

Wise as serpents: The faithful partisan in public office

Thank you for your generous invitation, unfailing encouragement and Christian friendship. I am flattered and humbled to address you all today – and it is good to be back.

I first visited this campus 25 years ago, for a summer school held at another college between Christmas and New Year, hosted by a small Catholic lay association then known as the Champion Fellowship. This was a kind of antipodean Inklings: part drinking club, part scholastic society, part prayer group. While the Champion Society was in no small part a chook yard full of competing foghorn leghorns, one of its more remarkable legacies is the germ of the project which became Champion College, the liberal arts college in Sydney's west with which some of you may be familiar.

My principal memories of that Queensland summer are three: I am from cold dry Canberra, and I had my first ever heat rash, and can still feel it now; I was a beer drinker, and had my first port hangover, and can still feel that too; and I was a child of the 1970s, and on the feast of St Thomas a'Beckett I heard the Traditional Latin Mass for the first time.

I was 18 years old and I can still feel all of it. So it is good to be visiting so close to a fondly remembered station on my life's journey.

While I've got the burden of two ANU degrees, I'm here speaking very much in my capacity as a political actor rather than an academic observer.

In the Simpsons episode 'Boy Scoutz n the Hood', Bart cuts school and goes on a squishee-fuelled bender with his friend Milhouse. Milhouse wakes up with a stomach tattoo ... Bart wakes up and finds he has joined the Junior Campers.

Bart quickly adopts the Junior Campers' boy scout style law and lore. Within a few days, he is watching his favourite television cartoon 'Itchy and Scratchy' cross-legged, in his uniform. On-screen, Itchy – the cartoon mouse who tortures the cat – twists and turns Scratchy's body into a tent. Bart scoffs:

The guys who wrote this cartoon don't know squat. Itchy should have tied Scratchy's tongue with a taut-line hitch, not a sheet bend.

He is now a *practitioner*.

So I'm here as a practitioner, and in turn, also as a party man; a partisan. I've been spared elected office but for the past 21 years I've been a member of the grand old party of Australian politics, the Australian Labor Party.

For the past 14 years I've served in various advisory roles to it, first as an adviser to Mark Latham and then as his policy director during his Labor leadership; as policy director to Kim Beazley during his return to that role; as founding policy director of the progressive think tank Per Capita, as a chief of staff in the ACT Labor Government.

Then as speechwriter to Prime Minister Gillard 2010 to 2013, with an occasional role advising her on relations with faith communities;

and today as Executive Director of the Chifley Research Centre, the think tank of the Australian Labor Party.

As you may know, I also recently published a book *The Gillard Project*, recording some of the things I saw in office 2010 to 2013.

So I'm here as a practitioner, and as a partisan; and I also go to Mass on Sundays. There are still a few of us left.

So given this combination of political and religious commitments, once completely commonplace in Australian society but now seemingly so complex and counter-intuitive, I thought it would be of interest to give you a short paper which reflects on how I try to practice integrity in partisanship, and mentions a few things other people have written about this that have made an impression on me. In particular, to share with you Michael Walzer's 1973 paper "Political Action: the problem of dirty hands" from *Philosophy and Public Affairs*.

To be clear, not integrity versus partisanship as poles operating in tension, but the integrity of partisanship, each modifying the other; when we have accepted a duty to party, and retain a duty to self.

Finally, I hope it is not too obvious an exercise in expectation management to cite Barthes, who wrote of his book *The Lover's Discourse* that it was an "utterance", not an "analysis".

More background to my practice and in turn what I mean by partisanship.

This whole idea of *partisanship* was always very romantic to me. My earliest memories of the outside world are of the adventures of Tom Sullivan on the Crawford television series, fighting alongside the partisans in Crete.

Say Crete, and there is little more to tell
Of muddle tall as treachery, despair
And black defeat resounding like a bell.

And then, of the same Tom arguing with his father about the details of the anti-communism of the post-war period; hadn't those same partisans been Comms?

The Little World of Don Camillo, the short stories by Giovanni Guareschi – also very wise on the cold war questions – did nothing to de-romanticise partisanship for me.

The background to these Italian tales is that the Po valley village's Catholic priest Camillo Tarocci, as cunning a "poor priest from the plains" as ever lived, had carried heavy machine guns alongside the village's Communist mayor Peppone, as a partisan, against the fascists, during the war; and buried some of those guns at the end for future use, too.

(Periodically, Don Camillo has to be persuaded by his Lord not to dig them up again for use against Peppone.)

But for all that private political dreaming, for all that I like partisans, it's true to say that the partisan as thinker and writer doesn't have a romantic public image.

We think of George Orwell's novel 1984, and the *duckspeaker*: the "man with the strident voice" whose "voice never stopped for an instant" jerking out phrases like

'complete and final elimination of Goldsteinism' ... very rapidly and, as it seemed, all in one piece, like a line of type cast solid.

Or even worse, the *doublethinker*, the "orator of the Inner Party" whose speech is an "endless catalogue of atrocities [committed by Oceania's enemy, Eurasia]" – until it is interrupted by a messenger with a scrap of paper advising him Oceania was now at war with *Eastasia* ...

Nothing altered in his voice or manner, or in the content of what he was saying, but suddenly the names were different.

It's not a pretty thought. And it is one to give pause to any of us who do panel shows on politics and spend moments of preparation on the phone to the Leader's office to check "the line".

At least it saves us from pride.

By contrast, in much of our political culture it is admiration for the non-partisan idealist which is effortlessly reproduced.

Just as Orwell's fictional partisan characters set a shattering stereotype of life on the party line, so the hugely admirable elements of his own dissenting character and career set us a

wonderful type of the alienated insider, a 'man of the Left' free of both the lies and murder of Stalinism and the lousy muddling-through of the social democratic parties.

Evidently mavericks always tell the truth. Even to themselves. Just ask them.

As appealing as Orwell's deep integrity is, for the political person, though, his is a paradoxical image; there is a kind of despair at politics at work in that conception of the political saint as the man outside the system.

As a Catholic, I reflect on the hagiography of Thomas More and see a similar trace.

The romantic face of the 1990 television series "The Civil War", historian Shelby Foote, made famous again the words William Faulkner wrote about the memory of Gettysburg in *Intruder in the Dust*:

For every Southern boy fourteen years old, not once but whenever he wants it, there is the instant when it's still not yet two o'clock on that July afternoon in 1863, the brigades are in position behind the rail fence, the guns are laid and ready in the woods and the furled flags are already loosened to break out and Pickett himself with his long oiled ringlets ... when the war could still be won.

He can always dream. I should add - I don't have any sympathy with that Cause.

And in just the same way, for the Catholic in politics, not once but whenever he wants it, there is the instant of St Thomas More on Tyburn, forever intoning the great prayer of the Catholic statesman:

I am the King's good servant, but God's servant first.

More is the great one. Our patron saint. And of course I daren't detract from that for an instant.

And yet in that instant, on that hill, his example is no help to us at all.

For what he shows us there is not the way *in* politics, but the way *out* of politics. The way of martyrdom. Of resignation. Of defeat.

In some respects, it is an evasion – even an escape.

It's obviously hard, but in an essential sense simple, to find your way out of politics with integrity. What's possibly not as hard, but surely more complex, is to find your way still *in*.

Can it really be the *resignation* of the Chancellorship that makes him the politicians' patron saint?

It is not much help to find your way through the partisan life.

We have all given – in our sleep ... on our walks ... in our showers – the great speech of our martyrdom. And yet the knock on the door of our simple cell never comes. And if it did ... when the door

opens, we would no longer be in politics. Our temptations are far more banal.

So what are we to do? Or – more precisely – how are we to decide?

Not on “that” day ... but on “this” day.

This is the integrity question the partisan faces every day.

Of course, if the judgements parties make, and to which partisans unite themselves, were morally straightforward, this question of whether to unite ourselves with our party would hardly arise.

They are not.

Partisan integrity is inseparable from the challenging ethics of politics in general – from what de Gaulle so plangently described as the obligation to take “risks, including moral risks”.

We do not thank our ambulance drivers or our infantry soldiers for playing it safe; should we thank our statesmen?

Or as my friend, the inventor Tony Kitchener, likes to say of a certain type of Formula 1 driver:

He is no good ... he doesn't crash often enough.

While I was trying to work out who Tony stole that line from – presumably Enzo Ferrari, but I am not sure – I found another, ostensibly about car racing, but again surely about the moral life

Any car which holds together for a whole race is too heavy.

This is the dilemma Michael Walzer examined in his famous essay [\[https://www.sss.ias.edu/files/pdfs/Walzer/Political-action.pdf\]](https://www.sss.ias.edu/files/pdfs/Walzer/Political-action.pdf)

which I've long pondered. Walzer asks first

[W]hether or not a man can ever face, or even has to face, a moral dilemma, a situation where he must choose between two courses of action both of which it would be wrong for him to undertake.

He goes on

In modern times, the dilemma appears most often as the problem of "dirty hands", and it is typically stated by the Communist leader Hoerderer in Sartre's play of that name: "I have dirty hands right up to the elbows. I've plunged them in filth and blood. Do you think I can govern innocently?"

Do you think I can govern innocently? What a question.

As Walzer puts it

The notion of dirty hands derives from the effort to refuse 'absolutism' ...

By refusing absolutism, he means, to refuse a purist statement that a man must remain innocent ...

... to refuse 'absolutism' without denying the reality of the moral dilemma.

In other words, for Walzer, the dirty hands notion is neither mere consequentialism nor pure resignation.

How?

In effect, his is the idea – not that it's right to do the wrong thing for the right reason – but that it may be *good* to do the wrong thing by doing the right thing for the wrong reason.

As long as you know it's wrong.

What did I just say?

Walzer expands, with a presumably hypothetical case.

In order to win the election the candidate must make a deal with a dishonest ward boss, involving the granting of contracts for school construction over the next four years. Should he make the deal? Well, at least he shouldn't be surprised by the offer, most of us would probably say (a conventional piece of sarcasm). And he should accept it or not, depending on exactly what is at stake in the election.

But that is not the candidate's view.

He is extremely reluctant even to consider the deal, puts off his aides when they remind him of it, refuses to calculate its possible effects upon the campaign. Now, if he is acting this way because the very thought of bargaining with that particular ward boss makes him feel unclean, his reluctance isn't very interesting. His feelings by themselves are not important.

But he may also have reasons for his reluctance.

He may know, for example, that some of his supporters support him precisely because they believe he is a good man, and this means to them a man who won't make such deals.

Or he may doubt his own motives for considering the deal, wondering whether it is the political campaign or his own candidacy that makes the bargain at all tempting.

Or he may believe that if he makes deals of this sort now he may not be able later on to achieve those ends that make the campaign worthwhile, and he may not feel entitled to take such risks with a future that is not only his own future.

Or he may simply think that the deal is dishonest and therefore wrong, corrupting not only himself but all those human relations in which he is involved.

Because he has scruples of this sort, we know him to be a good man. But we view the campaign in a certain light, estimate its importance in a certain way, and hope that he will overcome his scruples and make the deal.

It is important to stress that we don't want just anyone to make the deal; we want him to make it, precisely because he has scruples about it.

We know he is doing right when he makes the deal because he knows he is doing wrong. I don't mean merely that he will feel badly or even very badly after he makes the deal. If he

is the good man I am imagining him to be, he will feel guilty, that is, he will believe himself to be guilty. That is what it means to have dirty hands.

That phrase again:

We know he is doing right when he makes the deal because he knows he is doing wrong.

This is not simple consequentialism: that it is right to do wrong.

This is not a cartoon Nietzschean morality: that we can decide.

Rather it is a tragic self-conception of a man who, in Machiavelli's terms, sacrifices everything for others ... even his soul.

But Walzer complicates this further.

Walzer describes such a man as "a suffering servant".

And he reflects upon Max Weber's Politics as a Vocation, glossing:

For Weber, the good man with dirty hands is a hero still, but a tragic hero. In part, his tragedy is that though politics is his vocation, he has not been called by God and so cannot be justified by Him. Weber's hero is alone in a world that seems to belong to Satan ...

And you thought the Manicheans lost! But I digress

Weber's hero is alone in a world that seems to belong to Satan, and his vocation is entirely his own choice. He still

wants what Christian magistrates have always wanted, both to do good in the world and to save his soul, but now these two ends have come into sharp contradiction ...

Thus, the complication. Because, like the traditional Catholic or Christian politician, Walzer cannot ultimately bring himself to follow Weber's hero – or Macbeth's fools – on "the way to dusty death".

For Walzer:

The difficulties with this view will be clear to anyone who has ever met a suffering servant. Here is a man who lies, intrigues, sends other men to their death – and suffers. He does what he must do with a heavy heart. None of us can know, he tells us, how much it costs him to do his duty. Indeed, we cannot, for he himself fixes the price he pays. And that is the trouble with this view of political crime.

We suspect the suffering servant of either masochism or hypocrisy or both, and while we are often wrong, we are not always wrong. Weber attempts to resolve the problem of dirty hands entirely within the confines of the individual conscience, but I am inclined to think that this is neither possible nor desirable. The self-awareness of the tragic hero is obviously of great value. We want the politician to have an inner life at least something like that which Weber describes.

But sometimes the hero's suffering needs to be socially expressed (for like punishment, it confirms and reinforces our sense that certain acts are wrong). And equally important, it

sometimes needs to be socially limited. We don't want to be ruled by men who have lost their souls.

But sometimes a political leader does choose the "absolutist" side of the conflict, and Weber writes that it is "immensely moving when a mature man ... aware of a responsibility for the consequences of his conduct ... reaches a point where he says: 'Here I stand; I can do no other.'"

Unfortunately, he does not suggest just where that point is or even where it might be. A politician with dirty hands needs a soul, and it is best for us all if he has some hope of personal salvation, however that is conceived.

It is not the case that when he does bad in order to do good he surrenders himself forever to the demon of politics. He commits a determinate crime, and he must pay a determinate penalty. When he has done so, his hands will be clean again, or as clean as human hands can ever be. So the Catholic Church has always taught

That's a pretty rich paragraph.

Let's take a breath.

Despite risking fetishizing guilt, Walzer is not a Catholic – nor is he a Christian – and his encapsulation of religious thought is adventurous and imprecise. His principal Catholic sources are Augustine, St Basil ... and Camus. Yet there is something in this.

So all this is the really tricky moral context of political decision-making.

And then, as a *partisan*, is the even trickier question of *who* decides.

Partisan integrity must acknowledge the complexity not only of actions which are intrinsically morally neutral and whose character arises from their consequences; and even more complex actions with effects not intended but foreseen; but acknowledge there is a question of *who the moral agent is*.

Walzer's moral agent, and Weber's, is a 'man in the landscape'.

But what of a partisan in a party? What of a staffer with a boss? Who decides? Who is guilty? Who gets punished? It's hard enough to work out what I may do – what may I co-operate with?

I said to Leigh during the week that this is an easier problem for someone whose ecclesiology is first millennium.

Judith Brett has persuasively argued that one reason for the continued identification of Australian Catholics with Australian Labor after the first world war was their alienation from the language of masculine judgement and individual conscience adhered to by Protestant leaders of politics on the conservative side in Australia at that time.

I should say she doesn't deny the other factors of class and conscription and so on – but she writes this factor back in.

I find this a very clever and persuasive analysis: picture the editorialists and aldermen fulminating against Labor – the MPs submit their conscience to a collective – they submit their intellect to a platform – they even acknowledge authority outside the Parliament in the movement ... the echoes of the same period's Rockchopping arguments about the cosmopolitan disloyalty and Popish authoritarianism of Irish society within Australia are unmistakable.

(Certain contemporary parallels about another cleric-ridden caste of immigrant devouts suggest themselves to me as well.)

But back to politics, I picture my grandfathers Francis Cooney and Gerard Lynch reading in their paper that their local Labor MPs do what they're told, not what they think themselves, and I see them thinking 'good man!'

That's partisan integrity for you.

I recall in *The Gillard Project* something written by Hugh Gaitskell - in the 1950s, UK Labour's moderate, modernising leader; but in the 1920s, just a student, politically awakened by the General Strike - in 1926, during the strike

“He would not ‘desert his side just because it had miscalculated its means’.”

I love that.

But wouldn't it be safer to trust your own judgement, rather than that of your party?

Perhaps. It depends on your judgement. And on your party's.

It's my view that judging the integrity of the partisan is inseparable from judging the conduct of the party he or she signs up to – inseparable from an actual political judgement about the rights and wrongs of the parties.

You can't judge it from a stance of false neutrality.

So yes, Orwell is a certain kind of saint – but not because he rejected solidarity, because he rejected *Stalinism*.

If you believe – as I'm inclined to believe – that the real test in your public life is 'who's side are you on', then the real ethical question becomes not how closely you stick to your side – but whether your side is right.

Not solely your integrity as a partisan, but the integrity of your party.

This is why partisan integrity does not allow you to do the wrong thing for the right reason.

Your party isn't just your city – Labor is not just Machiavelli's Florence – it represents a partial interest, the right one, and it has ideas.

And I don't think this is a licence to kill – Auden was right to want to unwrite the lines “the necessary murder” – and I don't think it's an escape from conscientious responsibility.

Partisanship is not an excuse. Rather, the partisan accepts a *larger* conscientious burden – I allow myself to be held accountable not only for my own deeds and words but for those of a party.

If you're going to follow orders, you'd better choose your commander well.

Because ultimately you may have to resign.

What do we know for sure? That we can't do the wrong thing for the right reason. We are Christians, after all.

But we are not fanatics.

And so the morally sensitive man in politics will ask – how far can I go? What price may I pay?

If it is right to do this at all, surely I am free, and even obliged, to do as much as I can. Because surely the purpose of the political life is not “the right politics” – it is “the good society”.

And arguably, that may require not so much the courage to do the right thing as the humility to know when we've done wrong, and to repent.

Especially if in the kind of politics which exists in a good society – the politics we aspire to build, and perhaps even largely see – the moral dilemmas are venial ... and not mortal?

These are the questions I end on.

What if in a good democracy dirty hands are soiled with mud ... not blood?

What if the sins of contemporary politics are not complicity with murder of all kinds, or taking the Oath of Allegiance ...

... but complicity with a counter productive tax policy ... or even worse, staying late at work when your kids need you at home?

What if the morality of politics is not one of heroes and martyrs ... but of sin, confession, absolution, and a slow increase in grace?

What if the way to that increase in grace is less imagining the great speech of martyrdom at Tyburn ... and more dropping in on confession at St Pat's – or a reading in chapel?

What if we need our partisans to be penitents, not saints?