

KATRIEN VAN DEN BROECK

CONFRONTING
THE 10¹ TRAPS
OF POWER
A SURVIVAL GUIDE
FOR WOMEN
(AND MEN)
IN POLITICS





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*With this book, I hope to help women to survive in politics
and dodge the most deadly traps of power gracefully.*

Katrien Van den broeck

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Preface: Why me? Why now?

It's 2 December 2018, and I'm at the first-ever Global Citizen charity concert in Johannesburg, South Africa, featuring Beyoncé, Jay-Z, Pharrell Williams, Chris Martin, Trevor Noah, Oprah Winfrey ... and my boss, Belgian Minister of Development Aid Alexander De Croo. I'm standing in front of the stage with my phone, hands shaking. 100,000 people are listening to De Croo, who gives a speech on women's rights as co-founder of SheDecides and author of *The Age of Women*. He asks the crowds to shout "She is equal." "She is ..." he goes, and 100,000 people shout back "EQUAL" five times in total. My arm is aching but I can't stop filming. Belgium is watching. The next day, the newspapers write that Alexander De Croo made a rock star-like plea for women's rights. Mission accomplished.

Fast forward to 2022. I'm still working for Alexander De Croo, who is now the Prime Minister. I have made his mission for more gender equality mine. On the weekends, I train women at the Alliance of Her Academy to pursue their political ambitions. I teach them everything I learned in 15 years of national and European politics. Although the Belgian government is the first gender-equal government with as many women as men, "She" turned out to be unequal. By December 2022, two of the women in the Belgian government had to resign, pushed towards the exit unapologetically. Four women in total left the Belgian government. The fate of two female ministers hung by a thread. Only

Women who left the Belgian government in years 2020–2023



one woman, Sophie Wilmès, left on her own terms, to take care of her ill husband.

Although clearly in positions of power, the women in our government were, or at least felt, undermined, interrupted, and questioned, left out of decisions and kept in the dark. I heard a lot of frustration and disappointment as I knew some of the ministers personally. From where I was sitting, I kept on hearing negative assessments, mostly made by men: “she is not smart enough,” “she doesn’t get it,” “she is not up for the task,” “she shouldn’t be doing politics“ ... It made me struggle with my mission at the Alliance of Her. It’s great we get women into power, but what if they are not surviving? Isn’t every woman who resigns or gets sacked proof that politics is a man’s world? I’m wondering how to share what I have learned about the flip side of politics with the participants of the Alliance of Her. What started as a wild idea turns into a full-blown workshop on the 10 traps of power. In this training, the premise “A wise man is worth two!” is turned into “A woman who has been warned, gets organized!” to steer the participating women clear

from falling into the evident traps of power. The scope of the Alliance of Her mission grows: we want women to lead, succeed, and thrive, but also survive in politics.

The workshop and therefore this book on the 10 traps of power is based on my experience and work in politics. I started in the European Parliament in 2006, as a parliamentary assistant to Johan Van Hecke, and continued in 2009 in Guy Verhofstadt's cabinet. Both Johan and Guy had long careers in national politics, both as party president, the latter also as Prime Minister. I left the European Parliament in 2016 to start my own company in communication and digital marketing, but politics lured me back in, and for the last six years I have been working for Alexander De Croo. This book is not an academic work. It's a practical guide highlighting 10 traps, red flags so you can see them coming, and many ways to save yourself once you have fallen into the trap. There are action items at the end of each chapter to check if action is necessary. The last chapter on power psychosis is shorter when it comes to solutions and has no action box, because once you reach that stage, there are few other ways out but to go and do something else with your life. It's possible chapters in this book generate resistance. You might object or disagree. If this is the case, please continue reading and endure the discomfort for a bit. It might be a sign you are stepping into a trap and you are not willing to admit it. The precondition for benefitting from this survival guide is an open mindset and a sense of ownership. Playing the victim or blaming others or the system is not the answer if you want to be in control of your own political faith.

Introduction

Don't pretend to have an academic background in neuroscience, but it's stating the obvious that gaining a position of power means entering a minefield. It will change you, from becoming less approachable or likable, to becoming a proper criminal. At the same time, it will change the way people treat you. For some you become an idol, for others a threat. It will cloud your judgment, make you self-centered, and bring out the worst in you. One starts to wonder if there is a way power can be good?

For those who study status, influence, and other sources of hierarchical differences, it is clear power alters your psychological and behavioral tendencies fundamentally. It increases your abstraction in thought and behavior, both of which make you more focused on your own goals and internal state.¹ You could even follow what's happening in your brain live on an fMRI in the exciting new science of neuropolitics.²

To maintain the high levels of dopamine you get when you hear crowds cheering for you, or when you succeed in getting a groundbreaking bill passed, you might become blindly ambitious, looking for the

- 1 Pamela K. Smith and Adam D. Galinsky, "The Nonconscious Nature of Power: Cues and Consequences," *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 4(10) (October 2010), 918–938.
- 2 Matt Qvortrup, *The Political Brain: The Emergence of Neuropolitics* (CEU Press Perspectives, 2024).

next hit, like a cocaine addict. On this quest, you start overlooking the emotions, reactions, and interests of others. The focus on yourself and the feeling of winning can lead to failing to notice what is happening around you. People in positions of power also tend to adopt a domineering and controlling conflict-resolution style and often lose the capacity to respond in other ways. Research has shown that power holders easily fall into domination, monopolizing speaking time and speaking out of turn. In negotiations, they tend to adopt one of two strategies—“take it or leave it” or “take it or suffer”—and they fail to be flexible. Power also clouds your judgment and makes you prone to highly biased or inaccurate reading of situations, often in your favor.³

It gets worse. In a series of studies conducted at the University of California Berkeley,⁴ powerful people were found to be more inclined to violate rules, break the law, lie during negotiations, and endorse unethical behavior. Is this exaggerated? Think about this: at the start of 2024, one in four Members of the European Parliament was implicated in judicial cases or scandals, meaning 25 percent of incumbent MEPs have been accused of breaches of the law and misconduct, including corruption, embezzlement, and harassment.⁵

I never had real power, in the sense of a political mandate, but I recall vividly that when I stopped managing the office of the president of the Liberal group in the European Parliament, I was told by friends and colleagues they didn't like me when I was doing that job. They were relieved I didn't hold such a pivotal position anymore. Some said I turned into a complete bitch, while others blamed me for becoming unavailable and overly focused on work. Although my power was limited, I got carried away.

3 Robert Ferguson and Peter T. Coleman, *Making Conflict Work: Harnessing the Power of Disagreement* (Piatkus, 2014).

4 Dacher Keltner, *The Power Paradox: How We Gain and Lose Influence* (Penguin, 2017).

5 Anne Michel and Vincent Nouvet, “One in Four MEPs Is Implicated in Judicial Cases or Scandals,” *Le Monde*, February 2, 2024.

Focus on women

The traps in this book are illustrated with examples from both men and women, from European politics and beyond. I also invited politicians from the Alliance of Her network to share their experiences and thoughts on these traps. The intent is not to prove that women are the ones making mistakes most often, or that they are not cut out for politics. On the contrary, both men and women are falling into the traps. There are two reasons why it's interesting to let these women speak. The first is to give female politicians the role models they are desperately looking for. Political science and reporting tend to be very focused on men. Ask Google to give you a picture of a politician, and the first results will be men. The second reason is that women tend to be much more self-reflexive, more aware of their behavior and able to recognize their responsibility. They are okay with admitting mistakes—often a bit too much. That makes their testimonials useful for understanding why politicians fall into these traps. And, on a more positive note, it is useful to shine a light on the measures they took to prevent falling deeper into the trap, or what they did to reverse things. None of the examples are meant to finger-point, name, or shame anyone. The coping mechanisms one develops in power may not be the right ones, but they are human.

Politics is hard, for men and especially for women. Women don't hold the same status as men in positions of power. They are still the odd birds at the table. Looking for women in the pictures of political leadership gatherings in Europe is like looking for Wally.⁶ According to the World Economic Forum, the political gender gap will take another 169 years to close at the current pace.⁷ Is it because women are bad at politics? On the contrary, the London School of Economics estimated Swedish lawmakers, both men and women, performed better after the

6 This is a reference to "Where's Wally," a British series of children's puzzle books created by English illustrator Martin Handford. Readers are challenged to find a character named Wally (or Waldo) and his friends hidden throughout the pages.

7 World Economic Forum, "Global Gender Gap Report 2024," 11 June 2024, <https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-gender-gap-report-2024/digest/>.

introduction of quotas as women made greater efforts and inspired some of the mediocre men to do the same.⁸ Is it because women are not tough enough for politics? In the last few years, we have seen several women leave politics, including Sigrid Kaag, Nicola Sturgeon, and Yacinda Ardern. All of them testified to the hardship of politics and the incessant attacks against them as women, both physical and mental. How tough do women have to be, really? British MP Jo Cox was shot dead in the street in Britain in 2016, Sweden's Foreign Minister Anna Lindh was stabbed while shopping in Stockholm in 2003, and Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen was attacked by a man in the center of Copenhagen this year.

When looking for answers, I came across two things that make it harder for women to thrive and survive in politics. The first thing is of course gender bias—the fact that most men, and most women, dislike women in power. If you think I'm exaggerating, I recommend M. A. Sieghart's book *The Authority Gap*. This is a realistic but gloomy analysis, supported by scientific research, on why a woman in a leadership position is still considered less of an expert, less of a leader, and less of a source of influence than a man in the same role.⁹ Even once in power, the bias against women in leading positions is alive and kicking and makes the job harder. Women aren't starting from 0, they are starting from -5.

The gap in female presence and therefore status has another consequence: it sets the bar higher. A large study conducted by researchers at Georgia State University comparing female and male leaders in 18 Latin American and East Asian democracies found that on average female leaders come into office with less support than male leaders and their support also erodes more quickly. The paper's lead author, Ryan E. Carlin, found that female presidents proved to be less popular and were judged more harshly than their male counterparts.¹⁰ This must be related to the status of women in politics. According to Professor

⁸ "Gender Quotas and the Crisis of the Mediocre Man," London School of Economics blog, 2017, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2017/04/05/gender-quotas-and-the-crisis-of-the-mediocre-man/>.

⁹ Mary Ann Sieghart, *The Authority Gap: Why Women Are Still Taken Less Seriously than Men, and What We Can Do About It* (Doubleday, 2021).

¹⁰ Ryan E. Carlin, Miguel Carreras, and Gregory J. Love, "Presidents' Sex and Popularity: Baselines, Dynamics and Policy Performance," *British Journal of Political Science* 50(4) (2019).

Adam Galinsky, status corresponds with different ranges of acceptable behavior. If you have a high status in an environment, you can get away with a lot. If you have a lower status, that range diminishes. Women still don't hold the same status as men in politics, nor do politicians of a migrant background or different skin color. If I may to exaggerate to make my point: While a male politician can break the rules and continue his political career with a simple apology, a female politician will be dragged through the mud for weeks and disqualified as never to be trusted by the public again. Women have small margins of error and must follow a perfect trajectory when in power. If not, they will be torn apart by the media and their opponents.

Some of the traps of power also have a gender aspect. The traps are linked to how men and women interact, what society expects of both genders, how boys and girls are raised, and so forth. Why did I not dig deeper and formulate answers on how to tackle these underlying mechanisms and biases that generate inequality? The answer is pragmatism. Bias and stereotypes, cultural presets, and educational systems are beyond this book's influence. Fighting them has already taken feminists and activists decades, if not centuries, but change is hard. What we can change are our own individual behaviors and attitudes.¹¹ That's why the book focuses on what aspiring politicians can do to survive in politics, to take control of their own careers, and to recognize the traps of power and act accordingly. Because only in power can they change the underlying mechanics of inequality. Only by surviving can they be part of the systemic change and become the role models we need to fight stereotypes and gender bias on a structural level.

Safety first

Few people pay attention to the flight attendant when he or she goes through the safety instructions prior to take-off, instead trusting that

¹¹ Sally Helgesen and Marshall Goldsmith, *How Women Rise: Break the 12 Habits Holding You Back from Your Next Raise, Promotion, or Job* (Hachette Books, 2018).

guidance will be given if and when it is needed during the flight. In politics, there are no flight attendants and no safety instructions. There is no guarantee that someone will guide you to safety or help you when things get tough. On the contrary, when the road gets bumpy, people will be happy to give you that extra push down into the abyss. Because positions of power are limited, your exit is someone else's entree and way to glory. Looking at others might also do you more harm than good, because let's face it, many politicians seem to have given up on being decent and honorable citizens a while ago. The living proof is the 2024 Republican candidate for president of the United States of America, who is facing a wide variety of felony counts, some of which could potentially lead to a prison sentence.

When embarking on a political journey, it therefore makes sense to check the safety instructions, that is, listen carefully to the stories of those who preceded you. It's worth learning from the pitfalls of others not to repeat them. There are of course more than 10 traps, but these are the most evident ones. If you open a newspaper's political section, you will find examples of each one of them. These 10 traps are a good starting point for those who seek to (lead, succeed, thrive, and) survive in politics. Being fully aware of the pitfalls can help aspiring politicians to either stay "safe" during the flight or find the exit when necessary.

For each trap discussed in this book, there is a list of red flags. You can consider them early warnings—signs you are heading the wrong way. At the end of each chapter, you will find practical ways to avoid the traps or, when it's too late, how to take back control of your political destiny. They ought to be lifesavers, because each of these 10 power traps could be the reason your political career comes to an end. Your career may not end abruptly, in a dramatic sudden death situation,¹² but the 10 traps could be the reason you are slowly losing your political capital.

So, make sure your seatbelt is fastened for the ride.

¹² Sudden death is not to be taken literally. It refers to your political career ending abruptly, or your position of power suddenly being taken away.

**FIRST BASKET
OF POWER TRAPS**

PEOPLE

Abraham Lincoln delivering his famous Gettysburg Address in 1863. Granger Collection, NYC



When Abraham Lincoln, on the afternoon of November 19, 1863, wanted to honor the soldiers who sacrificed their lives to defeat the Confederates in the Battle of Gettysburg, he said they died in order “that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.”¹³ Although it seems such a logical thing for politicians to govern for the people, “the people”—those who voted for them, supported them, and allowed them to gain power—are often the first ones politicians seem to forget. Instead of reaching out and returning to “those people,” politicians get distracted by focusing on themselves, “politics as such,” or, in the worst case, their sheer existence in politics. Instead of staying connected, politicians lose touch. Instead of being guided by the people, they go ahead without them, all to the detriment of their political life span.

¹³ US President Abraham Lincoln, The Gettysburg Address (November 19, 1863).

In no way do I want to tap into the dichotomy between the elite and the people. Nowadays, the word “people” is often abused or used to misguide voters. Extreme politicians and populists claim they know what “the people” want, while their opponents, “the elite,” are too distanced from “real people.” In this first basket of traps, the term “people” has to be understood very concretely: they are your friends, your families, your acquaintances, the people who supported you from day one, the people who support you today, your allies, your staff, your campaign team, your party colleagues, your voters, and, to a large extent, the people just like you, women (or men), mothers (or fathers), sisters (or brothers).

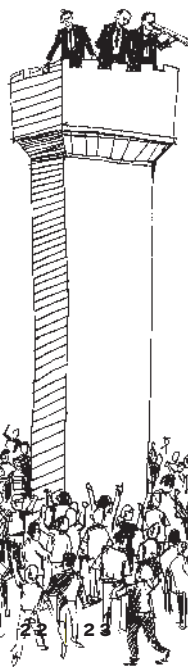
1 Splendid Isolation

TRAP

The ivory tower as a safe space

You often hear that politicians are stuck in their ivory tower. This ivory tower was always a figure of speech. Historically, there has never been such a thing as an ivory tower, not even in biblical times, as ivory was so costly that it was only used for small sacred objects or statues at best.¹⁴

The irony of this expression is that government buildings often are physical towers. Think about the Berlaymont building in Brussels that houses the European Commission, or the European Parliament in Strasbourg. These are tall buildings that are impossible to enter if you don't have the right badge or haven't gone through a strict security check. Having worked in those "ivory



Ivory Tower,
by Eva Strauss

¹⁴ Steven Shapin, "The Ivory Tower: The History of a Figure of Speech and Its Cultural Uses," *British Journal for the History of Science* 45(1) (March 2012), 1–27, https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/shapin/files/shapin_ivory_tower_bjhs.pdf.

towers“ for more than a decade, it’s not hard to understand why politicians like it there. It’s quite cozy, clean, and safe, with a proper restaurant and all the facilities you need from a gym to an ATM. Because of all the busyness and adrenaline in there, you feel like it’s a place “where it happens,” as opposed to the outside world, among “the people.” The red carpets, the polite staff dressed like penguins, and the 24/7 media attention make the inhabitants of these towers feel very important. And the outsiders ... well, they don’t understand.

When I started working for Guy Verhofstadt in the European Parliament, after he was Prime Minister for almost 10 years, I was shocked by how he shied away from people. After a while, I understood. As soon as you become a politician, you become public property. Everyone feels they have the right to speak to you and ask you something. My favorite request: “I voted for you last election, can you have a look at my son’s cv and give him a job?” It’s rather human that when people address you all day, at the most uneasy moments, with the most indecent questions, you start to shy away from human interaction. It then becomes preferable to eat in the restaurant of the Parliament rather than cross the street and run the chance of being stopped by a random pedestrian/voter. As Alliance of Her alumna Anneli Akkermann (EE), former Minister of Finance and now MP, confirms: “You get the feeling everyone wants something from you. And that’s quite tiring.”

On top of that, people can be quite rude. When you start out in politics, people tend to be nice. You are a fresh face, maybe the change they were longing for. But if you have been in power for a while and you have had to make a couple of controversial decisions, conversations can become uncivil. Not only do you have less time to knock on people’s doors as a politician, you might also lack the courage. Reading criticism on X or in the media is one thing; having people complaining and lamenting to you in person is something else. And let’s not forget, we have seen some violence against politicians lately, for example in Germany, Slovakia, and Denmark. So, there are plenty of reasons to hide within your tower.

When I commute to Brussels, I often see politicians on the train hiding, tucked away in their shawls, trying not to be noticed or disturbed. I always find that odd, because you could win over a couple of voters

by starting a conversation right there and then. At the same time, it's human. I love my me time on the train as well. On top of that, not all politicians are extraverts and keen to talk to anyone anytime. For some, socializing is second nature, but for others it's a major challenge. MEP and Alliance of Her alumna Svenja Hahn (DE) confessed in our class that she felt uneasy going to the supermarket, as she couldn't get to the cashiers without being asked loads of things by people she had never met. Being a public figure also means people could be taking pictures and putting them online, so that a photo of you in the supermarket in your pajamas goes viral in no time. That feeling of being hunted may make you want to even outsource buying bread. Ironically, politicians' self-isolation is often in sharp contrast with their image and branding. Politicians and PR specialists love pictures taken in large crowds because it shows that politicians care and are close to the public.

Facebook
Emmanuel Macron



Shaking hands, reaching out, blowing kisses, especially among lower-ranking civil servants or children—these events are often staged, especially since the level of security and protocol required for these VIPs doesn't allow for spontaneous encounters of this kind.

Better hit that (online) market place

Even though I understand the ivory tower is a safe space, the hiding in politics can become problematic. Pulling back and shying away from people or voters can become your first trap, especially at a time when populists are actively using this frame of the “elite” being too distant.

Why is isolation problematic? Isn't it a way to focus and not be distracted by noise? Isn't politics a 24/7 job already? When are you supposed to meet all these people? First, you need to bear in mind politics is a world on its own. If you don't escape that world often enough, you will start to live in that world more than in the real world. You will start to believe everything you do matters more than anything else, and that every citizen knows what's going on in politics and is highly convinced, just like you, that it's the most important thing in the world. The sad reality is, of course, that not everyone follows politics. Politics is something people complain about, get angry or worked up about, but often only in times of elections or big scandals. For most people, politics is remote. Sitting comfortably behind the walls of political towers might make politicians forget that grim reality. It's also the first thing you realize when you step out of the political bubble. Life goes on. Politics doesn't affect people's lives all that much. People prefer to read the sports news or human-interest section, instead of reading about the latest bill passed in the regional parliament. That's why getting out of the office, speaking to people outside politics, is essential for politicians to stay sane, mentally sharp, and grounded in the real world.

But it's not only for you. It's for the people—those who put their fate and trust in you. For them, accessibility is key. If there is no way for voters or fans to reach out to you, to ask you questions, to get in touch, you become a stranger, or worse a ghost—someone far away who cannot

possibly be looking out for their interests. For a politician who wants to thrive and survive in politics, you must have that genuine desire to stay close to people, to meet your constituents and your voters. After all, they gave you the power to change their lives, not yours. They will determine the next election results. Their feelings will turn up in voter confidence polls. There is a Dutch saying: “Trust arrives on foot and leaves on horseback.” Trust comes slowly but is easily lost. As soon as you are perceived to be one of those politicians who only come around at election time, you will lose their trust and probably their vote to someone else who puts in the work.

Social media may seem like a way for politicians to remain close to their voters while staying safe in their towers. Via live chats and Q&As, direct messages and live stories, voters feel they can almost touch you. I’m the first to advocate heavy social media usage as a politician, but it has its limits, because you need to invest a lot of time and money to make it work and one shouldn’t overestimate the weight of “a like.” Meeting someone in real life will always have a more lasting effect than meeting someone online. There are plenty of politicians with millions of followers and a good number of likes who don’t win elections or don’t get re-elected.

What about women?

Women often make the mistake of overrating expertise.¹⁵ No woman wants to be referred to as “the dumb one.” That’s why women often hide in their office for the first few months of their mandate “to study.” If I had 100 euros for each female minister who has said she will study her portfolio thoroughly at the beginning of her mandate, I could treat myself to a nice trip to the Bahamas. The truth is that this study period deprives her of the most important opportunity in her first months in office: cozying up with stakeholders, spending time forging a team, tying experts to her, and reporting back her to voters. Your outreach

¹⁵ Helgesen and Goldsmith, *How Women Rise*.

in the first six months is crucial. Of course, it would be detrimental for a Defense Minister not to know anything about the state of the national army or the issues at stake at the start of the mandate, but power is more than expertise. It's also about your authority, charisma, and ability to make decisions based on the recommendations of experts. So, if you have just been appointed Minister of Environment and you planned to empty your agenda for five weeks to study EU legislation, please reconsider and invite experts, activists, your local representatives, and even opponents to discuss the most urgent national priorities instead. Listening is pixy dust in politics.



Red flags

- **Missing your loved ones.** Your friends and family are your biggest asset in life, but also in your political survival. Why? Because they usually don't live in the political bubble and they can tell you to let go, to breathe occasionally, and to calm down. They will allow you to see things in a different and less political way. Many politicians admit their family prevents them from becoming too big for their own boots. As Alexander De Croo said, “my wife and children say I have become tough. I hate that, but it's good that they hold up a mirror for me.”¹⁶ It is worth forcing yourself to commit time and attention to “normal people,” that is, those not on a political payroll, and to keep ordinary things on the agenda such as family gatherings, dropping your kids at school, or that monthly lunch with your best friends. Your advisers might not like it. They want you to speak to large crowds of business-people instead. But spending time with family and friends is the healthy, non-political contact you need to stay sane and not lose yourself. Unfortunately, you are likely to see much less of your loved ones while in office, as former Belgian Minister Meryame Kitir confessed, after having to resign dramatically from her mandate as Minister of Development Cooperation: “You learn who your real friends are: the ones you neglect

¹⁶ Raf Liekens, “Het politiek jaaroverzicht van Alexander De Croo,” Humo, December 18, 2023

most when you are in politics, are the ones who reappear when you drop out.”¹⁷

- **Avoiding your community** is a second red flag—like driving to the next town to go to the bakery or no longer going to your favorite coffee place. All politics is local, and staying connected with your community is key. If you stop engaging in local habits or events, people may feel alienated and consider you out of touch. Maintaining these ties keeps you grounded and earns strong local support. Remaining “one of them” beats becoming “one of those politicians.” Even small events matter, to reinforce your connection to the community. Don’t let the size of the audience turn you (or your advisors) off. Aoife McCooey, for instance, succeeded as a Monaghan County Councillor by actively engaging with her constituents, helping her stay connected and enabling her to then communicate her policies in a relatable way, as illustrated in the Alliance of Her documentary *She Will be Heard* (2022).
- **Feeling too important to canvass.** It’s true that social media and TV enable you to be on people’s minds every day, but nothing beats a real-life encounter, not only because people will appreciate the effort, but because it’s humbling. People who tell you canvassing is “too American” and “people don’t appreciate that here” don’t know what they are talking about. Once you are in power and on national television every day, it might not feel necessary anymore. But it is. Even Prime Minister Kaja Kallas was running around in her white sneakers canvassing in the national election campaign in 2023, despite her role as the voice of the West against Putin and a rising star in the international media. It is good to remember where you came from, and you will be surprised how meaningful and insightful these conversations can be.
- **Canceling events.** Anyone who has worked for a politician knows canceling engagements is part of the job. There is often a good reason for the

¹⁷ Raf Liekens, “Op de keien van de Wetstraat, HUMO sprak met Meryame Kitir en Eva De Bleeker,” Humo, February 6, 2024.

cancellation—parliamentary debates taking longer, the need to build in a meeting or preparation time, national emergencies, drama in the party, and so on. But, often, politicians have just had enough of shaking hands, public speaking, selfies, and blood-thirsty journalists waiting at the entrance. Sometimes you might just want to cancel an event and relax. But the cancellation is no fun for the people who invited you. How much time and effort did they invest in organizing this event? How many people will be affected? It's worth asking yourself why you are hiding. Do you really want to become the politician who always cancels at the last minute and therefore no longer receives invitations?



How to stay connected

The antidote to losing yourself in the political circus or becoming too isolated is to stay rooted and connected. Even a WhatsApp group can perform miracles. During her last four years as a Minister of Interior Affairs, Annelies Verlinden's (BE) childhood friends kept her going via their WhatsApp group chat, providing encouragement and putting things in perspective with humor and jokes. In return, it allowed her friends to get a sneak peek behind the scenes and to see what she was experiencing.¹⁸

You need the real world to come knocking on your door, not only for moral support but also as a reality check. To ensure down time or family time, you could look into e-options. Estonian Alliance of Her alumna Annely Akkermann uses the Estonian-developed free app Toggl Track. "This way I can see how much time I have spent in a day or in a week and if a lot of time is spent with duties in politics I do not take new tasks. It is easier to say 'no' and not to take time from family or sleep." Bosnian Minister of Justice of the Sarajevo Canton Darja Softic Kadenic says it took her a year to figure out how to balance work and not-work. One of her main solutions is to decline a lot of invitations, only saying yes to the things that really matter, even if it sometimes disappoints her party.¹⁹

¹⁸ Interview with Annelies Verlinden, Minister of Interior Affairs, Belgium (2020–present).

¹⁹ Interview with Alliance of Her alumna Darja Softic Kadenic (BA).

If you have turned to hiding, you might have legitimate reasons for it. No judgments here. You might have had one too many nasty encounters, or you are simply overworked, and you want some peace and quiet. In that case, the antidote to your splendid isolation is not to put everything in reverse all at once and start going out 200 percent again. It's like stopping eating all together to lose weight—it's a strategy set for failure. Drastic change is not the most sustainable. What you could do is start with small steps and try to enjoy those social activities again. Ask yourself: What would it take for you to go door-knocking again? A fun team? A big BBQ afterwards? What kind of event would I love to go to? Can I take a friend or family member, or even my children, to make it less politically charged? If it's wise to do town halls, what can be done differently with the setting for you to feel at ease?

If any social interaction is too much to ask, and you would rather stay in bed, it's time for a proper holiday and serious mental recharge. If your social battery is dead, it's going to be quite hard to do politics in a democratic way at least, because people, whether you like it or not, are the cornerstone of your power.



2 Stop Listening

TRAP

Talk to the hand, the face ain't listening

Politics is conflictual by nature. Some would say that in our hyper-polarized world, that's more the case than before, but as an historian I would say it never really was a peaceful business.

One simple but powerful tool for avoiding or resolving conflict is listening. Millions of courses are given every day in active listening, a way of listening and responding to another person that improves mutual understanding. It is an important first step to defuse situations, seek solutions to problems, find compromises, or manage conflicts, because effective communication consists of both speaking and listening. Now, if there is one thing you really miss at a higher level in politics, it's politicians listening. If you watch parliamentary debates, you sometimes wonder why they still call them debates. They might as well just call them "monologues." You hear one statement after the other in which politicians stick to prepared notes and rarely bother to respond or react to the audience. In fake democracies such as Russia or China, you only need to listen to the "great leader," but if you are maneuvering in our European democracies, you will need others to engage in democratic decision-making. So listening is essential.

On their way up, politicians tend to listen a lot. They listen to the concerns of citizens, the advice of party members, and the arguments

of their opponents in order to formulate counter-arguments. But when in power, the listening seems to stop, especially when it comes to dissenting voices. They are considered buzzkills. Their arguments, their concerns, their points are dismissed as “being really negative” or “stuck in their own frame.” From the opposition to the dissenting voices in your own party, conversations run dry. Next in line are critical journalists, opinion makers with whom you disagree, and academics who prove you wrong. What an annoying bunch, indeed! Further down the line are civil society, interest groups, lobbyists, citizen panels, diplomats—some politicians really stop listening to anyone who wishes to share information or insights that don’t fit their version of the story.

The excuse given for not listening is often time constraints. Politicians send people away saying “please speak to my advisors” or “I don’t have time now, but do send me an email.” Sometimes, this time constraint excuse becomes very ironic. Not making time to meet one disgruntled party member for half an hour can result in spending two or three full days mitigating a media storm because he or she took his or her matter public. Sometimes the door isn’t closed intentionally, but the result is the same: valuable information is not transferred, and people feel unheard. A lobbyist in the EU bubble recently complained to me that he could no longer get an appointment with the mainstream parties because “they think they know what I will say.” He was gutted that the more extreme parties did listen, and he reluctantly admitted that he had started to enjoy working with them.

I’m not advocating listening to every lobbyist that knocks at your door, but I do want to advocate an open attitude. If you pretend to know it all and stop listening, you will miss valuable information. You will fail to understand why people want A or B, or why they are upset about x and y, and these are the insights you need to get the upper hand.

Going deaf goes beyond politics. There is also the chance you will stop listening to friends and family. Once you rise in the political food chain, you will know many things they don’t, such as state secrets and details that were never published in the press. So you might think they can’t possibly understand, help, or have anything interesting or new to add. You will alienate them once more, and more importantly you’ll



Protest sign made by Eline Janssens, St-Lucas, Antwerpen

cease to learn and practice empathy. Listening is like breathing, and breathing is vital for survival.

Can you O.D. on listening?

Listening doesn't mean getting distracted in your decision-making by all the anecdotes and individual stories you hear. It's essential for a politician not to get carried away by details and to focus on the bigger picture. Data and research count. To complicate things, you can also listen too much—to what people are saying online, to anecdotes that blur your judgment, to a myriad of personal opinions and tastes that don't help you. Many people share their genuine opinions and views on social media, and you can consider these posts valuable for understanding what goes on in society. There are plenty of tools out there for "social listening." But there are also a lot of more obscure powers at work. It's possible the opposition is actively mobilizing people, or even that the posts are from a Russian troll farm. For women especially, too much social listening can be detrimental for their health, as women tend to receive more hateful comments, death threats, and dick pics. One of the more powerful moves made by Alliance of Her alumna Romina

Pourmhoktari (SE) was to scrap social media in her first years in office as Minister of Environment in Sweden. Given her age and the role social media had played in getting her into that position, it was a very bold move. But she decided she had more to lose than to gain from opening the social media gates of hell with all its negativity and personal attacks.

What if people stop talking?

Alliance of Her alumna Darja Softic Kadenic (BA), who was an assistant professor in the Faculty of Law at the University of Sarajevo before becoming a minister, noticed that when she became affiliated to her party, some people stopped approaching her, sharing information, or giving her advice. What complicates your life as a politician is that people stop talking. They cease being honest. Power breeds silence in other people. Instead of telling their local parliamentarian they are angry with her climate policy, they ask for a selfie when she comes to visit a local event. Instead of telling the minister her recent interview was crap, her staff tells her the journalist was an asshole. That kind of dishonesty and flattery might keep politicians happy and smiling and believing they are doing great, but it's not helpful.²⁰ To counter the lack of honesty around you, you need to create an open attitude towards others, showing people you are keen on listening and have an open-door policy. If people feel you will listen, even when the news is bad, necessary information will keep coming your way. Never shoot the messenger. Make sure he or she feels safe and heard.²¹

²⁰ In strategic intelligence studies this is defined as the “deadly embrace.” See R. A. Heifetz, *Leadership without Easy Answers* (Harvard University Press, 1994).

²¹ Do check articles by disgruntled party members after an election defeat. One statement that always recurs is that no one was listening to the dissenting voice within the party.



Red flags

- **You stop reading the news.** You often hear politicians saying they stopped reading the news because it's so negative. President Barack Obama even advised politicians not to get distracted by the news.²² What is in the news, of course, is often only part of the story. When you work in politics for too long, you read the newspapers more like the result of a battle between spokespersons. Who was able to wine and dine the journalist to get their version of the truth out? Media today, driven by advertising revenues and clickbait, is often more negative than positive. But if you stop reading the news, you are fooling yourself because “your voters” will continue reading it, unless you lure them into an online rabbit hole like the extremists do and feed them with your curated information on Telegram and home-owned apps only. Reading the news, whether you like what is written or not, has a double advantage: You read what other people read and you are able to estimate your political strength. Are journalists still allowing you time and space? Or are you slowly becoming a pariah? Are your press releases redistributed or do your colleagues make it into the headlines? If you don't read the news for the news, then at least read it to keep track of your media “street cred.”

²² Interview with Annelies Verlinden, Minister of Interior Affairs, Belgium (2020–present).

- **Your agenda is too full.** Don't hide behind your agenda. Everyone knows that's a bad argument. Smart people make time. I've seen politicians spend hours, even days, talking to that same small inner group of trusted advisors or close colleagues—days of brainstorming and strategy meetings, dinners and drinks after work. This is time they could have spent with “outsiders,” that is, people with fresh insights, new ideas, or different perspectives.
- **You stop talking after a disagreement.** Nasty things happen in politics—backstabbing, betrayals, all of that. And I've seen it more than once that politicians stop talking to each other and therefore stop listening, between parties but also within their own ranks. However, the political bubble is small. You will end up meeting each other again. I once asked a campaigner from the Democratic Party why she thought Joe Biden won the party's nomination in 2020 and she replied because he is such a nice guy. He never made enemies within his own party and throughout his long career he never closed the door on people.
- **You surround yourself with like-minded people of the same sex and background.** This is a persistent and detrimental factor and therefore I keep referring to it, because I have seen it over and over again: politicians turning to an inner circle comprised of near copies of themselves. For male politicians, it's a boys' club; for women, it's a female posse. It's comfortable. It's even pleasant. You know the same things, feel the same things, read a situation in the same way. You travel together, laugh together, bitch about other politicians together. It feels comfortable. But this group is an echo chamber, which is a slow killer in politics. What business tells us is that new ideas, dissenting voices, and alternative perspectives lead to better decision-making.²³ Your inner circle should contain a good mix of people with different backgrounds, different family situations, different academic backgrounds. These people should be

²³ McKinsey & Company, “Diversity Matters Even More: The Case for Holistic Impact,” December 5, 2023, <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/diversity-and-inclusion/diversity-matters-even-more-the-case-for-holistic-impact>.

able to have controlled, conflict-free arguments with each other. Many bad decisions and strange moves by politicians can be prevented by allowing more internal opposition. A surreal story I heard in this respect was of a minister who hired her neighbor and best friend as she felt too challenged by her staff. Challenging is good, not bad.



How to keep your ears open

Open your agenda up to experts. Open your door to your staffers, colleagues, the administration—even your opponents. Open your mind to different opinions. It’s cozy to stay in an echo chamber with people who agree with you. But the comfort you are feeling is false. Be willing to listen. For the people on the other side—voters, lobbyists, journalists—there is nothing more frustrating than not getting through. They will turn their backs on you, or worse, hunt you down.

One suggestion would be to consider listening as a workout, something you pencil in, like a 10-kilometer run on a Sunday morning. You may not look forward to it, but you know you will feel good about it afterwards. Liesje Schreimacher, Alliance of Her alumna (NL) and former Minister of Development Aid and International Trade, says listening is her secret weapon. EU commissioner Margrethe Vestager also confirms listening was her secret weapon when she started off as a minister at the age of 29 in the Danish government. Listening allows you to learn very fast.

Make sure your staffers continue to speak up by allowing bad news to be shared. At the beginning of a weekly staff meeting, for example, start by spilling the beans. Create an environment where they feel safe to share negative as well as positive information. If you have become too nervous, too arrogant, or too caught up to listen, then make sure

your staff still listens so that at least you can send a message that “there is someone still prepared to listen.” However, watch out for power-hungry staffers. Information is power in a cabinet. Make sure information flows fluently and there is no information monopoly. Information may be deliberately withheld to further isolate you from the rest of your staff, colleagues, or peers and may prevent you from hearing the warning or dissenting voices.

3

Team Trouble

TRAP

Google “politicians staff harassment” and you get 332 million results.

Having your political staff run personal errands, throwing shoes at them, approaching them inappropriately when drunk, having them babysit your children, shouting, manipulating, screaming, stalking, bullying—after 15 years in politics, I’m sad to admit that I have heard it all. “But those poor politicians, they are under so much pressure.” Yes, they are. But this is not an excuse to put others under pressure or create a toxic working environment.

As a politician, your staff is like a precious diamond. Some of them are opportunists, some of them naive believers. But all of them are giving up a lot of their time to join you in the rat race. Treating them well and fairly is the one thing you really must do right, and not only because you want to be a good person. There are many pragmatic reasons to be the best manager you possibly can. Your staff co-determines your political career, for better or for worse.

First, motivated and happy staffers go the extra mile. Politics isn’t a 9-to-5 business, so you will be asking more of them than any other job would. You may need to call them at unreasonable hours, ask them to work on Christmas Eve, catch early-morning flights, miss out on family obligations, and open their laptops in the middle of the night.

How can you expect them to do that if your behavior drains the life out of them?

Second, disgruntled staffers can end your career. It's as simple as that. They don't even need to know extremely compromising things about you. Even rumors or unproven accusations of harassment can lead to resignation. Not guilty until proven otherwise doesn't fly in a reputational business such as politics. Purely based on rumors, the party might conclude you are too much of a liability to remain in place, let alone run in the next elections. Rumors are also enough for the opposition to frame you over and over as a person unfit for duty.

Does that mean you should fear your staff? No, but you do need to make an effort and take care of them. Guy Verhofstadt was by no means a sweet boss. He was demanding, relentless, and not really interested in birthdays or well-being. But he did make an effort to take his people out for lunch—Italian lunch, of course. These outings were often work-related, involving speechwriting in a group, or a trip down memory lane with juicy stories from his life in Belgian politics. I only realized what they meant for the team after some years.

A third reason to cherish your staff is that you spend a lot of time with them—in the office, while traveling, weekdays and weekends. Spending all that time in silence or with tense relationships makes the job unbearable. Another reason to keep your staff happy and motivated is that you want to keep them on board. Often political staffers have their own ambitions and goals. They see their job as an advisor as a stepping stone for something else. Rapid turnover in your office will have a detrimental effect on your political work, as training new people takes time. And rapid turnover is fodder for gossip.

Trouble within your team not only prevents you from doing a proper job, but it can also end your political career very quickly. In 2023, Politico delved into what it called the “hidden scale of intimidation and abuse at the heart of EU democracy,” finding that between 2019 and 2021, 34 cases of psychological or sexual harassment were investigated, 24 of which involved the behavior of MEPS. Eight of these cases resulted in sanctions. Politico describes the European Parliament as “a system in crisis,” where the power dynamic heavily favors MEPS over their small teams,

who work without HR support or standard safeguards.²⁴ The MEPs who were publicly exposed by this report didn't stand for re-election.

More structurally, the lack of protective mechanisms such as confidants or ombudsmen is common not just at the European level but also in national and local political offices.

Focus on females

Since #Metoo, there is more awareness about power dynamics and some of the more toxic behaviors it produces. It would be interesting to retroactively interview staffers who worked for politicians in the 1970s and compare the limits of acceptable behavior! What's intriguing is the gender aspect, because many of the reported cases of harassment in the European Parliament were perpetrated by women. Are women more likely to be accused because people expect certain types of behavior from men but not from women in politics? Do old white men get away with screaming and intimidating but (young) women don't?

In my days in the European Parliament, it was no secret that Elmar Brok (EPP, DE) was treating his staff very badly. I remember one day he was shouting at them in the corridor in front of our office. Politico even reported on his habit of throwing objects at his staff.²⁵ He denied creating a toxic office environment, saying that "working closely together and having stressful days means that there is room for friction." Brok was a highly respected MEP. Going against him would have meant the end of your career in EPP politics. With the exception of the whistleblowers in Politico, no one ever made an official claim against him. This reflects Galinsky's theory on "acceptable behavior" being linked to a person's status. Since Brok's status is obviously greater than that of the young and inexperienced female politicians, his range of accepted behavior is broader.

24 Barbara Moens and Eddy Wax, "Inside Europe's Parliament of Bullies," Politico, June 2, 2023.

25 Paul Dallison, "MEPs Behaving Badly: A Rogues' Gallery," Politico, January 4, 2023.

At the same time, unconscious gender bias and stereotypes also come into play. Women, after all, are known for their care, warmth, team spirit, and collaborative skills. That means that when a woman politician fails to fit the stereotype, she will be crucified.²⁶ If you take into consideration the often unconscious aversion people have to women seeking power, you can imagine the unconscious resistance that can arise both with male and female staffers in the office of a female politician.²⁷

The last factor is an interpersonal element. Research shows that women have the tendency to create friends at work,²⁸ sharing deeply personal stories and creating meaningful and lasting relationships. In a power dynamic, however, that can be confusing. Sharing personal stories might undermine a woman's authority in the team. If a female politician trusts her staff and admits that she feels insecure, or that she has just had a devastating or nasty break-up, how will it affect the staff's judgment of her behavior the next day? Being too intimate or disclosing too much carries risks.

Having said all that, there is no reason to sugarcoat abusive behavior. If you can't respect your staff or treat them humanely, what does that say about you as a leader? I would love to cut politicians some slack when they are under intense pressure, but then it's a matter of making amends. No doubt you will be under pressure and will find coping strategies that may not be perfect. But what do you do afterwards? Do you send a rude, frustrated message and apologize afterwards? Or do you continue this aggressive messaging and take it to the next level? Do you ask your staffer to pick up your dry cleaning once in case of crisis, or does this become one of their recurring tasks?

26 T. G. Okimoto and V. L. Brescoll, "The Price of Power: Power Seeking and Backlash against Female Politicians," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 36(7) (2010), 923–936, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167210371949>.

27 Sieghart, *The Authority Gap*.

28 Helgesen and Goldsmith, *How Women Rise*.

The other way around

Can a politician become the victim of his or her team as well? Most definitely. In the BBC documentary *State of Chaos* on British politics, Laura Kuenssberg reveals how Theresa May was screwed over by her two Chiefs of Staff.²⁹ They felt they were the ones in control and decided on a strategy to call for elections without her, a strategy that was disastrous for May's political career. When your closest advisors have little respect for you, question your views, and prefer their own, they can easily destroy the political capital you have built.

There are also staffers who create such discourse within the team that it leads to your demise. Please watch out for those who kiss up and kick down. They usually try to isolate you, join you on every trip, and keep the information funnel tightly in their hands. Because of their abusive handling of the other team members, they create discord and chaos and push good people out. If you hear complaints from your team about toxic personalities, you should investigate what kind of power struggle is going on ASAP. The control some seek over you is not healthy. It's in your interest to remove these kinds of people from your team. If they are particularly brilliant, which is sometimes the case, assign them very specific tasks they can do on their own, such as speechwriting. But prevent them from becoming too powerful or able to divide the team, or from becoming uncontrollable like Dominic Cummings, also known as Boris Johnson's shadow prime minister, or "a career psychopath," as David Cameron described him.³⁰

²⁹ Laura Kuenssberg, *State of Chaos*, BBC, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Svh4G-zTnaU>.

³⁰ Mark Landler and Stephen Castle, "Dominic Cummings, Powerful Aide to Boris Johnson, Resigns, Report Says," *New York Times*, November 13, 2020.



Red flags

- **It's their fault.** Hiring good people is tricky business. Look at the lengthy processes and expensive external agencies that are put into hiring people in the private sector nowadays. In politics, there is often neither time nor resources to devote to hiring. Sometimes you are lucky and can hire your own people, but it also happens that you are forced to hire people the party wants you to hire, or civil servants. If they have worked for another politician before, you start off being compared with them, which is no fun. But even when you are able to choose your staff, things can become sour. One thing to bear in mind is that there are always two sides in a case of conflict—two different stories, different pretexts, different expectations.

If you find yourself in a conflict with your staff and you retreat behind “I was right, I’m the boss and you were wrong,” things won’t improve. It pays to get the full picture of what is going on, with a moderator if necessary.

- **They are all crazy.** You often read that politics attracts a weird segment of the population. There is even a psychological study showing that narcissists disproportionately take part in the democratic process.³¹

³¹ Z. Fazekas and P. K. Hatemi, “Narcissism in Political Participation,” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 47(3) (2021), 347–361, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167220919212>.

But when politicians start saying that all their staffers are mentally ill, it might be time to look in the mirror. It is of course possible that this politician really has a nose for finding and hiring “the crazys,” but it is also possible that this politician is losing his or her ability to be empathic, to listen, to be kind, because they are too focused on themselves.

- **People in your team are leaving.** If you allow me to generalize, there are two types of political staffers and hybrid versions in between. On the one hand, you have extremely loyal ones who want to work for you only, out of conviction, and who are very emotionally attached. On the other hand, you have the opportunists who consider their role in your office merely a stepping stone to the next job. When they find that next position and announce their resignation, you won’t be surprised. Maybe you even helped them find that next job, or you are proud to see them move up. When staffers of the first type start leaving, you should wonder what’s going on, especially if they are leaving one after the other. You should consider doing exit interviews to find out why they are leaving. Refreshing your team is by no means a bad thing, but having a lot of turnover is a red flag and should prompt you to make an effort to ensure the new team is more sustainable.
- **You call yourself “demanding.”** Managers can be demanding and still be great managers. My sister apparently is one of them. I once encountered one of her former employees who told me “your sister is tough, therefore she gets the best out of you.” When your staff refers to you being “demanding” as a reason to leave, it’s worth digging deeper. Of course, there are staffers who are just lazy and want to do as little as possible. But in politics, the work you do is demanding by default. So there must be more than meets the eye. According to the HR bible, also known as LinkedIn, the best leaders are demanding, yet intensely caring.
- **You rely on just a few and ignore the others.** A divide and conquer strategy can have its merits in politics when it comes to forging uneasy coalitions or getting support for your amendments. But when it comes to your staff, this is the worst possible approach. Creating “intentional

disharmony” goes directly against the “rules” of a well-functioning team, in which cohesion, cooperation, and the formation of positive bonds are key. There are no good reasons, according to sociologists and psychologists, to actively try to undermine group functioning. When you do, you are most likely driven by a desire to protect your own power because you feel threatened or uneasy in your authority.³² Surely there are other ways to deal with that, maybe a therapist or coach, rather than to create frustration, jealousy, unhappiness, and friction among your staff.

- **You never spend quality time with your team.** The Ringelmann Effect states that it is human nature to make less effort in something as more people become involved in the activity.³³ This phenomenon, also referred to as “social loafing,” is often unintentional, yet it has increasingly detrimental effects within the work environment. That’s why you need to invest in a team and its functioning to keep it performing well. Team building efforts don’t have to include paintball, nor loads of alcohol, but they should aim at fostering internal communication. In a 2012 study by the Human Dynamics Laboratory at MIT, teams composed of more qualified individuals were outperformed by teams that communicated more effectively.³⁴ So, you can hire the best and the brightest, but if they don’t communicate well, it affects team performance. Team building is not about becoming best friends, but about building trust and understanding. Teams with high levels of trust can work through conflict, think more effectively, and produce better outcomes.
- **You ask staff to do your household chores.** Picking up laundry, scheduling the hairdresser, renting out apartments—just like my peers, I did

32 Charleen R. Case, “Divide and Conquer: When and Why Leaders Undermine the Cohesive Fabric of Their Group,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 107(6) (2014), 1033–1050.

33 “Ringelmann Effect,” *APA Dictionary of Psychology*, <https://dictionary.apa.org/ringelmann-effect>.

34 Alex “Sandy” Pentland, “The New Science of Building Great Teams,” *Harvard Business Review*, April 2012.

many of these “household chores” during my career as a political staffer. Especially when you are working in the European Parliament, far from home and often on the move, there’s the temptation to outsource private tasks as a politician. The requests often seem too innocent to be labeled toxic or a reason to file a complaint. However, many of the harassment cases against Members of Parliament involve these types of complaints by staffers. For example, MEP Assita Kanko (BE), an Alliance of Her alumna who afterwards left the liberal family, was charged in 2023 with creating “a ‘culture of fear’ among her staff with outrageous demands such as ‘babysitting her child’ and working on days off. She also reportedly ‘playing [*sic*] mind games’ with employees.”³⁵ Some staffers won’t mind babysitting in an emergency, while others will feel personally offended. When the Prime Minister of Belgium, Alexander De Croo, brought his dog to work, there was no shortage of colleagues who wanted to take him for a walk. What’s important to always keep in mind is that personal requests are unusual requests. And the frequency of these requests matters. Are you asking your staff to babysit every Wednesday, because you can’t find a nanny, or did you bring your child to work just once in a crisis? Expectation management and healthy, open dialogue is again the way forward.

³⁵ Carl Deconinck, “Euro MP Accused of Harassment ‘Demanded Staff Babysit Her Child,’” *Brussels Signal*, May 25, 2023.



How to stay out of trouble

Politics is time-consuming and comes with a lot of pressure and potentially toxic hierarchical structures. Needless to say, good HR practices are needed. There is, however, rarely someone taking care of psychological safety in ministerial cabinets, party secretariats, or local councilor offices. Politics has also proven to be very slow in adopting known HR practices such as office confidants. When I was writing this book, the European Commission had just appointed one!

How to stay out of team trouble?

- 1 Good management is key. One can't expect every elected or appointed politician to have great managerial skills, nor do politicians have the time to develop those skills or complete the required leadership trainings. That's why I tell the Alliance of Her participants: "If you are not a good manager, hire one." And if you don't have the budget to hire someone, seek out HR support from party headquarters or maybe pool an HR manager among different political teams. It also makes sense to take the responsibility for hiring and firing away from you as a politician. It makes you less vulnerable to legal claims.

- 2 Understand how teams thrive.³⁶ Trust and structured conflict management are the two most vital conditions of a well-functioning team. Trust issues can occur when you are not allowed to pick your own staff. That's what Karen Melchior, Alliance of Her alumna and former MEP (DK), found out the hard way. Disagreement should be possible in a team. If one cannot voice one's opinion, however unpopular, without getting tangled up in long-lasting conflict, the team becomes dysfunctional. Given the presence of power and ego in politics, it can be especially hard to challenge one other, but in a good team, people should have a mandate to question things and find healthy ways of disagreeing. Other essentials of a good team are commitment, accountability, and a focus on results. That's why it's worth setting out a clear purpose in the office.³⁷ The only way to engage, energize, and ignite your workforce is to infuse work with meaning and communicate your values and joint mission over and over. When you define a cause for your team, it's essential to show them where they fit in and create a culture of belonging.
- 3 Prioritize mental health in the office, for both politicians and staffers, to avoid burnout and toxic behavior. Self-care is essential given the intense pressure you are under from the outside. It's important to be able to let off steam, process emotions, allow for introspection and reflection, and take time to deal with setbacks. If you don't, it can result in all kinds of escapism, such as alcohol abuse, or other toxic ways of releasing pressure including staff abuse.³⁸ Mental health is still very much a taboo topic in politics, while the escapism and compensatory and irresponsible behavior fill the newspapers.³⁹

36 Patrick Lencioni, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team: A Leadership Fable* (Jossey-Bass, 2002), p. 188.

37 Kevin Leman and William Pentak, *The Way of the Shepherd: Seven Secrets to Managing Productive People* (Zondervan, 2004).

38 There is an infamous story in which French MEP Robert Rochefort was caught masturbating in a public shop. He told the police he does that when he is stressed out. Interpellé pour exhibition sexuelle, Robert Rochefort plaide coupable, *Le Monde*, November 9, 2016, https://www.lemonde.fr/police-justice/article/2016/11/09/interpelle-pour-exhibition-sexuelle-robert-rochefort-plaide-coupable_5028380_1653578.html.

39 That's why Kiki Bakker, core trainer of the Alliance of Her, actively advocates for more self-care for politicians and offers one-on-one coaching for politicians to stay balanced. When

4 Understanding team dynamics. The relationship between those in power and their “employees” or “subordinates” is always complicated.⁴⁰ Often, we see staffers idealizing their bosses, especially in an ideological context like politics. This idealization often has more to do with their emotional needs than with the politician’s “superpowers.” On top of that, the idealization can quickly turn into hostility when they become disappointed or hurt. It’s also good to know you should not just hire the best and the brightest, but make sure you have a good mix of different personalities who can work well together.⁴¹ I have seen many MEP teams in which the staffers strongly resented each other. How can such an office run smoothly?

5 Another important element for avoiding problems is expectation management. Clearly communicate job expectations to your staff, including the demands of the role. You must make sure your staffers know what they are getting themselves into. They might be blinded by the prestige of the office and not see that work sometimes requires making coffee. It also pays to agree on their development track, as their happiness is a shared responsibility.

6 Draw clear red lines regarding emotional involvement. Of course you can have friendly relations with your staff, but becoming best friends

you are a minister or a counselor, a president or a mayor, there is a huge amount of pressure and public scrutiny and things become very personal. You must have your feet firmly planted on the ground, as current Belgian Minister of Interior Affairs Annelies Verlinden told me. A personal coach is not a luxury. She doesn’t have one, but finds mental ease in running.

40 Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries, “Leaders Who Self-Destruct: The Causes and Cures,” *Organizational Dynamics* 17(4) (Spring 1989), 5–17.

41 Referring to the Insights Discovery model. This is a psychometric tool based on the psychology of Carl Jung, to help people understand themselves, understand others, and make the most of the relationships that affect them in the workplace. The Insights Discovery methodology uses a simple and memorable four color model to help people understand their style, their strengths, and the value they bring to the team. We call these the color energies, and it’s the unique mix of Fiery Red, Sunshine Yellow, Earth Green, and Cool Blue energies that determines how and why people behave the way they do, and how they can work well together based on self-awareness and safe feedback.

and sharing all love and life stories makes you vulnerable. This sort of relationship complicates working in the pressure cooker of politics. From the interviews I had with staffers of female politicians who failed to survive, not setting interpersonal boundaries was pointed to as one of the reasons the office atmosphere turned sour. It's good to get along, but it's wise to stay at arm's length.



Action items

When in power, you will focus on yourself, while you should be focusing on “the people.”

Trap 1: Splendid Isolation

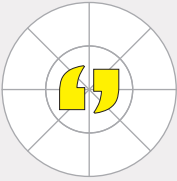
Ask yourself	Can you count the number of people you trust on one hand? Do you always meet the same people for lunch or do you eat in your office? Did you skip the last two family dinners? Do you avoid your volunteers? Does meeting your constituents bore you? Do you prefer not to speak to anyone at party events? Was the last time you spoke with someone from another party in 2017?	Action	End your isolation. Climb down from your ivory tower to stay rooted and stay connected. To stay safe and sane, you should not forget where you came from and who helped you get where you are.
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Trap 2: Stop Listening

<p>Ask yourself</p>	<p>Are your advisors your only source of information? Do you bin all meeting requests? Was the last time you watched the news on tv to watch the Twin Towers collapsing? Do you have all the newspapers in the office but you barely look at them? Was the last book you read <i>The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F*ck</i>?</p>	<p>Action</p>	<p>Get out and meet people. Information is power. You need to stay ahead not to fall behind.</p> <p>To maintain your position of power, you need to consider listening as a form of breathing. Until science finds an alternative, breathing is necessary to survive.</p>
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Trap 3: Team Trouble

<p>Ask yourself</p>	<p>Do you think it's normal for staffers to pick up the phone after 10:00 pm? Do you hear members of your team crying in the toilet? Are you worried your staffers spit in your coffee? Do you notice people are quietly quitting? Do you only speak to your staff once every six months?</p>	<p>Action</p>	<p>Be a good manager or hire one. You have to make work work!</p> <p>People matter. You can't do this alone. Put the team first (instead of yourself).</p>
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Interview with **ANNA DONATH**^{HU}

At the time of the interview, she was Member of the European Parliament and President of Momentum.

Anna worked for an international nongovernmental organization in the Netherlands on human rights issues before she returned to Hungary and helped to kickstart the Momentum party. After following the Alliance of Her Academy, she ran for the European elections in 2019 and got elected. During the 10 traps of power workshop, she confessed to falling into many of them.

Momentum as a party was created by you and your childhood friends. That means personal life and political life are very intertwined. How do you avoid living in a bubble?

Many of my fellow party members are fully in love with the party. Their best friends are in the party, their social life is at the party, they're working in the party. They cannot live without the party after seven years. I was conscious not to let that happen and feel that's the biggest trap. I started very early with considering friends within the party my colleagues. I have friends within the party, but I didn't want all the socialization happening within the party. My husband is outside of party. My best friends are. My life is outside of party.

The European Parliament is also a bubble. How do you stay in touch with “the people”?

My party is a political startup, so it is our strength to be on the streets, not just during the campaign. It's the part of politics I love the most. Sometimes it feels like swimming: I have to dress up and go there and dry my hair afterward. But once I'm in the pool, I love it. And I'm super grateful every time I push myself back to the pool. Of course, it is tiring to constantly be on the road, and everybody wants five minutes of you. I'm not the type of person who can say no, so, I had to learn to have somebody near to me who can be the bad guy, who makes sure I go to the toilet, or who helps me out when there are crazy people around.

In Hungary, politics is very polarized. Are you ever scared to go places?

No, in my experience people are violent and disgusting online, but not so much in real life. Of course, I would never show up near a Fidesz rally. That's asking for trouble.

Does online hatred affect you?

I stopped reading the comments.

An important element for politicians to keep their feet on the ground is to have people who challenge them. Who challenges you?

Well, my best friends are from university. We studied sociology, so we are all political and talk a lot about politics. They are my biggest critics. I don't think for a long time they even voted for my party. This is why I love them. In this purple bubble (reference to color of Momentum), you don't see the forest from the trees sometimes. So you need friends to show you the mirror. To tell you “you think you know what you're talking about, but you don't understand.”

Some of your colleagues in the European Parliament were accused of harassment. How do you explain that?

I once asked some fellow MEPs for advice. When I woke up, I saw I received many emails at 3:00 am. Later, when it turned out that one of them was accused of harassment, I understood that if she was working at 3:00 am, it meant her team was working at 3:00 am. That's not OK. For me, it was always obvious that if I wanted my team to let me have a day off, I should give an example. On weekends, if they reach out to me, I ask to talk about it on Monday, so we can go back to your family. But it's hard to set these limits.

Is there a gender aspect to it, you think?

If a man is an arsehole, then it's OK. But a woman cannot be.

Are you managing things differently?

Like many of the young women in the European Parliament, I never had a team before I was elected. I did most of the things myself. And then, you end up here (in the European Parliament), and you get tons of money to set up an office. People get a salary to help you. They're not your friends. They are your employees. It was Ian Marquadt (Director of the Alliance of Her Academy) who suggested to me not to be their boss, but their MEP and to have someone in charge of the team. That way I am not the boss and someone else can play the bad cop.

Did you ever ask your staff to do household chores?

It happened the other way around. My team was complaining about why I didn't ask for help. I remember one of my colleagues asked me to let him set up a hairdresser appointment for me. Or when I had a flat here in Brussels, my colleague who lived nearby offered to go there and let the maintenance guy in ...

You said colleague?

Yes, we are working in a team. So, they are colleagues. I would feel weird to call them assistants, although legally that's what they are. It feels like a degradation. I have a right hand. I have a left hand. I have a heart in Brussels. I have a brain in Budapest, I'm calling them like this.

Can the workload explain why things go wrong in political teams?

When I look at my agenda, I see it is full. And then I know more stuff will come on top. In politics, there are a lot of things you cannot schedule, it's just going to happen. So, I already know there will be 20 percent more work added, every day. In the meantime, I've learned that fulfilling all the duties doesn't necessarily mean I'm doing the best work. So slowly but surely, I'm setting up more boundaries.

Being a young woman in politics, did anyone ever question you?

As a young woman, you are considered the assistant of even the intern, instead of the MEP when your position is not clear right away. At some point, we had a Renew group meeting in Frankfurt and we are at this wine tasting. I was the only MEP among the parliamentary assistants. We talked about politics, we laughed. At some point, they asked me who I worked for. And I said, well, I don't know how to put it. I think I'm working for myself. But mostly I'm working for the Hungarian people.

When you attended the 10 traps of power training, you realized you were in many of them.

At some point, I was asked to become president of the party to rescue the party. I accepted the challenge. But at the same time, I saw my full agenda. I knew spending time with my son would decrease. That put me off. I stopped replying to the WhatsApp group with my best friends. I stopped listening. I hated to go anywhere. I wanted a minimum of interaction. I was being my biggest enemy. As soon as I tapped into the

why I was doing politics, and started getting out, I realized it wasn't as hard as it looked. Once I'm in it, it's a drug.

After all these years, what are you still insecure about?

Funnily enough, for those stupid one minutes in the plenary. Every time I went there, my legs were shaking. Why? These speeches are important to me because with these speeches I can show Hungary that I'm a serious politician and I'm not just a streetfighter or a nobody from the opposition.

What would be your advice for aspiring politicians?

Don't get into the trap that others know better or give too much weight to other people's opinion. How to behave, what it is like to be an MEP or a politician in general. I was struggling with people saying "you must dress like this," "you have to behave like that." The hardest is to learn to set your boundaries and do what is comfortable for you. Don't lose the capability of trusting in another person, while knowing you cannot trust anybody in politics. So don't be naïve, but don't be cynical either. Play the political game if you want to get into a higher position. If you are not a perfectionist yourself, have somebody in your team who is. And finally, don't ever believe that everything is at stake all the time. I realized it's much easier and much more honest when you think that you have nothing to lose. When you are afraid and believe you have something to lose, like a title or a position, then you limit yourself. A position is just ego. You're not becoming a better person because you're an MEP, for example.

There surely are people who do. Do you think power corrupts?

I speak a lot to the drivers and the ushers of the European Parliament. I know many of them by name, their family stories. They always tell me I am unique, and they complain about the other MEPs. It seems they

behave like they are on top of everything and everybody, and people are just here to serve you. It seems to be the mentality in this building.

Do positions and titles matter to you?

In the last seven years. I've been vice president. I've been president. I've been an MEP, I've been a nobody. I don't think that anything ever changed. Titles only matter if they help the cause I'm fighting for. I don't care about the different positions. It just takes a lot of attention. While I like to focus.

So, there is life after politics for you?

I never intended to get into party politics, even though my father and my grandfather used to be politicians. To me, politics has always been a platform to fight for something. It's a good platform because you have a direct influence on people's lives. But it was my father who taught me you cannot use politics as the end goal. You must have a profession that you can fall back on because you cannot count on politics, especially party politics. He was a Lutheran pastor and was always a public figure. He taught in universities and was an opinion maker.

For 12 years of his life, he had a mandate in the Hungarian Parliament. After that, he became an active priest again. For my grandfather, politics was life. He was imprisoned by three different systems and almost executed after the revolution in 1956. He died in 1986, and never saw the result of his fight.

**SECOND BASKET
OF POWER TRAPS**

YOU

Politics is full of enemies and animosities, not only between different political parties but also within parties. It's not rare to become paranoid when working in politics. But, on top of all those external enemies, there is also yourself. It's not just the others or the press setting up the minefield. Some of the hardships and the pitfalls are created by you. And the only one to curse when your political career goes awry is you. At the same time, you should never forget: you are your own biggest ally, so behave like it!

Spoiler alert—this chapter has a gender element to it. Without wanting to generalize too much, Trap 4 is a common male trap, Trap 5 a common female trap. In Trap 4, one doesn't care enough; in Trap 5, one cares too much. Extensive research has been done on the confidence of men versus the confidence of women. It is conclusive: Overconfidence is rarely a major female failing. While overconfidence leads to being lazy, the lack of confidence leads to paralysis or self-sabotage. If you don't agree and you are the exception to the rule, please don't sue me and just continue reading. If what you read doesn't apply to you, it may well help you to see what is going wrong for others.

4

Become Lazy

TRAP

Underestimating the power paradox

“I know that I know nothing” is what Plato makes of the saying of Greek philosopher Socrates: “For I was conscious that I knew practically nothing” This is a healthy premise to bear in mind when in power. When you manage to get elected and spend some time in a parliament, or government, you will at some point, like in any job, have the impression that you “get it.” You will see the mechanisms, the patterns, the cycles; you will understand the way of working, the rules of the game, and you will be able to play ball. You will know whom to talk to, make deals with, avoid, and keep an eye on. Your staffers, experienced or not, will sooner or later (hopefully) have that same “aha-erlebnis” and will become equally confident in the political arena. But that confidence is dangerous. That confidence or familiarity breeds laziness and entitlement. And it becomes a pitfall of power, because the seat you are occupying is not a natural right. It’s not a given at any point in time or history. It’s something you have to fight for, and you can be sure as hell someone is willing to fight for it too, often in the most nasty and vile ways. So, laziness is not an option, whether it’s intellectually, strategically, or physically. If I were to exaggerate: *Letting things be* equals giving

up. Not investing time or effort will cost you in the long run. You must stay ahead because of what is called the “power paradox”: “The strong might be expected to grow ever stronger and the weak weaker still. But poorer or smaller combatants often end up improving their position relative to richer or larger ones. The explanation is that initially poorer contenders are rationally motivated to fight harder, to invest relatively more in conflictual activity.”⁴²

One of my former colleagues challenged me on this trap, saying that ministers can’t be lazy as their schedule is too tight. But I’m convinced you can be busy and lazy at the same time. You can be putting in the hours and going home late but still be lazy in the sense of intellectually lazy, not innovative enough, or not having people around who challenge you. You can be lazy in your vision of the world, when you haven’t changed your narrative after transformative moments such as a banking crisis or a global pandemic. Political laziness comes in different shapes and sizes, so don’t assume you are “in the clear” just because you are extremely busy.

Why investing in yourself matters

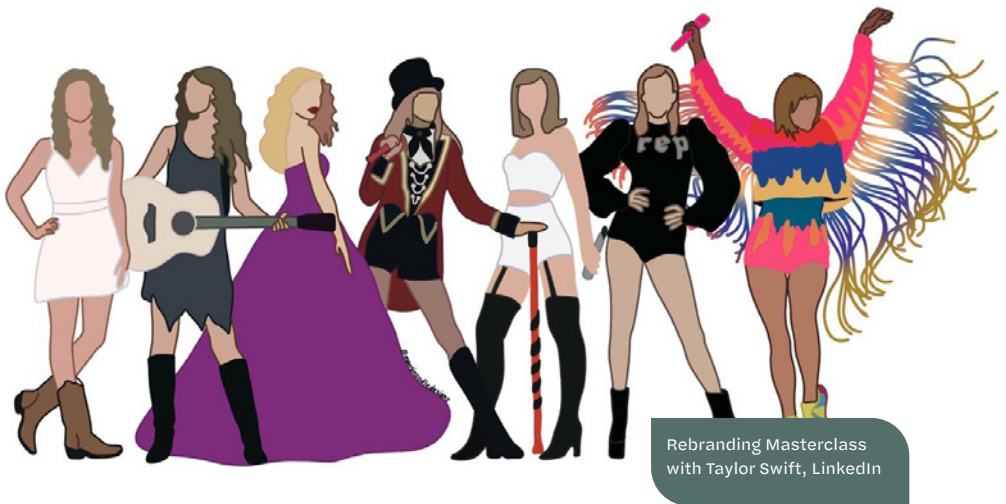
Advising you to invest in yourself and not to become lazy isn’t about pushing aspiring politicians into burnout. Instead, it’s about avoiding complacency in the highly competitive world of politics. If you slack off, your adversaries will exploit that. In elections, for example, you can’t assume voter loyalty or be a one-trick pony. Times change, election strategies evolve, voters evolve. You must invest time, effort, and resources and use the latest strategies and technologies, such as artificial intelligence, nowadays to stay ahead. You need new data and all the manpower available. Politicians who say they don’t need any additional hands during re-election lose.

⁴² Randall Bartlett, *Economics and Power: An Inquiry Into Human Relations and Markets* (Cambridge University Press, 1989), chapters 1–2.

SECOND BASKET OF POWER TRAPS: YOU

It's also important to continue to invest in yourself. Even successful politicians can study or improve certain skills—whether it's refining public speaking or enhancing language skills. There is no shame in seeking help for that. Your competitors become smarter when you become too predictable.

Another key investment for politicians and for parties is rebranding. Just like pop stars, such as Taylor Swift, have reinvented themselves to stay relevant, politicians and parties must evolve. They can't rely on past glories; instead, they should work to transform and innovate continuously.



Never assume your position is secure; someone will always challenge you by focusing on your weaknesses. Don't assume that your position of power is a given and that you don't have to make any effort besides staying out of trouble.

The position versus the person

One very important stepping stone to this trap is mixing up your position and yourself. It happens all the time in politics and comes naturally.

When you are the Prime Minister and everyone wants a selfie, it's hard to discern if they want a selfie with you or with the person holding the position of Prime Minister. This doesn't only happen to people in power. Belgian Minister of Foreign Affairs Hadja Lahbib, a former TV news anchor, testified that the same holds true for TV personalities. One can wonder: Are they cheering for you, or are they cheering for the celebrity status you hold? And will they still like you once you leave the scene? MP Kira Rudik (UKR) admits it's incredibly hard to maintain a distinction between your self and the position and treat it as a job. But unless you are a king or a queen, your position isn't for life. On the contrary, it's temporary, and sometimes very short-lived. In order to maintain your status, you have to keep on making an effort. Earn it—and remember, it's not yours forever.



Red flags

- **You stop reading briefing notes.** Of course you get to know your files. If you were a Minister of Education for the last four years, you will need less preparation or background notes than in your first year. But being confident is no prerogative to become complacent. The people on the other side of the table should never get the impression that you haven't done your homework, or that you don't have the latest numbers or facts. Because that small margin of error on your side is a chance for them to get ahead or to sense you are becoming lazy and become more ambitious.
- **You stop reading.** Time is limited. Newspapers tend to be depressingly negative. Your brain is fried after a week of working in the VUCA environment which is politics.⁴³ Sometimes you want to give your brain a break. But reading is a highly underestimated mindful activity. As Marcella Frydman Manoharan, co-founder of Cambridge Coaching, says, "reading is so much a part of our everyday lives that we take it for granted—text messages, the banners that run across our televisions, the

⁴³ VUCA is a trendy managerial acronym, short for volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity. Basically it's "Hey, it's crazy out there!" See Nate Bennett and G. James Lemoine, "What VUCA Really Means for You," *Harvard Business Review*, January-February 2014, <https://hbr.org/2014/01/what-vuca-really-means-for-you>.

ads that pop up. And yet, reading can be a crucial opportunity for mindfulness—the ability to be in the present moment, aware while withholding judgment, both inside and outside of yourself.”⁴⁴ Reading fiction especially is worth your time as it allow you to exercise empathy, change your perspective, and stop spinning within the political world.⁴⁵

- **You always use the same speech, same numbers, same quotes.** This is not in contradiction to the rules of branding or positioning, which I also teach at the Alliance of Her Academy. Those rules imply that you repeat your message over and over because repetition breeds familiarity and not everyone is listening at the same time. But there is a difference between using the same message and using the exact same wording, arguments, stories, or examples. Your audience needs to hear a speech tailored for them, with examples they can relate to. Customizing your message to your audience is the number one rule in effective communication. Using examples from the business world for a crowd of teachers will have no lasting effect. That’s why you (or your team) can’t become lazy in tuning the message.
- **You stop investing time in your network.** European societies are well organized through interest groups and civil society, associations, unions, and so on. Some of them are linked to political parties, while others tend to be opportunistic and switch between parties that serve their interests. As soon as their current political partner in crime doesn’t serve their interest, is no longer in power, or becomes deaf to their demands, they find a new partner in crime. As a politician, you can therefore never take the old network or partners for granted. Constantly investing in a personal and professional network, nourishing it and enlarging it, is in your interest.
- **You consider your party an unnecessary evil and avoid party activities.** Political parties are like family—sometimes you wish you could live

⁴⁴ David Gelles, “How to Be Mindful While Reading,” *New York Times*, July 19, 2017.

⁴⁵ More in the interview with Commissioner Vestager at p. 132.

without them, but you can't. They include all the stereotypical family characters: drunk uncles, whining aunts, and senile grandparents. Especially before and after election time, relations that were once friendly can turn sour. While a position of power at the European level can seem like a welcome break from internal party politics, it's not in your interest to step out of the party limelight. Maintaining good relations with the party leadership is crucial as parties can be ruthless in cutting you off when it suits them, even if your personal popularity is high and you bring in the votes! Freshly elected MEPs who think they can ignore party politics and be a no-show are mistaken. Flaking out comes with consequences. It's wiser to pursue a position in the leadership instead, to remain informed, engaged, and in the driving seat.

- **You are too cool for school.** When I see politicians at public events, I observe their behavior. Are they mingling and working the room, or are they sticking to their staff and other VIPs? Both prime ministers I worked for, Guy Verhofstadt and Alexander De Croo, always made an effort to engage with the audience, network, and socialize, even as introverts. They understood that staying accessible matters, unlike some politicians who become "too cool," only using VIP entrances or being hustled out immediately after making a speech by security. The moment you stop mixing and mingling, competitors will seize the opportunity to outwork and eventually replace you.



How to stay ahead

First, let's differentiate between being lazy from being tired. Politics will wear you out after some years. After intensive periods, you rightfully want to spend some time with your family and slow the pace. This time off is essential to recharge and to re-energize. A well-deserved rest or holiday can even make you perform more efficiently afterwards. Taking it easy for a while doesn't mean you are heading for this power trap.

But what if you do get lazy and reduce your level of effort? Maybe a playful approach can help you get back in the swing of things. Why not find something you have never done before that will push you outside your comfort zone, such as giving a lengthy speech not in your native language? Or try to acquire a title or position of power during your mandate for which you have to run a mini-campaign. Not only will it give you exposure, but it will also allow you to taste “winning” again. Another approach could be to piggy-back on a hyperactive colleague and follow him or her around at a couple of events to get back into it and start to enjoy making the political effort again.

When you're honest with yourself and realize you're less motivated than before—perhaps settling for “good enough” or showing up unprepared—it's time for introspection. Ask yourself: What is your mission in politics? Are you still driven by a purpose, or has your role become just a means to a salary, free perks, or social prestige? If the latter, it's

crucial to reignite your passion. Reflect on what motivated you to enter politics, what injustices you want to address, and what changes you aim to make. Reconnect with the roots of your political journey or engage with those in need who lack your access and influence.

If you are not in a position of power in order to make an impact or to improve people's lives, please make way for people who will. Politics is not "a job" like any other. It's a privilege you earn. Power isn't about you. It's about how you use it for others.

5

TRAP

Paralyzed by Perfectionism or Insecurity

When executive coach Marshall Goldsmith defined 10 common habits that explain why people get stuck in their careers at mid-level, he didn't realize there was an important gender aspect to it. Many of the habits he found didn't seem to be applicable to women. That's why he embarked on a journey with female coaches to distinguish 12 habits that keep women back. They found wide disparities in the self-sabotaging behaviors of men versus women, with one of the most obvious differences related to confidence.⁴⁶ In 2011, the UK Institute of Leadership and Management surveyed British managers about how confident they feel in their professions. Half the female respondents reported self-doubt about their job performance and careers, compared with fewer than a third of male respondents.⁴⁷ Does this mean men don't doubt themselves sometimes? Of course not. But they don't let their doubts stop them as often as women do.

⁴⁶ Helgesen and Goldsmith, *How Women Rise*.

⁴⁷ Katty Kay and Claire Shipman, "The Confidence Gap," *The Atlantic*, May 2014.

Looking for perfection

In the past, it was common to mention perfectionism as a *positive* characteristic at a job interview. That would mean you would do a great job and be hard on yourself. What employer doesn't want that kind of employee? The burnout tsunami of the last decades has ended that practice. Perfectionism nowadays is seen much more as a weakness than as a strength. Perfectionists put the bar too high and therefore crash and burn. It's worrying to see the drive to achieve beyond a reasonable standard, and destructive self-criticism is increasingly widespread in Western culture.⁴⁸ This has all kinds of negative effects on people's cognition, emotions, and behavior and is even linked to increased mortality rates among older adults!

While perfectionists may appear to be highly successful, they often suffer from problems in relationships and the workplace, as well as poor mental health and emotional well-being. Perfectionists fear being wrong or messing up, or receiving negative feedback, and they are preoccupied by being seen positively by others. They are not comfortable with or even tolerant of anything less than perfection. They constantly compare themselves with others and are often appearance-oriented, self-critical, and driven by fear. Contrary to Elsa's popular quote in Disney's *Frozen*, they don't let it go, to the detriment of their well-being.

While you may think perfectionism is the only way to survive in politics, it's also a shortcut to depression, anxiety, addiction, and life paralysis.⁴⁹ According to *How Women Rise*, striving to be perfect will help you reach the halfway point but it will get in your way as you aspire to attain higher levels.⁵⁰ In politics, I never came across perfectionist men. The men were ambitious, for sure, but they never seemed to lose themselves in the details. Having worked with Ursula von der Leyen's team

48 H. Patterson, C. Firebaugh, T. Zolnikov, R. Wardlow, S. Morgan, and B. Gordon, "A Systematic Review on the Psychological Effects of Perfectionism and Accompanying Treatment," *Psychology* 12 (2021), 1–24.

49 Brené Brown, *The Gifts of Imperfection* (Hazelden Publishing, 2018).

50 Helgesen and Goldsmith, *How Women Rise*, p. 125.

on several occasions, I was flabbergasted that no detail was overlooked. Everything was prepared and thought through: the press releases, the speeches, the height of her desk, her clothing (even her shoes), and even the food on the table. Nothing was left to chance, placing a considerable burden on her team. Of course, you can't blame her. As the first female European Commission President, every mistake she made would have been amplified and used against her. Perfectionism is almost inevitable if you carry the burden of being such a role model. You're afraid your mistakes will be seized upon as evidence women are not cut out for politics after all. This is true for all women in positions of power, but even more so for women of color. In the US, African American women testify to feeling an extra burden of expectations to perform and prove their worth.⁵¹

Perfectionism, however, can become more of a hindrance than a help. In *The Confidence Code*, BBC's Katty Kay and ABC's Claire Shipman explain how perfectionism can lead to self-doubt and even paralysis. Women often decline opportunities or promotions because they feel they aren't "ready yet." This aversion to risk means they hold back until they are 100 percent certain they can succeed. For instance, women typically apply for promotions only when they meet all the qualifications, whereas men do so at 50 percent. I've never seen a man decline a position because he wouldn't have enough time to do a decent job, or because he lacked the experience for it. However, I saw plenty of female politicians doing weird things. A friend of mine was offered a prime spot in parliamentary elections—almost a guaranteed seat. Yet she turned it down because she felt unprepared. A less experienced man took that spot instead.

Perfectionism also fuels a toxic working environment, as many high-achieving women struggle to delegate, trying to do everything themselves. However, in leadership roles, this approach is unsustainable. Imagine a minister trying to do everything herself except for outsourcing driving. At some point, you have to trust others to do the work. Giving that trust to others and allowing them to do it their way takes time, but it's essential for effective leadership.

⁵¹ Helgesen and Goldsmith, *How Women Rise*, pp. 129–131.

Why do women tend to be perfectionists? Research suggests there is a gender element to it.⁵² Expectations for girls are set in childhood and are reinforced in the workplace. Girls tend to be rewarded for being obedient and excellent students more than boys. Although perfectionism may look like a way to protect yourself from making mistakes, it often holds female politicians back. As Maria Shriver put it, “perfectionism doesn’t make you feel perfect. It makes you feel inadequate.” It can lead to emotional distress, undermining your career and making you decline good offers or push away good staffers.

⁵² Katty Kay and Claire Shipman, *The Confidence Code: The Science and Art of Self-Assurance—What Women Should Know* (HarperBusiness, 2014).



Red flags

- **“I want it to be perfect.”** A speech, a TV interview, a piece of legislation, an outfit—if indeed you want it to be perfect, the preparation will probably be excessive. You will end up spending too much time and energy on little things or lose yourself in the details. Fifty versions of a speech is a clear sign that something is off. This attitude also means you are overestimating your control over things. What if your speech is perfect, but the sound equipment fails (Murphy’s law!), or there is so much noise and talking in the room that you get the impression no one is listening to your perfect speech? There will always be things that are beyond your control. By focusing on every minor mistake, you will end up walking around depressed, frustrated, and angry.
- **Deciding not to decide anything.** Indecisiveness has many causes, like perfectionism, and one thing is certain: It will impact your political life span, especially since deciding and delivering is the one thing people expect of someone in a position of power. Trust in politics and the system has been unstable over the past decade with major crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine,⁵³ so more than ever

⁵³ According to Pew Research, which has been keeping track of public trust in the United States since 1958, they are now at the lowest trust measures in nearly seven decades of polling. The Eurobarometer shows better numbers for Europe for trust in European,

the pressure is on to deliver. It seems like stating the obvious, but self-confidence is key in decision-making. A lack of self-confidence and second-guessing often leads to procrastination. Of course, it's okay to get all the facts right, to consult all the necessary experts, and to listen to different voices before you present your long-term strategy on health care or your cybersecurity plan. But when you decide not to decide at all and you fail to deliver any plan as a minister because you are afraid to make bad choices or to make a mistake, you fail to do what people have elected you to do, and they will have no problem recognizing your lethargy.

- **Micromanagement.** I haven't found any conclusive scientific evidence that micromanaging is more of a trap for women than for men. What is true, however, is that micromanaging is the worst management style of all. It saps the energy of a team. Regardless of whether micromanaging is intentional or not, it's defeating, disempowering, and frustrating.⁵⁴ Research shows that people have strong negative emotional and physiological reactions to unnecessary or unwanted help and that it can erode interpersonal relationships quickly.⁵⁵
- **Imposter syndrome.** "First, I want to do local politics" "When I become an expert in defense, I will" Women invent all kinds of reasons and excuses to self-sabotage. Afraid of being exposed as an imposter, they decline opportunities. But the more relevant question is: Is anyone ever fully ready for a certain responsibility or position of power? Can you ever be "ready" to be a prime minister? Politics is such a volatile

national, and local governments, but also shows a decline. See Pew Research Center, "Public Trust in Government: 1958–2024," June 24, 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2023/09/19/public-trust-in-government-1958-2023/>; and Eurofound, "Trust in Institutions Continues to Fall in EU, Despite Declining Unemployment and Phasing Out of Pandemic Restrictions," July 7, 2022, <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/en/news/2022/trust-institutions-continues-fall-eu-despite-declining-unemployment-and-phasing-out>.

⁵⁴ Heidi Lynne Kurter, "Is Micromanaging a Form of Bullying? Here Are 3 Things You Should Know," *Forbes*, June 29, 2021.

⁵⁵ Colin M. Fisher, Teresa M. Amabile, and Julianna Pillemer, "How to Help (Without Micromanaging)," *Harvard Business Review*, January–February 2021.

environment that even if you have already held several positions of power, the challenges on your path will be new, outside your comfort zone, and you will have to be creative. So much is clear after having worked in the Prime Minister's office during the pandemic, an unprecedented crisis in which we all had to take unprecedented measures. No one among my colleagues was ready, but there was no time to wonder if we were qualified enough to navigate through this crisis. We were in the pool and could either swim or drown.



How to save yourself

Perfectionism is a power trap if it paralyzes you and prevents you from getting anything done because you lose yourself in irrelevant details. I'm not advocating here for politicians to lower their standards and start becoming sloppy—especially not women, as any mistake is taken as evidence in our gender-biased world that women aren't fit for duty. Given the low trust levels of people in politics, I can only applaud politicians who hold their work to the highest standards.

However, it's important to mitigate the negative impact of perfectionism. To prevent mental distress and burnout, it's essential to learn how to embrace mistakes and practice kindness and gentleness toward yourself (and others). Anna Brailsford of Code First Girls, a social impact organization whose mission is to close the gender gap in tech by helping women, confessed to having been one of these women who hold themselves to high standards. She forced herself to change that attitude because being too afraid to fail was holding her back. She believes women need to embrace the “fail fast” mindset advocated in Silicon Valley—to be “more forgiving,” to focus less on the perfection of the task and more on the way it is executed and what can be learned along the way. Brailsford tries to do something that forces her out of her comfort zone at least once every day because it produces two feelings, anxiety and adrenaline,

and to slowly start to enjoy those feelings.⁵⁶ We emphasize this practice in the Alliance of Her Academy, especially when it comes to saying NO and creating boundaries. During training, I also ask the participants to challenge their perfectionism by looking at “mediocre men” around them. This usually gives rise to uneasy but funny moments, as the men in the room confirm that in comparison with all the perfectionist women in the room, they feel pretty average. The observation of mediocre men helps women save time and focus on the essence. Would men reminisce so long about outfits? How long would men mope over an interview in which a journalist didn’t put things down just the way they liked? Would they spend that much time reviewing social media copy? Would they freak out about an unflattering photograph? If the answer is no, these men are winning while you are wasting your limited resources of time and energy. Their mediocrity can help them “let go.” Of course, I’m not saying all men are mediocre, as I have an exceptional model at home and many more among my friends.

To avoid letting your perfectionism overwhelm your team, it’s essential to set high standards without resorting to controlling or micromanaging. Focus on teamwork by helping your staff constructively and staying involved without making them feel controlled. There are three key preconditions for this:

- **Good timing:** Offer advice when it’s needed, not pre-emptively, to avoid making your team feel micromanaged.
- **Clear communication:** Articulate your supportive role from the start to foster a collaborative “we’re in this together” atmosphere.
- **Balanced engagement:** Find the right frequency for checking in—enough to support, but not so much that you disrupt their workflow.

⁵⁶ Dougal Shaw, “CEO Secrets: ‘Perfectionism Can Hold Women Back,’” BBC News, May 19, 2021.

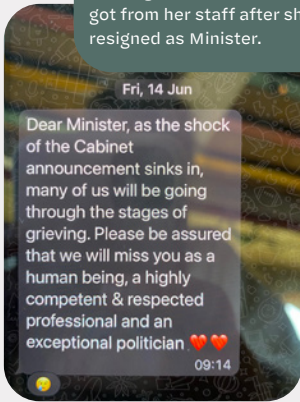
In my search for women who have successfully navigated the challenges of power, I met the remarkable Nomafrench Mbombo, former Provincial Minister of Health & Wellness in Western Cape, South Africa. Previously a university professor and health clinician, she managed her perfectionism by clearly communicating expectations and setting firm boundaries with her team. Her office operated on the principles of “I.E.I.”: integrity, energy, and intelligence. Staff were expected to live by these—never lie, never hide problems, and work as much as needed. As she humorously noted, “R.I.P. is on graves because there’s plenty of time to rest when you’re dead.” To ensure perfection, every proposal, text, or project passed through what she called “I.C.U.1” (first check)

and “I.C.U.2” (second check) before the final deadline. She joked that a deadline is called a “deadline” because “if you surpass it, you’re dead.” Despite her high demands, she obviously motivated her team with humor and this kind of informal vocabulary. She also offered them freedom and flexibility, allowing them to work where they felt most productive, and when the work was done, they would go out and celebrate together⁵⁶.

If you are a perfectionist, here is a short to-do list: Accept that humans make mistakes. Don’t focus on the little things that went wrong but judge the whole. Stop looking at things in black

and white. Women excel at judging that they have either done something well or badly, while there are a million shades of gray in between.⁵⁷ Being able to delegate and prioritize is another important safeguard. Finally, it’s essential that you get comfortable with taking measured risks. This will create a less stressful environment for you and the people around you.

Message Nomafrench got from her staff after she resigned as Minister.



Insecurity overload

I take the risk of being called a sexist by saying Trap 5 is a common trap for women, but it serves a purpose. Over the course of the years, I have heard so many female politicians and their aides complaining about the effects of insecurity in their daily political activities that I cannot exclude it from this book. The male politicians I have worked for never seemed to suffer from insecurity, or at least they didn't show it. In all the years I worked for Belgian Prime Minister Alexander De Croo, I remember him being openly nervous once, when he was about to speak in front of thousands of people in a stadium in Johannesburg. I was amused at the time because I had never seen him nervous before. Some of the female politicians I know would show that same nervousness when facing only 20 people.

Insecurity for women is a widespread phenomenon. "Men are almost always more confident than women, even when the women are equally or more talented," according to *The Confidence Code*.⁵⁸ Insecurity is one of the most common reasons women don't enter politics in the first place. Compared with men, women are more pessimistic about their ability to be influential in politics.⁵⁹ If you are not insecure as a woman because it's in your nature, you might as well become so given the little margin for mistakes allowed to women and the actual violence women in politics meet online and on the streets. A 2016 survey of female parliamentarians by the Inter-Parliamentary Union across 39 countries showed that 44 percent of surveyed women had received threats of death, rape, assault, or abduction. One-fifth said they had been subjected to sexual violence.⁶⁰ You would have to be superhuman not to be intimidated or scared.

⁵⁸ Kay and Shipman, *The Confidence Code*.

⁵⁹ Jennifer Wolak, "Self-Confidence and Gender Gaps in Political Interest, Attention, and Efficacy," *Journal of Politics* 82(4) (October 2020).

⁶⁰ "Sexism, Harassment and Violence against Women Parliamentarians," Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2016, <https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/issue-briefs/2016-10/sexism-harassment-and-violence-against-women-parliamentarians>.

Can too much insecurity make women fail in politics? The answer is yes. Although power can be transformative and boost women's confidence, as Alliance of Her alumna Annely Akkermann (EE) felt, it can also hamper you significantly. Not being confident enough leads you to avoid certain high-exposure activities, such as granting TV interviews, giving high-profile speeches, or taking on the responsibility for big legislative files. It may hold you back from doing what you should be doing or taking the chances you should be taking. Ironically, showing insecurity means you run the risk of being framed as incompetent or weak. Moreover, insecurity is often (intentionally) mistaken for incompetence, which is deadly for women in politics. Research shows that a man can be both incompetent and unlikable and still be elected. Women, however, need to be both competent and likable, as research by the 2012 Barbara Lee Foundation found. Having confidence is critical, as is demonstrating it. Voters want to be assured that a woman can get the job done in the largely male game of politics. So, however human or inevitable it is, showing insecurity is bad.

Maybe insecurity makes you think you don't deserve the position of power you have (imposter syndrome), leading to self-sabotage. Maybe insecurity makes you work too much to overcompensate and to prove your worth, leading to burnout. Maybe insecurity paralyzes you. Or maybe your insecurity affects your team, therefore making the workplace very toxic. There are no happy endings here.

A story of insecurity is the case of Meryame Kitir, a Belgian socialist politician with extensive experience as a trade union activist and parliamentarian who became Minister of Development Cooperation in 2020. After two years in office, her party asked her to resign upon hearing rumors of toxic behavior in the office. In her response to the press, she carefully admits that "the diplomatic world was a totally new world to discover."⁶¹ It was suggested in the press that the unhealthy atmosphere was created in part by her insecurity and inability to incorporate feedback. Not having a diploma, she may have felt intimidated by the

61 Hannes Heynderickx, "Meryame Kitir (Vooruit) over haar ontslag als minister: 'Mijn excuses als ik mensen ongewild gekwetst heb,'" *Het Nieuwsblad*, December 18, 2022.

multilingual diplomats surrounding her. This lack of confidence made her postpone decisions, micromanage, and focus in an exaggerated way on things such as social media. The feeling of not being good enough put her team under pressure and made her unnecessarily anxious.⁶²

⁶² I spoke to some of Meryame's staffers, who prefer to remain anonymous. They were willing to share their experience to the benefit of women in power.



Red flags

- **You rely heavily on others.** If you don't feel confident, the quick fix is to rely on others. Machiavelli is very firm when it comes to listening to others. If you rely on others to make decisions or if you are too scared to make decisions, this weakens your position. It undermines your authority. As a politician, it is wise to listen, to gather all the relevant information, but then to remain in charge of the decision-making. If a decision doesn't appear to be yours, you are getting into stormy waters. Seeking approval from others will be a time- and energy-consuming exercise for you and for your "victims." Receiving an encouraging tap on the shoulder and assurance that you'll be fine and do well is okay. Needing an endless stream of confirmation and praise before you go on stage is problematic.
- **You postpone decisions.** When you are not sure what to decide, and you end up ruminating and going back and forth, you might end up deciding nothing at all, which is detrimental for the perception of you as a female politician. As we know, you are fighting the existing gender bias to prove to people that you are worthy. Not deciding and not leading reinforces the idea that politics is a man's job and actively confirms the stereotypes that work against you.

- **You can't say no.** It's good to keep in mind that the inability to say no is directly linked to the need to seek approval from others.⁶³ Saying yes to any request that pops up isn't smart. Saying no requires guts.
- **You always compare yourself.** I'm very happy I was able to grow up in the nineties without social media—no updates, no feeds, no endless comparing. There is a reason why girls worldwide are suffering from mental health issues. From body dysmorphia to depression, growing up scrolling, liking, and tagging has proven to have a very negative impact on the mental health of young girls and teens.⁶⁴ While the comparison culture may seem harmless, the reality is much more sinister than social media platforms dare to admit.⁶⁵ Social media has been linked to increased loneliness, anxiety, and depression, as well as self-harm and suicidal thoughts, because of all the comparing and unrealistic expectations that follow. Comparison as a “thief of joy” (attributed to Theodore Roosevelt) is a very human reflex but one that can become unhealthy. Comparison can inspire you to do better. But far too often, comparison becomes toxic and makes people too anxious or paralyzed.
- **You are scared of journalists.** The most striking difference I have witnessed between male and female politicians is their approach to the media. While male politicians give interviews without having anything to say and rarely decline a TV interview, female politicians tend to take a much more cautious approach to the media and journalists. For example, Alliance of Her alumna Liesje Schreimacher (NL) admits that she rarely agrees to appear on TV as Minister of Foreign Affairs. It can be scary; you don't control the questions or the direction of the interview, and it can make you feel less in control. This is a shame because TV and national coverage is, even in a social media world, still a guarantee of huge visibility, the currency of politics.

⁶³ Dr. Sheri Jacobson, “The Psychological Cost of Never Saying No,” Harley Therapy Ltd., January 19, 2022.

⁶⁴ Lucy Buchholz, “Compare and Despair: The Disastrous Impact of Social Media,” March 8, January 16, 2023.

⁶⁵ Georgia Wells, Jeff Horwitz, and Deepa Seetharaman, “Facebook Knows Instagram Is Toxic for Teen Girls, Company Documents Show,” *Wall Street Journal*, September 14, 2021.



How to save yourself

Female politicians are outnumbered, interrupted, distrusted, judged by what they wear, punished more harshly for their mistakes, and targeted by physical and online threats. No wonder women in power become insecure. But let's look at the facts. Not only do women have the right to take up their space, but they also do a damn good job. So, before you go all insecure, look at the facts as noted by the Global Institute for Women's Leadership at King's College London.⁶⁶ Women leaders are more proactive legislators and more responsive to constituents. Having more women representatives is related to lower levels of corruption. Evidence suggests that having more women in politics leads to better implementation of welfare and health services and infrastructure, and women political leaders are associated with lower levels of conflict and fewer human rights abuses. Women leaders also seem to make for more equal and caring societies.⁶⁷ Moreover, in business, women score higher than men in most leadership skills, even in the traditional male bastions such as IT, operations, and law. Women excel in taking the initiative, acting with resilience, practicing

⁶⁶ M. Cowper-Coles, "Women Political Leaders: The Impact of Gender on Democracy," Global Institute for Women's Leadership, 2020, <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/giwl/assets/women-political-leaders.pdf>.

⁶⁷ Sieghart, *The Authority Gap*.

self-development, driving for results, and displaying high integrity and honesty, according to Jack Zenger and Joseph Folkman in the *Harvard Business Review*.⁶⁸ This insight made them wonder out loud why there still hasn't been a female president in the United States. We'll know by the end of 2024 if that's still the case!

When it comes to confidence, women apparently just need to be patient, because age is on their side. Zenger and Folkman found the confidence ratings of men and women merging at the age of 40. According to their research, at the age of 60 female confidence increases more and leaves the male rates behind.

If you don't want to wait that long, you can try to tackle your insecurity head on. First, look it straight in the face. Pushing insecurities away or avoiding self-criticism will only make them stronger. What's triggering this idea that you're not good enough? Does this go back to your childhood and upbringing? Is this based on a negative comment from a parent or a teacher that lingered in your mind too long? Turning toward the discomfort and looking your insecurity in the face is the first step in eventually melting it away. Reframing it is the next step. Instead of listing all the things you can't do, start focusing on what you are good at and try building on that. Always have two or three stories of successful projects up your sleeve to empower you, as Kira Rudik (UKR) suggests. You have to challenge your negative thoughts and practice self-compassion. Focus on personal growth rather than on comparisons. The third step is to start doing. Confidence is like a muscle that can be trained and strengthened over time.⁶⁹ Passively waiting and ruminating won't allow you to celebrate your accomplishments and build upon them. In the end, repetition works. Whether it's public speaking or making decisions, the more you do it, the more you learn along the way and the better you get at it. Finally, you don't have to do it alone. Look for support and surround yourself with trustworthy and empowering

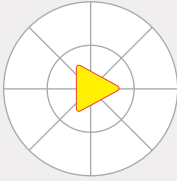
68 Jack Zenger and Joseph Folkman "Research: Women Score Higher than Men in Most Leadership Skills," *Harvard Business Review*, June 25, 2019.

69 Kimberly King, "I Survived the Glass Cliff. Here's What I Tell Other Execs about How to Beat Being Set Up to Fail," *Fastcompany.com*, 2023.

staffers, family, and friends, people who challenge you without wearing you down, empower you without false flattery, recognize your worth, and help you focus on progress rather than perfection.

Can you overcome your insecurity? Hell yes. Who should be your role model? The iron lady herself! A BBC2 documentary series about Margaret Thatcher shows the young Margaret being consumed by self-doubt. When she was praised for her brave words in the House of Commons, she replied: “I’m normally as frightened as a kitten, it’s just that somehow you manage to control it.” She did, by putting on “a sort of armor” to cope with the rigors of politics, according to the documentary.⁷⁰

⁷⁰ Miranda Green, “Don’t Look Down, Women Suffering Imposter Syndrome Are Told,” *Financial Times*, May 29, 2019.



Action items

When in power you can be your own worst enemy, when you should be your biggest ally. You are your own best friend, so behave like it.

Trap 4: Become Lazy

Ask yourself

Did you stop learning new things at university? Do you think you are a natural-born politician? Do you still think you can win elections by sending post cards? Do you think your competitors are clueless so there is no need to worry? Do you think being on tv makes meeting constituents unnecessary?

Action

Push yourself outside your comfort zone so you don't become complacent or entitled.

If you don't, your enemies will outdo you based on their level of motivation..

Trap 5: Paralyzed by Perfectionism or Insecurity

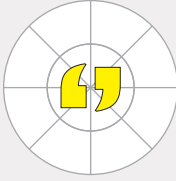
Ask yourself

Are you constantly trying to prove yourself? Is a stain on your shirt your biggest nightmare? Do you (micro) manage your own social media? Is someone in your team responsible for counting the meters between your car and the entrance? Do you cancel speeches because you don't feel ready? Do you say no to opportunities because you are not ready?

Action

Focus on the process of learning and just jump.

Perfect doesn't exist. There are many mediocre politicians around you.



Interview with **LIESJE SCHREIMACHER**^{NL}

At the time of the interview, she was the Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation.

After participating in the European Women's Academy (now known as the Alliance of Her), Liesje ran for the European Parliament and was elected. After two and a half years as MEP, she was asked to become Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation in the fourth cabinet of Mark Rutte. Prior to her public office, she worked behind the scenes for almost seven years as an assistant in the Dutch Parliament and to Minister of Defense Jeanine Hennis-Plasschaert. Liesje was the first Dutch minister to give birth during her mandate.

You created a new life while you were a minister. Does that mean there is life outside politics for a minister?

I found love during my time as a minister in the cabinet, so yes. And I know other members of the cabinet who found their current partners as well. But I won't deny that it is hard and you have to prioritize, because I often find myself in a bubble. It seems that politics is a lifestyle in itself. My family and friends try to drag me out of it on occasion, but it is hard to escape. When I'm at a birthday party people always try to talk politics with me.

You are Liesje for them but Madame Minister for the others. Is there someone who dares to challenge you?

Yes, my partner. He used to be politically engaged so he knows politics and I like him as my sparring partner. My friends tend to be more forgiving and try to give me a break, because they are well aware that the outside world can be critical enough. It's often my friends' husbands or partners who are the ones that are more confrontational. They seem happy to finally meet a politician to question everything that is going on in Dutch politics at that moment.

What do you find hard about being in a position of power?

I've learned as an assistant that the room changes when the person with power enters the room. It doesn't matter who is at the table. That can make it difficult to read the relations and interactions between people. Sometimes I ask my assistant or other people that I trust what happened before I came into the room or to give me a little bit of background on the people in front of me, so I can understand the dynamics.

Research shows that there is a huge gender authority gap in politics. Do you sometimes feel your authority is tested?

Yes, sometimes you can just feel it. You don't know exactly what is happening, but you feel people are not working with you, but against you. I also hear it from people who work at other ministries: "Our Minister wants this or that, but we don't support this, so we're just going to make it as difficult as we can." Yes, I know it happens. There is no denying.

Is this why young women in politics have trouble with their staff?

It can be problematic, when you are new and young, and your staff is well established, and they don't really take you seriously. But I have experienced that this also happens to men. So, I don't necessarily think

that I have more trouble with my staff than my male colleagues, but I may be more sensitive to it.

What I have also seen around me is that young women ask a lot from themselves. They want to do everything perfectly. And when you're not being supported by your party or people you can trust, it can be quite lonely and stressful. I'm not going to defend people who harass their staff, but I do acknowledge it can feel quite lonely and difficult, and if you don't allow yourself to look to others for help or advice when things start going south, a difficult situation can spiral out of control with terrible consequences for everyone involved.

What do you do when you feel the room isn't working with you?

I try to listen and to show people that I'm listening. I ask them to explain their point of view, why they don't agree with me, why they want to go in another direction.

So listening is your secret weapon?

It's the only way I know. Some ministers can say without hesitation "I don't care. I want it this way." And for some, that works. But when it is not in your character, that's doesn't fly. It would not be realistic and it's not my style, to be honest.

Since you were a staffer yourself, you know the hours can be long and the time can be rough. Do you take care of them? Like pizza nights and ...

Hmmmm, good point. Of course I try to take care of them as best as I can. But thinking about it, I could treat them better. I guess this is one of the pitfalls with a job that is so demanding, not realizing what the people around you need ...

Paralyzing perfectionism, rings a bell?

Yes, guilty as charged, I am a perfectionist. I always check every quote, every line and every tweet that is sent out.

Political talk shows are another example. I don't do them often, because I want it to go perfectly. So, that takes a lot of time to prepare and a lot of energy. That means I don't accept an invitation unless I find it really important. While I see my colleagues just go, not care, and go for the visibility.

Why does everything have to be perfect?

Because I don't want to get into trouble or get criticism for something I could have done better. That doesn't make me an easy boss, but of course, in the end, it's my name and reputation on the line. That's what makes it difficult to "let it go." And somewhere deep down, I also want to keep proving to my party that they made a good decision when they put me there.

The party, another interesting topic! How is your relationship with the party? Do you invest a lot of time and energy in that?

I feel confident about our relationship (laughing). Of course the departure of Mark Rutte and a new party leader, Dilan Yesilgoz, taking his place, is followed by a shift in the power balance within the party. But I think that is a good thing for a party to go through. Concerning the time I spend with the party, I try to attend party gatherings such as congresses, but in all honesty, because I travel so much with my job, I don't have that much time. After my time as a minister I hope that will change.

Because parties can be ruthless, right?

When you make a mistake, the party can be quite unforgiving. But that's not abnormal because many talented people are waiting for an opportunity to become a minister or gain a position of power.

Having said that, I'm always amazed by how some people rely on the party to find them a new job or position. You would be surprised how many people who had to resign, still expect something from the party. That's odd, especially in liberal parties, where everyone always talks about taking responsibility.

Prior to becoming an MEP, I have worked hard to become an attorney-at-law to ensure that whatever happened, I could always go back to practicing law. I think that's healthy. It also makes me more autonomous in my decision-making. I'm not afraid to raise my voice, because I'm not married to the party. And that would be my advice to anyone in politics: Make sure you know how to do other things and have an exit strategy.

Will leaving your position of power be easy?

I just took maternity leave, so that allowed me to feel what it would be like to become less relevant. People stop asking you questions. That was a humbling experience, and I noticed my ego was struggling a bit with that. But, at the same time, I have always known the seats weren't mine. When I became an MEP, a friend sat me down and said: "OK, two things. First, please enjoy this experience to the fullest, because time goes by very, very quickly. And secondly, it's not *your* seat. It's something you get to borrow. So please make full use of it, but remember that it's not about you." I've always tried to keep this in the back of my head.

Why is it so painful when parties drop politicians?

Everyone—especially in politics—wants to be liked by others, so no one wants to be the bearer of bad news. Which is why the honest talk of "you're not really functioning" or "we don't have a new job for you" hardly takes place. And of course it is especially painful when you don't see it coming. Overall, from what I have seen and from what I hear from others, there is hardly any expectations management within political parties.

Is that the hardest part of the job?

I'd say the most nerve-wrecking part of the job is the media. You have the 24/7 news cycles and once you're on the bad side, you're toast. I imagine that 20 years ago, you still had more time to explain what you were doing and why you were taking a certain direction. Now, journalists seem to start from distrust, believing almost all politicians lie. And I have found that these discussions do not always involve getting to the truth but are more focused on what sells. And conflict sells. This is why I always feel that I need my guard up around journalists.

But what about visibility then?

Polling suggests people don't want politicians with big egos and big stories, they want politicians to fix their problems. So, that's what I do. I don't need to be on TV every day or to be recognized on the streets. I guess therefore I'm a bit boring in the eyes of the media.

Which is an advantage, because the opposition doesn't come looking for me. At the same time, if you are not so visible, it's more difficult to get votes. So, you need to find a balance between being boring and being out there showing people what you're doing for them. I think if you want to be in power for a long time, you have to be a little bit boring.

Are journalists wrong? Isn't there a lot of lying in politics?

Of course there is a lot of framing going on, such as only focusing on the positive consequences of certain policy or decisions. But straight out lying? If you see what happened to Halbe Zijlstra when he told a lie (Dutch Foreign Minister who lied about attending a meeting with Vladimir Putin in 2006), that was perceived as a cardinal sin. Halbe left politics and has never returned.

How do you stay sane in this business?

Well, the system does not take care of you. So I have a few “mentors,” for political questions. But for your mental health, you need a more personal coach, someone who knows politics but isn’t part of the system. Because you need to be able to deal with the pressure and all the emotions that come with power in a safe space with someone you can trust, and with whom you can laugh about all the funny and bizarre things you experience!

What would be your advice for women in power to stay sane?

First of all, learn how to let go. Don’t be too much of a perfectionist (and if you find out how to do it, please tell me how). Secondly, always have a Plan B, so you can have some control over your own exit strategy, allowing you to be independent. And finally—and I know this is off topic but I always want to share this with other women—share your ambitions! Tell people what position you want. You assume that they know, but oftentimes they don’t, because let’s face it, people are preoccupied with their own ambitions most of the time. Of course that doesn’t always mean that you gain it right away, but no guts, no glory!

**THIRD BASKET OF
POWER TRAPS**

THE GAME

There is a reason why the famous Netflix series starring Kevin Spacey refers to a game of cards.⁷¹ There are a lot of similarities between politics and card games. You have players, tactics, winners and losers, good cards and bad cards. According to Mark Field, a British politician and MP for Cities of London and Westminster, playing cards as a child helped him in his life of politics, first and foremost because there is a lot of uncertainty and chance in politics.⁷² You are never 100 percent sure about the cards the other person is holding, so you have to make the best choices and judgments you can according to the information you have. Another reason is that politicians, just like card players, are not necessarily playing to win. Assuming that would be a mistake, Field writes, because some politicians don't play to win. They find pleasure in being part of the game, or even in watching the other person lose. The unknown and the unpredictable make politics exciting but difficult, and when you operate based on false premises, you end up losing.

⁷¹ This series was in fact an American adaptation of a British political thriller series broadcast by the BBC in 1990. The original British version, based on Michael Dobbs' 1989 novel of the same name, was set in the political arena of post-Thatcher Britain. Dobbs was a former Chief of Staff at the Conservative Party headquarters.

⁷² "How Analyze Politics by Playing Cards," markfieldmp.com, <https://www.markfieldmp.com/how-analyze-politics-by-playing-cards>.

What is also true is that politicians don't always play fair. Just like in *House of Cards*, there is a lot of scheming and nasty stuff both on stage and behind the scenes. In *Nice Girls Don't Get the Corner Office*, Lois P. Frankel tries to convey to women that the nice way is not the way up: "Missed opportunities for promotions arise from acting like the nice little girl you were taught to be in childhood: being reluctant to showcase your capabilities, feeling hesitant to speak in meetings."⁷³ When asked what held her back in politics, Estonian MP and Minister of Finance Anneli Akkermann confessed that it was her good-girl upbringing and her grandmother not allowing her to insult anybody. It made her too kind for politics, she reckoned, and therefore she was sometimes taken advantage of. Although I sincerely hope that more women in politics will overcome its Machiavellian nature and enable a different type of leadership than the strong man principle, we are not there yet. And for women (and men) to survive in politics, a degree of shrewdness is needed. Any naïveté needs to be thrown overboard. If you don't want to play dirty, you at least need to understand and acknowledge that others probably will.

73 Lois P. Frankel, *Nice Girls Don't Get the Corner Office: 101 Unconscious Mistakes Women Make That Sabotage Their Careers* (Business Plus, 2004).



TRAP

An Offer Too Good to Be True

Once in a lifetime

One of those false premises in the game of politics is “the opportunity trap”: a position of power, a spot on the list, or a political mandate, presented to you as a wonderful opportunity. It’s sold as something you can’t say no to, an offer too good to be true,⁷⁴ which masks another reality. There are many possibilities, the most obvious ones being: (1) you are ticking a minority box—woman, person of color, person with a handicap, LGBTQIA+; (2) you are from a region where they don’t have any other options; (3) they are trying to get rid of someone else; (4) they are not interested in you as such but want you to attract new voters; (5) they don’t have someone with that expertise and consider you not too much of a threat as you lack experience in the political game.

Such an opportunity entails a clear risk. If you have no clue about defense and you are suddenly dealing with generals and majors who have zero sympathy for people with no military track record, you are working against a strong current. If you have been active in the private

⁷⁴ For the participants of the Alliance of Her Academy, I refer to this offer as “the woman trap,” because in 2024, political parties and party leaders have become quite conscious of gender. All-male teams don’t look good. So they actively (and hopefully sometimes genuinely) look for a competent woman to put in place. Instead of working their way up slowly in the party hierarchy, women are catapulted into high offices just because they are a woman.

sector and are being launched into a ministerial post to digitalize the government, you will be biting off more than you can chew in the face of the political process, the bickering between parties, and the slow process of virtually any decision-making. You will be shocked by the inefficiency of democracy and at a loss when opposition parties shoot down perfectly sensible legislation just because they don't want to let your party win. In both cases, your lack of expertise or lack of experience is a tricky starting point.

Such offers are made to women as well as to men. It is then up to them to either accept or decline. The most important thing, keeping Mark Field in mind, is that you will probably never be certain why you have been offered the seat. But you need to be fully aware that this is potentially an opportunity trap and to consciously play along without having all the information. And before you play, ask the main question: What's in it for you? Will this enable you to pursue your why and enable the change you want to see in society? Or are you just playing along for fun or as a way to arrive somewhere else? A negative reason—not wanting someone else to do it, or to get out of your current job—is probably not the best motivation. In any case, if you decide to play ball, be aware of your precarious starting point, its shortcomings, and the risks.

The Belgian cases

The Belgian government that was installed in 2020, in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, seemed to have a lot of opportunity traps (for women). It was very proud to announce full gender parity, but looking at the women who held positions, you would see odd matches. Minister of Interior Affairs Annelies Verlinden was a top-notch lawyer working for a big international law firm. She had been active in her party locally but never really played at national level. From one day to the other, she went from pursuing court cases in public or administrative law to imposing COVID-19 measures and handling terrorist attacks and the war on drugs. Eva De Bleeker, alumna of the Alliance of Her (BE), who was dealing with fisheries agreements in the European Commission, was catapulted

to the position of Secretary of State on Budget, a highly technical and dry topic. Meryame Kitir, a true activist and former trade union representative in the automotive industry, became Minister of Development Cooperation and suddenly was attending international fora where she was surrounded by diplomats. Hadja Lahbib was a TV journalist and not even a member of the liberal Reformist Movement when she was unexpectedly nominated to replace Sophie Wilmès in 2022 as Minister of Foreign Affairs. In each of the cases, it is clear the parties wanted a woman. But why these women? Did their appointment represent a genuine choice for renewal or a fresh face? Or did they mask other interests, perhaps even a malicious intent to put in place someone who would be slightly uncomfortable and therefore controllable? One of the Romanian Alliance of Her alumnae reacted to this point in my training with the question whether women aren't always chosen because they are the most loyal and will do what they are told? Let's hope not!



Red flags

- **Flattery followed by pressure.** Imagine you are the CEO of a billion-dollar tech company and are invited to lead an electoral list. Party members are calling you to flatter and convince you. They see you as a game changer in raising the pro-business profile of the party and promise you a portfolio to influence tech legislation. They pledge to help you navigate politics. Once you are elected, hidden realities emerge. Party insiders resent you, feeling they deserved your spot, and work to undermine you. Colleagues who benefited from your popularity at the elections turn against you as soon as you make your first mistake. They are eager to replace you as soon as you become a liability. You aren't one of them, after all. This scenario highlights the risks of accepting an offer too fast, without enough skin in the game.
- **You have to decide fast.** You may be pressured to make a decision quickly, with no time to talk or think things through. This was the case for Paulina Brandberg, Swedish Minister of Equality. Paulina worked as a prosecutor, specializing in cases related to sexual offenses and domestic violence, when she was asked to become a minister. Although the portfolio fit her perfectly, she had no political experience. She had less than a day to decide.

- **A portfolio that doesn't fit you at all.** Some politicians are good because they are generalists. Whether they are in charge of education or agriculture, they are quick to catch up and get comfortable with the files on their desks. Others are experts in a certain field and leverage that against their competitors or colleagues in the parliament. When, however, you are an expert in defense and you are being asked to become the poster girl for free tampons, you might wonder whether they are serious. That's probably the moment to decide there is nothing to gain for you in the long run and to decline politely.
- **The challenge of the century, or cleaning up other people's mess.** For women, this phenomenon is known as the glass cliff, an analogy to the glass ceiling. Women have a better chance of taking the lead when an organization is facing a crisis.⁷⁵ While men have the privilege to decline a risky offer to lead, women feel this may be their only shot and therefore they must take the opportunity. Theresa May became UK Prime Minister easily as no one else wanted the post in the tumultuous political climate following the Brexit vote. May didn't even vote to leave the UK but stepped in to manage the mess David Cameron left behind. In a similar vein, Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir became the first female Prime Minister of Iceland amid violent street protests when the Icelandic economy was in a dire state.⁷⁶ Sadly, taking the risk doesn't mean women succeed. PwC found that in a crisis, female managers were more easily forced out of office compared with men.⁷⁷ Ask Liz Truss, whose reign was shorter than the lifespan of a lettuce.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ The term was formulated by Michelle Ryan and Alex Haslam, of the University of Exeter.

⁷⁶ Susanne Bruckmüller and Nyla R. Branscombe, "How Women End Up on the 'Glass Cliff,'" *Harvard Business Review*, January–February 2011.

⁷⁷ Emily Stuart, "Why Struggling Companies Promote Women: The Glass Cliff, Explained," *Vox*, October 31, 2018.

⁷⁸ Sarah Bores, "Gender and Power: Liz Truss and the Glass Cliff Theory," *Boston Political Review*, December 8, 2022.



How to respond

There aren't many options when you get an offer too good to be true. You either say yes, or you say no. In my honest opinion, the "no" is not the end of your political career. The expression "once in a lifetime" might make you think it is, but if you really have a talent for politics, charisma, a vision, a loyal fan base, and a very clear **WHY**, more opportunities will come—and they may be earned. "Politics is a marathon," I always tell the Alliance of Her participants. Of course you are impatient to make a difference, but the context needs to be right and the offer needs to be in line with your long-term career aspirations, ambitions, values, and strengths. If the opportunity doesn't fit, you should decline. Saying yes to buy leverage for later seems to make sense, but since you don't know what comes next, it can lead to disappointment. The party leader who owes you might not be there anymore when you want to see the favor returned. Or the role may put you in such a pickle you are no longer in a position to demand anything. Saying no can also be an empowering experience. As Alliance of Her alumna Ellen Mok (NL) explained, one can say no while suggesting an alternative: "No, I won't do this, but I will do that." This is a way to show your party that you have ambition and a plan. It's a way to buy credit and respect.

A "yes" has to be a conscious yes, because while unique opportunities or glass cliffs may offer you a chance to shine, they are not without risks, including high stress levels, increased risk of burnout, and even

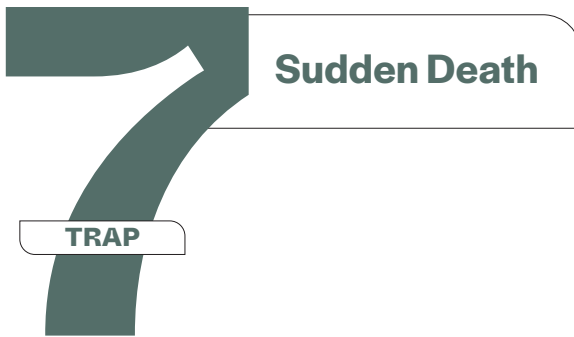
potential setbacks in your career. You must be fully aware of what you are getting yourself into.

A “yes” has to be a smart yes. Deepa Purushothaman, Executive Fellow at Harvard Business School, writes in *The First, The Few, The Only* that women appointed to senior leadership positions must become more comfortable asking for more and learn not to just be thankful for being included. For her, the key to making the best of indecent proposals or glass cliff opportunities is not to accept the bare minimum, but to demand adequate resources and support: money, resources, staff, experts, you name it.⁷⁹ You will need an increase in support systems. Or you can set some conditions: “Yes, I will take on this role, but no, I won’t be going to each single party event”; or “I will have the following people in my team.”

A “yes” also means you need to be your best ally. If you are going to do something challenging, you need to wear your colorful “growth mindset” pants. Consider barriers as opportunities for growth. Even missteps can help you grow as a leader. Focus on your achievements, even if they are small. If you are preoccupied with the chance of failure, you might be too scared to make mistakes and therefore become paralyzed and undermine your chances of succeeding. Success is possible with the right mindset: Own the moment, cherish your unique skills and experiences, and leverage them as stepping stones toward your goals.⁸⁰ If you manage to get to the top of the glass cliff, the view is amazing. Alliance of Her alumna Anneli Akkermann (EE) says she attained her most powerful positions during times of crisis, when there was a high risk that she would fail. She didn’t. And because she was solving problems elegantly, she received a lot of attention, positive feedback, and political credibility.

⁷⁹ Deepa Purushothaman, *The First, the Few, the Only: How Women of Color Can Redefine Power in Corporate America* (Harper Business, 2022).

⁸⁰ King, “I Survived the Glass Cliff.”



Sudden Death

TRAP

Sudden death is not to be taken literally. This chapter is about your political career ending abruptly, or your position of power suddenly being taken away. Thomas Kemmerich was Premier of the German Länder Thuringen for just 24 hours in 2020. Heather Anderson served as an MEP for four days before the UK left the EU. In 2001, Argentina had five presidents in 10 days. Political careers can end abruptly for various reasons—sometimes justified, sometimes seemingly unfair and personal. When political “death” feels disproportionate, it can be tempting to dwell on the unfairness. However, if you are at the heart of political crisis, or you are being targeted, it’s crucial to remain cold-blooded and not get caught up in your emotions. Taking a detached, almost scientific approach, like an anthropologist observing from a distance, is the best way to survive.

Death by partisans

One of the most dangerous things to do in politics is to place unwavering trust in your party. In 15 years in politics, I’ve seen both men and women leave the stage in tears, anger, or disbelief, pushed out without warning. They were in awe: “How could they do this to me?” “All I ever did was be loyal, but what did I get in return?” The disappointment and

betrayal by party members can be devastating. It's natural to trust and bond with your party. You may spend more time with them than with your family; you share values, principles, and even enemies. Many see their party as a tribe or family. But vigilance is wise. Parties are not your family; they are power structures operating on Darwinian principles. You are either an asset or a liability. Maintaining a degree of emotional distance is crucial for survival. If you let your guard down, information shared in confidence can be used against you. There are nice stories of camaraderie and long-lasting friendships, especially when a party is on the rise. But things change when fortunes decline. As parties unravel, seats become scarce, and frictions emerge. Leadership changes can also be quite dramatic.

A healthy approach is to expect nothing from your party in terms of fairness or merit. Even if you have good relationships and bring in votes, you can still get sidelined. This doesn't mean you should be paranoid and never trust anyone, as that would make politics unbearable. However, it's vital to stay vigilant, remain agile, maintain a safe observational distance, and watch for red flags.



Red flags

- **Party people stop replying to your emails and answering your calls.** Parties don't operate according to the same rules as companies. The people who work for parties are a very interesting mix: you have the ideologically convinced, the professionals, the elected officials, former politicians, and aspiring politicians. On top of that, you will find the sons, daughters, friends, or neighbors of politicians or party people, possibly put in position because of their expertise, but often for their loyalty. What all these people have in common is their dependency on the party hierarchy. Their existence within the party secretariat depends on the leadership. In a company, when the CEO leaves, you aren't necessarily replaced. In a party, there's often a trusted club of insiders at work. These insiders often lose their jobs when the leadership changes. That's why the behavior and responsiveness of party people will tell you a lot about your "street cred" within the party. If people are happy to help you and accommodate your requests and questions, you are good. If not, start to worry.
- **You can't get face time with the party president.** While politics can be rough between parties and you can hear ad hominem insults in the media daily, attacking party colleagues in public is a no go. Discourse between party members preferably happens behind closed doors. Any sign of disunity is fuel for your opponents and undermines voters' trust.

Trying to avoid conflict therefore seems inherent to parties. Rising rivalries and tensions aren't addressed up front but loom under the surface, with everyone hoping the issues will go away or that an all-out fight can be avoided. That's why, if you are considered a problem or a troublemaker, doors close and phone calls are not returned.

- **Your team is being criticized.** In the same spirit of avoiding conflict, it may happen that you are being told your team is problematic: Your chief of staff or your spokesperson is unfit for duty, or not to be trusted. Blaming your team constitutes indirect but clear criticism of you and is a sign that something is going wrong.
- **You are being asked to put the party first.** One of the Alliance of Her alumnae, Marie Bjerre (DK), was elected to the Folketing in the 2019 Danish general election and re-elected in 2022, becoming Minister of Digitalization and Equality in Mette Frederiksen's government. Less than a year later, she was suddenly replaced by Mia Wagner, a famous Danish businesswoman and lawyer. The public had gotten to know her when she appeared as an investor on the TV series *Løvens Hule*. She became a member of the political party Venstre just one week before she was appointed.

After two weeks, Wagner resigned for health reasons and Marie Bjerre was reappointed. What happened there? In short, there was a change in party leadership. When Troels Lund Poulsen became the new chairman of the party, he replaced two out of six Venstre ministers. Wagner's appointment was a classic case of bringing in an expert and well-known personality to attract potential new voters. Poulsen told the media that his decision wasn't the result of a wish to exclude Bjerre, but of a wish to include Wagner. Bjerre was asked to move over and "put the party first." On her way to inform the Queen of Denmark of her resignation, she gracefully told the press: "I am surprised, but Venstre's chairman always puts the right team. There are a lot of considerations and balances that must be considered." After the resignation, Bjerre was asked what she had said to the Queen, and she replied, "until I see you again." She didn't show any remorse in public. Due to a twist of fate, Bjerre was put back in office.

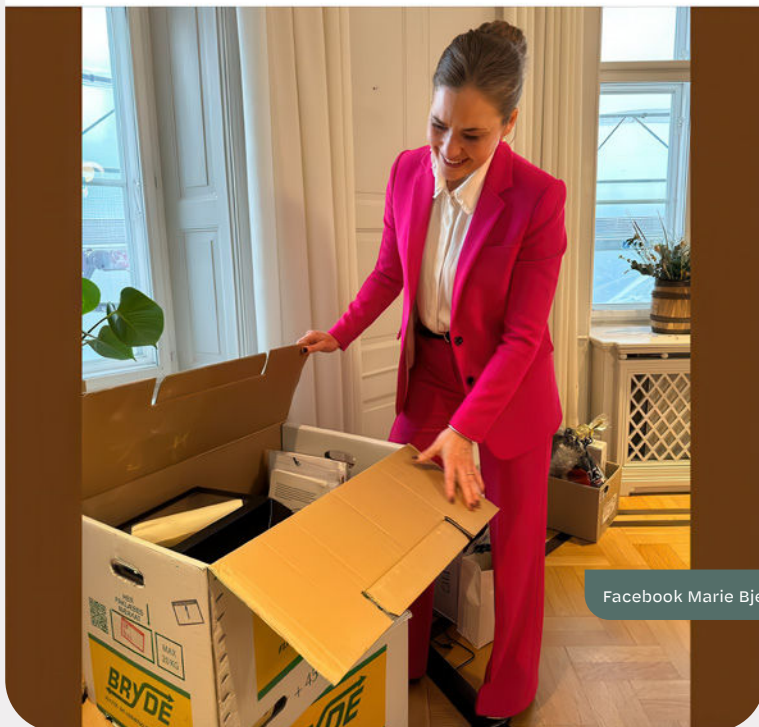
RED FLAGS

On the way to Amalienborg to the Queen to say goodbye.

I'm so proud of my achievements in digitalization and gender equality and I'm so grateful to have been allowed to serve as a minister.

See you again 🥳

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Facebook Marie Bjerre



How to protect yourself

Bjerre's story had a happy ending, but many other stories don't. Being close to the party hierarchy can be a way to secure your position. Playing an active role in the secretariat can be a way to stay close, to stay informed, and to influence the direction the party is heading. However, party leadership comes and goes. Taking up a formal role can become a disadvantage when the leadership changes. As Director of the Alliance of Her Academy, Ian Marquadt, always points out: "Party leaders come, and party leaders go." When the subsequent party chairmen/women don't like one another, your loyalty or closeness to the previous leadership can become problematic. Betting on different horses can work in one party, but against you in another. In short, it's a minefield. That's why one of the common questions of the Alliance of Her participants is "How do I navigate within the party?" Who do I trust, befriend, go to, avoid? Many parties nowadays have women's networks or even empowerment programs for women. But they often can't take away the sharp edges of party dynamics. Moreover, within these networks competition can arise between the members. Volatility within parties is a given, which means that if your relationship with the current leadership is not great, you can stick around and hope for improvement with the next. The downside is that promises made to you by the current leadership might not survive the next. Being promised a spot on the list by the current party president doesn't mean the next one will support you too.

An important safeguard is to have a strong network and really work to get to know the party and its dynamics. Many of the Alliance of Her alumnae success stories point to their effort to find out who’s who by having endless coffees, or by meticulously mapping out the people in the party and giving them ratings on power and familiarity. You can like or dislike your party, but having your allies lined up (in an excel sheet if possible) will help you navigate, dodge bullets, and gather support if needed. Alliance of Her alumna Anne Stärk (AT) also recommends proactively looking for male allies in the party and keeping them close.

Second, in order to ensure that you receive warnings before it’s too late, you should have eyes and ears within the party. If there are different “camps” or “clans,” seek out intel from all sides, if not directly, then maybe via a staffer who is considered part of “the other side.” “You have to play the game to change the game,” as Anna Stärk says. Outreach is something proactive and efficient people do. Your contacts with the party might seem to be in the category of “not urgent but important,”⁸¹ so not on your priority list, until you get into some kind of trouble and by then it’s too late.

Stephen Covey’s Time Management Matrix

	Urgent	Not Urgent
Important	<p>Quadrant 1</p> <p>Crises Pressing Problems Projects with Deadlines</p>	<p>Quadrant 2</p> <p>Relationship Building Planning Recreation</p>
Not Important	<p>Quadrant 3</p> <p>Interruptions Some Phone Calls Some Mail Some Reports</p>	<p>Quadrant 4</p> <p>Busy Work Some Phone Calls Some Mail Time Wasters</p>

⁸¹ Based on Covey’s 7 habits of highly effective people. Covey distinguishes between proactive people—people who focus their efforts on things that they can do something about—and reactive people, who blame, accuse, behave like victims, and complain about external factors over which they have no control.

Catch of the day

Another lethal false premise is to trust that there is a thing called justice in politics—that politicians get what they deserve, that good things happen to good politicians and bad things happen to bad politicians. If you have watched *House of Cards* or even real-life politics, you know that's not true. Bad people get elected and bad people get away with fraud, scandals, and misbehavior while other people don't even survive the smallest mistakes or errors. Their mistakes can be blown up and, after a media storm, end in their inglorious exit.

If you separate out the human suffering, it's fascinating to see how this sort of sudden death occurs. At no point is a politician's survival or demise 100 percent guaranteed. In the end, their fate is determined by a combination of things, some of which are often unrelated to the mistake they made or the issue at stake. Sometimes your opponents will have something else to hide that week and want to turn the spotlight on you. At other times your party may have been under pressure for a while and you are the sacrifice to be made in order to move on. Sometimes your party can save you, sometimes it can't.

Two crises, different outcomes

When Sarah Schlitz (Greens), Belgian Secretary of State for Gender Equality, Equal Opportunity and Diversity, came under scrutiny for adding her personal logo to a subsidies grant document, she must have thought it was a minor issue, a storm she would survive. However, mistakes were made, and she had to resign. The first mistake was that the two politicians who exposed the misconduct were called “nazis” on X by one of her advisors. Instead of downplaying the hostilities, this increased them. A witch hunt in the press followed. The second mistake was lying in the parliament about having asked to add the logo. Lying in parliament is never a good idea, although politicians sometimes get away with it. Schlitz's problem was that by that time, she could no longer count on the support of her party, nor that of the coalition partners in

the government. Only half a year later, Hadja Lahbib, Foreign Minister in the government (Liberals), was in the firing line over the provision of visas to a peculiar delegation of Iranians. While a Socialist councilor resigned over the matter and the opposition parties pushed for her resignation, she survived. Her party leader remained firm in supporting her. He even threatened to drag the entire government into a crisis if she were to be thrown under the bus.



Red flags

- **Your phone is ringing off the hook.** When you become the catch of the day, you will know it. Journalists will be calling to get your reaction, your family will be calling worried because the news headlines are about you, and your staff will be calling frenetically trying to get on top of things. Unless you are taking a flight to Hawaii and you are switched to Airplane mode for a long time, it's hard to miss the signs that you are the catch of the day.
- **Your party leader wants to talk.** If you have become the catch of the day, your party will soon become involved, because your successes are good for the party, but your failures are not. Whether the party will stand by you will depend on why your head is on the chopping block, or it may be determined by the political context. They may be eager to cut their losses and distance themselves quickly, or they may turn you into a martyr for political gain and make the event into a political stunt.
- **You are receiving unsolicited advice.** When you are in a tough spot, many people will come to you with suggestions on how to handle the crisis. Every one of your colleagues turns out to be a crisis communication expert. Although it is well meaning, it's wise to focus on the advice of professionals.



How to protect yourself

The only right approach when a price is put on your head is proper crisis management. You can't trust the media or the opposition to put things in the right perspective, to look at the real impact or make an objective assessment of the misconduct. As soon as someone smells blood, you will be toast. Convincing yourself and others that this is not the kind of mistake someone needs to resign over won't help you.

The best way to handle a crisis is to anticipate it. When journalists start calling you and you have yet to find a spokesperson who will speak on your behalf or trace down a legal expert who can help you, you are losing valuable time. Any mistake can be deadly, and amateurism is the fastest way to the exit. When the shit hits the fan, your (senior) crisis team should be on speed-dial and meet regularly to decide what messages to send externally and internally. Those messages should be communicated by someone who speaks with authority and who remains calm amid the media storm. If you are too freaked out by all the media pressure, leave it to someone else to handle. The tone of voice of the spokesperson should be authentic and empathic. In times of crisis, information comes in waves. Details of problems or mistakes come bit by bit. That means you will have to keep communicating and start with a "holding statement." This statement confirms that you know something has or is about to happen and that you're taking all the necessary steps to assemble all the information and make the right decisions.

You can add your values and priorities to that statement. It might feel like communicating too fast, but it's important to communicate first. If you wait too long, it's not you who writes the narrative and you will be pushed into a defensive position. Whatever you communicate, it should be done with empathy. This entails never putting yourself first. You show compassion for those affected. When you start apologizing, you want to have legal advice to make sure you are expressing empathy without necessarily admitting liability. It's always a good idea to test your message with partners, outsiders, and trusted people. One major rule: DON'T LIE. Even if your spokesperson suggests omitting certain parts, it's best to be transparent. The truth will come out. It's useful to continue monitoring traditional and social media to make sure you know when to communicate again, when things are evolving the wrong way.

Finally, the best way to handle the next crisis is to assess your previous crisis. What went right? What went wrong? Learning from your mistakes will make you more confident the next time.⁸² And don't forget, when you are the catch of the day, it's possible to make it worse yourself, like Sarah Schlitz did, by adding fuel to the fire. As EU Commissioner Vestager said: You need to take the aggression out of the attack. Keep calm and carry on, like the London Underground tells you, even if the odds are against you.

Having personal relations with the press, with a number of influential journalists on speed-dial, can also help. Politicians and journalists can be "friends with benefits,"⁸³ as each has what the other one wants. Journalists need good stories, gossip, insight, off the record intel, and leads, while politicians need exposure and sometimes saving. If you are the catch of the day, it helps to be friends with some of the editors-in-chief. They may not be able to save you completely, but they can give you a heads up or more information on what your opponents are planning. The proximity of media and politics differs across European countries, however. In the Netherlands, for example, the two sides try to keep their distance from one another.

⁸² Kathleen Lucente, "Prepare a Crisis Communications Plan with These Eight Steps," *Forbes*, November 28, 2018.

⁸³ In Flanders, long-lasting love stories started when politicians started dating journalists.

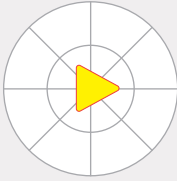
Is there life after death?

Can you come back after being politically executed? There are many examples of politicians who have. It may not happen immediately, but it might happen over time, when the memories of your mistake have faded, after you have made extensive public apologies, admitted your mistake, acknowledged the societal impact of what you did, or recognized the anger you caused. Some politicians are like cats with multiple lives, for example Suella Braverman (what's in the name) in the UK. She was appointed Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union by Theresa May. In November 2018, she resigned in protest against May's draft Brexit withdrawal agreement. Then, she was appointed Attorney General for England and Wales and Advocate General for Northern Ireland by Boris Johnson in 2022. After that, she served as Home Secretary under Liz Truss but resigned, reportedly after a serious breach of the ministerial code, after she sent an official document from a personal email. A few days later, she returned as Minister of Interior under Rishi Sunak. After a year in his cabinet, she was fired in November 2023 after making inflammatory comments about the policing of pro-Palestinian protests in Central London. Winston Churchill preceded her in epic comebacks: he changed parties twice, had three periods in disgrace, and was a minister, on and off, from 1906 to 1955. Another example was US Senator David Vitter, who admitted his guilt in the D.C. Madam scandal in 2007. His phone number had been published in 2009 in a list of phone records from a prostitution ring led by Deborah Jeane Palfrey, also known as the "D.C. Madam." Three years later he was re-elected to the Senate. Marion Barry was sworn in as Mayor of Washington, DC with his wife, Cora Masters Barry, at his side, in 1995. Four years earlier, he had been forced from the mayor's

office, and later imprisoned, after being caught on videotape smoking crack.

In the Alliance of Her Academy, we preach the notion of “politics as a marathon” because societal engagement and an internal desire for impact is persistent, even after you leave politics. However, if power as such is your end goal, you will most likely fall into traps 8, 9, and 10, and you will move toward the exit sooner than expected.

Sometimes taking a step back is healthy. “Reculer pour mieux sauter,” as the French saying goes. Take, for example, Alliance of Her alumna Eva De Bleeker, who had to resign from the government after an open clash with the prime minister from her party on the budget. She left the national scene in tears and did not seek much public attention afterwards. She did, however, remain politically active at the local level. Two years after her dramatic exit, she was re-elected to the regional parliament and elected party president after a disappointing election result for the liberals. Ironically, she is now in charge of rebuilding the party and closing the ranks.



Action items

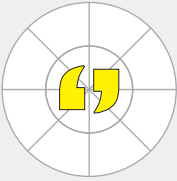
[When in power, underestimating the game can be lethal.]

Trap 6: An Offer Too Good to Be True

Ask yourself	Are you “being offered” something amazing but suspicious at the same time? Are people calling you to exert soft pressure on you to say yes? Do the newspapers mention your name before you have been contacted?	Action	Play ball but state your conditions. Focus on what’s in it for you, and on what you need to make this work.
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Trap 7: Sudden Death

Ask yourself	Are you being sacrificed for the sake of the party? Is the media chasing you down like prey? Is the opposition asking for your resignation?	Action	Stay cool and manage the crisis like a pro. At this point in time, freewheeling is not allowed.
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Interview with **MARGRETHE VESTAGER**^{DK}

At the time of the interview, she was the European Commission executive vice-president for a Europe fit for the digital age and Commissioner for Competition.

Margrethe Vestager has been Executive Vice President of the European Commission since December 2019. In the Juncker Commission, she served as European Commissioner for Competition. Prior to her European appointments, she was the Danish Minister for Economic Affairs and the Interior, as well as the political leader of her party, and prior to that Minister for Education and Ecclesiastical Affairs.

I must admit I have never seen a political office with so many pictures.

These are the people important to me. It says who I am. And it also shows who I work for. At the end of the day, we all work for real people—for all Europeans, not for the sort of people who I shake hands with next to the European flag.

Is it your way of having your loved ones close? It may be lonely at the top ...

It is lonely in the sense that there are many things that you can't share. And that very often you know that someone else wants your job.

How do you deal with that?

You need a bit of care. It's important to have someone outside of politics, who you enjoy being with, who has your back, who is willing to listen even though they have no idea what you're talking about, and who can stand being bored while you tell them about everything that annoys you. Someone who maybe pushes you a bit and gives you advice. I have different people around me, for them to share the burden (laughs). My family, a couple of friends that I made ages ago when no one knew my name. I also have a book club with seven other women. We have been reading books together for 35 years. It's a good way of meeting and keeping in touch, when you live different lives, and you may not see each other very often.

This is a women's book club?

Yes, I think it's a good thing. Women speak about different things than men when they're among themselves. It's a safe space.

Talking about safe spaces, it seems to be hard for politicians to create healthy teams, in which information flows freely. How do you explain that?

When I started in the Berlaymont 10 years ago, I was asked whether I would organize myself in the way that only the Head of Cabinet would speak to me. No one could tell me why. I thought it was stupid. Because if you give the Head of the Cabinet the information monopoly, you disengage the other members of the team. And you do not unfold the different competences in your team. Unfortunately, there is a sort of "natural development" of not engaging with the boss. People don't come to you because "she's so busy," "she probably doesn't really want to hear," "let's not bother her." It's therefore important for me to signal that I want to listen and to have people around me pick up what is going on. In my office, there is an open-door policy. I make sure I'm visible and available. For example, I pass the main entrance every day, so if people want to approach me, they can meet me every morning. If you are in

your office, behind a closed door, taking a secret elevator to your car, then you will experience nothing.

And you have colleagues who do that?

I have colleagues who do that.

Is openness essential?

Well, you very often get people who flatter upwards and shout downwards. If you have someone, without your knowledge, like that in your team, you might not discover it yourself. But if you have such a person, it can ruin the rest of the team. So, you need someone willing to tell you what's happening.

We saw a lot of ruined teams in the European Parliament because of bad management. How do you manage?

I think about myself and what I prefer: I hate to be told off and shouted at. So I don't think people deliver if they're afraid of you, afraid of getting fired or afraid of being attacked one way or another. I like people to have high expectations of me. I like them to respect what I say. I can take a no if people think that I have a bad idea. I listen. And that is how I treat other people, as simple as that. This is not something that you need to get from reading "Seven ways of good leadership." I never read management books. I read literature, that's a much better way of getting to know people.

Politicians being lazy, is that allowed?

It's important to be a bit lazy. To be human. First, because you need to repeat your message so many times. You get tired of listening to yourself, and yet you must do it over and over because there are so many people who need to hear the same message before you change anything. But also, lazy in order to stay sane. Like staying up late and

having another glass of red wine, even though you haven't read all the briefings for the next day. Sanity also comes from sometimes saying "I don't have to do that now." Women rarely fall into the laziness trap. They usually work too much. I seem to have a natural talent for being a bit lazy (laughs). For example, I don't work like crazy in the evening during the week. I want to have a real life. I walk home from the office, do my shopping, and cook for myself. You need to find ways to stop yourself from constantly working.

Were you always good at stopping yourself?

When I was the Deputy Prime Minister, it was crazy. A bit like a tumble dryer where you cannot see what happens behind the door when it is closed. So, you are inside, you just turn and turn but it is difficult for others to see what you're doing. When I came to Brussels, I realized I worked too much inside the tumble dryer. Now, I do what's relevant to our mission. I don't show up just to make people happy. Because it will not make me happy. The sort of nice girl attitude to work, work, work, work, work, and do things because it's expected. I don't do that anymore.

For many female leaders wanting to be the good girl and to be perfect is a trap. It paralyzes them.

Yes. I'm not a perfectionist. But it's a real trap. Because then you never get anything done because it will never be good enough. You're never happy because it's never good enough and you will not celebrate what was good, but maybe not perfect. And you get sort of hung up on mediocre things.

What would you advise politicians who struggle with this?

Perfect doesn't exist. When people look at you, they're not asking for perfection. They're asking for things that work. You might only have two minutes to explain something, and you need to be lucky if they look at you those two minutes when you're perfect. People want to see a person who is engaged and motivated and who's getting things

done. And they don't have time to check if you are perfect or not. For instance, if you are wearing stockings and they run. You think you need to do unspeakable things to find a pharmacy and get new ones. But it turns out that if you don't care, nobody cares. And if people judge you by your stockings, they're stupid.

When you were 29, you got an offer you couldn't refuse of becoming a minister. How did you manage?

I was 29, I had been a civil servant in the Ministry of Finance. I was very active in my party and had been in student politics, so I knew about politics, but I had no idea about the parliament, and I didn't know what it was like to be a minister. The first thing they did in the ministry was give me three binders, 10 centimeters thick. And they said, you go read this and then you know everything. There was no way that I would read all of that, it was not my exam! So instead, I told them they had to tell me what I needed to know and that sort of calibrated the start quite well. Secondly, I had a very, very good woman by my side. She knew the parliament inside out. She taught me to listen. Parliamentarians would just love that you would come over and sit down and have coffee and listen to what they think, what they would like to do, how they would do things. And then you connect. And then suddenly you have a network. And when there's rough weather, you have people who will do their best to help you out.

Help is needed as politics can be very violent. Like sharks, they attack, the media, the opposition, even your own party. Did they ever come looking for you?

Oh yes, many times.

How does one manage these attacks?

You need support. If you don't have that, you are like a wounded animal, and the attackers smell the blood. Secondly, you need to take out the

aggression. If the attack is completely unjustified, you should fight it, but never without knowing what coalition will fight with you. Most stories about people being taken down are because of the way they managed it. For example, if you are under attack and your defense starts with half a lie, you're increasing your vulnerability. Very often, people are generous, you know, if you make a mistake and you realize it and you're sorry, and you learn from it. People are not generous if you insist that you have never done anything wrong. Because then, it confirms every prejudice about people in power: people with privilege abuse it. Finally, don't be afraid of the attack. If you hide from it, you don't know how to fight it or to deal with it. You need to figure out how to embrace the storm. And it's important that you have someone to help you. Because if you're alone, they will hunt you down.

Power comes with privilege, as you said. Politicians tend to stick to their privilege and hold on to their seats. What do you think of that?

To a very large degree, voters take care of that. The internal fighting as well. Because the party will topple you once they start to think that you're a bit over the hill, too self-important, or that you're clinging on because you have no idea what else you would want to do with yourself because you haven't produced a life, but only a career.

Should we then limit terms?

It's a bit too rigid to say that you can only have two mandates as a Member of Parliament. But one needs to limit the mandates of a president because the president is so much more powerful. That kind of power is much more dangerous to the person because the risk is that they will start thinking it's about them. And the problem is, you will not realize that you're taking the wrong path. You think that you are the best person, the only one that people trust, the only one who can do this. You think that you're great, and there's no alternative. And you will not have honed a successor, why would you? It's great to exercise power, you know. But when you are done, there is nothing left of you.

That sounds like a call to always draw a clear line between yourself and the position you hold.

Yes, one needs to be careful about that. You're not having the position because of you. It was given to you for a limited period, for you to do a job, and it will be taken away. One way or another, you will lose it. The last shirt has no pockets, as they say.

**FINAL BASKET OF
POWER TRAPS**

**POWER
PSYCHOSIS**

When Putin invaded Ukraine, people in many parts of the world, especially Europeans, reacted in shock. How could he do this? Has he gone crazy? A similar reaction came when Trump encouraged his people “to walk down to the Capitol and show strength,” which led to 2,000 rioters entering and vandalizing Capitol Hill.⁸⁴ But the term “crazy” doesn’t cut it. “Power high” does. This is a mental condition that results from having too much unchecked power for too long. Psychologists such as Peter T. Coleman call it “power psychosis” because it entails losing touch with reality. It’s a kind of delusion that many people in power share, whether it’s those running countries, businesses, cults, religious sects, terrorist cells, or criminal organizations. It’s not a prerogative of men or women. It can happen to anyone, but especially the wealthy, the famous, the politically advantaged, and those in positions of high authority.⁸⁵

Christopher Coker, a British political scientist known for his extensive writings on warfare, suggests that prominent conquerors such as Hitler and Napoleon suffered from power psychosis. The condition, according to

⁸⁴ “Jan. 6 Flashback: Trump Tells Supporters at Rally ‘You Have to Show Strength,’” YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pleNc54qssQ>.

⁸⁵ Peter T. Coleman and Robert Ferguson, “Mad with Power? Has Vladimir Putin Lost Touch with Reality?,” *Psychology Today*, August 29, 2014.

Coker, is the result of the brain's increasing dependence on the dopamine rush, which eventually leads to significant behavioral changes, such as a diminished sense of empathy, grandiosity, and paranoia. These changes impair judgment, causing the individual to lose clarity, which leads to critical errors in decision-making. Coker explains that the alterations in the brain's frontal lobe reduce the individual's capacity to assess risks accurately. Napoleon, for instance, ultimately reversed all his accomplishments by invading Russia.⁸⁶

Of course not every person who maintains a position of power for a long time starts bombing the hell out of a neighboring country or breaking the law. However, a milder form of delusion can have devastating effects. If you start seeing people in instrumental and stereotypical terms, your capacity for complex social reasoning and moral judgment decreases. If you become too self-confident and less inhibited, your choices become riskier. If you start believing you can't be caught or punished, you end up in a court of law anyway.

Power psychosis often comes with a form of super-optimism—that things can't go wrong. But that's precisely when things turn ugly. And that's why you should always have people around you to tell you the truth, says Alliance of Her Award winner Kira Rudik (UKR).

Emmanuel Macron's surprise call for early parliamentary elections in 2024 shocked many, as he bypassed his advisers and failed to form a coalition. People were flabbergasted by the risk he was taking. Though a left coalition defeated Marine Le Pen's Rassemblement national (RN) in the end and prevented a far-right government from taking over in France, Macron's political standing was severely damaged. Politico called his move "Machiavellian."⁸⁷ With no majority, commentators saw France facing political paralysis, likely even reversing Macron's reforms.⁸⁸ The cover of *Le Figaro* (below) portrayed Macron as politically isolated and

⁸⁶ Christopher Coker, "The War in Ukraine and the Return of History," *LSE Public Policy Review* 3(1) (2023), <https://ppr.lse.ac.uk/articles/10.31389/lseppr.81>.

⁸⁷ Clea Caulcutt, "Macron Goes Machiavelli," Politico, September 19, 2024, <https://www.politico.eu/article/france-emmanuel-macron-political-death-prime-minister-michel-barnier/>.

⁸⁸ Nicholas Vinocur, "Macron's Gamble Ends in Leadership Crisis," Politico, July 8, 2024, <https://www.politico.eu/newsletter/brussels-playbook/macrons-gamble-ends-in-leadership-crisis/>.



weakened. Time will tell whether this decision will keep him off the list of great French presidents.⁸⁹

The final ugly stage of being in a high position of power is the subject of this last chapter. It paints a rather gloomy picture of politics. The ways out of these traps are less evident. When you have gone down one of the following roads, your political career is often beyond saving. The only solution might be a clear break from politics and power, to rebalance and get back in touch with reality. If you fail to do that and decide to stick around and go down kicking and screaming, the history books won't be kind in judging you.

⁸⁹ Lieve Dierckx, "Macron zag zichzelf als De Gaulle, maar hij gaat slechts door het tuinpoortje de geschiedenis in," *De Tijd*, July 8, 2024.



Not shy of a little white lie

Lying is part of politics. That's not my takeaway from 15 years of politics, but Hannah Arendt's, one of the 20th century's most influential political theorists. In her essay "Lying in Politics," written after the Pentagon Papers revealed the lies told to defend the Vietnam War, Arendt explores the intrinsic link between politics and deception. She argues that a fundamental trait of human action is the ability to create new realities, which often requires the destruction or reimagining of existing ones. This process of change, she suggests, relies on the denial of truth—placing lying at the very root of political action. Arendt writes: "Deliberate denial of factual truth, the ability to lie, and the capacity to act are interconnected; they owe their existence to the same source: imagination."⁹⁰ By this logic, Martin Luther King Jr. was "lying" when he spoke of his dream of a color-blind world, as he was envisioning an alternative reality to inspire action. In this context, lying can be a positive thing when you envision a better future. According to Arendt, lies are prevalent in politics because they are often more plausible and appealing than reality. For example, it was easier for the British to believe that leaving the EU

⁹⁰ Hannah Arendt, *Crises of the Republic: Lying in Politics; Civil Disobedience; On Violence; Thoughts on Politics and Revolution* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972), p. 5.

would quickly transform the National Health Service into a well-funded, efficient service than to face the reality that such changes would require years of structural reform and significant investment. Similarly, both Hitler and Stalin propagated lies that were more attractive to people than the truth. Even when people knew these lies didn't reflect reality, they preferred to believe them because the lies seemed better than the complex and messy truth.

Arendt argues that the temptation to embrace lies is ever-present in politics, but she offers hope. She suggests that there is a tipping point at which lies become counterproductive. This occurs when an audience is forced to abandon any distinction between truth and falsehood simply to survive. When truth and trust vanish, the world becomes unstable, undermining another fundamental human need: stability. Arendt trusts instability to ultimately lead to rebellion against authoritarianism, as people will always resist the absence of stability. When Trump started claiming that the 2020 election had been "stolen," many commentators referenced Arendt's theories.⁹² Most manifestos for the 2024 European elections also illustrate Arendt's point: they often contain lies about stopping migration, reversing economic trends, or taxing the rich, presented as magic solutions that won't cause any upheaval.

The truth will out

If lies are an intrinsic part of politics, and the capacity to deny reality comes with the capacity to deliver change, then when do lies become pitfalls for politicians? It's when, as Shakespeare puts it, "the truth will out," that is, when reality catches up and exposes the lies and generates distrust. That is why, according to Arendt, political self-deception is the greatest threat for politicians, because a self-deceived politician

⁹¹ "Iraq's WMS Capabilities," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, <https://carnegeendowment.org/files/Iraq3Chap2.pdf>.

⁹² Lyndsey Stonebridge, "What Hannah Arendt Knew about Lying in Politics," *Time*, February 8, 2024, <https://time.com/6590691/political-lies-trump-hannah-arendt/>.

“loses all contact, not only with his audience but with the real world, which will catch up with him.”⁹³ President Trump and his health policy provide an excellent but grim illustration of that. *CNN* counted almost 654 false claims made by Trump over 14 weeks during the coronavirus pandemic. According to Christian Paz, Trump lied about the nature of the outbreak, about the availability of tests, about the vaccines, about China, and so on.⁹⁴ In the end, the pandemic became “The One Time Trump Couldn’t Lie His Way Out of a Crisis,” as Politico put it: “Trump would respond to the greatest challenge of his presidency like he had to so many previous tests: with lie after lie after lie. In the end, he was buried underneath them and lost the reelection bid.”⁹⁵ The British medical journal *The Lancet* argued that Trump’s “appalling response” to the coronavirus pandemic, which included the politicization of masks and repudiation of science, “expedited the spread of Covid-19” in the U.S.” When you start believing your own lies and therefore are not able to see the changing parameters in society and to adjust your strategy or policy, you are screwed. Self-deception is the root of political failure, as Professor Tyler Cowen puts it.⁹⁶ Self-deception will lead you to draw wrong conclusions or make bad decisions.

A priority of populists

Lies aren’t a prerogative of populist politicians like Trump, but populists surely don’t seem to mind a lie or two.⁹⁷ According to Catherine Fieschi,

⁹³ Arendt, *Crises of the Republic*.

⁹⁴ Christian Paz, “All the President’s Lies about the Coronavirus,” *The Atlantic*, November 2, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2020/11/trumps-lies-about-coronavirus/608647/>.

⁹⁵ Jonathan Lemire, “The One Time Trump Couldn’t Lie His Way Out of a Crisis,” Politico, July 22, 2022, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2022/07/22/donald-trump-covid-panic-february-2020-00047177>.

⁹⁶ Tyler Cowen, “Self-Deception as the Root of Political Failure,” *Public Choice* 124 (2005), 437–451, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30026728>.

⁹⁷ Definition of populism (Britannica): “Populism, political program or movement that champions, or claims to champion, the common person, usually by favorable contrast with a real

lying is a constant feature of populist politics, and populist politicians do it shamelessly.⁹⁸ While non-populist politicians seem to be (rightfully) cautious so as not to be caught lying, as that might lead to public scrutiny or a loss of the public's trust, populists have made lying into an art form, a brilliant instrument of subversion. It's the politics of appealing to the gut over the brain. For now, populists seem to be getting away with lying as they value "authenticity" more than "truthfulness." They don't seem to care about being "liars," if the lies are told "in the interest of the people." But if we can trust Arendt, populists in power will reach a limit when their lies lead to bad decisions, instability, and harmful policies. Getting away with fake news and lies when you are in the opposition is easy. But when in power, it's harder to maintain the lies, to deny the truth, as we have seen with Trump and Boris Johnson, as reality does eventually catch up.

Spinning around

Lying is a job description in politics. It's what spin doctors, spokespersons, or campaign managers do—the Stampers (*House of Cards*) and Kasper Juuls (*Borgen*) of the world. They are the most obvious manufacturers of lies in politics. They can do this in a light way, by presenting only part of the story or making it sound good; in a moderate way, by blending facts with alternative realities to fit a political narrative; or in the most extreme and blatant way, by spreading disinformation or lies.

The definition of "political spin" according to Britannica is "the attempt to control or influence communication in order to deliver the preferred message." It's a negative word, used to refer to the sophisticated selling of a specific message heavily biased in favor of one's own position. Spin techniques may include careful timing in delivering information,

or perceived elite or establishment. Populism usually combines elements of the left and the right, opposing large business and financial interests but also frequently being hostile to established liberal, socialist, and labor parties."

⁹⁸ Catherine Fieschi, "Why Europe's New Populists Tell So Many Lies—and Do It So Shamelessly," *The Guardian*, October 1, 2019.

selective presentation of facts, careful selection of words and phrases meant to invoke certain responses, choice of sound bites, or redefining of terms and phrases. It's also about how you manage journalists and the media with the intention of exerting control over the situation. Mike McCurry, press secretary to us President Bill Clinton, a famous “spinster,” was known for his ability to use charm and wit while misleading reporters, intimidating but also courting correspondents. He was able to manage a lot of damaging stories coming out of an administration mired in controversy.⁹⁹ Already in the 4th century BC, Xenophon classed certain lies as righteous acts. The deception of a general who sees his army discouraged and announces imaginary reinforcements gives the troops courage and leads them to victory. In political philosophy, this is the “problem of dirty hands”: to achieve a bigger goal, you must occasionally commit small wrongs.¹⁰⁰ By that logic, you can't blame spin doctors for trying to sell a politician and his or her policies. It's a case of “rectify the evil of your action with the purity of your intention,” as Molière's *Tartuffe* would say.¹⁰¹ After all, they are just trying to seduce the voters. It's like when you are in love, and you oversell your positive characteristics—are you misleading or merely seducing?

But there are limits to the spinning. As a spokesperson or political comms person, trustworthiness is a currency. If you run out of it, no journalists will trust your information or publish your intel. You will end up with no coverage in the media. That's a disaster as there is a direct link between public exposure in the media and the popularity of politicians. That's why you see populists turning to their own media, online or social, to continue spreading fake news. But too much spinning and fabricating has a double risk for you as a politician. Not only is your credibility on the line, but you and your good judgment are also at risk. If you as a politician start to believe the spin or the lies, you are in trouble.

⁹⁹ “Political Spin,” Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/political-spin>.

¹⁰⁰ “The Problem of Dirty Hands,” Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2023, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/dirty-hands/>.

¹⁰¹ François-Xavier Druet, *Le prix du mensonge en politique*, *Le Vif*, June 8, 2018, <https://www.levif.be/belgique/le-prix-du-mensonge-en-politique/>.

Returning to the point of self-deception, this is when things get out of hand and you start making tactical and practical mistakes based on your own lies or evasive communication tactics. If you start to focus only on the good news, you might miss a chance to counter the bad news and intervene in the business as usual. If you leave out one part of your budget deficit, the numbers will come back to haunt you when the European Commission releases its assessment. If you decide to spin voting results in your favor and proclaim yourself the winner, your voters will end up disillusioned and angry if you fail to deliver the change you promised. You can't continue to hide from reality, or deny it, as in the case of Biden's poor performance in the first presidential debate against Trump. While the whole world seemed to agree, Biden's team and family wouldn't budge.

The cover of *The Economist* after the US presidential debate was without pity. The magazine described his performance as "awful" and



“an agony to watch.” But what it considered even worse was the “cover-up.” The magazine called it “the Biden campaign’s contempt-provoking bid to deny what tens of millions of Americans saw with their own eyes.” Their denial, according to *The Economist*, was a way of mocking people’s intelligence. That’s when you really have reached the limits of lying. Biden finally withdrew from the race on July 21, 2024, as many of his donors were backing out, his poll numbers were slipping, and Democrats were openly pushing him to exit.



Red flags

- **You say “everybody lies.”** You often hear this motto from the famous and cynical Doctor House M.D. in political offices when the truth of certain statements or press releases is being questioned, a nice example of whataboutism used to legitimize a lying strategy.¹⁰² But will you be able to keep up your lying? Of course, (decent) journalists are aware of all the spinning and half-truths pushed out by politicians. It’s their job to remain critical. For your political opponents, your blatant lies are gold. They will not refrain from exposing your lies and untrustworthiness to the public, in the media, or in the parliament. They will make sure to portray you as a liar. Polls show distrust in politics has never been higher. Do you really want to confirm the stereotype of the lying politician? Ask yourself: If you caught somebody lying to you, how likely would you be to trust him or her again?
- **You are super optimistic.** When Macron called for elections after the European elections in 2024, many called out his arrogance. Dominic Moïsi, French political scientist and writer, also exposed it as self-deceit. Macron thought his party lost the European elections because he did

¹⁰² Whataboutism is a rhetorical method in which you reverse an accusation, arguing that an opponent is guilty of an offense just as egregious as or worse than what the original party was accused of doing, however unconnected the offenses may be.

not get involved. With new elections, he wouldn't make that mistake again and would get involved in the campaign. However, he was living a lie and made a grave error in his reasoning, Moïsi says, because he was already out of favor with the French public. Instead of seeing things as they were, he kept on believing his own more self-serving truth.¹⁰³

- **You deny the obvious.** When faced with negative realities, there are many techniques available to defend yourself as a politician. One of them is denying the truth or sugarcoating it. When you start believing that defense, you are in trouble. Polls are a good example. The reaction to polls is predictable: When they are to your advantage, they are right. When they are not, they must be flawed. Or you might claim that “they don't represent reality because people haven't made up their mind yet,”¹⁰⁴ like the Biden team stated before he stepped down. While there is of course a margin for error, bad polls are not to be laughed off, and it's not wise to believe the justifications and absolve yourself of any responsibility or need for action. Bad polls are warning signs not to be ignored. They should prompt immediate action, not complacency. If you ignore them and buy into your own spin, those bad polls will eventually become your reality.
- **You surround yourself with people who tell you what you want to hear.** I was never in that category, but I often found myself alone in being more blunt or negative in assessing situations. I learned the hard way that criticism is not much appreciated. Of course, Negative Nancys can be quite a buzzkill, but given all the side effects of power, I genuinely believe there is a need for skeptical or critical minds in your team because you will start making mistakes if you continue to view the world through your overly optimistic power glasses.

¹⁰³ Maarten Rabaey, “Dominique Moïsi over de hoogmoed van de Franse president: ‘Macron is alle contact met de werkelijkheid kwijtgeraakt,’” *De Morgen*, June 22, 2024.

¹⁰⁴ Joel Mathhis, “Is Biden in Denial about His Bad Polls?,” *The Week*, May 21, 2024, <https://theweek.com/politics/biden-denial-bad-polls>.

- **You say “look at the dead cat.”** Another political communication tactic is the “dead cat strategy,” in which you create a distraction to divert attention from negative news. When faced with bad press or poor results, you shift the focus by highlighting mistakes made by opponents or introducing sensational news that grabs the media’s attention, leaving the original story behind. While this tactic can be effective, overusing it risks exposure. Boris Johnson was a master of this approach, often deploying it to deflect from scandals. The *Washington Post* called him “a consummate dead cat dealer.”¹⁰⁵ For instance, when his illegal parties at Downing Street were revealed, he deflected by accusing the opposition leader of enabling Jimmy Savile; faced with grim inflation figures, he proposed selling Channel 4; and when calls for his resignation grew louder, he introduced the Rwanda migration deal. Each time, the focus shifted to the new controversy. Johnson’s reliance on this strategy stemmed from his belief in the power of his own words and a sense that the rules didn’t apply to him.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ Matt Potter, “Boris Johnson Is a Master of Distraction. What if That Stops Working?,” *Washington Post*, April 15, 2022.

¹⁰⁶ Isaac Chotiner, “How Hypocrisy Undid Boris Johnson,” *The New Yorker*, February 3, 2022.



How to prevent this trap

There is a reason why Machiavelli spends a whole chapter in *Il Principe* on what can be translated as “Flatterers.”¹⁰⁷ These are people who please you and tell you what you want to hear. He reasons that flatterers represent a clear danger to any ruler because it is natural for the powerful to become self-absorbed. Or, as Annelies Verlinden admitted, leaders, such as politicians, are under such pressure, it’s sometimes nice to get some confirmation. They therefore probably tend to listen more happily to those who give them positive feedback.¹⁰⁸

The best way to remain lucid is to make sure people know you are not offended by the truth. Machiavelli, by the way, recommends punishing “flatterers” around you who conceal the truth. I’m not suggesting you apply 16th-century punishments to flatterers, because those might lead you back to Trap 3. But, in order not to lose yourself in lies or start believing in the reality you see through your power psychosis lens, it’s recommended that you also have “fact-checkers” around, people who challenge your view on reality and who dare to object. These fact-checkers can be your staffers, your family, or your friends. They should not be punished or silenced for disagreeing. Machiavelli cautions against allowing these fact-checkers too much access because “if everyone can

¹⁰⁷ Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield (University of Chicago Press, 1985).

¹⁰⁸ Interview with Annelies Verlinden, Minister of Interior Affairs, Belgium (2020–present).

speak to the prince, the prince will lose respect.” A prince should allow only wise advisors to speak with him, and only when he specifically requests their advice, he writes. A prince should not listen to anyone else and should be firm in his decisions. Vacillation will again lead to a loss of respect, something Annelies Verlinden confirmed during our interview. So, better to have your fact-checkers object to you in private, instead of in public.

And what about lies as such? Have politicians gotten away with them? The cynical answer is yes. There are plenty of examples in political history. Even lying on prime time television hasn’t proven to be a red line (check out Ronald Reagan, George W. Bush, and Lyndon B. Johnson).¹⁰⁹ If you get caught lying, sometimes an apology or rectification can remedy the situation. If you are piling up several lies, which I do not recommend, there is one thing that can save you and that is results. According to Arthur Chevallier, author of several notable works on Napoleonic history, you can keep on lying in politics as long as you still deliver. Chevallier writes: “The widespread use of lies in political communication is not bad in itself, and we understand how it could promote efficiency, but it cannot go hand in hand with an absence of results.”¹¹⁰ Boris Johnson wasn’t afraid of a lie or two.¹¹¹ However, at the end of 2023, a clear majority of the British public believed Brexit had been bad for the UK economy, that it had driven up prices in shops, and that it had even hampered government attempts to control immigration. So not only had Johnson lied to the people, but he also failed to deliver. Reality caught up with him and made his position of power untenable.

¹⁰⁹ The accusation that Reagan lied during the Iran–Contra affair—particularly regarding whether arms were traded for hostages—comes from multiple sources, including congressional investigators, journalists, and members of his own administration. The accusation that Johnson misled the public about the Gulf of Tonkin Incident and the Vietnam War comes from the Pentagon Papers and US Senate investigations.

¹¹⁰ Arthur Chevallier, ‘De l’art délicat du mensonge en politique,’ *Le Point*, September 13, 2022, https://www.lepoint.fr/debats/arthur-chevallier-de-l-art-delicat-du-mensonge-en-politique-13-09-2022-2489858_2.php#11.

¹¹¹ Cécile Ducourtieux, “Boris Johnson’s Lies Finally Exposed in Official Report,” *Le Monde*, June 16, 2023, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2023/06/16/boris-johnson-s-lies-finally-exposed-in-official-report_6032654_4.html.

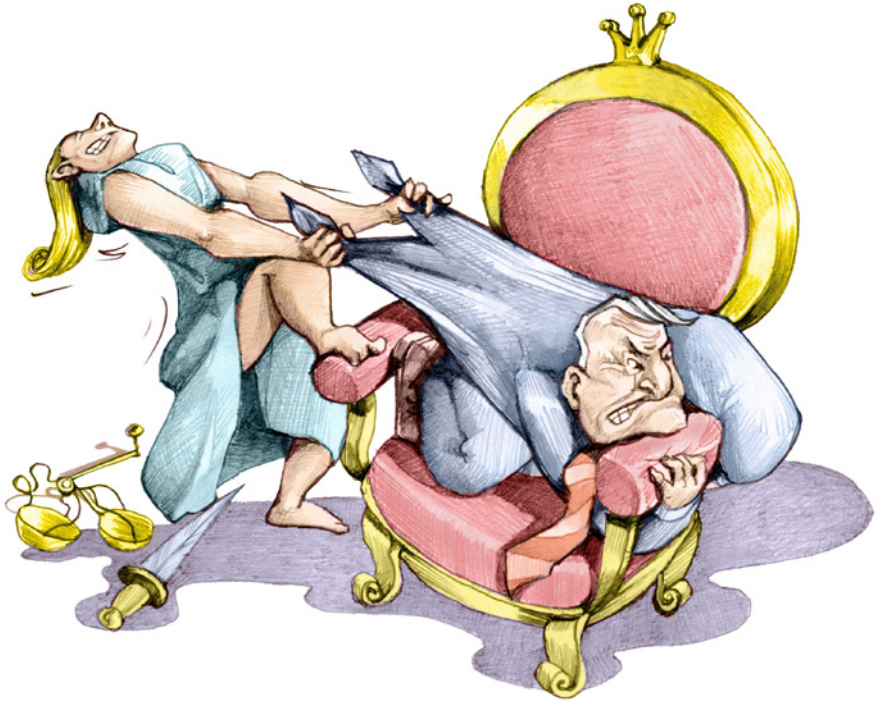
9

Clinging to Power

TRAP

Non-stop politics

After the collapse of the Soviet Republic, the mandate of the President of Russia was limited to two consecutive four-year terms. When Vladimir Putin couldn't run for re-election in 2008, he endorsed Dmitry Medvedev as President, who then appointed Putin as Prime Minister. The presidential term was extended from four to six years in 2008, and Putin returned as President in 2012 and 2018. A 2020 amendment reset his term count, allowing him to potentially stay in power until 2036. This tactic of changing laws to extend power mirrors the actions of leaders such as Fidel Castro, Kim Il-sung, and Muammar Gaddafi. In democracies the rules are less flexible, but nevertheless politicians tend to extend their careers as long as possible and become career politicians. Among female politicians, a good example is Nancy Pelosi (b. 1940), who was first elected to the US Congress in the mid-1980s and has declared she will run again! What keeps politicians going? Is politics that much fun, or is power so addictive? Or could it be that politics becomes part of your identity? Or is it ego, the belief that you are indispensable, and the world will stop turning without you? Or is it fear of losing status? The allure of power, with its privileges including a high salary, access to exclusive events, and special treatment, is, after all, hard to give up. The perks of power naturally make it difficult for politicians to step down.



Is clinging to power a problem? In ancient Greece and Rome, terms of office were introduced to prevent dictatorships, ensure fresh ideas, and reduce corruption. In the US, entrenched politicians have led some to worry about a gerontocracy threatening democracy.¹¹² At the same time, in one of the founding documents of the US Constitution, James Madison writes that experience is a good thing: “A good government implies two things: first, fidelity to the object of government, which is the happiness of the people; secondly, a knowledge of the means by which that object can be best attained.”¹¹³ It’s true that long-serving

¹¹² Eva Xiao, “Battle of the Ages: How America’s Gerontocracy Is a Challenge for Democracy,” *Financial Times*, September 17, 2023, <https://www.ft.com/content/faa721e6-4fcf-4b9b-ae39-9ad6c44ed971>.

¹¹³ Federalist 62.

politicians can benefit from their networks, relationships, and experience in wheeling and dealing. The more complicated the issues, the more valuable the institutional knowledge.¹¹⁴

The reason why clinging to power deserves a chapter in this book is because it can harm your own career as well as your party. In every democracy, you will find politicians who have been around for ages and simply don't want to leave. These people will do crazy, erratic, or extreme things to hold on to their seat, from giving up on their values or principles to jumping ship (changing political parties), withholding information, not taking responsibility, not leaving the next generation space to grow, or brutally taking out the competition.

For you personally and professionally, it's a good idea to accept that your time will be up one day. And that day won't be the end of the world. There are a million other ways to have societal impact. Politics is just one path of many. For political parties, leaving the same lot of politicians in play for decades is detrimental. Look at the Dutch *VVD*. Mark Rutte was able to be Prime Minister for 14 years, but his departure became a turning point for the party. If you pre-empt social mobility within parties and don't allow new and ambitious leaders to rise up, you shoot yourself in the foot, because when the hot shots lose popularity or credibility, there is no back-up plan.

When I was interviewing Diane Thibaut de Maisières, an executive coach, about this trap and what it looks like in the business world, she pointed out that in business grooming for successors is standard procedure. Boards tend to put serious pressure on companies to find a new CEO. The market knows that having a single CEO in power for too long isn't good. (Someone should probably remind Elon Musk.) While business operates according to market rules, politics also incorporates some market reasoning, as voters tend to get tired of always seeing the same face, especially if your opponent is a fresh and shiny new kid on the block.

¹¹⁴ Ruth Marcus, "Those Career Politicians," *Washington Post*, September 6, 2011.



Red flags

- **You see politics as the only option.** Current EU Council President Charles Michel (BE) spent his entire career in politics. After studying law, he quickly transitioned from being a lawyer to holding various political roles, from President of the Youth movement of Mouvement Réformateur to member of the Belgian federal parliament, from Mayor of Wavre to Prime Minister of Belgium. In 2024, he announced his candidacy for the European Parliament, sparking backlash as many saw this move as prioritizing his political future over his current role. Given his uninterrupted political career, it shouldn't have come as a shock that he would run in the elections. Politics is his thing. Under pressure, he withdrew from the race, leaving his political future uncertain. His lifelong involvement in politics contrasts sharply with the experience of Kira Rudik (UKR), who had a successful career in tech before entering politics and envisions opening a cat shelter after she leaves politics.¹¹⁵
- **You consider successors threats.** In the Vienna division of the Austrian liberal party NEOS, a relatively new party with a fresh approach to party practices, every elected politician is expected to train three to four successors. He or she should mentor fresh blood and teach them the skills of the trade. This is a healthy principle that ensures social

¹¹⁵ Interview with MP Kira Rudik (UKR).

mobility within the party, opportunities for all, and a steady turnover of politicians. This practice is rare, however. Most politicians aren't concerned with training their "offspring," let alone allowing people to shine, which is a shame. New kids on the block often have the benefit of the doubt. Campaigns that are seen as "new" or "different" tend to win. Looking at your successors as a threat to your power is the sad alternative to considering them an instrument with which to continue to have societal impact.

- **You would rather die than give up the perks and privileges.** The story of Boris Johnson's wedding is funny and revealing. The wedding, postponed due to COVID-19, was to be held in the Prime Minister's official country house, Chequers, in Buckinghamshire on July 30, 2023. This house is for the sole use of the incumbent prime minister. When Johnson resigned on June 9, 2023, after mounting pressure, he declared that he would remain in his position until a successor was elected. In the British tabloids this was linked to the wedding, which was confirmed by a Conservative Party source.¹¹⁶
- **You don't know what you stand for anymore after so many compromises.** Unless your party achieves overwhelming election results that give you an absolute majority in the parliament, democracy is always compromise-driven. That entails that every time you enter a government coalition, you run the risk of betraying your electoral promises. The more subsequent governments you join, the more compromises you pile up. You will describe those betrayals as necessary. But after a couple of mandates, your voters will of course wonder what's in it for them. Your position of power was supposed to deliver for them, but it seems to have only delivered "jobs" for the party. That's why it's healthy for a political party and a politician to be in the opposition occasionally.

¹¹⁶ Nicky Harley, "Is Boris Johnson Hanging On to Power to Use Chequers Country House for His Wedding Party?," *The National*, July 7, 2022, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/uk-news/2022/07/07/is-boris-johnson-hanging-on-to-power-to-use-chequers-country-house-for-his-wedding-party/>.

You will be able to refocus on the topics and issues you and your voters care about and recalibrate your efforts toward having an impact again, rather than focusing on the number of seats.

- **You would change the law to hold onto power.** Hungary's Fidesz and Poland's PiS (Law and Justice) both took the following steps to retain their hold on power: 1) target the highest courts and the judiciary; 2) restrict the independence of the media and civil society; and 3) transform the constitutional framework and electoral laws.



How to prevent this trap

It is essential for a politician to have a healthy attitude toward power. Anna Donath put it beautifully: “Being a politician is not the end goal, it’s the means to an end. A platform for change, like there are many others.” When I joined the 40 under 40 leadership program in Belgium, a program addressed to young leaders in their 20s or 30s driven by a strong desire to make the world a better place, I was surprised to find no one was interested in entering politics. They were interested in other ways to channel their societal engagement: they were entrepreneurs, civil servants, researchers, NGO founders, or they ignited change within the large corporations where they worked. Politics wasn’t even on their radar.

In the Alliance of Her Academy, we talk a lot about the political drive of the participants. Why do they enter politics? Why do they run campaigns? This motivation is essential to keep them going. But to stay healthy and sane, we also encourage them to look at the bigger picture, the longer term. Is politics something that will enable me to achieve my mission now, or will it require time? Is politics the platform, or can I find other ways to lean in? Focusing on politics is necessary for you to win elections. But focusing exclusively on politics will lead you to hold on frantically and desperately to a position of power and will distract you from your mission, while experience outside politics may give you skill sets and insights you can use later when you re-enter the political arena.

Avoiding this trap requires proper detachment and healthy self-reflection. It's essential to ask yourself whether it's the impact or the power and privileges that keeps you going. Is politics really the only way to achieve your why? Is it still the voters and the ability to improve their lives that makes you wake up in the morning, or is it all the nice perks and privileges or the fear of missing out?

On top of that, in an ideal world, you commit to training a successor from day one. You teach them the ropes and empower them to lead so that they will one day take your spot and make you proud. This is not completely altruistic, because through that person you will continue to make an impact after your own peak of political power. Transferring your knowledge and seeing your “pupils” thrive is equally satisfactory and will enable you to retain a role after you have left behind the crazy pressure, pace, and exposure of politics.

10

TRAP

Auto-destruct

Betraying your voters, selling out on your values, chucking your election promises, abusing government money, hiring prostitutes and making yourself vulnerable to extortion, withholding information, breaking agreements, breaking the rules, breaking the law, undermining democracy—the list of bad decisions, some of them constituting criminal acts, made by people in positions of power is long, and the list of self-defeating politicians is extensive. At the time of writing, at least two men—Rishi Sunak and Joe Biden—were on their way out of office and were beyond saving (politically).

Why are politicians likely to go astray? Research shows that people in positions of power are likely to take excessive risks. According to Andre Spicer, a professor of organizational behavior at the University of London, “their very nature seems to be to break rules, act hypocritically, overlook questions of justice and ignore the perspective of others.”¹¹⁷ A telling illustration is that people who drive expensive cars are more

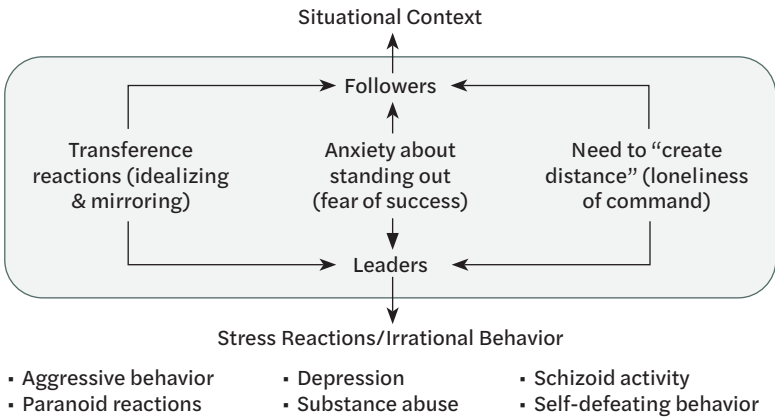
¹¹⁷ Hamish Armstrong, “Powerful People Are the Most Likely to Break the Rules—Even If They Make Them,” Monday, City, June 1, 2020, <https://www.city.ac.uk/news-and-events/news/2020/06/powerful-people-are-the-most-likely-to-break-the-rules-even-if-they-make-them>; and Andre Spicer, “Dominic Cummings: Power People Are the Most Likely to Break the Rules—Even If They Make Them,” The Conversation, May 25, 2020, <https://the-conversation.com/dominic-cummings-powerful-people-are-the-most-likely-to-break-the-rules-even-if-they-make-them-139340>.

likely to violate traffic rules, such as cutting off other cars at an intersection or cutting off pedestrians at a crossing. During the COVID-19 pandemic, there was public outcry over politicians, including Boris Johnson, not obeying the rules they themselves had made to keep the pandemic under control. But for Spicer this didn't come as a surprise, as people in power are more likely to act in a hypocritical way and strongly enforce rules with which they themselves don't comply.

When you are no longer able to make a clear risk assessment, you dig your own grave. Whether it comes from vanity, arrogance, ego, pride, confidence, a feeling of superiority, or hubris, your wrong calls become self-defeating ones, like calling elections you can't win, as Rishi Sunak and Emmanuel Macron did.

There are two things that contribute to clouding your judgment, according to expert Manfred Kets De Vries. First, it's lonely at the top. The lack of peers or equals limits your interaction with others. The detachment and alienation make you less interested in the human side of things. On top of that, people in leadership positions are often idealized and therefore are no longer treated as "normal." Why wouldn't you start believing you can fly when the people around you are applauding you all the time?

The Pressures of Leadership



Source: Kets de Vries, "Leaders Who Self-Destruct"

Just like all the other traps of power, there is no need to be ashamed of falling into this one. It's fine to admit that your ego is bigger than it was previously. However, you need to be well aware that the risks you are about to take may turn out to be too big, and that pride comes before the fall. The potential for losing touch with reality and behaving irrationally and self-destructively in a position of power is dormant in all of us, according to Kets de Vries.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁸ Kets de Vries, "Leaders Who Self-Destruct."



Red flags

- **You believe you are untouchable.** According to CNN analyst and best-selling author Elie Honig, the rich, the famous, and the powerful are able to escape justice. In his book *Untouchable: How Powerful People Get Away with It*, he describes a two-tier justice system in which people can manipulate the legal system and get away with serious misdemeanors, Trump of course being a great example.¹¹⁹ Psychologist Peter T. Coleman and other scholars refer to this as the “bulletproof trap.” When in power, you believe you can’t be shot. After all, you are special. You are entitled to more. It’s a form of arrogance in which power holders feel they can do or say whatever they want, or at least more than someone without power. If this feeling of being special allows you get away with a lie or a mistake once, you will definitely try it again. And you will start taking more risks. This trap is also known to make conflicts worse, as you start believing you are invincible.¹²⁰

¹¹⁹ While writing this book, the Republican candidate for the 2024 presidential elections was found guilty of all 34 counts of falsifying business records in a criminal hush-money scheme to influence the outcome of the 2016 election. This unprecedented criminal trial against a former US president is a hopeful sign that no one is untouchable, no matter how rich or powerful. Whether his punishment will be just financial, or withstand appeal, remains to be seen.

¹²⁰ Ferguson and Coleman, *Making Conflict Work*.

- **You cast away critics as “traitors.”** In the final stages of your power psychosis, the world will become very black and white. You will see the people around you as one of only two types: those who are “with” you or those who are “against” you. In many cases, people’s behavior toward you has nothing to do with you. They have their own plans and ideas. The fact that you are starting to see everything as one big Truman Show about you is a sign that you are overestimating your importance and significance, and you are about to lose your grip. In Trump’s case, he takes this one step further and states that the people who are against him are also against America.
- **The rules don’t apply to you.** In the European Parliament, just like in many national parliaments, there are rules to hold parliamentarians accountable, from declaring travel expenses to keeping a register of who lobbies you on what. It’s always telling that some parliamentarians feel this reporting or transparency doesn’t apply to them. At this point, criminal behavior or corruption is just one step away. The COVID-19 pandemic provided a good context to see who feels the rules apply to everyone else but not to them. In 2021, six MEPS were penalized for refusing to show an EU digital COVID-19 vaccination certificate when entering parliamentary buildings. They were fined up to €2,268.¹²¹
- **I have the right to ...** (Some) politicians have a hard life. They work non-stop, are under constant public scrutiny, and often give up a lot of their personal life and freedoms for the common good. This might give them the impression that they deserve more than others. Driving like a mad man through traffic with a police escort and preventing ordinary citizens from getting where they need to go on time feels justified. At that point, it’s worth thinking about several professions that also require big personal sacrifices for society but have fewer perks, such as nurses, ER doctors, fire fighters, and soldiers.

¹²¹ Laurens Cerulus, “The European Parliament’s Black Book,” Politico, January 19, 2022.



How to prevent this trap

It's important to keep in mind that your power-driven, biased outlook on the world might orchestrate your own fall from grace. When assuming power, it's wise to cautiously protect your integrity and practice self-control. Taking a step back occasionally will allow you to see reality in a less biased way and reconnect with yourself. So, is there a way to prevent the auto-destructive effect of power? The answer is yes. However, it requires insight and action. Kets de Vries recommends the following three principles.¹²² You can put them on yellow post-it notes in your office in order not to forget.

- 1 Reality testing.** To lead effectively, it's crucial to see things as they are, not as you wish them to be. You need to avoid isolation and blurred lines by surrounding yourself with peers who can offer honest feedback. Joe Biden's presidential candidacy illustrates the danger of failing to recognize what's right in front of you. In politics, maintaining a clear perspective is challenging, which is why networks such as the Alliance of Her are invaluable. Like executive management programs that gather CEOs for coaching in a non-threatening environment, it allows for a safe space to share experiences, gain new insights, and remain self-critical.

¹²² Kets de Vries, "Leaders Who Self-Destruct."

2 **Being grounded.** The self-sabotaging in power can be driven by fear, insecurity, paranoia, retaliation, retribution, resentment, hubris, you name it. Being able to manage your position of power and all the psychological and regressive pulls it imposes requires mental stability, resilience, and self-control.¹²³ That's why it takes a village to support you (in the analogy of it takes a village to raise a child). And that's why preferably you enter politics after having dealt with the demons of the past, you are well aware of your weaknesses, and you remain very self-reflexive and aware.

3 **Empathy.** Nurturing your sense of empathy is a very powerful way to resist the tendency to see the world in a self-serving way.¹²⁴ You need the humbling experience of understanding the concerns of the less powerful. That's why it's important for politicians to get out, talk to people, spend time away with friends and family, and avoid isolation, which brings us back to Trap 1—and so this book has come full circle.

If the risks you have taken, the unlawful decisions you have made, and the resulting isolation seem to mount up to an inevitable implosion, it's time to take a step back. This will allow you to exit gracefully on your own terms. As Jacques Chirac said:



*Si je veux espérer revenir un jour en grâce, je dois me faire oublier et me planquer avec un casque de maçon sur la tête, à cause des jets de boulons des petits copains, en attendant des jours meilleurs. Alors je me planque.*¹²⁵

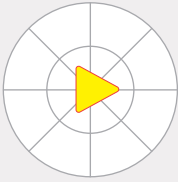
(If I'm ever to hope to return to grace, I've got to make myself forgotten and hide with a bricklayer's helmet on my head, because of the bolts thrown at me by my friends, while I wait for better days. So I hide.)

¹²³ Kets de Vries, "Leaders Who Self-Destruct."

¹²⁴ Keltner, *The Power Paradox*.

¹²⁵ Franz-Olivier Giesbert, *Jacques Chirac* (Flammarion, 2016).

If you let things spiral out of control, you will be pushed out and convicted or judged by a trial in the media. At that point, not only will your career come to an end, but your reputation will be ruined and your legacy will be cancelled.



Action items

When in power, you won't see things straight on.
Your view of what is happening will be highly biased.
You have to be aware of the potential for poisonous
power and stay true to yourself.

Trap 8: Living the Lie

Ask yourself

Do you think every journalist is against you? Do you agree with everyone in the office but disagree with everyone outside the office? Are people asking whether you have lost your mind?

Action

Surround yourself with fact checkers, because you can no longer see the forest for the trees.

If you keep on living in your parallel universe, reality will catch up with you.

Trap 9: Clinging to Power

Ask yourself

Do you think every journalist is against you? Do you agree with everyone in the office but disagree with everyone outside the office? Are people asking whether you have lost your mind?

Action

Start looking for another interesting job or assignment if you don't want to ruin your reputation.

The seat isn't yours. It's been given to you to do a job.

Trap 10: Auto-destruct

Ask yourself

Are you breaking the law? Do you think the rules don't apply to you? Are people advising you to calm down? Are you ignoring everyone and everything and going on full offense every day? Are you looking for fights, preferably fist fights?

Action

Leave on your own terms so as not to be pushed out ingloriously or via the back door.

You won't be the first to ruin your own career.

Conclusion

The quote “Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely” comes from the nineteenth-century English historian Lord Acton (1834–1902) in a letter to Bishop Mandell Creighton about how historians should judge the abuse of power by past rulers, especially popes.¹²⁶ When working in politics, or following politics closely, you can see examples of the negative effects of power every day. The psychological and corrupting effects are both fascinating and discomfoting.

Psychological research on the effects of power corroborates what we have gleaned from the stories and anecdotes of those in power. For example, in 1971, the US Office of Naval Research funded the now infamous Stanford prison experiment, in which college students became either prisoners or guards in a simulated prison environment.¹²⁷ In this case, the students who were given power as guards quickly became abusive, and the mistreatment of the prisoners escalated so badly that the experiment had to be stopped. The methodology of the Stanford prison experiment was questioned by many psychologists, but later experiments by Professor Dacher Keltner and his colleagues at the University

¹²⁶ Dalberg-Acton, John Emerich Edward, “Letter to Bishop Mandell Creighton,” April 3, 1887. In *Essays on Freedom and Power*, edited by Gertrude Himmelfarb (Beacon Press, 1948), 335–336.

¹²⁷ “Stanford Prison Experiment,” Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Stanford-Prison-Experiment>.

of California Berkeley point in the same direction. For example, in what was referred to as the cookie monster experiment, they arranged for one person to assume they had a lot more money and property than another person. They then offered the two a plate containing an odd number of cookies. Invariably, the person with the power in the game ate the last cookie. Not only did they eat it, but they also got crumbs all over the place and chewed the cookie with their mouths open. The persons with power were not only willing to cheat, they also defied cultural norms of politeness.¹²⁸ This lab experiment and many other telling variants seem to lead to the same conclusion: power goes to our heads, and not in a good way.¹²⁹

Are there exceptions? According to Katherine A. DeCelles, a professor of management at the University of Toronto, morally just people are able to steer clear of the pitfalls of power.¹³⁰ Her research brings subtlety to Acton's grim statement and offers a more optimistic view. If it's true that power leads people to take ethical shortcuts and brings out the worst in them, DeCelles shows that it can also bring out the best in some people. It all depends on pre-existing ethical tendencies, their so-called sense of moral identity. When people consider it important to be "caring," "compassionate," "fair," and "generous," their response to feelings of power is positive. That means good people can acquire power and do good.¹³¹ But when bad people enter politics, the outcome is different. Pamela Smith, a power researcher at the University of California San Diego, also found that those who say they have more

128 Anne Brice, "Power Corrupts Even the Best of Us. But There's an Antidote," *Fiat Vox*, March 30, 2021, <https://news.berkeley.edu/2021/03/30/podcast-power-corrupts/>.

129 The Berkeley experiments have been criticized. Three European academics, Martin Kordörfer, Stefan Schumke, and Boris Egloff, tried to reproduce the findings with data sets from surveys carried out by the German state. They could not confirm the thesis that privilege corrupts. According to their research, privileged individuals were proportionally more generous, more likely to volunteer, and more likely to help strangers. The Berkeley academics refute these findings, stating that privileged people are better at disguising their true nature and therefore self-reported data isn't reliable.

130 Katherine A. DeCelles, D. Scott DeRue, Joshua D. Margolis, and Tara L. Ceranic, "Does Power Corrupt or Enable? When and Why Power Facilitates Self-Interested Behavior," *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 97(3) (May 2012), 681–689, <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0026811>.

131 DeCelles et al., "Does Power Corrupt or Enable?"

self-centered values tend to be more selfish the more power they have.¹³² Abraham Lincoln referred to this dynamic when he said: “If you want to test a man’s character, give him power.”

Where do we go from here? According to Keltner, it’s important to focus on mitigation. Even those without pre-existing prosocial tendencies can avoid the traps of power and do good. In his book *The Power Paradox: How We Gain and Lose Influence*, he argues that we should not look at power in a Machiavellian way, as something that you grab. He offers a more refreshing and hopeful frame, in which power is not grabbed but given. People have the capacity to grant power to those who advance the greater good, just as they have the ability to remove or undermine that power. What Keltner calls “the power paradox” is that we rise to a position of power by focusing on others, but we then fall from that position because the effects of power disable exactly those social skills. We stop focusing on others. The way forward to outsmart the power paradox is therefore to always continue focusing on others. He offers five recommendations:

- 1 Be aware of the effects of power (check) (that’s why you just read this book).
- 2 Practice humility (to influence others is a privilege; to have power is humbling).
- 3 Don’t be impressed by your own work; stay critical of it. Accept the skepticism and pushback of others with an open mind and encourage it.
- 4 Remember that others have enabled you to make a difference in the world.
- 5 Remember there is always more work to do: Practice respect, ask questions, listen with intent, be curious about others, acknowledge them, compliment and praise with gusto, and express gratitude.

¹³² Christopher Shea, “Why Power Corrupts,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, October 2012.

Perhaps I can add a sixth recommendation, one suggested by MEP and Alliance of Her alumna Raquel García Hermida-van der Walle (NL):



Ask yourself the question “Why am I doing this?” regularly, and keep the answer fresh in your mind at all times.

By focusing on others, you can use the good side effects of power for the greater good. Let’s not forget, power is not only bad. Joe Magee, a professor at the New York University Stern School of Business and an expert on power, says power comes with benefits such as taking decisive action, thinking more abstractly, and favoring the bigger picture over smaller consequences. It increases confidence, optimism, risk-taking, goal-directed behavior, and creativity.¹³³ The dynamics are clear: Power does crazy things to our brains, but by being fully aware of the poisonous side of power, one can choose to use power graciously instead and accomplish great things.

Thriving in politics is of course not just a matter of staying clear from the traps of power and knowing this book by heart. For that you need a vision, an internal fire that will continue to burn through big crises, the best possible team, and the full support of your family and friends. I wish the reader a safe and successful journey. I hope he or she will use these insights and self-awareness to stay clear from the pitfalls of power and do what people in power should do: use power to uplift those around them, not merely for personal gain or professional objectives. This brings me back to the beginning of the book, to the airplane you have boarded. Imagine you just got elected and your airplane of success is taking off. You just heard the safety instructions and can now you can sit back, relax, and enjoy your flight.

¹³³ Scott Barry Kaufman, “Does Power Corrupt Everyone Equally?,” *Greater Good Magazine*, September 3, 2015, https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/does_power_corrupt_everyone_equally.

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The Alliance of Her

The Alliance of Her is Europe's leading platform dedicated to promoting female political leadership, power and representation, and supporting women in politics across Europe to achieve their political goals.

We believe that when women are equal in power and decision-making, their leadership is valued, and that only when more liberal women thrive in politics will we achieve a truly free, open, and prosperous Europe for all.

We are an influential community of courageous liberal women and our allies that disrupts the unjust status quo, dismantles barriers that hold women in politics back, and arms ourselves with the resources, knowledge, and tools to realize our political ambitions.

Our Academy series supports female political leaders to lead, succeed, survive, and thrive in political life, no matter how ambitious their goals. Our fast-growing and active network includes over 250 alumnae, many of whom occupy positions in the highest political levels across Europe.

To find out more and how you can be a part of it, visit us on aldeparty.eu/theallianceofher

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ELF is engaged on all political levels, from the local to the European. We bring together a diverse network of national foundations, think tanks and other experts. At the same time, we are also close to, but independent from, the ALDE Party and other Liberal actors in Europe. In this role, our forum serves as a space for an open and informed exchange of views between a wide range of different actors.

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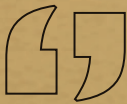
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I assembled the list of top 10 traps to avoid in politics based on my 15 years of working experience in European and Belgian politics. They are not scientifically measured but are so common you can find an example of each one of them in the newspaper's political section daily. There are more than 10 traps, but these are the most evident ones and a good starting point for those who seek to (lead, succeed, thrive, and) survive in politics. Being fully aware of the pitfalls can help aspiring politicians to survive.

Katrien Van den broeck maps out 10 of the most common “traps” politicians face when navigating political roles and mandates. Drawing on her extensive experience working at the highest levels in European and national politics, Van den broeck assembles proven strategies for dealing with power traps so that talented leaders live to fight another day. While *Confronting the 10 Traps of Power* is meant to empower female politicians to maintain control and gracefully dodge the most challenging pitfalls of their political careers, the book equally serves men.

KATRIEN VAN DEN BROECK is a communications and campaign expert and resident trainer at the Alliance of Her Academy.



It's just a simple act of fairness that both genders should be taking part in leadership. This book offers upcoming female leaders a welcome lifeline in politics.

MARGRETHE VESTAGER (Former European Commissioner)

