

# The Ethical Paradox of Democratic Leadership<sup>1</sup>

John Kane

*Democracy is arguably ethically superior because democratic openness fosters truth-telling as a public value, yet democratic citizens typically distrust their representatives and suspect them of peddling lies or half-truths. This paradox arises because democratic rulers are conceived as servants of a sovereign people who may electorally replace them. Servants must often expediently and hypocritically tell the sovereign what it wants to hear rather than unpalatable truths. Yet popular sovereignty provides a key to distinguishing those lies that democrats will tolerate and those they will not, namely any whose tendency or intention is to usurp the sovereignty of the people.*

Upon the recent departure of Tony Blair from the Prime Ministership of Great Britain, social commentator A.A. Gill observed:

Tony, as we call him with curled lips, is a personable man who has worked very, very hard on being liked. He is by his own admission a people person, a straight kind

---

<sup>1</sup> John Kane is Professor, Department of Politics and Public Policy, Griffith University. This essay is the product of a larger study of democratic leadership conducted with Haig Patapan and funded by a grant from the Australian Research Council. A version was presented to the After the Third Wave Conference organized in Taipei by the Taiwan Thinktank in August 2007.

of guy, and he'd done his best. But it counts for naught. He'll leave office well and truly loathed. Loathed and mocked. Loathed, mocked and despised.<sup>2</sup>

Gill claimed that this is the fate of all British leaders, even the most successful, a fact allegedly explained by the ingrained hatred of the British people for all politicians and by an adversarial system of party government that fosters bullying, bickering and petty point-scoring. I will argue, however, that it represents a general pattern of the fate of leadership in any democracy.

Democracies need and want good leaders yet are naturally suspicious of them. The people perennially hope for leaders who can inspire their confidence and trust, and are ready to invest their faith in any plausible candidate, yet initial enthusiasm inevitably turns to disillusionment and disgust. The question is, why should this be so? The answer, I believe, lies in the central animating principle of democracy, the sovereignty of the people.

The doctrine of popular sovereignty denies the justice of a society ordered by inherited rank. It proclaims that there is no class which possesses a natural right to rule over other, supposedly inferior, classes. The idea of democratic liberty is therefore closely tied to that of political equality. But if the people are sovereign then the people should rule, yet it is impractical for the people to rule directly in large democracies save on exceptional occasions (such as foundings, plebiscites or referenda). All existing democracies are

---

<sup>2</sup> A. A. Gill, "Tony Blair, Three Time Loser," *New York Times*, June 24, 2007, A 4.

therefore *representative* democracies, meaning that people rule through elected representatives. Efficient as this form may be in very large societies, it embodies a conundrum that creates a permanent tension between governors and governed: democracy is supposed to be rule by the people, yet most people find themselves largely excluded from the business of ruling. Robert Dahl argued that this was why the leadership presented a perennial problem for democratic theory:

To portray a democratic order without leaders is a conspicuous distortion of all historical experience; but to put them into the picture is even more troublesome. Whether by definition, by implication, or simply as a fact, leaders, as individuals, exercise more direct influence on many decisions than ordinary individual citizens. Thus the superior influence of leaders violates the strict criteria for political equality.<sup>3</sup>

True, the principle of popular sovereignty is formally respected in the convention that elected rulers regard themselves as the people's servants rather than their masters, yet citizens often find themselves being ruled by their servants in ways they do not like. When an employee asserts imperious rule over the employer something is clearly wrong. What majesty can a sovereign claim whose rule is restricted to the periodic exercise of a power to throw out one set of scoundrels only to replace them with another, a choice

---

<sup>3</sup> Robert A. Dahl, *A Preface to Economic Democracy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 152.

artificially restricted by powerful political parties? And what is democratic about a system in which the people, between elections, sink back into political impotence? Is representative democracy anything more than an “elective dictatorship,” or at best an “elective monarchy,” implying the rule of an authoritarian, therefore undemocratic, executive?

Some scholars, confronted with this conundrum, have concluded that the sovereignty of the people is simply a sham. Democracy, they say, has always been the rule of the hidden few, and the best we may hope for is a mediated democracy in which public contest between elites is adjudicated by the people.<sup>4</sup> Others, unhappy with the denial of popular sovereignty yet unable to refute the “elite thesis,” have simply chosen to ignore the problem of democratic leadership and sought to retrieve the idea of the “people” as a source of countervailing authority and leadership. Thus “participatory”

---

<sup>4</sup> For some government *by* the people became government *approved by* the people: Harold D. Lasswell, Daniel Lerner and C. Easton Rothwell, *The Comparative Study of Elites: An Introduction and Bibliography* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1952); Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1961 [1942]). For others, democracy could only survive with the leadership of the “superior few:” Giovanni Sartori, *Democratic Theory* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1962). On the importance of elites in democratic transitions see Guillermo O’Donnell, Philip C. Schmitter and Laurence Whitehead, eds, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule – Comparative Perspective* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986); T. L. Karl and Philip Schmitter, “Modes of Transitions in Latin America, Southern Europe and Eastern Europe,” *International Social Science Journal* 128, (May 1991), 269-284. For attempts to combine both structural and agency perspectives see Wolf Linder and André Bachtiger, “What Drives Democratisation in Asia and Africa?” *European Journal of Political Research* 44, (2005), 861-880.

democrats, “deliberative” democrats and “associational” democrats claim that, if only conditions can be properly and fairly arranged, the people may lead themselves – though how this leadership will be exercised in practice, and how it might deny elite authority, are never clearly explained.<sup>5</sup> Nearly all of this theory can be described as an implicit attempt to solve the problem of democratic leadership by devising systems that dispense with the need for it altogether.

One of the significant consequences of this is the remarkable lack of serious studies of democratic leadership as it is actually practiced in modern societies. The denial of the truth of popular sovereignty – either by affirming the inevitability of elitism or trying to flee from it – leads to misunderstanding of the true nature of democratic leadership and its peculiar challenges. I will argue here that popular sovereignty is more real and more continuously efficacious than critics generally recognize. Its efficacy is best seen in the continuous demands and constraints democracy places upon its leaders, the purpose and effect of which is to test the democratic legitimacy of any leadership action.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Dahl regards all such schemes as the illusory “razzle-dazzle” of theorists, but nevertheless outlines schemes that might ameliorate, if they cannot “solve,” the problem of democratic leadership: Robert A Dahl, *After the Revolution?* (New Haven: Yale University Press 1970), 86-7, 146.

<sup>6</sup> For the scholarship on political leadership see especially J. MacGregor Burns, *Leadership* (New York: Harper Colophon Burns, 1978) and *Transforming Leadership* (New York: Atlantic

Democratic constraints make democratic leadership a constant practice in ambiguity, one of the results of which is, paradoxically, the practical inevitability of leadership hypocrisy in a system that demands perfect honesty. Tony Blair's parting shot at the media as a "feral beast, just tearing people and reputations to bits" was greeted with bemusement and scorn by a public which had grown cynical about his devoted use of the media to "spin" government policies and influence popular opinion. It was one small but telling incident illustrating the difficulties that beset democratic leadership as it attempts to manage its message and preserve its ever-fragile legitimacy. These difficulties will be more clearly revealed as we examine democracy's dependency on gaining consent while maintaining channels of dissent.

### **Consent, dissent and truthfulness**

Democratic leaders are at once the strongest and weakest of leaders. They are the strongest because democracy is founded upon consent and not on fear. In a democracy leaders must fear the people, not the other way round. Singapore's Lee Kwan Yew once commented: "If nobody is afraid of me, I'm

---

Monthly Press, 2003). For an overview of the scholarship on democratic leadership see: Barbara Kellerman, *Political Leadership: A Sourcebook* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1986); Anthony Mughan and Samuel C. Patterson, eds, *Political Leadership in Democratic Societies* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1992); Howard Elcock, *Political Leadership* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2001); Kenneth Ruscio, *The Dilemma of Democratic Leadership*, (London: Edward Elgar, 2004); and Bruce Miroff, *Icons of Democracy: American Leaders as Heroes, Aristocrats, Dissenters, and Democrats* (Lawrence, KA: University Press of Kansas, 2000).

meaningless. When I say something, to make it easier for me to govern, I have to be taken very seriously.”<sup>7</sup> No leader in a genuinely democratic regime could or would make such a claim. In addition to the necessity of facing periodic elections, democratic leaders are kept in their place by numerous constraining rules, laws and other means meant to ensure they do not arrogate to themselves an independent right to rule based other than in popular consent.

Democratic leaders are weakest because, absent compulsion, consent must be earned. Once it is, democratic leaders are allowed extraordinary discretion and are able to exercise far-reaching authority. Yet consent can never be assumed, and must be perpetually renewed. The authority of democratic leaders, though genuine, is called into question each time it is exercised, and remains constantly under challenge from the principle of popular sovereignty. The leader must never, either in word or deed, usurp a sovereignty that resides always and only in the people. If democratic leaders are to lead effectively, they must play the boss and make positive decisions on behalf of all the people; yet at the same time they must remember that those people retain a boss’s right to dismiss them at the next election for unsatisfactory service, upon which occasion the servant-leader has no option but to stand down. Negotiating this duality requires that democratic leaders,

---

<sup>7</sup> Cited in Han Fook Kwang, Warren Fernandez and Sumiko Tan, eds, *Lee Kuan Yew: The Man and His Ideas* (Singapore: Times Editions, Straits Times Press, 1998), 229.

in their every word and action, carefully balance authority with submission, command with obedience, power with deference. This is a skill not easily acquired or practiced by leaders in long-established democratic regimes, much less those accustomed to more authoritarian forms of rule.<sup>8</sup>

A large part of the challenge of democratic leadership lies in the fact that democrats commingle three different meanings of representation, each of which assumes different and mutually contradictory bases of legitimacy. Democrats typically regard their representatives either as “servants,” “mirror models,” or “trustees.” The servant is given strict orders and expected not to deviate from them; the mirror representative is chosen because of a likeness to oneself (rich, poor, male, female, of a certain sexual orientation, of a particular religion or ethnicity, an example of “the common man,” and so on) on the assumption that someone of a shared identity will naturally act in one’s best interest; the trustee, by contrast, represents us not as we are but as the best we can be, exercising prudence and judgment on our behalf, even sometimes seeming to contradict our own wishes but only for our own sake.<sup>9</sup> These

---

<sup>8</sup> For the challenges facing ‘dissident democratic’ leaders before and during transitions from authoritarianism to democracy, see John Kane, Haig Patapan and Benjamin Wong, eds, *Dissident Democrats: The Challenge of Democratic Leadership in Asia* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008 forthcoming).

<sup>9</sup> On the extensive literature on these themes see eg Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, *The Concept of Representation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967); Bernard Manin, *The Principles of Representative Government* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).



forms of representation provide three different ways of reconciling democratic leadership and popular sovereignty. The problem is that democrats usually demand all three at once: for example, the leader must pay attention to polls that express people's opinions but must, contrarily, be a "conviction" politician who does what is right irrespective of polls; the leader must look and act just like you and me and refrain from haughty attitudes, yet behave with appropriate dignity and authority so as not to shame us; the leader must act firmly in the interest of those sections of the people that she or he most closely mirrors, yet must also act for all the people at once.

The legitimacy of any exercise of judgment and authority by leaders is perpetually threatened by such contradictory demands. Leaders must constantly attempt to shore up their legitimacy even as it is worn away daily by people assailing their good motives, their manner of proceeding, even their reputation, on the simple grounds that they are not being sufficiently "democratic." Indeed, the democratic leader is often more vulnerable to the charge of being undemocratic than to that of being imprudent or unwise. The decisions of democratic leaders may be challenged less on their merits than on the legitimacy of the process by which they were reached, with special emphasis on such things as consultation, transparency and inclusiveness. Contenders for office become adept at deploying this politics of legitimacy, accusing their opponents of pursuing personal ambition, of disregarding proper processes, of catering to "special interests," and so on – in other

words, of behaving undemocratically. These tactics can be safely indulged within well-functioning democracies because democratic leaders are, despite the constant problem of legitimacy, *institutionally* secure.

The very fact that leadership positions *can* be thus challenged reminds us that the corollary of democratic consent is the allowance of permanent *dissent*. Democracies pride themselves on allowing as much room as possible for dissenting opinions, including opinions on the political-legal foundations of the state itself, its economic arrangements and its current incumbent officers. Indeed, this permissiveness is seen as one of the cornerstones of liberal democratic stability, the paradoxical provision of security through the maintenance of opposition and challenge. Dissent is not only accepted as unavoidable in practice, but positively welcomed because it encourages a diversity of views, promotes debate, discussion and deliberation, thereby encouraging progress, innovation and dynamism and a healthy civic life.

Democratic institutions consequently provide negotiated spaces in which dissent may be aired. They entrench the principle of dissent in their very design by establishing a system of permanently countervailing powers. Constitutional laws protect freedom of belief, speech, movement and assembly, and permit the flourishing of free media which, however much their harping voices may irritate people in power, cannot be arbitrarily silenced. Even when free media are held to be irresponsible, trivial or biased, it is generally assumed that permitting their folly, even their offensiveness, is

preferable to silencing them as independent organs of dissent. Imperfect as the whole system may be in practice, the aim is to mitigate the worst excesses of dissent while encouraging its creative potential.

Loyal oppositional parties, meanwhile, are not merely tolerated but publicly supported and given definite, very vocal roles in parliamentary institutions – to the discomfort of incumbent governments obliged to defend themselves against unceasing critique. Oppositions challenge a government's policies and practices without challenging its authority, and thus do not endanger the regime. As well as calling governments permanently to account, they act as potential future governments, working toward the day when their dissenting views may gain sufficient support to win electoral victory. In this resides the secret of the peaceful transfer of power that is also regarded as one of the supreme virtues of democracies.

All of this seems needlessly messy and inefficient to authoritarians, yet taken all together is held to denote the ethical superiority of democracy over other forms of government. Certain familiar contrasts are drawn: the periodic election of leaders versus the entrenchment of tyranny; peaceful change of government versus bloody palace coups; governance for the general good versus rule for the sake of power or self-enrichment; personal liberty under an equitable rule of law versus subjection to an arbitrary, often ruthless will; prosperity through the free play of economic forces versus economic stagnation and backwardness resulting from repression and corruption; a

permanent will for peace versus the frequent resort to external aggression by ambitious or insecure autocrats. In contrast to the cowed and fearful populations of “closed” societies under authoritarian regimes, democracy fosters societies that are “open” and self-confident. This openness must necessarily extend to democratic government. Since leaders are the servants, not masters, of the people, they are expected, like all good and faithful servants, to adhere to high standards of accountability and transparency. Nothing should, in principle, be hidden from the sovereign people unless it can be demonstrated that a limited secrecy in certain areas (defense, commercial-in-confidence, privacy etc.) serves to protect the people’s own best interests. Secretive behavior by leaders suggests that they have something *culpable* to hide, making their concealment akin to lying.

Democratic accountability implies that *truthfulness* must always be a central value of democratic systems. Lies, even great lies, may serve tyrants whose rule generally demands their continuous production and reproduction. Lies may also serve vanguard parties for whom “truth” – what is to be believed or acted upon as though believed – becomes a function of political expediency, justified by the supposed ultimate good the party aims at achieving. But regimes founded on lies are likely, sooner or later, to inspire disbelief among citizens, who come to rely more on rumor, scuttlebutt or underground *Samizdat*-type publications – even the illicit broadcasts of democratic “enemies” – than on the propaganda of their own governments.

Lies must be presumed always destructive of a genuinely democratic ethos and, since honesty has always ranked high among the cardinal virtues, it must be further presumed that democracies are by nature *morally superior* to other types of regime.

But here we come to one of the great ironies of democratic government. Even as this apparently self-evident truth is upheld, existing liberal democracies believe themselves to be suffering a “democratic deficit” that apparently diminishes the reality or quality of their consent. The increasing apathy and alienation of citizens from the political process – evidenced in declining voter turnouts and mounting distrust of political leaders, parties and politicians – is adduced as symptomatic. Governments keen to prove their democratic legitimacy face a mounting tide of skepticism or even cynicism.

Such resistance is often taken as a sign of some current democratic malaise, but is in fact a permanent feature of democracy. To be sure, levels of distrust and cynicism rise and fall with particular events and circumstances, as polls across time reveal, but suspicion of the real intentions of political leaders is practically definitional of democratic government. Though openness and stringent honesty are eternally demanded, the general expectation of citizens is that they are more likely to encounter secrecy and dishonesty among their representatives. What explains this distrust and cynicism?

No democratic leader would ever explicitly argue, as totalitarian dictators have done, the efficacy and necessity of lying.<sup>10</sup> Any who did would surely pay a heavy political price. Indeed democratic leaders commonly profess their belief in the inherent openness of democratic government and the consequent necessity of maintaining truthfulness as a core value. Deceiving the democratically elected legislature is regarded in both Westminster and presidential systems as a cardinal sin, usually a politically costly one if proven. Leaders caught telling an outright lie to the public usually face a political crisis.

The fact that the exposure of a blatant lie causes crisis may seem to demonstrate that the principle of truthfulness generally holds beneficent sway, yet this is not what democratic citizens usually believe. They generally assume that their leaders, even if they do not positively lie to them, seldom tell them the whole truth, a suspicion that seems well-grounded in everyday

---

<sup>10</sup> Hannah Arendt discussed the question of lying in democracies in two essays: "Truth and Politics," in *Between Past and Future* (New York: Viking Press, 1968) and "Lying in Politics," in *Crises of the Republic* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972). She argued that the totalitarian technique that dispensed with simple lying and replaced reality with a factitious image of reality, confounding people's capacity to judge, was also employed in modern democracies. Such lies are not individual, but aim at transforming the whole political sphere and thus inducing unreserved confidence in executive authority and 'experts' (1968, 252-3). Unable to employ systematic terror, however, democracies are always potentially able to unravel the deceiving veil and bring the executive back under control. Arendt, however, develops a curious view of political action and lies as always linked because each aim at changing reality, and each as linked to human freedom, which I will not pursue here.

observation. Do not democratic leaders, after all, make extravagant promises to gain power and then, having won it, weep crocodile tears because new circumstances or fiscal shortfalls (deviously concealed, of course, by the previous administration) prevent the promises being kept? Moreover, the evasions and avoidances that are the hallmark of the typical “political” response give skeptical listeners a strong impression of calculated deviousness or moral slipperiness. Anne Applebaum, monitoring the debates of candidates for the American presidency in 2008, inveighs against “the infuriating blandness of political speech” typified by vacuous generalities and phrases of “unique pointlessness.”<sup>11</sup> But she is dealing with one of the perennial conundrums of democratic electoral politics – how to gain election when winning requires votes from a number of distinct constituencies with contradictory views and values. Political candidates need to present themselves as strong leaders who are firm on policy, yet their campaigns are usually dominated by the need not to offend any particular, strategic constituency.

Democratic politicians have powerful incentives not to answer a straight question in straightforward fashion. It is not surprising that they seem seldom to say what they really mean or to mean what they actually say. If they sometimes do, the listener can be sure it is for some perceived political

---

<sup>11</sup> Anne Applebaum, “Life, Liberty, and Politicians’ Maddening Way with Words,” *Slate*, June 18, 2007 (<http://www.slate.com/id/2168646> – accessed June 18 2007).

advantage rather than from a devotion to democratic truth-telling. However strenuously such leaders may profess the values of openness and honesty, their natural (or at least their political) instincts seem powerfully opposed. Little wonder that the statement, "Trust me, I'm a politician," should be a joke in itself.

So prevalent is the democratic belief in the hypocrisy of politicians that it has become common for outsider candidates to base their campaigns on the claim that they are emphatically *not* politicians, but rather ordinary people who share the general outrage at the deceitfulness and/or high-handedness of the current leadership. Such an anti-political stance is frequently effective because hope springs eternal in the democratic heart that a truly honest leader who speaks with the authentic voice of the people will arise to fulfill the democratic promise and clean out the Augean stables of politics. In 1976, US presidential candidate Jimmy Carter – a sincere born-again Christian and a humble Georgian governor untainted by the Machiavellian machinations of insider-Washington – promised never to tell a lie to the American people and to resign if ever caught in one. Many ordinary Americans responded positively, hopefully. The political cognoscenti, however, were appalled at such a rash and innocent oath. Their experience and understanding had instructed them that the rough-and-tumble of democratic politics did not permit such moral simplicity. They knew that even sincere anti-politicians, once they enter the domain of power, must curb their plain-speaking and



learn the evasive arts of concealment and obfuscation – as Carter discovered even before his campaign was over.<sup>12</sup> What is the reason for this enduring gap between promise and reality? Why does the perennial hope for truthful democratic government seem to be so regularly disappointed?

### **Self-interest and corruption**

There are two broad possible answers to this that are seldom clearly distinguished. The first relates to the character of the people who seek political office, the other relates to the character of democratic politics itself. Let us examine each in turn.

With regard to personal character, there is a long-enduring conventional view that the self-interest of politicians generally displaces the public interest. There are two alternative understandings of why this happens. One maintains the peculiar and morally deficient nature of those who are attracted to political life; the other argues a general case from human nature that all people are liable to be corrupted by the possession of power.

The former version maintains that the people who go into politics are shamming when they claim to serve the public interest; they are in it only for themselves, they have their “snouts in the trough,” they love power for its own sake. On this reading politicians form a particular subset of the

---

<sup>12</sup> Betty Glad, *Jimmy Carter in Search of the Great White House* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1980), 354-5.

population that is driven by excessive personal ambition for wealth or power. Their lust for lucre or domination allegedly explains why they enter politics in the first place, a domain that seems somewhat repellent to the ordinary, unambitious citizen. If such is the case then democratic politics must inevitably be hypocritical because the people who are attracted to that realm have purely self-interested motives that they must conceal if they are to make themselves acceptable to the populace and thus succeed in their ulterior aims. Democratic politics, dominated by such characters, is necessarily demagogic. A demagogue is of one who professes to be for the people, to be acting for their good against the forces that oppress them, one who flatters and arouses them by proclaiming the inherent justice of their cause and the essential goodness of their hearts, and yet who in reality is merely using the people as a means to personal power and satisfaction. In every selfish representative's breast, therefore, there lurks the soul of a tyrant who would divert the public interest toward his or her own.

If this were the central problem, the cure would be for incorruptible, public-spirited people to enter and transform democratic politics – which is indeed the same heartfelt hope of democrats that fuels the fortunes of populist, anti-political candidates. Nor are the latter inevitably cynical demagogues making appeal to people's baser instincts and prejudices, for some seek to arouse nobler sentiments. Vaclav Havel, for example, hero and president of the Czech Republic, argued that if people of good will and public

spirit chose not act to enter the political arena then they deserved whatever leaders they got. Good policies, he said, come only from good and sincerely motivated people employing good means. Decent ends can only be reached using decent means, implying a rejection of Machiavellian “tactics”: “the simple fact [is] that directness can never be established by indirection, or truth through lies, or the democratic spirit through authoritarian directives.” The good democrat seeks to “live in truth”, and declares his faith that “the world might actually be changed by the force of truth, the power of the truthful word, the strength of a free spirit, conscience, and responsibility – with no guns, no lust for power, no political wheeling and dealing.” Havel claimed that, since he himself had no longing or love for power, he was freer than those who clung to power and position, giving him the luxury of behaving untactically, which is to say, truthfully.<sup>13</sup>

This answer becomes problematical, however, if we accept the alternative version of why politicians inevitably substitute the public interest for their own – if we assume, that is, that the seeds of corruption lie within us all and not just within a few power-hungry souls. Indeed Havel accepted that the practice of what he called moral politics begins with striving with oneself to be decent, just, tolerant, and to resist corruption and deception: “I must do my utmost,” he wrote, “to act in harmony with my conscience and my better

---

<sup>13</sup> Vaclav Havel, *Summer Meditations* (London: Faber & Faber, 1992), 5-7.

self." Havel argues that the struggle to realize the values of civility, harmony and respect for humanity and nature is never-ending, and it is a struggle that takes place, not just between good people and evil people, but *inside everyone*.<sup>14</sup>

But this struggle becomes an unequal one if it is assumed that power inevitably corrupts. The example of America's Founding Fathers, who were deeply affected by this teaching and who struggled to solve the political problem it set, is instructive here. Many of them became obsessed with finding ways to ensure, not so much that power was wisely used, but that it was not abused by delegates whose interests, once in office, were likely to become detached from the interests of those who had elected them. Various democratic mechanisms – annual terms, delegate recall, citizen petitions – were mooted to ensure that representatives' interests remained in lockstep with those of their constituents. Some hope, but little confidence, was placed in the personal virtue of individual governors who might resist the temptation to use their power to trample citizen rights and liberties. The main burden of reliance was placed on institutional and legal arrangements that pitted interest against interest, that checked power with countervailing power, and that installed regimes of strict accountability. David Hume had argued that the checks and controls of a free government should be ordered

---

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., xvii-xviii.

so as to make it in the interest even of bad men to act for the public good, but the Americans often seemed less interested in fostering such contingent virtue than in discouraging vice. Henry Clay vividly expressed what he took to be the ruling principle of American government: “The pervading principle of our system of government – of all free government – is not merely the possibility, but the absolute certainty of infidelity and treachery, with even the highest functionary of the State.”<sup>15</sup>

The maintenance of checks and balances and mechanisms of external accountability remain, of course, central to modern democratic governance. The problem with such systems is that, however indispensable they may be for deterring the more egregious forms of ill-doing, they cannot ensure *good government* – unless it be assumed, that is, that all problems of government can be traced to the perversion of governors who substitute private (or sectoral, or elite, or class) interests for the public interest. And certainly it is not unusual for democratic citizens, faced with an unpopular leadership decision, to question the leader’s motives rather than his or her judgment. Whatever general justification the leader may offer, democrats often presume that the only possible explanation for the choice is the interposition of some secret personal or partial interest. Explanations of the Bush administration’s stumble into a disastrous war in Iraq on premises that proved to be mistaken

---

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Gerald Stourzh, *Alexander Hamilton and the Idea of Republican Government* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1970), 97.

at best, culpably false at worst, provide a typical instance. Many citizens in the countries who followed Bush's lead – including Britain and Australia – felt they had been lied to, and Bush's subsequently expressed intentions of spreading democracy and freedom were treated as mere covers for the assumed "real" motives – domination of the region and control of its oil resources. Nor was it merely national or Western self-interest that was alleged, but personal interest. Cynical critics pointed to Bush's historical ties to the oil industry and the Saudis, and the links between members of his administration and the big businesses that profited from the "reconstruction" of Iraq.

We need not discount the chance that private or partial interest may sometimes blatantly subvert the public, but to presume that this is the only possible cause is to misapprehend the nature of democratic government itself. Democracy places constraints upon its leaders that make it often difficult for them, whatever their personal characters, either to be entirely frank about their reasons or to keep explicit promises however sincerely made. Havel's history as President provides an illustration. In 1992, he raised the question of the transition from "dissident politics" to the politics of high office, from an era, as he put it, of enthusiasm, unity, mutual understanding and dedication to a common cause to a time of hard, everyday work in which conflicting interests had surfaced and clarity and harmony were no longer possible. Might not a lowering of expectations and standards be expected, even

appropriate? His answer was an emphatic No! He expressed enduring faith in his honest, apolitical politics. He could not remain faithful to that notion, he said, without trying, as President, to bring it to fruition. “Not to put at least some of my ideas into practice,” he wrote, “could have only two consequences: either I would eventually be swept from office or I would become a tolerated eccentric, sounding off to an unheeding audience.”<sup>16</sup>

Yet the latter was in fact his fate, especially after the Presidency had been altered from an executive to a largely ceremonial office in 1994. Even when he had wielded genuine power, there proved to be decided limits to the extent that he was able to implement his favored “moral” policies. He spoke passionately, for example, about wanting to close down his country’s huge arms industry, but the manufacture of weapons continued — because, of course, large numbers of jobs and foreign income depended on it. He desired the disbandment of NATO and the Warsaw Pact, only to become one of the main players in the Czech Republic’s bid to join NATO. He used to rail at his country’s nuclear power plants, but they went on operating and he eventually ceased to mention them. This did not mean he had lied in his initial pronouncements and promises — not even Havel’s most determined opponents ever questioned his honesty or integrity. Nor did it imply that he had been “corrupted” by power. It signified only that his estimate of the

---

<sup>16</sup> Havel, *Summer Meditations*, xvii-xviii, 10.

freedom of action that personal disinterestedness and goodness of intention brings in a democracy was exaggerated. Concern with power for its own sake is not, after all, the only or even the principal reason that democratic leaders choose to trim, to behave tactically, and to be circumspect about divulging the whole truth of their aims and opinions. It is perfectly possible, and indeed common, that leaders are well and honestly intentioned but must inevitably come to terms with the institutional limits to simple truth-telling or face political failure.

### **The character of democratic politics**

Ruth W. Grant writes of democracies that, “While most in need of honesty as a political virtue, liberal democratic regimes are most likely to produce the conditions that undermine that virtue.” Grant argues that all political systems tend toward the hypocritical because relations of power are also relations of dependency – meaning that political actors, to achieve anything at all, must secure the acquiescence, cooperation or alliance of different sets of people with varying interests, opinions and aims. Such “webs of dependency,” she says, cannot be effectively managed *without* hypocrisy. Democracies are particularly difficult to manage because their egalitarianism substitutes a web of shifting dependencies for the more fixed dependencies of hierarchical social orders. “Democratic politicians, unable to take their support for granted and subject to frequent elections, must continually cultivate the public as well



as actual or potential coalition partners. It would be difficult to imagine a less autonomous actor than a politician in a democracy.”<sup>17</sup>

Grant’s normative purpose is to explore the possibility of genuine political integrity given the inevitability of hypocrisy, and even to show how *necessary* hypocrisy can support a system of integrity (necessary hypocrisy being defined as that which cannot be avoided and which has a morally justifiable aim). Though her focus is only secondarily on democratic government, and though her remarks on democratic leadership are sketchy if provocative, she is surely correct in her claim that navigating the complex web of dependencies in a democracy is extremely difficult.<sup>18</sup> It is, indeed, fraught with peril, a fact that accounts for most of the evasion and double-talk that characterizes the typical discourse of democratic politicians. It is not just that a plain statement might upset some section of the populace that the politician needs to court, but that oppositional parties exist whose principal task, interest and joy is to pounce on and denounce any careless word for the sake of political advantage. The price of perfect honesty is too high in

---

<sup>17</sup> Ruth W. Grant, *Hypocrisy and Integrity: Machiavelli, Rousseau and the Ethics of Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 273, 44-5.

<sup>18</sup> Grant also slides between democracy and liberalism when discussing constraints on truth-telling, without inquiring whether the one might carry different implications in this regard from the other. Thus within a single paragraph (*ibid.*, 176) she states that, “Democratic politicians are even more enmeshed than Machiavellian princes in a web of dependency relations. ... [L]iberalism can be criticized, not for being hypocritical, but for refusing to acknowledge the necessity of hypocrisy.”

democratic politics if it costs a party the support of a majority of the electorate and denies it office.

Grant notes (2003, 53-4) that, "To eliminate manipulation and hypocrisy from politics would require, not more egalitarianism, but more autonomy for democratic politicians." But enlarged leadership autonomy is precisely what democratic government is designed to prevent. The central dependency in a democracy, though mediated through parties and alliances, is the dependency of the leadership on a sovereign people whose electorally-expressed will determines who gets the opportunity to govern. This dependency implies that the democratic leader cannot benefit from Machiavelli's advice to the prince that it is more reliable to be feared than loved by one's subjects.<sup>19</sup> Democratic leaders may sometimes find it expedient to arouse the fears of the populace in order to assume the role of savior or guardian, but it is not open to them to rule through awe and fear like a monarch or tyrant. Rather it is they that must fear the sovereign upon whom they are dependent and who they will naturally be disposed to please and flatter. As experience in liberal democracies has shown again and again, leaders who neglect to attend carefully to the people, who become seduced by

---

<sup>19</sup> Nicolò Machiavelli, *The Prince* (Chicago: William Benton Publisher, 1982), Ch XVII, 24. He concludes that, "men loving according to their own will and fearing according to that of the prince, a wise prince should establish himself on that which is in his own control and not that of others; he must endeavour only to avoid hatred."

their own success and by the charms of office and power – who start to behave, in other words, as though they had a natural right to rule – come soon to electoral grief. Thus, though the expression of the sovereign’s will to dismiss and appoint is intermittent, its effects are continuous. The party in power must strive constantly to maintain the trust of the majority while the party out of power must contrarily strive to increase the people’s distrust in the government as it tries to win trust for itself.

Yet trust is a fragile commodity when dissimulation and even downright deceit are sometimes necessary to stave off electoral disaster, and when dependency on the sovereign’s pleasure enforces some necessary level of hypocrisy. Note that this hypocrisy is not primarily a matter of the individual character of politicians or of the generally corruptible character of humanity, but of the systemic nature of democracy itself. Even a saint in democratic politics must experience pressure to bow to this reality. Note, too, that such systemic hypocrisy, if we may call it that, has nothing to do with the question of private interests displacing public ones. Ruth Grant makes it a central proposition of her book that, “Political relations ... are dependencies among people who require one another’s voluntary cooperation but *whose interests are in conflict*.”<sup>20</sup> Yet it is not inevitable, or perhaps even usual, that the ubiquitous tension of democratic government either produces or is caused

---

<sup>20</sup> Grant, *Hypocrisy and Integrity*, 3 (my emphasis).

by a conflict of *interest* between leader and people. Even leaders who take their responsibility to govern for the common weal with the utmost seriousness sometimes find reasons to dissemble. This is partly because it is impossible that any policy will ever satisfy all the varied interests of a democratic polity, but it is also because the leader's judgment of what the common weal actually requires may differ markedly from what he or she knows the multitude will approve.

Part of the problem here is how to define the proper role of the leader who in modern liberal democracies is a representative of the people as well as their governor. Edmund Burke's famous statement of his duties to his constituents in Bristol remains apposite. While accepting that the wishes, opinions and interests of the constituents ought to carry the "greatest weight" with him, Burke declared he could not sacrifice his "unbiased opinion, his mature judgment, his enlightened conscience" to them. "Your representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgment; and he betrays, instead of serving you, if he sacrifices it to your opinion."<sup>21</sup> This is a sentiment often echoed by democratic leaders when they are pursuing policies they know to be unpopular. If it works it is because democratic citizens, as well as insisting that their leaders heed and respond to the clear weight of public opinion, also demand that they behave like stalwart leaders of genuine strength,

---

<sup>21</sup> Edmund Burke, 1901, *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1901), II, 95.

independence and integrity. Such conflicting expectations can lead to interesting paradoxes, as was well illustrated by George W. Bush during his debates with John Kerry in the 2004 presidential campaign. Bush assumed a square-jawed, unfaltering, ever-onward stance on the continuing conflict in Iraq, despite the fact that the war was opposed by many and had only lukewarm support from the Republican faithful. His job, he said, was to make tough but necessary decisions for the protection of the American people, not slavishly to follow opinion polls. But a White House source later revealed that Bush had adopted this tactic because polls had indicated that an image of strength and determination was just what a majority of voters wanted to see.

Nevertheless, there is always the possibility that democratic leaders may successfully pursue policies which, though widely unpopular, they hold necessary or beneficial. Standing out against the majority is risky and therefore never a preferred option, but there are times when a virtue can be made of necessity. Such a course demands courage and conviction on the part of the leader and, on the people's side, a high level of trust in the leader's essential integrity. The democratic citizen may grumble and disagree yet respect the leader's principled stand and admit his or her right to choose. Real danger, however, is courted by the leader who believes in the need for a particular action but doubts his or her ability to gain majority acquiescence without resort to deceitful means or spurious reasons. Such lies, if discovered,

fracture public trust and lead to political crisis because they have effectively usurped popular sovereignty. The Iraq war again proves instructive.

Certainly Bush had consulted no opinion polls when deciding to launch the war. Insider reports reveal that the question of Iraq arose immediately after September 11, with the president and top officials exhibiting a strong desire that a link between the terrorist attacks and Saddam Hussein be sought and found. Bob Woodward notes that Bush asked Defense Secretary Rumsfeld to start a war plan for Iraq on Nov. 21, 2001, but to do it in secret to avoid “enormous international angst and domestic speculation.”<sup>22</sup> September 11 provided the opportunity but was not the reason for the Iraq invasion. The full story of the reasoning behind the decision has yet to be told, though it is clear that it involved (as well as a standing grudge against Saddam) long-range strategic calculations of American geopolitical hegemony that required re-ordering the balance in the Middle East.<sup>23</sup> But these are not

---

<sup>22</sup> Bob Woodward, *Plan of Attack* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 24. Intelligence chief Richard A. Clarke claims Donald Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz, and the president were all pressing to make a connection with Saddam; see *Against All Enemies: Inside the White House's War on Terror – What Really Happened* (New York: Free Press, 2004). On the attitude of Wolfowitz, undersecretary of defense and one of the key architects of the plan, see James Mann, *Rise of the Vulcans: The History of Bush's War Cabinet* (New York: Viking Press, 2004), 300-1.

<sup>23</sup> The grand plans were hatched as far back as 1992 under the elder George Bush, when a document called “Defense Planning Guidance, 1994-1999” (DPG) was prepared by, or with input from, Department of Defense intellectuals, many of whom would play important roles during the administration of the second President Bush (Paul Wolfowitz, I. Lewis Libby and

the sort of calculations that a democratic populace easily understands or, even if it does, will readily accept as reasons for sacrificing people in a preemptive war against a nation posing no apparent immediate threat. The purposes and point of the Afghanistan invasion had been patently clear to all, even to those who opposed it; no concealment or hypocrisy was necessary. The point of invading Iraq was obscure, and the administration knew that the truth would not serve. Thus the emphasis on Saddam's weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) and the fear that they might fall into terrorist hands, and thus the constant intimations (which a majority of Americans accepted) of a link between Saddam and September 11. Iraq was portrayed as an American security issue, and secondarily as a crusade to liberate Iraqis from Saddam's cruel and tyrannical rule.

Even so, it was hardly an enthusiastic American nation that decided to trust its president in dangerous times – a president whose responses to 9/11 thus far had vastly increased his moral and political capital – and support a war that the United Nations had ultimately refused to endorse. All may have been well, nevertheless, had the Iraqis wholeheartedly greeted the invaders as liberators (as the administration had confidently and naively expected),

---

Zalmay Khalilzad who were all aides to then-Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney); see Mann, *Vulcans*, 199, 209-13.

and/or had any WMDs actually been found.<sup>24</sup> The failure of the proffered reasons and the steady descent into the morass of an intractable guerrilla war exposed the American leadership – and also the leadership of America’s allies – to the charge that they had deceived their people on the gravest possible issue that nations can face, that of war (moreover, a preemptive war of choice). The subsequent allegations and revelations that intelligence prior to the invasion had been hyped and massaged to provide a rationale for a decision already made provided evidence that the sovereign people had been deceived.

One of the traditional arguments in favour of democracies is that popular governments are reluctant to go to war unless under immediate, undeniable threat. Dynastic rulers, obsessed with power and advantage, might frequently order their subjects into battle on a whim, a sudden passion, or a calculated ambition, but it was always assumed that if the people who bore the brunt of suffering in war were to be consulted they would seldom consent. Where the people are sovereign, therefore, it is anticipated that they will expect their leaders to take them into war only upon the clearest and direst necessity. The vociferously adverse reaction to the Iraqi invasion of majorities in countries that had broadly supported the Afghani operation

---

<sup>24</sup> The general expectation was summed up in Cheney’s quoted remark: “I really do believe that we will be greeted as liberators;” quoted in Mark Hosenball, Michael Isikoff and Evan Thomas, “Cheney’s Long Path to War,” *Newsweek* (November 17, 2003), 34-9, at 35.



seemed to confirm this expectation. Popular opposition to the war helped win an election in Germany, gained kudos for the president of France, caused a change of government in Spain, and presented severe domestic problems for leaders in Britain, Italy and Australia who had joined Bush's "coalition of the willing." Even in an America which, after 9/11, desperately wanted to trust its leader, the dawning realization that the nation had been taken into an apparently unwinnable conflict on spurious grounds, perhaps on outright lies, caused a steady erosion of confidence in and decline of approval for the president.

The reason is clear. For someone with executive authority to lie in order to justify a war that they personally desire or think necessary is to show contempt for the sovereign people. It is in effect to claim, through deception, the prerogative that formerly belonged to undemocratic, absolute rulers. It is an act, in other words, that usurps the people's sovereignty. Lies that undermine sovereignty are the ones that a democratic populace can least easily forgive. It was Lyndon Johnson's deception of both Congress and people over Vietnam that caused decline in public confidence, and a similar deception by Richard Nixon that precipitated Watergate and led to the resignation that avoided an impending impeachment. It is most instructive here to look at the contrasting fate of a later president also threatened with impeachment. Bill Clinton's lies, despite the extreme efforts of a furiously partisan Congress to turn them into a Constitutional issue, were judged by

the people as morally blameworthy but politically harmless. Clinton's sexual behaviour hardly reflected well on the dignity of his office, but his lies were patently, humanly self-defensive with no tendency to usurp popular sovereignty. Polls at the time consistently showed a split between Clinton's moral approval rating (around 20%) and his political approval rating (around 70%).<sup>25</sup>

Another contrast emphasizes the general point. Why was Clinton's sexual dereliction not politically fatal when that of politicians who preach "family values" almost invariably is? Senator David Vitter of Louisiana, who made a political career defending family values and preaching against the sins of his fellows until his outing as a client of D.C. Madam, Deborah Jean Palfrey, is merely the latest in a long line to fall from with a thump from the moral high ground. Rudolph Giuliani, whose Southern campaign for the presidency was being directed by Vitter, said defensively (quoted Nossiter 2007), "I believe that this is a personal issue."<sup>26</sup> The trouble is, it was not. The hypocrisy of politicians who fail to practice what they preach in moral matters is condemnable because they are, by their preaching, giving political direction

---

<sup>25</sup> See John Kane, *The Politics of Moral Capital* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 248. Note a letter from citizen Ted Arnold to the *New York Times* comparing Clinton's lies to Bush's: "This is not another question of infidelity and its lies. Now we are talking about the deaths of thousands. We the people will not hush up now and take this lightly. This is our blood, our nation, our democracy on the line;" *NYT*, October 29, 2006, A 14.

<sup>26</sup> Quoted in Adam Nossiter, "A Senator's Moral High Ground Gets a Little Shaky," *New York Times*, July 11, 2007, A11.

to people in a manner that points to their shortcomings. The authority that the preacher presumes is based upon his claim to be morally *superior to* the average sinner in the population. The sovereign people will tolerate such an upstart judgment only so long as the preacher's claim to spotlessness is validated by experience. A revelation of hypocrisy immediately destroys all moral authority and exposes what is actually an attempt to influence the sovereign will through a lie. The preacher's presumption in falsely placing himself on a level above the people is an act of effectual usurpation that will be ruthlessly punished, and the people will experience secret satisfaction at the deserved fall.

### **Conclusion**

Ruth Grant, characterizing what might count as political integrity in a leader, argued that: "Ethical political action requires a combination of principle, prudence and character: knowledge of what is right, an assessment of how far it can be achieved, and the resolve to act in accordance with this assessment."<sup>27</sup> This is succinct, but the sting for the democratic leader is in the middle, prudential term – the "assessment of how far it can be achieved." In a democracy this assessment must include an appreciation of the likelihood that the people will accept a leader's estimate of what is right (or at least find it

---

<sup>27</sup> Grant, *Hypocrisy and Integrity*, 175.

congenial), or an estimation of the likelihood that the leader may, by rhetoric and persuasion, convince the people to accept, or at the very least acquiesce in, his or her judgment. When a democratic leader has cause to doubt that the people will concur, but is convinced of the necessity for a particular action, the temptation will be to find other, deceitful means for pursuing the course in question. This is an inherently dangerous path, for it marks the lie that usurps the people's ultimate authority, a lie which, if discovered, tends to produce political crisis.

Montesquieu argued that a democratic people should do for itself what it could do well and leave what it could not to ministers. A people who had sovereign power, he said, were admirable for choosing those to whom they should entrust some part of their authority, for they can perceive obvious merit.

As most citizens have sufficient ability to choose, though unqualified to be chosen, so the people, though capable of calling others to account for their administration, are incapable of conducting the administration themselves.<sup>28</sup>

The "calling to account" comes, I have argued, not merely when democratic leaders have been guilty of pursuing self-serving goals, but when their

---

<sup>28</sup> Baron de Montesquieu, *Spirit of the Laws* (Chicago: William Benton, 1982 [1748]), Bk II, Ch 2, 4-5.

judgment of the public good is misunderstood by, or seems unacceptable to, the majority of people, and when they choose to employ lies in order to substitute their own view for that of the sovereign people. Democratic systems, by their very nature, encourage self-protective hypocritical habits in their politicians, but by the same token democratic citizens, though they complain, are quite tolerant of such continuous low-level hypocrisy. When it comes to large matters of critical importance, democratic citizens will usually give the benefit of the doubt to leaders who insist on definite, even if not obviously palatable, courses. If the public reasons offered turn out to be lies, however, citizens feel they have been taken for fools. There is then a swift erosion of trust in leaders who, by virtue of their lies, have substituted their own particular (tyrannical) will for that of the proper sovereign.