**History of Britain**

The kingdom of Great Britain was formed by the Act of Union (1707) between England and Scotland. England (including the principality of Wales, annexed in the 14th century) and Scotland had been separate kingdoms since the early Middle Ages, but since 1603 the same monarch has ruled both lands. Only in 1707, however, did London become the capital of the entire island. Great Britain from then on had a single Parliament and a single system of national administration, taxation, and weights and measures. All tariff barriers within the island were ended. England and Scotland continued, however, to have separate traditions of law and separate established churches—the Presbyterian in Scotland, the Anglican in England and Wales. For the history of the two countries before 1707, *see* Britain, Ancient; England; Scotland.

***A Century of Conflicts***

One of the chief purposes of the planners of the Act of Union had been to strengthen a land preoccupied with the War of the Spanish Succession. Under the leadership of John Churchill, 1st Duke of Marlborough, Britain and its allies had won many battles against France, then the most populous and powerful European state, but by 1710 it seemed clear that not even Marlborough could prevent Louis XIV of France from installing a Bourbon relation on the Spanish throne. Marlborough and his political allies were replaced by members of the Tory Party, who in due course made peace with France. In the Treaty of Utrecht (1713), Britain acknowledged the right of the Bourbon dynasty to the Spanish crown. At the same time, France ceded to Britain the North American areas of Hudson Bay, Nova Scotia, and Newfoundland. Spain ceded Gibraltar and the Mediterranean island of Minorca and granted to British merchants a limited right to trade with Spain’s American colonies; included in that (until 1750) was the *asiento*—the right to import African slaves into Spanish America.

Because Queen Anne had no surviving children, she was succeeded, according to the Act of Settlement (1701), by her nearest Protestant relative, the elector of Hannover, who came from Germany in 1714 and was accepted as King George I of Great Britain. A new era of British history began.

**Government in the 18th Century**

Although the first years of George I’s reign were marked by two major crises—the Jacobite Rebellion of 1715 by followers of Queen Anne’s half brother, James Stuart, and the South Sea Bubble, a stock market crash of 1720—Britain was actually entering two decades of relative peace and stability. Local government was left largely in the hands of country gentlemen owning large estates. As justices of the peace, they settled the majority of legal disputes. They also administered roads, bridges, inns, and markets and supervised the local operation of the Poor Law—aid to orphans, paupers, the very old, and those too ill to work. At the national level, many Britons came to take pride in their mixed government, which happily combined monarchical (the hereditary ruler), aristocratic (the hereditary House of Lords), and democratic (the elected House of Commons) elements and also provided for an independent judiciary. The reign of Queen Anne had been marked by parliamentary elections every three years and by keen rivalry between Whig and Tory factions. With the coming of George I, the Whigs were given preference over the Tories, many of whom were sympathetic to the claims of the Stuart pretenders. Under the Septennial Act of 1716, parliamentary elections were required every seven years rather than every three, and direct political participation declined. Parliament was made up of 122 county members and 436 borough members. Virtually all counties and boroughs sent two members to Parliament, but each borough, whether a large city or a tiny village, had its own tradition of choosing its members of Parliament. Even those Britons who lacked the right to vote could claim the rights of petition, jury trial, and freedom from arbitrary arrest. Full political privileges were granted only to members of the Anglican church, but non-Anglican Protestants could legally hold office if they were willing to take Anglican communion once a year.

**The Era of Robert Walpole**

Although the king could appoint whomever he wished to his government, he found it convenient to select members of Parliament, who could exercise influence there. Such was the case of Robert Walpole, who was appointed first lord of the Treasury (and came to be known as prime minister) in 1721 in the aftermath of the South Sea Bubble. The Bubble was sparked by the financial collapse of the giant South Sea Company. The crash slowed down the commercial boom of the previous three decades, a time when the Bank of England had been founded, the concept of a long-term national debt formulated, and many large joint-stock companies established. In part because George I could not speak English and in part because both he and his son, King George II, were often in Hannover, Germany, which they continued to rule, Walpole was able to build up and dominate a government machine. He presided over an informal group of ministers that came to be known as the cabinet, and he controlled Parliament by his personality, his policies, and his use of patronage. His influence, however, had limits. Hoping to curb smuggling, Walpole in 1732 and 1733 sought to replace a land tax and customs duties on imports with an excise tax on wine and tobacco collected from retailers, but parliamentary critics and popular rioters protested against the army of tax collectors that the bill would have created, and Walpole was ultimately forced to give up his plan. During his administration, Walpole kept Great Britain out of war, and even Anglo-French relations remained cordial. In the late 1730s, however, a war party emerged in Parliament. Its members sought revenge against Spain for the harassment by Spanish coast guards of British merchants who wished to trade with Spanish colonists in the Americas. In 1739, against Walpole’s better judgment, Britain declared war on Spain, and two years later parliamentary pressure forced Walpole to resign.

**Two Decades of Conflict**

Between 1739 and 1763, Great Britain was generally at war. The war against Spain (*see* Jenkins’s Ear, War of) soon merged with the War of the Austrian Succession, which began in 1740, pitting Prussia, France, and Spain against Austria. Great Britain became Austria’s chief ally, and British armies and ships fought the French in Europe, in North America, on the high seas, and in India, where the English and French East India companies competed for influence. In 1745 the Scottish Jacobites, taking advantage of Britain’s involvement on the Continent, made their last major attempt to recover the British throne for the Stuart dynasty. Prince Charles Edward (“Bonnie Prince Charlie”) landed in Scotland, won the allegiance of thousands of Highlanders, and in September captured Edinburgh and proclaimed his father King James III. Marching south with his army, he came within a hundred miles of London, but failed to attract many English supporters. In December he retreated to Scotland. The following April he was defeated at the Battle of Culloden and fled to France.

The War of the Austrian Succession ended with the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle (1748), which, as far as Britain was concerned, restored the territorial status quo. By then, a series of short-lived ministries had given way to the relatively stable administration of Henry Pelham. During the mid-1750s the British found themselves fighting an undeclared war against France both in North America (*see* French and Indian War) and in India. In 1756 formal war broke out again. The Seven Years’ War (1756-1763) pitted Britain, allied with Prussia, against France in alliance with Austria and Russia. For Britain the war began with a series of defeats in North America, in India, in the Mediterranean, and on the Continent (where the French overran Hannover). Under strong popular pressure, King George II then appointed the fiery William Pitt the Elder as the minister to run the war abroad, while his colleague, the duke of Newcastle, oiled the political wheels at home. Pitt was an expert strategist and conducted the war with vigor. The French fleet was defeated off the coast of Portugal, the English East India Company triumphed over its French counterpart in Bengal and elsewhere, and British and colonial troops in North America captured Fort Duquesne (on the site of present-day Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania), Quйbec, and Montrйal. Although Pitt was forced from office in 1761 and the British negotiated separately from Prussia, the Treaty of Paris (1763) was a diplomatic triumph. All French claims to Canada and to lands east of the Mississippi River were ceded to Britain, as were most French claims to India. Spain, which had entered the war on the French side in 1762, ceded Florida. The Treaty of Paris established Britain’s 18th-century empire at its height.

**Population Growth, Urbanization, and Industrialization**

During the first half of the 18th century, the population of Great Britain increased by less than 15 percent. Between 1751 and 1801, the year of the first official census, the number rose by one-half to 16 million, and between 1801 and 1851, the population grew by more than two-thirds to 27 million. The reasons include a decline of deaths from infectious diseases, especially smallpox; an improved diet made possible by more efficient farming practices and the large-scale use of the potato; and earlier marriages and larger families, especially in those areas where new industries were starting up. A quickening of economic change was noticeable by the 1780s, when James Watt perfected the steam engine as a new source of power. New inventions mechanized the spinning and weaving of imported cotton. Between 1760 and 1830 the production of cotton textiles increased twelvefold, making the product Britain’s leading export. At the same time, other inventions comparably raised the production of iron, and the amount of coal mined increased fourfold. By 1830 this Industrial Revolution had turned Britain into the “workshop of the world.”

The towns that spread across northwestern England, lowland Scotland, and southern Wales accustomed a generation of workers to factory life. The advantages were more regular hours, higher wages than those received by handicraft workers or farm laborers, and less dependence on human muscle power; many machines could be operated by women and children. The disadvantages included the devaluation of old artisan skills, a new emphasis on discipline and punctuality, and a less personal relationship between employer and employee. For several decades also, such civic amenities as water and sewage systems did not keep pace with the growth of population. London remained Britain’s largest city, a center of commerce, shipping, justice, and administration more than of industry. Its population, estimated at 600,000 in 1701, had grown to 950,000 by 1801, and to 2.5 million by 1851, making it the largest city in the world. By then, Britain had become the first large nation to have more urban than rural inhabitants.

**The Early Years of King George III**

In 1760, the aged George II was succeeded by his 22-year-old grandson, George III. The new British-born king had a deep sense of moral duty and tried to play a direct role in governing his country. To this end he appointed men he trusted, such as his onetime Scottish tutor, Lord Bute, who became prime minister in 1762. Bute’s ministry was not a success, however, and four short-lived ministries followed until 1770, when George found, in Lord North, a leader pleasing both to him and to the majority of Parliament.

During the 1760s, politicians out of office spurred a campaign of criticism ag\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*f13Borough), an expansion of the right to vote, and an increase in the frequency of meetings of Parliament.

**The American Revolution**

The fears expressed by Wilkes’s supporters confirmed the more radical American colonial leaders in their suspicion of the British government. Long accustomed to a considerable degree of self-government and freed, after 1763, from the French danger, they resented the attempts by successive British ministries to make them pay a share of the cost of imperial defense in the form of assorted taxes and duties. They also resented British attempts to enforce mercantilistic regulations and to treat colonial legislatures as secondary to the government in London. American resistance led in due course to the calling of the First Continental Congress in 1774 and the commencement of hostilities the following year. Although parliamentary critics such as Edmund Burke continued to urge conciliation, the king and Lord North felt the rebellious colonists had to be brought to their senses.

British governmental authority in the 13 colonies collapsed in 1775. Although British forces were able to occupy first Boston and later New York City and Philadelphia, the Americans did not give up. After the defeat of General John Burgoyne at Saratoga in 1777, the civil war within the British Empire became an international one. First the French (1778), then the Spanish (1779), and the Dutch (1780) joined the anti-British side, while other powers formed a League of Armed Neutrality. For the first time in more than a century, the British were diplomatically isolated. After General Charles Cornwallis’s surrender at Yorktown in 1781, opposition at home to the frustrations and high taxation brought on by the American war compelled Lord North to resign and his successors to sign a new Treaty of Paris in 1783. The 13 colonies were recognized as independent states and were granted all British territory south of the Great Lakes. Florida and Minorca were ceded to Spain and some West Indian islands and African ports to France.

**Pitt, Reform, and Revolution**

In the wake of the war, many old institutions were reexamined. The Economical Reform Act of 1782 reduced the patronage powers of the king and his ministers. The Irish Parliament, controlled by Anglo-Irish Protestants, won a greater degree of independence. The India Act in 1784 gave ultimate authority over British India to the government instead of the English East India Company. The India Act was sponsored by William Pitt the Younger, who was named prime minister late in 1783 at the age of 24. Pitt remained in office for most of the rest of his life and did much to shape the modern prime ministership. In the aftermath of the American war, he restored faith in the government’s ability to pay interest on the much-increased national debt, and he set up the first consolidated annual budget. Pitt was also sympathetic to political reform, repeal of restrictions on non-Anglican Protestants, and abolition of the slave trade, but when these measures failed to win a parliamentary majority, he dropped them.

Reformers, such as Charles James Fox and Thomas Paine, were inspired by the revolution that began in France in 1789, but others, such as Edmund Burke, became fearful of all radical change. Pitt was less concerned with French ideas than actions, and when the French revolutionary army invaded the Austrian Netherlands (Belgium) and declared war on England in February 1793, a decade of moderate reform in Britain gave way to 22 years of all-out war.

**The Napoleonic Wars**

In the 1790s, the wars of the French Revolution merged into the Napoleonic Wars, as Napoleon Bonaparte took over the French revolutionary government. Pitt’s First Coalition (with Prussia, Austria, and Russia) against the French collapsed in 1796, and in 1797 Britain was beset by naval defeat, by naval mutiny, and by French invasion attempts. The war caused a boom in farm production and in certain industries. At the same time it caused rapid inflation: Wage rates lagged behind prices, and Poor Law expenses grew. In 1797 the Bank of England was forced to suspend the payment of gold for paper currency, and Parliament voted the first income tax. Rebellion and a French invasion threat led to the Act of Union with Ireland (1801). The Dublin legislature was abolished, and 100 Irish representatives became members of the Parliament in London; only an Irish viceroy and a London-appointed administration remained in Dublin.

Despite the defeat of the French in the Battle of the Nile in 1798, the war did not go well for Britain. The Second Coalition collapsed in 1801, and Britain made peace with Napoleon at Amiens the following year. War broke out again the following year, but between 1805 and 1807 the Third Coalition also collapsed. Napoleon’s plans to invade Britain were foiled by the British naval victory under Horatio Nelson at Trafalgar. Napoleon then sought to drive Britain into bankruptcy with his Continental System. Difficulties in enforcing that system prompted Napoleon’s invasion of Russia in 1812. This led to the Fourth Coalition (Britain, Russia, Austria, and Prussia) and to Napoleon’s downfall two years later. Britain’s contribution included an army led by the duke of Wellington fighting in Spain and, after Napoleon’s return from exile in Elba, the Battle of Waterloo in June 1815. The War of 1812 with the United States was for Britain a sideshow that brought no territorial changes.

***A Century of Peace***

At the end of the Napoleonic Wars, King George III, by then insane, had been succeeded by his eldest son, who reigned first as prince regent and then as King George IV. Although a patron of art and Regency architecture, the prince regent became unpopular because of his gluttony and his personal immorality. His attempt to divorce his wife, Caroline of Brunswick, provided much cause for scandal.

**Postwar Government (1815-1830)**

Robert Banks Jenkinson, 2nd Earl of Liverpool, presided as Tory prime minister from 1812 to 1827, over a cabinet of luminaries including Viscount Castlereagh, the foreign secretary, who represented Britain at the Congress of Vienna (1815). Former Dutch possessions such as the Cape of Good Hope and Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) were added to the British Empire, and a balance of power was restored to continental Europe. Although eager to consult its European partners about possible territorial changes, Britain soon made it clear that it had no desire to join the Holy Alliance (Russia, Austria, and Prussia) in policing Europe.

Rapid demobilization after the wars, economic depression, and bad harvests led to rioting in 1816. The Liverpool government sought to aid landlords with protective tariffs (the Corn Laws of 1815) and to aid other supporters by repealing the wartime income tax in 1817 and restoring the gold standard in 1819. The so-called Six Acts in 1819 curbed the freedom of the press and the rights of assembly. A giant political protest demonstration near Manchester that year was broken up by the militia. The economy recovered during the early 1820s, and government policies became more moderate. George Canning, who replaced Castlereagh as foreign secretary, welcomed the independence of Spain’s South American colonies and aided the Greek rebellion against Turkish rule—a cause also hailed by romantic poets such as Lord Byron. William Huskisson at the Board of Trade cut tariffs and eased international trade. Robert Peel, the home secretary, reformed the criminal law and instituted a modern police force in London in 1829. Barriers to labor union organization were also reduced during this time.

Despite an early 19th-century religious revival, especially among Methodists and other non-Anglican Protestants, Tory ministries remained reluctant to challenge religious and political fundamentals. In 1828 Parliament agreed, however, to end political restrictions on Protestant dissenters, and one year later the government of the duke of Wellington was challenged in Ireland by a mass movement called the Catholic Association. Wellington bought peace in Ireland by granting Roman Catholics the right to become members of Parliament and to hold public office, but in so doing split the Tory Party. In November 1830, after the election prompted by the death of George IV and the accession of his brother, William IV, a predominantly Whig ministry headed by the 2nd Earl Grey took over.

**Reforms of the 1830s**

The great political issue of 1831 and 1832 was the Whig Reform Bill. After much debate in and out of the House of Commons and after a threat to swamp a reluctant House of Lords with new and sympathetic peers, the measure became law in June 1832. It provided for a redistribution of seats in favor of the growing industrial cities and a single property test that gave the vote to all middle-class men and some artisans. In England and Wales the electorate grew by 50 percent. In Ireland it more than doubled, and in Scotland it increased by 15 times. The bill set up a system of registration that encouraged political party organization, both locally and nationally. The measure weakened the influence of the monarch and the House of Lords. Other reforms followed. The Factory Act of 1833 limited the working hours of women and children and provided for central inspectors. Slavery was abolished in the same year, and the controversial New Poor Law, enacted a year later, also involved supervision by a central board. The Municipal Corporations Act (1835) provided for elected representative town councils. An Ecclesiastical Commission was set up in 1836 to reform the established church, and a separate statute placed the registration of births, deaths, and marriages in the hands of the state rather than the church.

In 1837 the elderly William IV was succeeded as monarch by his 18-year-old niece, Victoria. She and her husband, Albert, came to symbolize many virtues: a close-knit family life, a sense of public duty, integrity, and respectability. These beliefs and attitudes, which are often known as “Victorian,” were also molded by the revival of evangelical religion and by utilitarian notions of efficiency and good business practice.

**Chartists and Corn Law Reformers**

The Whig reform spirit ebbed during the ministry of Lord Melbourne, and an economic depression in 1837 brought to public attention two powerful protest organizations. The Chartists urged the immediate adoption of the People’s Charter, which would have transformed Britain into a political democracy (with universal male suffrage, equal electoral districts, and secret ballot) and which was somehow expected to improve living standards as well. Millions of workers signed Charter petitions in 1839, 1842, and 1848, and some Chartist demonstrations turned into riots. Parliament repeatedly rejected the People’s Charter, but it proved more receptive to the creed of the Manchester-based Anti-Corn Law League. League leaders such as Richard Cobden expected the repeal of tariffs on imported food to advance the welfare of manufacturers and workers alike, while promoting international trade and peace among nations. Sir Robert Peel’s Conservative ministry succeeded Melbourne, and became active in reducing Britain’s tariffs but brought back the income tax to make up for lost revenue. In the winter of 1845 and 1846, spurred by an Irish potato blight and consequent famine, Peel proposed the complete repeal of the Corn Laws. With Whig aid the measure passed, but two-thirds of Peel’s fellow Conservatives condemned the action as a sellout of the party’s agricultural supporters. The Conservatives divided between Peelites and protectionists, and the Whigs returned to power under Lord John Russell in 1846.

During the Peel and Russell years the trend toward free trade continued, aided by the 1849 repeal of the Navigation Acts, and a system of administrative regulation was gradually established. Women and children were barred from underground work in mines and limited to 10-hour working days in factories. Regulations were also imposed on urban sanitation facilities and passenger-carrying railroads, and commissions were set up to oversee prisons, insane asylums, merchant shipping, and private charities. Attempts to subsidize elementary education, however, were hampered by conflict over the church’s role in running schools.

**Mid-Victorian Prosperity**

From the late 1840s until the late 1860s, Britons were less concerned with domestic conflict than with an economic boom occasionally affected by wars and threats of war on the Continent and overseas. The Great Exhibition of 1851 in London symbolized Britain’s industrial supremacy. The 10,600-km (6600-mi) railroad network of 1850 more than doubled during the mid-Victorian years, and the number of passengers carried annually went up by seven times. The telegraph provided instant communication. Inexpensive steel was made possible by Henry Bessemer’s process, developed in 1856, and a boom in steamship building began in the 1860s. The value of British exports tripled, and overseas capital investments quadrupled. Working-class living standards improved also, and the growth of trade unionism among engineers, carpenters, and others led to the founding of the Trades Union Congress in 1868. In the aftermath of the Continental revolutions of 1848, a Britain governed by the Peelite-Liberal coalition of Lord Aberdeen drifted into war with an autocratic, expansionist Russia. In alliance with the France of Napoleon III, Britain entered the Crimean War in 1854. Parliamentary criticism of army mismanagement, however, caused the downfall of Aberdeen. He was replaced by Lord Palmerston, a staunch English nationalist and champion of European liberalism, who saw the war to its conclusion—a limited Anglo-French victory in 1856. In 1857 and 1858, the Sepoy Mutiny was suppressed, and Britain abolished the East India Company, making British India a crown colony. In contrast, domestic self-government was encouraged in Britain’s settlement colonies: Canada (federated under the British North America Act of 1867), Australia, New Zealand, and Cape Colony (South Africa). Britain maintained a difficult neutrality during the American Civil War (1861-1865). It encouraged the unification of Italy, but witnessed with apprehension Prince Otto von Bismarck’s creation of a German Empire under Prussian domination.

**The Gladstone-Disraeli Rivalry**

During the 16 years after Palmerston’s death in 1865, the rivalry of William Gladstone and Benjamin Disraeli dominated British politics. Both had begun as Tories, but in 1846 Gladstone had become a Peelite and had thereafter gradually moved toward liberalism. As Palmerston’s chancellor of the\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\* ultimately came up with the Reform Bill of 1867, which Disraeli successfully piloted through the House of Commons. The measure enfranchised most urban workers. It almost doubled the English and Welsh electorates and more than doubled the Scottish. It also launched the era of mass political organization and of increasingly polarized and disciplined parliamentary parties.

Disraeli succeeded Derby as prime minister early in 1868, but a Liberal election victory in December of that year gave the post to Gladstone. Gladstone’s first cabinet was responsible for numerous reforms: the disestablishment of the Church of Ireland; the creation of a national system of elementary education; the full admission of religious dissenters to the universities of Oxford and Cambridge; a merit-based civil service; the secret ballot; and judicial and army reform. During the Disraeli ministry that followed, the Conservatives passed legislation advancing “Tory democracy”—trade union legalization, slum clearance, and public health—but Disraeli became more concerned with upholding the British Empire in Africa and Asia and scoring a diplomatic triumph at the Congress of Berlin (1878).

A whistle-stop campaign by Gladstone in 1879 and 1880 restored him to the prime ministership. His second cabinet curbed electoral corruption and, with the Reform Act of 1884, extended the vote to almost all males who owned or rented housing. The measure made the single-member parliamentary district the general rule. Gladstone became increasingly concerned with bringing peace and land reform to Ireland, which was represented in Parliament by the Irish Nationalist Party of Charles Stewart Parnell. When Gladstone became a convert to the cause of home rule—the creation of a semi-independent Irish legislature and cabinet—he divided the Liberal Party and led his brief third ministry to defeat in 1886. A second effort to enact home rule during Gladstone’s fourth ministry, which lasted from 1892 to 1894, was blocked by the House of Lords.

**Late Victorian Economic and Social Change**

The same agricultural depression that led to unrest among Irish tenant farmers in the second half of the 19th century also undermined British agriculture and the prosperity of country squires. The mid-Victorian boom gave way to an era of deflation, falling profit margins, and occasional large-scale unemployment. Both the United States and Germany overtook Britain in the production of steel and other manufactured goods. At the same time, Britain remained the world’s prime shipbuilder, shipper, and banker, and a majority of British workers gained in purchasing power. The number of trade unionists grew, and significant attempts were made to organize the semiskilled; the London Dock Strike of 1889 was the result of one such effort. Social investigators and professed socialists discovered large pockets of poverty in the slums of London and other cities, and the national government as well as voluntary agencies were called on to remedy social evils. Despite a high level of emigration to British colonies and the United States—more than 200,000 per year during the 1880s—the population of England and Wales doubled between 1851 and 1911 (to more than 36 million) and that of Scotland grew by more than 60 percent (to almost 5 million). Both death rates and birth rates declined somewhat, and a series of changes in the law made it possible for a minority of women to enter universities, vote in local elections, and keep control of their property while married.

**The Late Victorian Empire**

A relative lack of interest in empire during the mid-Victorian years gave way to increased concern during the 1880s and 1890s. The raising of tariff barriers by the United States, Germany, and France made colonies more valuable again, ushering in an era of rivalry with Russia in the Middle East and along the Indian frontier and a “scramble for Africa” that involved the carving out of large claims by Britain, France, and Germany. Hong Kong and Singapore served as centers of British trade and influence in China and the South Pacific. The completion of the Suez Canal in 1869 led indirectly to a British protectorate over Egypt in 1882. Queen Victoria became empress of India in 1876, and both Victoria’s golden jubilee (1887) and her diamond jubilee (1897) celebrated imperial unity. The Conservative ministries of Lord Salisbury were preoccupied with imperial concerns as well. The policies of Salisbury’s colonial secretary, Joseph Chamberlain, contributed to the outbreak of the Boer War in 1899. Britain suffered initial reverses in that war but then captured Johannesburg and Pretoria in 1900. Only after protracted guerrilla warfare, however, was the conflict brought to an end in 1902. By then Queen Victoria was dead.

**The Edwardian Age (1901-1914)**

In the aftermath of the Boer War, Britain signed a treaty of alliance with Japan (1902) and ended several decades of overseas rivalry with France in the Entente Cordiale (1904). After Anglo-Russian disputes had also been settled, this link became the Triple Entente (1907), which faced the Triple Alliance of Germany, Austria, and Italy. As the reign of King Edward VII began, however, most Britons were more concerned with domestic matters. Arthur Balfour’s Education Act in 1902 helped meet the demand for national efficiency with the beginnings of a national system of secondary education, but the measure stirred old religious passions. In the course of Balfour’s ministry, the Conservative Party was divided between tariff reformers, who wanted to restore protective duties, and free traders. The general election of 1906 gave the Liberals an overwhelming majority. Union influence led to the appearance of a small separate Labour Party of 29 members as well. The Liberal government, headed first by Henry Campbell-Bannerman and then by Herbert Asquith, gave domestic self-government to the new Union of South Africa and partial provincial self-government to British India in 1909 and 1910. Under the inspiration of David Lloyd George and Winston Churchill, it also laid the foundations of the welfare state. Its program, from 1908 to 1912, included old-age pensions, government employment offices, unemployment insurance, a contributory program of national medical insurance for most workers, and boards to fix minimum wages for miners and others. Lloyd George’s controversial “people’s budget,” designed to pay the costs of social welfare and naval rearmament, was blocked by the House of Lords and led in due course to the Parliament Act of 1911, which left the Lords with no more than a temporary veto. The Conservatives made a comeback, however, in the general elections of 1910, and the Liberals were thereafter dependent on the Irish Nationalists to stay in power. Although the economy seemed to be booming, wages scarcely kept up with rising prices, and the years 1911 to 1914 were marked by major and divisive strikes by miners, dock workers, and transport workers. Suffragists staged violent demonstrations in favor of the enfranchisement of women. When the Liberal government sought to enact home rule for Ireland, non-Catholic Irish from Ulster threatened force to prevent Britain from compelling them to become part of a semi-independent Ireland. In the midst of these domestic disputes, a crisis in the Balkans exploded into World War I.

***The Era of World Wars***

Although the competitive naval buildup of Britain and Germany is often cited as a cause of World War I, Anglo-German relations were actually cordial in early 1914, and Britain was Germany’s best customer. It was Germany’s threat to France and its invasion of neutral Belgium that prompted Britain to declare war.

**Britain in World War I**

A British expeditionary force was immediately sent to France and helped stem the German advance at the Marne. Fighting on the Western Front soon became mired in a bloody stalemate amid muddy trenches, barbed wire, and machine-gun emplacements. Battles to push the Germans back failed repeatedly at the cost of tens of thousands of lives. Efforts to outflank the Central Powers (Germany, Austria, and Turkey) in the Balkans, as at Gallipoli (1915), failed also. At the Battle of Jutland (1916), the British prevented the German fleet from venturing into the North Sea and beyond, but German submarines threatened Britain with starvation early in 1917; merchant-ship convoys guarded by destroyers helped avert that danger.

In May 1915 Asquith’s Liberal ministry became a coalition of Liberals, Conservatives, and a few Labourites. Lloyd George became minister of munitions. Continued frustration with the nation’s inability to win the war, however, led to the replacement of Asquith by Lloyd George, heading a predominantly Conservative coalition, in December 1916. Problems in Ireland, chiefly the 1916 Easter rebellion, resulted in several hundred dead. By 1918 the annual budget was 13 times that of 1913; tax rates had risen fivefold, and the total national debt, fourteenfold.

Although many Britons welcomed the end of czarist rule in Russia in 1917, they saw the Communist decision to make a separate peace with Germany as a sellout. Only the entry of the United States into the war made possible General Douglas Haig’s successful tank offensive in the summer of 1918 and the German surrender in November. The election called immediately thereafter gave the Lloyd George coalition an overwhelming mandate. The Labour Party, now formally pledged to socialism, became the largest opposition party, while the Asquith wing of a divided Liberal Party was almost wiped out. By then the Reform Act of 1918 had granted the vote to all men over the age of 21 and all women over 30.

**Changes Wrought by the War**

Lloyd George represented Britain as one of the Big Three (together with France and the United States) at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919. The resulting treaties enlarged the British Empire as former German colonies in Africa and Turkish holdings in the Middle East became British mandates. At the same time Britain’s self-governing dominions—Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa—became separate treaty signatories and separate members of the new League of Nations. An intermittent civil war in Ireland ended with a treaty negotiated by Lloyd George in 1921. Most of the island became the Irish Free State, independent of British rule in all but name. The six counties of Northern Ireland continued to be represented in the British Parliament, although they also gained their own provincial parliament. The immediate postwar years were marked by economic boom, rapid demobilization, and much labor strife. By 1922, however, the boom had petered out. That year a rebellion by a group of Conservative members of Parliament ended the prime ministership of Lloyd George, and the wholly Conservative ministry of Andrew Bonar Law represented a return to “normal times.”

**The Interwar Era**

During the early 1920s a major political shift took place in Britain. The general election of 1922 gave victory to the Conservatives, but another one, called a year later by Bonar Law’s successor, Stanley Baldwin, left no party with a clear majority. As a consequence, Ramsay MacDonald, the Labour Party leader, became the first professed socialist to serve as prime minister of Great Britain. His first ministry in 1924, rested on Liberal acquiescence; it lasted less than a year, when yet another election brought back Baldwin’s Conservatives. Lloyd George’s and Asquith’s efforts at Liberal reunion failed to restore the party’s fortunes, and it has remained a minor party in British politics. The Baldwin ministry restored the gold standard and enacted several social-reform measures, including the Widows’, Orphans’, and Old Age Contributory Pensions Act, a national electric power network, and a reform of local government. In 1928 women were given voting rights that were equal to those of men.

Between 1929 and 1932 the international depression more than doubled an already high rate of unemployment. In the course of three years, both the levels of industrial activity and of prices dipped by a quarter, and industries such as shipbuilding collapsed almost entirely. MacDonald’s second Labour government found itself unable to cope with the depression, and in 1931 it gave way to a national government, headed first by MacDonald and then by Baldwin and made up mostly of Conservatives. The Labour Party denounced MacDonald as a traitor, but the national government won an overwhelming mandate in the general election of 1931. It took Britain off the gold standard, restored protective tariffs, and subsidized the building of houses. Between 1933 and 1937, the economy recovered steadily, with the automobile, construction, and electrical industries leading the way. Unemployment remained high, however, especially in Wales, Scotland, and northern England. Interwar society was influenced by the radio (monopolized by the British Broadcasting Corporation, which was begun in 1927) and the cinema, but British life was little affected by the continental ideologies of communism and fascism. The empire remained a fact, even though the Statute of Westminster (1931) proclaimed the equality of Commonwealth nations such as Canada and Australia. Religious attendance declined, but King George V maintained the prestige of the monarchy. When his son, Edward VIII, insisted on marrying a twice-divorced American in 1936, abdication proved to be the only acceptable solution. Under Edward’s brother, George VI, the monarchy again provided the model family of the land.

**Britain and World War II**

Memories of World War I left Britons with an overwhelming desire to avoid another war, and the country played a leading role in the League of Nations and at interwar disarmament conferences such as those in Washington, D.C. in 1921 and 1922 and London in 1930 that limited naval size. Conscious that Germany might have been unfairly treated at the 1919 peace conference, the British government followed a policy of appeasement in dealing with Adolf Hitler’s Germany after 1933. Germany’s decisions between 1934 and 1936 to leave the League of Nations, rearm, and remilitarize the Rhineland in defiance of the Treaty of Versailles were accepted. So was the German annexation of Austria in 1938. In his efforts to keep the peace at all costs, Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain also acquiesced to the Munich Pact of 1938, which gave Germany the Sudetenland portion of Czechoslovakia. Only after the German annexation of Prague in March of 1939 did Britain make pledges to Poland and Romania.

When Hitler invaded Poland in September 1939, Britain and France declared war, and World War II began. The defeat\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*at achieved by any other power. Although a German invasion plan was foiled by British air supremacy, large parts of London and other cities were destroyed and some 60,000 civilians were killed. Beginning early in 1941, the still-neutral United States granted lend-lease aid to Britain.

The nature of the war changed with the German invasion of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in June 1941 and the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941. Churchill then forged the “Grand Alliance” with Soviet leader Joseph Stalin and U.S. president Franklin D. Roosevelt against Germany, Italy, and Japan. In the immediate aftermath of the Japanese intervention, much of the British Empire in Southeast Asia was overrun, but late in 1942 the tide turned. The British contribution included the Battle of the North Atlantic against the German submarine menace and the campaign led by General Bernard Montgomery against the German army in North Africa. Churchill corresponded continually and met often with Roosevelt, and British forces joined American in the 1943 invasion of Sicily and Italy, the invasion of France in 1944, and the ultimate defeat of the Axis powers in 1945.

***The Winds of Change***

The general election of 1945 gave the Labour Party for the first time a majority of the popular vote and an overwhelming parliamentary majority. The result was less a rebuke of Churchill’s wartime leadership than an expression of approval of Labour’s role in the war and of hope that the party would bring more prosperity.

**Clement Attlee’s Ministry (1945-1951)**

During the years that followed, Labour, led by Clement Attlee, sought to build a socialist Britain, while surviving postwar austerity, dismantling the empire, and adjusting to a cold war with the USSR. The two measures that established a welfare state in Britain, the National Insurance Act of 1946 (a consolidation of benefit laws involving maternity, unemployment, disability, old age, and death) and the National Health Service, set up in 1948, were widely popular. Both drew on the wartime reports of Sir William Beveridge, a Liberal. The nationalization of the Bank of England, the coal industry, gas and electricity, the railroads, and most airlines proved relatively noncontroversial, but the Conservatives vigorously if vainly opposed the nationalization of the trucking and the iron and steel industries. In 1948 Labour eliminated the last remnants of plural voting (that is, voting in more than one constituency) and reduced the delaying powers of the House of Lords from two years to one. These changes were instituted in the midst of a postwar era of austerity. The national debt had tripled, and for the first time since the 18th century Britain had become a debtor nation. With the end of U.S. lend-lease aid in 1945, the British import bill had risen abruptly long before military demobilization and reconversion to peacetime industry had been accomplished. Wartime regulations, therefore, had been kept; food rationing in 1946 and 1947 was more restrictive than during the war.

Postwar Germany was divided into occupation zones among the USSR, the United States, Britain, and France, but efforts to reach agreement on a peace treaty with Germany broke down as it became clear that the USSR was converting all of Eastern Europe into a Soviet sphere. Britain, assisted by the U.S.-sponsored Marshall Plan (1948-1952), joined other Western powers and the United States in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1949 in order to counter the Soviet threat. The British government felt less able, however, to play an independent role in the Middle East, and in 1948 it gave up its Palestinian mandate, which led to the establishment of Israel and the first Arab-Israeli War. Aware of Britain’s depleted coffers and sympathetic toward their nationalist causes, the Labour government granted independence to India and Pakistan in 1947 and to Burma (now known as Myanmar) and Ceylon (Sri Lanka) in 1948.

**Conservative Rule (1951-1964)**

Its program of social reform apparently accomplished, the Labour government’s parliamentary majority was sharply reduced in the general election of 1950, and the election of 1951 enabled the Conservatives under Winston Churchill to slip back into power. Except for denationalizing iron and steel, the Conservatives made no attempt to reverse the legislation or the welfare-state program enacted by Labour, and the early 1950s brought steady economic recovery. As income tax rates were reduced and the framework of wartime and postwar regulation largely dismantled, housing construction boomed and international trade flourished. With a veteran world statesman heading Britain’s government, the accession of a young queen drew the attention of the world to London for the coronation of Elizabeth II in June 1953. During these years Britain perfected its own atomic and hydrogen bombs and pioneered in the generation of electricity by nuclear power. Churchill’s hopes for another diplomatic summit meeting were disappointed, but Stalin’s death in 1953 led to an easing of the Cold War.

*Eden and Macmillan*

Churchill’s successor, Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden, led his party to a second election victory in the spring of 1955. In the same year he helped negotiate an Austrian peace treaty and participated in a summit conference at Geneva.

Eden’s tenure as prime minister, however, was cut short by the crisis that followed Egypt’s nationalization of the Suez Canal in 1956. British forces had been withdrawn from the canal only a year earlier, and an Anglo-French reoccupation in 1956 was halted by Soviet-U.S. pressure. The episode led both to the loss of much of Britain’s remaining influence in the Middle East and to Eden’s resignation. His successor, Harold Macmillan, presided over a period of renewed consumer affluence. In 1959 he led the Conservatives to their third successive election victory—the fourth time in a row that the party gained parliamentary seats.

*Decolonization*

In Africa, Macmillan’s government followed a deliberate policy of decolonization. The Sudan had already become independent in 1956, and during the next seven years Ghana, Nigeria, Somalia, Tanzania, Sierra Leone, Uganda, and Kenya followed suit. Most of these states remained members of a highly decentralized multiracial Commonwealth, but the Union of South Africa, dominated by a white minority of Boer descent, left the Commonwealth in 1961 and declared itself a republic. Independence was also given to Malaysia, Cyprus, and Jamaica during Macmillan’s tenure.

Even as imperial ties loosened, tens of thousands of immigrants—especially from the West Indies and Pakistan—poured into Britain. Their arrival caused intermittent social strife and led to efforts to limit further immigration sharply, while ensuring legal equality for the immigrants and their descendants.

As Britons turned their attention away from their overseas empire, they became increasingly aware that their economy, although prospering, was growing less rapidly than those of their Continental neighbors. In 1961 Macmillan applied for British membership in the European Community (EC), or Common Market (now called the European Union). Many Britons felt unprepared to cast their lot with continental Europe, but for the moment their feelings proved immaterial, because the application was vetoed by President Charles de Gaulle of France. In 1963 Macmillan was replaced as Conservative prime minister by Sir Alec Douglas-Home. In the general election of 1964, however, the latter was narrowly defeated by the Labour Party, headed by Harold Wilson.

**The Permissive Society**

During the 1960s, Britain experienced a widespread mood of rebellion against the conventions of the past—in dress, in music, in popular entertainment, and in social behavior. The phenomenon had its positive consequences in helping to make “swinging” London a world capital of popular music, theater, and, for a time, fashion. Among the negative side effects, however, were a rising crime rate and a spreading drug culture.

Harold Wilson’s Labour government sympathized with some of these trends. It sought both to expand higher education opportunities and to end a high school system that separated the academically inclined from other students. During the later 1960s, laws on divorce were eased, abortion was legalized, curbs on homosexual practices were ended, capital punishment was abolished, equal pay for equal work was prescribed for women, and the voting age was lowered from 21 to 18.

In economic life the Labour government became more rigorous. A persistent trend toward inflation, unfavorable balance of trade, and unbalanced government budgets led to a wage-and-price freeze in 1966 and attempts thereafter to secure “severe restraint.” These actions eased certain economic problems but at the price of alienating many of Labour’s union supporters, and in 1970 the Conservatives returned to power under Edward Heath.

**Battle Against Inflation**

A major theme of British history since the mid-1960s has been the battle to eliminate double-digit inflation. Heath’s policy of deliberate economic expansion did not accomplish that goal, however, and the attempt to curb the legal powers of labor unions in 1971 evoked a mood of civil disobedience among union leaders. More working days were lost because of strikes in 1972 than in any year since the general strike of 1926. Heath hoped to solve economic problems by “floating the pound,” that is, by freeing Britain’s currency from earlier fixed rates of exchange with other currencies, and by again seeking British admission to the EC. Britain did join in 1973, and two years later the first national referendum in British history approved the step by a 2-1 margin. An attempt by Heath in 1972 and 1973 first to freeze and then sharply to restrain wage and price increases was defied by the miners. When Heath appealed to the public in the general election of February 1974, the results were indecisive. A revival in the popular vote of the Liberal Party, however, enabled Harold Wilson to form a minority Labour government that lasted five years under his leadership and that of James Callaghan.

**Irish and Scottish Problems**

During the 1970s, successive British governments also faced difficulties in Ireland and Scotland. A civil rights movement supporting social equality for the Roman Catholic minority in Northern Ireland clashed violently with Protestant extremists. In 1969 the British government sent troops to keep order, and in 1972 it abolished Northern Ireland’s autonomous parliament. A campaign of terrorism by the Irish Republican Army (IRA) followed; its aim was to unite Northern Ireland with the Irish Republic in defiance of the wishes of a majority of the Northern Irish people. British measures gradually curbed but could not totally halt the wave of bombings and killings in Northern Ireland and England. In Scotland, a Scottish Nationalist Party scored impressive gains in the elections of 1974, and Callaghan’s ministry attempted to set up a semi-independent parliament in Edinburgh. When only 33 percent of the Scottish electorate supported the plan in a 1979 referendum, the project died, at least temporarily.

**Economic Woes Under Labour**

The Labour government of 1974 to 1979 began by ending all legal restrictions on wage and price rises, but after the annual inflation rate topped 25 percent in 1975, the government did succeed in obtaining some trade union restraints on wage claims in return for an end to some voluntary restraints on wage claims; the inflation rate declined somewhat between 1976 and 1979. In return, union leaders demanded an end to legal restraints on union power and more government subsidies for housing and other social services. By the late 1970s, British politics seemed to be polarizing between left-wing Labourites, who sought an ever larger role for the state in order to impose social equality, and Conservatives, who hoped to restore a greater role to private enterprise and individual achievement. By the beginning of 1979, Callaghan’s government was dependent on two minor parties. A winter of labor unrest undercut his claims to be able to deal successfully with the unions, and a vote of no confidence in March 1979 went against him.

**The Thatcher Decade**

In the elections of April 1979 the Conservatives, led by Margaret Thatcher, emerged with a substantial majority of parliamentary seats and with the first woman prime minister in British or European history. She was to remain in office for the next 11 years, making hers the longest continuous prime ministership since the end of the Napoleonic Wars.

Thatcher’s first years were difficult. She sought to halt inflation by a policy of high interest rates and government budget cuts, rather than of wage and price freezes. By 1981 and 1982 those policies were showing some success, but only at the cost of the highest unemployment rates since the 1930s. The government was jolted in April 1982 when Argentina forcibly occupied the Falkland Islands, a British-held archipelago in the South Atlantic that Argentina had long claimed. When U.S. mediation efforts failed, Thatcher sent a British counterinvasion fleet, and in June that force succeeded in recapturing the islands.

The decisive Conservative victories in the elections of June 1983 and June 1987 were the consequence not only of widespread popular support for the government’s Falklands policy, but also of a sharp division in the ranks of the political opposition. In 1980 a group of Labour Party members headed by Roy Jenkins and David Owen broke away and in 1981 formed the Social Democratic Party. The new party joined with the Liberals to constitute an influential alliance that ultimately won relatively few parliamentary seats but did garner 25 percent of the total popular vote in 1983 and 23 percent in 1987 (compared to 28 and 31 percent for Labour and 42 percent in both elections for the Conservatives).

The years between 1982 and 1988 were economic boom years in Britain. The living standards of most Britons rose and the rate of unemployment gradually ebbed. British industries became more efficient, and London maintained its role as one of the world’s top three centers of finance. The economic role of government declined as Thatcher promoted privatization—the turning over to private investors of government monopolies such as British Airways, the telephone service, and the distribution of gas and water. Public housing tenants were strongly encour\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*ble-digit inflation, the enactment of an unpopular “poll tax” (as a substitute for local government real estate taxes), and the alienation of some members of her cabinet over the prime minister’s increasingly critical attitude toward cooperation with her EC colleagues.

**John Major**

Thatcher was succeeded as Conservative Party leader and prime minister by John Major, who continued Thatcher’s policy of maintaining close ties with the United States. British troops fought as part of the multinational coalition led by the United States in the Persian Gulf War (1991). In 1992, despite an economic recession, Major led his party to victory in the April general elections, though with a reduced majority. Opposition leader Neil Kinnock, who had gradually moved his Labour Party back from the left toward the ideological center, resigned after the election. Following the Conservatives’ election victory, Major’s government faced a growing financial crisis as the pound weakened in the currency market, inflation and unemployment grew, and the nation entered a recession. As a result, Major received the lowest approval rating, 14 percent, of any prime minister in British history.

One of John Major’s main accomplishments in office occurred in 1993, when he was instrumental in opening a dialogue between the British government and the Irish Republican Army (IRA). Major and Irish prime minister Albert Reynolds issued a statement requiring the IRA to cease terrorist activities for three months, after which time Sinn Fein, the organization’s political wing, would be invited to join talks on the future of Northern Ireland. In August 1994 the IRA announced a cease-fire, bringing to a halt the violence that is estimated to have killed more than 3000 people in the previous 25 years. In May 1995 representatives from the British government and the IRA met face-to-face for the first time in 23 years.

Despite this breakthrough, the Conservative Party continued to lose ground. Though beset by low opinion polls, large defeats in local elections in April and May 1995, and a series of scandals, its most serious problem was the growing rift within the party over policy toward Europe and the European Union (EU). Many Conservatives felt that closer British relations with the EU would undermine British sovereignty, and the constant internal conflict over this issue severely damaged the party. In July 1995, in an attempt to solidify the party, John Major resigned as leader of the Conservatives, forcing an election for a new leader. Major won against an anti-European opponent, but one-third of the party voted against him or abstained. Dissatisfaction with the progress of the Northern Ireland talks led the IRA to resume its campaign of violence in February 1996 by setting off a large bomb in London that injured more than 100 people.

In March and April of 1996 the government disclosed that a link may exist between bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE, commonly known as mad cow disease), an infection that had been found in some British cattle, and Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (CJD), a degenerative human brain disorder. This disclosure led the European Union to ban British beef, which devastated the British cattle industry, further damaging the Conservatives’ popularity. In April the Conservatives suffered a substantial loss in local parliamentary elections to the opposition Labour Party, headed by Tony Blair. This loss trimmed the Conservative parliamentary majority to just one seat.

During the second half of 1996 and early 1997 Major struggled to regain support for his party, but was unsuccessful. The split within the party over the issue of European relations, most specifically the question as to whether the economic and monetary union (EMU) proposed by the European Union would damage the British economy, continued to widen. In national elections in May 1997 the Conservatives were swept out of office in a landslide. The Labour Party won almost 45 percent of the vote and came away with 419 seats and a 179-seat majority in the House of Commons. The Conservatives had their worst showing in over 150 years, receiving about 33 percent of the vote and losing almost half of their seats, to finish with 165. Labour leader Tony Blair became prime minister, and after the election, John Major announced that he would resign as head of the Conservative Party as soon as a replacement could be found.