

**Staging the constitution: theatrical
representations of British political
institutions in times of change**

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The unstable constitution?



This House and The Audience



This House and the Audience

- Both plays contain echoes of classical constitutional thinking to offer accounts of how the political system copes with crisis and change.
- Neither play is radical, but they do draw quite different conclusions:
 - *The Audience* stresses continuity and the role of (in Bagehot's words) the dignified parts of the constitution.
 - *This House* stresses the informal nature of the constitution, decay and failure of the human element. The text highlights disagreement as to whether the constitution is suitable for times of crisis, and ultimately rejects conservative, anti-rationalist readings of the constitution.

Exposing the “hidden wiring”

- Both plays invite their audiences into secret or little understood parts of the British body politic – the Whips’ offices and the private audience between the monarch and a Premier.
- This reflects a tradition of stressing the secrecy in British constitutional literature
 - Bagehot frequently talks of the magic, secrets and mystery in the constitution i.e. “We catch the Americans smiling at our Queen and her secret mystery, and our Prince of Wales with his happy inaction” (1867/2001, a point discussed by King, 2009)
 - More recently constitutional historian Peter Hennessey referred to “the hidden wiring” of the British constitution (1995).

Exposing the “hidden wiring”

- However, the two plays do it in subtly different ways, which changes the way they present the institutions:
 - In *This House*, the audience is complicit in the process, especially due to the setting of the play. Even though Westminster is a secret place, we are invited in.
 - In *The Audience*, viewers are more invasive. This is evident in a sequence where the young Queen is fearful of being observed by passers by (Morgan, 2013: 20).
- This difference is further evident in the characters appearing on stage. In *The Audience*, they are highly familiar, in *This House*, famous political names are almost completely avoided, and only hinted at.

Deference and dignity

- *The Audience* offers a traditional response to political crisis.
- This echoes Bagehot's claim that "The use of the Queen, in a dignified capacity, is incalculable. Without her in England, the present English Government would fail and pass away" (1867/2001)
- This claim is based on the idea that ceremonial elements of the constitution provide protection for political leaders (or perhaps, less positively, a distraction for citizens).
- In his words "It acts as a DISGUISE" (1867/2001, capitals in original).

Deference and dignity

- The end of the play would seem to clearly offer this argument:
 - Elizabeth: “No matter how old-fashioned, expensive or unjustifiable we are, we will still be preferable to a elected president meddling in what they [Prime Ministers] do. Which is why they always dive into rescue us every time we make a mess of things. If you want to know how it is that the monarchy in this country has survived as long as it has – don’t look to its monarchs, look to its Prime Ministers” (Morgan, 2013: 88).
- The constitutional conservatism of the play is also reflected in which PMs appear. Macmillan, Hume, Heath and Blair are absent.

Fit for purpose?

- This House suggests that the origins of many of the constitutional principles that govern the Commons are lost in the past:
 - Mellish: "[On the process of pairing*] "It's a sort of gentleman's agreement, pairing back, well, forever" (Graham, 2012: 28).
 - Atkins: "I sympathize, Fred, I do, but remember, we are gloriously unique, this country in not having a written constitution. What we have are traditions, gentleman's agreements" (Graham, 2012: 42).
- "We live under a system of tacit understandings... The understandings themselves are not always understood" (Low, 1904).

*Pairing involves a government and opposition MP both agreeing not to vote in a lobby, so as one can be absent.

Fit for purpose?

- A central question raised in the play is whether the system of informal agreements, tacit understandings and traditions can withstand the pressure of moments of crisis.
- One argument made is that, despite everything, the system works.
 - Mellish: "It's archaic, it's old fashioned, it's bollocks, but somehow it works" (Graham, 2012: 31).
 - Atkins: "Do what we do best. Muddle through" (Graham, 2012: 42).
 - This is essentially a Whig or Burkean reading of constitutional history (Burke, 1790). Constitutions have value not because they are written, but because they evolve out of shared understanding (see also Oakeshott, 1962).
- However, counter positions are articulated in the text:
 - Harrison: "I'd think it'd all work fine. British democracy. If it weren't so damn reliant on people" (Graham, 2012: 115).
 - Atkins: "One party governs. One party opposes. That's our system... We are not built for cooperation (Graham, 2012: 104).

Weakness and decay

- It is the human element of the system that is exposed as its greatest weakness, as the government's majority is slowly eroded by the death of MPs.
- But there is a sense that this human decay is contagious, spreading to the fabric of the buildings and their workings.
 - Member for Meroneith: "I've never liked the Thames. It looks... Diseased" (Graham, 2012: 32).
 - Member for Walsall North: "I see that...that the Houses of Parliament are on fire. And suddenly the Thames turns... it turns to blood."
 - Reference is made to the only major breakdown of the Westminster Clock Tower ("Big Ben"), which occurred in 1976.
- Ultimately, *This House* rejects the Victorian constitution. It's failing maybe down to the human element, but these are significant because it is so reliant on the human element.
- As such, it rejects Burke's argument that constitutions must be based "not on human reason, but on human nature" (1790).

Staging the constitution

- Both of these plays address political crisis and the constitution. They offer quite different readings, however:
 - *The Audience* fetishes the Victorian constitution, suggesting that stability, continuity and service are the best ways through crisis. The relationship with the audience might also suggest social hierarchy is important.
 - *This House* invites the audience to empathize with MPs attempting to work within a constitutional machinery that is unwieldy and prone to breakage. As such, the constitution may be part of the problem.
 - While the play does not overtly suggest radical constitutional change, in rejecting Burkean readings of the constitution, the play at least leaves open a justification for reform.

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