THE INSTITUTE FOR ANACYCLOSIS

EXCERPT FROM
THE ENGLISH CONSTITUTION
BY WALTER BAGEHOT

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Note: This text describes a pattern of constitutional development which occurred in Greece and Rome, and also in England, pursuant to which the advisory and the popular adjuncts of monarchy developed into "the organs of a republic". This text also notes the influence of the growth of the English middle classes in the development of the English Parliament. Although many particulars are omitted, the basic organic pattern of constitutional development described by Bagehot, as applied to states that developed representative government, and the essential forces which strengthen the power of representative bodies, are easily reconciled with The Institute's model of Anacyclosis.

No. IX. Its History, and the Effects of that History.–Conclusion

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There is a certain common polity, or germ of polity, which we find in all the rude nations that have attained civilization. These nations seem to begin in what I may call a consultative and tentative absolutism. The king of early days, in vigorous nations, was not absolute as despots now are; there was then no standing army to repress rebellion, no organized *espionage* to spy out discontent, no skilled bureaucracy to smooth the ruts of obedient life. …

To early royalty, as Homer describes it in Greece and as we may well imagine it elsewhere, there were always two adjuncts: one the "old men," the men of weight, the council, the *βουλή*, of which the king asked advice, from the debates in which the king tried to learn what he could do and what he ought to do. Besides this there was the *ἀγορά*, the purely listening assembly, as some have called it, but the *tentative* assembly, as I think it might best be called. The king came down to his assembled people in form to announce his will, but in reality, speaking in very modern words, to "feel his way". He was sacred, no doubt; and popular, very likely; still he was half like a popular Premier speaking to a high-spirited chamber; there were limits to his authority and power—limits which he would discover by trying whether eager cheers received his mandate, or only hollow murmurs and a thinking silence.

This polity is a good one for its era and its place, but there is a fatal defect in it. The reverential associations upon which the government is built are transmitted according to one law, and the capacity needful to work the government is transmitted according to another law. The popular homage clings to the line of god-descended kings; it is transmitted by inheritance. But very soon that line comes to a child or an idiot, or one by some defect or other incapable. Then we find everywhere the truth of the old saying, that liberty thrives under weak princes; then the listening assembly begins not only to murmur, but to speak; then the grave council begins not so much to suggest as to inculcate, not so much to advise as to enjoin.

Mr. Grote has told at length how out of these appendages of the original kingdom the free States of Greece derived their origin, and how they gradually grew—the oligarchical States expanding the council, and the democratical expanding the assembly. The history has as many varieties in detail as there were Greek cities, but the essence is the same everywhere. The political characteristic of the early Greeks, and

of the early Romans, too, is that out of the *tentacula* of a monarchy they developed the organs of a republic.

English history has been in substance the same, though its form is different, and its growth far slower and longer. The scale was larger, and the elements more various. A Greek city soon got rid of its kings, for the political sacredness of the monarch would not bear the daily inspection and constant criticism of an eager and talking multitude. … The different orders of English people have progressed, too, at different rates. The change in the state of the higher classes since the Middle Ages is enormous, and it is all improvement; but the lower have varied little, and many argue that in some important respects they have got worse, even if in others they have got better. The development of the English Constitution was of necessity slow, because a quick one would have destroyed the executive and killed the State, and because the most numerous classes, who changed very little, were not prepared for any catastrophic change in our institutions.

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There are, as is well known, three great periods in the English Constitution. The first of these is the ante-Tudor period. The English Parliament then seemed to be gaining extraordinary strength and power. The title to the Crown was uncertain; some monarchs were imbecile. Many ambitious men wanted to "take the people into partnership". … The principal popular force was an aristocratic force, acting with the co-operation of the gentry and yeomanry, and resting on the loyal fealty of sworn retainers. The head of this force, on whom its efficiency depended, was the high nobility. But the high nobility killed itself out. The great barons who adhered to the "Red Rose" or the "White Rose," or who fluctuated from one to the other, became poorer, fewer, and less potent every year. When the great struggle ended at Bosworth, a large part of the greatest combatants were gone. The restless, aspiring, rich barons, who made the civil war, were broken by it. Henry VII. attained a kingdom in which there was a Parliament to advise, but scarcely a Parliament to control.

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The second period of the British Constitution begins with the accession of the House of Tudor, and goes down to 1688; it is in substance the history of the growth, development, and gradually acquired supremacy of the new great council. I have no room and no occasion to narrate again the familiar history of the many steps by which the slavish Parliament of Henry VIII. grew into the murmuring Parliament of Queen Elizabeth, the mutinous Parliament of James I., and the rebellious Parliament of Charles I. The steps were many, but the energy was one—the growth of the English middle-class, using that word in its most inclusive sense, and its animation under the influence of Protestantism. …

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Though the rule of Parliament was definitely established in 1688, yet the mode of exercising that rule has since changed. At first Parliament did not know how to exercise it; the organisation of parties and the appointment of Cabinets by parties grew up in the manner Macaulay has described so well. Up to the latest period the sovereign was supposed, to a most mischievous extent, to interfere in the choice of the persons to be Ministers. When George III. finally became insane, in 1810, every one believed that George IV., on assuming power as Prince Regent, would turn out Mr. Perceval's Government and empower Lord Grey or Lord Grenville, the Whig leaders, to form another. The Tory Ministry was carrying on a successful war—a war of existence—against Napoleon; but in the people's minds, the necessity at such an occasion for an unchanged Government did not outweigh the fancy that George IV. was a Whig. And a Whig it is true he had been before the French Revolution, when he lived an

indescribable life in St. James's Street with Mr. Fox. But Lord Grey and Lord Grenville were rigid men, and had no immoral sort of influence. What liberalism of opinion the Regent ever had was frightened out of him (as of other people) by the Reign of Terror. He felt, according to the saying of another monarch, that "he lived by being a royalist". It soon appeared that he was most anxious to retain Mr. Perceval, and that he was most eager to quarrel with the Whig Lords. As we all know, he kept the Ministry whom he found in office; but that it should have been thought he could then change them, is a significant example how exceedingly modern our notions of the despotic action of Parliament in fact are.

By the steps of the struggle thus rudely mentioned (and by others which I have no room to speak of, nor need I), the change which in the Greek cities was effected both in appearance and in fact, has been effected in England, though in reality only, and not in outside. Here, too, the appendages of a monarchy have been converted into the essence of a republic; only here, because of a more numerous heterogeneous political population, it is needful to keep the ancient show while we secretly interpolate the new reality.

This long and curious history has left its trace on almost every part of our present political condition; its effects lie at the root of many of our most important controversies; and because these effects are not rightly perceived, many of these controversies are misconceived.

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