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978-0-521-29148-4 - Documents on Contemporary British Government: I British Government and Constitutional Change

Edited by Martin Minogue

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# Documents on Contemporary British Government

## I. British government and constitutional change

EDITED BY

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*For Lizzie*

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

# Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>page</i> xi
<i>Introduction</i>	1
<b>I What's wrong with British government</b>	<b>15</b>
1 The Commission on the Constitution	15
<b>II Parliament</b>	<b>37</b>
2 Who governs Britain?	38
3 Parliamentary reform	41
4 Select committees	42
5 Specialist committees	47
6 Parliament and public expenditure	52
7 The Renton Report on legislation	58
8 Members' interests	67
9 House of Lords reform	71
10 Parliamentary statistics	79
<b>III The centre of government</b>	<b>83</b>
11 Organisation of the Cabinet	83
12 Prime Ministerial government?	87
13 The reorganisation of central government	91
14 Giant departments	96
15 Machinery of government changes, 1952–74	107
16 The planning and administration of public expenditure	108
17 P.E.S.C. and P.A.R.	117
18 Public expenditure statistics	121
19 Organisation for policy-making	124
<b>IV The government of the public sector</b>	<b>129</b>
20 Ministerial control of the nationalised industries	130
vii	

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-29148-4 - Documents on Contemporary British Government: I British Government and Constitutional Change

Edited by Martin Minogue

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

viii	<i>Contents</i>	
21	The Government's reply	<i>page</i> 145
22	The management of the public economic sector	150
23	Government and the private sector	161
24	The consumer interest	169
<b>V</b>	<b>The changing Civil Service</b>	173
25	Ministers and civil servants	174
26	Who are the policy-makers?	177
27	An outside view of British bureaucracy	184
28	Fulton: evidence from civil servants	186
29	Fulton: Report of the Management Consultancy Group	192
30	Fulton: the basic critique	202
31	Post-Fulton developments	207
32	Civil servants and change	218
33	Civil Service training	223
34	Civil servants and politics	236
35	The Civil Service and changing government	238
36	Civil Service statistics	241
<b>VI</b>	<b>The control of government</b>	249
37	Government information	250
38	Official secrets	254
39	Ministerial memoirs	261
40	The Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration	267
41	The Health Service Commissioner	274
42	Administrative tribunals and inquiries	278
43	A critique of administrative law	287
44	Tribunals at work	289
45	Civil liberties in Northern Ireland	295
<b>VII</b>	<b>The devolution of government: Scotland and Wales</b>	299
46	The Kilbrandon Majority Report	300
47	The dissenting Minority Report	308
48	The major alternative schemes	322
49	The Government's approach	326
<b>VIII</b>	<b>The devolution of government: Northern Ireland</b>	347
50	Constitutional developments, 1972–4	348
51	Criteria for devolution	354
52	The 1973 structure of government	358

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-29148-4 - Documents on Contemporary British Government: I British Government  
and Constitutional Change

Edited by Martin Minogue

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

ix	<b><i>Contents</i></b>	
53	The Convention proposal	<i>page</i> 361
54	The Convention's recommendations	363
55	The British Government's response	365
<b>IX</b>	<b>The impact of the European Community</b>	<b>371</b>
56	The facts	372
57	Implications for the British machinery of government	375
58	The role of Parliament	378
59	Common law or common market?	381
60	Parliamentary scrutiny of European secondary legislation	383
61	The referendum	393
62	Direct elections to the European Assembly	396
	<i>Select bibliography</i>	405

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-29148-4 - Documents on Contemporary British Government: I British Government and Constitutional Change

Edited by Martin Minogue

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

## Preface

This is the first volume in a two-volume selection of documents related to government in Britain. This volume illustrates the main characteristics of the system of government, with an emphasis on significant areas of constitutional change; the second volume deals with the local government systems of Britain (England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland) and their reorganisation.

The past thirty years is taken as the principal reference period, but the majority of documents in both volumes comes from the past decade, which has witnessed a remarkable and unprecedented series of reforming investigations across the whole field of governmental activity, and into the system of government itself. The chief reason for the concentration in these volumes on the formal structures of government is that the analysis and reform of these structures has occupied the centre of the political stage in recent years. Moreover, the system of government more readily lends itself to documentary analysis than the less formal parts of the political system, and it would have been impossible, for reasons of space, to deal adequately with political parties, pressure groups and elections within the scope of the present volume: it may be that a separate sourcebook is needed to cover these areas. Clearly an understanding of the political context of structural and constitutional changes is essential to either description or analysis of those changes, and the business of relating governmental structures and arrangements to political institutions and processes is part of the task of teachers and students of politics and government everywhere. This documentary selection is, therefore, intended to be complementary to the best existing texts and commentaries on British government and politics. The intention is to give students the opportunity to make more direct acquaintance with the basic materials of British government than the burgeoning supply of instant textbooks either allows or encourages. Too often the student thinks of official documents as dull, incomprehensible or insignificant. Sometimes they may be all of these things, but more frequently they are lively, readable and make crucial contributions to policy formulation. This selection is published in the hope that students will be stimulated to turn towards these primary sources of information, and away from the easy 'crammer' which all too often oversimplifies what is complex, renders anodyne what is fascinating, and imposes an unreal order on a shifting, disorderly process. It is my view that if students become accustomed to familiarity with the primary documents, they will not only learn to make their own judgements about source material, but will derive from their studies an enhanced enjoyment and enthusiasm for further enquiry.

Undeniably the attempt to select from a mass of documents has pitfalls for the



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978-0-521-29148-4 - Documents on Contemporary British Government: I British Government and Constitutional Change

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)xii *Preface*

unwary. Documents cannot be properly understood if divorced from their political and administrative context; extracts may give an incomplete or partial impression of the content of a particular document. The need to compress the selection into the confines dictated by the publisher and the market inevitably compels the editor to make arbitrary decisions about which documents, or parts of documents, to include or exclude. Accepting these strictures, I would emphasise firstly, that the documents are intended to supplement the secondary reading material and lecture programmes, which will provide the basis for any course in British government; secondly, that I have attempted to provide brief contextual material which will serve to link together the selected sources in a reasonably coherent manner, but would expect the more detailed interpretation of the sources, and their context, to be provided by lecturers responsible for courses (and this allows for differing interpretations of the same material, where textbooks frequently impose a particular approach); thirdly, that in selecting from documents, I have tried to reduce the elements of arbitrariness by making lengthy rather than brief selections and by concentrating on documents which seemed to have a more permanent rather than an ephemeral character; and finally, I have tried to illustrate the wide range of sources which contribute to the formidable mass of official publications: White Papers, Green Papers, departmental reports from special working parties, Royal Commission reports, parliamentary papers, commentaries by pressure groups, contributions from individual policy-makers – the range of sources is enormous and fascinating. But the sheer volume daunts the average student, and even when it does not, considerable problems of access may remain. The present selection is intended to provide more convenient access to these sources, and at the same time to stimulate an appetite for more extensive use of the basic materials for the study of British government. (Note: ‘British’ and ‘Britain’ are taken to include Northern Ireland throughout these volumes, though technically they do not.)

I wish to offer my thanks to Quentin Skinner for helpful criticism of the Introduction, and more generally for the intellectual stimulus and friendly encouragement he has given me for many years; to James Craig, who always has interesting things to say about British government and politics; to the staff of the John Rylands Library, Manchester University, for considerable help in locating documents; to Marjorie Marchant for help with the typing and preparation of material; to my publisher for sympathetic flexibility over deadlines; and to my wife Lizzie for her comments upon the Introduction and for constant encouragement and support. Any faults are my own.