliament;
- some written down on the basis of judgments made in court (precedents);
- some have never been written down at all.

3 main sources

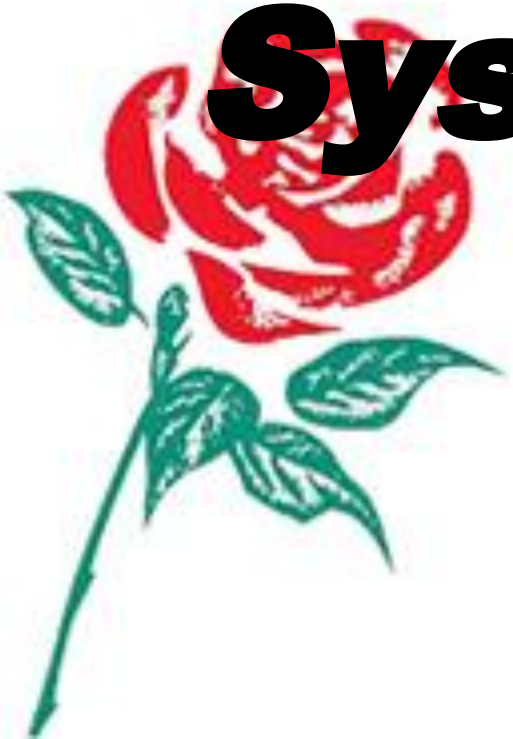
- **Statute of Westminster** –the most important Acts of Parliament, which regulate political system of the country and the rights and duties of British citizens.

- **Common Law** – is based on precedent

  Common Law is guided by the motto "What is not proved directly forbidden is allowed".

- **Conventions** – unwritten law. They regulate the relations on different levels of the society

2. The Party System.



The political party system has evolved since the 18th c.,

since the 1st half of the 19th c. has been essentially **a 2-party system.**

- members of just 2 parties normally occupy more than 85% of the seats in the HC.
- political parties were first formed <u>inside Parliament</u> and only later extended to the public.

the 18th c. 2 conflicting parties within Parliament

- **Tories** = ‘Catholic Irish Bandit’
- **Whigs** = ‘whiggamore’, a cattle driver.

the **Tories** = the more conservative royalists, who supported a strong monarchy

the **Whigs** = opponents of the Court.

Wanted to strip the monarchy of its essential powers and make it dependent upon Parliament.

- The party which holds the majority in Parliament forms the government
  - **Prime Minister + the Cabinet**

Since the 19th c.

the 2nd largest party in Parliament presents itself as an alternative government.

The leader of the second biggest party in Parliament = **‘Leader of HM’s Opposition’**.

He or she chooses a **‘Shadow Cabinet’.**

<u>The Conservative Party</u>,

officially **the Conservative and Unionist Party**

colloquially **the Tory Party** or **the Tories**,

HISTORY

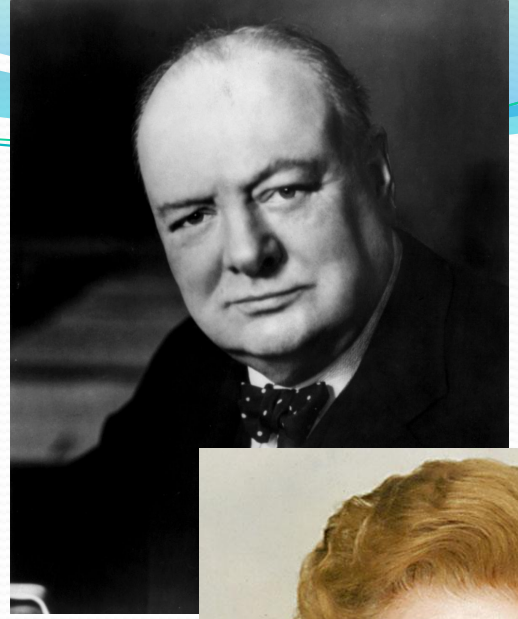
- founded **in 1834**,
- one of two dominant parties in the 19th century, along with the **Liberal Party**.

Conservative prime ministers led governments for **57 years of the 20th century,**

Winston Churchill (1940–45, 1951–55)

Margaret Thatcher (1979–90).

2010 **David Cameron**



In 2015 - the largest single party in the House of Commons with **330 MPs (out of 650)**,

David Cameron, the leader of the Conservative Party, Prime Minister.

TRADITIONAL OUTLOOK

- a centre-right political party
- Ideas:

- *for private property and enterprise*,
- *a strong army*,

- *the preservation of traditional cultural values and institutions*

TRADITIONAL VOTERS:

- the richest sections of society

The **Labour Party**

HISTORY

- founded in **1900** from the alliance of trade unionist and intellectuals
- formed **<u>outside</u>** Parliament

Labour

- last in national government 1997-2010 under **Tony Blair** and **Gordon Brown**

- 232 seats in the 2015 general election the **Official Opposition**

Labour

TRADITIONAL OUTLOOK

- a *centre-left political party*

Historically, the party favoured

- *government intervention in the economy*
- *the redistribution of wealth by means of fair taxation*

Labour

- *increased rights for workers*
- *a welfare state including publicly funded healthcare*

From the late-1980s onwards, the party has adopted free market policies.

Labour

The party is the Conservatives' main rivals.

TRADITIONAL VOTERS

working class

+ small middle class

the Liberal Democratic Party

HISTORY

- appeared in **1877** as **<u>the Liberal Party</u>**
- descended from the Whigs, as an opposition to the Tory Party
- 1 of the 2 major parties in the UK during the 19-20th c.

- In the middle of the 19th c. they represented the trading and manufacturing classes
- Grew weaker after WW I
- In 1988 merged with the Social Democratic Party

- **The Liberal Democrats**

TRADITIONAL OUTLOOK

- centre or slightly left of the centre in favour of
  - *greater unification with the EU,*
  - *emphasis on the environment issues,*
  - *giving more power to local government.*

Liberal Democrats

TRADITIONAL VOTERS

from all classes,

but more middle class

Small parties represented in Parliament

<u>Nationalist parties</u>

- **Plaid Cymru** – Party of Wales
- **SNP – Scottish National Party** – stand mostly for independence of their country

 a few MPs

Small parties NOT represented in Parliament

- **The Green Party**
- **The British National Party (BNP)** – against immigration
- **The UK Independence Party (UKIP)** – wants Britain to withdraw from the EU

3. British Prime Ministers

- The head of the <u>state</u> is **the monarch**
- The head of the <u>government</u> is the **Prime Minister**

‘HM Government’ governs **in the name of the Queen.**

By modern convention, the Prime Minister always sits **in the House of Commons.**

The office is not established by any constitution or law but <u>exists only by long-established convention</u>.

The PM's duties:

1) chooses the ministers who run *Government departments*

2) presides over the Cabinet (the collection of the senior Ministers)

3) informs the Queen at regular meetings of the general business of the Government

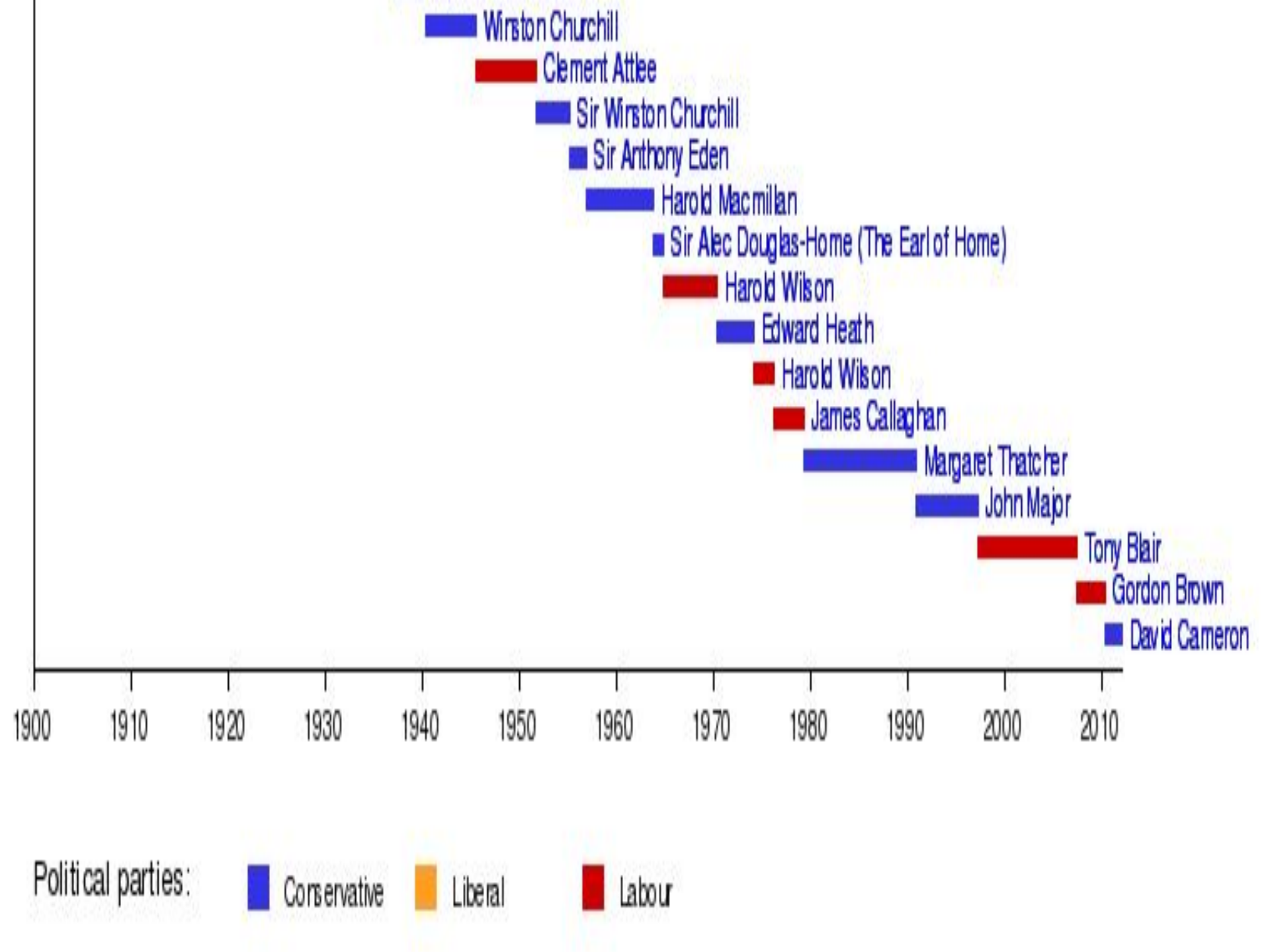
4) recommends a number of appointments to the Queen:

- Church of England archbishops, bishops and deans and other Church appointments;
- senior judges, such as the Lord Chief Justice;
- Privy Counselors.

The residence of the Prime Minister is **Downing St, 10 (since 1732)**

Chequers, the PM's official country home

- in the 18th c. PMs mostly represented **the Whigs**,
- in the 19th c. – **the Tories** □ **Conservatives**.


Winston Churchill
Clement Attlee
Sir Winston Churchill
Sir Anthony Eden
Harold Macmillan
Sir Alec Douglas-Home (The Earl of Home)
Harold Wilson
Edward Heath
Harold Wilson
James Callaghan
Margaret Thatcher
John Major
Tony Blair
Gordon Brown
David Cameron
1900
1910
1920
1930
1940
1950
1960
1970
1980
1990
2000
2010
Political parties:
Conservative
Liberal
Labour

PMs since WW II

1940	**Winston Churchill**	C
1945	**Clement Attlee**	L
1951	**Winston Churchill**	C
1955	**Sir Anthony Eden**	C
1957	**Harold Macmillan**	C
1963	**Sir Alec Douglas-Home**	C
1964	**Harold Wilson**	L

1970	**Edward Heath**	**C**
1974	**Harold Wilson**	**L**
1976	**James Callaghan**	**L**
1979	**Margaret Thatcher**	**C**
1990	**John Major**	**C**
1997	**Tony Blair**	**L**
2007	**Gordon Brown**	**L**
2010	**David Cameron**	**C**

- Upon retirement from the Commons, Prime Ministers are **granted peerage** which elevates them to the House of Lords

E.g.: **Churchill** was made a duke

- Since the 1960s life peerages have been preferred.

e.g.: **Margaret Thatcher**

Edward Heath, John Major and Tony Blair did not accept peerages of any kind.

Gordon Brown - a backbencher

4. Electoral system

- **simple majority system** in which each person casts one vote.

The electoral system

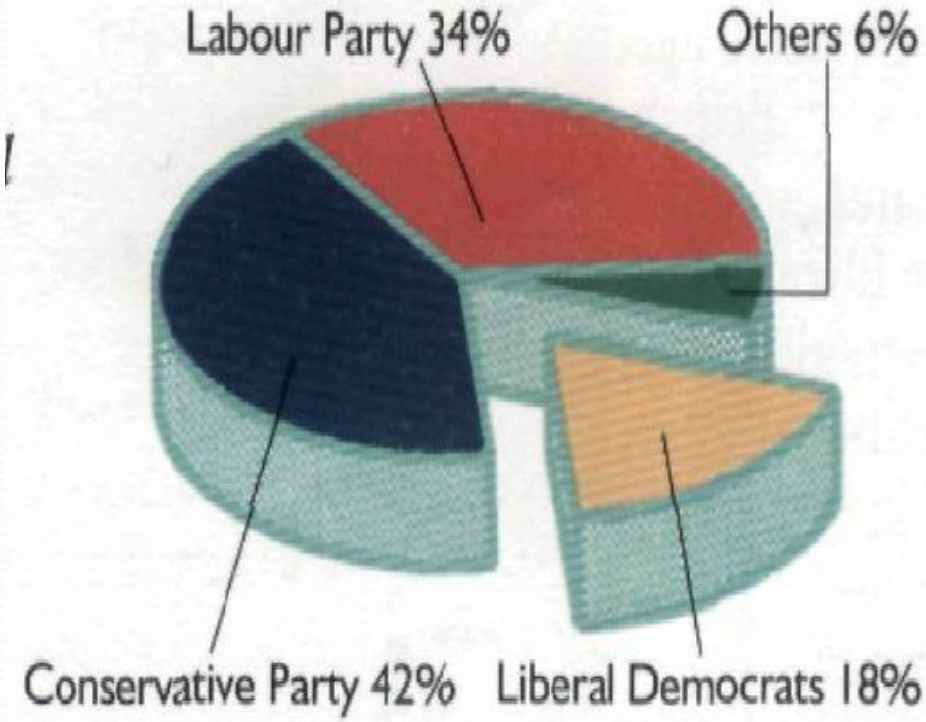
the UK is divided into **constituencies**

≈650 seats in the Commons, one seat on average for every 65,000 electors.

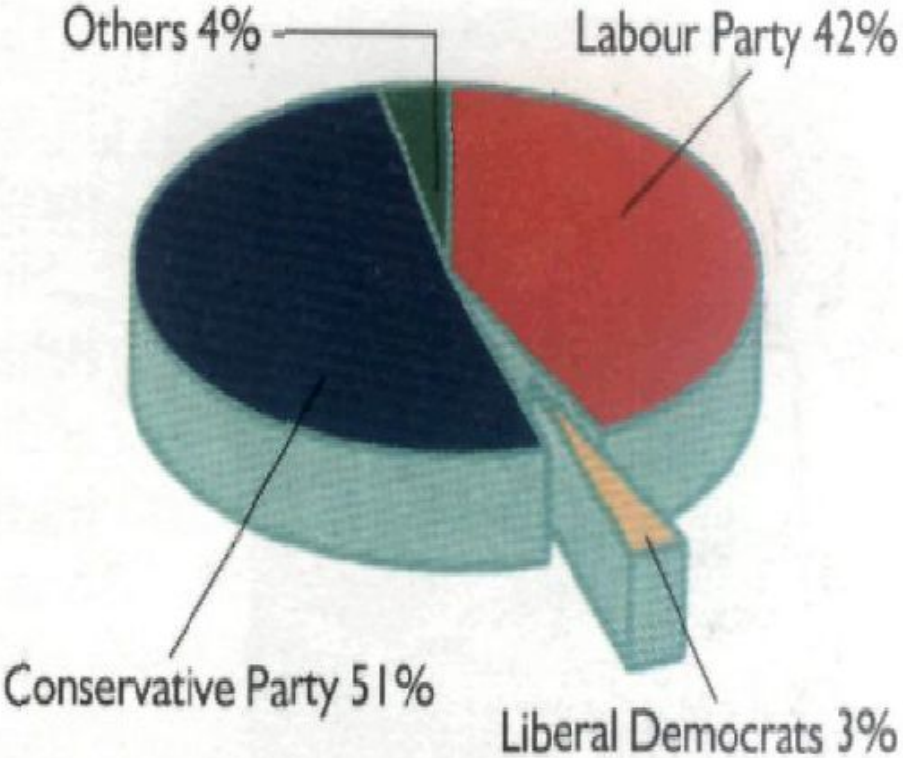
The candidate in a constituency who gains most votes becomes an MP

- **‘first-past-the-post’ system.**

The effects of the first past the post electoral system



Percentage of votes in the last general election.



Percentage of MPs in the House of Commons after the last general election.

All British citizens may vote, provided

- ✔ they are aged 18 and over;
- ✔ are registered;
- ✔ are not disqualified by insanity, membership of the House of Lords or by being a sentenced prisoners.

General elections

- are held every five years
- The PM chooses the date (usually the time that gives as much advantage for his party as possible).
- Then he asks the Queen to dissolve the Parliament.

- ***election campaigning*** - about 3 weeks with large-scale press, radio and TV coverage.
- *Candidates* may be from a political party or they may stand as an “Independent”.

Candidates eligibility:

- over 18 years of age,
- a British citizen, or citizen of a Commonwealth country or the Republic of Ireland.

- Don’t have to be a member of a political party.
- pays £500 to a **Returning Officer** (= a person responsible for elections in a particular constituency).

- BUT! more chances for those who represent one of the 3 main British political parties or a nationalist or unionist party in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland.

- **Polling Day** (usually on a Thursday
  - a working day
  - the *polling stations* are open till late.

By-elections

- when a seat in the House of Commons becomes vacant between general elections if an MP:
  - resigns from Parliament,
  - dies,
  - is made a peer,

- goes bankrupt,
- develops mental illness
- is convicted for a serious criminal offence.

By-elections can be held on any day.