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**Article:**

Sleat, M. (2013) Hope and Disappointment in Politics. *Contemporary Politics*, 19 (2). pp. 131-145. ISSN 1469-3631

<https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2013.785826>

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# Hope and Disappointment in Politics

Matt Sleat<sup>i</sup>

*Personally, I feel an inner rage every day at the disparity between what is promised and what is delivered, between what is possible and what is happening, between the 'is' and the 'ought'*

Sir Bernard Crick<sup>ii</sup>

Disappointment is a familiar experience of political life. We are more accustomed to the experience of political hopes frustrated than of hopes fulfilled. Our own age is one of deep and potentially damaging disaffection with politics, with a widespread perception that politics is letting us down. There is good reason to be sceptical of the idea that our current 'hatred' of politics is either new or particularly unique to our time (see Hay, 2007, p. 7). But even if this is true, it only serves to make the question that this paper seeks to address even more pertinent: why is it that politics is so often experienced as a sphere of human disappointment? Is there anything about the nature of politics, not just politics here-and-now but politics-as-such, that makes disappointment an inevitable outcome?

The causes of our current disdain for politics has been the focus of several recent important studies, many of which have either sought to defend politics against its most ardent critics or have offered suggestions as to how institutional or more widespread cultural reforms could help reduce our disappointment in politics (see Flinders, 2012; Gamble, 2000; Hay, 2007; Riddell, 2011; Stoker, 2006). In this paper I want to make a contribution to this debate in a similar vein, though it will be unique insofar as it will offer a political theory perspective on the issue. What I shall make the case for is an understanding of politics which helps bring back into focus some aspects of the nature of politics and enables us to understand disappointment as an inevitable feature of political life. While there are 'limits to all human striving' as Reinhold Niebuhr put it (2008, p. 133), this is particularly true in the political sphere. The limits of politics are, I shall argue, the result of the conditions in which politics takes place; they are intrinsic to the political. Moreover it is these limits and constraints that make political disappointment unavoidable so that even when politics is going well or successfully it will inevitably generate disappointment. Recognising this has important ramifications for how we understand disappointment in politics but, as I shall discuss in the second section, hope also. What I want to

point to is a set of theoretical considerations which might give us reason to dampen our optimism in what politics can deliver without necessarily resigning us to our fate of political disappointment. And it may be that accepting the inevitability of disappointment in politics could place our hopes for our shared world on a much firmer and more stable footing.<sup>iii</sup>

Before beginning, it is worth noting that the fact this paper makes no reference to causes of disappointment in politics such as politicians' behaviour, the role of money or unions in dictating parties' policies, or questions about the difficulty of implementing policies in practice, should not be interpreted as in any way excusing such causes of citizens' dissatisfaction with our current politics. Far from it. I believe that such activities and issues justify frustration with much contemporary politics. But here I want to try and focus our attention on the nature of politics itself and how this generates disappointment. Neither, therefore, does the fact that I do not make any suggestions as to how institutional reform that could reduce disappointment mean that I do not think there are such things we could do that would help revive trust and engagement with politics (though I have nothing new to add to that debate and endorse many of the recommendations already present in the literature). What I want to draw attention to are rather the permanent and necessary features of politics that generate disappointment and which, as such, would always resist any such attempts at reform. Though I will not argue this directly, much of our current disdain for politics stems from the fact that we (politicians, citizens and the media) have forgotten or lost sight of the nature of politics and the specific problem or set of problems that politics is needed to address. In doing so, we point the finger of blame automatically and not always justly at politicians or the political system itself as the root cause of the widespread public disaffection. Recognising the limits that are internal to politics, and hence the inevitability of disappointment, should therefore affect how we assess or evaluate politics.

## **Disappointment and Politics**

Disappointment, at least in the manner that I want to discuss it here, is the feeling that follows the failure of expectations or hopes to manifest in reality. When we are disappointed in politics, therefore, we are disappointed that politics has not produced the sort of outcomes that we were hoping for, that there is a gap between the 'is' and the 'ought'. There are two crude but intuitive and very plausible answers to the question of the prevalence of disappointment in politics. The first focuses primarily on the character and disposition of political agents. A MORI poll conducted in the UK in 1996 showed that 56 per cent of respondents believed that Members of

Parliament put their own interest first; only five per cent believed their primary interest was that of the country (Hay, 2007, p. 37). Continual financial and sexual scandals, as well as on-going stories about the misuse of political power and influence, lead us to be deeply suspicious about the personal motivations of our politicians. Rather than being interested in the common good, those who rule are much more interested in their own gain, pursuing their own partial agendas or simply enjoying the respect and trappings that comes with holding high office. Self-interest, or maybe even class or group-bias, motivates politicians to a much greater degree than does the welfare of the people. Even if there is not a concern about politicians' motivations, however, there could still be a worry that politics is essentially a conveyor belt of individuals who, despite being members of different parties, are part of the same so-called political class (privately educated, attended Oxbridge, worked as a special advisor before being elected, little work or life experience outside of politics, etc.) and hence have little connection with or understanding of the world at large. So though they may well be driven by more noble motives, politicians' limited life experience ensures that they are unable to properly empathise with or appreciate the difficulties that the country faces, or have a real sense of the sort of actions that could resolve them. But then maybe if we are to focus on the agents of politics then we should widen our focus and pay attention not only to the rulers but to the ruled themselves. Many lament the character of the citizenry more widely, accuse them of being generally unable or unwilling to undertake the duties of citizenship that are required in order to ensure a functioning and healthy polis, which in turn might affect the quality of the politicians that rule over us. If this is true, then, as it is often put, we get the politicians we deserve.

The second intuitive and plausible answer to the question of disappointment in politics focuses more on the structures of political systems themselves, systems which we are often told are 'broken', 'out of date', or 'not fit for purpose'. While there remains widespread support for democracy as a form of government, some of the institutions within Western democratic regimes are coming under profound scrutiny and criticism. Unions, civil service, big businesses, and even the democratic multi-party system itself are regularly blamed for hindering or preventing politics from delivering. In relation specifically to the party system (which even politician themselves now regularly disparage), it is often viewed as inherently adversarial, breeding a culture of short-term opportunism in which parties seek to out manoeuvre each other for electoral advantages, or as encouraging the consumerism of politics in which parties are brands to be packaged and repackaged to suit the tastes of the median voter, all of course at the expense of enabling politicians to work together towards the common good. On the other hand, maybe the party system, as part of the policy making process more generally, leads to the sort of

compromises, concessions, bargaining, and negotiations between different interests that again leaves politics unable to provide the sort of radical policies that are needed. And we constantly hear, again often from politicians themselves, how the bureaucratic machinery of the modern state distorts noble, radical and high-minded ambitions into standardised and hegemonic projects (Scott, 1998). In other words, the institutions of politics might be to blame for the perennial disappointment.

Common to both of these answers is the notion that disappointment is only a *contingent* feature of politics: if we were ruled by better people, those who *really* cared about and understood the common good, who weren't in politics for financial gain or for the prestige, blinded by partisanship or ideology, then politics could deliver on its promise of achieving the common good. Likewise, if only we could get our constitutional and institutional structures right, design our political system along truly rational lines, then politics will no longer disappoint. In both cases, politics might disappoint us now, but we can legitimately hope for and work towards a world in which it does not. This is essentially the theme of many contributions to the recent literature on political disappointment and Meg Russell's pamphlet 'Must Politics Disappoint?' (2005) is a good example of this. If only, so her argument goes, politics threw off the dominant consumerist vocabulary; if only politicians were less adversarial; if only political campaigns were less negative; if only politicians were more open and honest about their values and normative commitments, then we would be able to develop a new culture of politics in which disappointment would no longer characterise political life, the common good would be realised, and a healthier relationship between citizens and politicians could take root.

There is indeed something intuitively plausible about such explanations, and in many specific instances of disappointment in politics we can often trace the source of our dissatisfaction back to either particular agents or structures (though we might disagree which). But what such accounts overlook or ignore is the extent to which disappointment is a perennial experience of politics because of features internal to politics itself, which, if true, mean that it cannot be a contingent aspect of political life but must be permanent and ineradicable.

The first thing to note is that disappointment is not necessarily linked to the common good in the manner these accounts imply. The natural tendency to partiality is shared by the public as much as politicians and ensures that the will of private individuals might not always itself be directed towards the common good either, prioritising instead for instance, self, group or family interest. It is a far from unfamiliar experience to find people endorsing policies simply because they further their own interests, even if they do so at the expense of other groups or the

common good in general. Their disappointment with politics often stems not from the fact that it has not acted in accordance with the common good but that it has gone against our partisan interests. What individuals can be and are in real life disappointed about need not bear any connection to the common good at all. And even where we do wish politics to be directed towards the common good, we might, as again is common, disagree with politicians as to what the common good is. It is not the fact that the politicians are being partisan or biased that disappoints us, but the fact that they are pursuing (what we take to be) the wrong vision of the common good. In either scenario, we will be disappointed that the policies pursued do not match up with our expectation of what should be done. Unless we, as Rousseau hoped, can become convinced that we were wrong either in what the common good is or to not have willed the common good in the first place, then disappointment will inevitably follow.

Furthermore, insofar as humans do think about the common good, they often have incoherent, inconsistent, and incomplete accounts of what it is. Frequently the assumption is made that people have the political equivalent of a ‘conception of the good’, ‘way of life’, or ‘comprehensive moral doctrine’, an internally coherent and more-or-less complete account of the ends, principles and values that should guide their lives and which they work towards achieving. A political equivalent, a concept of the political good so to speak, would likewise be a coherent and at least near complete account of the principles, values and ends that should underpin their shared political lives, often determining the nature and structure of the political associations’ fundamental institutions and practices, and which politics should be directed towards promoting, protecting or realising. It is, in other words, our vision of the political ideal. Yet few of us have such an ideal, at least not in any properly thought-through, coherent and complete sense. Our notions of how things ought to be are more often than not vague and ambiguous, incomplete and internally incoherent. There are a number of reasons for this. The first is simply that few of us rarely spend any time thinking about those grandiose matters such as our vision of the political ideal. For many, politics in general is deemed (rightly or wrongly) to be irrelevant or simply boring and not worthy of any intellectual effort. Many others simply lack the time, even if they do have the inclination. Academics, political theorists and political scientists alike, are relatively better-placed and more disposed to spend significant time than most pondering on their conception of the political ideal, and more inclined to worry about ensuring that they are coherent and complete. But we are the exception that should not be mistaken for the norm. And it is not clear that we fare that much better in this endeavour than others anyway. Secondly, the problems of vagueness, incoherence, incompleteness and ambiguity that dog our conceptions of the political ideal are the result of the sort of unavoidable epistemic limitations that face all

human beings when we try and think about such fundamental yet complex normative questions (Geuss, 2008). The more questions we try and address simultaneously and fit together into some sort of system, and in the case of a vision of the political ideal this will necessarily be many, the more difficult achieving a coherent and complete response will become.

In light of these difficulties, it would be wrong to think that disappointment *only* arises when there is a perceived discrepancy between the way things are and the common good as we perceive it to be. Rarely do persons have such a vision of the political idea that this account would demand. We often know what we don't want without knowing what we would want in its place, at least not in any great detail. We are disappointed to find the world in the shape that it is, but we rarely have any real sense of the shape that we wish it were in. Sometimes we are indeed disappointed to find that things did not turn out how we wished they had, where we have a clear and distinct idea of how we wish things were. We can be disappointed that a friend betrayed us, for instance, or when we find out we have contracted a serious illness. But often we feel disappointment even when we are unclear even in our own mind as to what alternative we would have preferred. Political disappointment often takes this form.

The account I want to give more attention to here, however, is one that explains the inevitability of disappointment not via humans' epistemic limitations but with reference to the limits that are generated from within politics itself. My starting point here will be Max Weber. Though Weber spoke about disappointment specifically in reference to those who feel that have a vocation for politics, his argument can be extended more generally to include all individuals who think about and reflect upon politics. His general view of the conditions of disagreement and conflict in which politics takes place are nicely summarised in this famous passage:

That old sober empiricist, John Stuart Mill, once said that, simply on the basis of experience, no one would ever arrive at the existence of *one* god – and, it seems to me, certainly not a god of goodness – but at polytheism. Indeed anyone living in the 'world' (in the Christian sense of the word) can only feel himself subject to the struggle between multiple sets of values, each of which, viewed separately, seems to impose an obligation on him. He has to choose which of these gods he will and should serve, or when he should serve the one and when the other. But at all times he will find himself in a fight against one or other of the gods of this world ...' (Weber, 1994, pp. 78-9)

Weber understood that politics required what he called an ‘ethics of conviction’, the sense in which one is fighting for a cause. It requires ‘Passion in the sense of *concern for the thing itself* (*Sachlichkeit*), the passionate commitment to a ‘cause’ (*Sache*), to the god or demon who commands that cause’ (Weber, 1994, p. 353). The difficulty is that there are a plurality of different and conflicting causes to which we can commit ourselves, numerous values and ideals for which we can fight. And there is no objective rational procedure via which we can determine which of these we should dedicate ourselves. Hence there is no sense to the thought that all persons would, if only they were properly rational, converge on the same set of political and moral ideals. Rather politics is the sphere of contest in which people struggle to realise their competing ideals and values in practice.

The plurality of competing political ideals and values determines that politics as a sphere of human activity will be characterised by conflict, disagreement and struggle. But not only does the plurality of values determine the nature of politics but, and more fundamentally, it also provides the context in which the need for politics arises. This is what Jeremy Waldron has called the conditions of politics. ‘We may say’, Waldron writes, ‘... that the felt need among the members of a certain group for a common framework or decision or course of action on some matter, even in the face of disagreement about what that framework, decision, or action should be, are *the circumstances of politics*’ (Waldron, 1999, p. 102). Politics arises precisely because we disagree about what should be done on a topic or issue on which a commonly-binding decision is felt to be required, including on the most basic principles and values that should underpin the constitution of the political order. Political disagreement goes all the way down, so to speak, and because it goes all the way down there will necessarily be no non-contentious way of selecting between different people’s beliefs and values. Hence politics arises and exists in the context of political conflict yet is also to be seen as a response to it, the means via which a public decision is reached where people disagree what the decision should be.<sup>iv</sup>

While Weber accepted that some individuals go into politics for the sheer feeling of power and ‘the knowledge that he holds in his hands some vital strand of historically important events’, he was adamant that unless we want to view politics as merely a ‘frivolous intellectual game’ then we need to understand politics as the arena of competition and struggle between conflicting and genuine values (Weber, 1994, p. 352-353). And while the perpetual conflict that is politics ensures that the triumph of any set of political values, or political ideal, will necessarily be temporary and provisional, this ensures that disappointment will always be permanent and

unavoidable. This is because, given the conditions of pluralism that generates the need for politics and in which political activity takes place, all values are contentious, no ideal is shared by all, and hence any decision will necessarily be viewed as unsatisfactory or undesirable by those who hold different views as to what should be done. Furthermore, the success of any set of values will necessarily come at the expense of the realisation of others. No social order can fully incorporate or embody all values and so some selection must be made from the full range of moral and political values. Politics requires us to 'select among cherished values' (Rawls, 1996, p. 57). Indeed, in some instances it might not only prevent their realisation but actually foster a political system in which they are undermined or excluded (sometimes purposefully so). It is likely therefore that any political order will fall short of the majority of citizens' notion of the political ideal and fail to be in tune with their deepest held values and beliefs. It is very rare, especially in large complex political societies like our own which has been witness to an enlargement both in the scope of politics and the drastic politicisation of some of the most intimate and pervasive features of collective human life (Dunn, 2000, p. 16-17), that there is ever anything more than a rough and ready fit between the political framework and any individual's conception of the political ideal. While there is, as I have already said, good reason to suspect that not everyone has a fully worked out notion of the political ideal, even when people do have more highly developed and relatively more coherent conceptions how they think politics should be, this usually only serves to intensify the distance between their ideal and the actual. The point is that all of us find ourselves by necessity having to live together in political societies with others according to political values, principles, institutions and practices which we take to be at varying distances from our conception of the political good.

So while we can see how disappointment stems from the inherent epistemic limitations of human reasoning, the fact that politics is a sphere of contestation and struggle between values that takes place in the context of often radical disagreement and conflict means that disappointment is an inevitable feature of the political. Politics will always require us to live according to some values, principles and laws with which we disagree. Accepting that in politics one will never have things all one's own way, that the world will never be ordered in exactly the manner that we would like it, is therefore part of a realistic and mature attitude to political life. Amongst the maelstrom of political conflict, and the variety of attempts to change and defend the status quo, it is unreasonable to expect that politics should mirror one's own vision of the ideal. Indeed we might consider ourselves relatively fortunate when there is anything more than a passing similarity between our ideal and the actual. This does not mean, however, that persons should abandon the pursuit of their ideal. They should do so knowing that their endeavour will

be, as Weber put it, 'like boring through hard wood', but also in the knowledge that even if their efforts are successful, they are likely to move the actual only a relatively small degree closer towards their ideal (1994, p. 369). To create a closer match between a person's or group's ideal and the actual requires the sort of wholesale re-creation of a political order that is very rare in politics, and often very dangerous.

## **Hope and Politics**

It might be questioned whether disappointment is the appropriate response if success in politics is not to be expected. It sounds strange, for instance, to hear someone speak of their disappointment at not winning the lottery when their chances of doing so were so small that it was an unreasonable expectation in the first place. Of course we'd rather we won the lottery than lost it; but to say that one is disappointed to have lost seems inappropriate because the chance of winning was, in reality, such a slim one. And maybe the same is true of politics. Because we cannot realistically expect the political order to reflect our deepest held ideals and values then maybe it is inappropriate to be disappointed when it does not. The proper response to the inevitability of unfulfilled hopes in politics is therefore not disappointment but resignation that this is the way things go. To this we might want to couple a further thought: if disappointment occurs whenever hopes are not realised, then it is possible to reduce the occurrence of disappointment by reducing our hopes. In other words, if we hope for less from politics then we will have less reason to feel disappointed by it (which is what is often meant by 'expectation management'). At the extreme, if we have no political hopes at all, if we resign ourselves to accepting or at least acquiescing to the status quo, then politics would no longer be an arena of inevitable disappointment at all. Without an 'ought' we have no reason to be worried about the state of the 'is'. The mature response to unfulfilled hopes in politics is therefore not disappointment but the reduction of our expectations.

On either of these approaches disappointment can be minimised or maybe even eradicated from politics by having the right disposition towards our hopes. Either one must abandon all hopes so that politics cannot disappoint us, or one should see the possibility of fulfilling our political hopes as so implausible and unlikely that we are not disappointed when they fail to be realised. Neither is a particularly plausible or desirable position. To foster a stoic attitude of resignation to disappointment would be to take the fervency and passion out of politics that motivates people to pursue their chosen values, principles or ends in the first place.

It would draw the passion out of politics and likely turn it into a dry sphere of mere management and governance rather than an arena of 'genuine human action' in which people fight for noble causes. Even the most supposedly anti-idealist thinker such as E. H. Carr rightly recognised that to ignore or downplay the values for which people participate in politics would be to overlook the 'ground for action' that is an 'an essential ingredient of all effective political thinking' (2001, p. 84). In other words, you cannot understand or think properly about politics without taking into account the passion and enthusiasm that motivates people to action. Furthermore, to try and eradicate or lower our political hopes is also, in an important sense, to attempt to overcome politics itself. Because politics is, at least in the first instance, required in order to address real disagreement and conflict over matters on which people feel a commonly binding decision is necessary, then to moderate those disagreements is also to diminish the need to which politics is a response. So this is not a strategy to reduce disappointment in politics, but to reduce the political sphere itself. But the line of response I want develop a little further rests on the notion that hope plays an important, maybe even vital, role in politics that could not be abandoned without significant cost and, as such, disappointment will always be prevalent.

Today even conservative political parties are unable to present themselves as merely seeking to preserve the status quo or conserve a particular way of life, to keep the ship afloat, the government governing (see Gray, 1997). That is no longer a viable electoral platform (apart maybe from in those countries where anarchy or civil war is a realistic possibility). In part this is no doubt because of the ever growing confidence, no matter how misplaced, that humans have a high-degree of control over the fate of their social world through the employment of reason. The notion that the world can bend to our will is central to modernity and the modern spirit (see Gamble, 2000). In such a context, accepting the status quo where there are perceived deficiencies of justice, fairness, equality, efficiency, etc., is simply not feasible. This would be to accept injustice when justice is a practicable possibility. When this is combined with the radical extension of politics into so many different areas of our lives that in part characterises modernity, then the potential for politics to not function as we think it should, or deliver the goods that we demand of it, is multiplied. Hence reform is the only option. And the promise of reform, even from right wing parties who will intuitively be more inclined to support the status quo than not, inevitably means employing the discourse of hope.

Hope, at least political hope, is the wish or desire that politics will improve in the future, where the way we hope things will turn out is determined by our various political ideals and values. It is in the nature of politics, however, that individuals hope for different states of affairs.

Likewise we will also evaluate the status quo differently. Depending on our political ideal, we shall inevitably find the status quo to be deficient in different regards. So, and being necessarily overly crude and simplistic, the libertarian finds the welfare state, and especially the taxes required to fund it, to be an unjustifiable infringement of persons' right to private property; the egalitarian will lament the wide inequalities in social mobility, wealth, or opportunity and the unwillingness of political parties to commit themselves to the sort of redistributive projects that could address these; conservatives abhor the loss of traditional values; cosmopolitans wish we paid greater attention to our duties and obligations to non-compatriots; and so on. Of course, rarely does disappointment take this sort of singular form; more often than not we are disappointed with several aspects of the political world and hence there can be varying degrees of overlap of objects of disappointment even between those with otherwise radically different political views. But though we may share disappointment that the political world takes the form that it currently does, the fact that we hold different political values and ideals means that we disagree both why it is deficient and how it should be improved. This goes some way to explain why disappointment is a prevalent experience in political life shared by most people: we live under the same political system, and hence share the experience of disappointment in the same 'is'. But our 'oughts' differ, and hence while we believe that the same political order falls short of the ideal, we disagree as to what the ideal should be.

The plurality of conflicting political ideals and values influences the manner in which the discourse of hope can and should be employed in politics, or at least how it can be employed successfully. If the party or person who is seeking the support or endorsement of those over whom they would or do rule, then there is an important sense in which they must appeal to the notion that the future will be an improvement over the present under their guidance. This will require them to say something about their vision of an ideal society (or at least key aspects of it), how they intend to get there (which means that there must be a degree of feasibility to the vision), and why they are the right person or party to deliver that change. They must say something about the values that drive them and how the social order would be better if reformed along the lines of those commitments. They must tell a narrative of hope. Most politicians are likely to have at least a relatively clear idea about their values and some notion of the political ideal along which lines they aim to reform society through the mechanisms of political power available to them (though in keeping with what was said above, this still need not be a perfectly complete or coherent vision of the ideal). But, and here lies the difficulty of hope in politics, it would be injudicious of the politician to ever fully disclose this ideal, the object of his or party's hope, to the public. The fact that persons hope for different things ensures that the discourse of

hope must be carried out in terms that are necessarily vague, ambiguous, imprecise, and to a certain extent at least, evasive. This is because if they specify too concretely the vision of a good society that they (the leader, representative, party, and so on) hold, in doing so they will likely alienate those who endorse alternate ideals and hence be unable to create the sort of widespread or general support that politics requires. This pressure is particularly keenly felt in modern democratic societies where elections are won on the so-called centre ground. Where there are parties at the extreme ends of the political spectrum, it is often relatively clear what sort of vision of the political ideal they are offering, even if there are questions over how plausible or realistic (let alone desirable) the achievement of that ideal would be in practice. So at least the main features of, for example, a society under a Communist or Neo-Fascist society are usually fairly clear and obvious, and the parties themselves rarely go to too much effort to hide these (though they may think it is electorally more advantageous to symbolically intimate these features rather than spell them explicitly). But those who try and occupy and win elections on the centre-ground must strike an uneasy balance of giving the impression that they will make the future better, and therefore can be the party of hope that voters who are disappointed with the status quo should endorse, without being too specific about what their vision of the political ideal towards which they will work would look like. The ideal discourse of politics therefore falls short of full disclosure. Rather the discourse most appropriate to politics is one of partial disclosure at best.

In order to shore up their support and develop a consensus, every politician and party needs to 'reach out' to those who are not otherwise inclined to endorse them. Because of the fact of political disagreement, part of how they must do this is by trying to persuade people that they have a notion of what needs to be done that they share but without being too specific about exactly what that vision is. This is why the language of politics and in particular electioneering is often perceived to be vague, elusive, and indeterminate such that it appeals to values no one could disagree with ('A future fair for all') or is so devoid of any mention of the party's values or principles that there is no normative content for anyone to be able to reject ('Things can only get better', 'Vote for change', 'Yes we can', 'Forward not backwards'). Yet the most successful campaigns and politicians master this way of communication as the non-disclosure of information.<sup>v</sup> Even in relation to those who are more naturally inclined to offer their support, the same sort of imprecision and avoidance of full disclosure will be required. There are, after all, varieties of left or right wing visions of the political ideal, and any party from either side that seeks to win an overall majority will need to garner enough support from those persons who identify themselves with the same broad political position as them. So again the discourse of hope will need to be employed yet in such a manner that persons who hope for a variety of

different, and possibly conflicting, visions of the political ideal can identify with and endorse yet without giving too much away. Though this political language is often lamented and ridiculed, and even sometimes seen as itself indicative of the problems of modern politics, at least in part this is a response to a combination of factors: the fundamental confidence of modernity in the ability of the human will to control our social world, the conditions of disagreement in which politics takes place, and the need to create consensus if politics is to be anything more than the imposition of the will of one person or party on all those who disagree with it.

Yet all this inevitably means that those who originally supported a party in sharing their hope for the future, regardless of how vaguely developed or expressed that vision was in public, will be disappointed to find that, in practice, the ideal politicians are working towards is at varying degrees of discrepancy to their own. In the abstract, claims to be committed to ‘A fairer society’, ‘Freedom and equality for all’, and so on, are ones that few people would reject or resent a political party for making. Yet the devil is in the detail; and in politics there are a lot of details. While we might be able to make some crude generalisations about how parties of the left and right might define ‘fairness’ or ‘equality’ differently, the fact of the matter is that there are numerous and often conflicting ways of defining or interpreting key political concepts even within the broad families of left or right wing interpretations. Hence, and indeed as is often the case, the most despondent people in politics are not those from the opposite side of the political spectrum as the governing party, but those who are broadly of the same ideological ilk. Disappointment stems from perceptions such as ‘the Conservative Government is not being right wing enough’ or ‘is not standing up for traditional conservative values’, or ‘the Labour Party has made too many concessions to free-market capitalism’, just as much as the more wholesale ideological disagreements. The art of governing therefore, and somewhat counter-intuitively, includes dealing with the disappointment of those one would usually consider to be friends or supporters as much as those of ideological political opponents.

This only serves to further entrench the inevitability of disappointment in politics. The discourse of hope must necessarily be carried out in a vague and indeterminate key. Politicians and parties must paint pictures of the future which appeals to values and ideals that all people accept in principle, freedom, equality, tolerance, etc., while leaving their content unspecified so as not to alienate those who interpret those values and ideals in different and possibly conflicting manners. Yet this vagueness and ambiguity is not something which we would usually accept in many other circumstances as providing sufficient rational grounds for action. In making an economic investment, for example, we would be very foolish to commit our money on the

grounds of vague notions of ‘guaranteed returns’, let alone ‘hopeful returns’, without wanting to know more details about how and where our money will be invested and what the return will likely be. As we are often warned in economic matters, if it seems too good to be true, it usually is. Moreover, financial investments are a form of speculation, the investing of money in the hope that it will grow in the future. There is an important sense in which political hope is also a form of speculation insofar as we can never be certain that the political party we favour interprets ‘fairness’ or ‘freedom’ in exactly the same way that we do. This is undoubtedly where the charisma of which Weber most famously wrote plays an important role in enabling certain people to convince others to trust them on the grounds of vague promises and ambitions. Nevertheless, if we look at this from a purely rational point of view, there is something deeply irrational about quite how powerful the discourse of hope can be in motivating individual commitment or spurring them into action, especially in conditions of necessarily imperfect information and disclosure. But then human beings are not, at least most of the time, particularly rational. Nor should we expect them to be and nor should we condemn them for not being so. And indeed maybe politics and effective political rule actually requires humans to be less than perfectly rational.

Furthermore, to call the necessary ambiguity and lack of full disclosure of political discourse duplicitous would be to misjudge the context in which politics takes place. Again, politics is not analogous to instances of providing incomplete or misleading information at a more individual and personal level. While it would clearly be wrong for a salesman to fail to disclose all the terms and a condition of a contract before it is signed, or if a husband neglects to inform his wife of his huge debts before they got married, there is no analogous wrong at the political level. Politics requires at best partial disclosure because legitimacy demands widespread convergence between the wills of the ruled and the rulers yet takes place in conditions where people answer the question of what should be done in a variety of ways. Whereas the ideals of economic transactions and loving relationships (as well as many others) require full disclosure, the same is not true of politics.

If politics is to have ambitions beyond simply maintaining the status quo, and insofar as political legitimacy in modernity must have some connections to the will of the ruled, then it cannot successfully function without appealing to and maybe even fostering the hope that the future will be better than the present. Hope is therefore an essential element of any successful politics. But this is a hope that will not, for almost all people and often regardless of who is in power, be fulfilled. And disappointment will inevitably follow.<sup>vi</sup> But this places politicians in

something of a bind: they must employ the language of hope yet in doing so will need to adopt a discourse that is by the standards of any other sphere of life inadequate and hence will, unless the citizenry do properly recognise the limits of the political, be judged to be indicative of a less than perfect politician. Furthermore, by not specifying in any meaningful detail the vision of the ideal that they will pursue, or often even the exact policies that they will seek to enact, so as to enable a wide basis of support in conditions of disagreement, they inevitably and unavoidably put themselves in a position in which they cannot but disappoint those who supported them as well as those that never did. Hope is therefore a necessary but malevolent force in politics, indispensable for successful politics yet guaranteed to generate winds of disappointment that must then be managed if they are not to become destructive and undermine the political body itself.

### **Disappointment and Political Unity**

Accepting the inevitability of disappointment in politics, facing up to the truth that in politics one is very unlikely to get things completely your own way, might be likened to a form of sacrifice. It is a sacrifice in the sense that it necessitates loss, accepting the fact that the political world will never completely (maybe even vaguely) live up to the values, principles and ideals that one would wish, but without abandoning the hope that it will. The object of our hopes must never lose their value for us, otherwise they stop becoming the object of our hope. But sacrifice implies that you give up something, in this case the hope that the ideal will become the real, in order to achieve some other good. So what good or goods does sacrificing hope engender? No doubt there are several; but I want to focus here on just one: political unity.

The language of politics is more often than not the language of unity. ‘*We* the people ...’, ‘*We* are all in this together’, the nation, the people, the common good or general will, all of these are familiar phrases or concepts but they each assume a fundamental political unity in which the will, values or interests of each member of the political association are effectively identical. They therefore mask the extent to which not only is political disagreement and conflict present within any political association but also the fact that such disagreement and conflict is a necessary condition of politics itself. And as we have seen, political disappointment is a direct consequence of the conditions of disagreement in which politics takes place. But while, as I have been suggesting, political disappointment should neither surprise nor confound us, the fact that disappointment can develop into the more damaging emotions of disaffection, resentment,

frustration, despair, antagonism and anger that loosen the ties of civility, it is something that should always concern us. Indeed, that politics will always involve disappointment raises normative questions regarding how it should be managed, including normative issues regarding its just distribution and limits.

It is not a great distance from disappointment to disaffection, distrust and disengagement, dispositions that are likely to make individuals feel uninterested in politics. It is a further step, though not one large enough to ensure that it is rarely made, from disappointment to resentment, despair, frustration, anger and hatred, those emotions that make people feel less than a full member of the political community or view it as an entity in which there is little if any connection between its will, the will of other citizens, and their own. As this occurs, the bonds of civility that bind people together are likely to corrode and become strained and, at the extreme, disappear altogether. For people to identify strongly with the political association there must be some sense in which they are able to recognise the will of the rulers as in some sense related to their own. This need not take the strongly liberal voluntaristic form in which the only legitimate form of political rule is that to which individuals have consented. Nor does it require recourse to a more Kantian schema in which the will of the rulers and the ruled is, properly understood, rational and therefore identical. But there must be some notion in which the political association is seen, from the perspective of the individual, to be 'theirs'. The weaker this identification becomes then the more the state will be experienced as the imposition of an alien will, one that has no authority or legitimacy to use coercive power over them or to force them to engage in collaborative projects to achieve goals or ends that they do not share. The closer to ones' ideal the political regime is, the more consistent it is with one's values and principles, then the more likely it is that you are going to identify with it and view it as a legitimate form of political authority. The further from the object of your political hopes, then the less likely it is that you will think this. If we assume that disappointment is inevitable in politics, then how do we create or, in stable regimes continue to maintain, this 'buy in' so that unity prospers?

Individuals' acceptance of disappointment, in the sense of appreciating the conditions of disagreement and conflict in which politics takes place and the limits that this places on what is plausible in practice, has an important role to play in this. That our political world rarely resembles our ideal or delivers the goods that we demand of it we might think gives us every right to feel resentful and even hateful towards it, especially when it falls so very short of our ideal. Yet if we accept that disappointment is inevitable in politics, then this may help 'calm our frustration and rage against our society and its history', reconcile us to a world that is neither of

our own choosing nor reflects, at least in totality, our deepest held values, beliefs and principles (Rawls, 2007, p. 10).<sup>vii</sup> If we can accept that the fact of political disagreement means that the world is unlikely to reflect such ideals and values in anything more, if we are lucky, than a rudimentary way, then it becomes less reasonable to take this as a justification to be angry or resentful of the political association in a manner which weakens ones identification with it. And insofar as disappointment will be felt by everybody, albeit to different extents, it also gives us reason to continue to reconcile ourselves with others as co-members of the same political association rather than enemies within it (even those with whom we radically disagree).

While some individual's might be pre-disposed to accept disappointment and hence not intensify this into the emotions that undermine civility and political unity, there are political mechanisms or institutions that can be employed to help foster this attitude also. The two that have probably been most successful at least in the West during the last couple of centuries are liberalism's public/private divide and democracy's prevention of permanent political winners (which is not to say they are either perfect or unproblematic).

Classical liberalism seeks to limit the sphere of politics by making a strong divide between the public and private arenas and ensuring that many of what are taken to be the most fundamental and important questions in individuals' lives, such as the sort of life they want to lead, the values and moral ideals they seek to pursue, relationships they want to foster, gods they want to worship, and so on, are placed firmly in the private sphere where individuals alone are free to make the relevant decisions. Part of what this does is protect an arena in which individuals can pursue their chosen values and ends free from the interference of the state or others. Importantly, individual fulfilment is sought exclusively in and through those activities that take place in the private sphere, with little if any sense in which engagement in public life is a constituent part of living a good life. The role of politics is merely to safeguard and protect individuals' private sphere of freedom. Hence by limiting the public-political sphere in this way, the scope for political disappointment is minimised too. We need not worry too much if politics disappoints us if we have control over and can seek fulfilment through the pursuit of our moral or religious values in the private realm.

One of the basic distinctions of politics is that of winners and losers.<sup>viii</sup> Insofar as politics is the sphere of struggle between people with competing values, principles and ends, there will inevitably some winners (for whom politics will be a source of some fulfilment) and some losers (for whom politics will be a source of more disappointment). By insisting upon regular elections to determine who the rulers should be, democracy provides a political system that ensures that

no one person or group is entrenched as permanent winners or losers. At the next election, all persons and parties have another chance to seek power and to put politics in service of the ends and values that they support. And freedom of speech ensures that we all have the opportunity to convince others to endorse those ends and values that we pursue also. Those who were winners at the last election might become the losers, and the losers might become the winners. While politics might disappoint today, there is always the hope that democracy affords that we might become the winners of the political contest tomorrow. No one should therefore feel so despondent about the hopes of realising their political values and ideals that disappointment develops into disaffection, antagonism or anger. After all, if they continue to be involved in the democratic process then they may indeed win come the next election. While disappointment is therefore a perennial feature of politics, in a democracy who suffers that disappointment is likely to be distributed differently after each election and each can hold the realistic hope of achieving their values and ideals in the future.

Even in conditions of widespread disaffection and disengagement with politics such as which characterise our political culture today, both of these mechanisms have largely proven to be successful at least to the extent to which they have widely prevented disappointment developing into emotions that more fundamentally challenge the political order. Yet both have their difficulties and limits. Crucially, we should not ignore the extent to which in either system there are those for whom this system of management itself is a source of disappointment. Those who hold sometimes radically anti-liberal values and conceptions of the political ideal do not see the public/private divide as a way of managing disappointment but rather as a source of disappointment itself, most familiarly either believing that the state should be able to dictate on religious or moral issues or that the separation is essentially, as Thomas Nagel put it, ‘a campaign to put the state behind a secular, individualist, and libertine morality – against religion and in favour of sex, roughly’ (1987, p. 217). Likewise not all people support democracy and some might lament the fact that *all* persons, even women, infidels or those of the wrong race, ethnicity or religion, get to have an equal say, maybe even a say at all, in the decision making process. Others question the extent to which democracy can legitimately make decisions that run counter to pre-political moral commitments such as individuals’ rights. And while many radical democrats such as Chantal Mouffe (2005) are keen to stress the impermanence of any political system, which is true, much depends on the timescale that one uses. Political regimes can change, sometimes quite radically, several times within a year, decade or century. But they can also, especially when they are particularly stable and their legitimacy firmly entrenched, remain fairly constant over an entire lifetime. And more often than not it is via the prospect or reality of

political progress within the interval between our birth and likely death that we measure and assess politics. When regimes seem to be so impermeable to change, the prospect of losers becoming winners in the near to medium-term future is drastically reduced. So the radical conservative, libertarian, anarchist, republican, environmentalist, Marxist, fascist, and religious fundamentalist is likely to have found the last few decades of politics to be fairly disappointing if they live in one of the Western liberal democracies. Unless something extreme occurs, as indeed it might, they are likely to find the next few decades (at the very least) to be disappointing also. The point is that despite democracy's attempt to overcome this there *are* always going to be significantly (though not strictly necessarily permanently) entrenched losers in any political system, those for whom the system for managing disappointment only serves to embed a particular set of practices and institutions that they cannot identify with.

We ask too much of people if we expect them to feel dispassionately if they are to be, in all likelihood, perennially strongly disappointed by politics throughout their lifetime. It is difficult to think that those who believe their political world is comprehensively unjust, for instance, should simply accept their disappointment and identify with the regime anyhow. We should not be surprised when we find that those groups within society who do feel like this, and who see no realistic prospect for achieving their ideal via the normal procedures of political reform, begin to feel alienated from the political association, and at the extreme turn to violent means for effecting change. The ideal scenario would of course be that no group would feel like entrenched losers; but politics takes place in conditions of disagreement and conflict that make such an ideal scenario deeply implausible and utopian in the worst sense of the word.

If the notion of political unity is to be truly meaningful, so that we can make at least some sense of the idea that there is a 'we' that represents the will of an association rather than merely its rulers, then the majority of its members will need to accept political disappointment, to be able to say that this is my political association though it is far from how I would ideally wish it to be. Political unity therefore depends upon the majority accepting disappointment with the status quo yet still being able to identify with it. It requires them to recognise that a political order that has gone even some small way to realise our most cherished ends, of freedom, equality, rights, etc., no matter how imperfectly is a human achievement worthy of at least some admiration. Yet because all forms of political order necessarily exclude or make impossible the realisation of particular values or goods, or at least particular interpretations of them (e.g. a liberal regime excludes non-liberal interpretations of moral and political values), the price of political unity in conditions of disagreement and conflict is that some people's hopes are

quashed. In effect, these individual's hopes are sacrificed in the name of the unity of a political association they reject.

## **Conclusion**

None of what I have discussed here should be interpreted as implying that we should expect less from our politicians. Sometimes we are right to feel let down by politicians, sometimes they genuinely do not meet the standards that they are rightly expected to live up to. We should continue to demand a lot (though within the bounds of the reasonable) from our elected representatives. If our social world is unjust or unequal, racist or sexist, for instance, then we must rally against it and try to change it for the better. I do not want to suggest otherwise by implying that accepting disappointment is tantamount to resigning ourselves to the status quo, regardless of its deficiencies. Accepting the inevitability of disappointment and the limits of hope does not mean seeing justice where there is injustice, freedom where there is slavery, equality where there is discrimination. Nor does it entail that individuals should feel less motivated to seek to rectify these shortcomings where they are felt to exist. This is particularly important today when many of the political issues that we are tackling today, climate change, human rights abuses, attacks on privacy and fundamental freedoms, the global financial crises, terrorism, etc. are so urgent and have such potentially catastrophic consequences that resignation would be a disastrous course of (in)action. The argument made here is not an apology for the status quo.

It does mean, however, that we should not be surprised when we find that politics does not live up to our ideals. This should, in most cases, calm our discontent with the political order and allow us to view its deficiencies as not necessarily the fault of politicians or the political system but as representing 'the limits of all human striving'. We need to put our disappointment in the context of the conditions of disagreement and conflict from which the need for politics arises and which limit its possibilities. Our expectations and assessment of politics should adapt appropriately. A form of politics that has at least some likeness to our ideal, despite its many failures, or is consistent with our values, even if it might interpret them differently, might be a worthy enough object of our appreciation and support. The difficulty we face today is that an argument like this, one that is in the unpopular vein of defending politics, is so frequently despised by those of a more 'idealistic' bent as foolishly or slavishly justifying the failures of our politicians. The result of this is undoubtedly a confusion in which the disappointments of politics are interpreted as the result of obstacles that can be overcome without recognising that, given

the conditions in which politics takes place, such misplaced faith only serves to further deepen such frustrations.<sup>ix</sup>

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<sup>ii</sup> 'Preface', (Russell, 2005, p. 1)

<sup>iii</sup> Indeed, what John Dunn said of his book *The Cunning of Unreason* I think applies equally to what I want to argue here: 'You could think of it as ... about the inevitability of disappointment. But I prefer myself to think of it as ... about how (and how not) to hope' (2000, p. xi).

<sup>iv</sup> Richard Bellamy put this well (2010, p. 415) when he writes: 'unlike natural science, there is no agreed epistemology or method for selecting between these views [persons' normative preferences and values] other than the process of politics itself. Conservatives, Liberals and Socialists, Utilitarians, Kantians, Aristotelians and Nietzscheans, largely operate with different and incommensurable justifications for their core beliefs that lead them to focus on different features of a given policy and look to different sets of public reasoning to support their views. There is no entirely 'public' way of resolving such disputes, no Archimedean position that unequivocally pays equal concern and respect to all relevant, reasonable views in an uncontentious way'.

<sup>v</sup> It may be that there are limits to the strategy of purposeful ambiguity and evasiveness and just how much people are willing to accept before they demand more detailed proposals, however.

<sup>vi</sup> The temporal element of political life might mean that short-term disappointment is considered a price worth paying in the longer run. Politicians might sacrifice hope on the altar of numerous god's. Sometimes these will be that of the perceived national interest even at the cost of one's own party (think Sir Robert Peel's revocation of the Corn Laws in 1846). But there will often be other more personal or party interests in play also. Disappointment, a politician is entitled to think, is sometimes a price worth paying for doing the right thing.

<sup>vii</sup> As Rawls pointed out, political philosophy has an important role to play in aiding this reconciliation between the ideal and the actual.

<sup>viii</sup> For Weber's discussion of this political distinction see Weber, 1994, p. 356.

<sup>ix</sup> The initial idea for this paper was discussed at one of the so-called 'Bath Sessions' informally run by the Department of Politics at the University of Sheffield. I would like to thank all of those who came along, as well as Professor Matthew Flinders who kindly read an early draft of this paper, for their helpful advice and comments.