

# 3

## *Politics and Moral Character*

BERNARD WILLIAMS

What sorts of person do we want and need to be politicians? This question, and the broader question of what we morally want from politics, are importantly different from the question of what the correct answers are to moral problems which present themselves within political activity. We may want – we may *morally* want – politicians who on some occasions ignore those problems. Moreover, even in cases where what we want the politician to do is to consider, and give the right answer to, such a problem, it is not enough to say that we want him to be the sort of person who can do that. Since some of the correct answers involve actions which are nonetheless very disagreeable, further questions arise about the sorts of persons who will give – in particular, who may find it too easy to give – those right answers.

It is cases where the politician does something morally disagreeable, that I am concerned with: the problem that has been called that of *dirty hands*. The central question is: how are we to think about the involvement of politicians in such actions, and about the dispositions that such involvement requires? This is not in the first place a question about what is permissible and defensible in such connexions; though something, obviously, will have to be said about what it means to claim that a politician has adequate reason to do something which is, as I put it, ‘morally disagreeable’.

The discussion assumes that it makes some difference what politicians are like, what dispositions they have. I do not want to stress an individualist picture of political action too much, but I assume that there is something to be said in the moral dimension about the actions of individual politicians. Even someone who denied that might admit, I suppose, that it could make some difference, of the sort which concerns us morally, what politicians were like. Someone who denies all that will probably think that

morality has nothing to do with politics at all, and for him the whole area of discussion lapses.

It is widely believed that the practice of politics selects at least for cynicism and perhaps for brutality in its practitioners. This belief, and our whole subject, notoriously elicit an uncertain tone from academics, who tend to be either over-embarrassed or under-embarrassed by moralizing in the face of power. Excited, in either direction, by the subject, they often take rather large-scale or epic examples, such as the conduct of international relations by hostile powers, or ruthless policies which may or may not be justified by history. I will touch marginally on those kinds of issue at the end, but my first concern is more with the simply squalid end of the subject, and with the politician not so much as national leader or maker of history, but as professional. I shall defer the more heady question of politicians being criminals in favour of the more banal notion that they are crooks.

There is of course one totally banal sense of the claim that they are crooks, namely that some break the law for their own advantage, take bribes, do shady things which are not actually illegal for personal gain. This dimension of effort is for the purpose of the present discussion beside the point. It does raise one or two interesting questions, for instance the absence from politics of any very robust notion of professional ethics. Some professions, such as lawyers and doctors, have elaborate codes of professional ethics: I take it that this is not because their vocation rises nobly above any thoughts of personal gain, but because their clients need to be protected, and be seen to be protected, in what are particularly sensitive areas of their interests. Some areas of business have similar provisions, but in general the concept of a professional business ethic is less developed than that of a professional medical or legal ethic. One might think that politics was concerned quite generally with sensitive areas of the clients' interests, yet even in places where it is recognized that these restrictions govern the activities of doctors and lawyers, the politician's professional conduct is perceived as more like that of the business man. The explanation of this fact I take not to be very mysterious: roughly, there are several reasons why it is in the interest of most in these professions to belong to a respectable cartel, but in the case of politicians, the circumstances in which

they are able to run a cartel are circumstances in which they have little motive to keep it respectable.

How are the morally dubious activities which belong to this, irrelevant, class, distinguished from those which concern our enquiry? Certainly not by the first sort being *secret*. For the first sort are often not secret, and in some cultures are barely meant to be so, it being an achievement calling for admiration that one has stolen extensively and conspicuously from the public funds. Even more obviously, many dubious acts of the more strictly political kind are themselves secret. The point rather is that not all acts done by politicians are political acts, and we are concerned with those that are. Relative to some appropriate account of what the politician is supposed to be up to as a politician, stealing from public funds is likely to count as a diversion of effort. However, it is to be recognized that not all classifications which would be made on these principles by the most respectable north-west European or North American opinion would come out the same elsewhere; thus bribery can be an integral and functional part of a political system. What must count as a political activity anywhere, however, is *trying to stay in office*. There are, needless to say, unacceptable ways of staying in office, and there are among them ways of staying in office which defeat the purposes of the methods for acquiring office (rigging the ballot). But this is a matter of means – the *objective* of staying in office, though it cannot by every means or in every circumstance be decently attained, is itself highly relevant to the business of politics, whereas the objectives of enriching oneself or of securing sinecures for one's family are not.

We shall leave aside the dubious activities of politicians which are not primarily political activities. But since the question we shall be concerned with is primarily what dispositions we want in politicians, we should not at the same time forget the platitude that the psychological distance between the two sorts of activity may be very small indeed. Not every politically ruthless or devious ruler is disposed to enrich himself or improperly advance his friends: the ones who are not are usually morally and psychologically more interesting. But the two sorts of tendency go together often enough, and cries for 'clean government' are usually demands for the suppression of both.

There is another aspect of the subject that I shall mention only in passing. I shall consider the politician as the originator of action, or at least as a joint originator of action, rather than as one who participates in a party or government, or acquiesces, with respect to decisions which he does not help to make. Some of the issues we shall consider apply to those who originate at any level; other larger issues apply only to those who originate at some higher level, such as a President or Prime Minister or (in the British system) a Cabinet Minister. This emphasis leaves on one side the question of a politician's responsibility, and hence the view one should take of him, when he agrees with a measure but did not originate it. It also leaves aside the more interesting question of his responsibility when he does not agree with it but acquiesces in it or stays in a position where he is identified with it – what is, in a democratic system at least, the *resigning problem*.

One remark is perhaps worth making here in relation to that problem. Resigning, or again refraining from resigning, cannot be straightforwardly either instrumental or expressive acts. Instrumental considerations of course bear on the issue, as in the classical 'working from within' argument which has kept many queasy people tied to many appalling ventures for remarkably long periods. Yet such decisions cannot, in the nature of the case, be purely and in all cases instrumental, since the decision has a class of consequences which themselves depend on the agent's being perceived as not being entirely consequentialist about it. Among the consequences of the act are some that depend on what it is taken to mean, so that the purely consequentialist agent would be faced, if he fully considered the consequences, with the fact that what he is doing is by its nature something which cannot be adequately thought about purely in terms of its consequences. On the other hand, to view resignation as the mere equivalent of saying 'I agree' or 'I disagree' in a private and uncoerced conversation would be an elementary misunderstanding, entertained only by someone who neglected the difference between a commitment to ongoing political activity, and a one-off example of political expression. It is also, therefore, to neglect the point that for a politician such a decision is, in a substantial and relevant sense, part of his life.

When that point is seen, moreover, it is often seen in the wrong terms: it naturally invites being seen in the wrong terms. For a

career politician, resignation is likely to affect the relation of his life to politics altogether. He must consider the decision to resign in the context of a commitment to a political life, and that can of course be read as his attending to his career. No doubt it is true of some in this situation that they are simply attending to their career, but it is important, both for the public and for the politician, to recognize that there is a structural reason why it should be difficult to tell whether that is true or not.

Among political acts are some for which there are good political reasons, as that important and worthy political projects would fail without these acts, but which are acts which honourable, scrupulous etc. people might, *prima facie* at least, be disinclined to do. Besides those, there are more, and more insidious, cases in which the unpalatable act seems necessary not to achieve any such clear-cut and noble objective, but just to keep going, or to pre-empt opposition to a worthy project, or more generally to prevent a worthy project becoming impossible later. What the unpalatable acts may be depends on the political environment; at present we are concerned with a relatively ordered situation where political activity involves at least bargaining and the expression of conflicting interests and ideals. In such a situation a politician might find himself involved in, or invited to, such things as: lying, or at least concealment and the making of misleading statements; breaking promises; special pleading; temporary coalition with the distasteful; sacrifice of the interests of worthy persons to those of unworthy persons; and (at least if in a sufficiently important position) coercion up to blackmail. We are not at this point considering more drastic situations in which there is a question, for instance, of having opponents killed. (I mean by that, that *there is no question of it*, and it would be thought outrageous or insane to mention it as an option. The situation is not one of those in which such options are mentioned and then, all things considered, laid aside.)

The less drastic, but still morally distasteful, activities are in no way confined to politics. That they should seem necessary follows just from there being large interests involved, in a context of partly unstructured bargaining. It is the same, for instance, with a lot of business of the more active variety. But it attracts more obloquy in politics than elsewhere: the use of such means is

thought more appropriate to the pursuit of professedly self-interested ends than where larger moral pretensions are entertained. But the fact that there are larger moral pretensions is itself not an accident. Besides the point that some objectives other than the self-interest of the professional participants are necessary – at the limit, are necessary for the activity even to be politics – there is the point that democracy has a tendency to impose higher expectations with regard even to the means, since under democracy control of politicians is precisely supposed to be a function of the expectations of the electorate.

I have mentioned acts, done in pursuit of worthy political ends, which 'honourable, scrupulous etc. people might, *prima facie* at least, be disinclined to do'. But, it will be said, if it is for some worthy political objective and the greater good, does not that merely show that it is an act which these honourable people should *not* be disinclined to do? At most, the characteristic which the act possesses is that it is of a type which these people would be disinclined to do if it were not in this interest; and that, it may be said, is irrelevant. But this Utilitarian response either does not get to the question which concerns us, or else gives an inadequate answer to it. It does not get to the question if it merely insists that the otherwise discreditable act is the one, in these circumstances, to be done, and says nothing about the dispositions of the agent, and how his dispositions express themselves in a view of this act. It gives an inadequate answer if it says that the only disposition such an agent needs is the disposition to do what is Utilitarianly right. Even Utilitarians have found that answer inadequate: it is not self-evident, and many Utilitarians agree that it is not even true, that the best way to secure their objective of the greatest happiness all round is to have agents each of whom is pursuing, as such, the greatest happiness all round. Beyond that level of discussion, again, there is the deeper point that moral dispositions other than Utilitarian benevolence may themselves figure in people's conceptions of 'happiness'.

In any case, it is not enough to say that these are situations in which the right thing to do is an act which would *normally* be morally objectionable. That description best fits the case in which an act and its situation constitute an *exception*. We may recall the repertoire, familiar from Ross and other writers, of obligations

properly overridden in emergencies. There, the decision is often easy – of course we break the routine promise to save the drowning child, and to doubt it, or to feel uneasy about having done it, would be utterly unreasonable. It is a clear overriding circumstance. While it is not as though the promise or other defeated obligation had never existed (one still has the obligation at least to explain), nevertheless it is quite clearly and unanswerably overridden, and complaints from the disadvantaged party would, once things had been explained, be unacceptable. Of course, not all cases of the straight overriding kind are clear cases of that kind. One can be in doubt what to do, and here there is room for unease. But the unease, within this structure, is directly related to the doubt or unclarity: the question will be 'did I really do the right thing?'. If one has an uneasy sense that one may have done wrong to the victim, it is because one has an uneasy sense that one may have done the wrong thing.

Some situations in politics are no doubt of that structure. But the situations I have in mind (of course, as I have said, they are not confined to politics) are of a different structure. In these, the sense that a discreditable thing has been done is not the product of uncertainty, nor again of a recognition that one has made the wrong choice. A sense that something discreditable has been done will, moreover, be properly shared by the victims, and they will have a complaint that they have been wronged. The politician who just could not see that they had a complaint, and who, after he had explained the situation to them, genuinely thought that their complaint was based on a misunderstanding and that they were unreasonable to make it (as one might properly think in the first kind of case) is a politician whose dispositions are already such as to raise our questions in a very pressing form.

I do not have in mind here drastic cases of tragic choice, where one might say that whatever the agent did was wrong.<sup>1</sup> They, though not merely exceptions, are certainly exceptional. The cases we are considering are not just what our normal categories count as exceptions, nor are they of the exceptional kind that reaches beyond our normal categories. Nor, again, need the decision be at all uncertain. It will often be true of these cases that so long

<sup>1</sup> I have said something about such cases in 'Ethical Consistency', reprinted in *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge 1973), Ch. 11.

as the agent takes seriously the moral frames of reference or reasons which support each of the courses of action, it will not be unclear what he should do. But the clarity in such a case is not that of the vivid emergency exception; nor is it the clarity of the impossible, which can attend the tragic case. It is clear because it is everyday, part of the business: not too often part of the business, one hopes, but part of the business all the same. If the politician is going to take the claims of politics seriously, including the moral claims of politics, and if he is going to act at anything except a modest and largely administrative level of responsibility, then he has to face at least the probability of situations of this kind. If he shares the highest responsibilities, it is virtually certain that he will encounter them. Below that level, he may perhaps not. He may operate in a very docile and citizenly environment. He may be lucky. He may even have, as a few seem to have, a virtue or a moral cunning which drives such situations away. But it is a predictable and probable hazard of public life that there will be these situations in which something morally disagreeable is clearly required. To refuse on moral grounds ever to do anything of that sort is more than likely to mean that one cannot seriously pursue even the moral ends of politics.

Yet, at the same time, the moral disagreeableness of these acts is not merely cancelled, and this comes out above all in the consideration that the victims can justly complain that they have been wronged. It is undeniable, for instance, that the agent has lied, or deliberately misled them, or bullied them, or let them down, or used them. It may be that when it is all explained, they understand, but it is foolish to say, even then, that they have no right to complain.

It may be said that the victims do not have a right to complain because their relation to the action is not the same in the political context as it would be outside it: perhaps it is not even the same action. There is some truth, sometimes, in this claim. It does apply to some victims themselves involved in politics: a certain level of roughness is to be expected by anyone who understands the nature of the activity, and it is merely a misunderstanding to go on about it in a way which might be appropriate to more sheltered activities. But this consideration – which might be called *Truman's kitchen-heat principle* – does not go all the way. There are victims outside

politics, and there are victims inside it who get worse than they could reasonably expect; and in general there are political acts which no considerations about appropriate expectations or the going currency of the trade can in themselves adequately excuse.

I mentioned the 'moral claims' of politics. In some cases, the claims of the political reasons are proximate enough, and enough of the moral kind, to enable one to say that there is a moral justification for that particular political act, a justification which has outweighed the moral reasons against it. Even so, that can still leave the moral remainder, the uncanceled moral disagreeableness I have referred to. The possibility of such a remainder is not peculiar to political action, but there are features of politics which make it specially liable to produce it. It particularly arises in cases where the moral justification of the action is of a consequentialist or maximizing kind, while what has gone to the wall is a right: there is a larger moral cost attached to letting a right be overridden by consequences, than to letting one consequence be overridden by another, since it is part of the point of rights that they cannot just<sup>2</sup> be overridden by consequences. In politics the justifying consideration will characteristically be of the consequentialist kind. Moreover, an important aspect of consequentialist reasoning lies in maximizing *expectation*, the product of the size of the pay-off and its probability. Since in the political sphere of action the pay-offs are, or can readily be thought to be, very large, the probabilities can be quite small, and the victims may find that their rights have been violated for the sake of an outside chance.

Where the political reasons are of the less proximate kind, for instance defensive, or pre-emptive, or concerned with securing an opportunity, we may speak, not of the moral claims of politics, but merely of the claims of politics against morality. While an anxious politician may hope still to find some moral considerations bearing on the situation, he may discover that they have retreated merely to the overall justification of the pursuit of his, or his party's, worthwhile objectives, or some similar over-arching con-

<sup>2</sup> I assume that rights can sometimes be overridden. To define 'rights' so that this should not ever be possible would have wider consequences – since one must say something about possible conflicts of rights among themselves – and is anyway undesirable: if all rights have to be *absolute* rights, then it is plausible to conclude that there are no rights at all.

cern. The Olympian point of retreat is notoriously so distant and invulnerable that the rationale of seriously<sup>3</sup> carrying on the business of politics ceases to be disturbed by any moral qualms or any sense of non-political costs at all. Decent political existence lies somewhere between that – or its totally cynical successor, from which even the distant view of Olympus has disappeared – and an absurd failure to recognize that if politics is to exist as an activity at all, some moral considerations must be expected to get out of its way.

If that space is to have any hope of being occupied, we need to hold on to the idea, and to find some politicians who will hold on to the idea, that there are actions which remain morally disagreeable even when politically justified. The point of this is not at all that it is edifying to have politicians who, while as ruthless in action as others, are unhappy about it. Sackcloth is not suitable dress for politicians, least of all successful ones. The point – and this is basic to my argument – is 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.

There are two different reasons for this. First, there is no disposition which just consists in getting it right every time, whether in politics or in anything else. Whether judgment is well exercised, whether immediate moral objections are given the right weight, or any, against large long-term issues, is, on any sensible view of those processes, something that involves patterns of sentiment and reaction. In a body of persons considering a practical question, it essentially involves their shared dispositions and their mutual expectations – what considerations can be heard, what kinds of hesitation or qualification or obstacle it is appropriate or effective to mention. (There is a remark attributed to Keynes, about an American official: 'a man who has his ear so close to the ground that he cannot hear what an upright man says'.) That is the first, and main, reason, and one which any reasonable view of deliberation must accept: a habit of reluctance is an essential obstacle against the happy acceptance of the intolerable.

<sup>3</sup> I have known a politician, now dead, who used to say 'that is not a *serious* political argument' to mean, more or less, 'that is an argument about what to do in politics which mentions a non-political consideration' – in particular, a moral consideration. This posture was to some degree bluff.

The second reason, which I have already included in my account, is something less widely acceptable: that reluctance in the necessary case, is not only a useful habit, but a correct reaction to *that case*, because that case does involve a genuine moral cost. The fact that reluctance is justified even in the necessary case – and in speaking of ‘reluctance’, I mean not just initial hesitation in reaching for the answer, but genuine disquiet when one arrives at it – is in fact something that helps to explain the nature, and the value, of the habit of reluctance which was appealed to in the first reason. It embodies a sensibility to moral costs. Utilitarianism, which hopes (in some of its indirect forms) to appeal to habits of reluctance, cannot in fact make any sense of them at this level, because it lacks any sense of *moral* cost, as opposed to costs of some other kind (such as utility) which have to be considered in arriving at the moral decision. Utilitarianism has its special reasons for not understanding the notion of a moral cost, which are connected with its maximizing conceptions; but much other moral philosophy shares that incapacity. Yet it is a notion deeply entrenched in many people’s moral consciousness. Why so many moral philosophers learn to forget it is a harder question, and perhaps a deeper one, than why some politicians do.

If, then, there can be agents who in this way have good moral reason to do things which they have good reason to think are, and remain, morally distasteful, a way of understanding their situation might be to see it as one in which the agent has some special relationship to parties involved, which will give him an honourable motive for overruling his objections to such acts. This is the model which Charles Fried in a recent paper (*‘The Lawyer as Friend: The Moral Foundations of the Lawyer–Client Relation’*, 85 *Yale Law Journal*, 1060–89 (1976)) has applied to the case (in some ways similar) of the lawyer who is required on behalf of his client to do things one would not feel morally well-disposed towards doing, such as harassing witnesses or pressing a formal advantage of well-off persons against the vital interests of less well-off persons. Fried invokes in this connexion the relationship of friendship, modelling the lawyer’s relationship to his client on the kind of personal relationship which would be widely acknowledged to permit or even require departures from what would otherwise be the demands of impartiality. Fried honestly raises and confronts

the problem, but it is hard to be convinced by the model that he has brought to bear on it. For one thing – a point which he mentions but, it seems to me, does not dispose of – one is not paid to be someone's friend; for another, the honourable man who is in question might not be expected to have friends who are like some of the lawyer's clients, or who expect him to do what some of the lawyer's clients expect him to do.

There are some analogies to a special relationship model in politics, inasmuch as politics involves loyalties or allegiances which require one to be something other than impartial. But while there are some allegiances of this kind, to country or party or electorate, and they play some role, they are not adequate, any more than a personal relationship to the client in the legal case, to cover the full range of these issues. Rather, the legal case very readily presses on us a different sort of question which is not only a useful question to ask but also, I think, *the* useful question to ask in these connexions: namely, what sort of system does one want, and what sort of disposition do you want in the person acting? We then have to think about how the answers to these questions can be harmonized, in the light of the question: what dispositions does the system require or favour?

The example of the law raises some interesting questions in this connexion, and I shall pursue it a little further. One has to ask how the desired product of legal activity, justice, is related to an adversarial system, and to what extent the sorts of behaviour that concern Fried are encouraged or required by such a system. That is, in fact, only the start of the problem, for if the adversarial system succeeds in producing justice, one factor in that must be the presence of a judge – and judges are lawyers, and usually former advocates. The judicial disposition is not the same as the adversarial disposition, but as our system of recruitment for judges works, the one has somehow to issue from the other.

Let us, however, stick to the adversarial case. Concentrating on the morally disagreeable activities which may be involved in the enforcement of some legal rights (e.g. some legal rights of the strong against the weak), we might be tempted by the following argument:

- (1) In any complex society (at least) the enforcement of some legal rights involves morally disagreeable acts.

(2) It is bad that legal rights which exist should not be enforceable.

(3) Enforcement of many rights of the kind mentioned in (1) requires lawyers.

(4) Any lawyer really effective in enforcing those rights must be fairly horrible.

ERGO (5) It is good that some lawyers are fairly horrible.

How might this argument be met, if at all? The conventional answer presumably lies in denying (1); but in our context of discussion, we will not accept as sufficient the conventional reason for denying it, namely that there is a sufficient moral justification for the system that requires those acts (which is in effect equivalent to (2)). Another line would be to deny (2). This is perhaps the approach of Wasserstrom,<sup>4</sup> who inclines to the view that if (1) carries much weight with regard to some rights, then it may just be better that those rights be not enforced. If this goes beyond the position of refusing to act when one knows that someone else will (not necessarily an objectionable position), it runs into difficulties about the operation of the law as a roughly predictable system. Fried denies (4), by putting the acts required in (1) into the framework of loyalty and friendship. Others might combat (4) by using notions of professionalism, insisting that since those acts are done in a professional role, in the name of a desirable system, it cannot follow that they express a horrible disposition – they are not, in that sense, personal acts at all.

The phenomenology of the states of mind invoked by that answer is very complex. The limitations of the answer are, however, fairly obvious and indeed notorious. One limitation, for instance, must lie in the consideration that it is a personal fact about somebody that that is his profession. However, whatever we think in general about those ideas of professionalism, there is at least one thing that can be allowed to the lawyer's situation which it is hard to allow to the politician's. Even if we accepted (5), the disagreeable conclusion of the argument, we could at least agree that the professional activities of lawyers are delimited enough to

<sup>4</sup> 'Lawyers as Professionals: some moral issues', 5 *Human Rights* (1975) pp. 2–24. I am grateful for discussion of these issues to Dick Wasserstrom, Andy Kaufman, and other participants in the Council for Philosophical Studies Institute on Law and Ethics, Williams College Mass., 1977.

make the fact that some are fairly horrible of limited account to the public: the ways in which the argument, if sound, shows them to be horrible are ways which their clients, at any rate, have no reason to regret. But there is much less reason for such comfort in the politicians' case, and if a comparable argument can be mounted with them, then the public has reason to be alarmed. The professional sphere of activity is very much less delimited, and there are important asymmetries, for example in the matter of concealment. The line between the client and the other side is one which in an adversarial system governs a great deal of the lawyer's behaviour, and certainly the sorts of reasons he has for concealing things from the opposition are not characteristically reasons for concealment from his client. But the reasons there are for concealing things in politics are always reasons for concealing them from the electorate.

Another reason for concern in the political case lies in the professional (and in itself perfectly proper) commitment to staying in power. I have already suggested that it involves an essential ambivalence: it is impossible to tell, at the limit, where it merges into simple ambition, and into that particular deformation of political life, under all systems, which consists in the inability to consider a question on its merits because one's attention is directed to the consequences of giving (to one's colleagues, in the first instance) a particular answer. Where that has widely taken over, the citizens have reason to fear their politicians' judgment.

The dispositions of politicians are differently related to their tasks and to their public than are those of a profession such as the legal profession for which partly analogous questions arise. Those differences all give greater reason for concern, and make more pressing the question: what features of the political system are likely to select for those dispositions in politicians which are at once morally welcome and compatible with their being effective politicians? What features of the system can help to bring it about that fairly decent people can dispose of a fair degree of power? How does one ensure a reasonable succession of colonists of the space between cynicism and political idiocy?

It is a vast, old, and in good part empirical question. If one adapts Plato's question, *how can the good rule?*, to Machiavelli's, *how to rule the world as it is?*, the simplest conflation – *how can the*

*good rule the world as it is?* – is merely discouraging. It is also, however, excessively pious: the conception of the good that it inherits from Plato invites the question of how the good could do anything at all, while the Machiavellian conception of the world as it is raises the question of how anyone could do anything with it. (A popular sense of ‘realism’ gets its strength from the fact that the second of those questions has some answers, while the first has none.) But if one modifies from both ends, allowing both that the good need not be as pure as all that, so long as they retain some active sense of moral costs and moral limits; and that the society has some genuinely settled politics and some expectations of civic respectability: then there is some place for discussing what properties we should like the system, in these respects, to have. There are many: I will mention, only in barest outline, four dimensions of a political system which seem to bear closely on this issue.

(a) There is the question, already touched on, of the balance of publicity, and the relations of politician and public, particularly of course in a democracy. The assumption is widespread, particularly in the USA, that public government and a great deal of public scrutiny must encourage honest government, and apply controls to the cynicism of politicians. There is, however, no reason to suppose that the influence of such practices and institutions will be uniformly in one direction. The requirements of instant publicity in a context which is, as we are supposing, to some mild degree moralized, has an evident potential for hypocrisy, while, even apart from that, the instant identification of particular political acts, as they are represented at the degree of resolution achievable in the media, is a recipe for competition in pre-emptive press releases.

(b) A similar question is that of the relations of politicians to one another; and there is another approved belief, that it is in the interest of good government that politicians should basically be related to one another only functionally, that they should not share a set of understandings which too markedly differentiate them from people who are not politicians. Yet it is not clear how far this is true, either. For it is an important function of the relations of politicians to one another, what courses of action are even discussible, and that is a basic dimension of a moral culture. Very

obviously, a ruthless clique is worse than a clique checked by less ruthless outsiders, but that is not the only option. Another is that of a less ruthless clique resisting more ruthless outsiders.

(c) A very well-known point is that of the relation of potential politicians to actual ones, the question of political recruitment. Notoriously, systems where succession is problematic or discontinuous have the property of selecting for the ruthless. No sensible critic will suggest that if that is so, it is at all easy to change, but it is nevertheless an important dimension of assessment of a political system.

(d) A slightly less obvious variant of the same sort of issue concerns the promotion-pattern within a political organization: in particular, the position of the bottleneck between very top jobs and rather less top jobs. Except in very favoured circumstances, it is likely to be the case that getting to the top of a political system will require properties which, while they need not at all necessarily be spectacularly undesirable or even regrettable, may nevertheless perhaps lean in the direction of the kind of ambition and professionalism which does not always make for the best judgment, moral or practical. It is desirable that the system should not put too heavy stress on those properties too soon in the business; there can then be an honourable and successful role, below the final bottleneck, for persons without the elbow-power to get into or through the bottleneck. Government concentrated on a few personalities of course tends to weaken this possibility. Related is the question of the prestige of jobs below the top one. It was a notable fact, remarked by some commentators, that when the English politician R. A. (now Lord) Butler retired from politics, it was suggested that his career had been a failure because – and although – he had held almost every major office of state except the Premiership itself.

These are, of course, only hints at certain dimensions of discussion. The aim is just to suggest that it is in such ways that one should think about the disagreeable acts involved in (everyday) politics – that fruitful thought should be directed to the aspects of a political system which may make it less likely that the only persons attracted to a profession which undoubtedly involves some such acts will be persons who are insufficiently disposed to find them disagreeable.

Last, I should like to make just one point about the further dimension of the subject, in which one is concerned not just with the disagreeable or distasteful but with crimes, or what otherwise would be crimes. This is a different level from the last: here we are concerned not just with business but, so to speak, with the Mafia. My question, rather as before, is not directly whether actions of a certain kind – in this case such things as murders, torture, etc. – are ever justified, but rather, if they are justified, how we should think of those who politically bring them about. I shall call the actions in question, for short, *violence*. It might be worth distinguishing, among official acts of violence, what could be called *structured* and *unstructured* violence: the former related to such processes as executions under law, application of legal force by the police, etc., while the latter include acts (it may be, more abroad than at home) pursued in what is regarded as the national interest.

I shall set out a list of four propositions which some would regard as all true, and which, if they were all true, would make the hope of finding politicians of honourable character, except in minor roles and in favourable circumstances, very slim.

- (i) There are violent acts which the state is justified in doing which no private citizen as such would be justified in doing.
- (ii) Anything the state is justified in doing, some official such as, often, a politician is justified in ordering to be done.
- (iii) You are not morally justified in ordering to be done anything which you would not be prepared to do yourself.
- (iv) Official violence is enough like unofficial violence for the preparedness referred to in (iii) to amount to a criminal tendency.

I take it that no-one except anarchists will deny (i), at least so far as structured violence is concerned (it is admitted that the distinction between structured and unstructured violence is imprecise). It may be said that structured violence constitutes acts which none but the state could even logically perform: thus nothing done by a private citizen as such could constitute a judicial execution. But I take it that while this is true, it does not cut very deep into the essential issues: thus there is another description of the act which is a judicial execution under which that act could logically, but ought not to be, performed by a

private citizen. A more substantial issue is whether the only violence that is legitimate for the state is structured violence. This I doubt, too. Even if regular military operations are counted as structured violence, there may be other acts, bordering on the military or of an irregular character, which a state may be lucky if it is in a position to do without altogether.

An important issue connected with this is the extent to which a political leader's task, particularly in a democracy, is defined in terms of defending the interests of the state; and whether, if the interests of some other, rival, state will be advanced unless some act of violence is authorized, he can be justified in refusing to authorize that act. A similar problem arises in the case where he thinks that the interests of another state should, in justice, prevail. He certainly has a right to that opinion; to what extent has he the right to act on it while still performing that role?

The (imprecise) distinction between structured and unstructured violence also bears on (iv). (iv) is perhaps more plausible with unstructured than with structured violence. It is very widely agreed that the distinction between the official and the unofficial can make a moral difference to the estimation of acts of violence; there are similarly psychological differences in the dispositions underlying the two kinds of acts, even if it is unclear how deep those differences may, in many cases, go (an unclarity which itself makes some people unduly nervous about the legitimacy of official violence). If that is right, then (iv) will fail, and the disobliging conclusion will not follow from the argument, even granted the truth of (i) and the platitudinous truth of (ii). At least, it will be enough to prevent its following with full generality. But while we may certainly agree that (iv) is not exceptionlessly true, it is quite plausible to claim that there are acts, particularly perhaps of unstructured violence, for which (iv) really does hold true, but which nevertheless would be justified under (i). To suppose that there could be no such acts, to suppose in particular that if an act is such that (iv) applies to it, then it must follow that it could not be justified, would be, it seems to me, to take a highly unrealistic view either of politics, or of the possible psychology of agents who will do that act.

In this case, attention turns to (iii); (iii) seems to me false, and more interestingly so than (iv). If so, then there is perhaps a larger

class of arguments which have some currency in moral discussion which will have to be abandoned or given extra help: as that one should be a vegetarian unless one would be prepared to work in an abattoir, or that one should not accept experimentation on animals unless one were prepared to conduct it (assuming that one had the skills) oneself. However it may be with those cases, at any rate our understanding of honesty and decency in politicians should be modified by reflexion on (iii). The consideration that they should not order something unless they were prepared to do it themselves should be counterweighted with the consideration that if they were prepared to do it themselves, they might be far too willing to order it.

