Are political promises always a sign of political weakness?

'To my critics, I am not a demagogue. I am a
defender of democracy. But democracy, it has
this tendency that we have to beware to
become mere transaction. You give me this, I
give you that. I come begging for your vote.
[...] The model that I follow isn't from the
scorched marketplace, where cunning men
haggle for the best price.'

Jeryd Mencken, *Succession* S04E8

Introduction

Promises are a core part of everyday life, expressing trust between the promiser and the promisee, binding us together in webs of obligation. Promises, in their making and keeping, are frequently signs of strength, affirming our commitments to one another, weakened when they are made out of expediency and broken out of convenience. In *politics*, however, promises are often in bad odour. Promises may weaken the power of the state and obviate sovereignty which, in a Schmittian sense, is most evident when it is unencumbered. Promises may also, as Jeryd Mencken argues in *Succession*, capitulate to febrile social constituencies who see politics only in terms of the distribution of public goods and deny its broader possibilities. Political promises may also weaken the link between political representatives and their citizens, eroding the trust which makes democratic politics possible.

I argue that political promises need not be signs of political weakness, dependent on their *soundness*. Political promises strengthen the link between states and their citizens if they create more than they destroy, and they weaken if they destroy more than they create. Part I reveals the genealogy—origin and nature—of political promises, part II espouses a theory of political promises

within democratic politics, and part III explores what I call the *paradox* of political promises: political promises have the capacity to *create* and *destroy* politics at the same time.

On the Genealogy of Political Promises

If promises are a feature of ordinary life, we ought to ask what distinguishes distinctively *political* promises. Both promises and contracts are kinds of agreements: contracts are bound by the external force of legal systems, whereas promises are bound by trust. Political pledges are invariably *promises* because there is no authority outside of the state to hold it to account; the power of the state is the power to make and shape those legal systems which administer contracts between citizens. They pertain to the affairs of the state and leverage the state's claim to a monopoly of legitimate violence in the Weberian sense (Weber, 1977: 77-79). That is, political promises involve the possibility of violence, whereas everyday promises presume the absence of violence; thus, political promises are qualitatively different from everyday promises.

In this sense, the creation of the modern state is the first political promise, the promise which makes all other promises possible. The modern state is the promise of peace, as Thomas Hobbes observed in *Leviathan*, between each member of the multitude when they lay down their right to all things, authorising a sovereign to represent them, the commonwealth. The sovereign personates the commonwealth and the commonwealth obeys the sovereign—Hobbes calls this the 'Covenant' (Hobbes, 1996). The Covenant depends on trust because 'he that is to performe in time to come, being trusted, his performance is called Keeping Of *Promise*, or Faith.' (Hobbes, 1996: 94) The first political promise answers what Bernard Williams (2005: 3) terms the 'first political question', defined in 'Hobbesian terms as the securing of order, protection, safety, trust, and the conditions of cooperation.' The first political promise sets a foundation for the practice of modern politics in ways that have fundamentally transformed the kinds of promises it makes. Its *strength* is that it makes democratic politics possible.

Within democratic politics, those subsequent political promises might always be regarded as forms of weakness because they restrain the sovereign, as Carl Schmitt (2007) would have it. However, by binding the governing and the governed together, the modes of interlocution between

states and their citizens create instead of destroy. Creation instead of destruction defines the *strength* of political promises, in which interests are not given so much as created and negotiated. Politicians compete to represent the people and promise to leverage the resources of the state to advance their interests (Runciman, 2007: 107). The question becomes, then, under what circumstances and in what ways political promises signal strength and weakness according to the contingency of politics.

A Theory of Political Promises

Political promises are not self-defining. We ought to ask, as Raymond Geuss (2008: 23-25) argues channelling Vladimir Lenin, the question '*who, whom?*' Who promises what to whom, how, and for what reason? Our answers to these questions are coloured by vicissitudes of democratic politics at any given moment: whether a political promise is a sign of strength or weakness is dependent on the role of politicians within political parties, the forms those parties take, the size of the franchise and the condition of the people, and the quality of state-society relations. These have undergone significant change since the twentieth century, where the relationship between the governing and the governed was mediated by mass parties who made clear promises to defined social constituencies who constituted their core votes. Mass politics gave way to what Bernard Manin (1997) terms 'audience' democracy, populated by 'cartel' parties who serve their own interests, having evacuated the traditional mediating space within democratic politics (Katz and Mair, 1995). Politicians only cross the resulting 'void' (Mair, 2013) at election time to win the votes of the alienated public in what is recognised as a transparent transaction. It is no wonder that the rise of populist leaders offering authentic representation for 'the pure people' (see Mudde 2004) and their *volonté générale* have gained traction, perhaps most notably in Donald Trump's emphasis on 'Promises Made, Promises Kept' during his re-election campaign. The dispassionate machinations of political parties and their 'shopping lists' of policy promises clearly intended for particular social groups give politics a curiously impersonal character (Thackeray and Toye, 2021: 3).

Post-democratic promises are 'Pyrrhic' promises, signs of weakness which destroy more than they create because they feed a persistent sense of democratic pessimism and reduce politics to transaction. Promises which are transparently instrumental, made from positions of weakness and compelled by circumstance rather than manifestations of conviction, erode trust rather than

enhance it. When David Cameron promised a referendum on Britain's EU membership in 2013, he responded to the rising tide of Euroscepticism, changing attitudes to immigration among the British public, and the growing threat of UKIP (Cameron, 2013). The ensuing "referendum lock" committed him to a course of action he neither believed in nor expected to eventuate, given the low *ex-ante* chances of a Conservative majority in 2015 and Cameron's continued public support for EU membership (Thompson, 2017: 443-444). Cameron's gamble was Pyrrhic: it consolidated his personal power and saw off UKIP, at the cost of his political career following the referendum.

While Cameron was compelled by circumstance, Harold Wilson recognised that a referendum would address the 'impossible task of agreeing a policy on membership, which would otherwise have driven one wing or another of the party into rebellion' (Saunders, 2018: 78). Unlike Cameron, Wilson remained neutral, an act of responsibility which ensured that a referendum could take place without his personal survival staked on a particular outcome. Wilson was also markedly more successful in his renegotiation of Britain's membership of the European Community, whereas Cameron promised the impossible and failed to deliver, weakening his position and enhancing the prospect of a 'Leave' vote.

Promises can signal strength when they create more than they destroy, when their constraints beget political possibility and commit leaders and their states to future courses of action which extend the horizon of political imagination and demonstrate a credible future, obviating the kinds of commitment problems game theorists describe (Downs, 1957). I call promises which create more than they destroy *sound* and those which destroy more than they create *unsound*. To distinguish sound from unsound promises–those which signal strength and weakness respectively–is to identify their *activity* and *validity*. Sound promises are active and valid.

Active promises are those which manifest politics as 'action', constitutive of the present and engaged in future-making activities where the politician making the promise narrates the possibility of a better future (Arendt, 1998). Active promises bind the promiser and promisee, as well as uniting the individuals composing the promise together. Democratic politics depends on a conception of the future which can orient a political community, a degree of certainty amidst the uncertainty which constitutes democratic politics and the possibility of change.

Sound promises must also be *valid*, recognising the constraints of democratic politics and generating 'democratic trust' (Huber, 2021: 733). In the Weberian sense, active promises are born

of *conviction*. Too much conviction, however, will render leaders incapable of making sense of the demands of *responsibility* and the kinds of action their resources and capital make possible (Weber, 1977: 79). They will promise without the ability to make good on them, reducing their promises to wishful thinking (Manin, 1997: 237). Too much responsibility, by contrast, will see leaders imprisoned by constraints and incapable of seeing the possibilities. A leader consumed by responsibility will be swallowed by the machine, making promises which are the most transactional and machine-like. Soundness derives from the appropriate balance of the ethics of conviction and responsibility, as Max Weber (1977) described in *Politik als Beruf*.

Unsound promises, which destroy more than they create, are either invalid, inactive, or both. If they are active and invalid, there is too much conviction and not enough responsibility; if they are valid and inactive, there is too much responsibility and not enough conviction. *In extremis*, promises can be invalid and inactive, made out of expediency without the conviction or intention to see it through.

The Paradox of Political Promises

As E. M. Forster (1909) and Mohandas Gandhi (1909) prophesied, if politics is consumed by the machine (what Arendt calls 'labour' and 'work'), civil society ceases to exist when *The Machine Stops*. Unsound promises serve this cause and can destroy the trust which sustains democratic politics; they are signs of weakness. Sound promises, by leveraging the possibilities of political leadership within a particular set of constraints, can be acts of 'natality', generating political capital, hope, extending the temporal horizons of politics, offsetting the short-term bias of democratic politics, and signalling strength (Arendt, 1998). The *paradox* is that political promises can act as the same means to opposing ends depending on their *soundness*. If Wilson and Cameron show sound and unsound promises in democratic politics, I will demonstrate this paradox at two further levels of construal: in international politics between Harold Wilson and Tony Blair on war, and between the political economy of William Gladstone and Liz Truss on the longest-term political promise of them all, *debt*.

Foreign policy is arguably the domain in which the most expansive political promises prevail. However, it is also the domain of short-term promises constrained by commitment problems and, as Ron Krebs and Aaron Rapport (2012) show, short time horizons given by the cognitive limitations

of construal-level theory. Blair's promise to Bush that 'I will be with you, whatever' was a *valid* promise made to assuage the Americans' concern over the size of their anti-Saddam coalition and leveraged Blair's sizeable Commons majority (Erlanger and Sanger, 2016). It was also an *active* one intended to re-create a 'special relationship' between the two states in the 21st century (Blair, 2010).

However, Blair's concomitant promise to help the Iraqis achieve a 'united, stable, and free country' following Saddam's removal was active but invalid, a long-term promise to Iraq's political institutions without a recognition of the circumstances on the ground that would make affecting that promise possible (Blair, 2003; 'The tragedy of Iraq, 20 years on', 2023). These circumstances were constituted by both the disintegration of domestic Iraqi politics—particularly the dissolution of the Iraqi Army— and Blair's declining domestic political capital, given the scale of public opposition to the invasion (Runciman, 2006: 33). Blair became the prototypical conviction politician, incapable of demonstrating an attention to the specifics that would make realising his dream of a stable, democratic Iraq possible. The disjuncture between Blair's sound promise to Bush, and his unsound promise to the Iraqi people, signals the corresponding signs of strength and weakness of his political promises on Iraq.

By contrast, Harold Wilson promised in Labour's 1964 manifesto to bring an 'end to colonialism' and repeatedly refused to commit troops to the Vietnam War despite persistent pressure from President Lyndon Johnson, balancing conviction and responsibility ('Labour Manifesto 1964', 1975: 267-270; Williams S, 2005). Wilson recognised that sending troops to Vietnam would both render his promise to end colonialism inactive and draw the ire of his parliamentary colleagues. Ben Pimlott observed in his biography of Wilson that he demonstrated both action and validity by 'courageously, persistently and despite the strongest inducements, [declining] to provide [troops]' (Pimlott, 1993: 388). Providing *moral* support for the US was both active and valid, demonstrating the strength of the UK's 'special relationship' with the US while retaining the support of parliamentary colleagues and remaining consistent with manifesto foreign policy commitments (Vickers, 2008: 43). Wilson's pragmatism secured validity and enabled Britain to pursue an independent foreign policy which did not commit resources to a costly war without an end in sight; his promise in 1964 signalled political *strength*.

Political promises are fundamentally promises about the future; the easiest way for politicians to connect the present to the future is by creating debt to fund their present promises. The balance

of debt, when leveraged by the state, is the balance between present conviction and future actions, a temporal bond that ties together present validity and action across time. Promises relating to budget whose debt burden exceeds the maximum capacity of the economic planning of initial promise(s) will destroy more than they create because their ability to act as a link between present and future is broken by the excess weight of debt. Liz Truss' promises in her 'mini-budget' demonstrate how excess debt can destroy more than it creates (Partington, 2022).

Promising to fundamentally challenge Britain's political economy by boosting growth and addressing productivity issues could be seen as *active*, but Truss' promises and the rapidly multiplying number of uncosted tax cuts and the debt increases they implied, expressed in terms of 'let[ting] the balance sheet do the work', lacked validity; her promises were dependent on exogenous market forces she could not control (Parker, Paynes, and Hughes, 2022). Operation 'rolling thunder' made too many *invalid promises*, and Truss' reluctance to countenance the continuity of her promises with the capacity of the fiscal state destroyed her project (Parker, Paynes, and Hughes, 2022). She failed to consider that her promises may precipitate a run on the pound, a spike in bond yields, and necessitated Bank of England intervention to soothe the gilt markets. Promises, if they hope to transcend the limits of the state in their *activity*, must, at some basic level, respect the constraints on possibility that democratic politics imposes.

While her lack of validity is clear, the appearance of Truss' promises as *active* might also be illusory. Truss' desire to appear as the heir to Thatcher in stylistic terms might not necessarily extend to the surplus of conviction Thatcher demonstrated towards the end of her premiership—as in the poll tax. Truss' conviction was calibrated to win the Conservative Party leadership; in this sense, she could be seen as a pure product of the machine, a Frankenstein's creature of the fiscal subconscious of the Conservative Party and a product without any conviction. Truss' transformation into a born-again 'Leaver' and her fiscal platform were all, in the first instance, intended to defeat Rishi Sunak. Truss' promises were promises *to* the Conservative Party, and the lack of responsibility to the wider constraints of politics demonstrates the cartelisation of political parties and their alienation from broader social constituencies. Truss, as a product of the machine, promised what the party wanted, forsaking its compatibility with what was possible. Long-term debt did not have a chance to become a problem because those concerns were overridden by immediate panic within Britain's fiscal architecture. Truss' inactive and invalid promises demonstrated her extreme political *weakness*.

William Gladstone provides an instructive comparison to Truss, serving as Chancellor under similar conditions of war and political turmoil. Gladstone rejected the temptations of debt when he promised to avoid borrowing to cover the cost of Britain's entry into the Crimean War in 1854 (Gunter and Maloney, 1999: 327). He stood, in Weber's words, as the 'dictator of the electoral battlefield', leading the machine and deftly negotiating the contingencies and uncertainties of Britain's fiscal position, refusing to 'give any absolute pledges' and making sufficiently vague promises to give him room for manoeuvre (Weber, 1994: 342). Gladstone's six-month doubling of income tax was unpopular but a responsible promise (Morley, 1903, i: 516-517). His promise was *sound* because it was both active and valid, a promise for the future grounded in the possibilities of the present and a sign of political *strength* evidenced by his future electoral success to become Prime Minister.

Conclusion

'I always have and always will refuse to make promises.'

      (R. A. Butler, Conservative election address, 1935, R. A. Butler Papers, RAB J/21/181)

Political promises, like Alexis de Tocqueville's ship (1835-1840), sink if they promise to go too far on too little. Their genealogy reveals that political promises are not always a sign of political weakness, as demonstrated by the first political promise; it *created* the modern state and democratic politics. However, within democratic politics, promises are often signs of weakness. My theory of political promises explains that their strength derives from balancing the Weberian ethics of conviction and responsibility and going beyond the machine to offer a *sound* account of the future. The *paradox* of political promises is discovered: political promises can be the same means to contradictory ends. As with most things in politics, whether political promises are signs of strength or weakness is a matter of contingency.

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