

On Government and Politics



Government was intended to suppress injustice, but its effect has been to embody and perpetuate it.

—*William Godwin*, 1793

Government exists to protect us from each other. Where government has gone beyond its limits is in deciding to protect us from ourselves.

—*Ronald Reagan*, 1980¹

The government solution to a problem is usually as bad as the problem and very often makes the problem worse.

—*Milton Friedman*, 1975

If we can prevent the government from wasting the labors of the people, under the pretense of taking care of them, they must become happy.

—*Thomas Jefferson*, 1802

The freest form of government is only the least objectionable form.

—*Herbert Spencer*, 1851

Anarchism is founded on the observation that since few men are wise enough to rule themselves, even fewer are wise enough to rule others.

—*Edward Abbey*, 1990

The worst thing in the world next to anarchy, is government.

—*Henry Ward Beecher*, 1867

¹I wish I knew the name of his speechwriter.

The world is run by ‘C’ students.²

—*Al McGuire*³

Decisions are made by people who have time, not people who have talent.

—*Scott Adams*, 2011

We hang the petty thieves and appoint the great ones to public office.

—*Aesop*⁴

Under our republican form of government, intelligence is so highly honored that it is rewarded by exemption from the cares of office.

—*Ambrose Bierce*, 1906

I am strongly in favor of common sense, common honesty, and common decency. This makes me forever ineligible to any public office.

—*H. L. Mencken*, 1946

There is a tragic flaw in our precious Constitution, and I don’t know what can be done to fix it. This is it: Only nut cases want to be president.

—*Kurt Vonnegut*, 2004

Anybody that wants the presidency so much that he’ll spend two years organizing and campaigning for it is not to be trusted with the office.

—*David S. Broder*, 1973⁵

When I was a boy I was told that anybody could become President. I’m beginning to believe it.

—*Clarence Darrow*, 1941

On some great and glorious day the plain folks of the land will reach their heart’s desire at last, and the White House will be adorned by a downright moron.

—*H. L. Mencken*, 1920⁶

There are men, in all ages, who [...] mean to govern well, but they mean to govern. They promise to be kind masters, but they mean to be masters.

—*Daniel Webster*, 1837

²If you have any doubt, just watch the news—or apply for a research grant.

³As quoted, without a date, in several collections, starting not later than 1987.

⁴As quoted, without a date, in major collections of his fables.

⁵A later (circa 2005) paraphrase of this maxim by Douglas Adams is quoted even more frequently.

⁶Note the date. If written today, the verbs’ tense might be different....

Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men.

—Lord Acton, 1887⁷

It is said that power ‘corrupts’, but actually it’s more true that power *attracts the corruptible*. The sane are usually attracted by other things than power.

—David Brin, 1985

All governments suffer a recurring problem: Power attracts pathological personalities. It is not that power corrupts but that it is magnetic to the corruptible.

—Frank Herbert, 1985

Power dements even more than it corrupts, lowering the guard of foresight and raising the haste of action.

—Will and Ariel Durant, 1975

Authority has always attracted the lowest elements in the human race. All through history mankind has been bullied by scum.

—P. J. O’Rourke, 1991

The higher the ape climbs, the more he shows his naked rump.

—European proverb

No man can rule innocently.

—Louis Antonie de Saint-Just, 1792

The great mass of men are made by nature to be slaves, they are unfit to control themselves, and for their own good need masters.

—W. Somerset Maugham, 1939

Nor should we listen to those who say, ‘The voice of the people is the voice of God’, for the turbulence of the mob is always close to insanity.

—Alcuin, 800 AD

Mankind, when left to themselves, are unfit for their own government.

—George Washington, 1786⁸

The proposition, that [the people] are the best keepers of their own liberties is not true. They are the worst conceivable; they are no keepers at all. They can neither judge, act, think, or will, as a [political body].

—John Adams, 1787⁹

⁷This famous line is actually a shorter paraphrase of an earlier (circa 1770) aphorism by William Pitt. In turn, it was repeatedly twisted later, including the notorious maxim “Absolute liberality corrupts absolutely” by Gertrude Himmelfarb. (See also the next three quotes).

⁸I still remember my shock at first reading this statement—by *this* author.

⁹One more quote in the same spirit—from another Founding Father of the United States – also from his private correspondence of course.

The masses [...] neither should nor can direct their personal existence, and still less to rule society in general.

—*José Ortega y Gasset*, 1930

The ignorant classes are the dangerous classes. Ignorance is the womb of monsters.

—*Henry Ward Beecher*, 1867

In the past, civilizations have been created and directed by a small intellectual aristocracy, never by the crowd.

—*Gustave Le Bon*, 1895

There are no wise few. Every aristocracy that has ever existed has behaved, in all essential points, exactly like a small mob.

—*G. K. Chesterton*, 1905

The intellectual elite is the most heavily indoctrinated sector, for good reasons. It's their role as a secular priesthood to really believe the nonsense that they put forth.

—*Noam Chomsky*, 1987

Plutocracy is abhorrent to a republic; it is more despotic than monarchy, more heartless than aristocracy, more selfish than bureaucracy.

—*William Jennings Bryan*, 1906

The danger is not that a particular class is unfit to govern. Every class is unfit to govern.

—*Lord Acton*, 1881

The best government is a benevolent tyranny tempered by an occasional assassination.

—*Voltaire*¹⁰

The best system of government would be an enlightened monarchy, but it has the unsolved problem of uninterrupted supply of enlightened monarchs.

—*Anonymous*

In the long run every Government is the exact symbol of its People, with their wisdom and unwisdom; we have to say, Like People like Government.

—*Thomas Carlyle*, 1843

Who serves the people, has a bad master.

—*European proverb*

Anyone can hold the helm when the sea is calm.

—*Publilius Syrus*, first century BC

¹⁰As quoted, without a date, by Laurence J. Peter in 1977.

You may proclaim, dear sirs, your fine philosophy,
But till you feed us, right and wrong can wait!

—*Bertolt Brecht*, 1928

The horses fight when the manger is empty.

—*Danish proverb*

[Karl Marx] discovered the simple fact that, hitherto concealed by an overgrowth of ideology, that mankind must first eat and drink, have shelter and clothing, before it can pursue politics, science, religion, art, etc.

—*Friedrich Engels*, 1883

The important thing is the struggle everybody is engaged into get better living conditions, and they are not interested too much in the form of government.

—*Bernard Baruch*, 1964

Few men desire liberty; most wish only for a just master.

—*Sallust*, 1st century BC

When men are well governed, they neither seek nor desire any other liberty.

—*Niccoló Machiavelli*, 1517

Pity the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

—*Don Marquis*¹¹

The century on which we are entering – the century which we will come out of this war – can be and must be the century of the common man.

—*Henry A. Wallace*, 1942

We are in danger of developing a cult of the Common Man, which means a cult of mediocrity.

—*Herbert Hoover*, 1955

A government by the passions of the multitude, or, no less correctly, according to the vices and ambition of their leaders, is a democracy.

—*Fisher Ames*, 1805

What does the democracy come down to? The persuasive power of slogans invented by wily self-seeking politicians.

—*W. Somerset Maugham*, 1939

Democracy is a pathetic belief in the collective wisdom of individual ignorance.

—*H. L. Mencken*, 1926¹²

¹¹This is of course an (undated) twist of a line from the Bible (Matthew 5:5), with the word “pity” replacing the original “blessed”.

¹²*Wikiquotes* states that this is a misattribution, but it is not – a rare error on this great web site.

It has been observed that a pure democracy, if it were practicable, would be the most perfect government. Experience has proved that no position in politics is more false than this.

—*Alexander Hamilton*, 1788

The best argument against democracy is a five-minute conversation with the average voter.

—*Anonymous*¹³

Democracy is the worst system of government. It reduces wisdom to impotence and secures the triumph of folly, ignorance, clap-trap and demagoguery. [...] Yet democracy is the only form of social order that is admissible, because it is the only one consistent with justice.

—*Robert Briffault*, 1930

No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except all the others that have been tried.

—*Winston Churchill*, 1947

In a democracy the majority of citizens is capable of exercising the most cruel oppression upon the minority.

—*Edmund Burke*, 1790

It is bad to be oppressed by a minority, but it is worse to be oppressed by a majority.

—*Lord Acton*, 1877

The love of democracy is that of equality.¹⁴

—*Montesquieu*, 1748

‘All animals are equal, but some are more equal than others.’

—*George Orwell*, 1945

Democratic institutions awaken and foster a passion for equality which they can never satisfy.

—*Alexis de Tocqueville*, 1893

It is not true that equality is a law of nature. Nature has made nothing equal.

—*Luc de Clapiers*, 1746

That all men are equal is a proposition to which, at ordinary times, no sane human being has ever given his assent.

—*Aldous Huxley*, 1927

A society that puts equality ahead of freedom will end up with neither.

—*Milton Friedman*, 1980

¹³Frequently misattributed to Winston Churchill. For his actual quote on this subject, see below.

¹⁴For me, as a scientist trained to discuss only clearly defined notions, it was always amazing to see how some authors lacking such training confuse—whether intentionally or unintentionally—two radically different notions of equality: that of *human rights*, and the equality (or inequality) of *personal benefits*—income, health care, housing—you name it. This confusion allows them to argue ad infinitum, without any risk of reaching an agreement—see the quotes below.

Where freedom is real, equality is the passion of the masses.
Where equality is real, freedom is the passion of a small minority.

—*Eric Hoffer*, 1951

Conservative, *n.* A statesman enamored of existing evils, as distinguished from a Liberal, who wants to replace them with others.

—*Ambrose Bierce*, 1906

Counterpart to the knee-jerk liberal is a knee-pad conservative.

—*Edward Abbey*, 1990

Conservative government is an organized hypocrisy.¹⁵

—*Benjamin Disraeli*, 1845

The world is full of people whose notion of a satisfactory future is, in fact, a return to the idealized past.

—*Robertson Davies*, 1960

In every age ‘the good old days’ were a myth. [...] For every age has consisted of crises that seemed intolerable to the people who lived through them.

—*Brooks Atkinson*, 1951

He that will nor apply new remedies must expect new evils; for the time is the greatest innovator.

—*Francis Bacon*, 1625

A state without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation.

—*Edmund Burke*, 1790

A tradition is kept alive only by something being added to it.

—*Henry James*, 1888

The past is for inspiration, not imitation, for continuation, not repetition.

—*Israel Zangwill*, 1921

Because we don’t think about future generations, they will never forget us.

—*Henrik Tikkanen*¹⁶

What experience and history teach is this – that nations and governments have never learned anything from history.

—*Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel*, 1832¹⁷

¹⁵Could this mean that the liberal government’s hypocrisy is always disorganized?

¹⁶As quoted, without a date, in a few generally reliable sources, starting not later than 2005.

¹⁷This maxim is often misattributed to George Bernard Shaw who actually used it with a reference to Hegel, and also to Aldous Huxley who just paraphrased it.

Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.

—*George Santayana*, 1905¹⁸

The past is never dead. It's not even past.

—*William Faulkner*, 1951

I have seen the future and it doesn't work.

—*Robert Fulford*¹⁹

It would only take one generation of forgetfulness to put us back intellectually several hundred years.

—*Anonymous*²⁰

When a nation goes down, or a society perishes, one condition may always be found. They forgot where they came from. They lost sight of what had brought them along.

—*Carl Sandburg*, 1948

Liberalism has no obvious answers to the biggest problems we face: ecological collapse and technological disruption.

—*Yuval Noah Harari*, 2018

A liberal is a man who is willing to spend somebody else's money.

—*Carter Glass*²¹

A liberal is a person whose interests aren't at stake at the moment.

—*Willis Player*, 1972

Much of the social history of the Western world over the past three decades has involved replacing what worked with what sounded good.

—*Thomas Sowell*, 1993

There's a mighty big difference between good, sound reasons and reasons that sound good.

—*William E. Vaughan*, 1978

Tender surgeons make foul wounds.

—*European proverb*

Nothing emboldens sin so much as mercy.

—*William Shakespeare*, 1606

¹⁸This famous aphorism is actually a succinct paraphrase of earlier, longer lines by Baruch Spinoza and Edmund Burke.

¹⁹This is an evident reverse of the well-known statement made by Lincoln Steffens after his visit to Soviet Russia in 1921, or rather to its later (circa 1933) paraphrase: "I have seen the future and it works".

²⁰This statement is sometimes attributed to certain Dean Tollefson, but I could not find a reliable confirmation of this authorship.

²¹As quoted, without a date, in several reputable collections.

He who spares vice wrongs virtue.

—*European proverb*

Pity for the guilty is treason to the innocent.

—*Ayn Rand, 1969*

Whenever the government assumes to deliver us from the trouble of thinking for ourselves, the only consequence it produces are those of torpor and imbecility.

—*William Godwin, 1793*

The weak members of civilized society propagate their kind. [...] This may be highly injurious to the race of men.

—*Charles Darwin, 1871*

Sympathy thwarts the law of development, of evolution, of the survival of the fittest. It preserves what is ripe for extinction.

—*Friederich Nietzsche, 1888*

The ultimate result of shielding men from the effects of their folly, is to fill the world with fools.

—*Herbert Spencer, 1891*

A nation or civilization that continues to produce soft-minded men purchases its own spiritual death on an installment plan.

—*Martin Luther King Jr., 1963*

One of the serious obstacles to the improvement of our race is indiscriminate charity.

—*Andrew Carnegie, 1889*²²

Charity corrupts both the giver and the taker, and moreover does not reach its goal, because it merely multiplies poverty.

—*Fyodor Dostoevsky, 1880*

Charity is twice cursed – it hardens him that gives and softens him that takes.

—*Bouck White, 1911*

If you give a man a fish he is hungry again in an hour. If you teach him to catch a fish you do him a good turn.²³

—*Anne Isabella Thackeray Ritchie, 1885*

²²He was not some old scrooge, but perhaps the most famous American philanthropist, who also said, “The man who dies thus rich dies disgraced”. The word “indiscriminate” is certainly the key to this apparent contradiction.

²³This is actually a rather liberal translation of an old Chinese proverb; I quote it in this form only because it has served as the basis of numerous later twists. Of them, I especially like the following (anonymous?) wisdom: “If you promise a man somebody else’s fish, he will vote for you”.

The best way of doing good to the poor, is not making them easy in poverty, but leading or driving them out of it.

—*Benjamin Franklin*, 1766

You cannot bring about prosperity by discouraging thrift.
 You cannot strengthen the weak by weakening the strong.
 You cannot help little men by tearing down big men.
 You cannot lift the wage earner by pulling down the wage payer.
 You cannot help the poor by destroying the rich.
 You cannot establish sound security on borrowed money.
 You cannot further the brotherhood of man by inciting class hatred.
 You cannot keep out of trouble by spending more than you earn.
 You cannot build character and courage by taking away men's initiative and independence.
 And you cannot help men permanently by doing for them what they could and should do for themselves.

—*William J. H. Boetcker*, 1916²⁴

The national budget must be balanced. The public debt must be reduced [...] Payments to foreign governments must be reduced, if the nation doesn't want to go bankrupt. People must again learn to work, instead of living on public assistance.

—*Cicero*, 55 BC²⁵

Nothing is so well calculated to produce a death-like torpor in the country as an extended system of taxation and a great national debt.

—*William Cobbett*, 1804

Fundamentally, there are two ways of coordinating the economic activity of millions. One is central direction involving the use of coercion: the technique of the army and the modern totalitarian state. The other is voluntary cooperation of individuals: the technique of the marketplace.

—*Milton Friedman*, 1962

America has believed that in differentiation, not in uniformity, lies the path of progress. It acted on this belief; it has advanced human happiness, and it has prospered.

—*Louis D. Brandeis*, 1915

It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard of their own interest.

—*Adam Smith*, 1776

The worst crime against working people is a company which fails to operate at a profit.

—*Samuel Gompers*²⁶

²⁴These so-called *Ten Cannots* are often misattributed to Abraham Lincoln.

²⁵Note the date; it takes millennia for some wisdoms to sink in ...

²⁶As quoted by Michael Rothschild in 1990.

I like business because it is honestly selfish, thereby avoiding the hypocrisy and sentimentality of the unselfish attitude.

—*William Feather, 1927*

Sentimentality is the emotional promiscuity of those who have no sentiment.

—*Norman Mailer, 1966*

When we divorce capital from labor, capital is hoarded, and labor starves.

—*Daniel Webster, 1838*

Extinguish free enterprise and you extinguish liberty.

—*Margaret Thatcher, 1979*

Capitalism: Nothing so mean could be right.

—*Edward Abbey, 1990*

Good medicine tastes bitter.

—*Chinese proverb*

Capitalism, wisely managed, can probably be made more efficient for attaining economic ends than any alternative system yet in sight, but [...] in itself is extremely objectionable.

—*John Maynard Keynes, 1926*

The inherent vice of Capitalism is the unequal sharing of blessings; the inherent virtue of Socialism is the equal sharing of miseries.

—*Winston Churchill, 1945*

To grasp the true meaning of socialism, imagine a world where everything is designed by the post office, even the sleaze.

—*P. J. O'Rourke, 1989*

Socialism proposes no adequate substitute for the motive of enlightened selfishness that today is the basis of all human labor and effort, enterprise and new activity.

—*William Howard Taft, 1913*

When everybody own something, nobody owns it, and nobody has a direct interest in maintaining or improving its condition.

—*Milton Friedman, 1980*

What is everybody's business is nobody's business.

—*European proverb*

Socialism of any type and shade leads to a total destruction of the human spirit and to a leveling the mankind to death.

—*Alexander Solzhenitsyn, 1978*

Socialism in general has a record of failure so blatant that only an intellectual could ignore or evade it.

—*Thomas Sowell, 1997*

Socialism is Communism in course of construction; it is incomplete Communism.

—*Nikolai Bukharin*, 1919

From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs.

—*Karl Marx*, 1875²⁷

Communism is like prohibition, it's a good idea but it won't work.

—*Will Rogers*, 1927

Communism is the most painful path from capitalism to capitalism.

—*Scott Adams*, 1989²⁸

Our rulers ought to be changed routinely, like diapers, for the same reason.

—*Dick Nolan*, 1966

Most people vote against somebody rather than for somebody.

—*Franklin P. Adams*, 1944

Vote for the man who promises least; he'll be least disappointing.

—*Bernard Baruch*, 1960

Under democracy one party always devotes its chief energies to trying to prove that the other party is unfit to rule - and both commonly succeed.

—*H. L. Mencken*, 1956

No one party can fool all of the people all of the time; that's why we have two parties.

—*Bob Hope*²⁹

Each party is worse than the other. The one that's out always looks the best.

—*Will Rogers*, 1924

The Democrats are the party that says government will make you smarter, taller, richer, and remove crabgrass on your lawn. Republicans are the party that says government doesn't work, and then get elected and prove it.

—*P. J. O'Rourke*, 1991

Party is the madness of many, for the gain of a few.

—*Alexander Pope*, 1714

I am a lover of liberty. I will not and cannot serve a party.

—*Erasmus*, 1523

²⁷This famous "sound-good" principle, based on earlier formulas by Henri de Saint-Simon (circa 1822) and Louis Blanc (circa 1841), was accepted by most communists as their final goal.

²⁸Note the date.

²⁹He was a comedian, and perhaps thought this observation was just a joke. (Sorry I could not establish its date).

Thanks to TV [...], you can only be one of two kinds of human beings, either a liberal or a conservative.

—Kurt Vonnegut, 2004³⁰

People are so conditioned to take sides that a balanced analysis looks to them like hatred.

—Scott Adams, 2005

In politics [...] a community of hatred is almost always the foundation of friendship.

—Alexis de Tocqueville, 1893

There is no stronger bond of friendship than a common enemy.

—Frank Frankfort Moore, 1907

Love, friendship, respect do not unite people as much as a common hatred for something.

—Anton Chekhov, 1921

We hate some persons because we do not know them; and we will not know them because we hate them.

—Charles Caleb Colton, 1825

Listening to both sides of a story will convince you that there is more to a story than both sides.

—Frank Tyger, 1975

The middle of the road is all of the usable surface. The extremes, right and left, are in the gutters.

—Dwight Eisenhower, 1949

We know what happens to people who stay in the middle of the road. They get run over.

—Aneurin Bevan, 1953³¹

Between two stools one cannot sit, and falls to the ground.

—John Gower, 1390

There is no larger mistake than to try to leap an abyss in two jumps.

—David Lloyd George, 1933

United we stand, divided we fall.

—Aesop³²

There are two kinds of fools: one says, ‘This is old, therefore it is good’; the other says, ‘This is new, therefore it is better’.

—Dean Inge, 1931

³⁰Note the date. Nowadays, thanks to the Internet, you can only be (in the C. Northcote Parkinson’s terminology) either an *in-law* or an *outlaw*.

³¹Possibly based on an earlier joke by Will Rogers.

³²Somebody has noticed that at the current political polarization, this famous old statement seems instrumental only in bra advertisements.

God, give us grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, courage to change the things which should be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other.

—*Reinhold Niebuhr*, 1942

State is the kind of organization which, though it does big things badly, does small things badly, too.

—*John Kenneth Galbraith*, 1969

In a bureaucratic system, useless work drives out useful work.

—*Milton Friedman*, 1977

Work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion.

—*C. Northcote Parkinson*, 1955³³

In a hierarchy every employee tends to rise to his level of incompetence. [...] Work is achieved by those employees who have not yet reached [that level].³⁴

—*Laurence J. Peter*, 1969

If the federal government had improved in efficiency as much as the computer has since the 1950s, we'd only need four federal employees and the federal budget would be \$100,000.

—*Newt Gingrich*, 1994³⁵

The only thing that saves us from the bureaucracy is inefficiency. An efficient bureaucracy is the greatest threat to liberty.

—*Eugene McCarthy*, 1979

Whenever you have an efficient government you have a dictatorship.

—*Harry S. Truman*, 1959

Be thankful we're not getting all the government we're paying for.

—*Will Rogers*³⁶

For every action there is an equal and opposite government program.

—*Bob Wells*³⁷

³³This is the punchline of his brilliant book *Parkinson's Law*, which summarizes the author's experience in the British Civil Service, and is perhaps the best description of the basic features of all bureaucracies—including the scientific ones. Indeed, one of his later (circa 1962) twists of the law is: "Successful research attracts the bigger grant which makes further research impossible".

³⁴This is the so-called *Peter Principle*, the main idea of another wonderful, very funny (but also realistic to the point of being scary) book with the same title, which looks at bureaucracies from a different angle than *Parkinson's Law*.

³⁵Cf. the Robert X. Cringley's quote in the *On Science and Technology* section.

³⁶Included, without a date, into the 1997 collection of his quotes.

³⁷As quoted, without a date, by many, starting not later than 1998.

Governments never learn.

—*Milton Friedman*, 1980

There 's no trick to being a humorist when you have the whole government working for you.

—*Will Rogers*³⁸

Government expands to absorb revenue - and then some.³⁹

—*Tom Wicker*, 1964

It is easy to be generous with another man's purse.

—*European proverb*

The first lesson of economics is scarcity: there is never enough of anything to fully satisfy all those who want it. The first lesson of politics is to disregard the first lesson of economics.

—*Thomas Sowell*, 1993

Nothing is easier than spending public money. It does not appear to belong to anybody. The temptation is overwhelming to bestow it on somebody.

—*Calvin Coolidge*, 1927

The principle of spending money to be paid by posterity, under the name of funding, is but swindling futurity on a large scale.

—*Thomas Jefferson*, 1816

There is no such thing as a free lunch.

—*Anonymous*⁴⁰

The state [...] can give nothing which it does not take from somebody.

—*William Graham Sumner*, 1883

The art of government consists of taking as much money as possible from one class of the citizens to give to the other.

—*Voltaire*, 1764

A government that robs Peter to pay Paul can always depend on the support of Paul.

—*George Bernard Shaw*, 1944⁴¹

One man's wage rise is another man's price increase.

—*Harold Wilson*, 1997

³⁸As quoted, without a date, in several collections, starting not later than 1977.

³⁹The so-called *Wicker's Law*—a natural extension of *Parkinson's Law*.

⁴⁰Frequently misattributed to either Milton Friedman or Robert Heinlein; seems to first appear in press, in an unsigned newspaper piece, in 1938.

⁴¹Apparently rooted in a European proverb, "To strip Peter to clothe Paul".

The horse that draws best is most whipped.

—*European proverb*

Injurious is the gift that takes away freedom.

—*Italian proverb*

I fear the Danaans even when they bring gifts.⁴²

—*Virgil, ~20 BC*

A government big enough to give you everything you want is a government big enough to take away everything you have.

—*Gerald Ford, 1974*

A claim for equality of material position can be met only by a government with totalitarian powers.

—*Friedrich Hayek, 1976*

Property must be secured, or liberty cannot exist.

—*John Adams, 1790*

Givers have to set limits because takers rarely do.

—*Irma Kurtz, 2003*

The government consists of a gang of men exactly like you and me. They have [...] no special talent for the business of government; they have only a talent for getting and holding office.

—*H. L. Mencken, 1936*

Let the people think they govern, and they will be governed.

—*William Penn, 1682*

If you can't convince 'em, confuse 'em.

—*Harry S. Truman, 1948*⁴³

Every government is run by liars. Nothing they say should be believed.

—*I. F. Stone, 1974*

Believe nothing until it has been officially denied.

—*Claud Cockburn, 1956*

Since a politician never believes what he says, he is quite surprised to be taken at his word.

—*Charles De Gaulle, 1962*

⁴²About the infamous *Trojan horse*, with the “Danaans” (Lat. *Danaos*) meaning the Greek invaders of the ancient Troy.

⁴³Quoted in his address to farmers as “an old political trick”.

It would be desirable if every Government, when it comes to power, should have its old speeches burnt.

—*Philip Snowden*, 1929

After eight years in Washington, I longed for the realism and sincerity of Hollywood.

—*Fred Thompson*, 2007⁴⁴

The mystery of government is not how Washington works but how to make it stop.

—*P. J. O'Rourke*, 1991

Washington is a city of Southern efficiency and Northern charm.

—*Anonymous*⁴⁵

Talk is cheap – except when Congress does it.

—*Cullen Hightower*⁴⁶

No man's life, liberty or property are safe while the legislature is in session.

—*Gideon J. Tucker*, 1866

The more laws and orders are made prominent, the more thieves and robbers.

—*Lǎozǐ*, ~4th century BC

The more numerous the laws, the more corrupt the government.

—*Tacitus*, 117 AD

A state is much better governed when has only a few laws, which are strictly observed.

—*René Descartes*, 1628

Why keep on enacting laws when we already have more than we can break?

—*Anonymous*

We have the best politicians that money can buy.

—*Edward Abbey*, 1990

The louder he talked of his honor, the faster we counted our spoons.

—*Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 1860⁴⁷

⁴⁴He was an actor—and a US Senator.

⁴⁵Frequently misattributed to John F. Kennedy, who only quoted it (in a 1961 speech) as a known joke.

⁴⁶As quoted, without a date, in several reputable collections, starting not later than 1992.

⁴⁷Apparently rooted in a much earlier (and much longer) remark by Samuel Johnson on a similar topic.

An honest politician is one who, when he is bought, will stay bought.

—Anonymous⁴⁸

Politics is supposed to be the second oldest profession. I have come to realize that it bears a very close resemblance to the first.

—Ronald Reagan, 1977

Politics is perhaps the only profession for which no preparation is thought necessary.

—Robert Louis Stevenson, 1882

Politics is the art of the possible.

—Otto Von Bismarck, 1867

Politics is *not* the art of the possible. It consists in choosing between the disastrous and the unpalatable.

—John Kenneth Galbraith, 1962

Politics: a Trojan horse race.

—Stanisław Jerzy Lec, 1957

Politics is the skilled use of blunt objects.

—Lester B. Pearson, 1982

Politics is the art of looking for trouble, finding it whether it exists or not, diagnosing it incorrectly, and applying the wrong remedy.

—Ernest Benn, 1930

Practical politics consists in ignoring facts.

—Henry Adams, 1907

Politics is made up largely of irrelevancies.

—Dalton Camp, 2001

Politics is the art of preventing people from taking part in affairs which properly concern them.

—Paul Valéry, 1943

Politics and the fate of mankind are formed by men without ideals and without greatness. Those who have greatness within them do not go in for politics.

—Albert Camus, 1962

Political language [...] is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind.

—George Orwell, 1950

When a politician, on a subject implicating science says, ‘the debate is over’, you may be sure of two things: the debate is raging, and he is losing it.

⁴⁸Frequently misattributed to American politician Simon Cameron (1799-1899).

—George Will, 2014

A good politician, under democracy, is quite as unthinkable as an honest burglar.

—H. L. Mencken, 1924

Ninety percent of the politicians give the other ten percent a bad reputation.

—Henry Kissinger, 1984

In politics you must always keep running with the pack. The moment that you falter and they sense that you are injured, the rest will turn on you like wolves.⁴⁹

—R. A. Butler, 1989

Being in politics is like being a football coach. You have to be smart enough to understand the game, and dumb enough to think it's important.⁵⁰

—Eugene McCarthy, 1967

Whoever could make two ears of corn or two blades of grass, to grow upon a spot of ground where only one grew before would deserve better of mankind and do more essential service to this country than the whole race of politicians put together.

—Jonathan Swift, 1726

The word 'politics' is derived from the word 'poly', meaning 'many', and the word 'ticks', meaning 'blood-sucking parasites'.

—Anonymous⁵¹

Too bad the only people who know how to run the country are busy driving cabs and cutting hair.

—George Burns, 1979

⁴⁹I believe that, very unfortunately, this statement remains valid well beyond politics, covering even some scientists.

⁵⁰Again, I believe the same may be said about many other human activities, including fashion, entertainment, and even some fields of science.

⁵¹This wonderful joke is widely attributed to some Larry Hardiman, but I could not confirm this authorship, and even identify this person.