

Must Democratic Leaders Necessarily be Hypocrites?

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Democratic openness fosters truth-telling as a public value rather than secrecy or double-dealing. Yet democracies typically distrust their political leaders, having a tendency to regard them as shifty with regard to motives and slippery with regard to morals. Valuing truth and honesty in government, democrats too often suspect they are being dealt lies and half-truths. Yet there are some lies that democrats will tolerate from their leaders and others they will not. This paper will argue that the tensions produced in democratic leadership by the fact (rather than the fiction) of popular sovereignty explains both the tendency toward leadership hypocrisy and the manner in which democrats distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable lies. In democracies, rather than the people fearing the ruler, rulers must fear the people who can ultimately displace them. As always in situations of authority, the awed leader must often tell the sovereign what it wants to hear rather than the unpalatable truth, producing a perennial temptation toward hypocrisy. Similarly, the lies that democrats really care about are those whose tendency or intention is to usurp or undermine their sovereignty.

“Hypocrisy is the homage vice pays to virtue.” La Rochefoucauld

John Plamenatz (1973, 89) tells the story of a radical leader during the French Second Republic who, hearing the noise of marchers in the street below, looked out the window and cried: “*Je suis leur chef, il faut que je les suive!*”¹ In similar vein, Richard Hughes characterised Hitler as having perfected a leadership technique “which divines uncannily what most of the conference wants and propounds that as the Leader’s own inexorable will” (1994, 261). This is a neat encapsulation of what James MacGregor Burns, in *Transforming Leadership*, calls the ‘leader-follower paradox’ (Burns 2003, Ch. 10). The problem, as Burns sees it, is that leadership and followership are so intertwined and fluid that it seems impossible conceptually to separate them. Followers are seldom simply an inactive mass waiting for guidance. New initiatives do not always come from the people designated leaders but sometimes from obscure followers. Leaders may choose their agendas by conducting polls and following majority opinion. Alternatively they may strike out in bold new directions only to find they are, embarrassingly, without followers. The question is, says Burns, who is really leading whom here?

Burns presumes that this conceptual problem requires a systemic solution (2003, 185), but in fact the paradox represents no more than the ordinary leadership challenge of constituency management deriving from the need to maintain a political base. Leaders will be constrained in their actions at a particular time by what the mass of constituents, or even a few influential members of a constituency, will tolerate or support. Their agendas will often be set not by their own desires or convictions but by their judgement of what will fly. Leaders may remain virtual captives of the prejudices of their own

followers, though the determined ones will always strive to recast these in forms more amenable to desired leadership initiatives. New opportunities may be created if leaders, by their own actions and rhetoric, can alter constituency assessments of what is possible, just or necessary.

Such management is always highly dynamic and often difficult even in an authoritarian system devoted to a *Führerprinzip* that holds the leader's will absolute and infallible. The illusion of strong leadership is especially hard to sustain in a democratic milieu, where leaders or would-be leaders must gain and retain the electoral support of a range of overlapping or even opposed constituencies. The fact that electoral campaigns frequently become exercises in offending the fewest rather than in inspiring the most is just one manifestation of the leader-follower paradox in a democracy. Indeed, in democratic systems this alleged paradox is actually a fundamental operative principle, one that affects every aspect of leadership. Leaders in any type of regime must, as a matter of simple political exigency, defer to forces they do not or cannot, at the moment, completely control. Yet contingent exigencies may always in principle be removed, along with the constraints they imply (as a brutal example, Stalin used to say: "No man, no problem."). Democratic leaders, however, must constantly manage an ineradicable exigency that presents a permanent challenge to their legitimacy. To meet its demand the leader must never, either in word or deed, usurp a sovereignty that resides always and only in the people.

The concept of popular sovereignty as the legitimating basis of modern liberal democracy is often regarded by democratic theorists as, at best, a harmless exaggeration symbolising an unattainable ideal or, at worst, a pernicious ideological falsehood. Proponents of the benign view argue that it is merely expedient and efficient that the collective sovereign should rule through elected representatives in a large and complex polity. More stringent critics point out that the representative form of government was devised by elites as much to curb the popular will – which they feared as dangerously unpredictable and potentially tyrannical – as to express it. On either reading we may ask, 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 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?

Much of the work of modern democratic theorists is premised on just such critical perceptions. Its stress is on finding ways to improve deliberation, participation, or association that are presumed to be currently deficient. It thus expresses a wish to make popular sovereignty something more than a

pious fiction, in effect to realise it. Yet I believe such critiques underestimate the actual potency of the concept of popular sovereignty in liberal democracies. While not wishing to deny the potential benefits of wider participative and deliberative processes, I want to argue that popular sovereignty is more real and more continuously efficacious than critics generally recognise. I will argue that this efficacy is best seen in the continuous demands and constraints that inevitably fall upon democratic leadership, one of the results of which is, paradoxically, the practical inevitability of leadership hypocrisy in a system that demands perfect honesty.

Democratic ironies

It is no secret that developed nations have long been concerned – formerly in principle and more recently in active practice – with the spread of democratic forms of government throughout regions of the world where highly undemocratic regimes are the norm. The superiority of democratic government is argued by pointing to certain familiar contrasts: 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. Because democracies are less liable to internal corruption and external aggression, they are believed to be extremely unlikely to go to war with other democracies. It follows that a world in which democracies are the norm is liable to be a permanently peaceful world, providing a motive for existing democracies to ensure that the virtuous contagion spreads as far and as rapidly as possible.

There is, however, a notable irony in all this. Even as these apparently self-evident truths are promulgated, existing liberal democracies believe themselves to be suffering a ‘democratic deficit.’ 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 of this deficit. An occasional populist political backlash convinces governments of the reality of the nascent discontent and stimulates them to adopt certain ‘democratic’ initiatives to reassure the populace that they are both ‘listening’ and ‘responsive’ – for example, the institution of e-democratic and other participatory mechanisms, increased consultation, community cabinets and so on.

Yet governments who go down this road find themselves breasting a natural tide of scepticism or even cynicism. Such resistance is more than just a sign of some current democratic malaise; it 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. To understand the stubborn nature of this disjunction, we must first understand why honesty is such an intrinsic value of democracy.

Democratic egalitarianism implies that every citizen's voice has, in principle, an equal right to be heard on questions of societal and political direction. Democracy thus encourages individuality, values free speech and tolerates dissent. In contrast to the cowed and fearful populations of 'closed' societies under tyrannous regimes, democracy fosters societies that are 'open' and self-confident. Democrats accept no masters, for the essence of the democratic spirit is that no one has an inherent right to rule over any other. Democratic governors are merely individual citizens who have been granted, for some determinate period, the people's trust to govern on their behalf. Since they are the servants, not the masters of the people, they are expected, like all good and faithful servants, to adhere to high standards of accountability and transparency. The openness of democratic society, in other words, must necessarily extend to government. Nothing should, in principle, be hidden from the sovereign people unless it can be demonstrated that a limited secrecy in certain areas serves to protect the people's own interests.

It follows, then, 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 extreme partisan organisations like the Comintern, 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 vanguard party aims at achieving. But lies must always be presumed destructive of a genuinely democratic ethos. And since honesty has always ranked high among the cardinal virtues, it must be presumed that democracies are by nature *more moral* than other types of regime.

It is perhaps not surprising that regimes devoted to lies should sooner or later cease to inspire belief. Twentieth century totalitarians were driven by an improbable ambition to control, through the rigorous application of various techniques, especially terror, the entire lives – including the thought processes and beliefs – of their populations. Hannah Arendt argued that the untruth of totalitarian ideological premises was neither here nor there, for the totalitarian aim was make them true in a factitious world created by the

murderous acts – the destruction of a race or class – that flowed logically from accepting them (Arendt 1968b, 470-2). The point was not simply to deceive a population but to destroy its capacity to judge. Yet the manipulators of those closed totalitarian societies that survived often grew lax over time. It was frequently observed that large portions of the population, imperfectly brain-washed by slipshod totalitarianism, learned to disbelieve everything that issued from government-monopolised communications media. All information was assumed to be propaganda and all propaganda assumed to be lies. For genuine information, citizens came to rely on rumour, scuttlebutt or underground *Samizdat*-type publications, and frequently trusted even the illicitly-received broadcasts of democratic ‘enemies’ more than the output of their own governments. Such public disbelief seemed a natural consequence of the adoption of lying as a central principle of government.

But what explains the distrust and cynicism of democratic citizens? No democratic leader would ever explicitly argue, as totalitarian dictators have done, the efficacy and necessity of lying.² Any who did would surely pay a heavy 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. And leaders caught telling an outright lie directly to the public typically face a political crisis.

The fact that the exposure of a blatant lie causes crisis – allied with the fact that such crises are relatively rare in democracies – 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. It is a suspicion that seems well-grounded in everyday 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 circumlocutious evasions and avoidances that are the hallmark of the ‘political’ response give sceptical listeners a strong impression of calculated deviousness or moral slipperiness. The openness and accountability that free media allegedly bring to democratic politics seems constantly vitiated by the infuriating refusal of democratic representatives to answer a straight question in straightforward fashion. Democratic politicians seem seldom to say what they really mean or to mean what they actually say, and if they sometimes do, the listener can be sure it is for some perceived political advantage rather than from a devotion to democratic truth-telling.

In the 2001 Australian Commonwealth election, Labor leader Kim Beazley made an impolitic but telling admission when attacking Prime

Minister John Howard's actions over the *Tampa* incident.³ "Every now and then in politics," he said on national radio, "just every now and then, a leader must take a stand on principle." The statement seemed to confirm the common prejudice that standing on principle was the rare rather than the default option for democratic leaders. 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 fulfil 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 (Glad, 1980, 354-5). (One may point to the recent and similar experience of Pauline Hanson in Australia, whose uncompromisingly populist rhetoric first won her support and election but then, under the spotlight of the political arena, made her vulnerable to attack.) 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?

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.

Self-interest and corruption

The first response is displayed in the 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 informs the wisdom of the average taxi driver who will tell you 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 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. On the modern understanding, 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 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" (Havel 1992, 7). 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" (1992, 5). 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.⁴

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 self” (1992, xvii-xviii). 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*.

But this struggle becomes an unequal one if it is assumed – as the tradition we inherit from the radical Whigs and Dissenters of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries instructs – 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 so as to make it in the interest even of bad men to act for the public good (Hume, 1993, 14), 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 its ruling principle, a vulgarization of Hume’s: “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” (quoted in Stourzh, 1970, 97).

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 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 (Havel 1992, xvii-xviii). 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" (1992, 10).

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 favoured '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 sincerity. Nor did it imply that he had been 'corrupted' by power. It signified only that his estimate of the 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.

The character of democratic politics

Ruth W. Grant (2003, 176) 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" (ibid., 44-5).

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 – ibid., 27). Though her focus is only secondarily on democratic government, and though her remarks on democratic leadership are sketchy if provocative,⁵ we must agree with her that navigating the complex web of dependencies in a democracy is extremely difficult. It is, indeed, fraught with peril, a fact that accounts for most of the evasion and double-talk that characterises 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. An incident during the aforementioned 2001 Australian election campaign nicely illustrates that ever-present danger.

Labor member Stephen Conroy, expounding Labor's plans for government to some students visiting Parliament House in Canberra, was asked how the policies were to be funded. Among a long list of measures, Conroy mentioned that taxes might have to be somewhat raised. The press got hold of the statement and broadcast it, enabling the Howard government to launch a gleeful and damaging attack on Labor leader Beazley. The cat was out of the bag, said Howard, Labor planned to increase taxation. Beazley responded by promising that there would be no rise in income tax under Labor. Howard pressed home his advantage: no hike in *income* tax implied that some *other* tax would be raised. Beazley, in a desperate corner, was forced to swear that there would be absolutely no tax increases of any kind under Labor. The result was that Labor found itself painted into corner on tax from which it would be almost impossible to extricate itself with any dignity or grace. A no-tax-rise policy, unless repudiated once in government, potentially undermined valid Labor goals, yet its repudiation would certainly be politically excoriated. The essential lesson was that any plans a party might have for raising taxes are best left unspoken until power has been safely won. In other words, the price of perfect honesty is too high in 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.⁶ Democratic leaders may sometimes find it expedient to arouse the fears of the populace in order to assume the role of saviour 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 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*" (2003, 3, my emphasis). Yet it is not inevitable, or perhaps even usual, that the ubiquitous tension of democratic government either produces or is caused 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 judgement 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, after all, 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" (Burke 1901, II, 95). 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, 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. 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. The necessary trust will be fractured, however, if the leader is less than frank, or even deceitful, in the public reasons given for the unpopular course. 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 (2004, 21) 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."⁷ 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.⁸ But these are not the sort of calculations that a democratic populace easily understands or, even if it does, will readily accept as reasons for taking a sovereign people into 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; the point of invading Iraq was not, 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 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),⁹ and/or had any WMDs actually been found. 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 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 realisation 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 his downfall, 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%) (see Kane 2001, 248).

Another contrast emphasises the general point. Why was Clinton's sexual dereliction not politically fatal when that of politicians who preach 'family values' almost invariably is? (The most recent Australian example of this was Liberal MP Ross Cameron, founder of the Parliamentary Christian Fellowship Group and forthright family values advocate, who confessed to cheating on his pregnant wife on the eve of the 2004 election and lost his seat of Parramatta – O'Rourke, 2004). Again, the reason is clear. The hypocrisy of politicians who fail to practice what they preach in moral matters is condemnable because they are, in their preaching, trying to give political direction to the sovereign people. In such a situation, the moral authority of the preacher is deployed in an effort to enlist the political authority of the people to pursue certain value ends. A revelation of hypocrisy destroys that moral authority and exposes what is actually an attempt to influence the sovereign will through a lie, an act of effectual usurpation that will be punished as such.

A skeptic might at this point raise the case of that great political survivor, John Howard, a participant in the Iraq war who appears to have escaped relatively unscathed from its bitter aftermath. Yet Howard is the exception that proves the rule. He stood firmly on his Constitutional authority as executive (via the Governor-General) to single-handedly choose to commit forces even without a debate in parliament (Channel 9 2002; CPD 2003, 12506). He claimed to act, of course, upon his own judgement of the best interests of the Australian people – the strong leader taking a strong stand despite opinion polls showing deep popular skepticism and opposition. Even so, he proved as politically vulnerable as other coalition leaders to the undermining of the main justifications for the war – WMDs and terrorist links – and suffered from revelations of intelligence 'doctoring.' He successfully rode the challenge, however, because of a number of factors, including luck (the lack of Australian casualties in Iraq).

For one thing, the Labor opposition was compromised by its declared willingness to support an invasion provided it had UN sanction, a technicality that could not disguise the fact that Labor accepted that some action against Saddam was justified.¹⁰ Most importantly, however, Howard had always offered *three* reasons for his decision: WMDs, fear of terrorist links, *and* the need to support an American alliance that was vital to Australian interests. The last was never much stressed because Howard was sensitive to the negative impact on the electorate of an Australian Prime Minister appearing to kowtow to the United States. Yet after the event, when challenged on television by interviewer Laurie Oakes over the failure to find WMDs or terrorist links, Howard replied exasperatedly: "Well, after all, Laurie, I always said there was a third reason, the importance of maintaining the American

alliance." Australians might or might not, in the main, think this an adequate reason, but they could easily believe it was the real reason. No one would ever suggest that Howard had any corrupt motives of personal interest for his decision. Nor would anyone who gave it a moment's thought believe he would ever have embarked on a distant foreign adventure to topple Saddam had Bush not already so chosen. Supporting the alliance was Howard's only plausible reason, and one that could be at least grudgingly accepted as informing the exercise of his right to decide on the nation's behalf. There had been some obfuscation and misdirection, surely, because Howard knew the Australian ambivalence about America, but never quite an outright, sovereignty-usurping lie.

Conclusion

Ruth Grant, characterising what might count as political integrity in a leader, argued that (2003, 175): "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." 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 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 (1982, Bk II, Ch 2, 4) 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 (*ibid.*, 5).

The 'calling to account' comes, I have argued, not merely when democratic leaders have been guilty of pursuing self-serving goals, but when their 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 for leaders who, by virtue of their lies, have substituted their own particular (tyrannical) will for that of the proper sovereign.

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¹ "I am their leader, I must follow them." Plamenatz adds, "He ran hard that day to retain his leadership."

² Arendt discussed the question of lying in democracies in two essays (1968a, 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' (1968a, 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 (1968a, 239).

³ The *Tampa* was a Norwegian ship that had picked up illegal immigrants whose boat had sunk off Western Australia. Howard, taking a popularly hard stance on immigration, drew a line in the water, so to speak, and refused to allow the *Tampa* to land the rescued on Christmas Island where they would fall under the jurisdiction of Australian policy and courts. They were eventually transferred to Noumea under a deal with the government there.

⁴ One is reminded here of Thucydides (1962, Bk II, Ch VII, 65, 163-4) description of Pericles, long upheld as the ideal of the democratic leader:

Pericles, because of his position, his intelligence, and his known integrity, could respect the liberty of the people and at the same time hold them in check. It was he who led them, rather than they who led him, and, since he never sought power from any wrong motive, he was under no necessity of flattering them: in fact he was so highly respected that he was able to speak angrily to them and to contradict them. ... So, in what was nominally a democracy, power was really in the hands of the first citizen.

⁵ 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 (2003, 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."

⁶ Machiavelli (1982, Ch XVII, 24) 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..."

⁷ Intelligence chief Richard A. Clarke (2004) claims Donald Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz, and the president were all pressing to make a connection with Saddam; on the attitude of Wolfowitz,

undersecretary of defense and one of the key architects of the plan, see James Mann (2004, 300-1).

⁸ 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 Zalmay Khalilzad who were all aides to then-Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney). See Mann (2004, 199, 209-13).

⁹ The general expectation was summed up in Cheney's quoted remark: "I really do believe that we will be greeted as liberators" (Hosenball, Isikoff and Thomas, 2003, 35).

¹⁰ Bush was similarly strengthened in America by Congress's 'blank check' in support of action. This was fatal for John Kerry who, having voted for the war, could never regain the moral high ground on the issue during the presidential campaign.