

# The Essentials of Parliamentary Democracy

**R. Bassett**

With a new introduction by  
Michael Oakeshott



**THE ESSENTIALS OF  
PARLIAMENTARY DEMOCRACY**

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PROFESSOR REGINALD BASSETT

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THE ESSENTIALS OF  
PARLIAMENTARY  
DEMOCRACY

*R. BASSETT*

Late Professor of Political Science in the  
University of London

With a new introduction by  
MICHAEL OAKESHOTT

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To  
MY MOTHER

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The characteristic danger of great nations, like the Romans or the English, which have a long history of continuous creation, is that they may at last fail from not comprehending the great institutions which they have created.

WALTER BAGEHOT

The chief argument for parliamentary government is that results are obtained by discussion between the divergent interests, and are imposed by consent—a method which produces a better average of humanity than the most scientific of despotisms.

PROFESSOR A. F. POLLARD

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## INTRODUCTION TO FIRST EDITION

THIS book has been provoked by recent tendencies in British politics and by current controversies relative to the present working and future prospects of our system of parliamentary government. Its object is to elucidate or to re-state the conditions essential to the maintenance of parliamentary democracy. I have sought to explain what parliamentary democracy involves rather than to defend it, because I am convinced that the dangers with which it is threatened, in this country especially, arise more from failure to understand the necessary conditions of its survival than from any form of direct attack.

In concentrating my attention upon British political life and institutions, I have not been indifferent to the fate of parliamentary democracy in other countries. On the contrary, I believe that the future of democracy throughout the world depends in large measure upon the preservation and improvement of the British system of government. Moreover, our long and successful application of democratic methods suggests that an analysis of the British situation is most likely to bring out the essentials of parliamentary democracy.

The analysis attempted in the following pages may be justified on several grounds. To some minds, British political institutions are already in grave peril. I do not share that view, but it is none the less desirable to be on guard against complacency. Elements of danger have always existed, and in recent years new ones have emerged.

In the first place, it is difficult to resist the conclusion that there is a widespread lack of understanding, not only of our own political system, but also of the nature and conditions of political action as such. The very continuity and apparent

stability of our political institutions have engendered a certain indifference to them, not unmingled with a measure of that contempt which familiarity often breeds. We are apt to take them for granted; we grumble at them, as is our habit; and we should probably rally to their defence if they were seriously attacked. Familiarity, however, is not the same thing as understanding; indifference, contempt, and unrestrained indulgence in the tendency we have to grumble, may all in their several ways weaken that which it is desired to preserve; and the instinctive rally against serious challenge is a poor substitute for the political intelligence which would obviate its necessity. It is this inadequate comprehension of the working of our political system which is responsible for excessive demands upon it, and for the resulting disillusionment. Too many people do not sufficiently understand either the nature of the British politician's work or the conditions under which he pursues his activities. They fail to penetrate beneath the superficialities of political life, and an atmosphere is created which is favourable to the growth of scepticism and cynicism.

In the second place, the extension of the functions of the State has given rise to real difficulties for all political systems, and to genuine doubts of the efficacy of existing political machinery and methods. Such doubts have been strengthened by the apparent inability of governments to cope with the manifold and complex problems of the post-war world. The political system, in this country as elsewhere, has been included in a general criticism of established institutions, fostered by economic distress. It has been held responsible for the failure to apply the so-called solutions which have found favour from time to time, numerous and incompatible though they have been. Since the coming of the world depression, especially, a demand has arisen for action as such—for getting something done, no matter what—and our political methods have been criticised as the main obstacle to its satisfaction. Other factors have been operative. Russian Communism may have

few admirers here, but many who disapprove of its motives have a certain sympathy with some of its methods. The same is true of Italian Fascism; and many of those repelled by the one have been attracted by the other. However objectionable the incidentals may be, the spectacle of one group or party imposing its will ruthlessly upon the rest evokes a sympathetic response in the most diverse quarters. Both movements have given an impression of vigour, efficiency, and determination, qualities seemingly lacking under parliamentary régimes. They have a dramatic appeal which the latter do not possess and can never hope to acquire. The rise of other dictatorships has seemed to justify their derision of democratic principles and to confirm the view that there is a general movement away from parliamentary methods of government. These events abroad have exercised a two-fold influence. A tendency to worship at strange shrines has emerged; while the mood of pessimism about parliamentary institutions has deepened and feelings of alarm have been aroused. The growing volume of criticism; the clamour for some way out of economic distress and party confusion; the loss of confidence; all constitute additional elements of danger.

The absence of any direct challenge of importance should not blind us to the fact that there are other dangerous factors. "He goes furthest who knows not where he is going," Cromwell is alleged to have said. A quite genuine avowal of support for our political institutions may be combined with renunciation of the methods upon which they rest. A sincere belief in democracy may be accompanied by actions which strike at its very foundations. The last few years have witnessed a marked tendency to advocate policies and programmes which have no regard to the possible consequences upon our political system. Determination to achieve particular ends has led to a growing indifference to means. When prominent spokesmen of an important political party declare their intention to carry out a revolutionary policy by constitutional methods, it is certainly

time to consider seriously whether or not that is possible, and what the effects of any attempt to carry out that intention are likely to be. In such circumstances, no further apology for this book need be advanced.

Doubtless there are many defects both in the form and the functioning of the British system of government. That is only to be expected, for men made it and men work it. But, however numerous and important the defects may be, it is of the first importance to preserve a sense of proportion. Dr. G. P. Gooch recently made a timely plea for a "reasonable relativity" in these matters, and Professor Herbert Kraus has reminded us that, "No State form and no State constitution is absolutely ideal for a community of people. The criterion must always be whether under the existing circumstances it is comparatively the most agreeable and comparatively the best constitution, under which the people can live." Moreover, "the comparatively best constitution in the circumstances" is operated by fallible human beings.

Among the existing circumstances must be included the effects of historical development, not only upon the political forms but also upon the political temperament and habits of the people. The political systems of the countries of the world can be properly understood and soundly judged only in the light of their historical experiences. The events of the last few years are fully explicable only by reference to those experiences. A word of warning against generalisations based upon recent happenings abroad may not be out of place here. The establishment of the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics upon the ruins of the old Russian Empire; the supersession of parliamentary government in Italy and Germany and Austria; the dictatorships, naked or veiled, in Turkey or Poland, Hungary or Yugo-Slavia; do not in themselves provide any justification either for doubts about the value of British parliamentary democracy or for alarm about its future. As Mr. Walter Citrine has said, in one of his many able speeches on the sub-

ject, "Almost in every case where dictatorships have arisen the institutions of the country had either not been democratic institutions in the full sense as understood in this country, or the institutions had been so recent in origin, and had had so little time to become grafted into the consciousness of the people, that they had not become part of the national life."<sup>1</sup>

In the circumstances indicated, a re-examination of the British system of government is eminently desirable. This book has been written as a contribution to that end. I hope it may do something to remove popular misapprehensions; to indicate what can and what can not be done through the existing political machinery and by the customary methods; and, by clarifying the position, to counteract tendencies which may endanger, and strengthen those which may improve, the functioning of British political institutions. If it should succeed only in drawing attention to the need for a fuller and more authoritative exposition, it will have achieved its purpose.

The book is divided into two parts: in the first, I have endeavoured to state or to re-state the essentials of the British system of parliamentary government and to indicate the conditions of its continuance; in the second, the argument is illustrated by a critical analysis of certain recent tendencies in British politics.

I have felt it necessary to refer briefly, in Chapter I, to the main characteristics of British constitutional and political development, and to re-interpret the central features of the existing political system. To this Chapter I have appended a note on the charge of dictatorship levelled against the Cabinet by Professor Ramsey Muir. In Chapters II and III, I have dealt at considerable length with the relatively neglected and all-important part played in the working of the system by the political parties. Since the subject of British Parliamentary government is so intimately bound up with the general subject of democracy, I have devoted Chapter IV to an interpretation

<sup>1</sup> Trades Union Congress, Brighton, September, 1933.

of the meaning of democracy, and to a discussion of the extent to which our political institutions and practices conform to the democratic method. I have proceeded from an affirmation of the essentially democratic basis of our political system to a critical examination, in Chapters V and VI, of certain popular arguments purporting to show that the system is doomed to collapse, and to an elucidation of the conditions upon which it depends for its maintenance and improvement. Finally, in Part II, I have discussed some recent developments in British politics which are potentially dangerous to parliamentary government; the views and proposals associated with the names of Sir Stafford Cripps, Professor H. J. Laski and Mr. G. D. H. Cole; the attitude of the Labour, Conservative and Liberal parties; the emergence of Sir Oswald Mosley's Fascist movement; and the problems raised by the existence and possible growth of anti-parliamentary political parties.

I desire to express my thanks to the group of friends with whom I have been associated in political studies or public activities, and with whom, despite inevitable differences of opinion and changes of party allegiance, I have shared the hopes and anxieties of recent times. Without their encouragement this book would not have been written; without their insistence and help it would not have been published; and whatever value it may have is due in large measure to their advice and criticism.

My indebtedness to many distinguished writers on British political history and institutions is obvious. I can only express the hope that I have not omitted to give due acknowledgement in any particular instance.

R. BASSETT.

*Frant, Sussex,*  
*January, 1935.*

## INTRODUCTION TO SECOND EDITION

THE author of this book was a man of some remarkable qualities. Born at the turn of the century, politics was in his blood, and he owed his first political education to his mother with whom, as a boy, he used to attend political meetings. He acquired strong political beliefs which led him to join the I.L.P. at an early age. But to his partisan persuasions was added the temperament of a scholar; and on leaving school and entering a solicitor's office (where business was not very brisk) he set about educating himself in earnest.

A scholarship at the age of twenty-five took him first to Ruskin College and then to New College, Oxford; and for fifteen years he was a lecturer under the Extra-Mural Delegacy of the University of Oxford, working mainly in his native Sussex.

When, in 1945, under the inspiration of the late Professor Tawney and Mr. Evan Durbin, the London School of Economics started a course for students drawn from the Trade Unions, Bassett was made Tutor. Academic life suited his disposition; he soon made his mark as a teacher and in 1961 he was appointed to a Professorship in the University of London.

His great intellectual passion was for the political history of his times, to the study of which he brought a powerful memory for events, persons and occasions, an acute political sensibility, a profound knowledge of the history and conduct of parliamentary government in Great Britain and a care for detail. For him, political history was composed, neither of the sweeping movements beloved of the 'intellectual', nor of the fortunes of 'systems' of government, but of the footprints

left by those who engaged in political activity, each a moment of significance to be recognized, reflected upon and interpreted in its context.

Circumstances had something to do with the slackening of his partisan activities (in 1931 he was a MacDonalдите and ceased to be a member of a political party); but it was characteristic of him that the only cause which held his unwavering allegiance was that of Parliamentary democracy, which he understood to be a noble and historic manner of conducting politics, reaching decisions and digesting the differences characteristic of a modern European society.

In other circumstances, Bassett might have written a remarkable history of the politics of his own time. In talk he could unfold the political realities—in Westminster and in the countryside—of the last sixty years in fascinating detail. But as it was, he engaged himself in a different project.

The ambition never to appear to have deserted one's principles, the desire to discredit one's opponents, and the normal course of human forgetfulness, have imposed, during the last four decades, a remarkable stock of legends upon some of the passages in our politics, and Bassett undertook to put the record straight in respect of some of the more notable of them. *Democracy and Foreign Policy* (1952) was a study of what had been thought and said during the Sino-Japanese Affair, 1931-33, and in *Nineteen Thirty-One: Political Crisis* (1958) he sought to disentangle historical truth from the various partisan legends. These were controversial works; but the motive which inspired them was his attachment to what he understood British parliamentary democracy to be.

*The Essentials of Parliamentary Democracy*, here reprinted, was his first book. It has for some years been out of print and (with some reluctance) he was, at the time of his death, engaged in revising it. His intention was to add an epilogue in which the later fortunes of parliamentary government in

Great Britain were to be considered, and to bring it up-to-date in other respects. But, since he never completed this work to his own satisfaction, it has been decided to reprint the book with only some minor alterations, chiefly in the foot-notes.

The book was written in the summer of 1934, and it bears the marks of its time. From some points of view, Bassett himself was content to regard it as something of a period-piece with a certain historical interest for students of British politics. But, without claiming for it more than it can sustain, it may be recognised to have qualities of a less ephemeral kind.

There are books (of varying quality) which purport to give an account of the working of the institutions and arrangements which comprise what is called the British Constitution. With these, this book does not compete. It should be read as an essay on British parliamentary government; its mood is interpretive. The truth is that Bassett was a Whig and he had the Whig's pious attachment to our institutions of government. He did not, indeed, believe that the British Constitution had descended from heaven, nor did he believe it to have the symmetry of perfection'; but he did believe it to afford a method of dealing with differences which had emerged in the contingencies of human choices, which was both tough and responsive to change, and which possessed pre-eminent practical virtues. And what he was concerned to do was to interpret its character, recognising its not negligible defects as anomalous survivals rather than as divergencies from an ideal model.

Part I, concerned with British parliamentary government as an organisation of beliefs and practices, is as durable a piece of writing as its subject can support. But Part II, which deals with a specific passage in British political history in the early 'thirties, may be thought to be of less permanent interest. This, however, is not the case. Bassett read in this passage a threat to British parliamentary government. In considering it he was obliged to notice opinions (many of them of passing