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Integrity in democratic politics¹

Integrity is commonly seen as a property of character that is ‘most obviously exhibited in a person’s resistance to sacrificing or compromising his convictions’ (Scherkoske, 2013, 29). Troublingly, this suggests that successful politicians cannot have integrity because accomplishing things in politics often requires sacrifices or compromises of this sort. However, many of us do believe that some politicians display integrity if they commit to various public-spirited ends throughout their career, while others lack it if they violate the public’s trust, sell-out their commitments for material rewards, or capitulate on their convictions too easily in the face of political opposition. Are we mistaken? I think not. To see why, we need to ask if there is such a thing as a distinctive kind of political integrity that can play an important role in our assessment of political conduct. In this article, I argue that there is and that it can make sense of our judgment that some politicians do act with integrity, even if they engage in certain kinds of behaviour which clash with the common view of integrity described above.

Taking various codes of political ethics in the United Kingdom as my starting point, I examine the extent to which we can understand political integrity as a matter of politicians adhering to the obligations that official codes of ethics prescribe and, in a more general sense, the public-service

¹ This hasn’t yet been copy edited yet but thought I’d send it in anyway so it can be read in this reading round.

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ethos that underpins these codes. I argue that although this way of approaching the issue usefully draws our attention to an important class of positional duties that apply to politicians, commitment to principled political causes plays a further, indispensable role in coherent assessments of political integrity. In consequence, I claim that politicians of integrity succeed in furthering their deepest political commitments while avoiding malfeasance or misconduct. As such, the ascription of political integrity can often only be made when assessing a long train of action.

My focus on integrity differs from other approaches in political ethics which are concerned with articulating general principles which underpin good conduct. Rather than formulating specific principles that ought to guide conduct, I am concerned with describing a virtue of character that admirable politicians display. Integrity is one of a number of such virtues; other obvious examples include loyalty and responsibility. There is no reason to think integrity *exhausts* discussions of political conduct, or that it is inherently more *important* than these other values. Rather, judgements about a politician's integrity are one of a number of considerations that plays a role in the all-things-considered evaluations that we make about politicians from an ethical perspective.

Examining the nature of political integrity is valuable because the term is frequently invoked in public discussions of political ethics, but often in sharply conflicting ways. Members of the public often rebuke politicians for lacking integrity if they fail to act in what they consider to be a

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fundamentally moral manner; by being less than truthful or for engaging in compromises on matters of principle. Many politicians, on the other hand, happily assert that they have acted with integrity if they have merely avoided enriching themselves at the public's expense.² I will argue that both of these ways of thinking about political integrity are problematic. If we are to continue to invoke the value of integrity in our discussions of political conduct, we need to think more realistically about the nature of politics, and in more sophisticated terms about the ways in which politicians can fail to match up to the demands of their profession.

I

As noted at the outset, in normal circumstances when we claim that a friend or colleague, for example, is a person of integrity, we assert that they show a particular kind of commitment to a set of principles, values, or ideals. Integrity is consequently often painted as a matter of "standing for something", in the sense that the person of integrity refuses to 'trade action on their own views too cheaply for gain, status, reward, approval, or for the escape from penalties, loss of status, disapproval [and so on]' (Calhoun, 1995, 6). On this view, a person paradigmatically betrays a lack of integrity if they abandon their values when they are met with opposition or temptation. The person of integrity, on the other hand,

² For an excellent discussion of how citizens' expectations of political conduct differ from politician's see Allen and Birch 2015.

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displays an *integrated self* as there is a basic continuity between their values and actions.³

The types of commitments one can trade action on vary. If a business owner with an ethical opposition to nepotism refuses to offer her nephew a job despite familial pleading, we would describe her as person of integrity, just as we would so describe an academic who defied departmental pressure to pass substandard work. As this latter example illustrates, the commitments that we expect a person to stand for can derive from an understanding of the duties they inherit when they agree to perform a certain professional role. A psychoanalyst would lack integrity if she routinely slept with her patients, although we would not make the same claim about a barmaid who slept with her customers, because there is something about the psychoanalyst-patient relationship which ensures that certain role-specific sexual standards apply to it and these standards don't apply to barmaids.

This suggests that one possible avenue for grasping the nature of political integrity lies in focusing on a politician's propensity to resist the temptation to contravene the specific obligations that apply to them *as politicians* for gain, status, reward, approval and so on. This approach is essentially adopted in the United Kingdom's *Code of Conduct for Members of Parliament*, which specifies four duties which Members of Parliament (MPs) should acknowledge in order to preserve the integrity of

³ As Martin Benjamin notes, 'Individual integrity... requires that one's words and deeds generally be true to a substantive, coherent, and relatively stable set of values and principles to which one is genuinely and freely committed' (1990, 51-52).

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Parliament. The first two address duties to (1) abide by the declaration of allegiance to the Crown and (2) uphold the law. MPs are also (3) said to have a duty to 'act in the interests of the nation as a whole; and a special duty to their constituents', and to (4) 'act on all occasions in accordance with the public trust placed in them' where this is taken to mean that 'they should always behave with probity and integrity, including in their use of public resources' (House of Commons, 2015, 3). This latter use of the term integrity is problematic, because it ensures that MPs have effectively been told that they can preserve the integrity of the House by acting with probity and integrity, and this is rather confusing. Yet the basic rationale behind the *Code of Conduct* is easily discerned. If MPs prioritise their private interests over the interests of those they serve, they violate the trust that is placed in them. As a result, their integrity, and the integrity of the House, is threatened. On such an account, political integrity should be understood in broadly negative terms; as a matter of not violating the public's trust by engaging in various kinds of malfeasance.

This schematic account is given more determinate content in the *Principles of Public Life* that were originally published in 1995 which list integrity as one of seven key principles.⁴ According to Mark Philp, the Chair of the Research Advisory Board to the UK's Committee on Standards in Public Life, the *Principles* are intended to cover 'standards, rules, norms and precepts that relate to the roles and functions that political office serves and the concomitant responsibilities that incumbents

⁴ Alongside selflessness, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty, and leadership.

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of office undertake to fulfil'. Philp claims that the *Principles* should be understood as 'standards that those in public office must respect in their capacity as holders of public office', rather than as more general personality traits. Indeed, thinking that the *Principles* necessarily refer to personality traits, mistakes the 'person with the office holder', and fails 'to distinguish between a judgment about what sort of person he or she is, and a judgment about what sort of office holder he or she is' (Philp, 2014, 5). On this view, a wide array of conduct may be irrelevant to our judgement of whether a politician has met the demands of public office.

The *Principles* were revised in 2013. Integrity is now officially described in the following way:

Holders of public office must avoid placing themselves under any obligation to people or organisations that might try inappropriately to influence them in their work. They should not act or take decisions in order to gain financial or other material benefits for themselves, their family, or their friends. They must declare and resolve any interests and relationships (Committee on Standards in Public Life, 2013a, 24).

On this reading, political integrity is a matter of politicians resisting some form of corruption by third parties. Cash for access scandals are illustrative examples of failures of political integrity of this kind. For example, in 2013 the Conservative MP Patrick Mercer accepted £4,000 to represent an organisation calling itself *Friends of Fiji*, which claimed to be campaigning for the readmission of Fiji into the Commonwealth. Mercer submitted five parliamentary questions, an Early Day Motion, and sought to create an All-Party Parliamentary Group on Fiji's readmission. However, *Friends of Fiji* was a fake company set up by the BBC's

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Panorama television show in collaboration with the *Daily Telegraph* (BBC News 2013).

This episode is instructive because although Mercer was not charged with any criminal wrongdoing, the Committee on Standards was explicitly tasked with asking if he broke the code of conduct for MPs, and damaged the integrity of the House. It found that Mercer evaded rules about registration and declaration, and broke the rules against paid advocacy, concluding that he inflicted significant reputational damage on the House (House of Commons 2014, 4; 6; 53). Hence, although the report does not explicitly state that Mercer displayed a lack of political integrity, given the earlier linkage of integrity with a concern for the reputation of the House, the judgement is tantamount to saying as much.

How satisfactory is it to think about the nature of integrity in politics along the lines set out by the *Principles of Public Life*? Not very, is the short answer. If the politician of integrity recognises that they have a duty to act in accordance with the public trust placed in them, we ought to endorse a far more wide-ranging understanding of the kinds of action they must refrain from. A more theoretically consistent approach to understanding political integrity in these terms, would not only hold that a politician displays a lack of integrity if they inappropriately try to influence the political process for material gain, as Mercer did, but also if they engage in electoral fraud, make purposefully deceptive statements about their

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opponents and their policies⁵, or cheat on their expenses.⁶ In all of these cases, politicians subvert various democratic procedures or ends which we think secure the common good, and correspondingly fail to stand for the values of public service we expect them to affirm. Thus, at a minimum, a more adequate understanding of political integrity as a matter of complying with external standards of conduct, and the public service ethos which underpins it, would have to operate with a more capacious understanding of the myriad ways that politicians can betray the trust that is placed in them.

Even though this is a more robust way of understanding what is involved in not violating the public's trust, it is still an overly narrow way of thinking about what political integrity requires. Consider a situation in which a newly elected MP decides that she will vote however her whips demand on any issue, not out of any kind of loyalty to the party or solidarity for her comrades, but simply because she wants to get promoted as quickly as possible in order to become a famous political figure. Although this decision would not obviously involve any malfeasance on her part, it is surely not the kind of decision that a politician of integrity would make; by renouncing her agency and judgement so comprehensively, she would be incapable of committing to the kinds of

⁵ The Labour MP Phil Woolas was found guilty of this in an especially unedifying episode during the 2010 election (Curtis 2010).

⁶ The question of what we should consider cheating on one's expenses, rather than merely benefitting from the system, cannot be resolved merely by considering whether or not a politician did not explicitly violate the rules. It's reasonably uncontroversial to see MPs *flipping* homes (officially changing one's principal residence between a London address and a constituency home to avoid capital gains tax) in such terms. See Ludwig 2009 for further discussion.

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things that we expect the politician of integrity to stand for, even when this is difficult for them. In this sense, her desire for fame does not appear to be commensurate with the behaviour of the politician of integrity. Yet if this is correct, it appears that understanding political integrity purely in external, rule-adherence terms is inadequate, and that a plausible understanding of political integrity must work with a richer account of the unique ethical demands that holding political office makes.

The failure of the *Principles of Public Life* to operate with a theoretically pristine account of political integrity is not surprising. Official ethics codes must be capable of generating robust, public assessments of conduct and the case of the MP introduced above is not susceptible to such assessment because of the epistemic difficulties of determining what motivates her behaviour from an external perspective. Moreover, such codes are chiefly concerned with sanctioning misconduct, and we might think that a desire for fame does not necessarily deserve to be sanctioned so long it does not involve gross negligence, or the misuse of public resources. However, we should not mistake the need for a public code that can be used to sanction misconduct with the *theoretical question* of the nature of the values that should inform our assessment of political conduct more broadly. There is a difference between the correct understanding of important political values and the rules or official codes of conduct we should adopt to encourage admirable behaviour.

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This is important to bear in mind. Many politicians claim that they have acted with integrity merely if they have avoided engaging in obvious rule breaking. I will now argue that such claims are hollow precisely because political integrity requires more than simply avoiding malfeasance.

II

As noted at the beginning of the article, it is problematic to view political integrity as a matter of sticking to one's moral principles or commitments by refusing to trade action on them *tout court*. However, it does not follow that principled commitment is irrelevant to such judgements. Indeed, I will now illustrate how the "identity conception" associated with Bernard Williams, which views integrity in strikingly different terms to those outlined in the *Principles of Public Life*, can enrich our understanding of the requirements of political integrity. There are some significant disanalogies between Williams's ethical account and the political account I develop, most notably because in politics consequences matter to our assessment of integrity, and this jars with Williams's rejection of consequentialism. But despite this, I hope to persuade readers that thinking about political integrity in terms inspired by Williams is salutary.

Williams's position is best understood via his discussion of a fictional George, who has just taken a PhD in chemistry, and is finding it difficult to get a job. George is informed by an older colleague that a position is available in a laboratory that researches chemical and biological warfare.

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He initially says that he cannot accept the job given his long-held opposition to chemical and biological weapons, but is asked to reconsider when it is pointed out that he needs money to support his family, and that if he declines the job will go to a contemporary not inhibited by his scruples (Williams, 1973, 97-98).

Williams notes that most forms of direct utilitarianism would urge George to take the job and, for this reason, argues that utilitarianism cannot make sense of the value of integrity, because it fails to appreciate how projects and commitments are constitutive of our characters as they give meaning to our lives. Williams refers to such character defining commitments as a person's ground projects, and claims that 'a man may have...a *ground* project or set of projects which are closely related to his existence and which to a significant degree give meaning to his life' (Williams, 1981, 12-13). For Williams, our ground projects provide us with an understanding of our ethical identity by giving us a 'sense of coherence across time', and being forced to give them up would cause the kind of 'psychological fragmentation' that is inimical to integrity (Ashford, 2000, 422). At heart, this account suggests that integrity is a quality we admire because we think, at least in most cases, that ethical commitment is an admirable trait for a person to display, even if we do not happen to endorse that person's commitments, because the person who is prepared to abandon their ethical commitments with ease displays a certain shallowness, and a life that evinces shallow commitment, or opportunism

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at every quarter, is one that displays the wrong kind of orientation toward the world.⁷

We cannot seamlessly apply Williams's "identity conception" to the actions of political agents in order to make plausible judgements about political integrity. As noted already, it is simply untenable to claim that political integrity could be a matter of politicians standing for their deepest political commitments in a similar way that Williams conceives of ethical integrity as a matter of standing for one's ground projects. Politics frequently requires its practitioners to compromise on matters of principle, and insisting that the politician of integrity must refuse to *trade action on* their principled political commitments, ignores the fact that a politician who acted in this way would be incapable of securing any of the goods

⁷ I broadly agree with Calhoun that Williams either holds that 'the depth of character that comes with deep commitments is an admirable characteristic of persons', or that 'deep attachments are part of any life that could count for us as a good, full, and flourishing human life' (1995, 255). Williams's critics have claimed that his account counter-intuitively suggests that it would be better if certain people, like the evangelical racist, lacked integrity, and that this must be incorrect because if integrity is a value its ascription must be an indicator of our esteem. For these critics, committing to ground projects can only confer integrity if such projects actually help an agent to lead 'a genuinely morally decent life' (Ashford, 2000, 424).

It makes intuitive sense to place some constraints on the set of ground projects that the person of integrity would pursue, although I make no attempt to settle the question of which constraints here. However, attempts to thoroughly moralise integrity are problematic because attributing integrity need not always signal moral approval. For example, most viewers of HBO's *The Wire* will attest that Omar Little is a person of integrity, despite the fact that he is a *stickup artist* who frequently engages in extreme violence, because he only targets people who are *in the game*. Yet moralised accounts, which insist that the person of integrity must pursue projects that are germane to living a "genuinely morally decent life", cannot make sense of this judgement given the immorality of many of the acts Omar routinely engages in. In this sense, we ought to acknowledge that claims about an agent's integrity often do not serve to signify that they act in accordance with objective moral requirements, but rather make reference to whether or not they abide by various principled standards *they* consider to have ethical force. It is not unusual to fervently disagree with someone while admiring their moral resolve and character, and we commonly refer to such people as displaying integrity if they avoid flagrant opportunism, or selling-out, even if we reject the moral standing of their particular convictions.

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that politics routinely provides.⁸ In this regard, the suggestion that any form of moral compromise represents a betrayal of one's political integrity looks worryingly close to the ethic of conviction that Max Weber rightly chides for being ill-suited to the political sphere.

However, it doesn't follow that we must revert to thinking that political integrity is simply a matter of adhering to formal rules and avoiding malfeasance. Indeed, Weber's criticism of conviction politicians has important implications for our understanding of how politicians can meet the requirements of their role along two key dimensions. First, Weber insists that some kind of commitment to a cause has to be manifested in political action for it to retain its normative character, because there is 'no more pernicious distortion of political energy than ... [the] worship of power for its own sake' (Weber, 1994, 354). If a politician does not display commitment to a political cause their actions, much like the actions of a person who has no ground projects, lack normative depth. Second, Weber is adamant that it is indecent to suppose that a politician's sole responsibility is to ensure 'that the flame of pure conviction...is never extinguished', so that 'to kindle that flame again and again is the purpose of his actions, actions which, judged from the point of view of their possible success...can and are only intended to have exemplary value' (Weber, 1994, 360). For him, and his followers like Mark Philp, responsible politicians do not seek to manifest a 'purity of intention [which] is

⁸ Although Crick's claim that politics is the activity 'by which differing interests within a given unit of rule are conciliated' excludes various things we standardly think of as politics, it contains an important element of truth (2009, 7).

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unconditioned by the need to compromise, negotiate, [or] exercise authority over others', because such a view is deeply anti-political (Philp, 2007, 82). Even if a politician is adamant that they have a true grasp on morality's requirements, refusing to work with the 'ethical irrationality of the world' (Weber, 1994, 361) is a failing because it shows that they do not treat their convictions with the requisite practical *seriousness*; as commitments that have to be achieved through the political process. A politician who refuses to engage in any compromising activities is highly unlikely to materially advance their political causes. Such intransigence will, in all probability, ensure that they fail to further their professed political commitments. In this sense, refusing to compromise and negotiate with opponents on matters of principle can be seen as a refusal to grasp the demands of the role.⁹

In this sense, a plausible conception of political integrity must recognise that admirable political conduct is not a matter of moral posturing, and that politicians should be prepared to compromise on matters of principle when this is likely to be the cost of their improving the political status quo. Once we grant that a functioning democratic polity requires politicians to compromise with one another, there is little reason to hold that compromises are inevitably unprincipled. They might instead be framed as the appropriate result of the democratic resolution of political disputes

⁹ A small number of political operators succeeded in transforming their societies while displaying such a purity of intention, but because so few succeeded by acting in this way I do not think they can be used to model effective political agency in general.

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(Bellamy 2012).¹⁰ There is nothing paradoxical in holding that the politician of integrity should be committed to both their substantive political commitments, and the ethos of compromise and conciliation that undergirds democratic political life – at least if we recognise, as we should, that values can conflict and that life is complicated.

In addition, a suitably politicised version of the identity conception has to recognise that *only certain kinds of commitment are integrity-conferring for politicians*. Some ground projects, like devoting oneself to being a good father, have very admirable ethical dimensions but do not have the right *object* to confer political integrity. The politician of integrity stands for a special set of value commitments that are commensurate with the public role they serve; principles and aims concerning how they think political institutions and practices should be ordered if they are to bring about the good of the polity. At a minimum, political integrity therefore requires principled public-spiritedness. On this account, using political office to enrich oneself, sleep with as many interns as possible, or to rescue stray cats, regardless of how steadfastly one commits to these activities, is not integrity conferring, because such projects do not focus on the good of the polity in the requisite way. Of course, the distinction between value commitments which concern political institutions and the common good,

¹⁰ As Hollis argues, ‘the politician must keep a kind of faith with several groups, who lay conflicting claims of loyalty on him...confronted with this plurality of aims and of values and of languages, he can only plead that the best is the enemy of the good’ (Hollis, 1983, 396-97). This does not rule out the idea that one important consideration in our judgements about political integrity is whether or not a politician has stood for their deepest political commitments; it just suggests that we need to think about the conditions of successfully doing that in a suitably realistic manner.

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rather than private ethical matters, is subject to dispute. Many projects, like George's opposition to chemical warfare, clearly have political dimensions, and if they are pursued in a public way are likely to count as relevantly political. This is fluid territory.

These claims about the appropriateness of compromise in politics and the object of identity-conferring political projects, should lead us to reformulate our understanding of the ethical demands that politics makes on its practitioners. Properly matching up to the role requires more than merely following official rules of conduct and avoiding malfeasance; it also demands a suitably realistic pursuit of one's deepest political causes. As such, political integrity requires a politician to stand for their deepest political commitments, while being flexible enough, and cognisant enough of their proper role, to recognise when concession, or perhaps even the renouncement, of certain commitments is called-for.

Deciding what the political analogues of Williams's ground projects are, and when they may have been betrayed, is hard. A politician is likely to have an array of political commitments, some of which will be regarded as central by them, their party, or their constituents, and others of which will not. It is reasonably easy to accept that compromising on those which are not is unlikely to threaten their integrity.¹¹ But it also seems that a politician may compromise on a core commitment without this automatically signalling a lack of integrity on their part, so long as such

¹¹ It may not be easy to cleanly separate core and non-core commitments in practice. Moreover, one may begin to grasp where certain commitments fall in the process of political negotiation.

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compromise was necessary to the successful pursuit of their other deep causes in the long term.¹²

Evaluating political conduct in this way is inherently contentious. Consider the most resonant example in recent British political history, the Liberal Democrats' decision to vote to increase the University tuition fee cap after they formed a coalition with the Conservative Party, in contravention of their pre-election pledge to vote against any such legislation.¹³ In his book, *22 Days in May: The Birth of the Lib Dem-Conservative Coalition*, David Laws argues that the suggestion that this decision can be used to impugn the party leadership's integrity rests on a misunderstanding of the options the party faced as the junior member of the coalition negotiations. Laws claims that The Liberal Democrats made a sensible political decision to prioritise four issues: the £10,000 personal tax allowance; the Pupil Premium; a sustainable economy; and electoral reform and argues, rightly, that they achieved success on all these dimensions (2010, 185-86).

Laws is right that it is unreasonable to have expected the Liberal Democrats to have been in a position to enact the entirety of their

¹² John Major's negotiations with the IRA during the troubles in Northern Ireland, despite the Conservative Party's publicly stated refusal to negotiate with them, is an apt case in point.

¹³ In their 2010 manifesto, the Liberal Democrats explicitly stated that the Party would 'scrap unfair university tuition fees for all students taking their first degree, including those studying part-time, saving them over £10,000 each' and proclaimed that they had 'a financially responsible plan to phase fees out over six years, so that the change is affordable even in these difficult economic times, and without cutting university income'. Moreover, 57 Lib-Dem MPs standing in the 2010 General Election signed the National Union of Students pledge to veto any such legislation, which had the following wording: "I pledge to vote against any increase in fees in the next parliament and to pressure the government to introduce a fairer alternative". See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vote_for_Students_pledge

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manifesto. As a result, questioning the party leadership's integrity on these grounds is irresponsible. Moreover, it is worth recalling that the party leadership were bound to this policy by their party even though they were against it, and that they had an obligation to act in a responsible manner, and to generate political stability, during a tumultuous period in recent history. Yet, despite the importance of these mitigating factors, any plausible judgement of this case must focus on the leadership's preceding actions. Once we focus on these, it is clear that while we cannot accuse the party decision-makers of lacking integrity simply because they failed to enact one of their manifesto commitments, we can do so for making the pledge, and for seeking to benefit from it, in the way that they did. The pledge was not merely presented as one manifesto commitment alongside a host of others, and one that any reflective Liberal Democrat voter, therefore, ought to have recognised as the possible subject of a future compromise were the party to enter into coalition negotiations. It had far more symbolic significance. By making the pledge in such trenchant terms, and then failing to abide by it, the party leadership systematically misled their supporters. This, rather than the act of compromising with the Conservative Party *per se*, explains why questioning their integrity is appropriate.

Acting with integrity by standing for one's deep political commitments is important in both an internal and external sense. From the internal perspective, if a politician is elected having presented themselves as a

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sincere advocate of policy q , and instead votes for p out of fear of the tabloid press, this is a normatively significant because by voting for p they fail to display the right kind of commitment to their convictions which, in turn, leads us to question their character and resolve. From an external standpoint, by voting for p she also lets down the people who voted for her. This external dimension matters greatly because her actions are in tension with some basic features of representative politics. In a democracy, representatives are supposed to be the agents of ordinary citizens: *they* are meant to be the ones choosing which commitments need to be pursued. This is why one's relation to past choices is often likely to matter *more* with regard to our judgement of a politician's integrity than our judgement of an ordinary agent's integrity, not that it is unimportant in that domain. For example, if a politician had said she would vote for q even if she was not especially committed to q and unsure of q 's merits, once the decision has been made she would display a lack of integrity by voting for p , because once a politician has publicly committed to a position it should be seen through. In politics, you have to wear your choices.

However, it is a mistake to collapse our understanding of political integrity into this set of external concerns. This is because although seeing through one's campaign promises is deeply important, it is not the only thing that matters from the standpoint of a politician's integrity. Politicians also have a role to play in restraining 'us from overhasty and ill-advised methods of getting what we want, while prodding us to pursue

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difficult and farsighted projects whose worth we might not see on our own' (Sabl 2002, 9-10). Moreover, there are likely to be a host of decisions politicians will have to make once they have been elected, on which they did not express any opinion during their campaign, and which were not addressed in their Party's manifesto. In these scenarios, we expect the politician of integrity to *stand for* their convictions in a politically serious way, rather than giving in to the temptation to trade on them for various personal rewards, or to capitulate in the face of opposition. This is why it makes sense to distinguish between politicians of integrity who display abiding commitment to causes and others who, although they do not violate any of the formal rules or obligations which apply to them, merely either operate with a careerist worldview, or engage in some kind of ideology-free managerialism.

III

In the last section, I argued that principled commitment plays an important role in our judgements about political integrity but that our understanding of principled commitment must cohere with a suitably realistic conception of politics. Successful politicians may also have to commit various other morally disreputable acts that may lead us to question an ordinary agent's moral integrity. Successful politicians may not be able to avoid lying, making coalitions with groups whose causes they disapprove of, and, more generally, adopting a kind of

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consequentialist reasoning that we would find objectionable in private life (Williams, 1981, 58). As Stuart Hampshire's defence of *experience* suggests, the morally *innocent* who wish to maintain an unsullied soul lose their way in politics because of the sometimes squalid, and always morally imperfect, context in which they must act (Hampshire, 1989, 170). Successful politicians consequently have to exhibit a kind of *toughness* that we do not expect many other actors to display (Galston 1991).

While this may be regretful, it should not lead us to question a politician's integrity if we can reasonably judge that such actions are necessary for them to further their deepest political convictions. Yet in cases where compromises on deep commitments, or other morally questionable acts are called-for, there is reason to think that the politician of integrity will only act with a particular kind of reluctance. As Williams notes, such reluctance serves two important purposes. First, from a pragmatic perspective, it seems that 'Only those who are reluctant or disinclined to do the morally disagreeable when it is really necessary have much chance of not doing it when it is not necessary' (Williams, 1981, 62). Second, from a more ethical vantage point, it is the *right* attitude to adopt given the real moral costs such political decisions have; even if an act is the correct thing to do *all-things-considered*, it can still involve some wrong (Williams, 1981, 61). Hence, the politician of integrity must be prepared to compromise on matters of principle, and to act with the requisite

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toughness, but they must also do so reluctantly and remain sensitive to the moral costs of their actions. This is, undoubtedly, challenging.

Politicians will often have to choose which of their commitments to prioritise in a given context, and this decision is likely to be conditioned both by the strength of their endorsement and basic strategic considerations. Two key points follow. First, that the refusal to fall victim to wishful thinking about what can be achieved is an epistemic virtue politicians of integrity must display. Second, as the dirty hands literature suggests, good political leaders may often have to act in direct contravention of some of their deepest convictions to avoid serious disasters (Walzer 2007). Given that political integrity is a matter of balancing the demands of one's role, and one's deep commitments, such decisions *do not necessarily* betray one's political integrity, because avoiding great disasters is one of the most central role-based obligations at play.

Once we appreciate that responsible political commitment is diachronic, there is also scant reason to hold that thinking in these terms requires us to endorse a worryingly rigid account of commitment, so that if a politician renounces a previous political commitment this necessarily signals a lack of integrity on their part.¹⁴ For example, the British Labour Party's renunciation of Clause IV (a longstanding the commitment to nationalisation), may not have immediately compromised the integrity of Labour Party MPs because nationalisation, as a principled commitment,

¹⁴ Contrary to the views of Sabl 2002, 27 (drawing on Luban).

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may have become ill-suited to the historical context in which the Labour Party had to act. In contrast, the extent to which the Blairite takeover may have radically altered the fundamental ends the Party pursued, and therefore changed its identity, potentially compromising the integrity of Labour Party MPs who remained committed to some form of socialism, is a much tougher question. If it did, avowed socialist MPs would have stood for a platform that directly repudiated their deepest political convictions. Nonetheless, a justification of the decision to remain a party member is possible, because it is not unreasonable to think that the Labour Party remained the best avenue for pursuing progressive politics in the United Kingdom. If it was, the decision to remain *in the tent pissing-out* can be presented as a responsible political judgement which resisted the temptation of moral posturing.

When thinking about the nature of political integrity, we have to operate with a resolutely realistic conception of political possibility. Mark Philp offers a penetrating account of how this commitment should influence our assessment of political conduct, and therefore our assessment of values like integrity which underwrite it, when he addresses Nye Bevan's decision to agree to the maintenance of a private dimension in the United Kingdom's National Health Service (NHS) when it was created in the aftermath of World War II. When assessing this decision, Philp insists that we have to ask tough questions about whether or not Bevan could have brokered a better deal; one that would have been

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equally enduring and not immediately revoked if the Conservative Party won the next election, as they did. This enables us to question how far Bevan 'was committed to the ideals in the name of which the NHS was proposed and how far he remained committed to those objectives...while accepting tactical concessions' (Philp, 2010, 479). Knowing that the Labour Party lost the 1951 election matters because it illustrates that Bevan's task was to establish a fixed baseline of universal provision before Labour lost power, and as this baseline has proved resilient in the face of some determined political opposition, Bevan's achievement is laudable (Philp, 2010, 479).

This enables us to see that strategic concessions need not necessarily compromise a politician's integrity even if they violate cherished principles. Yet, something of a puzzle arises when we take the necessity of strategic concession making seriously. If the NHS had been quickly dismantled despite Bevan's various concessions for reasons outside of his control, should our judgement of his political integrity change? In one regard, it seems that it should not. Surely, the key question is whether or not a politician made a reasonable judgement at the time, by thinking about whether or not a strategic compromise on an issue of principle was *likely* to advance the long-term prospects of their political causes. If this hope was thwarted for reasons beyond their control, isn't it overly harsh to impugn their character by doubting their integrity?

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Although this line of thought has some intuitive appeal, there is reason to think that how events turn out *should* affect a politician's retrospective judgement of their agency. Consider the case of a politician whose momentous political decisions failed to further their political causes, but who succeeded in silencing their internal doubts about their conduct by telling themselves their choices were perfectly reasonable decisions to make at the time. If such self-assurance does not strike us as the right kind of response to political failure, this implies that admirable self-assessments of one's acts, in politics as elsewhere, often utilise a conception of agent-regret which is not constrained by our assessment of whether or not a decision was *ex ante* reasonable.¹⁵

For example, when discussing his decision to support the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, Tony Blair poses the following question:

Had we foreseen what Iraq was going to be like following the removal of Sadaam, would we still have done it? Should we still have done it? Many would say no. The cost in money and blood has been enormous.

My response however, is very clear. Had this money and bloodshed been expended in removing Sadaam, I would agree. But it wasn't. It was largely expended in dealing with the consequences of [Iranian and Al-Queda] extremism whose aim was not to implement the will of the Iraqi people, but to defy it.

What are we saying when we ask: Look at the bloodshed, how can it be worth it? First, consider who is responsible. It wasn't UK or US soldiers. There was no inevitability about the violence. These were deliberate acts of

¹⁵ In his work on moral luck, Williams argues that denying the existence of this kind of agent-regret falsely suggests that 'we might, if we conducted ourselves clear-headedly enough, entirely detach ourselves from the unintentional aspects of our actions...and yet still retain our character as agents'. He denies this is possible because 'one's history as an agent is a web in which anything that is the product of the will is surrounded and held up and partly formed by things that are not in such a way that reflection can only go in one of two directions: either in the direction of saying that responsible agency is a fairly superficial concept...or else that it is not a superficial concept, but that it cannot ultimately be purified' (Williams, 1981, 29-30).

As I have argued that the person of integrity knows who she *is* and what she *stands for* by acting in the world to further her deepest projects, the link between cogent judgements of integrity and an adequate account of the nature of agency should be clear.

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sabotage. Had we conceded to them, we would have strengthened the wider ideology they represented. By refusing to concede and by supporting Iraqi democracy, we struck a blow against that ideology everywhere...

All I know is that I did what I thought was right. I stood by America when it needed standing by. Together we rid the world of a tyrant. Together we fought to uphold the Iraqi's right to democratic government (Blair, 2010, 479).

Even if we set aside the veracity of Blair's empirical judgements, it is hard read this passage and to not find his refusal to take responsibility for the consequences of his decision deeply disreputable. Is it so disreputable that it ought to lead us to question his integrity? Possibly. If we accept that political commitment cannot merely serve exemplary value, and that admirable politicians refuse to pass responsibility on to the world rather than owning it themselves, it appears that politicians who do not feel deep painful agent-regret when their actions do not succeed in furthering their political causes evince the wrong kind of response to their political failure as well as a bad understanding of the costs that politics has inflicted on *them*. In an ironic twist, there are consequently grounds for holding that admirable politicians will recognise that their integrity can be threatened by events that are outside of their control and for which they should not, necessarily, be morally blamed.¹⁶

IV

At heart, political integrity is matter of standing for one's deepest commitments in a politically realistic way, without violating the

¹⁶ Admittedly, this claim is very controversial and my argument far from conclusive, but I find this is a plausible extension of my view even if it is not a logical entailment of it.

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distinctive role-based obligations that apply to holders of public office. We cannot construct an “integrity-algorithm” that can definitively tell politicians how to do this. Nor is it possible to legislate for this conception of integrity *in toto*, even though suitably robust public-ethics codes can sanction certain actions which reflect a lack of political integrity along *some* of the dimensions discussed. Rather, politicians must use their judgment, and weigh the relevant factors at play in a responsible manner when deciding how to act with integrity. Likewise, as external observers we must focus on the considerations I have outlined, and make a judgement about whether or not a politician appropriately took them into account with reference to a host of complex contextual factors. As such, evaluations of politician’s integrity are inherently messy. We may decide that a politician acted with integrity even if they violated some of the official rules of conduct we normally think they ought to abide by, so long as they did so in service of an admirable, public-spirited commitment.

My account suggests that a politician’s integrity can be threatened in at least four directions. First, a politician can engage in various kinds of malfeasance or misconduct and therefore act in violation of the public trust that is placed in them. Second, they may sell-out their commitments for various kinds of personal gain, or capitulate too easily in the face of political opposition. Third, political integrity is vulnerable to a kind of under-reaching which occurs when a politician does not try sufficiently hard to achieve their political commitments by refusing to engage in any

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compromises on matters of principle, regardless of the likely unsuccessful political results of this decision. Fourth, and admittedly much more controversially, once we accept that intentions are not the only things that matter, it seems that a related thought might apply to the problem of over-reaching. If a politician engages in various compromises on matters of principle, in the hope that they will later be in a better position to pursue their ends, but this hope ends up being frustrated, our assessment of their political integrity will be coloured, because they will not have achieved the right kind of coherence between their commitments and their agency.

With the exception of cases of the first sort, or especially egregious cases of selling-out or capitulation in the face of opposition, convincing judgements about political integrity will often require us to avoid the temptation of thinking in clear-cut, black-and-white terms. Most politicians will trade on some of their convictions in the hope being able to better advance their deepest political causes in the long run. This is why politics is a standing threat to its practitioner's integrity; political decisions are subject to the actions of other people and events beyond one's control. Conversely, some compromises on matters of principle may be outweighed by a politician's successes in such a way that their sense of themselves, and their commitment to their fundamental political convictions, remain reasonably intact.

If political integrity is understood in this way, it should be painted as an achievement brought about by laudable dimensions of a politician's

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character and some degree of luck. In many cases, our judgements about a politician's integrity can only be vindicated from a retrospective standpoint when judging a long train of action, and will often be contentious because such commitment is rarely helpfully understood in all-or-nothing terms. To this end, as with many other key topics in political ethics, thinking realistically about the nature of political integrity requires us to resist the siren-song of simplistic moral hectoring and to instead think in shades of grey.

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