Loyalty, partiality and the duties of the political role

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**Abstract:**

The role of politicians is broadly defined as serving the interests of the people they represent. As the UK Code of Conduct for MPs states, MPs have "a duty to act in the interests of the nation as a whole; and a special duty to their constituents." But this stipulation already brings to light potential conflicts between what is best for the nation as a whole and for the specific group represented. Defining the political role is therefore more complicated than first thought. This paper scrutinises these dilemmas from the specific angle of loyalty, in order to assess what role loyalty plays in political conduct. Politicians have many objects of loyalty, whose interests may easily conflict: from loyalty to party, allies, to loyalty to the general "public." A common view is that particular attachments should be outweighed by universal ones. This paper challenges this view. It asserts that group loyalty is unavoidable, and even an essential element in political life, whilst acknowledging the evident negative impact of factional allegiances and favouritism. It concludes that partiality is not necessarily unreasonable, as long as it is driven by clear political judgement.

**Introduction:**

In line with a common portrayal of politicians as self-serving and driven by a "clique mentality", immoral conduct in politics is often understood as endorsing the factional interests of political clans. In contrast to this, moral conduct means striving for impartiality and the good of the public as a whole. This dichotomy is supported by a series of cases of nepotism and abuse of power which regularly make the headlines. To give but one example, Spanish Prime Minister Mario Rajoy and his Popular Party (PP) are currently embroiled in serious allegations of corruption, with the former treasurer of the party placed in custody. This paper will not attempt to condone, or even excuse, outright cases of betrayal of public trust. But it intends to analyse the ramifications which arise from conflicts of obligation – more specifically, of loyalty – that politicians are faced with.

The role of politicians is broadly defined as serving the people they represent, at a local or national level. As the UK Code of Conduct for MPs states, MPs have "a duty to act in the interests of the nation as a whole; and a special duty to their constituents" (2012). This

stipulation already brings to light potential tensions between what is best for the nation as a whole and for the specific group represented. This becomes even more apparent in the guide for local UK councillors, which states: "Every day, councillors have to balance the needs and interests of their residents, voters, political parties and the council. All these groups will make legitimate demands on the councillor's time on top of their personal responsibilities to family, workplace and friends."[1] Defining the political role is therefore more complicated than the simple axiom "serve the public." Translated into the language of loyalty, this entails not just that officials encounter tensions between loyalty to the public and to their personal relations to family or friends, but that many other conflicts arise at various levels in between these two extremes. The objects of politicians' loyalties are numerous: 1) loyalty to people in their ward or constituency; 2) loyalty to specific groups of voters within this area (specific industries for example, or students if there is a university nearby); 3) loyalty to their political party, its values, structures, leaders, etc.; 4) loyalty to specific individuals within the party who have "made" them; 5) loyalty to connections other than strictly political ones, such as with certain businesses, the media, etc.; 6) loyalty to family and friends who have supported them, including during hard times; and finally 7) loyalty to their own values. Conflicts can occur between these various objects of loyalty, and the usual question then arises: which loyalty should trump the other(s)? A traditional answer is that "higher" levels should prevail over "lower" ones. In other words, the democratic process implies that partial interests be overridden by the will of the people.[2] The aim of this paper is to partially challenge this assumption and to show that it can be misleading, or even naïve, to presume that democracy can and should do away with partial loyalties. Is partiality always unreasonable? Generally, to what extent do loyalties (or lack of them) define appropriate political conduct?

In order to answer these questions, a brief clarification of the concept of loyalty is essential (more specific characteristics of loyalty are dealt with later on). The term loyalty is generally preferred to others, such as obligations or duties, because it allows observers to have a more rounded view of individual politicians, incorporating rational as well as emotional levels of analysis. When one is driven by a sense of loyalty, rational calculation of one's and another's interests are only a partial account of the process at work, as one's emotional and even psychological dimensions must be taken into account. Loyalty can be pervasive, and the individual may not be aware of its influence on her. A main feature of

[1] P. 26 http://www.local.gov.uk/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=c26abbde-e57b-46bd-9ad3-fb6ce9f90e89&groupId=10171

[2] The Code of conduct for MPs states: "avoid conflict between personal interest and the public interest and resolve any conflict between the two, at once, and in favour of the public interest." (1995, V.9)

loyalty is that it entails partiality, that one treats a person or group differently. Exclusivity is therefore at its core. As Jollimore points out, "the loyal person cannot be loyal to everyone; that is incoherent" (2013, p. xiv). Treating someone or some group differently can mean giving them benefit of the doubt, or on the contrary be especially reprimanding (for their own good). In any case, being loyal presupposes a certain "constancy or steadfastness in our attachments" (Bennett, p. 665)[3]. Loyal relationships resist temporary disagreements; loyal people "stick" with one another, beyond obvious personal interests.

It must be noted that the term "virtue" has so far not been used to refer to loyalty. Debates are continuously raging in the literature as to whether loyalty can be considered a virtue, given the negative effects of some loyal behaviours (a typical case is the loyal Nazi). I do not wish to enter into these debates, though my intention is to stress both the benefits and shortcomings of being loyal. Generally speaking, my approach will neither be that of virtue ethicists such as MacIntyre, nor that of applied ethics. I am uncomfortable with setting up an "ideal" position which would define moral political conduct according to abstract principles. I do not believe that a neutral Archimedean position can be adopted, from which the virtues of the political role could be determined. This is why I intend to stay in the cave, to borrow Plato's analogy, and adopt a method of reflection which is closer to the "political realism" of theorists like Williams (2005), Geuss (2008) and Philp (2012). Details of this method will become more evident in the course of the study, but, roughly speaking, it takes as its point of departure the political realm itself, not abstract ethical theories. With this in mind, the first part analyses loyalty to partial groups in politics, and queries whether this form of attachment is essentially bad. The second part focuses on loyalty to "the public", and calls into question the desirability and possibility of achieving it.

## Part 1: Loyalty to intermediary groups in politics: a realist account

The object of scrutiny of this first part is loyalty to partial "groups", which is deliberately defined in loose terms. It incorporates the political party or movement of which the politician is a member, but also the coalition she belongs to, in the event that her party shares the exercise of power. In addition to this, it is important to include other connections which have an indirect impact in the exercise of her political role, such as links with certain businesses, lobbies, trade unions, institutions, and also her connections with the media. This definition of

[3] Bennett, William, Book of Virtues, 1993, Simon and Schuster.

"group" might appear quite sketchy and potentially problematic, but the inclusion of levels beyond the party is essential if one is to offer an accurate representation of networks in political life. Firstly, the negative impacts of such loyalties are emphasised and cannot be denied. But secondly, they have to be put into perspective in relation to other factors, which offer a more positive understanding of group loyalties in politics.

The deleterious effects of factional loyalties in politics are well-known and highly publicised. The clique mentality denounced by commentators such as Peter Oborne (2008) is at work in the worst cases of abuse of power recently uncovered, such as the "cash for honours" scandals. One illustration of it is the decision of Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg to nominate for peerage Rumi Verjee, Mr Domino's Pizza in the UK and generous donor to the Liberal Democrat party. If political life is to become more ethical, such actions resulting from partial loyalties are not welcome, and politicians should steer clear of these influences. There are three main sets of reasons why factional loyalties are detrimental to good political conduct. The first one is linked with the sense of allegiance to the group. The politician may feel compelled, consciously or not, to make her allegiance to group prevail over allegiance to other causes, because of a need to express gratitude to those who have helped her. The notion of debt is quite common in the literature on loyalty, and its devastating consequences are often stressed: the group has power over the politician, whose hands are partially tied, and who may be manipulated (Keller 101-14). The politician may exploit her position of power to pay her debt, and, in blunts terms, exercise favouritism. She could, for instance, vote in favour of constructing a road or sports complex in a specific area, or by a specific company, in order to satisfy the interests of her group or connections. Secret negotiations of this sort may occur with the setting-up of large infrastructure like motorways or high speed trains, with certain allies wanting an exit or station, or, on the contrary, lobbying for their region to be spared of alterations, as with HS2 in the UK. This argument that counsels distrust of partial loyalties in politics is not new, and was already developed by Locke in his *Letter Concerning Toleration* in 1689, in another context. For Locke, Roman Catholics could not be trusted to exercise their political role dutifully, because of their allegiance to a "higher" and incompatible form of power, namely the Catholic hierarchy of Rome. More than three centuries later, religious influences may have diminished, but the mechanisms at work in the conditioning of politicians are still similar.

A second reason to denounce factional loyalties is situated at an epistemic level. In politics, like in love or friendship, loyalty can be blind and misguided. It has already been

pointed out that loyalty is a combination of rational and emotional elements, the latter having sometimes clear predominance of the former, with potentially disastrous effects. The politician may suspend her judgment and duty of critical scrutiny, and act in the most irrational manner. She can go against the moral principles of the society she is representing, and her own moral principles too. Keller rightly stresses that partial attachments such as patriotism "can underlie warmongering, smugness, intolerance, bigotry and stupidity." (2007, p. 92). Misguided loyalties may also, in worst-case scenarios, go against evidence and the truth, to the extent that the epistemic integrity of the politician is compromised, and that she does "insult [her] own intelligence…[and] wilfully believe things [she] know[s] to be false" (Felten, p. 179). Examples of this are ministers who lie about the information in their possession, or at least are economical with the truth, in order to spare a colleague or connection serious trouble. The consequences are damaging for the public, whose interests are not prioritised, but also for the politician herself, whose individual autonomy is jeopardised. Beyond the damage to her credibility as a politician, her ability to think for herself and remain an independent being is seriously undermined. This calls into question the image that democratic theorists have of the decision-making process in politics, which is pictured as being reached through reflective and rational debate between sensible and reasonable individuals.

The third negative impact of partial loyalty follows on from the first two, and concerns the influence of leaders. Unlike other types of loyalty, such as friendship, loyalty in politics is less often a relationship of equals, where all parties reciprocate their support and feelings. Loyalty in politics is largely asymmetrical, with the lower ranks subordinating their views and actions to that of their leaders. In other words, representatives have to shut up for the sake of their party or coalition, even if they disagree with the decisions made. Politicians here are usually pretty conscious of the clashes of values and interests, and not blinded by the forces that put pressure on them. There are, however, some instances when members of a party develop a form of devotion, if not idolatry, towards their leader. It can be genuine, or the result of careful propaganda machinery. Examples are easier to find in the non-Western world, such as North Korea or Venezuela under Chavez, but some elements of subservience to superiors are certainly present in presidential regimes, and generally where the personalisation of politics has become the norm. The commitment to the leader, or party, may go further than just keeping quiet, as the hierarchy may demand that the politician temporarily sacrifice her position to help the group keep a credible position, as former Tory Chief Whip Andrew Mitchell learnt in 2012 when he was forced to resign over the so-called

"plebgate." In addition to the damage to the politician's autonomy of judgement described above, the negative impact for the political process is evident: a democratic system does not function fully if it is full of yes-men or women who are never prepared to challenge their leaders. The meritocratic system that is meant to be at work could easily evolve towards a more sinister form of oligarchy, organised around nepotism. The most common criticisms of the political system in European countries are found at this level, with regular accusations of cover-ups and connivance between politicians of all colours and other influential groups of people, including the civil service. A deliberate lack of transparency was revealed in affairs such as the decision to award the franchise of the West Coast train line to FirstGroup in 2012, which was eventually retracted. The negative effects of factional loyalty are clear and undeniable, and explain largely why many demand more impartiality and neutrality in the political realm. Despite these undeniable shortcomings of group loyalty, it is now helpful to examine whether more positive features can be uncovered, which are often neglected by political commentators, but are at the core of the literature on loyalty.

Philosophers like Plato may strive for a political realm in which the guardians are at one in achieving moral perfection, but the reality is otherwise: politicians are not Gods, politics is messy, and tensions always exist. In fact, as theorists since J. S. Mill have pointed out (2003), the decision-making process in politics benefits from opposite views. It therefore seems unrealistic to envisage that politics could do without partisan groups. Politics is about partisanship, it is organised around oppositions of views, ideologies, and interests, and partial loyalties are, as such, inherent to it, and unavoidable. One-party systems have been tried in various regimes, but are never a sign of a true democratic process. Besides, divisions within the single party are always rife, even if leaders would pretend otherwise. The nature of politics is to witness permanent struggles on various matters that constantly evolve. In addition to this, political links cannot rely entirely on the movement's programme or platform: like any other organisation, they rest a lot on personal ties, and even friendships.

It is in this context that political connections need to be understood. As Philp rightly notes, "every politician, irrespective of the stability of the political order, will start his or her political life needing support from others, and needing to secure the patronage of others through his or her own loyalties, which means that a consistent undercurrent of nonneutral and partisan relationships is endemic to political life" (2007, p. 133). The politician depends on others, but the party also depends on its components if it is to be successful. This means that, though yeah-sayers are not good politicians, the reverse, i.e. having individuals who are constantly undermining the party or coalition, can also be detrimental to the good functioning

not just of the party but of the political system as such. The right balance must be struck between not challenging one's leaders at all, and destabilising them too often. A certain level of commitment and reliability is expected of people involved in politics (even at the most basic membership level) if the party is not to implode. That is not to say that negative comments are not welcome, but that they must be pondered and kept within the limits of the party. Only in exceptional circumstances will the politician voice their disapproval more publicly, either through whistle-blowing or resignation. Finally, loyalties in the political realm are also useful to the extent that they reflect the social world around it, which makes it, for Philp, "an essential ingredient of political life." (2007, p. 135)

If ties of loyalty are inescapable in the political sphere, they must not be exaggerated. Expressions of loyalty can be manipulated, and there is a lot of façade and pretence, masking personal interests, just like when businesses make use of "brand loyalty" to retain their customers. Secret alliances, intrigues and even conspiracies exist within and between parties, and betrayals do occur. Low-level forms of disloyalty which are very common are leaks to the press about internal disputes, controversial policy drafts, etc. These can be pretty harmless and have, to a certain extent, become part of the rules of the game. However, they may be used to carry out a much more serious form of betrayal, when the leader is abandoned by his or her base: Blair by the Labour party in 2007, or Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard, in 2013. Cases like this have made political commentators doubt that true loyalties in politics are ever possible. Carville, one of the few remaining allies of President Clinton during the 1998 "Monicagate" scandal, sarcastically remarks that backstabbing is so rife that "if Brutus lived today, there would be a monument to him on the Mall." (2000, p. 14). Similarly, Felten recalls the "Washington adage" whereby the only way to get loyal friendship in politics is to "get a dog" (2011, p. 203). This, nevertheless, is perhaps an exaggeration of what goes on in day-to-day politics.

Acts of disloyalty (including of the worst kind) cannot be denied, but some of them are actually organised by clear procedures, in an attempt to canalise frustrations and to also embrace the dimension of politics as a fighting ground for opposing viewpoints and personalities. For instance, electing a new leader is done quite openly in most parties, with various candidates taking part in debates during which internal divisions are clear. Leadership elections are a risky exercise for parties, as the UMP in France found out after the leadership contest of 2012, the results of which were contested by defeated François Fillon, fierce enemy of victor Jean-François Copé. It may at times be difficult to restore some unity afterwards. But such challenges, when well handled, can be beneficial to the party, as the

primary elections of the French socialist candidates for the 2012 elections showed. At another level, there also exist a few instances, admittedly quite rare, when representatives are not bound to follow the party line during their vote, such as with gay marriage. Moreover, extreme cases of betrayal, i.e. defecting to the enemy, are not common, and certainly less frequent than in other professions such as footballer or trader. Yes they do happen, at local as well as national level, though we only hear of the most extreme examples, such as that of Eric Besson, French former socialist MP who switched to the UMP party of Sarkozy after the latter became president in 2007. Other cases involve people who resign from a party to become independent, or to set up their own movement (such as Nigel Farage in the UK or Dominique de Villepin in France), with mixed personal success. But overall, as Jollimore remarks, disloyalty in politics is "frequently a form of political suicide" (2013, p. x). So if the risks of betrayal are not uncommon and run both ways, it appears that the individual needs the group more than the other way around.

This leads us to our final set of positive observations on the role of partial loyalty in politics. Representatives, like any other category of people in the exercise of a profession or activity, can rarely function effectively without some sense of attachment to the group. Their dedication to the abstract cause of the will of the people, even when it is genuine, is not enough to drive them to act: they need personal connections too. It is essential to recognise this emotional side of the politician, which is often neglected. The politician is not robotically programmed to produce good policies, speeches, etc., and cannot be interchangeably replaced by others. She is a human being who feels part of a community: if she didn't, she would in Aristotle's words, be either "a beast or a God" (1253a). She wants to identify with others, and develop of sense of "philia", of comradeship, which, Helm notices, in its original Greek meaning, applied not just to relationships of friendship, but also of business (2009). These contacts help her become more embedded, and contribute to her personal development and self-esteem. In other words, personal loyalty motivates the politician, and all the more so that politics is a very adversarial milieu: placed in a situation of permanent hostility from the media and opposition from other parties, it is crucial for her to have allies to rely on in order to cope with criticism and not lose impetus.

It is quite striking that while antagonisms are toned down and cordial relations encouraged in day-to-day life, especially in the British culture, in politics undermining others is a daily game, which even the toughest and most experienced individuals may not always find easy to handle. Further to this, they have to face the resentment and distrust of the public (opinions pools regularly show that politicians are one of the least trusted category of people,

see for instance Edelman Trust Barometer, 2013). It is thus no surprise that politicians welcome the support of their clan and reciprocate it whenever possible. Recognising that politicians need ties of loyalty, and that loyalty to their group is an essential feature of their life, is therefore essential. If they didn't feel it, as Keller argues for people who have no loyalties at all, we would feel sorry for them, and we would describe them as "callous or misanthropic" (p. 159). Other scholars go as far as saying that such individuals would be deficient as moral agents (Kleinig 2013). I do not wish to adopt the communitarian standpoint whereby the individual is nothing without the groups she is embedded in, but I want to stress that politicians are not tough cookies who can take any criticism and are not affected by insults, threats, or, on the contrary, flattery. A portrayal of political life that does not take this into account seems to leave something out. The emotional links of loyalty may have adverse consequences, but they are nonetheless largely inescapable, and bring motivation to the politician. Finally, being loyal may not necessarily mean being a sycophant or an opportunist. Genuine evaluative beliefs can result from loyal relations. The above reasoning leads us to this conclusion: the outright condemnation of partial loyalties ought to be revised, though not entirely dismissed. We may call into question the common desire to have a completely impartial political process, which is examined in the second part.

**Part 2: Loyalty to the Good of the Public: Myth and Reality**

Political and moral philosophers do not tend to use the phrase "loyalty to the public" to describe the duty of politicians towards their constituents. They prefer terms such as "dedication" or "obligations." I would argue that these terms cover phenomena very similar, if not identical, to what I call "loyalty to the public:" an attachment to a group of people, and a bias towards them, whether they are residents of a village, town, region, or nation, the most written about form of loyalty being patriotism. It is not my intention to discuss patriotic loyalties, but it is commonly understood by moral philosophers that regional or national representatives, in the exercise of power, should be driven by a spirit of attachment to the group. With the notion of loyalty or dedication to the public cause, scholars aim to get the best of both worlds: the virtues of loyalty (e.g. a sense of attachment discussed above) as well as the merits of impartiality, thus avoiding the shortcomings of loyalty (favouritism, idolatry, excessive emotions, also covered earlier on). In this second part, I wish to argue that, though this is not entirely impossible, reconciling loyalty and impartiality is not very easy, and is not a realistic representation of what good political conduct usually achieves. Rather, political life

is better understood as the difficult exercise of political judgement in the face of unavoidable conflicts. But before expanding on this, let us state the obvious: there are good reasons why we should request our representatives to strive for loyalty to the public in general. The dangers of partial loyalties have already been stressed, but to them must be added those resulting from excessive selfishness.

The plague of politics, and perhaps of Western societies as a whole, is the "me-me" mentality. Politicians are often portrayed as being "in it for themselves," as evidenced by the attempts by some to engineer financial reward (cf. the expenses and the cash for questions scandals, but also the many consultancy fees they obtain on top of their public role). Personal greed is also combined with ambition and careerism: some will do all they can to ascend the ladder, and become more influential. This explains, for instance, the backstabbing and the faked expressions of party loyalty, mentioned in the first part. Asking for dedication to others, and to the public as a whole, is therefore seen as a means of discouraging such demeanours. Arguments in favour of more selflessness are found at two levels. First, they are developed by opponents to crude individualism, which is seen as endangering the notion of society itself. As R. E. Ewin maintains, "loyalty is the instinct to sociability that keeps us from the radical form of the Hobbesian natural condition, the war of each against all." (1999, p. 4) Many other scholars on loyalty stress that loyalty is a remedy that makes individuals conscious that they are integrated into a larger whole. It gives them a sense of the "other" and her differences, and helps them shy away from their selfish and narrow-minded views of the world. Fletcher, for instance, denounces strongly those increasing numbers of people driven by what he calls "the ethic of self-interest" (1993, p. ix). Instead, Fletcher promotes loyalty, because "we invariably need some basis for group cohesion, for caring about others, for seeing them not as strangers who threaten our security but as partners in a common venture" (p. 21). Others can, and perhaps should, been seen as allies for whom sacrifice may be necessary, thus increasing the virtues of selflessness amongst all. It could be objected here that these elements may be achieved through partial loyalties to one's family, friends, or to a clan, and are not specific to loyalty to the general public. This is true of course, but a familiar argument runs whereby the broader the group, and the higher the cause, the more developed the sense of selflessness. Ultimately, dedication to the community (local or national) constitutes an essential ingredient if one is truly to grasp the attachments of loyalty. Loyalty is, in Fletcher's terms, "a critical element in a theory of justice" (1993, p. 21).

This leads us to the second set of arguments which emphasise the centrality of loyalty to the public good in the political realm. This second set originates from various democratic

theories according to which the foundations of democratic regimes rely on representatives acting as servants of the people, driven by a sense of what is best for the public interest and nothing else. The term "servant" is worth emphasising, since it implies that elected people receive instructions, or a mandate (not to call this "orders") which they must abide mechanically. Like the butler in Kazuo Ishiguro*'s The Remains of the Day*, the role of the servant is not to assess and criticise the decisions of the employer, but merely to act on them (in Jollimore 2013, pp. 25-7). On this view, once the people have spoken, chosen their political leaders and placed their trust in them, the leaders should refrain from betraying their will. The secrecies, lies and manipulations resulting from partial loyalties would be breaking this trust, and thus the legitimacy of the representatives. This explains the demand for impartiality or neutrality with regards to intermediary groups. One of the first modern democratic thinkers, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, made absolutely clear his distrust for what he called, pejoratively, "factions." In his view, factional interests combined with personal interests, and expressed through the "will of all" were the antinomy of the true expression of the will of the people, which he famously named the "general will." (1973) This will, to him, could only be forged if the "delegates" (he disliked the term representative, which presupposed more autonomy of choice) rejected external influences but also silenced their individual interests, and instead listened solely to the voice of the general will, which emerged through genuine discussions amongst delegates. Only in this manner could loyalty to the public be guaranteed, which in turn would develop amongst the whole population a deeper sense of civic virtue, and of dedication to the greater good. The more recent theory of justice of Rawls, though not primarily inspired by Rousseau, also contains a reflection on how to avoid the influence of personal and partial interests in politics, though partiality is understood less in terms of party factions, and more in terms of role of race, sex, wealth, etc. The solution found by Rawls to guarantee impartiality is his "veil of ignorance," whereby each member of the community is unaware of its own characteristic whilst entering the social contract (1971). Finally, another set of theories which place loyalty to the public at its core are role-model theories, influenced by virtue ethics (Spurgin 2012). According to these, politicians must "embody" their role, and, as such, amend their demeanour not just in the exercise of their profession but also in their life. Leaving to one side their personal desires or that of their family, they are encouraged, to set the example: for instance, to stop smoking or eating too many chocolate bars in public, to send their children to state schools, to cycle to the town hall/Parliament or use public transport, and to spend their holidays in non-ostentatious places. All of it, once again, in the name of the public good.

It was already pointed out in the first part that it is unreasonable to assume that politicians can carry out their role with the sole motivation of an abstract "public good." Like any other human being, they are grounded and have various attachments that it would be foolish to dismiss. Whilst it is not my wish to argue that these attachments should trump their task of achieving the public good, I suspect, with other theorists like Geuss, that impartiality is a utopian ambition. Geuss demonstrates that the Rawlsian notion of "choice under the veil of ignorance" is an "incoherent concept" because real choice cannot occur in the absence of essential knowledge of the situation (2008, p. 71), and that a "neutral" standpoint may, in reality, be biased toward certain groups who have internalised their oppression (p. 88). Impartiality *à la* Rousseau has also been criticised as unachievable, for a simple reason: how does one determine what the "general will" is? It is difficult to define the public interest, and always has been. Its meaning is essentially contested and evolving, which explains the inherent argumentative nature of politics. As Runciman rightly points out, to the question "Who knows best?" (2006, p. 81), the answer is open-ended and does evolve. That is not to say that politicians should not strive to find ways of alleviating the sufferings of the population and of creating prosperity and well-being for all. What it means is that the obsession towards an unattainable goal is unhealthy, and even dangerous, as will now be demonstrated.

It is a common assumption that loyalty to principles (such as the "general will") is safer than that to a person or group because it is "adopted after rational consideration", to follow Ewin's words (1990, p. 9). But, as Ewin argues, this assumption can easily be dismissed, because it is not difficult to prove that some principles are held in a mechanic way, with no prior reasoning. We can go further than this and say that, just as loyalty to a person can be blind, loyalty to an abstract set of values may be ill-judged and perilous. In other words, fanaticism is not solely the outcome of factional loyalties, but of loyalty to concepts and ideas too. Attacks on Rousseau's famous line that those who do not recognise the general will should be "forced to be free" are well known, and must be put in parallel with comments by scholars who have rightfully stressed the atrocities caused when promoting loyalty to a greater abstract good. Anti-totalitarian writer Arthur Koestler uses fierce language to express this: "No historian would deny that the part played by crimes committed for personal motives is very small compared to the vast populations slaughtered in unselfish loyalty to a jealous God, king, country or political system" (in Felten, p. 10-1). The many oppressive regimes he indirectly refers to are countless: from Jacobin rule in revolutionary France to the practises of the Stasi in former Eastern Germany during the Cold War, the primacy of the "collective"

will seriously damaged family ties and created a climate of permanent fear of arbitrary arrest and death. Patriotism is another grand cause that led, and is still leading, to costly wars, which steered Kateb to define patriotism as "a readiness to die and to kill for what is largely a figment of the imagination" (in Jollimore, p. 63). Several scholars, in the same vein as Koestler, are even prepared to argue that loyalty to high values such as the nation, the public or the revolution, are even more dangerous than loyalties to the leader or a clan. Jollimore notes that the horrible deeds carried out in the name of such attachments can be worse because the perpetrators feels less responsible for the actions and more emotionally separated from the reasons of their actions (2013, p. 71).

Historical events teach us to be wary of political regimes driven by abstract loyalties, but also of "ideal" political theories which fail to understand the nature of politics. Amongst them can be included Kantianism and Utilitarianism. For Geuss, such approaches rests on "few general principles such that humans are rational, or that they generally seek pleasure and try to avoid pain, or that they always pursue their own 'interests'; these principles are taken to be historically invariant", and aspire for "systematicity" (2008, p. 7). These, for Geuss and other political realists, fail to recognise that politics is not the mere implementation of ethical values, but is instead primarily about action and reaction. It is a messy realm dictated mainly by events. As Bernard Williams put it, "political projects are essentially conditioned… by their historical circumstances" (2005, p. 25). Excessive idealism and moralism in politics is thus not only "frivolous" (p. 25), but also perilous.

Where does this leave us in our assessment of loyalty and impartiality in politics? Clearly, it is not a case of dismissing one and striving for the other. Fletcher nicely sums up the dilemma that faces us all, including politicians: "Absolute loyalty deprives us of our critical judgment; impartial ethics, of our human sensibilities" (1993, p. 172). So what should politicians do when faced with conflicts between their personal loyalties and loyalty to the public, or between other forms of partial loyalties, as listed before? Well, first of all, it must be noted that conflicts may not systematically occur. There are instances when loyalty to party and connections may also be in the public interest. In fact, the party line is meant to be a representation of what this party thinks is best for the public, and the politician is meant to be sharing most of the views of their party. Situations become more complicated when loyalty involves specific individuals, such as a close colleague or business ally, or a family member or friend. But there again, conflicts do not have to always occur. Burke remarked that the opposition between family commitments and others may not be true, and that in fact, loyalty within the "little platoons" of one's community is a reflection, and a preparation for

those of the whole community (1790). More recently, Hare added that in many instances, it is good for the community if mothers care for their children, and if generally individuals stand by their intermediary loyalties (1981, p. 137). If, for example, a local councillor backs the bid of his brother's business to build a sports complex in the city, knowing that this company has a proven record of reliability and effectiveness, it should not necessarily be seen as nepotism.

Nevertheless, easy cases like this are not frequent, and conflicts of loyalty are inevitable. The politician's decision is not straightforward, since it has become clear that they cannot mechanically follow a set of few and clear principles which would work for every situation. The genuine difficulty of their tasks is worth stressing: it does not systematically entail rejecting the pressures of the factions and endorsing the obvious interests of the population, as is often caricatured by those who cynically denigrate the political class. On the contrary, tensions run deep, and the collision of loyalties places the politician, like the rest of us, "in an intersecting circle of loyal commitments" (Fletcher, p. 155). The role of the politician is not one-dimensional, and it is better to refer to her roles, plural, given that she is also a family member, a party ally, etc. as well as a political representative. More often than not, she finds no easy get-out, and her choice has negative as well as positive outcomes. But being a politician is essentially about concentrating on damage control. In order to do so, representatives rely largely on their political judgement. Much has been written about political judgement, which is at the core of theories of political realism. Williams and Geuss, for instance, make it clear that an historical outlook is one if its important constituents, in fact more important than abstract reflection (2005, p. 55; 2008 p. 13). Departing from the excessive moralism of abstract principles, the politician exercises judgement when she analyses the information in her possession (which will never be complete), take into account the specific circumstances, replacing them in the recent and longer past, and tries to find the best timing for announcing a decision. The institutions within which she is working also have a role to play in her reflection (Cordell, 2011, p. 262). Furthermore, she needs to ponder between the potential short-term and long-term effects of the various possible options. For instance, she may decide that the short-term disloyalty to certain values may be outweighed by the necessity of keeping long term loyalty to important allies. This is a classic dilemma of diplomatic relations, as exemplified by the case of American whistle-blower Edward Snowden who first went to seek refuge in Hong-Kong. The protection of his human rights was balanced by the necessity to keep good relations in the long term with the most influential world power, and the get-out was to let him go to a third country (Russia), to avoid failing to comply with the extradition request from the US. Finally, with the best of

preparation and reflection, the success of decisions always relies on elements which are beyond the control of politicians, and therefore on luck.

It becomes clear that thinking in terms of allegiances of loyalty has an integral part to play when defining political conduct. Geuss states that "to think politically is to think about agency, power, and interests, and the relations amongst these" (p. 25). Loyalty plays a role at all of these levels: loyalty focuses on the object (person, group) of a politician's actions, and their respective interests at stake. As shown earlier, relations of loyalty also have a clear dimension of power, such as duty of gratitude, or on the contrary, an ability to extract obedience from others. Finally, power relations are central to a good understanding of loyal links, whether these relations are amongst equals or unequals. Given that many of the dilemmas that politicians are faced with are conflicts of loyalty, approaching political judgement from this angle helps makes sense of the nature of the judgement they make. Political conduct is not value neutral, but not primarily based on moral grounds either, just like relations of loyalty. Political judgement is comparable to loyalty in that it is partly rational and partly emotional, and politics is therefore an art or a craft rather than science. The leeway that politicians are given in the exercise of their power should thus be welcome, even if it means that they can, and will, abuse it. Finally, the fact that many forms of loyalty are a necessary element of politics does not entail that we should condone despicable behaviours driven by partial loyalties. Loyalty cannot be an excuse for everything. But to fight to eradicate group ties could have more negative effects that first thought, excessive moralism and abstract systems in politics having resulted in equally, if not worse, atrocious deeds.

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