Supporting a state: The peculiarities of political commitment

In Plato’s Republic, Socrates resorts to a magnificent myth about the different metals in the soul, gold, silver, and bronze, that could justify social distinctions. ‘Now I wonder if we could contrive one of those convenient stories’, he contemplates, ‘that would in itself carry conviction to our whole community ... it should serve to increase their loyalty to the state and to each other’. What does commitment to a society or a state entail? Does it have to be supported by myths? Is loyalty its acceptable or usual form? And do we commit because it is a reasonable thing to do on due reflection or because we are emotionally inclined to find comfort in group membership? For reasons of conscience, of religious belief, and perhaps for reasons of commitment to a particular conception of German culture, Adam von Trott had to choose among loyalties. He rejected loyalty to the state while balancing loyalty to family, to class and noblesse oblige, and to country. But he also harboured deep principled commitments and obligations that went beyond loyalty.

From the time of the Old Testament, from the ancient Greeks onwards, the ethical pros and cons of political obligation have occupied literary, philosophical and religious works, and they have particularly crisscrossed the painful territory of conflicting loyalties. The question I want to pose today is slightly different: not why ought we obey, or commit, conscientiously to authority, to community, or to state, but what shapes does support take—and by default the withdrawal of support—for the social and cultural groups of which we are part? I am putting to one side whether commitment to a polity is a good or a bad thing, desirable or not, rewarding or not. Rather, given that forms of commitment are at centre-stage of political language, and that they constitute a crucial political resource without which a
society and its agencies would shudder to a halt, what are we to make of them? And why
does our awareness of those different forms matter?

One reason why these questions are of interest is because beyond the ethical
requirements of obligation—the preferred language of philosophers when they explore
justifications, or good reasons, for consensually obeying or disobeying a state, its officers, or
its constitution—it is a simple fact that human beings show and crave support for groups of
which they either are, or would like to be, members. For in parallel with the individualism
that liberal societies extol, we hunt in ideological and emotional packs. We have witnessed
this year, nearer and further away, many manifestations of dissent, disillusionment, hostility
and fury towards established political orders, as well as towards the trappings of political
order itself. Yet there is order and support also in dissent—through electronic social
networks, through solidarity among the politically or economically dispossessed, through
commitment to alternative causes, through mass rallies, through rootedness in regions,
through the rituals of tribes, through the closed ranks of youth gangs, or through organized
resistance to evacuation from a travellers’ site. To withdraw support from the ‘enemy’—be it
a leader, a regime, a class, an ethnicity—is almost always possible only due to prior support,
tangible but mainly intangible, from other groups, and it is frequently accompanied by the
transfer of support from one social entity to another. While states and governments
unsurprisingly aspire to support that is fixed and steadfast, the support that is actually
available to them is far more fluid and malleable: indeed, democracies operate in principle
under the assumption that support for governments is transferable and impermanent, thus
undermining the secure stability that even democratic governments endeavour to consolidate
against their own people. On the other hand, democracies are in theory pretty confident,
perhaps arrogantly so, that their procedures and principles, if not their rulers and leaders,
command respect and should elicit permanent commitment. Their problem, of course, is that
by encouraging reasonable disagreement and dissenting voices, democracies may perforate the line between the trenchant criticism of governments and the very legitimacy of the democratic state itself. That has happened more than once in 20th century Europe.

And when we are confronted with extreme expressions of dissent, with dire consequences for all concerned, for perpetrator and target—and in the case of Adam von Trott and his colleagues in the 1944 plot their target, Hitler, was primarily perpetrator, an immediate object of violence, but the meter out of far worse violence in advance and in return—we need to understand the different forms of support, and the consequences of each of those forms for leading a political life, a life in collectivities that dream, and decide, and argue, and wield power for good or evil. Irrespective of passing judgment, we need to know what it means to say that individuals engage with states, and polities, and what the different ways of doing that are. We need to understand long before we prescribe, not to prescribe before we understand; in Max Weber’s phrase we seek Verstehen.

Support is one of the most precious gifts that individuals can lavish on the groups of which they are part, groups in which they are born, or groups to which they migrate, voluntarily or otherwise. Support is the fuel on which societies and states run, and the withholding of such support starves and emaciates them. Support may be delivered materially in the form of taxes, national service or charitable work, but it may also be symbolic in the form of voting, celebrating public holidays, or expressions of national pride, often limited to war or sports—has anything changed here since the ancient Greeks? When support is wanting materially there is little that states or governments can do; they limp along and sometimes fold up. But when it is in scarce supply symbolically—that is, not voluntarily offered—it is often manufactured artificially or even fabricated by those who want to be its recipients. Support may then be demanded rather than gifted, and in the worst instances it may be enforced, in which case it bears the clothing without the substance, obedience without
commitment, resentment without contentment. To demand unconditional loyalty, however, is to abandon the voluntarism, tenuousness and authenticity of what attracts human beings to one another and to part company with liberal thinking. Even to bestow unconditional loyalty willingly comes at a price. Vis-à-vis their own children, parents may not make good liberals, to the extent that liberalism is thought to require distanced and cool commitment.

In the history of English political thought the absence of conditionality is what distinguishes Hobbes’ irreversible contract from Locke’s reversible consent. Hobbes’ contract is between all in the state of nature, the product of which is the absolute Leviathan that shields individuals from their own unpredictable violence by replacing it with predictable state violence, without accountability. Locke postulates a conditional investment of trust in a government. And yet, to withhold support is a matter of the utmost gravity to societies and their agents, states: it threatens to delegitimize them and it can freeze the sympathy without which social ties grow stale. For many individuals that withholding is also an act of psychological self-sacrifice: alienation from one’s own society, however justifiable, is very painful. That is why dissident members of a society, acting conscientiously rather than merely from egoistic motives, have to pass a threshold of civic pain before they are driven to cut off support and to replace it with resistance. As Locke wisely noted, ‘Great mistakes in the ruling part, many wrong and inconvenient Laws, and all the slips of humane frailty will be born by the People, without murmur or mutiny.’ It is only when ‘a long train of Abuses, Prevarications, and Artifices, all tending the same way’, become visible to the people that they will rouse themselves.

Loyalty, allegiance, bonding, national pride, and from a slightly alternative perspective, trust—these diverse forms of support, all ubiquitous in different measures, entail and create very varied social and political relationships, and they all serve, deliberately or unintentionally, to deflect active defiance. They stamp particular hallmarks on societies who
practice them in diverse combinations and they create different patterns in the complex and often turbulent interfaces between citizen or resident on the one hand and authority or government on the other. The distinctions among those terms are not crisp in professional political theory, and even less acute in the substitutes and circumlocutions present in everyday discourse. But there is nonetheless conceptual space to be found between them. A switch from one to the other may, as we shall see, be highly significant ideologically.

There is another matter to note. The debates about the ties between citizens and their polities have been mediated historically though liberal paradigms; and liberalism has conventionally been thought of as a rational, and reasonable, doctrine. That is after all Locke’s message about the long limits of human patience; it is a message of tolerance, up to a point. But scholars of political thought have become increasingly aware of the emotional, and even passionate, sides of political thought and conduct. In the past those were relegated to the extremes of herd behaviour, of irrationalism, of losing control, of fanaticism—inducing moral condemnation and cultural embarrassment. No longer. It is evident that even liberals get hot under the collar when confronted with abuses of human rights, or corruption in high places, or unjustifiable wars. But the emotions in the political arena are not merely negative. They also reflect warmth, comfort, enthusiasm, solidarity, uplift. Were societies to be based mainly on rational, calculating contractualism, their cultures would be cold and formal and their understandings of human nature depleted. Factoring in the demonstrative, passionate fabric of political sentiments offers us a more complex, and possibly more troubled, appreciation of both the messiness and the allure of the relationship between individual and state. And there is a further issue at stake. All those emotions are deep-rooted in small-scale human relationships. But what happens to them when some of them, such as anger and pride, become crucial currencies of political relationships? Are public emotions distorted, exaggerated, impoverished, channelled emotions? And does it ring true when Mazzini says ‘I
adore my Country because I adore a Country in the abstract; I adore our Liberty, because I believe in abstract Liberty; our rights, because I believe in abstract Right.’ What feelings are acceptable between concrete individuals and abstract social entities? What kinds of support are normally generated on the grander, non-personal, scale?

In the complex relationships between people and their states and governments, three kinds of asymmetry muddy the waters. The first one, almost insurmountable, is immediately encountered through a fundamental lop-sidedness between the expectations of states, and the conduct and thoughts of their members. Centres of political decision-making exhibit what may be termed a finality drive—they want to sort things out and, if that proves impossible, to pretend that most intractable problems don’t exist, or to downplay their intractability. Their expectations are general in that they desire the smooth acceptance of the fruits of governance with as little opposition as possible, even though their policy and legislative activities are quite specific. The public language of political systems is replete with the abstract language of finality: authority, duties, sovereignty, rule, hegemony, order, rights, ‘the buck stops here’. Specific legislation and action are protected by the abstract language of finality and by legal systems whose highest instance is conclusive. ‘People should be in no doubt that we will do everything necessary to restore order to Britain's streets and make them safe for the law-abiding’, said David Cameron reacting to the summer riots in the UK. ‘I am determined, the government is determined, that justice will be done, and these people will see the consequences of their actions. And I have this very clear message for those people who are responsible for this wrongdoing and criminality. You will feel the full force of the law.’ The rhetoric—decontextualized, of course—could have been Syrian rather than British. On their own terms, within their own rules of the game, however different in their principles from one another, governments crave the same kind of decisiveness and they fear disloyalty and dissent.
Individuals too want solutions. Often their demands are concrete and time and space specific, and therefore fluctuating—the cancellation of a particular tax, controlling immigration from certain EU countries, the removal of a nuclear energy plant from populated areas, the breaking up of the power of banks—and the support they can offer states and governments may therefore seem at one level to be fickle, even when in a more profound sense they accept the broad contours of their societies. At the same time their expectations are more diffuse than those in government, who are trained to feed their electorates with plans and visions, whether realistic or not. Individuals can rarely provide in return the kind of finality and conclusiveness that governments would prefer: at the very least they lack the institutional arrangements that create the illusion of finality: supreme courts, Acts of Parliament. The support they offer their governments is therefore much more unfocused. And when they, not infrequently, claim to have been short-changed in the implicit contractual deal between people and their government they flood into the streets in a way that is both structured and unstructured, as has been the case throughout this year in the Middle East. At that point contention spills over into the non-specific. As one commentator wrote about the extraordinary mass Israeli tent protests in the summer of 2011, they were ‘not driven by concrete demands for specific concessions, but by a deeper and more generalised sense of discontent.’ If the 1944 plot against Hitler may seem, to the contrary, to be a concrete and very specific form of resistance, let us recall that it was designed by individuals who came from experienced cadres of formal and hierarchical decision-making professions—the army and the civil service, hatched within a small group, and necessarily lacking the openness that mass resistance—which always possesses both populist and quasi-democratic features—exhibits.

So the various languages of political support that circulate in a society take on a particular significance. Certain types of support are especially valuable to polities and they
may encourage, pursue, or even impose them vigorously: support when international affairs produce threats, support in shoring up ailing economic systems, support in re-establishing an eroding national identity, support in choosing among priorities in social policy. If support is not easily available, states may have to resort to the artificial manufacturing of the sympathy that comes more naturally to families and in friendship, and that is a tough call. Bonding and solidarity seem to work mainly in small groups, and in the mythologies constructed around nations rather than states. No wonder that theorists and philosophers have preferred the language of obligation, ostensibly bereft of emotion. But is obligation simply a moral ersatz for genuine fellow-feeling? And can genuine fellow-feeling be better captured by alternative concepts such as loyalty or allegiance?

Here the second asymmetry becomes evident. The Oxford English Dictionary defines loyalty in the political sphere as ‘faithful adherence to the sovereign or lawful government’; and it defines allegiance as ‘the relation or duties of a liege-man to his liege-lord’—etymologically inherited from the feudal system. Now, the hypothetical contract of old between the ruled and their rulers is at least predicated on some implicit equality: the two sides to the contract are ostensibly balanced in that either side can abrogate it if the other side defaults, and there is a clear two-way flow of obligations and benefits: say, protection in return for service, or welfare in return for taxes, or upholding the constitution in return for non-violence. But loyalty and allegiance are one-way streets. When we proclaim our loyalty to a social entity, we are not usually gifted with declarations of parallel loyalty from that entity to us. When we are called upon to declare allegiance to the crown, the crown does not reciprocate by affirming its allegiance to us.

And there is a third asymmetry—between numbers and power. In any relationship between members of a society and their political bodies, the numbers tilt heavily in favour of the first. But there is a tilt in the other direction in terms of the distribution of power—usually
located in the hands of the organs of the state. Even resistance that wrests such power away from governments will invariably end with depositing it in the hands of another government, barring an as yet unrealized anarchist society. A wry comment on that asymmetry is to be found in the work of the satirist Ephraim Kishon, who ‘imagined a confrontation between the public and a government minister, in which “the public submits its resignation on the eighth day”’.

Quite crucial to the fortunes of a state is whether support for its institutions and activities is spontaneous or contrived. Here is one interesting difference. Allegiance in the middle ages normally involved uttering a concrete oath of fealty to a feudal lord, ad personam—hence the term homage: you became the man belonging to the lord. Political obligation, to the contrary, has been thought of as a hypothetical contract of promising, generally between all the people in a pre-political state of nature, and one binding if the state is a just one. No ceremony there, but importantly an expression of real and authentic collective consent—this is ultimately good for us, not only for me. In its more modern understandings, political obligation relates to a sense of reciprocal duty towards one’s fellow citizens because it is the right thing to do, or because it is fair (do as you would be done by), or maybe because we need to show gratitude for services received. However, this ideal-type world has little to do with actual political practices, crucial practices that tend to fly undetected under the radar of the political philosophers of obligation. Very few of us feel obligated to the state, let alone have promised to obey it. As for loyalty, on the surface, it is the least ceremonial of the three. It simply is, or at least it develops and it is a down-up sentiment—it should be given, or expressed, not demanded. Being an emotional offering, it should not involve formal subservience. Dogs are loyal in the sense of faithful—at least in our anthropocentric misreading of their behaviour. What is therefore remarkable are the various attempts, nonetheless, to codify loyalty in Western state practices.
One example is the invention of Loyalty Day in the USA. Initially an endeavour in 1921 to replace the 1st of May celebrations with something more patriotic, more American (it was then known as Americanization Day), it was redesignated Loyalty Day by Congress in 1958. Its official purpose is ‘the reaffirmation of loyalty to the United States and ... the recognition of the heritage of American freedom’, and on that day (unbeknownst to most Americans, incidentally), the President is requested to issue a proclamation (1) calling on United States Government officials to display the flag of the United States on all Government buildings; and (2) inviting the people of the United States to observe Loyalty Day with appropriate ceremonies in schools and other suitable places. In 2007 President George W. Bush proclaimed that ‘all citizens can express their loyalty to the United States by flying the flag, participating in our democracy, and learning more about our country’s grand story of courage and simple dream of dignity’. But a telling difference between President Bush and President Obama has emerged on this issue of loyalty. Whereas for Bush the object of loyalty was America and its ideals, Obama emphasized the core constitutional values ‘of liberty, equality, and justice for all’ as principles that elicited ‘loyalty and fidelity’, adding to Bush’s exhortation to display the flag also the request to pledge ‘allegiance to the Republic for which it stands’. So loyalty can be split between, on the one hand, an appeal to commit to a nation and its history, and on the other something akin to what the German philosopher and commentator Jürgen Habermas has called constitutional patriotism—a quasi-emotional, quasi-rational commitment not to a nation but to the basic values of a society, its procedures and ways of comporting itself legally and ethically.

Or consider the oddity of recent British political practice in its attempts to forge formal links between citizen and state. Under the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002 a citizenship pledge was added to the UK oath of allegiance. The initial ‘I will be faithful and bear true allegiance to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth the Second, her heirs and
successors’—still couched in traditional terms of a narrow tie to a personal sovereign—was supplemented by: ‘I will give my loyalty to the United Kingdom and respect its rights and freedoms. I will uphold its democratic values. I will observe its laws faithfully and fulfil my duties and obligations as a British citizen’. The Act was followed by a detailed report entitled *The New and the Old: The Report of the “Life in the United Kingdom” Advisory Group*, chaired by Bernard Crick. It focused on ‘creating a greater sense of mutual respect, support and belonging’, which it interpreted as a ‘civic duty’. The objects of loyalty have become far broader than the related use of allegiance. In particular, a double definition of citizenship was enlisted, ‘as nationality as defined by law, and as participation in public life’, so that ‘new citizens should be equipped to be active citizens’. That formally transformed citizenship from merely a legal status to a social role with expectations of contribution to behave in certain ways that is summed up as a ‘civic obligation’—an extension of political obligation. The flow of active support from citizen to state—the shoring up of the system—is a precondition to becoming a part of it: no conditionality here, no contract, no symmetry.

Not content with allegiance, then, governments underpin it with a second line of defence, loyalty. How anxious they must be. And how mistrustful—and I shall return to that in a moment—of their future citizens they are to make them jump through so many hoops. Notably, in effect only immigrant adults are subject to compulsory allegiance and loyalty tests; only they are bound to declare their formal support of the state. Allegiance and loyalty ceremonies are interpreted as obligation avowals, while the rest of us, born here, no matter how much we like or hate our polity, are spared formal obligation in this two-tier structure. We are slipping out of the liberal ideological matrix here—away from liberal as generous, as tolerant, as optimistic about human nature, as willing to cut some slack.

Behind all that is an uneasy feeling that loyalty needs to be obtained, proclaimed, ceremoniously rendered, not just tendered. Can loyalty be imposed through ceremony? Are
governments deluding themselves in seeking to transform personal feeling into political commitment, when loyalties are more usually interpersonal than institutional, close than distant? When governments and states work so hard to extract loyalty from their members, something is wrong. But groups can elicit loyalty, and nations have been one of the prime objects of that kind of affection. The problem, therefore, is different: it is when in a world of competing loyalties, one claimant to loyalty rises up and attempts to trump the others. The state has the ammunition for that, but it lacks the immediacy that is at the heart of loyalty. It is easier to evoke loyalty for a nation than for a state, and governments know that, though it can also be far more dangerous.

For the idea of trust, in its political sense, we can return once again to Locke, for whom it concerned the entrusting of power to a government, and the setting up of government in a quasi-legal manner as trustees of people’s rights. But the relationship is not contractual. As the OED defines trust, it is ‘confidence in or reliance on some quality or attribute of a person or thing’ and it involves accepting or giving ‘credit to without investigation or evidence’. Trust is about implicit or explicit responsibility, a precious gift presented to a trustee who is expected to take exceptionally good care of it. There is something immoral, not illegal, about a breach of trust. It generates disappointment and hurt; it is not an offence, but it is offensive. It goes to the heart of the expectations we hold of wholesome human relationships. ‘Without investigation or evidence’: that is a crucial phrase. Love and friendship have strong components of trust: we do not need to ask, or to worry, or to doubt. Trust has nothing to do with allegiance; it has very little to do with obligation, and it is also distinguishable from loyalty, because it cannot be reduced to an emotional or arational sentiment. Trust can make one feel safe, but it entails a conscious recognition of the other as a good entity and therefore as a source of good for oneself. But is that appropriate language for the relationship between citizens and governments?
The main difference between personal and political trust is that in the latter case the possibility of its breach is always there; it is in fact a strong possibility. When that breach occurs on an individual level, we are shocked, distressed, disoriented. But in the political world distrust is built into the practice of trust. It is an error to extrapolate from intimate personal trust to trust in political systems. ‘In God we trust’; ‘trust the people’ — in both these phrases the sources of good have been extended from personal relationships, but they are considered watertight. ‘Trust the rulers’, ‘trust the government’—those excursions away from the personal are far trickier. Trust becomes instrumental: The people lend their power to government, within specified constraints, and government must do as they expect. Those utilitarian implications of trust are absent from the diffuse nature of trust in personal ties. Locke is quite clear on that nature of political trust: ‘There remains still in the People a Supream Power to remove or alter the Legislative, when they find the Legislative act contrary to the Trust reposed in them. For all Power given with trust for the attaining an end, being limited by that end, whenever that end is manifestly neglected, or opposed, the trust must necessarily be forfeited, and the Power devolve into the hands of those that gave it, who may place it anew where they shall think best’ (149).

Since Locke’s day, people have become far more active in monitoring the repositories of their political trust. Particularly in liberal democracies, distrust has become a sign of political health, maturity and involvement. How can that be? Political trust is never left in the hands of its trustees ‘without investigation or evidence’. The democratic political sphere is committed to a series of practices that involve accountability, monitoring, probing, insisting on transparency, re-establishing political mandates periodically through elections and using those elections as rewards or threats. If we trusted our leaders unconditionally we would not need elections. In the UK, Parliamentary question time, votes of non-confidence (non-confidence!), or committees of inquiry are normal mechanisms of investigation or control and
they reflect suspicion of government almost as a default position. And control of public representatives is the name of the game. So do we have a dilution of trust, or a mutation fit for the purposes to which trust needs to be expressed in the political arena? Institutional trust extends credit for a shorter time than intimate trust, and exchanges of services, real or symbolic, are often calculating rather than affective.

How does that cash out in political discourse? Leaders may well resort to rhetorical devices and to ideological representations of their role that attempt to reduce the distance between individuals and institutions. Father of the nation imagery is available to the formation of new states or the reconstitution of old ones—think of Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, or of Nelson Mandela. Liberal ideology may insist on institutional distrust, as well as fundamental trust in the benefits of a constitutional regime, but it may equally be inspired by notions of human harmony and decency that can be projected onto a political leader who makes the right noises and displays reassuring body-language. Socialists may be torn between a deep distrust of capitalism and its political arrangements that infects their perception of current political institutions, and an idealized view of human nature that—shorn of its alienating and dehumanizing environments—will eventually emerge as entirely trustworthy. Conservative ideologies will place distrust at the centre of their constructs, arising from theories of flawed human existence, or human imperfection. Breach of trust indicates, moreover, that trust itself also involves the bestowing of extensive emotional and moral ‘capital’ onto the trusted object; indeed, that any cognitive risk potentially involved in the bestowing of trust is overridden by an emotional leap of faith based on beliefs, even myths. Trust in the US and UK government positions over the existence of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction in 2003 was not based on knowledge held by the respective electorates but on the belief (not shared by all, obviously) that governments would not lie on such a crucial matter, and on a parallel belief that expertise, proper channels of assessment and
accountability were part and parcel of a democratic constitutional set-up. Nonetheless, in the cold light of day, the political sphere cannot supply the *emotional* certitude that someone in a position of power will behave responsibly—one that we may take for granted in personal relationships—so when that certitude is breached it makes one angry rather than devastated.

The vernacular language of trust was particularly evident during the premiership of Tony Blair. In his 1996 book, *New Labour: My vision of a young country*, Blair set out to ‘win the trust of the British people’ by ‘chang[ing] the tide of ideas.’ By 2004 he was declaring that such trust had been earned: ‘When people talk of trust, I say this: I know manifestos rarely make best sellers. But any party activist who wants an answer to the question about trust—go and read what we said we would do in 1997 and 2001.’ At the same time, the concept of trust was proving counterproductive, leading Blair to deny that the divisions over Iraq were ‘over issues of trust or integrity... the real issue … is not a matter of trust but of judgement.’ Following the invasion of Iraq the issue of trust loomed large in the public eye. Opponents of New Labour have been particularly scathing: The *Yorkshire Post* wrote in 2007: ‘The fact that voters trust politicians less than they did in 1997—something unthinkable 10 years ago—is indicative of New Labour’s fall from grace as it became undermined by a succession of sleaze scandals, the corrosive effect of Mr. Blair’s power struggle with Gordon Brown and, most profoundly, the Iraq crisis.’ The effect of that loss of trust left Blair’s successor ‘facing a daunting task to restore not just the Labour Party’s credibility, but the credibility of the entire political establishment.’ Notably, in his leadership acceptance speech Gordon Brown pledged to strive to ‘earn your trust not just in foreign policy but earn your trust in our schools, in our hospitals, in our public services, and to respond to your concerns.’ Concepts such as integrity and credibility serve as verbal hooks for snaring political support, while reference to judgment tries to anchor support in expectations of reflective assessment by the public’s leaders instead of the public.
A commentator, Matthew d’Ancona, wrote earlier this month of the Conservative conference, ‘This is not quite the cult of personality that arose around Blair, a cult so often mocked by the Tories. But Cameron's unabashed “leadership” motif does recall Blair's recognition that modern politics is essentially presidential - even more so since the advent of televised debates at the last election - and that the leader is much more than a tribal chieftain: he incarnates, or ought to, the hopes and anxieties of the nation. He invites emotional assent as much as calculated support... Invest your hopes in me, the PM tells the voters, and it will all come good - in the end. Trust me, and you will be glad you did – eventually’. In that canny reference to the anticipated durability of a government, acknowledging that voters can normally be expected to be more impatient with governments than with their families and friends, the long run of a personal trust relationship is deceptively evoked. That language tries to override the implicit contract that has sneaked back into people-government relations, a contractualism to which Locke objected in his version of trust.

Those uses of political language are revealing. Trust and distrust are distributed among different political entities: the personalized leader, the party in power (i.e. the particular government) and, strikingly, the world of governance in general. If we can affirm the relationship between a government and its people as one of trust, an extraordinary political and ideological battle has been partly won, for the register of the relationship resonates with deep personal experiences. But such a political relationship cannot aspire to the authenticity it can have in personal life, and that tells us something about the importance of distance between people and their state. Protecting such space is essential to liberal ideologies, where the disjuncture between individual and society cultivates a sense of personal worth and delineates an area of freedom. Too much political trust threatens the spirit of liberalism.
The reality of the benefits that ensue, once a polity obtains the support from its citizens without which it is condemned to precarious uncertainty, is always supplemented by imaginary and seductive myths. No ideology is exempt from that, and no political system can survive without its mythology. The language of obligation, contract and consent is most suitable to the liberal family of ideologies, but it is a paradigm that simply cannot be delivered and it bears little resemblance to the multiple forms of commitment societies, including liberal ones, actually display. The language of allegiance has deeply conservative ideological undertones in its appeal to hierarchies of power and the exaltation of leadership. The language of loyalty excavates the emotional side of human commitment, more comfortable in intimate relationship, or in national mythology, and its crossover to states and governments exploits communitarian and bonding urges we find in both socialist and nationalist ideologies. The notion of trust may be a misconception about what accountability is all about, but the way it is practised paints the democratic process in bleak terms that lie uncomfortably with the self-image democracies endeavour to propagate. All those languages are in important senses defective; yet all are ways of fallibly catering to a vital social need.

Adam von Trott rejected allegiance, a demand clothed in the power of the state; he readjusted his loyalties in line with the groups he held dear, he maintained a rational obligation and a sense of duty to a set of principles, and he displayed an emotional commitment to the correct conduct required of civilized people. Trust, however, even in its heavily qualified political form, had no outlet in a National Socialist world. A healthy society must offer the possibility of navigating among the various forms of support it requires, while assessing the place of each in the tangled web of social relationships.

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