

Prologue

A Profound Constitutional Breakdown

*We don't have a written constitution, we
have constitutional arrangements ...*

Lord Lisvane, former clerk of the House of Commons
(16 July 2024, day of the State Opening of Parliament)

*If liberal democracy fails in the 21st century, as it failed
in the twentieth, to construct a humane, prosperous,
and peaceful world, it will invite the rise of alternative
creeds apt to be based, like fascism and communism,
on flight from freedom and surrender to authority.*

Arthur Schlesinger Jr. ('Has Democracy a Future?', 1997)

The 'voice of sanity' is getting hoarse ...

Seamus Heaney ('Whatever You Say, Say Nothing', 1975)

We have no wish to cause alarm. We are not devotees of the 'what if?' school of history. We can scarcely believe we are trailing these thoughts and possibilities in the pages to come. Until the summer of 2024, it simply would not have occurred to us to do so. But, with the significant surge of the hard Right in Western Europe,

more than a flicker of it in the British election debate of June to July 2024, plus the still vivid memory of how easy it proved for some of the conventions and decencies of political behaviour to be swept aside during the Johnson years in No. 10 (which we discussed in an earlier treatment, *The Bonfire of the Decencies*), there lurks in the British political air a tang of unease.

As we began to write, a wave of deeply worrying disturbances disfigured a range of big cities and large towns after far-Right demonstrators, feeding off disinformation and lies about the murderer of three young girls at a dance school in Southport, sought to foment what some of them plainly wished would follow – a ‘race war’. The still very new Prime Minister sought, through a mixture of countermeasures and deterrence, to blunt the violence and unleash the law upon the perpetrators.

The King, carefully judging the timing, content, and its means of communication, waited until the end of the week of disturbances before making his intervention. On Friday 10 August, his Buckingham Palace spokesman let it be known that the King had talked on the phone to the Prime Minister and senior police figures, telling them he had been ‘greatly encouraged’ by the way they had countered the ‘aggression and criminality from a few with the compassion and resilience of the many’ describing his ‘heartfelt thanks’ to the police and the emergency services. He had been greatly encouraged, too, ‘by the many examples of community spirit’ that the disturbances had brought forth. Underscoring one of the major themes of Charles III’s

reign, the Palace spokesman said: ‘It remains his Majesty’s hope that shared values of mutual respect and understanding will continue to strengthen and unite the nation.’

Though in no way wishing to suggest a level of peril is close that might eventually inject the blight of authoritarianism into mainstream British politics, the experiences of July to August 2024 did add to a sense that we could be edging towards a coarse, deeply undesirable, and occasionally violence-tinged system of politics that itself could bring about an authoritarian administration in the Cabinet Room at some point in the next fifteen to twenty years.

As a consequence of these factors, a political and constitutional contingency that scarcely dare speak its name is this: if, through a series of mischances, we were to find ourselves with an authoritarian government that refused to budge after the country, in a general election, had voted against them or produced a hung result leading to a deal between rival parties in order to command a majority in the House of Commons. How might they be removed and prevented from abusing their position while they retained office? We explore this particular scenario as a possibility in itself, but in doing so also provide a basis for considering a wider range of potential outcomes that could come about in the context of a rise of authoritarian politics, and its intersection with the UK constitution.

Part One, *The Limpet Prime Minister*, is an account of the projected circumstance which is the basis for this book, placing it in the context of the UK democratic system.

Part Two, *Protecting the System*, considers the existing instruments (written and unwritten) available to those wishing to deter or counter this scenario and to restrict the potential for malpractice on the part of the recalcitrant premier pending their being ousted. It also discusses the human defences – that is, the office holders who might come into play. It is not only their offices that count, but that they, as individuals, ‘do the right thing’, as one insider put it; ‘the more they act in concert, the likelier you are to prise off the limpet’. Finally, Part Two sketches out means by which we might construct stronger and better-understood defences of the British way of parliamentary democracy than exist at present.

Part Three, *The Ten-Year Stress Test*, sets out key constitutional developments since the 2014 referendum on Scottish independence, as a kind of ready reckoner of what happened next. It also partly carries a cumulative explanation of the stress experienced by the mysterious entity we call our ‘unwritten constitution’.

As for the authors, we fervently hope that what follows is the most redundant piece of work either of us has ever published. We would be truly happy if, in the years to come, a young PhD student found our words in an obscure corner of a second-hand bookshop and thoroughly derided us for wasting their time and that of any reader we might have diverted from other things.

Peter Hennessy and Andrew Blick, November 2024