

# Political Deference in a Democratic Age

Catherine Marshall

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British Politics and the Constitution  
from the Eighteenth Century to Brexit

palgrave  
macmillan

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ISBN 978-3-030-62538-2      ISBN 978-3-030-62539-9 (eBook)  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-62539-9>

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A long time ago, while I was writing my PhD at the Sorbonne on Walter Bagehot's political and constitutional theory, I had a feeling that understanding England was out of the reach of non-English people. Yet, there was an irresistible appeal in trying to make sense of all things English, not least because I was about to get married to one. One concept in particular, described by Walter Bagehot in *The English Constitution* (1867), eluded me: deference. The term was never used in France in the way Bagehot referred to it, and it carried a political message I could not grasp. I always knew I would go back to it. The turning point was the (ab)use of the term in the press and TV coverage at the time of the celebrations for the Diamond Jubilee of Queen Elizabeth II in June 2012. The term was regularly brandished as a self-explanatory tool for the 'British' love of the Queen, as if 'deference' and 'British' could easily sit together. It seemed to me that the commentators had not only misunderstood Bagehot, but that they were also making very poor use of a key concept in English (not British) politics. As I started my research on the term, Britain was rocked by a number of events which culminated in the vote in favour of Brexit in June 2016, giving a new twist to the concept. Once only used in reference to the monarchy, the term could be used to describe certain Brexiteers who valued parliamentary sovereignty and for whom the European federal project was not only foreign but also rather hard to comprehend. However much I was torn about the United Kingdom leaving the EU, Brexit was perhaps the consequence of a long process of change which had affected the Anglo-British constitution throughout its democratic journey. This

book is the result of this meandering inking that there is more to political deference than meets the eye.

On my quest, I was helped by a number of friends and colleagues and a very understanding family. Even if I am solely responsible for what is written in these pages, I can safely say that this book is the product of many minds as I had countless conversations about many parts of the work which transformed my ways of thinking and writing.

My first thanks go to my university, CY Cergy Paris Université (formerly the University of Cergy-Pontoise), and to my research centre, AGORA, which generously allowed me to spend a term in Oxford in 2014 to do my research and provided funding as well as support over the years.

I am also indebted to Anne Brunon-Ernst (université Paris II-Panthéon Assas), Jeremy Jennings (King's College London), Pierre Lurbe (université Paris Sorbonne), Jean-Paul Rosaye (université d'Artois), and Georgios Varouxakis (Queen Mary University of London), who all had to read the first draft, as it was part of my application to get the accreditation to direct research in France. They all gave invaluable suggestions, kind criticism and generous support to get the manuscript published.

My warm thanks go to Christine Dunn Henderson, who made many introductory meetings possible for me in Britain and the United States through the years, who gave much needed encouragement always at the right time and whose painstaking reading of the first version of the manuscript pointed out many defects which were subsequently removed as well as raising a number of questions that were answered in the last draft. She did so with a generous kindness that has always characterised her.

I am also very grateful to Molly Beck at Palgrave, for her interest in the subject and for her help in bringing it to fruition, and to the anonymous referee who gave support to the book while writing a report which pushed me into rewriting parts he/she felt could be strengthened. With Patrick Hopper, a former student from the University of Portsmouth, who took the time to read the manuscript, and Ruth Coetzee, who thoughtfully copy-edited the final version, they all made the book a reality.

My greatest thanks go to Alan Kahan (université de Paris-Saclay), who not only agreed to supervise the project of my habilitation thesis, in a system which is an administrative maze for non-French academics, but took on the role of coach, supporter, editor, adviser, critic and friend in a way which has often made me feel that he might never want to supervise an habilitation in France ever again. His extensive historical knowledge of the evolution of western democracies, his acute ability to question an unclear

idea, his patience with a green dithering mind, combined with an ever-present sense of humour, have been invaluable throughout the years.

Lastly, I have an enormous debt of gratitude to my family—my husband, Julian, my daughters, Emma and Daphne, as well as my mother—who have accepted the long hours spent on the book away from them, years of discussing something most boring for them and whose love, amazingly, has never wavered. With due deference, I dedicate this book to them.

Elie Halévy, the great French thinker who wrote extensively on Britain and British thought, once wrote to one of his friends: ‘The real danger in studying England too exclusively, is to become an Anglophile. But what can be done about it? It is inevitable that intelligence incurs the action of the object to which it attaches itself, and moreover, it cannot be denied that for two centuries, it is England which has given Europe lessons in politics. Therefore, in studying English history, I lose the feeling that revolutions may be beautiful.’<sup>1</sup> Eventually, if this is what I risked by working on England, I do not mind catching this dangerous Anglophile virus and letting go of the idea that revolutions can ever be beautiful.

## NOTE

1. Elie Halévy to his friend Célestin Bouglé, 14 September 1905. Henriette Guy-Loë (ed.), *Correspondance, 1891–1937*, Paris, Editions de Fallois, 1996, p. 370.

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