

Explaining Political Judgement

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Explaining Political Judgement

What is political judgement? Why do politicians exhibit such contrasting thought styles in making decisions, even when they agree ideologically? What happens when governments with contrasting thought styles have to deal with each other? In this book Perri 6 presents a fresh, rigorous, explanatory theory of judgement, its varieties and its consequences, drawing upon Durkheim and Douglas. He argues that policymakers will understand – and misunderstand – their problems and choices in ways that reproduce their own social organisation. This theory is developed by using the Cuban missile crisis of 1962 as an extended case study, examining the decision-making of the Kennedy, Castro and Khrushchev régimes. Explaining political judgement is the first comprehensive study to show what a neo-Durkheimian institutional approach can offer to political science and to the social sciences generally.

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Figure 3.2, Figure 3.4, Table 3.2 and preceding paragraphs on pages 74–76 are reproduced with changes of style and presentation with kind permission of Palgrave Macmillan, from, respectively, 6 (2007a), 133, Figure 7.1; 6 *et al.*, 2006, 47, Figure 4.1; Peck and 6, 2006, 96, Figure 4.1; and 6 (2007b), 41–42 (see References).

Epigraph

I

Everybody complains of his memory, but nobody of his judgement.
La Rochefoucauld (1958 [1665], 48)

The great danger and risk in all of this is a miscalculation – a mistake in judgment.

John Fitzgerald Kennedy, President of the United States, 1960–63, Tuesday, 23 October 1962, in conversation with Robert Kennedy, Attorney-General; Kenneth O'Donnell, special adviser; and Theodore Sorensen, special counsel, as reported in Kennedy (1968, 65).

You will never know how much bad advice I had.

John Fitzgerald Kennedy on the Cuban missile crisis, private conversation with John Kenneth Galbraith.¹

II

[E]vents and results, especially in war, depend for the most part on fortune, which will not conform or subject itself to our reason or foresight . . . our opinions and deliberations depend on fortune just as much, and that she involves our reason too in her uncertainties and confusion.

Montaigne, 'On the uncertainty of our judgement' (1958 [1580], 129–130).

We are trying to get ourselves out of this *avantyura* [reckless gamble] and now you are pulling us into another one!

Nikita Sergeevich Khrushchev, Chairman of the Praesidium and First Secretary of the Communist Party of the USSR, to Vasili Kuznetsov, First Deputy Foreign Minister, 22 October 1962 (Zubok and Pleshakov, 1996, 260–261)

III

If [the imperialists] actually carry out the brutal act of invading Cuba in violation of international law and morality, that would be the moment to eliminate such danger forever through an act of clear legitimate defence, however harsh and terrible the solution would be, for there is no other.

Fidel Castro, Prime Minister of Cuba, to Nikita Sergeevich Khrushchev, 26 October 1962 (Blight *et al.*, 2002, 509–510)

1 On political judgement

Characterising political judgement

This book presents a new account of the limited number of basic forms of political judgement, showing how they work with and against each other in shaping decision-making. It offers a fresh causal explanation of these styles of judgement, although it draws upon classical works.

Politically to judge is to select and to commit to action, but it involves much that comes beforehand.¹ Political judgement is the thought style exhibited in and shaping the pattern of political decision-making. It can only be measured over a series of decisions that decision-makers consider causally related. A thought style is the *manner* in which ideas, categories, propositions, feelings, etc., are believed, rejected, construed, framed, classified, used and felt.² For example, propositions may be believed with greater or less dogmatism; emotions may be felt with greater or less complexity and ambivalence; categories and their boundaries may be marked with greater or less rigidity, with greater or less exaggeration of differences between cases within and beyond a category, allowing for more or for less negotiation, hybridity, etc.; aims and intentions may be pursued more or less tolerantly of compromise. Style is contrasted with the *content* of thought, which consists in descriptive, explanatory or prescriptive propositions accepted. Political ideology is a key aspect of content. Indeed, this book shows that people with diametrically opposed ideologies may exhibit similar thought styles; conversely, ideological allies may think in quite contrasting styles.

It is a mistake to suppose that ideology is the substance and style the mere presentation of thought. Thought style matters as much as, and sometimes more than, ideology, in shaping decisions and outcomes. Judgement style selects issues, focuses political emotion, sustains capacity for action, guides commitment and determination. Potential opponents and supporters respond as much to style as to ideology. Style determines radicalisation and moderation. Political decision-making is as much about how we think as about what we think.

Policymaking groups typically show a mix of different thought styles. Political judgement, then, describes the weighted mix of thought styles through which politicians and their advisers³ determine whether they face a condition or a problem; understand and misunderstand their allies and opponents; classify their problems, options (if any) and conflicting imperatives; understand circumstance, causation, constraint or opportunity; recognise possible instruments; select analogies; construe risks; become willing to bear some risks but not others; conceive linkages between issues; relate reasons for action to goals for policy; and do or do not risk medium- or long-range anticipation, and in detail or only in outline. These things, Vickers (1995 [1965]) called 'appreciation'.

Committing to a course of action, by deliberation or otherwise, is more than forming an appreciation of circumstances and selecting means for a priority goal. It is a social and political process, and not just a mental one, of settling what is feasible, meaningful, apt, acceptable, adroit or astute to do, how to reason about it and how to present it. Appreciation, appraisal, settlement, decision and commitment or its attenuation are critical aspects of judgement. Deliberation and persuasion are social processes, as are developing and sustaining categories for appreciation. What people involved centrally or tangentially in judgement can deliberate upon, and be persuaded of, and what will count as a reason for them, are all shaped by their informal social relations and institutions.

Although the case studied in this book is indeed one of deep crisis, political judgement is not only called for in crises. Indeed, some crises do not require deep political judgement, at least in the first instance. Designing immediate responses even to some types of crises (major oil spills, for example) may be a largely technical matter, although their aftermath typically gives rise to problems that will require fully political judgement (Boin *et al.*, 2005).

Yet political judgement is not neatly separable from other kinds of judgement contributing to political decisions, despite reformers' occasional efforts to insulate technical judgement – for example, on the interpretation of intelligence, or judgement of military feasibility, or economists' assessment of forecasts or even professional diplomats' judgement of the scope for further negotiation – from purely political aspects. In practice, political considerations infuse technical ones: on decisions of any magnitude, political judgement processes provide the framework for practical synthesis of the various technical judgements.

In circumstances calling for political judgement, there is no dominant rule to be followed, no superordinate principle to be conformed to, no authoritative algorithm to be followed, no uniquely trusted form of calculation to be undertaken, that reliably yields a superior decision.

Imperatives clash; people are divided. Policymakers face genuine dilemmas (or trilemmas, etc.). All the good things cannot go together; something valuable must be surrendered.

Whatever the merits, in some codes of morality, of the principle, 'let justice be done, even though the heavens may fall' (*fiat iustitia, ruat caelum*), it generally fails what many people expect of judgement that is political at all (let alone *good* political judgement), although we shall see that this claim can indeed be influential in some political circumstances. For politics are precisely the fields of adjustment between fundamental values – even, *in extremis*, between justice and other goods. The philosopher and historian of ideas, Isaiah Berlin, argued in a well-known (1996) article on political judgement that this principle is part of a catastrophic utopianism in politics that often flows from the excessive commitment to a single principle (whether of justice or anything else). Conversely, he argued that *good* political judgement recognises multiple, irreconcilable values and frameworks of understanding. Appreciating these conflicting imperatives is, for Berlin (1979), the virtue of the fox which knows many things, by contrast with that of the hedgehog which knows only one (cf. Tetlock, 2005, *passim*).

In dire circumstances, political leaders may be forgiven, if they exercise judgement with due care, for coming to a decision involving breaking a moral rule, perhaps even a law, if they are prepared to face the consequences later. In the most extreme situations, political considerations may quite reasonably require it. Since antiquity, philosophers have discussed the conundrum for political judgement described as the condition of 'dirty hands', where sometimes coming to intelligent and astute settlement between rival claims will result in politically justifiable but morally indefensible action. During centuries of debate about the idea of 'reasons of state' (*raison d'état*), worrying about the relationship between judgement and wrongdoing has been a central theme, although by no means the only or dominant one (Meinecke, 1998 [1957, 1925]). The philosopher Hannah Arendt (e.g. 1992) struggled with this problem, finally coming to believe in the pre-eminence of moral over instrumental considerations in most major settings for political judgement. Yet the argument for the independence of political judgement rests on the recognition that politics are not simply moralities writ large, even if they cannot and should never be simply amoral, still less merely immoral, practices (Bourke, 2009). Moral considerations neither exhaust nor automatically trump all prudential ones; yet they can never be extruded from political judgement.

Nevertheless, calls for political judgement themselves carry normative freight of their own. When politicians are asked to exercise judgement,

they are often being asked to exercise a certain kind of restraint or moderation upon the imperatives expected to weigh with them (Bourke, 2009). In calling for *good* judgement, we typically expect political leaders to find a path that neither follows the vocal minority's selfish interests nor the majority's temporary mood, but which neither indulges short-term desires for vengeance nor puts a country's short-term interests before its longer-term ones. In asking for judgement that meets the requirements of being political at all, we call for decisions to recognise that authority cannot sustainably rest on domination, that there must eventually be some accommodation between imperatives and people in conflict.

When we care about judgement at all – and not only about a notion of good judgement – we care about the manner of policymaking, not simply the option finally settled upon. Calls for judgement (as opposed to rule-following or principled action) ask policymakers to exercise a peculiar thoughtfulness, self-consciousness and sense of solemn responsibility in their deliberation, showing appropriate respect for the gravity of the problem or condition, the tragic character of the conflicting imperatives, and the requirement not to give way to the immediate, the obvious, the simple and the pressing.⁴

Perhaps this seems too high-minded. Certainly, partisan interest, coalition building and sustaining one's own position in office cannot be forced out of political judgement; nor is it a reasonable standard for political judgement to ask that they should. We may praise a Robert Peel who is prepared to break his party and his administration in pursuit of a decision that he regards as right for his country. But to make that a general condition of political judgement is supererogatory and absurd, if government is to be carried out at all. For the duty to sustain government, within the limits of the constitution, is one that rightly weighs with every politician in office, not only – even if always partly – for selfish reasons, as well as with citizens. High and low political considerations do, will and should intermingle in judgement that is adequately political. To complain of this is simply to complain about the human condition of politics and of rule. If sometimes we ask for a Robert Peel or an Abraham Lincoln, much more frequently we should reasonably ask only for a mere Benjamin Disraeli, a Harold Wilson or even an Andrew Jackson. Politicians in office may make policy judgements which are later seen as wise, but do so for reasons of partisanship, spite or furthering their own careers. It is similarly muddled to complain that domestic politics enter into, for example, foreign policy judgement, or that policy decisions are taken with an eye to votes or support on the backbenches: calculating what can secure enough support to be feasible is central to genuinely political judgement (Hurd, 1979, 35–36). If we are to ask sometimes

that decisions be made precisely against the common wisdom, then, in democracies, we can and should not expect such decisions themselves to be commonplace. Democracy privileges the common wisdom, requiring it to be set aside only with the weightiest justification and willingness, if necessary, by officials to bear the consequences of their uncommon wisdom at the subsequent polls.

Capabilities for recognising, appreciating and making decisions about political settlements and taking responsibility for them afterward are neither lightly cultivated nor cheaply sustained. Nor do those capabilities reside principally in individuals or their personal dispositions. Politics are those practices by which we contain from coming to sheer violence, the conflicts which are the inevitable condition of our living together (Crick, 1964; Stoker, 2006). Political judgement is therefore conditioned by the need to accommodate conflicting preferences, ideas and practices, and to institutionalise capacities for such accommodation. Political judgement must therefore often tolerate inconsistencies abhorred by tidy-minded intellectuals. Some inconsistencies are so deep that they render settlements unviable. Other settlements are unviable precisely because they lack adequate inconsistency (6, 2006a; Margetts, 6 and Hood, 2010) – what Bagehot (2001 [1865–7, 1872], 102) called a ‘studied and illogical moderation’. Judgement that is political at all, and perhaps good judgement most of all, is therefore a dynamic process by which mutually inconsistent practices are brought into such relationship with each other that, if the judgements prove successful (as they often will not, especially in the longer run), they can constrain each other from the runaway bandwagoning effects in any of one set of practices. If that sounds too noble, it is important to recognise that it often involves squalid and never wholly consistently principled compromise, in order to avoid the still greater squalor that often attends utter refusal to compromise.⁵

Problems for political judgement

‘Wicked’, not ‘tame’, problems call for political judgement (Rittel and Webber, 1973). Wicked problems admit no definitive solution. They afford only incomplete and ambiguous information. Cases of apparently similar types differ so significantly that we fear to risk drawing inferences from one to another.⁶ Imperatives conflict, creating dilemmas rather than continual trade-offs. Decisions are made under severe constraints. Policymakers face blame and obloquy for any of the available outcomes. Weighing imperatives usually involves difficult comparisons among very different kinds of considerations not readily reduced to a common numeraire. There is little hope of widespread consensus on what to do

in particular disputes. The question, ‘What to do?’, cannot be settled by appeal to empirical evidence alone. Occasionally, people with contrasting political and moral positions can agree on examples of competent or astute political judgement, often for different reasons. But extending agreement to many circumstances would likely prove infeasible.

Some policy problems are comparatively straightforward. For example, the decisions are indeed political ones about what funds to allocate for common procedures in a system of socialised health care such as the British National Health Service (NHS). Rival groups of professionals and patients lobby for and against a variety of options; ultimately, political considerations can settle priorities. But demand and need can usually be forecast with workable confidence. Technical requirements are reasonably well known. Likely health benefits from many existing procedures can be calculated with acceptable confidence. Managers have some idea of how long it might take to increase or reduce activity, given the time taken to bring new facilities and trained staff into the system or else to decommission facilities and lay staff off or reallocate them to other functions. Available and relevant information does not suffer from very great imperfection (ignorance of other players’ actions) or incompleteness (ignorance of the options and pay-offs from the options available) or even uncertainty (low or unknown and quite possibly low probabilities of information being accurate). Moreover, the decision-making body is fairly straightforward, consisting in the government of the day and within the government, mainly the health ministers and their officials. For decisions of this kind, there is usually time and money enough to commission experts to analyse the likely costs and benefits of the main options, and information required for that analysis can be obtained relatively easily from NHS data collections. In short, these are relatively tame problems.

Political judgement is called for, by contrast, in situations where policymakers face many of the following deficits from the ideal conditions:

ignorance: lack of contextual information about the conditions under which other players are making decisions, what they want, how they think, or about what they might count as a welcome or unwelcome pay-off;

uncertain information: information, to which an actor is unable, given their ignorance of other facts, to assign any probabilities of its truth or relevance, for example, about what the probabilities of particular pay-offs might be, even though those pay-offs can be classified as welcome or unwelcome to other players, should they transpire;

incomplete information: lack of knowledge of the structure of the game – that is, lack of knowledge about the strategies available to other actors, and of the pay-offs each would receive, given the utilities they are believed with some confidence to be operating with;

imperfect information: lack of knowledge in the game – that is, lack of knowledge of what other players in a game have done or inability to update existing knowledge about other players' actions with new information;

potentially misleading information: an actor has to assign a significant, non-trivial probability that the information available to them is disinformation – that is, another player has guilefully provided information to mislead them;

limited processing capability: limited capacity to conduct long or complex chains of reasoning, including counterfactual, anticipatory or hypothetical reasoning, with the time, information and skills available for decision.

These information conditions can be characterised together as *opacity*. As opacity deepens, so does a problem's intractability. The type of fact about which one has no information, or only uncertain, incomplete or imperfect information, also matters. Uncertainty about other players' preferences, goals or utilities means that one cannot be sure of their pay-offs, so deepening incompleteness of information in very serious ways. Political judgement is demanded precisely when no one is sure what game is being played, why, with whom or for what. The politician working in conditions of ignorance can only wish for those of mere uncertainty.

As resource conditions for choice such as the costs of search, analysis or skills to appraise information rise, or as time available for choice shrinks, so too does tractability fall further. These can be called decision-making conditions of *pressure*.

Finally, problem intractability rises as the decision-making body's own complexity increases. For more complicated agents have more goals and find it harder to rank them in a consistent schedule with sequentially structured trade-offs. More decision-makers have first to be accommodated in prior coalition-building exercises. Accommodating these goals gives rise to costs of searching for and analysing information and of conciliating people. These are *conflicted* decision-making problems. In the face of such increasing opacity, pressure and conflict, depending on the solution concept used, in many rational choice modelling exercises decision-makers face either rising numbers of equilibria or none at all.

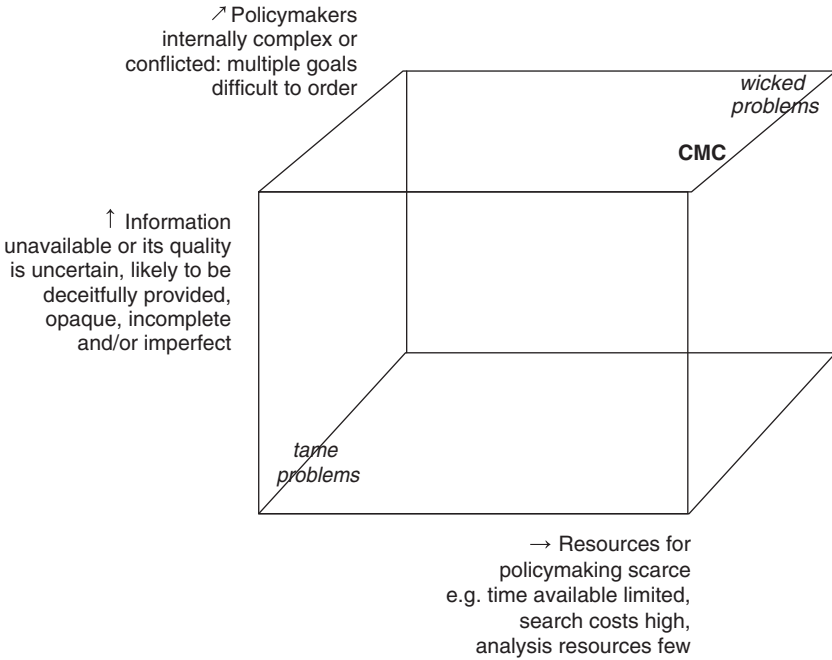


Figure 1.1 Types of problem requiring decision. CMC: Cuban missile crisis

Equilibrium selection becomes highly sensitive to small changes in beliefs or weightings.

Figure 1.1 shows a simple, three-dimensional representation of the difference between tame and wicked problems.

The case study of the Cuban missile crisis of October 1962, examined below, presented the Soviet, the American and the Cuban administrations with just such a highly opaque, pressured and conflicted decision-making situation. It can therefore provisionally be placed, for at least the US and Soviet decision-makers, roughly at the point marked by the abbreviation ‘CMC’ (Cuban missile crisis) in Figure 1.1.

Argument

This book develops a causal account of factors leading political judgement to exhibit particular styles. It offers a richer understanding than most rival theories can of social relations marking different basic informal institutional processes within which styles of judgement are cultivated

and exercised. Showing that social relations have systematically patterned causal influences upon styles enables us to learn something important about how political judgement works and why it works in these ways.

Proposing an explanation of political judgement style is ambitious enough. Doing so by using the case study that has been used to test a great many other theories is doubly so. Offering an explanation to rival those offered in one of the great classic texts of political science – Allison's *Essence of decision* (1971; Allison and Zelikow, rev. 2nd edn, 1999) – only compounds the trouble. But this approach has important merits too. Examining a theory of political decision-making against the available data from the Cuban missile crisis has rightly become an important rite of passage for any ambitious tradition of theorising, to demonstrate its intellectual maturity. This rite has the merit of enabling the theory to be compared directly with other traditions. Moreover, the richness of the available data about the events of October 1962, their antecedents and consequences, is enough alone to justify the choice.

The interest of the case does not lie in any excellence of the political judgement of the principal protagonists. Normative argument is not the aim of this study, but for the record, it is perhaps worth saying that all sides made decisions that led to the crisis, during its height and in its aftermath, that could readily be regarded as blunders. This was as true of the political advisers, military staff from senior to junior ranks, and technical analysts, as it was of the leading politicians.

The Cuban missile crisis is particularly valuable for examining a theory of political judgement of the kind presented below, because it provides diversity in the styles of the informal organisation among policymakers which the theory predicts to be fundamental in shaping styles of political judgement. Moreover, these rich data enable exploration of important causal processes.

This book's aim is to establish a theoretical framework, illustrating it with a comparative case analysis, showing thereby the framework's initial plausibility and interest. The empirical material is drawn from the mainstream of academic historiography of the October 1962 crisis. The book does not offer a new history of the Cuban missile crisis: it presents no previously unknown empirical facts. Rather, it offers *explanations* not previously presented. Science does not progress only by the discovery of new facts, but also by conceptual, methodological and theoretical development, the better to explain already known facts, solve problems and resolve anomalies in theoretical understanding (Laudan, 1977, *passim*, but esp. 66 ff.).

In this vein, every theoretical argument about political judgement and the policy process, whether or not it examines the missile crisis in detail, must engage with the achievements of Allison's work. His three models

of decisions by a rational state actor pursuing its interests, of organisational processes shaping decisions, and of decisions emerging from the internal conflicts and bargains of the various parties within the administration, are derived respectively from three classical thinkers. The first is from Machiavelli: states are regarded as unified collective actors, pursuing interests taken to be more or less fixed for the period in question, and doing so with guile and ruthlessness. Starting from Weber's work on bureaucracy (Gerth and Mills, 1958) and routinisation (Weber, 1947), Allison's second model regards governments as organisations following rules and routines institutionalised in them. Simmel (1955; Levine, 1971) provides the third model with the idea that decisions arise from conflict and cooperation in networks of individuals.⁷

One classical writer missing from Allison's antecedents is Durkheim. This book shows that his legacy provides the basis for a distinctive and powerful understanding of political policymaking. Durkheimian traditions have generally had less influence in political science than those of Machiavelli, Weber and Simmel, to say nothing of Marx, de Tocqueville, Dewey, Schumpeter, Bentley or Easton. This is partly because Durkheim's own writings on politics (Giddens, 1986), when finally collected, appeared fragmentary, scattered, suggestive and inadequately developed. In recent years, as misconceptions stemming from Parsons about Durkheim's real achievements have been dispelled, the relevance of his political writings has been appreciated more widely (e.g. Cladis, 1992; Cotterrell, 1999; Rawls, 2003b). To date, though, little has been done to apply his argument to the policy process or to political judgement.

This book follows a methodological tradition of taking an approach to explaining judgement in general found in a great classical writer on another subject rather than their specific writings on politics, and developing it into a theory of political judgement. This was Arendt's (1992) method. She set aside Kant's explicitly political writings (Reiss, 1991 [1970]), drawing instead upon his treatise on aesthetic judgement to develop her account of moral judgement in political contexts. In the same way, the present book begins from Durkheim's account of classification (Durkheim and Mauss, 1963 [1902–3]), ritual and the social shaping of religious thought (1995 [1912]), suicide (1951 [1897]) and moral education (1961 [1925]), and only tangentially from his writings on the democratic state (1957 [1950]) or the origins of German militarism (1915). This book argues thereby that the social sciences, like other sciences, often make progress by further mining in seams first opened up by the founding figures.

The framework offered derives from the work of the Durkheimian anthropologist, Mary Douglas. It draws most heavily on Douglas'

writings on the institutional shaping of cognition and the sociology of knowledge (1986), on classification (1992a), on anomaly (1966, 1996 [1990]) and on quotidian ritual (Douglas and Isherwood, 1979), rather more than upon her writings on politics and risk perception. Again, tangentially, those too will be used – especially, those on stylisation in judgement of risk (e.g. 1992b). For her work forms a single arch with a common Durkheimian causal mechanism underpinning her arguments.

This book offers a more fully developed argument than that offered in 6 (2004), but its approach is consistent with that in the previous study. The earlier volume examined political judgement principally as a problem of information rejection (cf. Thompson and Wildavsky, 1986). All policymakers are overwhelmed by a glut of potentially relevant information. To think at all, they must discard much of it. But what counts for politicians and officials in different contexts as intelligent choice of what to discard? The argument there was that policymakers tend to reject information the intellectual organisation of which tends to represent too great a contrast with the form of their own social and institutional organisation, and that informal institutions lying behind the organisation of policymakers select acceptable and unacceptable information. This book uses a wider range of measures of political judgement, including risk appetite, issue linkage, ways of classifying the problems, and relations between reasons and goals. It also clarifies the relationship between the policymakers' informal organisation, the ritual order of their encounters with each other and their styles of judgement, tracing the causal role of ritual in fixing categories through a sequence of linked conversations and decisions.

Significance of the argument

The argument matters for three reasons. First, it helps to explain decision-making in the Cuban missile crisis. More significantly, though, it offers a fresh understanding of political judgement and the policy process. Finally, it demonstrates the contribution of Durkheimian approaches to explanation in political science.

Controversy continues about how to explain Khrushchev's decision to put ballistic nuclear missiles into Cuba, his decision to withdraw and the manner by which he did so; about Castro's apparently extraordinary recklessness about the risk of nuclear war; and even about the nature of the relationship between the internal governmental figures and forces in the Kennedy administration and the president himself. This book offers distinctive, comparable and integrated explanations for several of these

puzzles. Moreover, the book treats the three governments most centrally involved with equal seriousness, moving beyond the treatment of the crisis that has lasted too long as one of superpower relations only.

More importantly, the argument makes political judgement into a clear, bounded and central concept for explanatory theory in understanding political action and relationships, not merely as a literary notion to be left to the history of ideas or to psychology as a technical but descriptive term for certain biases. It provides measures derived from a specified theory, for distinguishing its basic forms; these are operationalised for research using archival and documentary sources.

Sabatier (1999, 11) charged that the neo-Durkheimian institutional tradition was unclear, not testable and incomplete, and that it lacked a clear account of the role of institutions. He concluded that it had yet to offer a major contribution to the understanding of the policy process. This book seeks to show how these charges can be refuted.

Chapter 3 provides the distinctive account of elementary forms of institutions, specifies expected associations, causal mechanisms and measures, and derives hypotheses to be examined against the case study data in later chapters. The book argues that, far from obscuring agency in a vast fog of social structure, the neo-Durkheimian account provides a rich and substantive account of just how agency works differently, through different substantive routes, in contrasting institutional contexts. The coarse view that agency is a ghost in the machine of structure, to be preserved against encroachment by institutional constraint, misunderstands what institutions do and leaves agency little more than a negation. Instead, we can develop richer and more substantive theories of its content by examining its variation between elementary forms of institutional context.

For this neo-Durkheimian tradition of theorising itself, the book provides clarification, correction and innovation. It lays out clearly the nature of the causal process which powers the theory, nailing the spurious charge that it is a typology without a causal theory. It clarifies the role played by the fourth form of informal institutional organisation, that of isolate life, showing it to be far from the inert phenomenon or mere ballast in politics for which it is often mistaken. The argument below distinguishes sharply between the independent variables of informal social organisation and the dependent ones of thought style, and seeks to measure them as far as possible independently of each other in the case study, thus avoiding the risk of circularity into which too many previous tests of the theory have fallen. In insisting on this distinction, it returns theory to its institutional basis, avoiding the problems created by turning into a theory of worldviews. The book distinguishes more

clearly than is usually done between those things which belong to the neo-Durkheimian framework, those which are theories and those which are models of particular theories.

For theorising in political science more generally, the argument presented here suggests that even those whose basic outlook is that of rational choice, or prospect theory, or bounded rationality, or the theory of heuristics have good reasons for taking seriously the resources that the Durkheimian tradition has to offer for understanding politics. Puzzles about origin of preferences, the nature and specific content of endogeneity of preferences to institutions, and selection among equilibria may be easier to tackle if the full neo-Durkheimian variety and causal roles of institutions are admitted. It is time for an end to the dull, century-long stand-off and mutual misunderstanding between the Durkheimian traditions and those which start from assumptions of rationality in actors. Commerce between them is possible and desirable.

In the same way, the cases where prospect theory works well and those where it does not become easier to understand by using neo-Durkheimian resources, and for the former much greater empirical content can be supplied when the precise gradient of prospect theory's curve is shown to be determined by forces used by the neo-Durkheimian engine. Instead of pointing to heuristics on a casuistical basis, the neo-Durkheimian approach enables us to understand why some are more likely to be relied upon than others in different kinds of context. Indeed, instead of the notion of context being used in a hand-waving fashion, the neo-Durkheimian approach suggests ways in which it can be used with rigour in understanding politics.

Finally, the book offers a fully worked account to contrast with those presented in a deservedly hailed major text of twentieth-century political science. The argument performs its homage to Allison's achievement, not by descriptive scholarship but rather by creative development of alternative theory and close engagement with the same empirical problems and closely related theoretical ones.

Structure of the book

The book is organised straightforwardly. The next chapter argues that political judgement stands in need of explanation, and that the already available theories do not satisfyingly explain its cultivation and variety. This requires an engagement with the principal traditions, such as rational choice, prospect theory and various theories of bounded rationality. After situating the argument against older

traditions of thought about political judgement, the chapter aims only to show that, for their all well-known uses, these approaches still need intellectual resources that only another theoretical tradition could provide.

In doing so, it opens the way for the main theoretical argument, that the neo-Durkheimian institutional approach can enrich our understanding of political judgement in ways that no other currently available framework can. The third chapter presents the neo-Durkheimian institutional theory in detail. Its roots in the work of Durkheim and Douglas are examined; its fundamental associations and their underlying causal mechanisms are set out, before presenting independent and dependent variables, indicators and hypotheses. Brief answers are given to some of the main lines of criticism offered by the tradition's opponents.

A chapter then introduces the case study of the Cuban missile crisis, setting out the reasons for choosing it for the present purpose. A brief review of some other traditions of theory used to explain outcomes or judgements made in the course of those events argues that there remain puzzles to be addressed by another theoretical approach. Much of the chapter is given over to a broadly chronological account of the crisis, for those readers who are not already familiar with it: experts in its history can comfortably skip this part of the chapter.

Three chapters follow, which examine evidence for the hypotheses set out in [Chapter 3](#), against historical information about the Khrushchev, Kennedy and Castro governments. Each follows the same format. First the chapters consider the evidence about the nature of institutions, and especially about informal ones, which shaped the policymaking process of coming to judgement. There follows some discussion of the evidence for the causal mechanism by which institutions cultivate judgement styles, which works through the implicit ritual order. Finally, evidence is examined for the hypotheses set out in [Chapter 3](#), about a series of indicators of judgement style.

The substantive concluding chapter summarises what has been learnt from the study. It begins by showing what we learn about the October crisis from the attempt to show the power of the neo-Durkheimian theory, which is not achieved by using other approaches. Next, it examines what we learn from the study about political judgement, both in respect of how it can best be characterised and how its forms can be explained. Implications for the development of the neo-Durkheimian theory itself are identified. This section also discusses briefly how something of a provisionally and contingently normative nature can be drawn from the argument. The argument suggests that there is merit in the scope opened up for conversation and dialogue – though not, indeed,

any grand once-for-all reconciliation – between the Durkheimian and the rational choice traditions.

A short final coda returns the reader to a moment of high ritual significance in Moscow at the nadir of the October crisis, which graphically – even operatically – illustrates the argument of the book and the power of the theory.

2 The need for richer explanation

Processes of and capabilities for exercising political judgement were once at the centre of thought about politics. In the twentieth century, these topics were eclipsed by concerns about the design of constitutions and patterns of distributional outcomes for citizens. To situate the arguments to follow that understanding politics should return to examining political judgement and that we need better explanations for its forms, this chapter begins with a brief review of the main traditions of thought about judgement and decision-making in politics. Much of this writing has been normative in character. The section ends with a short consideration of the risks in using normatively defined notions of judgement as the objects of explanation.

This chapter's central task, though, is to argue that the corpus of recent explanatory theoretical writing on the subject provides inadequate explanations for the varieties and shaping forces of judgement. This will make the case that we need something like the theory which will be set out in detail in [Chapter 3](#). Perhaps the simplest and commonest explanation is the appeal to individual character. The next section examines the weakness of this approach.

Some readers may doubt that political judgement needs explanation at all. Typically, those who think that thought style and judgement do not matter have formed that view because they believe that it is possible to explain actions or outcomes directly, without needing to inquire into thought and judgement. Among this group are some within the rational choice tradition, who would argue that if we know enough about people's interests, the constraints they face, the pay-offs available to them, and the prior and anticipated actions of their counterparts in other governments and interest groups, we can explain governing administrations' actions and the outcomes they achieve. A short section considers this suggestion that we can bypass political judgement altogether in understanding political action.

Others will agree that political judgement and thought style matter. But they may consider that we already have perfectly good theories to

explain these things, and so have no need of a new one, let alone one borrowed from Durkheim, Douglas and anthropology. This group is more diverse. Some of those who think that all the explanation needed has been done will also be rational choice theorists. These rational choice theorists, however, regard preferences as forms of judgement and thought that are explicable in more or less straightforward ways. Others think that judgement has been explained by another tradition of theory. For some, Bayesian updating of information will do the job. For others, prospect theory's account of political decision-makers as loss averse in the domain of gains and willing to bear huge risks in the domain of losses will work best. Yet others will argue that a host of particular rules of thumb, heuristics, biases, tendencies to use particular analogies, etc., adequately explain the differences we can observe in styles of political judgement.

Space does not allow for a full argument to be presented that each of these leaves problems unsolved, or is incomplete. This chapter offers brief statements of the reasons that some of the main traditions of theory are either incomplete, or are problematic, in ways that open up space for a new account. It is organised by considering traditions that assume the fullest rationality, before considering those which insist that rationality is attenuated in various ways.

The first half of the chapter revisits rational choice. The argument presented in the later chapters of the book never suggests that policymakers, or people generally, are irrational and non-rational – quite the contrary. However, mainstream rational choice theory does not fully account for the variety of judgement styles we observe. Taking preferences to be explained by interests and pay-offs tends in practice to bring them as independent factors in by the back door. For it is very difficult to explain why, of all of the candidate interests and pay-offs clamouring for attention, some are more important for some policymakers, without introducing and explaining preferences in richer ways than conventional rational choice approaches have.

This chapter then argues that taking preferences as given makes for unsatisfying explanations. Many rational choice theorists today agree. To deal with the problem, they have developed accounts that show that preferences emerge endogenously, given certain constraints, and especially given certain institutions. Unfortunately, this chapter will suggest, these accounts are not yet fully adequate. The neo-Durkheimian theory offers some important resources that will help here, because its account of endogeneity of thought style works with a rich and subtle set of institutions (in particular, informal ones), because it allows for important diversity in just how endogeneity

works, and because its endogeneity is especially deep. Finally, one problem faced by current game-theory modellers, working within the broad tradition of rational choice, is that equilibria proliferate. Some games exhibit a great many, some indefinitely many. This leaves a problem of determining why some matter more than others. Again, a theory which can explain why people will in some circumstances regard some things as more salient, more legitimate or more readily available, or why they might weight some costs lower than others, or when common knowledge will be sustained, could help here.

For much of the twentieth century, Durkheimian and rational choice traditions have been supposed to be irreconcilable enemies. This book will propose a truce. It argues that they could work together to provide richer accounts of preferences, if rational choice theorists who recognise the need for institutions would only be willing to allow for the full set of institutions and for the full depth of their effects, and if Durkheimians would welcome some greater formalisation. The institutional endogeneity of the full depth of thought style is not at all a source of irrationality, but a subtler and more substantive account of the limited plurality in elementary forms of reason. Indeed, Durkheimians do not make many of the standard, textbook criticisms of rational choice, and have little reason to do so. Moreover, the two traditions share common enemies: both oppose postmodernist and relativist approaches; both seek substantive explanations using causal mechanisms.

In the second half, the chapter examines various attenuations of rationality that theorists offer to explain political judgement, many of which are often grouped together as theories of 'bounded rationality'. The chapter will argue that prospect theory's account is inadequately specified in two ways. Firstly, it has little to say about just how steep will be the gradient of its famous curve of loss aversion and risk loving, at any point in the domains of gains and losses. Secondly, it is silent on just *which* risks policymakers will choose to bear, when they can select from a wide menu of risky projects. Thirdly, against the advocates of heuristics, biases and analogies, the chapter argues that just listing the biases that appear to be associated with a decision is not a very satisfying explanation: it is too proximate. What we need to know is why just this particular bias arises in just this particular situation for this particular decision-making group, when it could surely have been otherwise. Each of these limitations and incompletenesses can be addressed with the neo-Durkheimian theory that will be presented in detail in the next chapter. At the very least, though, this chapter argues, these limitations make the case for being willing to take a look at how far another tradition of theory might help.

Traditions of writing about political judgement

Writing about political judgement is among the oldest genres in both non-fiction and fiction alike.

Unsurprisingly, ancient Athenian insights are still central. Appraisal of the quality of political judgement which emerged under conditions of imperial democracy dominated by demagogues in Athens was Thucydides' (1972 [1954]) principal project in his analysis of the origins and consequences of the Peloponnesian War (e.g. Hawthorn, 2009). Counterposing Nicias' caution against Alcibiades' recklessness in their respective construals of Athenian interests and their ways of classifying the strategic problems that the city state faced provided a framework for measuring two of the styles of judgement available in the debates between the two parties. The adversarial, oratorical ritual order governing how debate was to be conducted before and among the Athenian citizens was, Thucydides strongly suggests, critical not only to the outcome but to the manner in which contrasting styles of judgement were cultivated in Athens.¹ If the present study too focuses on risk appetite, upon ways of classifying problems and resources, and upon the ritual order of policymaking, then this reflects not so much our failure to progress beyond Thucydides – after all, what would it mean to 'progress beyond' Shakespeare? – as the fundamental continuity of the traditions of political analysis that flow from classical Athenian debates.

For several centuries, political judgement was at the centre of political thought. A series of connected traditions worked with the concept of *raison d'état* (Meinecke, 1998 [1957, 1925]). One strand in the debates that ran from Machiavelli to the early twentieth century concerned the degree to which political judgement inevitably is, or rightly should be, driven by essentially amoral notions of prudence, or by considerations of moral duties, not least to peoples in other countries. Those duties might arise from general morality or from specific treaty obligations. Machiavelli infamously argued in *The Prince* that political judgement is and, for political reasons, should be amorally prudential. Yet his *Discourses* suggest that moral claims are and should be load-bearing structures in political judgement. Hegel would later suggest that it is misleading to pose the two as alternatives, but his critics were unconvinced by his too quick reconciliation.

A central issue for the *raison d'état* literature was the extent to which national leaders are constrained by perceived constraint, or 'necessity' – for example, arising within the international state system – which effectively defines the goals that they must pursue, or conversely, the extent to which they have discretion to pursue goals of their own choice, where

alliances are tactical at best and provide only weak bonds. Developing the ‘mirror for princes’ literature and writing for precarious rulers in a highly competitive system in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Italy, Machiavelli could assume significant scope for princes to seek their own glory in their own way, albeit within the severe constraints of the international system and of their own resources: *virtù* and *fortuna* were in perpetual contention. By contrast, in an age of vulnerable nation states and contending absolutisms, Frederick the Great (Meinecke, 1998 [1957, 1925]), 272–339), sometimes wrote of statecraft as following necessity, meaning the only goals and means available for the state to survive. The understanding of necessity as a higher law than morality was used to provide rationales for overriding constitutional principle, not least among some royalist propagandists for Charles I during the period of ‘personal rule’ and even into the 1640s.

In political thought, the *raison d'état* tradition was largely exhausted by the mid-twentieth century, having come to be associated – rather unfairly – with the notions of brutal *realpolitik* used by some totalitarians of both left and right (although Lenin and Trotsky’s use of that term, too, was very far from its previous connotations of modest ambition). As the institutional architecture of international relations developed during the century, and especially after 1945, alternative assumptions were developed to that harsh realism, in the sense that the word is used in international relations, of Treitschke and later Morgenthau. It became possible for at least some thinkers to conceive the ‘interests’ of states, political leaders and their organisations as being open to wider ranges of construal than had been allowed in the *raison d'état* tradition of thought about political judgement.

‘Statecraft’ came to be used, to describe not only international diplomatic activity in pursuit of the most fundamental goals of national survival, but also a variety of reforms of internal constitutional and public service machinery. The ‘statecraft interpretation of British politics’ was developed by, in particular, Bulpitt (e.g. 1986), who, in studying the Thatcher period, defined the term as the general strategy for retaining power used by for a small core group which was presumed to be the unit exercising political judgement and using external relations as a way of securing internal credibility and power (see the assessment and review of criticisms by Buller, 1999, 2000). That view regarded judgement as the rational, amoral pursuit of that core group’s interests and commitments for the state that it governed. It was perhaps the last attempt in the political science tradition to resurrect the *raison d'état* tradition for empirical and explanatory purposes. By the time that Margaret Thatcher herself used the word as the title for her own (2002) views in retirement on a vast range of current

political questions, the expansion of the term's meaning to cover almost anything to do with political preference was complete.

Other writers have tried to resuscitate Aristotle's concept of *phronesis*, rather clumsily rendered in English as prudence or practical wisdom. 'Prudence' is often used in self-justification after the fact for an exercise of political judgement. Unfortunately, this has not yet yielded much fruit that is especially helpful in political science, beyond historical studies (esp. Hariman, 2003), some casuistical analysis and arguments for attending to capabilities rather than rules. Aristotle's argument that judgement should seek a balance or a 'mean' between rival imperatives is not helpful in genuine dilemmas, where differences cannot be split (6 *et al.*, 2010). The suggestion is similarly unhelpfully vague, that political judgement must somehow respect the rival demands of the interests, passions and reason (Hirschman, 1978; cf. Elster, 1999, 2007), or those of 'values' and 'power' (Flyvbjerg, 2001). In Berlin's (1996) essay, although Aristotle is not given pride of place and notions of the mean are carefully eschewed, his legacy is clear in the argument that political judgement is best understood as a tacit and practical skill of appreciation, shrewd insight and decision that is not amenable to representation by rules, models, principles or theories. By contrast, this book will show that prudence is not a single thing, but is found in several conflicting basic styles.²

The twentieth-century political thinker who devoted greatest attention to judgement in politics was Hannah Arendt. Unfortunately, she died before even preparing a manuscript of what was to be her capstone study of judgement. Her writings on judgement are therefore scattered, incomplete, subtle and suggestive (see esp. Arendt, 1992, 2003; for discussions, see Beiner, 1983; Beiner and Nedelsky, 2001; d'Entrèves, 1994, 2000; Wellmer, 1997; Yar, 2000). This is not the place for a detailed examination of Arendt's thought, let alone for a new attempt to reconstruct the argument of what she might have written, had she lived. For Arendt, politics form an arena in which people act – in the moment of the *vita activa* – to pursue major achievement. Action is taken under conditions of acute ignorance and uncertainty of the actions and goals of others and of the irreversible consequences of political action. Yet if action is to be authentic, then it must be done with moral attentiveness (Arendt, 1958; Kateb, 2000). For Arendt, 'the world', meaning the political arena, is absolutely the field of human freedom, not the sphere of necessity, which she regarded as a squalid excuse for unjustifiable action. The judgement of the political actor should be constrained by the moral ability to think from the perspectives of others. The spectator's political judgement – in the moment of the *vita contemplativa* – should be a principally moral one

(Arendt, 1963). Much of her writing on judgement concerns the retrospective moral judgement of citizens and politicians of the decisions made by those in office, rather than an analysis of the relative weight of rival political, moral and other considerations that can, must or should weigh with policymakers.

Recent normative thought about politics generally has had less to say about political judgement than did the classical writers. Instead, most political theorists tend to be preoccupied with justice, as if judgement in politics were an extension of the judgement exercised in the higher courts (a criticism made, for example, by Gray, 2000, of Rawls, e.g. 1993, and more generally by Geuss, 2008, 2009), or else with democracy, as if even democratic politics and rule were entirely characterised by the challenges of divining and representing the will of the majority, or with liberalism or republicanism or other sets of principles for constitutional constraint upon the will of the majority. Less central traditions of work, however, are concerned with particular aspects of political judgement such as principles of appropriate risk bearing (e.g. the debate about the precautionary principle: e.g. Sunstein (2005), or with the condition of dirty hands (Buckler, 1993; Hampshire, 1978; Johnson, 1993; Thompson, 1987)).

Some recent literature on political judgement has been concerned with normative questions of identifying the characteristics of 'good' or 'successful' judgement (Hammond, 1996; Renshon and Larson, 2003; Vickers, 1995 [1965]) or with philosophical questions about the epistemological status of political judgement (Beiner, 1983; Steinberger, 1993).

Of the recent political theorists who have continued to write about political judgement, perhaps the one who has addressed it most explicitly is John Dunn (1990, 2000) (Bourke and Geuss, 2009). He argues that capacities for judgement are necessary for cultivating political responsibility. Nevertheless, Dunn (2000) describes political judgement as a desperate and fragile affair, working under conditions of such opacity, uncertainty and ignorance that judgement can have no more than a relationship of chance with decision, outcome or perception.³ He regards it as suspended between risky interpretations of political shifts and flows, and undertaken under conditions of acute opacity of information. Dunn is surely right to emphasise the opacity of politics, the lack of connections between pieces of information available to decision-makers, and the sheer difficulty of achieving understanding adequate for the exercise of judgement. Yet he offers no structured account of its varieties and strategies.

Looking for features of good political judgement in general, and, certainly, seeking to infer what political judgement empirically is from

any set of candidate features of good judgement are theoretically and methodologically flawed procedures. The competences involved do not form a single kind. A more fruitful strategy is to start with some positive or explanatory typologies that might prove generally workable (and they had better be ones that do not boil down to the good, the bad and the indifferent). The problem is one of concept formation (Goertz, 2005; 6 and Bellamy, 2012). Methodologically, the mistake is exactly like that in many studies of ‘excellent performance’ in companies. Peters and Waterman’s (1982) *In search of excellence* offered a set of characteristics of supposedly highly performing companies of its day, which, unfortunately, researchers soon found in poorly performing companies also. In any case, the same companies studied by Peters and Waterman themselves soon slipped down the league tables or in some cases foundered entirely.

Nor is it a very promising strategy to try to identify the content of poor decisions, for the variety of human folly is so drearily vast that it defies even the hardest of list-makers – and the psychological study of decision-makers’ biases attracts very hardy list-makers indeed. Taking great or small risks, linking issues or treating them separately, fully committing oneself or leaving options open (each an issue to be discussed at some length in later chapters) may each be intelligent responses to different kinds of problems or conditions.

The mistake here is not only the usual problem of sampling only on the dependent variable (which provoked the ire of King *et al.*, 1994), although that might have been enough to sink the approach. More profoundly, what was misguided was to ask explanatory questions directly about dependent variables that are specified in unambiguously normative terms. Rather, we should ask questions about dependent variables defined by more solidly empirical criteria. Then we ought to approach the normative questions indirectly, attempting to learn from comparisons within well-formed types. This book examines in some depth only one case, albeit with three sub-cases. The cases are examined, not because they present examples of generally good or bad political judgement, but because they exhibit the required diversity in candidate causes. In fact, each government involved in the Cuban missile crisis produced judgements exhibiting a mix of blundering and wisdom.

A character trait?

Probably the commonest explanation of variation in political judgement to be found in both popular and scholarly writing is that which appeals to the idea that it consists in or at least is explained by closely related

features that lie in individual character. Indeed, it is an everyday matter of political punditry and of accusation between politicians to comment on the quality of political judgement exhibited by a party leader or minister on particular occasions or, for obituary commentators, over the course of a life. In that vein, a genre of literature has grown up which presumes to analyse the characters of politicians who achieve office, in the hope of picking out enduring characteristics of their personality which conduce to them supposedly ‘possessing’ excellent or lamentable political judgement (see e.g. Khilnani, 2009; Renshon, 2003). This work implies that the topic can be researched by examining leaders’ character traits which are taken to be associated with a propensity for exhibiting good or bad political judgement as a personal virtue. Both hagiographic studies and denunciations of politicians’ decisions seek to trace their supposed triumphs or blunders of judgement to features of their individual psychological make-up that, it is hinted, must long predate their coming to office, so justifying protracted analyses of their ‘formative years’ when, it is fondly imagined, their capacities for political judgement were cultivated.

Thus, the distinguished British political historian Peter Hennessy (2000, 15), explaining his contempt for all forms of theoretical explanation, complains of ‘certain social science approaches which eschew character and suck the sap from political life as it is actually lived’. So too, unfortunately, do many approaches that emphasise character. Barber’s (2009 [1972]) argument is that the actions of US presidents can be predicted from two measures of their characters – the extent of their activity or effort, or passivity or lack of it, and the degree to which their worldview is ‘positive’ or ‘negative’ prior to taking office. Unfortunately, this leads to implausibly heroic inferences and concept stretching. For the only evidence (other than that about quite possibly irrelevant private behaviour) for the character traits is precisely the same as that for the political judgements: the danger is one of circularity. It smuggles ideology into character, so making dependent and independent variables dangerously close to one another, and ignores huge differences that experiences of opposition and holding office make to opportunities, constraints and available information (see Elster’s (2007, 178–190) critique of such explanations). Hennessy would never employ such blunt instruments, but as an historian, his interest in explanation lies not in seeking the generality to which theory aspires but in the particularity which is the domain of his profession.

For the most part, characterology provides weak causal explanations. Not very much, for example, was constant about Churchill’s political judgement, which should rather be spoken of in the plural. His