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Changes in the British political institutions since 1945

- Réalisations d'élèves - Projets pédagogiques et travaux d'élèves - Les défis de la Paix : Vivre la démocratie en Europe - Evolution des institutions -

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Since 1945 changes to the British institutions have largely attempted to produce greater democracy within the British political system. Though greater democracy has been the general outcome, it has not been a continuous or gradual process, certain governments have been more inclined to reform than others. Similarly the outcomes of these changes have not always produced greater democracy. The main institutions this essay will focus on are local government, devolution and the house of lords.

Arguably the most marked change to the British political system has been the creation of devolved assemblies in Northern Ireland and Wales, and a parliament in Scotland. Under Harold Wilson's Labour government there had been referenda offering devolution to Scotland and Wales in 1979, but these had failed. In Scotland there was a majority yes vote but it was insufficient to approve devolution; in Wales there had been an overwhelming no vote, 79.7% against. Despite this setback and the lack of support for devolution from successive Conservative governments, interest in devolution grew thanks to increasing electoral strength of the Scottish Nationalist Party and Welsh discontent at Conservative governments intent on bypassing local government in Wales.

The major turning point in devolutionary politics came with election of Labour in May 1997. Blair's government was committed to some form of devolution and referenda were held in September 1997 in Wales and Scotland. In Scotland this resulted in convincing yes votes to the both the creation of a Scottish parliament and the transferral of limited taxation powers to Edinburgh. The Scottish parliament opened in 2000 using a partially proportional electoral system to elect Scottish Members of Parliament (SMPs) which represented a major change in the British political/electoral system. Scotland also has its own first Minister, the leader of the largest party in the parliament, who acts as a sort of Scottish prime minister and chooses a cabinet.

In Wales the result of the referendum was less convincing and led to less substantial change. However it still saw a significant change in Welsh government and led to the creation of an elected Welsh assembly, which replaced previously undemocratic Welsh governing bodies. This assembly only has limited legislative power and has no control over taxation, working within a budget set by Westminster.

Northern Ireland also gained its own elected body in June 1998 as a result of the Good Friday Agreement between Ireland and Britain. This body was elected with a proportional representation system and used a weighted majority system to pass laws, ensuring that Unionists could not dominate the Nationalists. This attempt at bringing significant self-rule and democracy to Northern Irish government has in fact largely failed due to the assembly's inability to agree on ministerial nominations. As a result the assembly has been regularly suspended by Westminster.

As well as these moves to increase regional governance in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, there have been attempts to change and develop regional government within England.
By 1945 the system of local governance had become archaic and inefficient. As a result, there was a strong demand for change but there has been little radical change, with the exception of the creation of the Greater London Council in 1963. In fact between 1979 &1997 conflicts between Labour councils and Conservative central government led the Conservatives to reduce the autonomy of local regions by deferring power to quangos. The Tories also got rid of the GLC for the same reason.

It was not until the arrival of Labour in 1997 that significant changes occurred. The Local Government Act of 2000 led to a significant change in local government structure. Councils had to choose one of three management structures, each based on an elected or council nominated leader who then chooses either a cabinet of councillors or a council. Some towns chose to have elected mayors but Labour enthusiasm for the policy has waned because of the election of several independent mayors. Under this system there is also less power for councillors who cannot formulate policy.

There have also been attempts to create regional assemblies in the North East and in Yorkshire; a sort of English devolution. However, despite good intentions, Labour over-estimated supported for English devolution as the failed referendum in the North-East indicated.

London's governance has also changed under Labour with the creation a Greater London Assembly with a separate Mayor. This Assembly has some taxation power and can also make some policy decisions in areas like transport and education.

In conclusion, since 1945 there have been very considerable changes to the political institutions governing the United Kingdom. At times these changes have definitely seen the introduction of greater democracy to political institutions in Britain. This is most obvious in the results of devolution and the creation of elected London assemblies. Despite the general progression towards greater democracy over the past fifty years, certain governments made changes which undoubtedly limited the democracy of British political institutions. Conservative policy towards local councils during the eighties, reducing their power by transferring authority to un-elected quangos, is perhaps the worst example of negative reforms to the British political institutions. In general though, the changes to the British political institutions have developed and improved democracy in Britain.