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## The Ethics of Democratic Deceit

Derek Edyvane

### Abstract

Deception presents a distinctive ethical problem for democratic politicians. This is because there seem in certain situations to be compelling democratic reasons for politicians both to deceive and not to deceive the public. Some philosophers have sought to negotiate this tension by appeal to moral principle, but such efforts may misrepresent the felt ambivalence surrounding dilemmas of public office. A different approach appeals to the moral character of politicians, and to the variety of forms of manipulative communication at their disposal. The public is usually more indulgent of politicians who 'spin' the truth than of those who tell bare-faced lies, but this could be a mistake. Spin expresses disdain for the democratic value of truthfulness, and so democratic 'spin doctors' ought to trouble us more than they typically do. The cause of confusion here may reside in the failure to appreciate the distinctiveness of public morality, and in the misguided application of private standards of behaviour to a public context in which they are out of place.

Deceptive, misleading and manipulative forms of communication are a pervasive feature of political discourse, and we are quite accustomed to being deceived or otherwise manipulated by our democratic representatives. But we seldom reflect on the variety of forms that manipulative communication may take, and on our different reactions to them. For example, we are likely to feel that there is a moral difference between a situation in which the case for an overseas war of dubious legality had been 'sexed up' (or exaggerated in certain ways), and one in which that case had simply been 'made up'. The former might be considered an instance of 'spin' - a potentially misleading and deceptive style of communication, but one that does not involve explicit lies<sup>1</sup> - whilst the latter resembles a lie. We, the public, are often more indulgent of spin than we are of lies; we tend (grudgingly) to accept the art of spin as a necessary art of the democratic politician. We are usually much less tolerant of lies; the discovery that our politicians, and especially our political leaders, have lied to us can often elicit a sense of betrayal and indignation among the citizenry. One might wonder why it is that we react in these ways and, indeed, whether such reactions are appropriate.

Whilst it is not part of my concern to defend the political liars, I do want to unsettle the supposition that a public culture of persistent spinning is necessarily preferable to a culture of lying. Spin may not always be deceptive, but that does not render it politically harmless. It is my central aim to bring the peculiar insidiousness of spin to light.

To situate the inquiry I (1) begin with some preliminary consideration of the problematic status of deception in democratic discourse – problematic because there seem in certain situations to be compelling democratic reasons for politicians both to deceive and not to deceive the public. I shall (2) briefly consider efforts to address this tension by appeal to moral principle. However, I shall not pursue that line of argument, partly because I do not think it especially promising, but also because it is a different set of questions that frame my primary interest here. Specifically, I shall (3) turn from matters of principle to matters of personality and the question of what sort of moral character we should look for in our politicians. Here I shall mount my case against the spin doctor and then devote the rest of the article to (4) consideration of why everyday thought on these matters is (arguably) muddled, and of what we might learn from that muddle.

### **1. Politics and Truthfulness**

The suspicion that Tony Blair had deceived parliament and the British people when, in 2003, he indicated that Saddam Hussein was capable of deploying Weapons of Mass Destruction within 45 minutes provoked a sense of outrage and betrayal. And not unreasonably: a plausible basis for our indignation in the face of political deception may be found in what Bernard Williams terms the *anti-tyranny argument* for truthfulness in politics:

Precisely because of their peculiar powers and opportunities, governments are disposed to commit illegitimate actions which they will wish to conceal, as also to conceal incompetent

actions. It is in citizens' interests that these be checked. They cannot be checked without true information.<sup>2</sup>

This argument derives its force from the widely recognised instrumental value of truthfulness as a bulwark against something we all fear – persecution at the hands of a tyrannical government.

As such, the anti-tyranny argument is not a peculiarly democratic justification for truthfulness; it is liable to work in any political setting. However, the argument is likely to seem more powerful in democratic settings for reasons associated with what Williams calls the *argument from democracy*:

The people are the source of the government's authority and, under restrictions, of the government's policies. Government is a trust. It is a violation of this conception for secrecy and falsehood to come between trustee and people.<sup>3</sup>

While Williams is right to worry about the high degree of idealization involved in this argument, which limits its justificatory force, it may still play an important explanatory role, helping to make sense of our reactions to political deception. It would be understandable for the subject of a dictatorship to feel indignant when deceived by the government (for reasons associated with the anti-tyranny argument), but it would be odd for a person in such a society to feel *betrayed*, as we do. It is possible to make sense of (and in that more limited sense to justify) our feelings of betrayal by appeal to the argument from democracy.

Truthfulness is an important condition of the core democratic value of representation. Democratic politicians are supposed to represent the will of the people. When they deceive us, they express contempt for that duty. Consider the case of Lyndon Johnson. In the 1964 Presidential election campaign, President Johnson presented himself as the candidate of peace and his opponent,

Senator Barry Goldwater, as a hawk who would escalate war in Vietnam. The prospect of the escalation of war was deeply unpopular with the American public and Johnson won the election by a landslide.

But Johnson had been informed by his advisers that an escalation of military involvement in Vietnam was inevitable. He knew that if he won the election he would escalate the war, and yet he presented himself as the candidate of peace in order to win the election. Of this example, Sissela Bok writes:

President Johnson thus denied the electorate any chance to give or to refuse consent to the escalation of the war in Vietnam. Believing they had voted for the candidate of peace, American citizens were, within months, deeply embroiled in one of the cruelest wars in their history. Deception of this kind strikes at the very essence of democratic government. It allows those in power to override or nullify the right vested in the people to cast an informed vote in critical elections.<sup>4</sup>

To the extent that our politicians deceive us about their aims and purposes, they obstruct the mechanisms of representation and thereby dishonour a core democratic value.

It seems not unreasonable, then, for democratic citizens to feel both indignant and betrayed when they are deceived by their politicians. But, both the anti-tyranny argument and the argument from democracy are vulnerable to a Machiavellian counter:

Everyone realizes how praiseworthy it is for a prince to honour his word and to be straightforward rather than crafty in his dealings; none the less contemporary experience shows that princes who have achieved great things have been those who have given their

word lightly, who have known how to trick men with their cunning, and who, in the end, have overcome those abiding by honest principles.<sup>5</sup>

A more moderate version of Machiavelli's argument, which would seem to apply to democratic societies as much as any other, is suggested by Williams when he notes that 'any government is charged with the security of its citizens, a responsibility which cannot be discharged without secrecy, and which it will be lucky if it can discharge without force or fraud.'<sup>6</sup>

Violations of truthfulness may well strike at core democratic principles, but there are times at which such violations seem necessary precisely in order to preserve democratic institutions and the security of citizens. To illustrate this important point it may be helpful to consider an example in some detail. When the British Labour Party returned to power in the mid-1960s, and against the backdrop of the Cold War, Denis Healey was appointed by the Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, as his designated 'alternate decision-taker'. In the event of a pre-emptive nuclear strike by the Soviets, and had Wilson himself been killed or otherwise incapacitated, it would fall to Healey to decide whether or not to order a nuclear retaliation. Healey is of particular interest here, as he has since spoken publicly of his view of the dilemma by which the role confronted him. As secretary of defence, Healey publicly supported the principle and policy of nuclear deterrence and facilitated the creation of the US military base at Diego Garcia. However, he has since admitted that he would have found it 'very difficult indeed to agree to use a nuclear weapon', and that he would not have been willing to give the order condemning 20 million Russians to death.<sup>7</sup> In other words, Healey's public support for the nuclear programme was a pretence – 'you had to make them think you would use ... [nuclear weapons] even if you wouldn't in practice'.<sup>8</sup> In the midst of the Cold War, it was not absurd to imagine that the security and sustainability of democracy depended on the plausibility of the nuclear deterrent, and certainly the effectiveness of the deterrent, in Healey's hands at least, depended on deception.

It is important to note that in these sorts of cases, reasons for deception arise from the commitment to democracy itself: it is out of a concern for the preservation of democratic institutions that Healey was moved to deceive the public. Had he refused to deceive, or had his attempt at deception failed, then the nuclear deterrent might also have failed and the democratic order would have been rendered intolerably vulnerable (or so many at the time believed). And it is important to emphasise that deception in such cases, as Williams observes, is a *responsibility* of those charged with the security of citizens. Healey would certainly have failed as a politician had he failed to discharge his political responsibility, but this generates a serious puzzle. Alongside his political responsibility to deceive the public, Healey should also have acknowledged a political responsibility not to deceive, on the grounds that deception makes a mockery of democratic representation and accountability.<sup>9</sup> It thus seems that the commitment to democracy generates conflicting imperatives both to deceive and not to deceive. What should we expect of our politicians confronted by situations in which deception would appear to be at once in and against the public interest?

## **2. Principles and Personalities**

One way of answering this question is to identify a principle that will enable us to draw a line between those deceptions that are democratically legitimate and those that are not. Sisella Bok proposes one such principle. Bok argues that practices of political deceit are democratically legitimate if they have been consented to in advance by the people: 'Certain forms of deception may be debated and authorized in advance by elected representatives of the public. The use of unmarked police cars to discourage speeding by drivers is an example of such a practice. Various forms of unannounced, sometimes covert, auditing of business and government operations are others'.<sup>10</sup> Such practices have been publicly debated and pre-authorized. But Bok insists that there have to be some strict conditions on this process of consent:

[practices of deceit] must be openly debated and agreed to in advance, with every precaution against abuses of privacy and the rights of individuals, and against the spread of such covert activities. It is not enough that a public official assumes that consent would be given to such practices.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, Bok argues that, in order for a practice of public deception to be deemed acceptable, there would need to be (i) prior 'open debate', culminating in (ii) some kind of public agreement on the need for the practice. And there would need to be concrete reassurances that (iii) 'every precaution' had been taken against the possibility of abuse. For example, any legislation introduced might incorporate 'sunset clauses' designed to ensure that the practice in question persisted only as long as absolutely necessary.

This is an attractive argument, but I want to register two internal problems and then to introduce a more fundamental external criticism. First, the notion of consent upon which Bok's account relies is notoriously problematical. There are familiar and difficult questions of what exactly is meant by consent, of how we define the relevant constituency of consenters, etc.<sup>12</sup> Bok suggests that consent is to be given by elected representatives of the public. So, while she insists that hypothetical consent is insufficient ('it is not enough that a public official assumes consent would be given'), she implies that tacit consent (of the people) is good enough. But why draw the line there? Why is it not necessary to hold a referendum in order secure the express consent of all citizens exposed to the deception? The ambiguity of consent may prompt us to wonder how practicable Bok's mechanism for the legitimation of deception actually is.

Secondly, the principle would have to be very limited in its application if it were not to be self-defeating. Beyond the cases of unmarked police cars, plain-clothed detectives and perhaps certain other forms of covert surveillance and auditing, it is unclear just how effective Bok's mechanism



would be. For instance, it is hard to see how Healey could have secured prior consent for his deception without (as it were) spoiling the surprise. Even Bok's move from specific deceptions to more general practices will not help here. In theory, the politician could secure prior consent for the practice of deceiving citizens in times of national emergency, but such a vague specification would surely not satisfy Bok's very stringent conditions and, even if it did, it would undermine our ability to trust the government in times of national emergency to the extent that it would still defeat the object.

And the two concerns are obviously related. The more stringent our interpretation of consent, the more we insist, that is to say, on widespread, explicit public agreement to narrowly specified and clearly identified practices, the more vulnerable to self-defeat the principle becomes. Conversely, and in order to reduce the risk of self-defeat, it would be necessary to loosen the specification of the practices and to lower the standard of consent in ways that Bok would presumably deem unacceptable.

Bok recognises the limited applicability of her principle when she admits the need for a further category of unjustified, yet excusable, democratic deceptions.<sup>13</sup> Presumably, this is intended to capture the Healey-type cases. But I find this unsatisfactory, and for the following, very important, reason: there are some political deceptions of which it does not seem right to say that they were unjustified, but excusable. Healey's deception was not merely excusable, it was, I have suggested, democratically justified – a necessary measure for the preservation of democratic order in dark times and his *responsibility* to the public he served. It was certainly regrettable given the democratic imperatives I have noted for transparency and accountability, but it was also admirable, or even (to employ a particularly loaded term in this context) 'noble'. The trouble with Bok's account is that it makes everything seem rather too neat and tidy. Instances of democratic deceit are often extremely complex and our attitudes towards them are rightly ambivalent. Bok seeks to classify deception –

either it is justified, unjustified but excusable, or unjustified and inexcusable. A presupposition of the approach is that the tension I have identified, and the sense of ambivalence to which it gives rise, are eliminable (and should be eliminated). But I am not persuaded that they can be eliminated without distorting our moral experience.

The tension and consequent ambivalence I have emphasised surrounding the question of democratic deception defies the application of any kind of straightforward code of ethics, or clearly drawn lines in the sand. It is widely accepted that it is in the nature of politics that some aspects of political activity must be concealed from the public.<sup>14</sup> This is a common occurrence in the domain of military strategy. For example, Barack Obama could not have disclosed his intention to order an assault on Osama Bin Laden's compound (or indeed the mere discovery of the compound) without jeopardising the mission. It is also a common practice for politicians not to release details in advance of their official visits to states where security is an issue. Concealment must also sometimes be practised for reasons of public safety. It might, for instance, be appropriate for political leaders to conceal details of a suspected terrorist attack on the basis of the judgement that any danger it posed was outweighed by the danger of the disorder that would ensue if the public were informed. Moreover, and on a far more mundane level, it would simply be impractical for the public to track every single discussion, decision and action of each and every one of their political representatives.

It is consequently unreasonable to insist that the electorate subject their political representatives to constant ethical scrutiny. There may of course be penalties for gross violations (and so the need for concealment need not preclude accountability, though in practice it often does), but these must always be retrospective. In any given moment, there are forms of political activity that must of necessity escape the ethical glare of the public. As Martin Hollis remarks, the domain of politics is one in which 'the best is the enemy of the good, where we license our agents to pursue the good, and where they can succeed, only if they operate partly beyond our ken and control'.<sup>15</sup> It would be

hopeless, on this view, to try to subject our politicians to a comprehensive set of rules of conduct; indeed, to do so would be to condemn them to failure. But this renders the notion of trust in politicians especially important. If it is true that our politicians must necessarily operate ‘partly beyond our ken and control’, then it is important that we are able to trust them to do so and to behave when doing so in acceptable ways (whatever ‘acceptable’ may mean in this context). And this raises questions not of principle – for, as I have said, our ability to subject our politicians to principle is necessarily limited – but rather of character: in which kinds of politicians ought we to place our trust?<sup>16</sup>

### **3. Saints, Liars and Spin Doctors**

If I am right about the relationship between democracy and deception, then we certainly ought not to place our trust in politicians we regard as moral saints, innocently incapable of deception (if there have ever been such politicians). We can at least imagine a politician simply unwilling or unable to engage in any form of public deception. But any such requirement is too restrictive, for it would drive out not only the cynical liars, but also the noble liars like Healey. That said, it would be equally perverse to place our trust in those we deem the most brazen liars. Rather, what we should presumably want are politicians who are disposed to deceive when absolutely necessary (for democracy’s sake), but – and in view of the fundamental democratic value of truthfulness – *only* when absolutely necessary, and certainly not simply for their own benefit. In other words, we should want politicians who are *capable* of deceiving, but who are profoundly *reluctant* to do so. This is a specific application of Bernard Williams’s more general endorsement of reluctance as a valuable political habit, valuable because ‘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’.<sup>17</sup>

The source of reluctance (in Williams’s sense) consists in the acknowledgement that deception is morally disagreeable even when morally necessary. In order to be reluctant in the right way, the

politician must recognise (before, during and after the act) that departures from the truth are wrongful because they violate core democratic principles and threaten tyranny. In other words, the politician must recognise and hold on to the (political) value of truth despite her deception. Part of the attraction of the reluctant politician inheres in the fact that she recognises the sheer *difficulty* of democratic deceit. She recognises, in a way that neater and more simplistic principled models of political conduct may not, that in many cases there are strong democratic reasons both for and against deception, that any particular act of deception is liable to be excusable (even admirable) by reference to one set of relevant considerations, and yet inexcusable by reference to another.

Now it might seem that the kind of politician indicated here is precisely the kind of politician the democratic system as we know it tends to select. The citizenry is typically outraged and appalled by brazen political liars, but more moderate styles of manipulation, especially the cluster of tactics characterised as 'spin', are largely tolerated and almost never elicit such extreme reactions. We may be weary at the amount of spin in modern politics, but we are generally more indulgent of it than we are of lies. We do not usually think it taints the character of those who practice it as lies sometimes can. And perhaps that is so because we deem the practitioner of spin to exhibit a degree of reluctance in a way that the liar does not. The skilful practitioner of spin, we might say, is able to secure many of the benefits of deception without actually needing to deceive. The politician's preference for spin thus reveals her willingness to acknowledge the 'realities of politics' and the fact that a measure of concealment and manipulation is unavoidable in public life, but yet also her unwillingness to go as far as actually lying to the electorate.

But this is too quick. In this section, I want to suggest that the common view of spin as the 'acceptable face' of democratic manipulation is mistaken. While spin need not be deceptive (except in a quite specific and narrow sense I will explain), it still expresses a kind of contempt for the

democratic value of truthfulness. In order to see why this may be, we need first to distinguish more carefully between the different styles of communication involved.

*(i) Lies and Spin*

Liars make statements that present as true what they believe to be false. Their purposes are many and varied, but always it is part of their intention to deceive their audience.<sup>18</sup> If I profess to you that I thought the meal you prepared was delicious, knowing all the while that I thought it disgusting, I am presenting as true something I know to be false with a view to deceiving you: I am lying. And that reveals something of my character. We might be reluctant to say that my utterance of a solitary 'white lie' automatically brands me a 'liar'. But, at the very least, it displays my capacity and disposition to lie under certain circumstances.

Spin is different. As Neil Manson observes, "'Spin" is used to denote a form of communication that may mislead, or deceive, but which does not involve explicit lies.'<sup>19</sup> More specifically, spin is shaped by the aim to achieve a particular kind of effect on the audience (a 'perlocutionary effect'):

Spin is fundamentally concerned with ensuring that audiences view some target phenomenon — e.g. an action, a proposal, a policy, an agent — in a way that favours the speaker's interests (or the interests of the principal whom she represents): let us call these sought-after effects *promotional perlocutionary effects*; that is, perlocutionary effects that are believed, by the speaker, to promote her interests.<sup>20</sup>

So, while the liar specifically seeks to implant a false belief in his audience, the spin doctor does not. The spin doctor simply wants the audience to adopt a view that favours her interests. She may be expected to say whatever it takes in order to foster that view, though this will rarely involve making claims that she considers false (as spin is meant to be a low-risk alternative to lying). Generally, the

spin doctor employs what Manson calls 'aspect selection' – she will 'cherry pick' and emphasise certain features of the target phenomenon that favour her cause, whilst not mentioning those inconvenient truths that hinder her cause.<sup>21</sup> Spin may also involve what Manson calls 'lexical selection'. Lexical selection consists in the re-description of those inconvenient truths in such a way as to make them support the perlocutionary aim.<sup>22</sup>

Suppose for example, then, that the governing political party has received a trouncing in the recent council elections. The party's spin doctor, whilst recognising that the outcome was a disaster, might seek to 'spin' the result and to persuade the public that it was not so bad for the government after all – her intended promotional perlocutionary effect. She might seek to achieve that effect by emphasising a handful of success stories whilst neglecting to mention the bigger picture of catastrophic failure. That would be an instance of aspect selection. Also, she might re-describe what she perceives as 'catastrophic failure' and speak instead of a 'difficult night for the government'. That would be an instance of lexical selection.

### *(ii) Spin and Bullshit*

So described, spin has much in common with what Harry Frankfurt terms 'bullshit'.<sup>23</sup> Frankfurt gives the idea of bullshit a specific, technical definition and distinguishes the bullshitter from the liar. The liar, as I have said, is she who consciously presents as true what she believes to be false. The bullshitter, by contrast, does not care whether what he says is true or false. His overriding concern is to manipulate his audience effectively (he seeks to achieve a particular perlocutionary effect in Manson's terminology) and he is thus largely indifferent to the truth or falsity of his utterances:

[The bullshitter] is neither on the side of the true nor on the side of the false. His eye is not on the facts at all, as the eyes of the honest man and the liar are, except insofar as they may be pertinent to his interest in getting away with what he says. He does not care whether the

things he says describe reality correctly. He just picks them out, or makes them up, to suit his purpose.<sup>24</sup>

Note, then, that bullshit need not be deceptive except in the narrow sense that the bullshitter seeks to deceive his audience about his motives: he wants them to think that he *does* care whether the things he says describe reality correctly when in fact he does not – he wants them to think that he is not bullshitting. So, the *form* of the communication is in a sense deceptive, but the *content* need not be: the bullshitter's utterances might well be entirely truthful.

Bullshit, so understood, is undoubtedly a pervasive feature of democratic politics. For example, the 'dodgy' Iraq dossier that was integral to Tony Blair's case for war in Iraq (and the associated claim to which it gave rise that Saddam Hussein was in a position to launch 'Weapons of Mass Destruction' within 45 minutes) seems a relatively clear instance of bullshit. The report appears just to have been thrown together – a selection of plagiarised sources cut and pasted into a single document with grammatical errors intact.<sup>25</sup> The implication is that those who compiled the dossier did not actually care whether it described reality correctly or not; they exhibited no attachment to the truth. All they cared about was that it strengthened the case for war. They picked the claims out or made them up to suit their purposes. Thus, on Frankfurt's definition, the dodgy dossier wasn't a lie; it was bullshit.

And Frankfurt suggests that bullshit poses a more insidious threat to the truth than do lies. Whilst lies involve departure from the truth, they are nevertheless crafted within a framework that attaches significance to what is true, and how it differs from what is false:

the teller of the lie submits to objective constraints imposed by what he takes to be the truth. The liar is inescapably concerned with truth-values. In order to invent a lie at all, he

must think he knows what is true. And in order to invent an effective lie, he must design his falsehood under the guidance of that truth<sup>26</sup>

In other words, it is possible for the liar to uphold a degree of respect for the truth, her departures from it notwithstanding. The same may not be said of the bullshitter, who exhibits by contrast a 'slovenly indifference to the distinction between true and false'.<sup>27</sup> And while individual 'bullshits' may be harmless (or even arguably 'noble'), over time this can have a corrosive effect: through 'excessive indulgence ... [in bullshit], which involves making assertions without paying attention to anything except what it suits one to say, a person's normal habit of attending to the way things are may become attenuated or lost'.<sup>28</sup>

This is a problem because the sort of indifference to the truth that a culture of bullshit breeds is, Frankfurt suggests, 'extremely dangerous':

The conduct of civilized life, and the vitality of the institutions that are indispensable to it, depend very fundamentally on respect for the distinction between the true and the false. Insofar as the authority of the distinction is undermined by the prevalence of bullshit and by the mindlessly frivolous attitude that accepts the proliferation of bullshit as innocuous, an indispensable human treasure is squandered.<sup>29</sup>

The persistent bullshitter is disrespectful of the truth, sees no independent value in it, and so is unconstrained by it. Her chosen mode of communication betrays her contempt for the truth. And if that is so, then bullshit is liable to seem especially troubling when it comes from our politicians. Because truthfulness is a central democratic value (for reasons I earlier adduced), those who express contempt for its value thereby express contempt for democracy. Politicians who bullshit the public thus reveal their disdain for the democratic system and values they profess to uphold.



But it would be far too quick simply to conclude here that spin is similarly bad for democracy, and that is because spin constitutes a distinctive form of bullshit. While some bullshitters really take no interest whatsoever in the facts of the matter at hand, it would generally be inaccurate to say that the practitioner of spin takes no interest in the truth value of her utterances. On the contrary, spin doctors usually take very great, almost obsessive, interest in the veracity of their claims: they must at all costs avoid being caught in a lie, because lying, as I have noted, tends to go down badly with the electorate. And so spin differs from run-of-the-mill bullshit inasmuch as the practitioner of spin displays a concern for telling the truth.

This distinction is strikingly illustrated by the notorious interview of the UK Conservative MP Michael Howard by Jeremy Paxman on the BBC *Newsnight* programme in 1997. Paxman asked Howard, who had been Home Secretary until thirteen days earlier, whether he had threatened to overrule the head of the Prison Service, Derek Lewis, over the possible dismissal of John Marriott, the governor of Parkhurst Prison. Paxman asked the same question twelve times in succession, and each time Howard offered evasive responses. He repeated that he had not overruled Lewis, ignoring the question of whether he had *threatened* to overrule him.<sup>30</sup> Howard's responses could easily be taken for bullshit inasmuch as his fundamental concern was not for the content of his utterances, but instead for the achievement of a particular perlocutionary aim. But that characterisation does not seem quite right. It would be deeply unfair to suggest that Howard had exhibited 'a slovenly indifference to the distinction between true and false' in the interview. On the contrary, he was willing to go to quite extraordinary lengths, making himself ridiculous in the process, in order to avoid saying something that was false.

In light of this, it might be said that (Howard-style) spin is not in fact a species of (Frankfurt-style) bullshit at all, but something rather different. But note that in the quotation I gave above, Frankfurt

does not suggest that to qualify as a bullshitter, one must have no interest in the truth whatsoever. He appears to allow that the bullshitter may be concerned for the truth, but only in so far as such concern is 'pertinent to his interest in getting away with what he says'. This describes the practitioner of spin rather well: she is one who is concerned for truth (often *very* concerned for the truth), but *only because and in so far as the truth is pertinent to her interest in achieving her perlocutionary aim*.

In other words, for the practitioner of spin, truth is reduced to a purely instrumental value, a useful political commodity given the deep unpopularity of lies. This feature of spin reveals the (narrow) sense in which it is necessarily deceptive. While the content of the spin doctor's utterances may well be entirely truthful, she nevertheless seeks to fool the audience about her motives: she affects a non-instrumental concern for the truth (not always very convincingly) when in fact her concern is tactical.

### *(iii) Spin and Democracy*

In this way, we can begin to see why persistent spin is bad for democracy. While liars may be concerned with truth values for non-instrumental reasons, even while they depart from the truth, spinners, in the sense that occupies me here, have only an instrumental attachment to the truth, even while they tell it. Although individual 'spins' may be harmless (may even be 'noble'), excessive indulgence in spin of the kind that has come to characterise modern democratic societies could well have a corrosive effect. Persistent spinning may function to atrophy a person's normal habit of attending to the truth simply *because it is truth*, and not just because it is *useful* to appreciate the way things really are. Of course, it is useful in all sorts of ways to attend to the truth, but we normally suppose that the truth matters independently of its utility.

There are, to be sure, instrumental reasons to demand the truth from our democratic representatives: to do so serves as an important bulwark against tyranny and oppression. But, for those who really value democracy, there should also be non-instrumental reasons. And that is because, as I have noted, government is a *trust*. And so even when the truth hurts (when its telling is instrumentally counter-productive), there is still reason to make it known so as not to violate that trust. A culture of spin is a culture that struggles to get a handle on that idea, because it is a culture that has forgotten the non-instrumental value of truth. And this of course is a dangerous position in which to find oneself. A purely tactical attachment to the truth is liable to be a fragile attachment, one that is too dependent on favourable circumstances and contingencies. Notoriously in politics, truth-telling is not always strategically sensible (and so we have instrumental reasons to prefer politicians who are non-instrumentally attached to the truth). But, more than that, a purely tactical attachment to the truth misses an important part of what democracy is meant to be all about, and betrays the kind of relationship (the trust) that is meant to obtain between citizens and their representatives.

The kind of debased political culture I am envisaging here is one in which politicians have become so absorbed in the political 'game', in all of its petty strategies and manoeuvring, that they have lost sight of the bigger picture and of the values that may have originally motivated them. A case in point here is that of Jo Moore, who served as a Special Adviser to the MP, Stephen Byers. Moore was roundly criticised when it emerged that, in the hours following the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center, she had sent an email to the press office of her department saying 'It is now a very good day to get out anything we want to bury. Councillors expenses?'<sup>31</sup> It is this sort of character, for whom political speech seems to have become a purely tactical matter and who may seem therefore to have little non-strategic interest in the veracity or otherwise of her utterances, in whom I am particularly interested. And I have suggested that perhaps we should be more troubled by this sort

of character – or rather by the public culture that *sustains* this sort of character – than typically we are.

The culture of spin – even while it is a culture of truth-telling – is a culture that expresses a kind of disdain for the democratic value of truth. To be clear, none of this is intended as an apology for political lying, but it is intended to suggest that we go wrong in our indulgence of spin and in our consequent tendency to prefer spinners to liars.

#### **4. Public and Private Morality**

Why do we tend to indulge the spin doctors whilst excoriating the liars? One reason I have already noted: it may simply be that we see in the spin doctor a reluctance to deceive that is absent in the liar. But I think there is more to it than that and I finish here by outlining a possible further reason, one rooted in a more general misapprehension of the relationship between public and private morality when we assess the character of our political representatives.

It is easy enough to see why lies are considered so odious in the intimate sphere.<sup>32</sup> Our general intolerance of lies from friends and loved ones seems to be generated (in large part) by the sense that they are harmful. Here is Frankfurt again:

Lies are designed to damage our grasp of reality. So they are intended, in a very real way, to make us crazy. To the extent that we believe them, our minds are occupied and governed by fictions, fantasies, and illusions that have been concocted for us by the liar.<sup>33</sup>

The liar deliberately constructs an imaginary world and then seeks to force his victim into it. Thus, in so far as being forced to occupy an imaginary world is harmful, the liar's intention is (in part at least) to harm the victim of his deception. It is important to note that the same cannot be said of the

practitioner of spin. The spin doctor certainly tries to manipulate her audience, but spin is not intentionally designed to damage the victim's grasp of reality, and it need not do so. The practitioner of spin is at all times at pains to avoid lying to her audience. Thus, she refuses to force her 'victims' into a world of falsehood in the manner of the liar. So, while liars necessarily intend to harm their victims, spinners do not. The propagation of spin may well have harmful consequences, but, in and of itself, it is harmless.

So, when a friend or loved one lies to us, we are liable to experience it as a personal *attack* and to find in it a degree of cruelty ('you deliberately tried to damage my grasp of reality; you tried to make me crazy'). Such behaviour is often thought to convey a lack of regard for our personal interests.<sup>34</sup> And we are likely to be much more tolerant of spin when practised by our friends precisely because it does not possess that same quality. We might even feel reassured by it. That you had gone to the trouble to spin the inconvenient truth rather than just lie to me about it is a sign of your respect for me and of your unwillingness to harm me notwithstanding the inconvenience of the truth.

And the fact that we are often more disturbed by political lies than by political spin suggests that we may deploy a similar set of considerations when we weigh the characters of our political representatives. As Michael Phillips-Anderson, a scholar of political communication, suggests, 'In a democracy, choosing our leaders turns out to be not very different from choosing our mates. We find people attractive with whom we share a worldview and an understanding of our backgrounds and beliefs. And we want someone who can make us laugh'.<sup>35</sup> We have a tendency to seek in our leaders the same sort of character and qualities we might seek in a personal friend. In particular, we seek in them the disposition not to harm us by telling us lies. Consequently, when we react with indignation to the political liars, it may be the case, as Frankfurt observes, that our main concern is not actually 'the concern of a *citizen*. What is most immediately aroused in our response to the liar is not *public spirit*. It is something more personal'.<sup>36</sup>

Consider the case of Bill Clinton. Famous for the ‘folksy’ manner that gave rise to his affectionate nickname, ‘Bubba’, Clinton deliberately sought to cultivate the perception that he was a man of the people, who shared the instincts and convictions of the electorate. And thus it seems probable that at least some of the ire directed at him following the Lewinsky ‘zippergate’ affair was fuelled by the sense of a friendship betrayed by the lies he had told.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, it is striking that Clinton’s defence of his actions turned partly on the attempt to persuade the public that his deceptive remarks (‘I did not have sexual relations with that woman’) had in fact been spin and not lies. As he put it, ‘while my answers were legally accurate, I did not volunteer information’.<sup>38</sup> In other words he used the technique I have mentioned of aspect selection, and also that of lexical selection (relating to the notorious ambiguity surrounding his reference to ‘sexual relations’). He ‘misled people’,<sup>39</sup> but he did not lie, and so he did not violate or betray his ‘friendship’ with the American public.

But it may be that this tendency to evaluate our leaders by reference to these kinds of private considerations (‘would she make a good friend?’) is a mistake. The idea that we tend to prioritise the wrong sorts of values in the assessment of our public officials is a familiar one. Stephen Carter identifies the same tendency in the confirmation process of Supreme Court Justices where, under the guise of evaluating their ‘judicial philosophies’, we actually favour those whose views we agree with. ‘When the people and their senators and their President talk about “judicial philosophy,” they have in mind adherence not to a particular theory, but people who will reach results we like’.<sup>40</sup> But of course – and this is Carter’s point – this is profoundly unconstitutional: ‘Beginning constitutional law students are taught that the Supreme Court serves as a countermajoritarian brake. The institution of judicial review exists precisely to thwart, not to further, the self-interested programs of temporary majorities’.<sup>41</sup> For Carter, then, the confirmation process is too often dominated by private considerations and interests, when it should be governed by public spirit.

Now of course, popularly elected representatives are not in the same (constitutional) position as Supreme Court Justices, but similar concerns arise nonetheless. I have argued that the problem of democratic deceit is structured by an altogether different set of values from those that structure the problem of deceit in intimate contexts.<sup>42</sup> Hence, the concern of a citizen *should* be very different from the concern of a private individual. When our politicians lie to us, it indicates that they are not moved (as good friends ought to be) by concern for our personal interests, and we interpret that as a marker of bad character. But in fact we should not want politicians who are moved by our personal interests – we should want (and democracy demands) politicians who are moved by the *public* interest. Our tendency to be more outraged by lies than by spin thus indicates that we worry about democratic deceit for the wrong reasons. We worry, as private individuals, that our politicians may not after all be the (potential) friends we had imagined them to be when really we should be concerned, as citizens, by the threat of tyranny, and for the preservation of accountability and the security and stability of the democratic order.

It is worth noting a couple of implications of these observations. The first is that what often passes for ‘public spirit’ in our society is in fact nothing of the sort. When we rail against the political liars whilst indulging the spin doctors, the likelihood is that we are motivated not by public spirit at all, but by our own private interest and a sense of personal affront. The truly publicly-spirited citizen would be rather more concerned about the spin doctors for reasons I have given. Secondly, this tendency of the electorate to gauge the characters of their politicians by reference to private rather than public considerations generates some perverse incentives. It encourages politicians to ingratiate themselves to the public as if they were our friends when in fact that is altogether the wrong mode of relationship. And the desire to ingratiate themselves in this way encourages them in turn to spin the truth rather than lie, even though spin is often the more democratically damaging style of deception. When we address the morality of political deceit, it is crucial that we think politically, and that we do not unthinkingly import our private evaluations into a context in which

they may be quite out of place. And thinking politically, on my account, renders the spin doctor a greater villain than we have generally been inclined to suppose.

Our democratically elected politicians are not our friends, even in the good times, but nor are they our enemies. They are, simply, our politicians, which is a social role all of its own embodying its own distinctive scheme of ethical standards and responsibilities. I have not attempted to make a case for lies over spin in public life, but I am inclined to insist that we evaluate our politicians by appeal to considerations appropriate to their role. Doing so (and doing so consistently) may lead us to see democratic deception in a different light.<sup>43</sup>



## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Neil Manson 'Making Sense of Spin', *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 29, 3 (2012), 200-213 at p. 201.

<sup>2</sup> Bernard Williams, *In the Beginning Was the Deed: Realism and Moralism in Political Argument*, ed. Geoffrey Hawthorn (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 157.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 158.

<sup>4</sup> Sissela Bok, *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life* (London: Quartet, 1980), p. 172.

<sup>5</sup> Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince* trans. George Bull (London: Penguin, 1999), p. 56.

<sup>6</sup> Bernard Williams, *In the Beginning Was the Deed* op. cit., p. 157.

<sup>7</sup> Denis Healey, 'The Human Button' [BBC Radio 4 documentary hosted by Peter Hennessy]. *BBC* (1998), available at: <http://huffduffer.com/zzot/60314>.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> The Healey case differs from the Blair and Johnson cases in a further sense. Healey's lie was directed primarily at the Soviets, not the British public. He had to fool the British public *in order* to fool the Soviets, but it was an unavoidable side-effect and not his primary aim. By contrast, Blair and Johnson primarily targeted the citizenry; their lies were paternalistic in a way that Healey's was not. Such differences with regard to the targets of political lies are clearly relevant to any comprehensive evaluation of the cases, but I do not think that they are decisive in explaining our divergent reactions to them. Another case that is often discussed in this context is John F Kennedy's lie to the American people about the deal he had made with the Soviets to resolve the Cuban Missile Crisis. That was clearly a paternalistic lie, directly targeted at the citizenry, but yet we may still think it admirable, and for the same sorts of reasons that we may think Healey's lie admirable.

<sup>10</sup> Bok op. cit., p. 177.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 177.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, A. John Simmons, *Moral Principles and Political Obligations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979), chapters 3 and 4.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 181.

<sup>14</sup> By this I do not mean to imply that the public must be deceived about some aspects of political activity. The line between concealment and deception is in many ways a hazy one, but my point here is simply to emphasise the variety of political activities that cannot realistically be subjected to public scrutiny.

<sup>15</sup> Martin Hollis, 'Dirty Hands', *British Journal of Political Science* 12, 4 (1982), 385-98 at p. 398.

<sup>16</sup> I do not claim to have offered a comprehensive refutation of principled approaches to the negotiation of the problem of democratic deceit. My aim has rather been to furnish some reasons for doubt about certain principled approaches and to suggest that, even insofar as they are intellectually coherent, there may be limits to the practicality of their implementation in the conditions of democratic politics. These doubts speak in favour of taking considerations of character more seriously, but I would not wish to deny the importance of considerations of principle suitably conceived.

<sup>17</sup> Bernard Williams, 'Politics and Moral Character' in Stuart Hampshire (ed.) *Public and Private Morality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 55-74 at p. 64.

<sup>18</sup> This is perhaps the most commonly accepted definition of lying among philosophers, and will suffice for my purposes, but it is not uncontroversial. A helpful overview of the controversy is provided by James Mahon 'The Definition of Lying and Deception', *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2008 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), on-line at: <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/lying-definition/>.

<sup>19</sup> Neil Manson 'Making Sense of Spin' op. cit., p. 201.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 202.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 203.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 205.

<sup>23</sup> Harry Frankfurt 'On Bullshit' in his *The Importance of What We Care About: Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 117-33.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 131.

<sup>25</sup> Michael White and Brian Whitaker 'UK war dossier a sham, say experts', *The Guardian* Friday 7<sup>th</sup> February (2003), available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2003/feb/07/uk.internationaleducationnews>.

<sup>26</sup> Frankfurt 'On Bullshit' op. cit., pp. 129-30. G. A. Cohen argues that Frankfurt fails to distinguish carefully enough between the tactics and goals of liars, the standard tactic being to say something untrue and the standard goal being to mislead with respect to reality. Cohen argues that tactic and goal can come apart in a way that Frankfurt overlooks. Specifically, Cohen suggests that one may prove oneself to be a liar even whilst

telling the truth (insofar as one's truthful utterances seek to mislead with respect to reality). And, if that is so, then certain kinds of liars become indistinguishable from bullshitters as Frankfurt characterises them. But part of the response to Cohen here might well be to resist the suggestion that the tactics and goals of liars can come apart in the way he describes. Insofar as one aims to mislead with respect to reality by telling the truth, one does not prove oneself to be a liar. One proves oneself to be something else (possibly a bullshitter). Otherwise, we would find ourselves in the (counterintuitive?) position of having to accept that a person could be a liar without ever having said anything she believed to be false. See G. A. Cohen 'Deeper into Bullshit' in Sarah Buss and Lee Overton (eds) *Contours of Agency: Essays of Themes from Harry Frankfurt* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002), 321-339 at 328-330.

<sup>27</sup> Harry Frankfurt, *On Truth* (London: Pimlico, 2007), p. 33.

<sup>28</sup> Frankfurt 'On Bullshit' op. cit., p. 132.

<sup>29</sup> Harry Frankfurt 'Reply to G. A. Cohen' in Sarah Buss and Lee Overton (eds) *Contours of Agency: Essays of Themes from Harry Frankfurt* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002), 340-44 at 343.

<sup>30</sup> The interview is available to watch here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uwlsd8RAoqI>

<sup>31</sup> Quoted in Andrew Sparrow 'Sept. 11: "a good day to bury bad news"'. *The Telegraph* 10 October, 2001. Available at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1358985/Sept-11-a-good-day-to-bury-bad-news.html> 2001. It is worth adding that this is not intended as a criticism of individuals. Indeed, one may well be inclined to sympathise with the likes of Jo Moore. As I have been arguing, the democratic system operates in such a way as to select for and to encourage these sorts of patterns of thought and behaviour in political actors. What is truly disquieting about Moore's advice is that it was absolutely right.

<sup>32</sup> One reason that I will not consider here, though it has received a lot of scholarly attention, is that lies constitute a betrayal, or an abuse, of trust. See, for example, Paul Faulkner 'What is Wrong with Lying?' *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 75, 3 (2007), 535-57; Collin O'Neil 'Lying, Trust and Gratitude', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 40, 4 (2012), 301-33.

<sup>33</sup> Frankfurt *On Truth* op. cit., p. 78.

<sup>34</sup> And of course this can often be so even where the liar imagines herself to be acting 'in the best interests' of her victim. 'Let me be the judge of that' as the victim might say.

<sup>35</sup> Michael Phillips-Anderson 'Working the Room', *Lapham's Quarterly* (2013), available at: <http://www.laphamsquarterly.org/essays/working-the-room.php?page=all>

<sup>36</sup> Frankfurt, *On Truth* op. cit., p. 75. To be sure, it does not follow automatically from the idea that we seek in our politicians the same sorts of characteristics as we seek in our friends that we see our political representatives *as friends*. My claim here is weaker: the fact (if it is a fact) that we seek in our politicians the same sorts of characteristics as we seek in our friends prompts the speculation that perhaps we may see our political representatives as friends. The discussion of Bill Clinton in the next paragraph is intended to show that, at least some of the time, the speculation is valid.

<sup>37</sup> In fact, the public reaction to the Lewinsky affair was extremely complex. Despite a ferocious reaction in the media, Clinton's public approval ratings remained high throughout, and even grew during the course of the scandal. This is probably due to the way in which the scandal rapidly became polarised along party lines. Nevertheless, the percentage of the public who considered Clinton a 'moral' individual plummeted across the board. 77% of Democrats thought of Clinton as moral in 1996; by the end of 1998 that figure had fallen to 49%. See Arthur Miller 'Sex, Politics, and Public Opinion: What Political Scientists Really Learned From the Clinton-Lewinsky Scandal' *PS: Political Science & Politics* 32, 4 (1999), 721-29 at p. 723.

<sup>38</sup> Bill Clinton [1998 Television Address], available at *The History Place: Great Speeches Collection*: <http://www.historyplace.com/speeches/clinton.htm>.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Stephen Carter 'The Confirmation Mess', *Harvard Law Review*, 101, 6 (1988), 1185-1201 at p. 1193.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 1193.

<sup>42</sup> To be sure, it does not follow automatically from this observation that spin is not equally bad in intimate contexts, but if it were equally bad, then it would have to be for different reasons.

<sup>43</sup> This article arises from lectures delivered at the University of Leeds over a number of years as part of an undergraduate module, 'Theories of Political Morality'. I would like to thank all of the students who participated in the module for providing a lively forum for the discussion of the paper's argument. Earlier versions of the article were presented on two occasions at the University of Leeds – at a political theory research seminar in the School of Politics and International Studies and at a research seminar in the Interdisciplinary Ethics Applied Centre. I am grateful to all participants for their comments. I would also like to thank Sue Mendus, who read and provided written comments on an earlier draft. Finally, I am particularly

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