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# Ethics in politics : why it matters more than ever and how it can make a difference : a declaration

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# Ethics in Politics

## Why it matters more than ever and how it can make a difference

## A Declaration

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## A Declaration

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This declaration was developed by the Globethics.net online workgroup "Ethics in Politics", especially by Ambassador Dr. Benoit Girardin, Switzerland, with Ambassador Prof. Osvaldo Agatiello, Argentina, and Prof. Sangeeta Sharma, India.

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# ETHICS IN POLITICS

## Challenges

1 Lessons need to be drawn from the recent past. Decades of economic and political crises, scandalous behaviour, voices ignored and unheard, suffering and war have destroyed decent ways of governing in many parts of the world. In some but not all cases, subsequent developments have built fruitfully upon constructive dialogue, international economic, cultural and interreligious cooperation and joint political efforts to overcome crises and bring about genuine reconciliation.

2 **The current challenges** of a globalised, closely interdependent and polycentric world and their bearing upon future generations, together with the opportunities offered by grassroots governance, require political leadership imbued with vision and responsibility, careful of global goods, and responsive to such challenges as climate change, the encounter of cultures, global migration, economic and financial crises, organised crime, and international terrorism.

3 We need **a change of paradigm** in the way politics is shaped and realised by both politicians and citizens.

4 **Politics is about struggling for power**, trade-offs and compromises between individual, local, national, regional and international interests. Thus, it is widely felt that politics is unavoidably evil, but this is not necessarily true. To be sure, an idealistic politics may prove deceitful, but ethics in politics may start with modest steps, even in difficult situations.

5 **Ethics in politics** requires the commitment not only of the executive branch of government but also of parliamentarians, judges, and civil servants, companies, banks and corporations, and civil society at large.

## Principles on Using Power

6 Politics can evolve in a virtuous way once political actors adopt three basic principles:

- **Power should be limited** by institutions and procedures, the rule of law, power-sharing, devolution and clear terms of service, open and fair competition, and a sense of modesty;
- **Power should be accountable** to the common good, the community and its representatives, establishing the ground for wider acceptance and commitment, securing smooth change and reducing retribution;
- **Power should be effective and efficient**, results-driven, turning assets into benefits for all and containing the corruption that captures common wealth for particular interests.

7 Power exercised in these ways serves sound governance, preventing populism, autocracy and dictatorial rule.

## Cardinal Ethical Values in Politics

8 While freedom and equality before the law are the governing principles of higher forms of political community, it is **justice,** the ethics of **reciprocity**, and the refusal of **arbitrariness** that serve as the cornerstone of civilised life and promote the **common good**.

9 **Human dignity** requires **unalienable respect,** in particular by avoiding any kind of cruelty and arbitrariness. Contextual values may vary, but the ethic common to all human beings should govern political actors, political activity and political processes.

10 Those exercising political or administrative functions must accept **full ethical responsibility for their decisions, actions and omissions** – towards their own constituency in the first place, but also towards neighbouring and future constituencies.

11 **Politics for the common good** must serve more than short-term, myopic interests and power positioning.

12 **Equal access** to resources, information and influence and **sound governance** are rights due to all human beings, regardless of their citizenship, cultural background, stage of development, religious affiliation or socioeconomic position.

13 **Governance** is enhanced by institutions that control and limit power in its various forms, encouraging pluralism of opinion, political competition and citizen participation.

14 In meeting the challenges of a globalised, interdependent world, **six ethical values in politics** are **cardinal**:

- **Identity with diversity**: combining national sovereignty, pride, and independence with diversity of cultures and backgrounds, avoiding the traps of ethnic purity and populism.
- **Peace and security**: maintaining a state monopoly on violence and managing conflicts through the regulated use of force, fostering self-rule, backing a culture of peace, respect, dialogue, reciprocal commitment, and reconciliation.
- **Responsibility and freedom**: focusing on the interaction between freedom and responsibility, promoting initiative and risk-taking, acknowledging human rights, being committed to open reporting.
- **Equity**: abiding by the rule of law, promoting equal access to resources, information and influence, tackling any tendency towards privilege or discrimination.
- **Solidarity**: developing fair mechanisms of cooperation with impoverished regions and underprivileged minorities or social groups, without paternalism or creating lasting dependency.

- **Sustainability**: securing an effective respect towards the earth and the future by refraining from overexploiting natural resources, limiting environmental damage and fining polluters, managing public goods prudently, and looking for reasonable trade-offs between immediate, long-term and earth-wide interests.

15 The six values in this **ethical hexagon** are interconnected and interdependent. All six need minimal realisation if every country is to play its part on the world scene and contribute as a partner to global progress. If instead global politics serves particular interests, defends privilege, or succumbs to self-delusion, policies and actions in the long run are bound to fail.

## Fair Political Processes

16 **The political process** has to harvest inputs and commitments from diverse stakeholders before setting the direction.

17 It should avoid over-legislating and overcomplicated systems where no one knows who is responsible for what.

18 It should prefer simple systems of incentives and breaks; and governments should be able to acknowledge some degree of uncertainty.

19 Where shared values are first sought as common ground, political negotiations, at domestic, international or global levels, have better chances of success.

20 Introducing ethical analysis discreetly into the discussion of government rulings, laws and regulations, highlighting the processes involved, and evaluating them regularly can elevate the quality, legitimacy and accountability of public policymaking and improve its effectiveness.

21 We call on all responsible decision-makers and citizens to use ethics to nurture and enhance politics.




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