if you are in one of the ones that doesn't work, wish for something better. What happens if the grass really is greener? When we are able to see the difference successful states can make, it is reasonable to want to know how they did it. The problem is knowing what to do with that knowledge. Seeing how they did it doesn't tell you how to do it yourself.

This puzzle was apparent within a century of Hobbes writing *Leviathan*. The founding father of modern comparative politics was a French aristocrat, Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu, whose great work *The Spirit of the Laws* was published in 1748. By this point Hobbes's argument about Lucca being no better than Constantinople seemed very out of date. It had been overtaken by events. Now there was something that clearly worked better than either: the revised British constitution, which had emerged from the revolution of 1688. Under this system power was divided between king and parliament, and between the two houses of parliament – Lords and Commons – allowing each to act as a check on the other. This was much preferable to any political system that concentrated power in the hands of a single ruler. Montesquieu certainly preferred it. 'In Turkey,' he wrote, 'where these powers are united in the Sultan's person, the subjects groan under the most dreadful oppression.' Italian city-states were just as unsatisfactory. Their constitutions concentrated power in the hands of their republican rulers, so that 'the government is obliged to have recourse to as violent methods for its support as even that of the Turks.' No one benefits from a regime of violence and fear. Stable politics requires restraint. A constitution on the British model could provide it.

However, Britain could not serve as a reliable model for other places wanting to know how to acquire such a constitution. There were two reasons for this. First, every country's political system was a product of its particular circumstances. Montesquieu was adamant that geography, history, climate, culture and custom all went together to make up a nation's politics. The British constitution did not emerge ready-made out of the revolution of 1688. It was also a result of the long history that preceded the revolution, and it drew on all sorts of influences, from ancient republicanism through medieval folklore to memories of the civil war, twisted and adapted to suit the needs of the modern age. A country's constitution was not simply a legal arrangement. It was more like a physiological condition: the thing that makes the body politic tick. Each country had its own. They might superficially resemble each other – various northern European countries in Montesquieu's time had features in common with England – but they all had their own individual character. Because these constitutions do not emerge out of thin air, they can never be transplanted ready-made to somewhere else.

Second, Britain's constitution worked because it was complex. What Montesquieu called 'constitutional monarchy' was preferable to more straightforward systems, whether straight monarchy or straight democracy. These suffered from the disadvantage of their simplicity: when something went wrong, there was nothing to stop everything from running out of control. Under a constitution like the British one