

# Why is there no strong Christian democracy in the United Kingdom?

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**Abstract:** *In contrast to most of the Western European countries, in the United Kingdom there has never been a strong Christian democracy. This article, – after justifying this statement, – ventures back to the Britain of the 1930s to examine the most important Christian democratic initiatives of the era. Then, the article shortly investigates three possible areas where to find the reasons why the UK lacks the presence of a strong Christian democracy.*

**Keywords:** *the United Kingdom, UK politics, Christian democracy, Christian politics*

## Introduction

One of the most interesting questions in political science – a question which mostly belongs to the discipline of comparative political science – is the great political differences that formulate between geographically close units. Although it is merely the Channel that divides the British Islands from continental Europe, there are numerous divergences, so it is valid to point to the several political differences between the United Kingdom and Western Europe. Certainly, one of them is the lack of a strong Christian democracy in the United Kingdom compared to most of Western Europe. But let us see what factors lie in the background to justify our statement on the UK.

First, it is clear that there is no strong Christian democratic party in UK politics. In the past century, *Conservatives* and the *Labour* dominated the political landscape. Neither they nor the current third and fourth biggest party in the UK parliament (*Scottish National Party, Liberal Democrats*) are Christian democratic parties. Of course, there are some Christian democratic parties in the UK (e.g., *Christian Democratic Party, Christian People's Alliance*, and maybe the *Christian Party*, and *Common Good Party*),

but none have considerable electoral weight. Probably if one wishes to find Christian democratic values in a party with serious political influence, that would be the *Conservatives*, but we argue that the differences between the aforementioned values and those articulated by the *Conservatives* (which we underline later) justify that the *Conservative Party* is not a Christian democratic party.

Second, and this is connected to the first argument, there is a shortage of strong Christian democratic politicians in UK politics. There are of course Christians in the Parliament of the United Kingdom,<sup>1</sup> who are democrats as well, but – as far as we know – none of them have considerable power or are commonly considered Christian democratic.

Third, *Centrist Democrat International* (IDC), a Christian democratic international political group (formerly called *Christian Democratic International*), has no UK parties either among its members.<sup>2</sup>

And finally, we can rely on several pieces of literature that underpin our general statement both directly and indirectly. In the latter case, this means that while most commonly countries such as Germany, France, Italy, Belgium, Austria, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands are mentioned among those places where Christian democracy has become a significant political force, the UK is simply absent from these listings.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, some authors emphasise our argument even directly, such as Thomas Jansen who wrote that “Christian democracy was and remains at odds in many respects with British political tradition and, more generally, with political thought in the English-speaking world and northern Europe”<sup>4</sup>

So, the verdict is quite clear, there is no strong Christian democratic presence in the United Kingdom. The ambition of our article is to provide explanations for this fact. Usually, there is of course no clear-cut answer to something that has not happened, so we can only name the most probable reasons that have led to the lack of a strong Christian democracy in the UK.<sup>5</sup> But first – based on Joan Keating’s article<sup>6</sup> – let us see what happened in Great Britain in a crucial period of the evolution of Christian democracy, namely, the 1930s when the basis of several Western European Christian democratic parties and ideas took ground.

## The 1930s and the “good” Christian democrats

The 1920s and 1930s were crucial decades in the formulation of Christian democracy. Several religiously inspired but secular institutions (for instance, organisations and parties) were founded to implement Catholic social teaching in politics and society. This process accelerated after Pius XI issued the social encyclical, *Quadragesimo Anno*, to the fortieth anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*. The papal document – which was written “on reconstruction of social order” – reaffirmed the foundations laid by the *Rerum Novarum* in 1891: it acknowledged the necessity of social care and encouraged it, combated socialist solutions by, for instance, defending private property; but highlighted the faults of the capitalist economic system as well. This encyclical was able to reflect on the changes of the previous four decades, such as the Great Economic Crisis; and it could introduce newly crystallised concepts, such as “subsidiarity”.<sup>7</sup>

The ideas of the papal encyclical reached the British Islands too, and even though it would be a mistake to overestimate the presence of Christian democracy (especially the number of Christian democratic sympathizers and politicians), Keating highlights that there were some considerable groups in the United Kingdom.<sup>8</sup> First, it is crucial to make a distinction between those who at the time sympathised with Fascist/authoritarian regimes and ideas and those who did not. This latter group we call “good” Christian democrats: these were those Catholics who, according to Keating’s analysis supported democracy while trying to reconcile it with papal social teaching. They professed that the negative consequences of industrialisation could be mitigated by encouraging “class co-operation, special support for the family, workers’ representation and a limited role for the state (subsidiarity)”.<sup>9</sup>

There were two larger organisations in this respect, the *Catholic Social Guild* (CSG) and the *People and Freedom Group*. The CSG was founded in 1909 and became an administrator of study clubs and provided further education for working-class Catholics. By 1938 it had nearly 4000 members and 379 study clubs, including the Catholic Workers’ College at Oxford. The general intention was to prepare the members of trade unions and the *Labour Party* to represent and defend Church interests in policy-making processes. First, the CSG had a monthly journal, the *Christian Democrat* from 1921,

then, after getting the criticism of intellectualism and impenetrability, it launched the more populist *Catholic Worker* in 1935. The organisation also held summer schools at Oxford – with topics, such as “Corporatism versus Fascism” – supported by European activists.<sup>10</sup>

The other initiative was the *People and Freedom Group* founded in 1936, with a rather surprising leading figure in UK politics, Luigi Sturzo. The well-known Italian priest, one of the first significant Christian democratic politicians, was the founder of *Partito Popolare Italiano* (PPP) but had to escape from Mussolini’s regime in 1924. The Christian democratic ideas were circulated in the *People and Freedom* news sheet including Sturzo’s ideas on corporatism, international stability, and justice (which Keating analyses shortly). The group altogether consisted of educated middle class members and was smaller in numbers than the CSG.<sup>11</sup>

Although the question of the formulation of a Christian democratic party was raised, it was neither a realistic prospect nor a real option since “existing parties, while not perfect by Christian democratic standards, were acceptable to most Catholics.”<sup>12</sup> Also, in Britain (unlike in Italy for a period), voters were free to choose between parties, for instance, several of them saw the possibility of achieving Christian democratic goals within the *Labour Party*. So, the Christian democrats were not enough to form a party themselves, and the chance of capturing higher public attention was probably missed as they could not join the few secular movements (for instance, *Next Five Years Group* with young Harold Macmillan) that professed similar ideas, such as class cooperation and limited state intervention. Also, after the Second World War, on the issue of European Unity, British Christian democrats were far from the electors, while the other topics, such as democratic procedures and class cooperation were tackled by other parties as well. Still, the great achievement of these groups was that Christian democratic ideas were able to develop in a calm environment while their European “friends” were persecuted on the continent by authoritarian leaders and dictators.<sup>13</sup>

## Possible reasons

In the following part of the article, based on scientific sources and journal articles, three main areas will be examined and investigated shortly to find possible reasons for the lacking presence of a strong Christian democracy in the United Kingdom. These

examinations will expand to the religious environment, politics, and historical developments.

### *Religious environment*

To understand the status of Christian democracy in a country, it is crucial to focus at first on the religious environment of that particular country and it is evident that England has a different religious environment than the rest of Western Europe. Naturally, the latter is not homogenous in this regard either, but there is a difference if we compare it with the Anglican heritage and hence the lack of a strong Catholic Church in England. In spite of the fact that Christian democracy has several protestant manifestations (for instance, the Dutch Neo-Calvinism inspired by Abraham Kuyper), there is somewhat of a consensus that it is mostly connected to the Catholic Church, its social teaching, and the reforms articulated in the *Rerum Novarum* and the *Quadragesimo Anno*. The recipients of these Catholic reforms were mostly Catholic individuals and social groups and, – as we have seen above, – even though one cannot declare that there was a complete lack of Catholicism in the United Kingdom, it was highly deficient in numbers. Furthermore, this also led to the fact that no Catholic political leader – who might have been a catalyst of a robust Christian democratic movement – such as Konrad Adenauer, Alcide de Gasperi, or Robert Schuman appeared in the UK politics.

Another factor might lie in the findings of researcher Thomas Jansen, which suggests that in countries where there was a strongly established Church, no Christian political movements flourished. His argument is the following: “In places where there have always been (Protestant) Established Churches, the United Kingdom and Scandinavia, for example, or the (Catholic) Church has continued to the present day to wield powerful and decisive influence in society and political affairs, as for instance in Poland and Spain, the churches hardly ever need to set up secular political ‘arms’ to defend their institutions or interests.”<sup>14</sup> So in short, the lack of a strong Catholic Church but the existence of strong Protestant Churches could lead to the same direction while reinforcing the effects of one another.

Naturally, the religious environment is changing, and Christian democracy is not only exposed to this, but it also has to provide answers to the questions raised by

secularising tendencies. It should be noted that traditional European Christian democratic parties reached their zenith from the 1950s until the 1980s but since then, there is a decline which is mostly attributed to the reduction of the number of religiously active people in societies. It means that even the great Christian democratic parties suffer to keep their electoral weight (for instance in Italy they collapsed) so it is very unlikely that a new Christian democratic enterprise would prosper in this changed religious environment.

### *Historical development*

Continuing our argument above, it seems that British Christian democracy missed the historical opportunity, or more specifically, it seems that there was hardly any historical opportunity for it. The literature argues, while trying to find reasons for the success of Christian democracy in Western Europe, that Christian democracy was “in a good place at a good time”.

At the end of the 1940s religion was still a very significant part of an individual's life, so religiously inspired values were crucial for the voters. Yet, it did not prevent Christian democrats to address all social classes from the right to left (so everyone except for the radicals) with their socially sensitive political campaigns. Moreover, in several defeated European countries, there was an expectation to form coalition governments, which was an advantage for the Christian democrats who were in the middle on the political scale; it was very difficult to leave them out. Their willingness to cooperate both in domestic and foreign politics (not to mention the willingness to integrate Europe) plus the strong electoral background led to the fact that Christian democrats were trusted partners of the winners. The militant anti-socialism of Christian democracy could also be utilised in the historical reality, in opposition with the Soviet Union. Probably one of the most important factors of success was the huge political vacuum that emerged after the Second World War. In Western Europe, the political right collapsed due to its relations to Nazism, while socialist alternatives were not preferable. Christian democrats – among whom many were in exile or were part of underground movements during the Second World War – managed to remain credible in politics and fill this vacant political space.

Just to mention a crucial difference in the UK regarding political vacuum but from another aspect: while Christian democracy was a relatively new phenomenon in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Britain already had a long history in representing Christian interests in politics. As it is explained in an executive summary of the think-tank *Theos*: “Britain never developed a tradition of Christian democracy or a major Christian party because, by the time this happened in Europe, it already had three – Anglican Tory, Nonconformist Liberal, and Nonconformist and Catholic Labour. Although correlations are perhaps weaker, this is still the case today.”<sup>15</sup> So, in short, Christian democracy in Western Europe won all by seizing the historical opportunity, yet these conditions were not prevalent in the UK.

### *Political system*

The last but equally serious area where answers for our article’s title could be found is connected to the political climate of the UK, which is very different from Western Europe. First, the electoral system in the UK significantly reduces the possibility of the emergence of a new party. To be more precise, in contrast to the proportional system, the majoritarian system (first-past-the-post-voting), reduces the chance of new parties (especially those who do not have a geographical base) to ascend since it gives mandates exclusively to those who gained the largest number of votes. Partly this system and the political heritage led to the fact that two parties (the *Conservative Party* and *Labour*) have dominated the political landscape for the last century (naturally their predecessors had been dominating for centuries), and their advantage is so huge that neither Christian democratic nor non-Christian-democratic parties could stop them from governing. Furthermore, usually, they can govern without coalition partners so instead of converging, diverging tendencies prevail (which is alien to Christian democracy).

The other vital question is whether the preferences of UK voters in parallel with the “offers” UK parties provide are similar or different from the Western European ones? Well, first let us see if there are any similarities. On the one hand, many highlight the similarities of Christian democracy and conservatism (for instance, centre-right position, praising family, tradition, private property, subsidiarity and condemning socialism, “statism”, and totalitarianism), on the other hand, there are those that point



out the similarities with social democracy (such as support for solidarism, democratism, human rights, international cooperation, and combating individualism and free-market capitalism). Beyond the many similarities, let us turn to the differences as well, in this case from conservatism. Jansen argues that in the United Kingdom the “opposition to liberalism and socialism produced non-collectivist people’s parties, conservative movements committed to defending traditional values and time-honoured state institutions. They represented the same national constituencies – both from a sociological point of view and in terms of values as the Christian democratic parties in continental Europe. But they differed significantly from the latter in style, political approach, and specific policy.”<sup>16</sup>

This question of alterations in style is perfectly depicted in a *The Economist* article – titled *Sprechen Sie Tory?* – in which the author, looking at Boris Johnson and Ursula von der Leyen, argues that the language, the style, and the attitude of the two leading politicians diverge radically, for instance:

- “Whereas Mrs von der Leyen speaks like a technocrat, Mr Johnson speaks like a bloke telling jokes in a pub.”
- “Even the preferred methods of politics clash. The slow, grinding consensus-building at the heart of Christian Democracy and consequently the EU itself is anathema to Conservatives, for whom the term sounds too much like capitulation. Compared with the winner-takes-all system of British politics, the workings of the EU seem slow and unresponsive to Conservative eyes and just the ticket to Christian Democrat ones.”
- “Dullness is a virtue for Christian Democrats. For Conservatives, it is a sin. Angela Merkel is far from the first Christian Democrat leader to revel in anti-charisma. For Mr Johnson, charisma is his main weapon.”<sup>17</sup>

But it is not just about style, it is also about the fundamental difference between worldviews that divide Christian democrats and Conservatives, and their respective electorate. In the UK – just look at Brexit – it is a crucial idea to defend the sovereignty of the state while in Christian democracy, based on historical experiences, serious doubts are raised against it, and to reflect on those doubts, they support the diffusion of power across different levels. There is a completely different perspective of the state

in the two worldviews.<sup>18</sup> And this is not just about the question of views on the state. Moreover, it is not just about conservatism, but about social democratism as well: neither of them holds the spiritual and intellectual foundations that Christian democrats do (for instance anti-materialism, religiously inspired politics<sup>a</sup>). To make it clear, our argument was not just to point to the similarities and the differences of the parties, but this means that masses of voters support issues that are alien to Christian democracy and there is probably a lack of approval to those specific Christian democratic values which would differentiate them from other parties.

## Conclusion

The central statement of the article was that there is lacking presence of a strong Christian democracy in the UK. First, we wished to show that in the 1930s, although it was not significant in numbers, there was a vivid discussion on Christian democratic ideas in Britain. Then, we were searching for possible reasons for this lack looking at three areas. In the case of the religious environment, we referred to secularising tendencies, and the lack of a strong Catholic presence while highlighting the existence of a Protestant one. Regarding the historical development, we focussed on the political vacuum in continental Europe that emerged after the Second World War (which partly led to the rise of Christian democratic political forces in Western Europe) and showed it in contrast to the lack of it in the UK. In the last part – beyond naming some similarities – we emphasised the difference between UK (and specifically *Conservative*) politics and Christian democracy, also pointing to the distinctive features of the UK political system (especially party system and electoral system). Although our analysis might seem a bit pessimistic about the opportunities of Christian (democratic) political ideas in the UK, as a conclusion we would highly recommend a more positive elaboration of this same topic, written by Christopher Rhodes, who analyses *Why Britain needs Christian politics*.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>a</sup> In this respect, probably Carlo Invernizzi Accetti's book titled *What is Christian Democracy? Politics, Religion and Ideology* published in 2019 by Cambridge University Press is the best guide the contents of which were summarised in one of our previous [articles](#).

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