

The Hunt for Promises in Danish Political Debate

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Introduction

In recent years promises have played an increasing role in Danish political debate, a development that has culminated in the so-called “breach of promises debate.”¹ The corresponding Danish word “løftebrudsdebatten” was coined in the wake of the general election in September 2011 to characterize the political debate after the Thorning-Schmidt government took over. This theme has persisted as the dominant frame throughout this government’s reign.

In my view the intensified focus on promises has deteriorated into a “hunt for promises” that has gotten out of hand. The purpose of this paper is neither to defend the government nor to discuss how many election promises the two “red” political parties – S (the Social Democrats) and SF (the Socialist People’s Party) – have fulfilled or walked away from. My concern is with a general tendency that works against the deliberative ideal of informed public debate and does not promote rhetorical citizenship. In what follows I discuss why indiscriminate accusations about broken promises are a problem.

Since the breach of promises debate is a culmination of a general development, the background leading up to this debate is outlined in section 2. Section 3 evidences how it exploded. In section 4, I argue that the debate reveals confusion between policy statements and actual election promises in the proper sense of “promises” as described in speech act theory. Finally, the implications for rhetorical citizenship and political debate are discussed in section 5.

¹ This development is not peculiar to Danish affairs. The debate focus on promises and breaches appears to be an international trend. For instance, the political commentator Nielsen (2013) refers to similar debates as “political wars about breach of promises” in a number of European democracies.

The background

Election promises and accusations of breaking them play natural roles as *topoi* of political argumentation before and after an election. The issuing of promises that a political party commits itself to, if elected, obviously has a positive function for the electorate, helping citizens decide how to vote. Especially promises *not* to take certain actions if elected may provide relevant information in the election process. If a politician afterwards acts in a way that is contrary to the promise, the citizens who voted for him or her have reason to feel deceived. Such cases are relatively frequent. Some attract little public attention and are soon forgotten. Others create public outrage, fed by massive media coverage, and persist for a long time in public memory. A notorious example is Danish Prime Minister Jens Otto Krag. In 1966 he formed his Social Democratic government with SF as its supporting party, the so-called “Red Cabinet,” although he had declared that he would never do so. His remark: “You hold a position until you take another”² has become a formula for the *topos* of broken election promises, often referred to by Danes in similar situations.³

The most significant event that prepared the ground for the breach of promises debate is what has become known as “the case of the early retirement allowance” (“*efterlønssagen*”) from 1998. About eight months after the general election in that year, Prime Minister Poul Nyrup Rasmussen struck a political compromise with the opposition to implement cuts in the early retirement allowance. Since during the election campaign he had made it a top issue to preserve the program, this caused a media storm.

This case has hampered the Social Democrats severely in the long run, drawing heavily on the party’s “ethos account” (McCroskey 1997, p. 95). It has attained status as a textbook example of broken election promises that political opponents and commentators return to time and again when, for instance, opinion polls look bad for the Social Democrats.

To prevent something similar from happening to himself, Nyrup Rasmussen’s successor, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, introduced the so-called “contract politics” at the 2001 election. The expression was used to refer to a list of governmental policies that he promised to uphold unconditionally until the next election. The mantra went: what we say before the election is

² “Man har et standpunkt til man tager et nyt.”

³ The *topos* is used both negatively and positively. It is often quoted in order to expose the absurdity of the idea that politicians should not be allowed to get wiser and change their minds.

also what we do after the election! Thus, contract politics was launched as a strategy to meet the general distrust of politicians that Nyrup Rasmussen's broken promise had stirred up in the electorate.

On the face of it, contract politics seems a sound principle – pure common sense, a voter might think. Upon reflection, however, it poses various problems. As it later turned out, it restricted the government's room for maneuvering as the financial crisis developed, and Fogh Rasmussen's successor Lars Løkke Rasmussen eventually took steps to depart from it. With respect to the democratic ideal of deliberation, the foremost problem with contract politics is that it renders argumentation by politicians about the current issues more or less superfluous: if the course of action is settled, why should politicians deliberate the pros and cons of the issue? This means that contract politics undermines rhetorical citizenship because it demotivates citizens from engaging in the issues that arise in the contingent realm of politics. Instead, it invites citizens to sit on their hands between elections, reducing them to voters who reward or punish politicians for having implemented or walked away from what they once promised.

The attention to promises has been heightened by the fact that the opposition parties tended to adopt the idea of contract politics that had worked successfully for the Fogh Rasmussen government. Thus, although the era of contract politics is over, it seems probable that Danes after a decade of this kind of politics have become accustomed to it and, in turn, more prone to expect and demand promises from politicians. Either way, much attention was devoted to promises in the election campaign of 2011. On the one hand, politicians across the spectrum spent much energy on blaming each other on this account and, on the other, they were constantly confronted in the media by journalists repeatedly asking whether they could promise this or that.

The debate frame is launched

We now turn to the breach of promises debate itself. It exploded almost from day one after the S-R-SF government took office.⁴ As R (the Danish

⁴ SF left the government in the beginning of 2014 in consequence of the increasing turmoil in the party's political backing caused by the discrepancy between the policy that SF stands for according to its members and the policy that the party leadership shouldered as their share of the responsibility for in government – generally referred to as the party leaders' many breaches of promise.

Social Liberal Party) had come out strengthened from the election, and the two “red” parties weakened, essential parts of S and SF’s collective election program *Fair løsning 2020* (A fair solution) were taken out, even negated, in the government program negotiated by the coalition parties after the election and then presented to the public.

According to a study by the weekly *Mandag Morgen*, the word “løftebrud,” i.e., “breach of promise” or “broken promise,” occurred in as many as 1,200 newspaper articles within the first eight months of the new government (Andersen 2012a). My own investigations indicate that the compound noun “løftebrudsdebat,” i.e., “breach of promises debate,” is a new word in the Danish vocabulary that was triggered by the opening debate in the Danish parliament on October 6, 2011, shortly after the election. Promises given and broken were the main theme in this 15-hour opening debate, turning it into an extremely hostile confrontation and a conspicuous display of futile and repetitive argumentation (transcript in *Folketingstidende*, October 6, 2011). According to my searches on *Google* and the database *Infomedia*, the word “løftebrudsdebat” (“breach of promises debate”) yields only one result before that date. This *hapax legomenon* had occurred in an online editorial from February 2010 predicting that no parties would risk being caught up in “a breach of promises debate of the sort that hit” Poul Nyrup Rasmussen.⁵ Used here as an indefinite noun I consider it a nonce word created momentarily by the author for the specific instance. The next result occurs in *Berlingske*’s online edition on October 6, 2011, this time used by the political commentator Thomas Larsen in reference to the opening debate while it was still taking place in the Danish Parliament. From that day on the word “løftebrudsdebat” abounded in the media for months to come.⁶ The fact that it is often used in the definite form shows that the word has now become conventionalized with direct reference to the unremitting debate succeeding the election – primarily as a frame directed against the Thorning-Schmidt government.

⁵ 180grader.dk, 24.02.2010: “... Efter valget vil ingen af partierne turde ende som centrum i en løftebrudsdebat af samme slags, som ramte tidligere statsminister Poul Nyrup Rasmussen, og derfor...”

⁶ Thomas Larsen’s active part in this development is evidenced by the information in *Mandag Morgen* that over the period of eight months he wrote 34 political analyses – “almost once a week” – about the case that he has called “the century’s breach of promise” (Andersen 2012b).

Is an election promise a promise?

What strikes me as a major problem with the breach of promises debate is that politicians and commentators as well as members of the electorate seem to extend the meaning of an “election promise” beyond a “promise” in the proper sense as described in speech act theory (Austin 1975, Searle 1969). This problem raises the questions: Are election promises proper promises? Do they count as true promises? In other words: Do the same speech act rules for performing a promise apply to election promises? Or does the election context make them a special case of promising? In that case we must evaluate them by different rules than we do proper promises. These questions relate primarily to the *essential* felicity conditions, i.e., the obligation to undertake the responsibility for fulfilling the promise and perform the promised act. The questions are of special relevance for evaluating argumentation in the breach of promises debate. Moreover, I suggest that a major problem with the breach of promises debate stems from the contamination of election promises in the proper sense and the word used in a broader sense. The following examples serve to explicate my points.

The first example illustrates a clear-cut election promise counting as a proper promise in accordance with speech act theory. In her election campaign 2005 to become Lord Mayor of Copenhagen, the Social Democrat Ritt Bjerregaard issued a promise to provide housing that ordinary people could afford under the slogan: “Five thousand flats for five thousand crowns in five years.” As I have argued elsewhere (Jørgensen 2011, 2012), she did indeed make a promise, explicitly saying that she had *promised* to build the “cheap flats,” and that she had *committed* herself to doing so. Yet, two years later when it became more and more obvious that her plan would fail, she denied the promise in a newspaper interview (Weiss 2007). She now claimed that she had “merely stated what [she] intended to work towards” (Jørgensen 2011, p. 910).

The second example, a paraphrase of a passage from the opening debate in the Danish parliament mentioned above, illustrates the massive accusations in the breach of promises debate. The leader of the Conservatives, Lars Barfoed, describes what he sees as the enormous political turnaround of S and SF as “voter deception” (*valgerbedrag*). While underscoring that he – a Conservative – of course appreciates these policy changes, he attacks the government on this account: it makes a politician untrustworthy to run away from a policy presented in the election campaign once the election

is won. Claiming that there are lots of similar examples, he points to one of “the 12 SF promises.” It allegedly promised less money to millionaires and more to those with low incomes, but now SF wants lower taxes for all, including millionaires! (*Folketingstidende* October 6, 2011, 84, 8.09 p.m.)

Also, this example illustrates the duplicity of an arguer who, on behalf of others, accuses an opponent of breaking a promise to do something he himself agrees with. The main point here, however, concerns the 12 SF promises Barfoed refers to. You cannot accuse someone of breaking a promise unless that person has made a promise. This self-evident condition was met in the former case of the cheap flats. Now, had SF actually issued a promise? The question in this second case is tricky.

The alleged promises were presented in SF’s election pamphlet *Friske øjne på Danmark* (2011). The front page announces 12 concrete *goals* to achieve a stronger Denmark and to measure the party by. Next follows a list of these goals, arranged in threes under four headings. Goal no. 3 under the heading New Growth says: “Less to millionaires, more to pensioners and wage earners.” However, on the last page these goals are suddenly called *election promises*. In other words, the pamphlet uses the word in a weak sense as interchangeable with *goals* or *policy statements* in election programs. An “election promise” now refers to a future act that the politician *promises to work for* – a significant shift from the obligation undertaken in a proper promise, where the speaker is committed to *do* the future act, not just work for it.

This notion of an election promise as something different from a regular promise is adapted and explicated in an editorial in the newspaper *Politiken* (August 11, 2011) after party leader Villy Søvndal’s presentation of SF’s election program. The 12 items are called *election promises* (*valglofter*) one moment and the next moment *goals* or *policy aims* (*målsætninger*). The expression “promises that [SF] wishes to be measured by” is first criticized because it conjures up bad memories of the failed and now abandoned notion of contract politics. However, the editor adds, Søvndal has wisely distanced himself from this interpretation: he has made a crucial distinction, saying that they are “promises which he cannot *guarantee*, but shall work for.”⁷ In that case the obvious reply would be: Why then call it a promise? A promise that you cannot guarantee is not much of a promise.

Note that Ritt Bjerregaard defended herself with the very same dis-

⁷ “Der er tale om løfter, som han ikke vil *garantere*, men som han vil arbejde for.”

tion when she denied her promise. Only, she did it in retrospect. As the journalist at that time remarked in the interview, one has to be in politics for a lifetime to apprehend this subtlety.

One is tempted to suspect that politicians parade goals as promises, reckoning that citizens will see them as binding commitments, while not doing so themselves. Using *election promise* in this weak sense may thus serve as a wild card to capture votes. Whether politicians do this manipulatively or unwittingly, they should consider the loss of credibility they risk when their more or less obtainable goals, masked as promises, are not – or cannot be – realized.

Back to Barfoed's accusation: Is it fair argumentation to say that SF has broken a promise on the criterion that the accusation presupposes that a promise has actually been made? My answer is: No. Barfoed's accusation cannot be sustained on this account. As long as he censures the disparity between, on the one hand, the policy that SF put forward in the election campaign and the policy they usually stand for and, on the other, the policy they are now willing to implement, so far so good. But when he frames it as a broken promise, his argumentation becomes a violation of the standard of fairness as defined by Onsberg and Jørgensen (2008, see Jørgensen 2007, pp. 170-173).

Admittedly, the leaders of SF have themselves been partly to blame since they did use the word “promise” in their election program; had they stuck to “goals” they could legitimately be censured for having held up unfeasible policy prospects in the election campaign, but they would not have laid themselves bare to the accusation of breaking a promise.

However, to maintain, as Barfoed does, that SF issued promises in the proper sense in the pamphlet is based on a skewed reading: it takes the word out of context and neglects the fact that SF obviously used it in the weak sense, as supported by the editorial. Speaking as if SF unequivocally issued promises and did not talk of goals, Barfoed clearly presents a false picture of SF's speech act in the pamphlet. Although SF may be accused of making a blunder, or even of manipulative language, in using the word promise, Barfoed is still to be criticized for contributing to the general slippage of terms referring to political speech acts in debate. I thus see the accusation as an example of *unfair argumentation*, more specifically as a case of distortion by *oversimplification* (Jørgensen 2007, p. 171). Furthermore, I consider it as rather seriously unfair on the following grounds. To accuse a

person of breaking a promise is a strong attack on that person's *ethos*. This increases the burden of proof on the accuser. Performing this speech act legitimately requires that the accuser has solid grounds for making it and is able to produce convincing evidence that the politician did in fact issue a proper promise. The Ritt Bjerregaard case serves as an example of such an election promise.

By contrast, if we accept that an election promise is merely a goal that the politician will “work for,” the implication is that the essential condition for the speech act of promising does not apply. In turn, we cannot talk of a broken promise. The accusation of breaking election promises now becomes just another of the hollow strategic maneuvers that politicians perform to attack each other. In the broader context of public debate, the indiscriminate outcry of “broken promise” becomes feed for the media, which seek conflict according to the notion that the good story is a bad story. As for the electorate, a “broken promise” becomes an outlet for frustrated citizens who feel let down by the politicians they voted for – politicians whose actions in power they find inconsistent with the policy their party represents.

I have taken the Barfoed example as representative of many of the accusations in the breach of promises debate; it illustrates some of the confusions that the hunt for promises, to my mind, has created. To be fair, I should add that Barfoed was one of the least eristic arguers among all those who made breaches of promise the main theme in the opening debate, making those accusations on loose grounds. He, after all, could provide some evidence that a promise had been made.

Some implications

In conclusion, let me sum up the views put forward in this paper. The implication is not that politicians should abstain from issuing promises, but that they should confine themselves to only those promises they intend to keep and are confident that they will be able to fulfill after the election. In all other cases, they should stick to “goals” and insist that this is what they are, resisting the temptation to dress them up as promises in order to get a short-term advantage, and not give in to the constant pressure from the media or to demands from the electorate. Journalists, for their part, should let up on their efforts to nail politicians to promises that they can afterwards blame them for having broken.

Nor do I mean to imply that politicians should not be held account-

able for promises they have clearly made, or that they should not be exposed and censured severely when breaking them. Rather, it is the inflation in “promising” and, in particular, the escalation of the *topos* of broken election promises that I have argued against – the ever more widespread assumption that promises are what matters most in politics.

An idealistic, probably utopian, hope is that the breach of promises debate has exhausted itself so that the hunt for promises will not turn out to be an enduring condition in future political debate. Looking back at the era of contract politics and at the last couple of years of the breach of promises debate, a political journalist on national TV news predicted that the focus on promises will be absent in the next election campaign and that the ensuing debate will be “completely different” from the breach of promises debate that has “ragged” since the 2011 election (Ringberg 2013).

The prospects for a positive development, however, seem bleak. Politicians may well have learned a lesson, be less inclined to make promises, take pains to specify that a party’s goals are not promises, and guard themselves against later attacks for running away from them. But apart from that, one should preserve a right to skepticism. Although the intensity of the breach of promises debate has dropped somewhat over the years since the election, it remains the dominant *topos* in contemporary Danish political debate, constantly popping up across the field. A curious example to illustrate the wide range of the *topos* is a newspaper advertisement inserted by the new Neo-liberalist party *Liberal Alliance*, attacking former Prime Minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen, leader of the right wing party *Venstre*, as a Social Democrat in disguise. The upper half of the ad is a close-up photo of his face with the headline above: *Løftebryder!*, i.e., *Promise breaker!* The main argument is that Løkke Rasmussen in the election campaign said that it “must not cost more to be a Dane,”⁸ but now he has struck a compromise on energy with the Government that will cost Danes more and make it harder for businesses to compete (Liberal Alliance 2012). In view of the ubiquity and frequency of the *topos*, I suspect that the breach of promises debate will not die out in the near future. My guesses for the next election campaign is that politicians will continue to holler *løftebryder* (*promise breaker*) at each other, that the media will continue their hunt for promises, that interviewers will keep asking if the politicians can promise or guarantee this or that, and that after the

⁸ “Det må ikke blive dyrere at være dansker.”

election journalists as well as voters will condemn them indiscriminately for breaches of promise.

As for the alleged semantic slide from “goals” to “promises,” one might object that the word “promise” has always in election contexts been used in the weak sense, sometimes referring to “goal,” as for instance in the expression “manifesto promise.” True enough, the expression *gyldne løfter* (*golden promises*) is well on in years in Danish usage. But it has been used figuratively – as a dead metaphor. In the breach of promises debate, however, “promise” is used in a more literal sense where “promise” is synonymous with “goal” (what the politician will work for), and, at the same time, it carries the same commitment as a regular “promise” (what the politician has undertaken an obligation to do).

My main objections to this muddle is that it empties the speech act of promising of its meaning – it erodes its illocutionary force, namely that promising is among those speech acts that place the heaviest load of commitment on the speaker,⁹ and, in turn, that accusing someone of breaking a promise is a very serious charge against that person’s ethos. Both promises and accusations of breaking them should therefore be uttered with utmost caution. If done indiscriminately, political debate will deteriorate into a populist rhetoric that distrusts electors’ sound judgment, and into toxic eristic that departs from the notion of deliberative democracy where dissent is considered potentially valuable and politicians are supposed to respect their opponents’ views (see for instance Jørgensen 1998, Kock 2007, 2009).

If politicians and the media continue on the path of the breach of promises debate, the implications are thus negative from a normative point of view. In relation to a notion of rhetorical citizenship, the general tendency to use “goals” and “promises” synonymously in the contexts of elections and parliamentary debate poses several problems. In the first place, voters need party goals, especially in a democracy like the Danish, characterized by a fairly large number of political parties and a tradition of coalition governments. The political debate obviously becomes absurd if parties cannot set up their individual goals, i.e., policy statements, without being accused

⁹ Cf. Searle, who argues that the reason why we sometimes use the locution *I promise* emphatically, i.e., in utterances that do not count as promises, is that it is among “the strongest illocutionary force indicating devices for *commitment* provided by the English language” (1969, p. 58).

afterwards of being promise breakers every time they make a compromise. In this connection, the breach of promises debate is a pseudo-debate that sidesteps the real issue, namely how far a party in power can deviate from the goals and policies they stand for in the eyes of the voter, without losing its integrity.

Further, as indicated in section 2, the problem in relation to rhetorical citizenship pointed out in connection with contract politics is transferred to the breach of promises debate, namely that the focus on promises reduces the deliberating citizen to a *consumer*-like position (Kock and Villadsen 2012, p. 3). The citizen, on this view, is nothing but a voter whose democratic participation is limited to election day, and who, in voting every few years, either rewards or punishes the politicians in power for either delivering or failing to deliver the desired products. More specifically, the semantic slide from “goals” to “promises” appeals to a passive recipient role, in contrast to the active and responsible listener role suggested by Kock and Villadsen’s discussion of rhetorical citizenship in their introduction above: see especially figure 1. The crucial distinction in the present context is that as long as we talk of “goals,” the voters share the communicative responsibility with the party they vote for in the sense that they partly have themselves to blame if these goals are unrealistic or obviously unfeasible. Talk of “promises” involves citizens less in the sense that it makes the promise-maker solely accountable for the feasibility of the propositional content of the promise. The risk is that this invites voters to assume an uncritical position, allowing them to blame the politician alone, not themselves, when the promises afterwards are not kept, whether the reasons for this are good or bad. For instance, many citizens, including left-leaning voters, by all accounts found S and SF’s election program *Fair løsning* too “rosy,” i.e., full of idealistic political goals and loose proposals that seemed too far from reality. Afterwards seeing this as a case of broken promises is to trivialize a much more important and urgent issue, involving big questions such as demagoguery, manipulative argumentation and the gulf between political elites and the electorate. This way, the focus on promises may promote a passive and irresponsible attitude, detrimental to the ambition of creating better conditions for rhetorical citizenship, and the breach of promises debate may be regarded as a symptom of the problems that contemporary Western democracies are facing.

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