

# Unmasking the State

## Session 2 commentary

Trying to illustrate the UK state graphically was always going to be a challenge! Anyway, I've done it as a revolving set of core institutions around a nucleus or mothership if you like called 'the state'. They are shown as overlapping because while each institution has a relative autonomy they can't be completely separated from each other.

Now, as we mentioned in the last session, the easiest way to understand the rather abstract concept of the state and its UK form is by examining its parts. This approach is not peculiar to the state.

This is how would you understand something like, for example, the UK's public transport system or the National Health Service. You can't point to the NHS as a whole but you can identify and study hospitals, GP surgeries, medical supplies, nurses, doctors, cleaners, surgeons and so on. Along with other parts, they come together to make up what we call the NHS. Essentially, you get to conceive of the whole through its component parts.

It's the same with the state. Here the distinct institutions shown in the graphic correspond broadly to the definitions and features of the state that we discussed in the previous session.

There are what could be called the enforcement agencies. These include the police, army, and the judicial-prison system. Police implement laws and regulations, as they have done in the pandemic. They have powers of arrest and detention. Investigation processes are governed by laws, although, of course, it doesn't prevent corrupt practices like we saw in the failed Stephen Lawrence investigation. Courts can fine and jail people for various offences set out by the state.

The police and army have the authority to use force where necessary in a variety of settings. Climate campaigners are physically removed from roads and buildings, for example. Police can shoot to kill if they believe someone to be an immediate threat to life. Bailiffs can ask the police to remove people from a property.

As the UK's government system is formally a constitutional monarchy, the crown is included among the institutions. The role of the monarch will be discussed in the next section. Just to say here that although the crown has limited powers and performs a largely ceremonial role, it is an integral part of the present state system. Some aspects add to the confusion about where state authority lies. For example, the police, the army and the judicial system are nominally servants of the crown and take an oath to that effect.

The Church of England has since the start of the Reformation under Henry VIII in 1534 been England's official state religion. The prime minister appoints the Archbishop of Canterbury, for example. Bishops have reserved seats in the House of Lords. Together with the crown, the Church of England plays a significant ideological role in society. We will discuss this aspect later on in the course when we talk about hegemony or authorised thinking in relation to upholding the status quo in practice.

All the state institutions shown here are subject to different forms of control by the government of the day through the apparatus it directs. For example, ministers can use the civil service to draft legislation that provides for new criminal offences. Usually, the UK government has little trouble getting the new laws through a Parliament that is low down the political food chain. The appropriate ministry will then draw up regulations and guidance for implementing the new laws. These are

usually applied without further recourse to debate in Parliament. And the police and other law enforcement agencies are obliged to carry them into practice.

So what preliminary conclusions can we draw from this brief introduction to what constitutes the UK state? Firstly, the state is much more than simply the sum of its parts. It is a complex, contradictory thing subject to stresses and strains, rather than some monolithic, unified body with a defined central purpose. Understanding this is crucial for the purposes of system change, as we shall discuss later on in the course.

For example, an immediate contradiction emerges when you consider that the state may claim to rule on behalf of the whole of society. But as it's somewhat set apart from the rest of society, there's an immediate conflict. How, for example, does the state get to 'know' what's in the best interests of the whole of society? Society, as we know, is not one solid, unified thing but has interests, some more powerful than other, divisions along the lines of class, gender and race and is unpredictable in its behaviour.

Further on we will discuss the role of political parties and other organisations in smoothing over this contradiction. For the moment, just reflect on terms like the 'national interest' and 'society as whole' and how they help to foster what some might call illusions in the role of the state as a neutral body.

For the state to sustain its authority and claim to rule on behalf of society, it needs validation in the form of trust and support for its actions. Well before the pandemic revealed a state unprepared for Covid-19 in terms of equipment, strategy and political direction, support for the system had fallen to new low.

The annual British Social Attitudes Survey found that in 2019 only 15 percent of respondents said they trusted the government either "most of the time or "just about always," which was described as the lowest level recorded in more than 40 years. Some 34 percent said they "almost never" trust the government. Plus, 79 percent said the U.K.'s system of governance could be improved either "quite a lot" or "a great deal," the highest level ever recorded by the survey. Another survey conducted in 2020 found that less than half the British public considered the UK government a relatively trustworthy source of news and information about coronavirus.

In other words, the authority of the state – especially in the form of government – is contested by a substantial portion of the population. Often this takes a passive form. From time to time, however, rejection of the authorities and their policies can take a more substantial, even violent form. One thinks of the miners' strike from 1984-85, the militant resistance to the poll tax in 1990 and the huge demonstrations in the run-up to the invasion of Iraq in 2003. In more recent years, huge Black Lives Matter demonstrations took issue with institutional racism in the police force and the Home Office. Climate change activists have rejected so-called norms of protest and moved on to forms of civil disobedience. School students have defied instructions to strike for action on climate change

In addition, conflicts can break out between different parts of the state. Take the judiciary, for example, which jealously guards its role as the upholder of the rule of law. Although it has no power to set aside legislation, also known as statute law, the judiciary will intervene when the government claims vague powers that it believes were inherited from the crown. In 2017 the Supreme Court ruled that the government could not trigger Article 50 notifying the European Union about Brexit without authorisation from Parliament. The judgement went into some detail about the constitution and what a government could or could not do.

In 2019, the Supreme Court was unanimous in finding against Boris Johnson's decision to prorogue – or terminate – a parliamentary session. It found that proroguing for five weeks, rather than the normal four to five days, in the run-up to a major constitutional change – leaving the EU - was unlawful. It quashed the decision.

Additionally, other conflicts arise when institutions guard their own territory and bureaucratic space. For example, the spy agencies MI5 and MI6 are known to have conflicts about who does what. So, all in all, while the state may give the appearance of solidity and permanence, dig deeper and all sorts of conflicts and issues are found.

We have looked at the formal, identifiable state institutions like government departments, the police and so on. That brings us to those agencies and organisations which have a close relationship to the central state but are not considered directly part of it. What we can learn is that the reach of the central state is wide. Its tentacles touch many other parts of society, including the Church of England. The monarch is both head of state and head of the C of E.

Anglican bishops get to sit in the House of Lords (Iran is apparently the only other country to set aside seats in its parliament for clerics). Bishops and archbishops are appointed by the government and Parliament has to approve church laws. Anglican prayers are said at the start of parliamentary business each day.

What of the BBC and the media in general? The state-funded BBC has its five “public purposes” agreed with the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport every 10 years.

The BBC Board is in overall charge of strategy and policy direction. It is led by 10 non-executive members, including the chair. They are all appointed by the same Secretary of State. The BBC's director-general is appointed by the board.

Currently that position is held by Tim Davie, a former Tory councillor who came to the BBC from the corporate world. Since Davie took over, BBC staff who took to Twitter to criticise Trump or government policy have been reprimanded. The Mash Report, which frequently criticised the Tories, was taken off air.

More directly connected to the state are “quangos” – short for quasi-autonomous non-government organisations”. They are public bodies that operate at arm's length from government, but for which ministers are ultimately accountable. Ministers usually make key appointments to quangos. There are also 20 what are called non-ministerial departments, including the Charity Commission, the Crown Prosecution Service, the Food Standards Agency, the Forestry Commission, energy regulators and the Serious Fraud Office. There are over 400 other agencies and public bodies, including the Arts Councils and the Bank of England, the British Library and the Boundary Commissions.

Just to confuse matters further, there are also executive agencies. They are part of a UK government department but are separate in terms of management and budget control. National Health Service in England is one of these, along with the Prison Service and Public Health England.

All in all, the UK state machine is a complex and less than transparent network of institutions.

Later on in the course, in the session dealing with the how dominant ideas are formed, we will look at the role of the church, the media, the education system and universities in upholding the status quo.

When you think of governments, political parties and general elections obviously spring to mind. In the UK, parties win elections and their leader forms the government of the day. Political parties are

thus the route by which voters indirectly gain access to political power. It hasn't always been that way. Up until the 1830s, governments in Britain had been formed by shifting alliances that lacked the formal discipline of a modern political party.

For years, radicals supported by the Whigs had campaigned for electoral reform. As we shall see in a later session, most members of the House of Commons owed their seats to patronage rather than elections. Fictitious constituencies - known as rotten boroughs - existed and sent MPs Westminster. Scotland, with a population of 2.25 million, only had 4,500 people who were eligible to vote.

The radical movement was repressed during the Napoleonic Wars but resumed activity in the late 1820s. By the 1830s, pressure for electoral reform had become irresistible. In 1832, despite bitter opposition, the first Reform Act was passed. Ultimately a fear of revolution persuaded the ruling class to make concessions. In the year before the Bill was passed, there were months of widespread violence in towns like Nottingham and Bristol. The National Union of the Working Classes was formed to press for change and Parliament received over 600 petitions in favour of the Reform Bill.

The franchise was extended – although it still excluded the working class - and corrupt electoral practices banned. Industrial towns got MPs for the first time.

The first steps were taken towards the formation of political parties. The Conservatives were first in the field under the leadership of Robert Peel who issued the Tamworth Manifesto in 1834. This pledged to accept the Reform Act, which the Conservatives had bitterly opposed in Parliament. It was another 25 years before the Liberal Party was founded under Lord Palmerston, bringing together Whigs, Radicals and a breakaway group from the Conservatives.

In the intervening period, a mass movement for working class votes called Chartism shook the ruling classes. The Chartists created what was in effect a political party and threatened the established order with massive petitions, demonstrations and conferences. A militant wing took to military drilling with a view to insurrection unless the Charter's six demands were granted. A convention met to discuss setting up a rival Parliament. Although their demands were denied, the message got through. Unless workers were granted the vote, a revolutionary revolt could not be ruled out.

A second expansion of the franchise in 1867 to include some sections of the working class led to another significant change. William Gladstone won a huge victory at the 1868 election and formed the first Liberal government. The establishment of the party as a national membership organisation came with the foundation of the National Liberal Federation in 1877. Skilled trade unions backed the Liberals who in turn granted them legal immunity from claims by employers. For the next 20 years, trade union candidates stood on a Liberal Party ticket.

As disillusionment with the Liberals gathered steam, the campaign grew for a party to represent workers directly. In 1900, the Trades Union Congress cooperated with the Independent Labour Party (founded in 1893) to establish a Labour Representation Committee, which took the name Labour Party in 1906. The early Labour Party made progress chiefly through an informal agreement with the Liberals not to run candidates against each other wherever possible.

After World War I the Liberal Party tore itself apart in a series of factional disputes while in 1918 the Representation of the People Act extended the electoral franchise to all males aged 21 or older and to women aged 30 or older. Labour reconstituted itself as a formally socialist party with a democratic constitution and a national structure. A short-lived minority Labour government took office in 1924 and then had to wait until 1945 to form the first majority government.

The Scottish National Party was formed in 1934 and became the largest party in the devolved Scottish Parliament in 2007, forming a government for the first time. Plaid Cymru, the Welsh nationalist party, was formed in 1924 while the Green Party was established in different countries of the UK in 1990.

Later in the course, we will examine the role of mainstream political parties in identifying with and supporting the present state.

The next session will show how real power is given legal backing through the weird and wonderful British constitution.