My interpretation of what I take to be the crucial passage affecting the subject of non-ideal constitutions in the \textit{Politicus} is already on the record (most recently, and in the most considered form, in a piece in the \textit{Journal of Hellenic Studies} entitled ‘Killing Socrates’ \textit{[JHS} 121 (2001), 63-76]), and will form the starting-point for my contribution to the present occasion. In short, I claim that when the Visitor from Elea says, or rather asks, at 300c5-7 in Burnet’s Oxford text, \textit{οὐκοῦν μυμήματα μὲν ἄν ἓκάστων ταύτα εἰὲν τῆς ἀληθείας, τὰ παρὰ τῶν εἰδότων εἰς δύναμιν εἶναι γεγραμμένα} (clearly expecting the answer ‘yes’), this is not – as it has traditionally been understood – an endorsement of laws \textit{per se}, with \textit{ταύτα} referring back to \textit{νόμοις καὶ συγγράμματα} in c1-2, but rather a reference to an ideal set of laws: \textit{ταύτα} refers \textit{forward}, to \textit{τὰ παρὰ τῶν εἰδότων εἰς δύναμιν εἶναι γεγραμμένα}, and the authors of existing laws are none of them \textit{εἰδότες}. (Nor is there anything particularly striking about \textit{οὐδός}’s having a forward reference: it happens, even if the general rule is for it to refer backwards).\footnote{For two alternative translations of the relevant passage of the \textit{Politicus}, see Appendix below. The difference is between (the traditional sort of interpretation, on the one hand) ‘Then \textit{laws} [sc. in general – whatever laws/rules were in question] \textit{would seem to be written copies of scientific truth in the various departments of life they cover, copies based as far as possible on the instructions received from those who really possess the scientific truth on these matters}’; and (on the other hand) ‘Well, \textit{imitations of the truth of each and every thing would be these, wouldn’t they - those things issuing from those who know, which have been written down so far as they can be}’ The latter is my preferred translation, which makes only those \textit{laws/rules that derive from knowledge} count as ‘imitations of the truth’: that is, laws that embody knowledge – as I suppose, of the truth as this would be possessed by the ideal statesman, who would – as again I suppose – also be the ideal, godlike, philosopher; a knowledge, however, which would have been translated into writing only ‘so far as [it] can be’, i.e. as effectively as anything can be translated into writing. Cf. \textit{Politicus} 294aff.}

The Visitor is in the process of trying to persuade the young Socrates that the second-best thing, if an ideal \textit{politikos} is not available, will be for cities to stick to their existing laws, the all too easily available alternative being a decline into lawlessness, and rule governed by considerations of profit or personal favour (300a1-7). Or rather – and this is a crucial point: the Visitor is trying to persuade Young Socrates that it is \textit{no better} than a second-best; it will be better for a city, absent the ideal statesman, to stick to its laws than it will be for it to live without laws. (But sticking faithfully to the established laws will have some bad consequences, among them the banning of research and the execution of anyone who tries his hand at it: 299b-e.) On the interpretation I have proposed, the ‘imitations of the truth’ in question in 300c5 are – not the laws and written rules of c1-2, which will include those imagined in the preceding section as set up by assemblies of one kind or another, but – \textit{ideal} laws, if that is not a contradiction in terms (cf. ‘written down as far as they can be’: laws, we have been told, are inevitably imperfect, because too general). That is, what these ‘imitations of the truth’ will be are laws that \textit{are as good as any laws could possibly be}, not just \textit{any} laws. Even then, the Visitor goes on to say, the true \textit{politikos} will not stick to the laws he has set down, because political, kingly/statesmanlike, expertise will always be able to do better, in every situation, than any set of general rules, even those written by the expert himself.