

Introduction

The rules of the game are changing

Tony Blair, BBC Panorama, 9 October 2005

Contemporary Western politics often lacks two things: a moral theory and a respect for the facts. Power, party and pragmatism have become paramount and spin more important than substance. Remnants of respect for the ideals of democracy, human rights and liberalism remain but these are often vaguely defined and inconsistently applied. Is it possible to rediscover or redefine some clearer sense of moral purpose in politics? To increase its concern for truthfulness and to base it upon some transparent moral objectives? The moral vacuum in Western politics today all too easily could be filled by blind patriotism, religious fundamentalism, commercialism or naked power. This book is not merely a call for maintaining standards in public life. It suggests that morality and truth-seeking should be put back into the very foundations of politics. This is not a plea for a hidden agenda, for any sort of dogmatism or for any absolute idealism. It is simply a request that political policy should be based, not upon mere opinion, nor upon a set of knee jerk reflexes, but upon a scientific concern for the facts and an intelligent and open moral argument.

I suppose my own interest in political philosophy goes back to childhood. There were times when I felt so oppressed by those around me that I tried to work out how the situation ought to be put right. At boarding school I found myself in a police state in miniature. The supreme authorities were the teachers or, significantly, the 'masters', as they were then called. Their police force was the prefects who enforced a rigid set of rules with draconian corporal punishment. The regime was authoritarian and hierarchical, inculcating the militaristic virtues of mental and physical toughness and obedi-

ence to command. The traditional principles of liberty, equality and democracy were ignored. Indeed, inequality was enforced through a system of petty privileges; the sixth former could walk upon the lawn and have one hand in his pocket, the prefect could use an umbrella, the head boy could have a beard, a wife and two children — while the wretched new boy had no privileges at all! Only ‘justice’ was given some sort of respect — but this was a justice that was defined and administered entirely by those in power, and without appeal. We, the subjects of this totalitarian mini-state, participated in no political debate about the running of the school, nor were we permitted any votes in determining how policy should be administered. In daily Anglican chapel services we were subjected to selective Christian indoctrination; our virtues were to be fortitude, self-discipline and obedience to authority. There was no separate legislature, no independent judiciary, only an unyielding and unelected executive that controlled every moment of our lives. Such a situation caused great misery and fear for many of us. Some, however, prospered under these conditions; those who were exceptionally robust and those who toed the line. Others cracked mentally and disappeared. A few became rebels, some clandestinely and some more openly; this is one of the many paradoxes of the traditional British public school system — it has produced not only the great conformers but also some of the reformers of society. None of us were to be uninfluenced throughout our lives by these few traumatic years. Eventually, when I became a prefect in this little police state, I tried, rather ineffectually, to put some revolutionary ideas into practice. What, I asked myself, was the purpose of the school regime? A ‘good education’? But what did that mean? As hard as I looked I could not see a clear moral vision on which school rules and policies were established, nor any body of hard factual evidence to support them.

This book proposes re-inserting moral principles into politics. I suggest these could be Utilitarian, Kantian, Aristotelian, Rights Theory, post-Christian or something new; the important point is that they should be argued clearly, open to dissent, and applied more or less consistently. Currently, it is impossible to debate political morality with most politicians because they do not have a coherent moral position. Instead, they utter an odd assortment of moral clichés and assumptions. While paying lip service to human rights, for example, they nevertheless tend to assume that the moral goodness of a policy depends upon the *total number of people* who benefit from it, often overlooking the interests of the individual. My own

moral position (painism) attempts to reverse this trend, claiming that it is only the individual that matters (Ryder 2001), and holding that the suffering of individuals should be our chief moral concern. As we shall see, this challenges democracy's main weakness – its so-called 'tyranny by the majority'. I believe that underlying all the traditional aims of politics – the attainments of liberty, equality or justice (which are analysed in detail in part 1) – is the search for happiness. Indeed, I would say that happiness, however unpopular the word itself may have become, should, nevertheless, be the real aim of politics. The wellbeing of the individual still faces two great political threats: the threat of the democratic majority and the threat of the state itself, whether or not it is democratic. Both threats must be challenged if the happiness of the individual is to be secured.

If politics is about helping individuals to be happy then it needs to find out from psychology how to do this. This is just one instance where science should play a greater role in establishing the facts in politics. There is a common failure to base political policies upon scientifically established truths. Most of the claims of political philosophers, too, have been untested scientifically. We may breezily assert that justice leads to freedom or that equality leads to justice, and a host of other things, but these claims are rarely tested scientifically, although some now could be.

My own experience of politicians at national level is that most of them are exceptionally decent people, although under far more searching moral scrutiny than are most of us, and far more likely to face angry charges of moral inconsistency, hypocrisy and mendacity. Nevertheless, we live in an age that is suspicious of politics. Over the last twenty years an average of only 18% of the British public have believed that politicians generally tell the truth. Why is this? Is this the fault of the politicians themselves or the media? Surely it would help if we knew what the politicians are really trying to achieve. This would increase their credibility. But we listen to them in vain for a convincing, coherent and consistent philosophy underlying their day to day manoeuvres. What we do find is 'sleaze' and a growing bureaucracy – a 'nanny state' that, with the proliferation of street CCTV cameras, the proposed introduction of identity cards, telephone-tapping, the politicisation of the police and new anti-terrorist legislation, increasingly resembles George Orwell's nightmare vision; worst of all, we see an increasing toleration of the practice of torture. There is a strange post-Marxist notion in the air that politics and morality should be disconnected. Even stranger is

the idea that their disconnection is both necessary and, in some way, right. This book challenges all these assumptions. Idealism itself can become dangerous. But going too far in the other direction, towards relativism, amoral expediency and opportunism, is equally perilous.

When Niccolo Machiavelli published *Il Principe* in 1513 he contested the then accepted Christian virtues by urging that rulers could use both force and fraud to protect the stability of the state and the welfare of its citizens. He argued that such laudable ends justified immoral means in a world where corruption and violence already prevailed and where entirely virtuous tactics were bound to fail. In effect, Machiavelli tried to take morality out of politics. So powerful has been the influence of Machiavelli's advice that, to this day, politicians and political philosophers frequently seem to assume that politics, because of its impact upon the lives of so many, not only allows, but rightly requires, violations of normally accepted moral standards. Of course, when faced by a Hitler or a Stalin, polite tea-table agreements count for little, and force and deception may become necessary. But this does not mean that moral considerations should be avoided. Quite to the contrary, it is precisely because of the gravity and the far reaching effects of politics that morality becomes exquisitely important. The lives and happiness of millions are at stake. It has been argued that in politics temptations to lie, steal, betray or even kill are far more compelling than in private life. But even if this is true, it is surely not a justification for throwing overboard all the usual moral scruples. If politics is often more morally testing than ordinary life, then this merely underlines why the relationship between morality and politics should be a close one.

Over the centuries, despite Machiavelli, politicians in Europe continued to justify their policies upon religious grounds: both sides in a war, for example, would claim that God was on their side. Various secular philosophers then began to add their contributions: Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Paine, Bentham and Mill – all could be said to be suggesting new moral bases for politics. The twentieth century, however, so active in every other way, began with a crisis in ethics; while the professional ethicists withdrew from public debate and became absorbed in obscure academic arguments among themselves, the politicians, mumbling as they did so about 'honour', drifted into two world wars. In 1945 there was a moral rebirth with the creation of a welfare state in Britain, the establishment of liberal democracies and increased political cooperation and interdependency in Europe. Despite, or perhaps because of the silence of the

ethicists, huge new moral steps were taken with the founding of the United Nations in 1945, and the revival of international interest in the concept of human rights, typified by the passage of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. This followed the Nuremberg War Crimes Tribunal which had dramatically spotlighted the Nazi atrocities, creating new offences such as crimes against peace and the crime of waging aggressive war. The charge of crimes against humanity for the first time held soldiers and officials liable for offences against individual citizens, whether foreigners or nationals. Hitherto, a state's killing of its own citizens had not been an established international offence. Much of the initiative for these moral and legal developments came from the US State Department following the line of Franklin Roosevelt's 'Four Freedoms' speech of January 1942 in which he had given, as the moral basis for US participation in World War Two, the defence of the freedoms of speech and worship, and from want and fear. Despite subsequent periods of stagnation due to the Cold War, gradual progress was marked by the UN Commission on Human Rights and by new UN treaties against torture (1984) and to protect women (1979) and children (1989).

It can be seen that the injection of the idea of human rights into the mainstream of international politics has been a most important moral development. It forms a strong moral basis for action. Nevertheless, there is still a chasm between these foundations and the formulation and rationale for detailed policies, and particularly for domestic ones. Some fifty rights are listed by the United Nations yet these are rarely cited by political leaders as the reasons for their actions. Why? Is it that the concept of rights is not accepted or that the problems of the rights theory approach are considered to be too great? Is there a need for an alternative moral language?

Uncertainty over the basis of rights has also been unsettling. Are rights self-justifying? Concepts such as 'humanity', 'human nature' and 'human dignity' have proved unsatisfactory as foundations for rights (Dunne & Wheeler 1999). Indeed, some cultures challenge the acceptance of the very concept of rights itself. Yet even with its quite different communal and hierarchical tradition China, for example, has signed the Vienna Declaration on Human Rights of 1993. Nevertheless, difficulties with this future superpower's attitude to human rights will persist. Is the alleged absolutism of the rights approach, which often seems to deny the possibility of trading off some people's rights in return for the enhancement of others' rights, going to prove to be too great a problem for China to accept? Although rights

in general are assumed to have an absolute quality, in fact the UN treats only one right as absolute – the right not to be tortured. Would a more graded approach, which does not regard rights as absolute trumps, be a more acceptable basis for global agreement? Perhaps the culture of China, now a nation of individualised ‘only’ children, will itself change so as to accept the individualism of the West in due course. (Only-children can be supremely narcissistic and wilful. I fear for a future dominated by a China where such figures are in charge.)

The human rights revolution of recent years has come under attack from several quarters: Islamicists have seen it as Western or Christian imperialism, conservatives have viewed it as a device for undermining the authority of the state, and others as a manifestation of an ever expanding nanny bureaucracy (Ignatieff 2001). There are even criticisms that the growth in human rights legislation is an attempt by unelected lawyers to take over from elected politicians! As we have seen, the growth in international law, based upon human rights, has been a feature since 1945. Since the Presidency of Ronald Reagan, however, the US has set itself against such constraints and has opposed the powers of the International Criminal Court established to try those charged with crimes against humanity. But without such effective judicial mechanisms to enforce human rights we will be in difficulties and, although no-one would deny that human rights has been and remains a magnificent moral concept in post world war politics, it may now be running out of steam.

The aims of the so-called ‘Third Way’ could also be described as a moral agenda (Giddens 1998, 2000). Closely allied with the philosophies of New Labour in Britain and of Bill Clinton in America, the Third Way was described as extolling ‘equal opportunity, personal responsibility and the mobilizing of citizens and communities’. With rights, so it said, come responsibilities. In America, it promoted wealth creation, fiscal discipline, health care reform, investment in education and training, welfare-to-work schemes, urban renewal and being tough on crime. It sought a dynamic and free market economy – ‘the state should not row but steer’. Its critics accused the Third Way (and New Labour) of being unacceptably authoritarian as regards crime and education, careless of human rights, neglectful of the environment and of failing to contest inequalities in wealth and power. The Third Way clearly tried to combine the benefits of the welfare state with those of a vibrant and free economy, making an electorally attractive package. But did it really answer the fundamental questions on the ultimate moral purpose of politics?

The Iraq war of 2003 has proved to be a turning point. In Britain, many voters were outraged by the war and over a million marched in protest. They felt that the British government had given them neither *the facts* (about weapons of mass destruction) nor the *moral justification* for going to war and killing and injuring thousands in their name. Most agreed that the removal of a cruel dictator was a good thing, but were rightly concerned about the tens of thousands of innocents killed and mutilated in the process. The war illustrated what is lacking in modern politics. First, without reliable intelligence, the war was allowed to proceed on the basis – ‘in the absence of any firm evidence that there are fairies at the bottom of the garden (i.e. weapons of mass destruction), we shall assume that there are’. Secondly, no coherent moral purpose for the war was provided by Coalition governments. In the place of rational moral argument there were only a few naive and inconsistent assertions – the emotive ramblings of philosophical amateurs such as George Bush and Tony Blair (Singer 2004). Yet US electors chose ‘moral values’ as the most important issue in the Presidential election that followed. Incredibly, most voted for Bush.

In the twenty-first century politicians cannot continue, surely, to pass laws and wage wars without explaining clearly to their peoples the precise moral arguments behind their actions, and their factual basis. A sound moral argument requires both factual and moral premises. Yet there has been little intelligent dialogue at either level. The mumbling of slogans must no longer suffice. We must demand more of our leaders, a few of whom are clearly morally blind (the sign of the psychopath) while others seem incapable of moral consistency. If they are not professional ethicists themselves then they should be advised by professional ethicists; they might then, at least, produce lucid and rational arguments to justify the decisions they take. Perhaps the title of this book – *Putting Morality Back into Politics* begs the question: was morality *ever* in politics? I like to believe that sometimes it has been. Certainly it should be.

Part I of the book goes back to basics and sketches an overview of traditional and contemporary political philosophy as it relates to the moral foundation for public policy, while Part II considers some psychological issues, outlines the moral theory of painism and suggests a way of putting it into politics (Ryder 2001). Painism happens to be the moral argument that I am proposing but, frankly, any decent moral theory, openly argued, would be better than none!