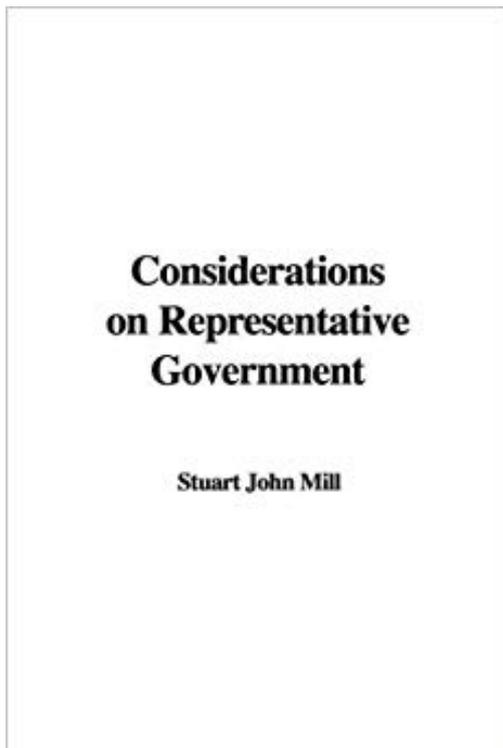


Considerations on Representative Government *by* Stuart John Mill



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Reviews of the **Considerations on Representative Government** *by* Stuart John Mill

Faebai

Surprisingly good evaluation of "government" even considering his high reputation. In particular, he has been unfairly maligned for this work in that read in context, it is not as some have argued a defense of colonialism.

Cala

Like all of Mill's work, it can be tough sledding, but it is worth it, particularly in this age of stupid sophistic political blather. It is helpful to know something about British politics of the mid-19th century, but not necessary.

It may also help some folks to read some 19th century prose as a warm-up exercise. Moby Dick, for instance, or The Scarlett Letter or maybe even The Dred Scott Decision.

Chi

I enjoy reading Mill as a more contemporary take on how to address/approach human affairs. He's not profound, but well grounded.

Beahelm

This is a very good book It ought to be a primer for high school students! More adults should read this as it will refresh your memory of the responsibilities of the people and those elected to represent us. This has some very profound thoughts on where a country will end up and why the type of government will be what you deserve. We MUST stop the backsliding and the first attitude that currently prevails in our great country if we want it to continue!

Runemane

Must Read

lacki

John Stuart Mill is always good, often wrong, but still good thinking. I especially enjoy his defense of slavery, a typical utilitarian argument found in government prose, today. In short, the argument is that I must compel people to do things for their own good. And morality requires that I do so.

Celace

Americans need to learn more about their government and where the roots of our government lay. A good read and counterpart to Alexis de'Toqueriville's Democracy in America.

John Stuart Mill, (1806-1873) was a British philosopher (known as a Utilitarian), political economist and member of Parliament. He wrote many books, including Selected Writings of John Stuart Mill, On Liberty, Theism, Autobiography, etc.

He wrote in the Preface to this 1861 book, "Those who have done me the honor of reading my previous writings, will probably receive no strong impression of novelty from the present volume; for the principles are those to which I have been working up during the greater part of my life, and most of the practical suggestions have been anticipated by others or by myself. There is novelty, however, in the fact of bringing them together, and exhibiting them in their connexion; and also, I believe, in much that is brought forward in their support... It seems to me... that both Conservatives and Liberals ... have lost confidence in the political creeds which they nominally profess, while neither side appears to have made any progress in providing itself with a better. Yet such a better doctrine must be possible... something wider than either, which... might be adopted by either Liberal or Conservative without renouncing anything which he really feels to be valuable in his own creed."

He suggests, "To think that, because those who wield the power in society wield in the end that of government, therefore it is of no use to attempt to influence the constitution of the government by acting on opinion, is to forget that opinion is itself one of the greatest active social forces. One person with a belief, is a social power equal to ninety-nine who have only interests." (Pg. 15)

He admits, "I am far from condemning, in cases of extreme exigency, the assumption of absolute power in the form of a temporary dictatorship. Free nations have, in times of old, conferred such power by their own choice, as a necessary medicine for diseases of the body politic which could not be got rid of by less violent means. But its acceptance... can only be excuses, if, like Solon or Pittacus, the dictator employs the whole power he assumes in removing the obstacles which debar the nation from the enjoyment of freedom. A good despotism is an altogether false ideal..." (Pg. 56)

He suggests, "whenever it ceases to be true that mankind, as a rule, prefer themselves to others,

and those nearest to them to those more remote, from that moment Communism is not only practicable, but the only defensible form of society; and will, when that time arrives, be assuredly carried into effect. For my own part, not believing in universal selfishness, I have no difficulty in admitting that Communism would even now be practicable among the ELITE of mankind, and may become so among the rest." (Pg. 59) He also acknowledges, "There are [other cases] in which [representative government] possibly might exist, but in which some other form of government would be preferable. These are principally when the people, in order to advance in civilization, have some lesson to learn, some habit not yet acquired, to the acquisition of which representative government is likely to be an impediment." (Pg. 79)

He observes about public offices, "Numerous bodies never regard special qualifications at all. Unless a man is fit for the gallows, he is thought to be about as fit as other people for almost anything for which he can offer himself as a candidate. When appointments made by a popular body are not decided as they almost always are, by party connexion or private jobbing, a man is appointed either because he has a reputation, often quite undeserved, for GENERAL ability, or oftener for no better reason than that he is personally popular." (Pg. 102)

He states, "The positive evils and dangers of the representative, as of every other form of government, may be reduced to two heads: first, general ignorance and incapacity, or... insufficient mental qualifications, in the controlling body; secondly, the danger of its being under the influence of interests not identical with the general welfare of the community." (Pg. 117) He adds, "One of the greatest dangers... of democracy... lies in the sinister interest of the holders of power: it is the danger of class legislation, of government intended for ... the immediate benefit of the dominant class, to the lasting detriment of the whole." (Pg. 136)

He argues, "The representative system ought to be so constituted as to maintain this state of things: it ought not to allow any of the sectional interests to be so powerful as to be capable of prevailing against truth and justice and the other sectional interests combined. There ought always to be such a balance preserved among personal interests, as may render any one of them dependent for its successes, on carrying with it at least a large proportion of those who act upon higher motives, and more comprehensive and distant views." (Pg. 138)

He insists, "I regard it as required by first principles, that the receipt of parish relief should be a peremptory disqualification for the franchise. He who cannot by his labor suffice for his own support, has no claim to the privilege of helping himself to the money of others." (Pg. 174) But he notes, "In the preceding argument for universal, but graduated suffrage, I have taken no account of difference of sex. I consider it to be as entirely irrelevant to political rights, as difference in height, or in the colour of the hair. All human beings have the same interest in good government; the welfare of all is alike affected by it, and they have equal need of a voice in it to secure their share of its benefits." (Pg. 187)

He points out, "There has never yet been, among political men, any real and serious attempt to prevent bribery, because there has been no real desire that elections should not be costly. Their costliness is an advantage to those who can afford the expense, by excluding a multitude of competitors, and anything, however noxious, is cherished as having a conservative tendency, if it limits the access to Parliament to rich men." (Pg. 222)

He states, "Superior powers of mind and profound study are of no use, if they do not sometimes lead a person to different conclusions from those which are formed by ordinary powers of mind without study; and if it be an object to possess representatives in any intellectual respect superior to average electors, it must be counted upon that the representative will sometimes differ in opinion from the

majority of his constituents, and that when he does, his opinion still will be the oftenest right of the two. It follows, that the electors will not do wisely if they insist on absolute conformity to their opinions, as the condition of his retaining his seat." (Pg. 235)

He asserts, "A most important principle of good government ... is that no executive functionaries should be appointed by popular election; neither by the votes of the people themselves, nor by those of their representatives. The entire business of government is skilled employment; the qualifications for the discharge of it are of that special and professional kind, which cannot be properly judged of except by persons who have themselves some share of those qualifications, or some practical experience of them." (Pg. 266)

He comments, "When the highest dignity in the State is to be conferred by popular election once in every few years, the whole intervening time is spent in what is virtually a canvas... the whole community is kept intent on the mere personalities of politics, and every public question is discussed and decided with less reference to its merits than to its expected bearing on the presidential election. If a system had been devised to make party spirit the ruling principle ... it would have been difficult to contrive any means better adapted to the purpose." (Pg. 269)

He observes sadly, "The confidence on which depends the stability of federal institutions [in the United States] has been for the first time impaired, by the judgment declaring slavery to be of common right, and consequently lawful in the Territories while not yet constituted as States, even as against the will of a majority of their inhabitants. The main pillar of the American Constitution is scarcely strong enough, to bear many more such shocks." (Pg. 327)

Although written in another country, and more than 150 years ago, some of Mill's opinions seem almost eerily "contemporary." This book is well worth studying by any student of the history of political science."

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