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Etceteras . . .

Public Choice and Political Leadership

PUBLIC CHOICE ANALYSTS PROCEED on the assumption that individuals do not differ as they participate in private and public affairs. The man who shops for groceries, they say, is the same man who votes. The woman who decides where to invest her savings is the same woman who serves in the state legislature. In the jargon of economics, each person has a utility function that remains in place whether the person acts in the market or in the political arena. If people behave differently when they possess governmental authority, they do so only because governmental actors face different incentives and constraints than private-sector actors. Accordingly, public choice analysts conclude, for example, that it is futile to “throw the rascals out” in elections, because the new officeholders will themselves become rascals in response to the incentives and constraints inherent in their positions.

As behooves an operating assumption, this one serves a certain purpose. It allows the analyst to abstract from any differences that do set public and private actors apart and thereby to determine how institutional differences in incentives and constraints alone elicit differing actions even if the actors have identical motives. So far, so good. Unfortunately, here as elsewhere, the analysts tend to fall in love with their theoretical assumption. Before long, they start to think it is actually true, as opposed to merely useful. The most cocksure analysts regard any questioning of the assumption as a sign of mental frailty.

Whatever its merits as an operating assumption in positive political analysis, the proposition that the people who wield political power are just like the rest of us is manifestly false. Lord Acton was not just expelling breath when he said that “power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” Nor did he err when he observed that “great men are almost always bad men”—at least if “great men” denotes those with great political power (Acton as quoted by James C. Holland in his “Introduction” to John Emerich Edward Dalberg Acton, *The History of Freedom*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: The Acton Institute, 1993, p. 2).

Among the most memorable lines in Friedrich A. Hayek's *Road to Serfdom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1944) is the title of chapter 10, "Why the Worst Get on Top." Hayek was considering collectivist dictatorships when he noted that "there will be special opportunities for the ruthless and unscrupulous" and that "the readiness to do bad things becomes a path to promotion and power" (p. 151). But the observation applies to the functionaries of less egregious governments, too. Nowadays nearly all governments, even those of countries such as the United States, France, or Germany, jokingly described as "free," provide numerous opportunities for ruthless and unscrupulous people. As Robert A. Sirico has written, tipping his hat to Lord Acton, "the corrupt seek power and use it absolutely" (*Wall Street Journal*, 20 August 1996). Decent people, virtually by definition, do not seek to exercise political power over their fellows. The enigma is that so many citizens continue to admire and defer to the reptilian wretches who rule them.

Of all the accounts of political leadership I have read, most of which obsequiously endorse the myths propagated by the master class itself, the best is anthropologist F. G. Bailey's *Humbuggery and Manipulation: The Art of Leadership* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988). Bailey gets right to the point by noting in his preface that "leaders and gangsters have much in common" (p. xiii). Of course, political leaders are much more ambitious than gangsters. The latter are content to take your money, whereas the former, besides taking far more of your money, have the effrontery to violate your just rights whenever their convenience dictates, anticipating your gratitude for their compassionate devotion to your welfare.

To put citizens into a suitably servile and moronic frame of mind, political leaders dish out claptrap day and night. Followers "are cajoled into devotion by the leader's pretended concern or admiration for them or for some cause in which they believe, by a pretense of virtue; it is mostly humbuggery.... [T]he role of leader requires performances in defiance of truth, ranging from the mild and on the whole inoffensive metaphorical exaggerations...to actions that are carefully written out of autobiographies because they are shamefully dishonest or even criminal" (p. 169).

Honorable people, taking a wrong turn and blundering into positions of political leadership, would last no longer than a nun in a brothel. If ruthless rivals did not displace them at the earliest opportunity, the scrupulous people would soon remove themselves in disgust. People who lack pugnacity do not succeed as prize fighters; people who lack a talent for lying, stealing and, if need be, abetting homicide do not succeed in modern politics. As Bailey puts it, "Leaders are not the virtuous people they claim to be; they put politics before statesmanship; they distort facts and oversimplify issues; they promise what no one could deliver; and they are liars.... [L]eaders, if

they are to be effective, have no choice in the matter. They could not be virtuous (in the sense of morally excellent) and be leaders at the same time” (p. 174).

Some critics have condemned public choice analysis for promoting cynicism about politics, government officials, and public affairs in general. In contrast, Bailey surveys the scene through the dispassionate eyes of a well-traveled social scientist. “Much of the time,” he affirms, “the humbuggery works and the enthusiastic followers are carried on a wave of passion and euphoria until the wave breaks on the rock of reality and they find themselves dumped. The cynics, meanwhile, stay out beyond the surf and stay afloat” (p. 173). It is true, I think, that public choice analysis fosters cynicism about political leaders. But not as much as they deserve.

ROBERT HIGGS