



The British Constitution

Anthony King

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In the latter part of the nineteenth century Walter Bagehot wrote a classic account of the British constitution as it had developed during Queen Victoria's reign. He argued that the late Victorian constitution was not at all what people thought it was. Anthony King argues that the same is true at the beginning of this century. Most people are aware that a series of major constitutional changes has taken place, but few recognize that their cumulative effect has been to change entirely the nature of Britain's constitutional structure. The old constitution has gone. The author insists that the new constitution is a mess, but one that we can make the best of.

The British Constitution is neither a reference book nor a textbook. Like Bagehot's classic, it is written with wit and mordant humor--by someone who is a journalist and political commentator as well as a distinguished academic. The author maintains that, while the new British constitution is a mess, there is no going back now. "As always", he says, "nostalgia is a good companion but a bad guide." Far from shying away from the thorniest issues facing the British polity today, the author grapples with them head on. He offers a trenchant analysis of the increasingly divergent relationship between England, Scotland and Wales in the light of devolution and a devastating critique of the reformed House of Lords, whose benches, the author fears, risk being adorned by "a miscellaneous assemblage of party hacks, political careerists, clapped-out retired or defeated MPs, has-beens, never-were's and never-could-possibly-be's."

The book is a Bagehot for the 21st Century--the product of a lifetime's reflection on the topic, and essential reading for anyone with an interest in the nature and future of British political life.

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