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Did You Know ...?

- Only one English monarch ever lost his head: Charles I in 1649?
- The Prime Minister lives at Number 10, Downing Street, but his neighbor at Number 11 is the Chancellor of the Exchequer?
- Before the 17-foot statue of Admiral Lord Nelson was erected on "Nelson's Column" in the center of Trafalgar Square in 1842, 14 stonemasons held a dinner on top of the 170-foot high pedestal?
- The 19th century Houses of Parliament incorporates the remains of the medieval Palace of Westminster, which burned on October 16, 1834?
- In 1811, London became the first city with a population of more than one million, holding that title until surpassed by Tokyo in 1957?
- Winston Churchill was born early in the ladies "loo" at Blenheim Palace in Oxfordshire when his mother was attending a ball?

Talking Politics, British Style

So closely tied in history and philosophy, so interwoven culturally, and of course, "divided by a common language" (to borrow from George Bernard Shaw), one can too quickly overlook the differences between the UK and the USA. This runs in spades when it comes to politics. Differences in the nature of government and in how people talk about politics make it important that you prepare yourself for a stay in the United Kingdom by appreciating some of the essential contrasts.



fundamentally unlike the U.S. government in another way: the lack of a single written constitution laying out the structure of government and enumerating the rights of the people. Ultimately, nearly all power resides in Parliament, and even then mostly in the House of Commons, the only elected chamber. The newly recognized European Convention on Human Rights has begun to

change things, but even now courts and rights are less important than the self-restraint of the government—often enforced by popular vigilance and protest.

England, And All That

Politics begins with how you identify yourself: who are you, or to what community do you belong? U.S. Americans think of themselves first and foremost as citizens of the United States, and secondarily as a resident of a state (say, a Californian). However, in the UK, the English, Scots, Welsh, and Irish (Northern Ireland) are first members of their nation, while the "United Kingdom" and "Britain" are artificial constructions that do not necessarily tug at their hearts. So please, avoid automatically calling anyone "English"—take the time to find out, and you will begin to see Britain's patchwork quilt of peoples.

The sensitivities are particularly keen because all roads lead to London. Britain does not have the United States' "federalism" in which states have their own sphere of influence. Prime Minister Tony Blair, the leader of the majority party in the House of Commons, has "devolved" some control to a Scottish parliament and a Welsh assembly, but Parliament still holds the strings. Indeed, British government is

Passions in Conversation

Indeed, attention to politics and current events is relatively high in Britain, making the issues of the day excellent fodder for conversation. However, people in Britain and the U.S. often approach political issues from different starting points. While you may be naturally cautious if you were talking in, say, the Middle East or East Asia, many people let down their guard in Britain and many relationships have been damaged as a result. Here are a few hot topics to handle carefully or avoid altogether:

Religion- Across much of Europe you'll find national churches foster relationships between church and state—Britain has government-funded Roman Catholic and Church of England schools. In contrast, church observance today is a mere fraction of attendance in the United States. Overall, Britons are very cool to overt dis-

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cussion of their religious beliefs. It is a good idea to leave religion to conversations with good friends or let others raise the subject first.

Northern Ireland- Part of the hesitance to raise religious questions stems from a history of repression, exemplified by the continuing struggles between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland. Despite much cause for hope in the past decade, feelings run deep. Tread carefully.

The National Health Service (NHS)- For millions of people, the nationalized system of medicine is a source of pride. Every health care system has its flaws, but many view the promise of universal health care as a moral issue. Even



though private health insurance is increasingly common and acceptable for many people, others believe they have an obligation to support the NHS.

The Spirit of the Age

Despite the differences, there remains a special relationship between the USA and Britain that goes beyond formal relationships and alliances. The two countries have often traveled the same road. In recent decades, Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher simultaneously articulated bold agendas of deregulation on the domestic front and anti-Communism on the international stage. Bill Clinton and Tony Blair arrived with youthful energy and hopes of crafting a "Third Way" between traditional welfare statism and laissez-faire libertarianism. Then, perhaps surprisingly, Blair found a shared vision for democracy with George W. Bush. This shared history is a bridge and passport into a wonderful country with so much richness to offer, so watch carefully for the differences, so the bridge remains open.

*-Patrick Schmidt
for CAI*

Suggested Reading: Living in London: A Practical Guide

The book "Living in London," written by The Junior League of London, is an effective and very user-friendly guide that covers basic information as well as the culture of this great city.

This book is a resourceful guide that contains personal recommendations and advice from the writers, who are actually volunteers who have compiled all of their experiences and knowledge about the city of London. Information is readily available on everything including housing, the banking system, transportation, the school system, shopping, various organizations to join, and popular events in London. Not only does this guide mention numerous useful stores, shops, and services for everyday life, but it also lists the addresses and phone numbers in an organized manner. "Living in London" also touches on even the smallest details, such as how to operate the light switches. Such detailed descriptions can make an expatriate feel right at home.

This pragmatic guide has easy-to-read conversion charts for everything from the monetary system to converting shoe sizes, which can help anyone learn the differences and make life easier. There is also a list of recommended readings that will assist anyone with their stay in London.

Overall, this guide can make anyone feel that they are not making this transition alone and can make either an expatriate or a tourist feel right at home in a short amount of time.

-Jennifer Newman



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