

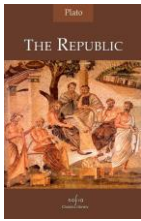
## A-LEVEL POLITICS – RECOMMENDED READING



### VALUABLE INTRODUCTORY READING

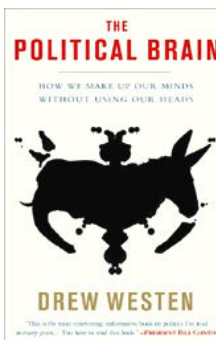
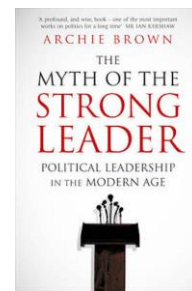
The problem with many books on politics is that they can soon become outdated. However, the following are books that could be considered essential reading for the would-be politics student. They are not directly related to the A-level course – see the “British Politics” section below for that – but they are good for starting any politics student thinking about politics in a broader context. While political study is about keeping abreast of the constantly changing dynamics of the British and global polity, there should also be time to step back and reflect on what it all means. These books do that.

If you are not sure which of the three to try, I would steer you towards “The Political Brain”, a fascinating assessment of the persuasive element of politics, linking it to psychology.



*The Republic* by Plato. One of the most influential works on political theory ever written, Plato wrote this around 380BC in the form of a dialogue concerning a wide range of issues connected with governing the state and the nature of justice. There is much to challenge you and disagree with here, but few would argue about its seminal position in the world of political theory.

*The Myth of the Strong Leader* by Archie Brown. This analysis of political leadership by a Cambridge professor of politics is a first class analysis of the world of politics. Brown’s first two chapters place leadership in the wider context of political understanding, and does so in a very accessible way. His discussion of leadership is given colour and interest by his consideration of a wide range of world leaders including American presidents (Johnson, Truman), British prime ministers (Churchill, Thatcher, Blair) and notorious dictators (Mao, Stalin). An excellent introduction to the wider world of politics.



*The Political Brain* by Drew Westen. Westen is an American psychologist who has studied US political campaigns and subsequently advised Democrat leaders like Bill Clinton. This book provides a fascinating insight into the nature of democratic politics and the emotional, rather than rational, way in which people respond. Though written a few years ago, the author’s insights and conclusions retain a particular relevance given the nature of the 2016 presidential campaign and subsequent Trumpian politics.

## **BRITISH POLITICAL BOOKS**

*The following selection is provided as a guide to the sort of books you should be reading during the British part of the A-level course. They will develop your own political insights and understanding whilst also providing – for the genuinely interested political student – engaging and exciting reads. Try and select at least two from the list to read.*

### **Recommended as an introductory read for all students:**

Isabel Hardman, an editor at the “Spectator” magazine, has produced one of the best understandings of the modern British politician in her “*Why Do We Get the Wrong Politicians?*” It is a concise and highly readable book which uses some comprehensive research and surveying to give a superb assessment of the current state of British politics. Invaluable.



A good primer for the course is Tony Wright, “*British Politics: A Very Short Introduction*” in the Oxford University Press series (2020 edition; an older version was published in 2013). Wright, a former university politics lecturer turned influential backbench Labour MP for many years, provides a clear and accessible guide to the machinery of UK politics.

Designed to illuminate the fault lines in British governance, is Tony King and Ivor Crewe’s “*The Blunders of British Governments*”, which in so doing gives a deep insight into how British government operates. The two authors are respected academics whose work has been referenced by journalists and by-standers for many years.

The Brexit campaign produced a welter of books, but the single best volume is probably “*All Out War*” by Sunday Times political editor Tim Shipman. He followed this up with an account of Theresa May’s disastrous 2017 election – “*Fall Out*” – and is soon to publish the third in what he now sees as a trilogy on modern British politics.

Also on the 2017 election, Tim Ross and Tom McTague produced “*Betting the House*”. The 2017 election illustrated the divided nature of British politics after the Brexit referendum, and served to turn Theresa May into a struggling, lame-duck Prime Minister.

The 2019 election awaits its books at the time of compiling this list.

The coalition government of 2010 – 2015 was a unique experiment in British politics and looks unlikely to occur again in the near future. A good insider's account is Lib Dem minister David Laws' *"Coalition"* (see also Matthew D'Ancona, below)

*"Broken Vows"* by Tom Bower is the most recent account of Tony Blair's time in government. Bower savages Blair's governing style, and used a wide range of civil service interviews to provide his negative insights into Blair's style and government. The assessment in fact confirms the view of those who considered Blair an essentially superficial leader, whilst being subject to strong criticism from those who admired his premiership.

*"Servants of the People"* and *"The End of the Party"* by Andrew Rawnsley are both excellent accounts of the Labour years in power from a journalist with good insider contacts (Rawnsley is the Observer's political editor). The second book in particular is a great read, covering as it does the last years of Blair and the bizarre prime ministership of Gordon Brown. When published, it made headlines with its revelations of Brown's antics, and still makes slightly appalling reading today.

Matthew D'Ancona was the Sunday Telegraph's chief political commentator and now edits the online long-form news site "Tortoise". *"In It Together"* is his well-researched account of the Coalition government formed by David Cameron and Nick Clegg in 2010. It probably has less scandal than the Rawnsley books, but it is just as well written and insightful.

*"5 Days in May"* is Andrew Adonis' account, as a leading negotiator for Labour, of the formation of the Coalition. Adonis is a former journalist who went on to hold ministerial jobs under Blair and Brown and who writes well on politics. An alternative account is David Laws' relatively short *"22 Days in May"*, from the perspective of a leading Liberal Democrat negotiator.

### **Standing the test of time – older books**

Peter Osborne is a conservative journalist who used to write for the Daily Telegraph before parting company with them over the undue influence of HSBS advertising on their editorial content. He has little regard for politicians of either side, and is not afraid to challenge status quo thinking (for example, his book, *"A Dangerous Delusion"*, attacks the notion that Iran should be seen as an enemy and puts the case for more positive engagement). On UK politics he has written two storming books, *"The Triumph of the Political Class"*, an attack on the cosiness and incestuousness of modern politics, and *"The Rise of Political Lying"*, an attack on the rise of misleading spin tactics. They are a little dated now, but still worth reading.

On the left of the political spectrum, Nick Cohen is also a challenging and brilliant journalist, often taking Labour to task for its betrayal of the principles it once stood for. His writing is seen at its iconoclastic best in his attack on the Blair leadership, *"Pretty*

*Straight Guys*". He subsequently produced *"What's Left?"*, a stirring indictment of how the political left has lost its way. Either book is well worth while.

Jeremy Paxman's *"The Political Animal"* is a good and interesting survey of why politicians do what they do. Paxman is quizzical, but usually sympathetic, and not quite as aggressive as he was when he had to actually interview them on Newsnight.

Ferdinand Mount, *"The New Few"*, provides an interesting assessment of how modern society has become controlled by such a narrow oligarchy; particularly useful insight coming as it does from a member of the 'Establishment' (former head of Mrs. Thatcher's Number 10 policy unit, cousin to David Cameron).

Douglas Carswell is the maverick former Tory MP turned UKIP defector who believes that MPs should face recall elections and that more democracy needs to be introduced into the British system. His key book on how to make the UK more democratic is *"The End of Politics"*.

## **History**

A grasp of recent British political history is essential, and the best volume on the 20<sup>th</sup> century is David Marguand's *"Britain since 1918: The strange career of British democracy"*. I will be issuing some short extracts from this book at the beginning of the course.

## **Autobiographies and Diaries**

Memoirs, whether in the form of autobiographies or diaries, are an important form of political information and a crucial part of gathering knowledge about the process of government. They are pretty well all self-serving, but there have been some talented and entertaining diarists, and some of the autobiographies have contained valuable insights.

Ken Clarke's *"Kind of Blue"* are the sort of engaging, readable memoirs you might expect from this One Nation Tory who is a renowned raconteur.

Damian McBride's memoirs, *"Power Trip"*, are well written and provide not only a first hand insight into the strange and intrigue-ridden world of Gordon Brown's No. 10, but also – in the first chapters – a useful personal account of his early civil service career.

Tony Blair's autobiography *"A Journey"* is hilariously self-serving and has some genuine nuggets of poor writing – most notably his attempt to describe intimate moments with Cherie – but it is undoubtedly useful. The present Conservative leadership, especially Cameron and Gove, treated this book with almost reverent respect, coming as it does

from the most successful Labour politician ever, and one of the most successful leaders in terms of electoral power the UK has seen.

Peter Mandelson loves his own image as the Dark Lord of Labour politics, and his autobiography, *"The Third Man"* is an entertaining read which probably even he doesn't expect to be taken too seriously. No-one should underestimate his importance to the re-emergent success of the modern Labour Party however (at least until Corbyn's leadership plunged it back into a left-wing abyss).

Of the Conservative Prime Ministers, Margaret Thatcher's memoirs (don't bother with volume 2 on her early life) are competent enough – written as they were by an effective ghost-writer – but not exactly sparkling, while John Major's autobiography is a little more engaging, but far too long (and, predictably, no mention of his affair with Edwina Currie). Thatcher's life is now the subject of a monumental, well written and very detailed 3-volume biography by Charles Moore.

Two recent diarists are worth checking out. Former Tory MP Gyles Brandreth (*"Breaking the Code"*) rose to the dizzy heights of government whip, while Labour MP Chris Mullins (*"A View From the Foothills"*, followed by other volumes) attained junior minister status before slipping out of government. Mullins writes that "failed politicians make the best diarists" and in this instance he and Brandreth do not disappoint. Diaries to be dipped into and enjoyed, rather than read straight through, but interesting insights both.

The most scandalous diarist of the modern era was Alan Clark, a right-wing Tory who became a junior minister under Margaret Thatcher, but was most notorious for detailing his numerous adulterous affairs in his diaries (including one with a South African judge's wife and both her daughters). Nevertheless, despite his moral dubiousness, his insider's account of the fall of Margaret Thatcher is good reading from an accomplished diarist.

The veteran left-wing Labour MP and cabinet minister Tony Benn produced very full diaries covering his eventful life in politics over many years. A single volume "best of" was produced – *"The Benn Diaries"*.

## **OTHER RESOURCES**

### **Newspapers and Magazines**

Regular political reading is the key ingredient behind the success of any politics student, and it should be interesting as well.

All of the newspapers run full websites, with the *Times* and the *Telegraph* currently charging for their wares (commercially sensible but really annoying for cash-strapped students). The *Financial Times* offers its excellent news coverage free to students (check

with Mr. Bartlett about getting this). The Guardian have well organized but left-biased political coverage that is free. All the websites have obvious addresses – eg [www.guardian.co.uk](http://www.guardian.co.uk). The *BBC News* pages are, of course, also free and the go-to pages for most people.

The best weekly magazine for news of all sorts is the *Economist*, including concise and insightful coverage of the British scene. No serious student of any discipline should be ignoring this publication.

There are two good political weeklies – “*The Spectator*” (on the right) and “*The New Statesman*” (on the left). Fraser Nelson has edited the *Spectator* for several years, maintaining a broad range of right-wing, erudite opinion within it. The *New Statesman*’s editor, Jason Cowley, visited the school to speak with the U6th in January 2014, and his magazine currently has a wide range of ideas and topics being covered.

Monthly magazines worth trying include “*Prospect*” and “*Standpoint*”, both of which have good long-read articles.

## **Blogs**

There are more political blogs than could possibly be read by an individual who still needs several hours sleep every 24 hours. You will doubtless find your own favoured sources of internet political discourse, and could even start your own, but the following provide a starter.

[www.order-order.com](http://www.order-order.com) – This is the Guido Fawkes blog, one of the oldest, and still most viewed, political blogs in Britain. The blog’s writers are united by a right-wing view of the world and a general suspicion of politicians.

[www.politicshome.com](http://www.politicshome.com) – A news aggregation site, giving links to various politics stories from around the web.

[www.spectator.co.uk/coffeehouse](http://www.spectator.co.uk/coffeehouse) - Updated - usually several times a day – by the *Spectator* team, this is a very good politics blog on the right of the spectrum; unfortunately it is now largely behind a paywall, although free registration gives you access to a couple of pieces a month.

[www.politics.co.uk](http://www.politics.co.uk) – News-site with liberal stance focusing on British politics, contains straight reporting and opinion.

[www.bbc.co.uk/news/politics](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/politics) - BBC site is always good, though increasingly a little superficial.

[www.politico.eu](http://www.politico.eu) – The European edition of an excellent US news site often has good British stories and comment. Signing up to the free daily email, “*The Politico Playbook*”, will bring a very comprehensive daily overview of political developments to your inbox. It is also soon going to be written by former SGS politics alumni [Alex Wickham](#).

## **Podcasts**

Like the blogs, far more than you will ever want to listen to. It is a case of find the ones that suit. As a starter, you could try “*Coffee House Shots*” from the Spectator, which has excellent insights in a short podcast; “*The Red Box Politics Podcast*” from the Times is usually interesting and listenable; “*The Intelligence*” from the Economist casts a global net; “*Talking Politics*” presented by Cambridge professor [David Runciman](#) offers a deeper analysis of selected political events, movements and ideas. All free.

*GM*