

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE UK

I. History and geography

- 4 nations (and their capitals): **England**, **Wales** (Cardiff), **Scotland** (Edinburgh) and **Northern Ireland** (Belfast)
 - Capital of the UK and England: **London**.
 - The adjective “British” may apply to all of these nations.
 - The UK is no longer part of the European Union (EU). Its currency is the sterling pound (£).
- ≠ The **Republic of Ireland** (also known as “Eire”), on the other hand, is part of the EU and uses the Euro as its currency. It is a republic, not a monarchy.



Some key dates:

1534: Henry VIII establishes the Church of England, thus separating from the Catholic Church.

1819-1901: Queen Victoria's reign.

1960s-1998: “The Troubles” = the Northern Ireland conflict opposing the Unionists (Protestants in favour of the UK) and the Loyalists (Catholics in favour of unification with independent Ireland).

2014: 1st referendum for independence in Scotland.

2016: Brexit referendum.

Jan. 30th, 2020: Brexit – the UK officially leaves the EU.

1952-2022: Queen Elizabeth II's reign.



II. Institutions – key elements

- A **constitutional monarchy** and a **parliamentary democracy**.
- Head of state = the monarch (**King Charles III**).
- Head of the government, or **Cabinet** = **Prime Minister**, currently, Keir Starmer (Labour Party). The PM lives in **10 Downing Street**. Prominent PMs include: Winston Churchill (Tory), Margaret Thatcher (Tory), Tony Blair (Labour).
- The **Houses of Parliament** are based in the Palace of Westminster, in London, and are composed of the **House of Commons** (650 elected Members of Parliament, or **MPs**) and the **House of Lords** (784 **Lords**, or **peers**, who are appointed for life).
- Main political parties = the **Conservative Party**, or **Tory Party** (right-wing); the **Labour Party** (left-wing); the Liberal Democrats; Reform UK (far-right).
- Devolution: UK's Parliament grants a greater level of self-government to the nations. => Scotland = the Scottish Parliament / Wales = the Senedd / Northern Ireland = the Northern Ireland Assembly. These are called “devolved parliaments”

III. The role of the monarch and the Royal Family

Powers held by the monarch (mainly symbolical):

- **Head of the Commonwealth** (56 member states) and **head of the Church of England**.
- Chooses the PM (leader of victorious party) and holds weekly meetings with him/her to discuss parliamentary work.
- Must sign all bills passed by Parliament so they can become law.
- Confers peerages and knighthoods (some are attributed at the PM's suggestion).
- Holds “royal prerogative” like concluding international treaties or declaring war but they are **mere ratifications of governmental decisions**.

→ The British monarch has “all authority but no power” (he cannot do anything without the PM and the government's approval). The King and the royal family must remain politically neutral.

→ The monarch is a symbol of **national unity**, of the permanence and stability of the nation.

IV. Brexit

- 1973: The UK joined the EEC (European Economic Community) but was never part of the Schengen Area nor of the Euro zone. The UK had always been rather “euroskeptical”, but this feeling increased over the decades. In 2015, during the general elections campaign, **David Cameron** (Tory) promised to organize a referendum on EU membership if he was elected...
- **June 23, 2016**: EU referendum, opposing the **Remainers** to the **Leave Campaign** (= **Brexiteers**). → almost **52% for Leave Vs 48% for Remain**. This revealed a great divide within the UK as Remainers were massively concentrated in urban areas and in Scotland and Northern Ireland, while Leavers came from more rural parts of the country.
- **January 30, 2020**: The UK officially leaves the EU.