



# The English Constitution

*Walter Bagehot , Miles Taylor (Editor)*

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## **The English Constitution** Walter Bagehot , Miles Taylor (Editor)

Walter Bagehot's *The English Constitution* (1867) is the best account of the history and workings of the British political system ever written. As arguments raged in mid-Victorian Britain about giving the working man the vote, and democracies overseas were pitched into despotism and civil war, Bagehot took a long, cool look at the "dignified" and "efficient" elements which made the English system the envy of the world. His analysis of the monarchy, the role of the prime minister and cabinet, and comparisons with the American presidential system are astute and timeless, pertinent to current discussions surrounding devolution and electoral reform. Combining the wit and panache of a journalist with the wisdom of a man of letters steeped in evolutionary ideas and historical knowledge, Bagehot produced a book which is always thoughtful, often funny, and surprisingly entertaining. This edition reproduces Bagehot's original 1867 work in full, and introduces the reader to the dramatic political events that surrounded its publication.

## **The English Constitution Details**

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### Edward says

*Introduction*

*Note on the Text*

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*A Chronology of Walter Bagehot*

--The English Constitution

*Explanatory Notes*

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### James says

A study of the English constitution from more than a century ago, yet is still a pertinent and interesting book today. The book is divided into essays on sections of the constitution and the government that it defines. The journalistic nature of the writing along with its high quality combine to make this a pleasant read. The political analysis is sharp and the opinions are timeless.

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### Simon says

Forty-two years between buying it and reading it. Worth the wait. The chap knows of what he writes. I even have a little empirical sympathy for his belief that giving the uninformed the vote can lead to trouble.

A warmer, clearer understanding than Dicey.

Essential for politics students and constitutional lawyers but worth reading for its own sake. An ideal accompaniment to Trollope, Disraeli and Dickens.

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### Caroline says

This is not really a review, it's basically just a collection of notes for my records. I didn't finish the main body of the book, which is an analysis of the English constitution in the 1860s. Instead, more than anything - I read and gained insight from Richard Crossman's forward/analysis, and the 4 stars I have given the book pertain to that analysis. I would highly recommend that anyone buying this book makes sure they get an edition containing his foreword.

More than anything, this book was a catalyst to make me find out more about the workings of British government both today and in the 19th century. I also learnt a bit about the American system of government, which was also briefly mentioned. To help me with this I found an incredibly helpful source, in Roger Darlington's guides to various political systems in different countries. The one I read was fantastically helpful.

<http://www.rogerdarlington.me.uk/2010...>

Back to Bagehot and Crossman - this is one of the most difficult books I have ever broached - not least because I am so hideously ignorant about parliamentary matters - but the outcome, in the way it forced me to research and learn more, was great.

I shall end with my usual jumble of notes, nearly all taken from Crossman's forward. (view spoiler)

(hide spoiler)]

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## Ainsley says

Much better than a dull textbook. This book reads like the Economist would, if the Economist was to describe the workings of the English Constitution. Just as well, as the author was the editor of that esteemed magazine. Obviously out of date (by at least 100 years) but it makes up for in readability what it lacks in precision.

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## Peter says

I read this out of an interest in reactions to democracy in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Many would bridle at even getting the word “react,” with its connotations of “reactionary,” so close to Walter Bagehot, such a liberal touchstone the Economist (which Bagehot edited) has a column named after him. I cede the differences between him and your “real” reactionaries but he is part of an early draft of the great western freakout about the masses and power.

I expected this to be more historical, but it is in fact a description of how Bagehot saw the English constitution as working when he was writing, just before the second big Reform Act hit that would grant something resembling universal manhood suffrage to the British people. It was also at or near the peak of British prestige on the world stage. Bagehot placed much of the success of the British government on the cabinet system — which united legislative and executive functions, he has no time for separation of power — and the differing but complementary effective and “dignified” parts of government, the latter including the House of Lords and the monarchy. The effective parts of the state, notionally democratic but really controlled by the best people with a stake in the system, took care of the effective bits, whilst the dignified parts of the state, while explicitly undemocratic, actually brought the masses in to the system by appealing to some supposed universal human penchant for mystery and ritual.

For a great liberal, he goes back to conservative talking points about the nature of the people and governance quite frequently. This is just how people (sometimes the British in specific, sometimes everyone) just are and will always remain. For one thing, it ignored a lot of what was going on with the working classes in Britain, who as E.P. Thompson showed were engaged in a flurry of self-education and had been for most of a century by the time Bagehot was writing. Secondly, like I was lamenting earlier, these figures never make clear what, exactly, about elite education really makes them the only ones who can govern. If anything, much of their education was wildly impractical, which just goes to show nobody is entirely ignorant of their own interest, American voting behavior notwithstanding. But in the end, even if you accept the general premise or take it as a given for this kind of literature, Bagehot — and in my experience, British reactionaries, conservatives, and conservative-liberals (with few honorable exceptions, like Wyndham Lewis) do not bring the same analytical depth or literary imagination to bear on their reactionary visions as their continental counterparts did. I tend to assume this is because the British were so much stronger and more complacent during the nineteenth century, and it seems to me that Bagehot exemplifies this- the sort of attitude the Economist tries to cop. \*\*\*

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## **Rachel says**

Used to be required reading amongst the British Royal family. Her Majesty Elizabeth II particularly devoted much time, at her father's request, to reading this book.

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## **Jonathan Robinson says**

Worth reading if you enjoy politics and/or history, simply for the experience of reading such a landmark text. Bagehot could also certainly coin a snappy phrase, and the book is peppered with them.

Of course, the actual legal commentary is a century and a half old. That's not to say there's nothing of value in his arguments - some things have not changed - but it does mean one has to tread carefully. The author rails against proposals for process-based guarantees of Commons superiority, fearing that they would lead to bad habits, but the Parliament Act was introduced about 35 years later and surely must go down as a successful piece of legislation. (Nobody said he was omniscient.) His heavy chapters on the Lords and the Commons are very interesting but both chambers have changed so much since he wrote that much of what he says is frankly obsolete.

Perhaps his most famous concept, the distinction between the dignified parts and the efficient parts of the constitution, is itself at the least in need of renovation. Some of his supporting logic will also seem profoundly elitist to a modern reader. However, yet again, beneath the faults there is a gem. Our public affairs remain steeped in history, and the rationale for various processes surely remains largely the same as the one Bagehot described.

A great one for the enthusiast; one to avoid for everyone else.

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## **Donn Headley says**

Throughout, Bagehot exhibits an abject misunderstanding of and ignorance about the American system. For example, he is ignorant of the role of the American states in the United States Constitution's Electoral College system, seeing it only as a rubber-stamp of the popular electorate, overlooking its role in distributing national campaign efforts and enhancing polling security. He also misunderstands the American system for nominating candidates for the presidency, characterizing the system as caucuses. By Bagehot's time, caucuses were not how most state systems operated their electoral processes; most had adopted the convention system after Andrew Jackson's popularity opened the systems to the "common man." And, anyway, caucuses (and conventions) did not "choose" the President, as Bagehot asserts, but nominated presidential candidates from within parties. Before a responsible historian disparages, he researches and becomes knowledgeable. Here, Bagehot fails, and fails in an irresponsible manner. Therefore, we are forced to pretty much dismiss everything else he asserts in his comparison between constitutional monarchy and constitutional republicanism. An insight into Victorian English politics and government, but little more.

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## **Peter says**

Bagehot was a terribly conservative editor of *The Economist* about the time of the American Civil War. He

did not believe in universal suffrage: "In theory, it is desirable that this highest class (rich, educated & 'cultivated') of wealth and leisure should have an influence far out of proportion to its mere number ..." He was a snob who believed whole-heartedly in an hereditary Monarchy: "Constitutional royalty ... acts as a disguise. It enables our real rulers to change without heedless people knowing it. The great masses of Englishmen are not fit for an elective government ..." He was a racial bigot convinced of the superiority of white Europeans: "An imposed government, a government like that of the English in India, may very possibly be better; it may represent the views of a higher race than the governed race ..." In 200 pages, he explores the ideas of the (still unwritten) English Constitution as it is embodied in the Parliament and compares it to the Greek city states, the American presidential system, and the French system of Napoleon after the Revolution. He was considered among the intellectual elite of his day, and his message still rings true among British and American Conservatives. Looking at today's political landscape in the US, I have some sympathy for his otherwise outdated views, especially as I watch American voters elect Tea Party Republicans against their own best interests, but I am an unapologetic progressive liberal and find his views generally distasteful. He does write with erudition and an excellent grasp of English history, as well as a certain graceful style. Whether you end up agreeing with him or not, this is good history well written.

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### **Nicholas Vela says**

This book, though difficult to get through at times, has increased my understanding of, as the title states, The English Constitution. I was, admittedly, turned to this book by Netflix's "The Crown".

Bagehot does an excellent job of making his case (Though in posterity, the case may have changed quickly). As usual, the Oxford Worlds Classics team does a tremendous job at giving a historical background to the work itself. The chapters on the Monarchy, the workings of Cabinet, as well as the House of Lords were insightful, considering that most of British Politics that we come across are the result of the House of Commons.

A wonderful and insightful book.

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### **Craig Bolton says**

The English Constitution (Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought) by Walter Bagehot (2001)

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### **Gordon Kwok says**

For those of us who heard of this book in the Netflix series the Crown, where Parliament is the efficient and the crown is the dignified, this was a worthwhile reading. It lays out how the British system of government works and explains their system of Parliamentary sovereignty. What that means is that the Parliament has the final say and can even vote to remove sovereign which they have done on prior occasions (e.g., dismissing King James II and calling in King William of Orange and King George I).

If you have an interest in British history or history in general or even how governments work, this is a good book and best of all, it was free on the Kindle.

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## Alexey says

Though I have quite bigger expectations from the book to which people refer even after a century and a half of the very turbulent history that changed the very base of the subject. But I did not find the extravagant depth of thought or its breadth, the author almost religiously devoted to the cabinet form of the government and ignored its drawbacks even if mentioned them. Though Mr Bagehot did not meet my expectation, I really enjoy reading, maybe because of I've been reading this book in parallel with De Tocqueville's Democracy in America - different epochs, different views, different countries.

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