

A Dialogue on Political Representation

[The text is excerpted from the novel *In the Shadow of the Prodigy* (2007, 2009). The narrator of the story, Michael Paradine, is a young historian with a marginal academic position and a commission to write a book about the history of the enterprises of the Overton family. Michael has dinner in Greenwich with David Allison, an acquaintance from his schooldays who is now an assistant professor at a university in Spain. The story is set in England in 1994. The book is available at <http://www.lulu.com/content/714983>]

The waitress brought us the pasta. The strong scent of the pesto sauce rose from the bowl. 'This smells good!' he exclaimed. We began to eat. A simple dish, but it was delightful. For a while, the subject of our conversation was Mediterranean food, about which he appeared to have extensive knowledge. Halfway through the meal, David switched from culinary to current affairs.

'Seriously,' he said, his mouth still full, 'what do you think of the local elections, if they are not general elections in disguise?'

'I don't think much of them; they are still a week away.'

'They are going to give the government the jitters.'

'Very likely; all the opinion polls say so.'

'Will you vote?'

'No, I'll be in Cunnir next week. Anyway, I might vote in a one-issue referendum, never in an election. It's against my religion.'

He nearly choked: 'Your religion? Let me drink to that!'

'Well, it's a matter of principle. I don't vote, on principle.'

'What principle is that?'

'Never write a blank cheque, not on your own account, which is stupid, and not on the accounts of others, which is fraud.'

'Wow!' he gasped. He just sat there, his mouth half open but not showing any teeth, trying to think of some witty repartee. It did not come. 'Writing a blank cheque on other people's accounts; you're right, voting is like that, isn't it?' Then, after a few more bites, he said, 'I see what you mean. Voting is a moral impossibility, right? If I were to do to you any of the things politicians regularly do to millions of us, people would call me a criminal and put me behind bars. How can I have the right to permit some politician to do what would be a crime if I did it myself? I loot your bank account; that's a crime; but if I vote for a politician to loot your bank account then that's a legitimate attempt to modify the tax laws. Think of that! Talk about whitewashing crime! "Do not steal! Let us do it for you; we're better at it!"—politics as the most successful method yet for making crime pay, the perfect protection racket! Obey and pay, or suffer and pay more!' He looked at me with an expression of triumphant enlightenment all over his face. Then, reverting to a doubt-ridden tone, he asked: 'Still, isn't it great to know that you can vote the bastards out of office?'

'By being obliged to vote another set of bastards into office? It's a constitutional issue as well as a moral one. I would vote gladly if the constitution said, "You have no right to permit your representatives to do what you have no right to do on your own." I would vote for a candidate who would say this, but I doubt that such a person would even be allowed to be a candidate.'

‘Ah, yes, the Rule of Law!’ David waved his fork at me in glee. ‘Now, that is literally a *politically* incorrect notion.’

‘What do politicians do, anyway? They decry the doings of other politicians, but when they are elected, instead of undoing the others’ work, they simply add their own nonsense to the nonsense of their predecessors, one layer on top of another, in an endless and’—I remembered Sarah’s word—‘perverse merry-go-round. As my father jokes: if the cigarette lighter had been a political creation, it would weigh a ton—and it wouldn’t light cigarettes.’

David chuckled: ‘No, but nobody would know that it was not the best lighter available, because only a Methuselah would remember how things were before matches were banned. Is your father a historian too?’

‘No, he’s an engineer, someone who takes the trouble to read the manual—his definition, of course. He gets suspicious if there’s no manual, if the manual is incomprehensible or, especially, if there’s no relation between the manual and how the machine works. That’s *his* complaint about politics. He even took night courses in constitutional law for a couple of years, on the English, the American and the French constitutions. He was not impressed: you take the constitution seriously or you take politics seriously; but you can’t take the two seriously at the same time.’

‘He does not take either the one or the other seriously, it seems to me.’

‘No, he does not. The constitution, he says, is last year’s academic interpretation of what the politicians got away with two years ago.’

‘Brilliant!’ David rubbed his hands in exultation. ‘Your old man knows how to make his point. No wonder an engineer like him can have a historian for a son.’

‘He claims that the true constitution of politics is that cowards need an excuse for their cowardice—like the passengers in a train, surrendering their money to a robber and applauding when he tells them, “Don’t worry, I might even spend some of it on you.”’

‘That’s so right.’ He mimicked an old lady protesting indignantly: ‘No dear, I did not give him the money because he pointed a gun at us; I gave it because of all the good he’s going to do with it.’

We finished the meal and ordered coffee. ‘And bring us some grappa,’ David added. He wanted to continue the discussion. ‘But surely you can’t win if you don’t vote.’

‘No, but I can’t lose either.’

‘I don’t mean that. I mean you can’t influence policy.’

‘As if a voter is able to influence policy! You put it well when we were in the Trafalgar Tavern: it’s a thin line between indirect influence and no influence.’ True, he muttered. ‘Anyway, influence without liability is irresponsibility. I know many people who vote; I don’t hear them say that they accept liability for all the policies enacted by the government, even if they voted for the ruling party. They are like football fans; they pay so that they may cheer and boo, but they don’t play.’

‘True, but only up to a point. As an economist, I’d say that voting is a perverse way of bidding for goods and services. In a regular auction, if you enter the winning bid then you commit your own money; in a political auction, entering the winning bid implies the legal right to commit everybody else’s money.’

‘I don’t dispute that; but remember: the voters write the blank cheque, but the elected politicians write in the amount, decide on whose accounts they will draw it and determine the purposes for which they will spend it.’

‘That’s true. A voter is not permitted to add conditions, such as “This cheque is to be used only for this or that purpose.”’

‘In short, he’s *not* supposed to influence policy; he’s supposed to elect so-called representatives. Only the elected representatives are empowered to determine what to do with the cheque. They get the power to rule—the power to rule not only those who voted for them but also everybody else.’

‘It’s the name of the game: representative democracy.’

‘It may be democracy, but it’s not representative. It takes three to play the game of representation: A, the representatives, represent B, the people, before C, the King. That was the idea: the representatives ensure that the King does not infringe the rights and liberties of his subjects, whom they represent. Obviously, if that scheme is to work as intended then the representatives shouldn’t have the power to infringe the rights and liberties of the people they represent. They shouldn’t have legislative power over the people; otherwise, they would be rulers themselves. Like the absolute kings of yore, our representatives claim to represent us before themselves. What sort of representation is that: A representing B before A? Either you elect representatives or you elect rulers. Under the present constitution, we have permission only to elect rulers. It’s like giving slaves the right to elect their overseers. A step up from chattel slavery, perhaps, but don’t call it the end of slavery. It’s more like an effective way to divide and rule, as the overseers vie with one another in promising to redistribute the workload in favour of one or another group of slaves.’

‘I see, and then the slaves become so absorbed in the politics of the plantation that they lose the longing for freedom.’ With his chubby fingers, David tapped a drum roll on the table. ‘Go on; I’ve never thought about it that way.’ At that moment, the waitress brought us our coffees and two glasses of grappa. ‘Thanks, love’, David said to her as she deposited the lot on the table. For a moment it looked as if he was going to add some witty compliment, but she got no more than a broad, grateful smile and a playful wink. David turned to me again: ‘Go on, I’m all ears.’

‘What would you say if you were hauled into court and there you discovered that your opponent had chosen his own lawyer to represent you? What would you say if that lawyer also turned out to be the judge? Wouldn’t you say that you were not represented at all?’

‘I should say you have found a formula for making the court system much more cost-effective! You’re right, of course. When push comes to shove, the majority party represents all of us, no matter how we voted—or whether we voted at all. Seriously, though, there is such a thing as the Separation of Powers.’

‘That’s what they tell us, don’t they. However, look at the facts. How often do you see a ruling party that’s not a parliamentary majority party? The rule is that the executive power and the legislative power are in the same hands, different individuals perhaps, but the same parties.’

‘What about the judiciary then?’

‘The legislators—in most cases, the government—make the rules and the judges apply them. The judges are free to care about justice only where the legislators haven’t yet intruded.’

‘And such places are becoming rarer by the minute.’

‘They are overgrown with the rules and regulations that you said get on your nerves so much.’

‘Where did you get all this?’

‘A professor at university told us that a historian shouldn't just look at what people think they do but also at what they actually do. I thought I should apply that advice to myself. I asked myself “What do I actually do when I cast my vote?” and writing a blank cheque was the only answer that seemed to fit the facts. All the rest followed from that.’

‘But what would you answer if someone said you're simply not realistic?’

‘Do you mean that one non-vote is about as insignificant as one vote? I don't know how the system would actually cope with it, but suppose only one voter showed up on Election Day. Presumably, his vote would determine the outcome of the election. At the same time, it would give the lie to any claim that the elected politicians “represent” the choice of anyone but that man. Consider now the case of a contested election between two parties: both parties are expected to receive approximately the same number of votes. That means a small number of votes, possibly even a single vote, is sufficient to tilt the balance one way or the other—no matter how many people cast their vote. The elected politicians still “represent” only the choices of a small group of people. Other people's votes are just random noise.’

‘Politicians like it that way, don't they? It's more profitable to bribe small groups that make an electoral difference than large groups that don't. And small groups of politically shrewd people like it even more, as they can demand an inordinate share of the expected spoils of victory from the contending parties or candidates! Still, it's votes that count, not non-votes.’

‘True, but consider the moral issue: voters express their desire to rule others, while the non-voters express no such desire, not even vis-à-vis voters. Voters who support the losing side are hoist with their own petard: they can't complain if others do unto them what they wanted to do unto the others. It does not matter whether or not their votes were decisive or merely statistical noise. They legitimise their own subjection as well as everybody else's. Why do they do that? Because they know that the few seconds in the voting booth are the only opportunity they have to behave really irresponsibly, with possibly far-reaching consequences?’

‘I believe I know where you're going, but explain anyway.’

‘How many people would vote if voters had to sign a form, declaring that they accept full responsibility and liability for everything done in their names by those they helped to elect? Anonymous voting institutionalises irresponsibility; its only virtue is that it occasionally adds an element of serendipity to the political process. But your question was about being realistic, wasn't it? I'd say that realism is not the same as mindless conformism or unprincipled pragmatism.’

‘I can't argue with that; adding mindless conformism to unprincipled pragmatism gives rampant opportunism, right? Rampant opportunism—that's my diagnosis. I think I'm with you.’

‘Churchill nailed it when he said that democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others—unless it was Lincoln, “You can fool some of the people all of the time, you can fool all of the people some of the time, but you can't fool all of the people all of the time.”’

‘You're right! That's why they invented democracy as we know it! It's enough that you fool a small majority of the voters every four years or so!’ It was not what I had meant to say, but it was so astute, so to the point that I wished I had. I felt a little piqued: it had been

my argument all along and now it seemed that David was going to have the last word. While I was still searching for an appropriate reply, he continued with increasing glee: 'There's a sucker born every minute. So, don't expect the game to end any time soon.'

He noticed that I had not touched my glass of grappa. 'You don't want that?' he asked. When I shook my head, he pulled the glass over to his side of the table. 'We shouldn't let it go to waste, should we? Cheers.' He downed half of the liquor in the glass, suppressed a burp, and gazed at me with beatific contentment. Then, his eyes twinkling, he gave me a half-smile and said semi-seriously, 'They're a funny lot, the electorate, aren't they? Tell them they have a choice between a bucket of shit and a bucket of excrement, and before the day is over the shittists and the excrementists will be at one another's throats, blaming one another for all the ills of the world.' He burst out in a spasm of raucous laughter that brought tears to his eyes and ended with a heartfelt 'Holy shit!'

'Already taking sides?'

After another upsurge of unrestrained laughter, he downed the rest of the grappa. 'Come, let's go now and have a drink somewhere else.'

I picked up the bill and paid at the cashier's desk.