

Under What Circumstances is it Legitimate for Politicians to Lie?

Written by Nigel Hogan

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NIGEL HOGAN, AUG 22 2012

The honesty of our democratically elected politicians is constantly scrutinised by their constituents, peers, the press and the nation as a whole. The recent expenses scandal provides an example as to why national and global societies have suspicious feelings toward the intentions of politicians. This essay will highlight the fact that the role of a professional politician, where instant decisive and important decisions need to be made, and the context sometimes require democratically elected politicians, engaged in a social contract with the electorate, to lie to safeguard the greater good of national and global citizens. Due to the volume of theory and discourse related to this topic, it would not be practical to analyse all aspects to this question. However, this essay will examine the following: first, it will look at the unique nature of the role of a politician, followed by an overview of the social contract theory and the contributions made to it by Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and John Rawls. Then, the work of Niccolo Machiavelli and the notion of Reason of State will be examined, followed, in turn, by Utilitarianism, commenting on the contributions of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. This will be done before going onto balance the essay by introducing a counterargument offered by Idealism. Finally, to contextualise the thesis, there will be a contemporary example given of a world leader having to lie for the greater good of global citizens for possible prevention of future harm.

Politicians work in a difficult profession and what they do is for the common good of society as a whole. Bellamy (2010) asserts that evidence to suggest that democratic politicians possess fewer morals than the general public lacks validity. They operate within the full gaze of the public, which exaggerates any failings they may have. Yet, their purpose is to work for the common good. The type of decision that a politician has to make differs greatly from those faced by those within other professions. Their decisions, for instance, may affect a greater number of people and, as such, politicians need to do “things that private individuals ought not to do, such as using falsehoods and violence and that a degree of hard headedness may be required.” (Bellamy, 2010: 414). In doing so, politicians may gain “dirty hands”, exacerbated by the exacting standards placed upon them by those they govern. This theory suggests that to engage in political life, one has to forego certain morals that exist outside of politics. Indeed, some assert that politics “exclusively or predominantly generates the need for dirty hands” (Coady, 1991: 374). These “dirty hands” can come from abandoning their personal morals for the common good and as Bellamy (2010) suggests and do things that they would normally recoil from in a cunning and callous manner. This sets the stage by which politicians are given the legitimacy to lie, as the public recognises that they have to work within a different realm where lying may be required.

The study of social contract theory has taken place over thousands of years, with the notable contributions to its development being Thomas Hobbes with “Leviathan” (1651), John Locke with “Second Treatise of Government” (1689), Jean-Jacques Rousseau with “Du contrat social” (1762) and, more recently, John Rawls with “A Theory of Justice” (1971). When discussing social contract theory in terms of political authority, it is important to mention the consent given by the “ruled”. Locke suggests that “no one can be...subjected to the political power of another, without his consent.” (Lessnoff, 1990 :3), which means that justification of political authority derives, in part, from the fact that all men are equal, but with also an agreement existing between the governors and governed.

An early analysis of political authority was carried out by Manegold of Lautenbach, stating: “Since no one can create

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himself emperor or king, the people elevates a certain one person over itself to this end, that he govern and rule it according to right reason, give to each one his own, protect the good, destroy the wicked and administer justice to every man.” (Lessnoff, 1990: 5). This highlights that political authority exists for the benefit of the people and is allowed to occur because the people recognise this authority, thus creating its legitimacy. Thomas Hobbes asserts that mankind chooses to live under some form of authority because the alternative is to live in a “state of nature”. This is said to be a time when one’s hypothetical life would be under threat from others and where anarchy would flourish due to the lack of basic social norms taken for granted today, as, for example, with education. This description of the “state of nature” is in contrast to the views of Locke and Rousseau, who recognise its existence, but view it as a more subdued time. In order to develop a more dignified existence, mankind has relinquished powers to others and stopped society from descending into violence by providing protection for citizens. They have, in return, agreed to respect each other, releasing themselves from the “state of nature”. Under social contract theory and, in particular, the normative theories of Locke, Hobbes and Rousseau, the legitimacy of governments and politicians and their actions derives from the consent of the people. The people are the ones who come to recognise that it is in their best interests to adhere to the laws of the state.

Central to the argument put forward by this essay is the concept of “reason of state,” which can be simply defined as the preservation of the state in a just or unjust manner. Many scholars assert that it was Niccolo Machiavelli that first introduced this notion. Yet, others such as Games Post suggest that it could be found in medieval literature (Viroli, 1992). Either way, it has proved an important topic within political theory. Machiavelli, though, at the age of 29, embarked on his political career by becoming Second Chancellor of the Florence Republic, a post that allowed him to travel around Europe holding diplomatic meetings with prominent political figures of the 15th century (McDonald, 1970). It was during this time that Machiavelli started to produce literature that has gone on to become some of the most discussed pieces of work within political fields by scholars and politicians alike, with the most famous being “The Prince”. Machiavelli recognised, in the 15th century, that those who governed successfully did not, and should not, rely on keeping to their promises. Even at this early stage, those that prospered relied on breaking promises and subterfuge. Machiavelli, in chapter 18 of “The Prince”, speaks of two different ways in which to govern, with the first being within the law, deemed as the most civil, and the second being by force, much like an animal commenting. He says: “Therefore a ruler must know well how to imitate beasts as well as employing properly human means” acting in the manner of “...a fox to recognise traps, and a lion to frighten away wolves.” (Machiavelli, 1988: 61). The concept of “reason of state,” again, provides legitimacy for the actions of politicians, as state preservation becomes of paramount importance.

Another theory that explains the personal and procedural actions of people in public office is Utilitarianism, with the modern founder of which is considered to be Jeremy Bentham. During the 18th and 19th centuries, Bentham developed the theory to further explain why people may disregard their personal morals when faced with a difficult decision and think of the greater good for the wider community. At the core of Utilitarianism is “The Happiness Principle” and the much used phrase “The greatest happiness of the greatest number”, both which also appear in the earlier works of Francis Hutcheson and Cesare Beccaria, (Goldworth (1969). The term “happiness” in this context is defined by John Stuart Mill as “the absence of pain” (Mill, 1991: 137). The principle itself came to dominate Bentham’s work and imply that the overall happiness of the people, the maintenance of which is essential, is of paramount importance when forming a decision. Therefore, when faced with a difficult situation, a person will assess all solutions available to them and analyse the pros and cons of these solutions in terms of maintaining the happiness of the people, before finally choosing the solution that delivers the maximum benefits to the majority. The means by which this outcome is achieved is of little concern to the followers of Utilitarianism, as the outcome is much more important. Given that this, according to Bentham and Mills, is a natural human action, it provides further legitimacy and justification to the reasons why some politicians may have to lie in order to preserve the greater good of the majority. This is further advanced by Bentham himself, who commented: “The right and proper end of government in every political community, is the greatest happiness of all individuals of which it is composed” (Goldworth, 1969: 316).

Idealism offers a counter argument to the notion that politicians and public officials have to act in an immoral manner and lie when in a position of power, asserting that those politicians that do so lack the necessary “moral fibre to do what they really ought to do in governmental contexts” (Calhoun, 2004: 364). Idealism views it inconceivable that

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fulfilling the duty imposed on an individual by the electorate or party members could lead to morals being broken as “acting in accordance with what is truly one’s duty cannot cause the degradation of the agent” (Calhoun, 2004: 366). In addition, the presupposed Realist viewpoint that people are susceptible to corruption and will become corrupt when embarking on a political career holds little validity with idealists, who do not see this as a foregone conclusion. They claim that it is possible to act within one’s moral boundaries even in the face of temptation, concluding that any outcome that is the result of an immoral act cannot itself be considered moral.

Despite that stance, to validate that it is the role of a professional politician that gives legitimacy for a politician to lie, a contemporary example of the aforementioned theories in action will now be provided. The contemporary example is that of the assassination of Osama Bin Laden, the leader of the international terror organisation Al-Qaeda. There continues to be a longstanding mistrust between the United States and Pakistani governments with regards to claims by the United States that Pakistan has failed to deal with internal terror groups, such as the Pakistan Taliban, a claim denied by Pakistan (Tisdall, 2011). This mutual distrust provided weak diplomatic foundations upon which to build any nuance of trust. Therefore, when the United States received information that Osama Bin Laden was alive and living close to the Pakistan capital, Islamabad, President Obama’s administration did not feel confident enough to divulge this information to the Pakistani government. As a senior official commented: “Only a very small group of people inside our own government knew of the operation in advance.” (BBC News, 2011). This situation provided President Obama with a moral dilemma. Would he inform his Pakistani counterpart, respect Pakistan as a sovereign state, and risk losing the opportunity to capture Osama Bin Laden or remain silent, lie and remove the head and inspirational leader of the world’s largest terror organisation, potentially protecting global citizens from further harm. In accordance with the proposed thesis, he chose the latter option.

In examining the legitimacy of lying for politicians, this essay has highlighted the importance of the subject matter and the lack of trust between the electorate and elected as important reasons for lying, providing the recent example of the expenses scandal as to how this issue is a growing problem for the public. The exceptional nature of the role of a politician was discussed, which helped provide some reasoning as to their actions. Following on from this, the thoughts of some of the major scholars, philosophers and political theorists were examined in the form of the theories they proposed. This provided explanations for the actions of politicians and from where the legitimacy to act in this way has been derived. These include the social contract theory, Niccolo Machiavelli’s Reason of State and Utilitarianism, along with Idealism forming a counter argument. Finally, the contemporary example was given of President Obama’s decision to lie to his Pakistani counterpart in order to assassinate Osama Bin Laden for the purpose of safeguard global citizens from future potential attacks. This validates the thesis that politicians do make decisions that go against personal morals and lie for the safety of the people. These difficult decisions, along with the nature of their work, provide the circumstances under which it becomes legitimate for a politician to lie.

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Written by: Nigel Hogan
Written at: University of Westminster
Written for: Dr Ricardo Blaug
Date written: February 2012