

# PROMISES and CONTRACT LAW

**Comparative Perspectives** 

**MARTIN HOGG** 

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# PROMISES AND CONTRACT LAW

Promises and Contract Law is the first modern work to explore the significance of promise to contract law from a comparative legal perspective. Part 1 explores the component elements of promise, its role in Greek thought and Roman law, the importance of the moral duty to keep promises and the development of promissory ideas in medieval legal scholarship. Part 2 considers the modern contract law of a number of legal systems from a promissory perspective. The focus is on the law of England, Germany and three mixed legal systems (Scotland, South Africa and Louisiana), though other legal systems are also mentioned. Major topics subjected to a promissory analysis include formation of contract, third party rights, contractual remedies and the renunciation of contractual rights. Part 3 analyses the future role which promise might play in contract law, especially within a harmonised European contract law.

MARTIN HOGG is a Senior Lecturer at the School of Law, University of Edinburgh. He has researched and published extensively in the field of obligations law, in both a national and comparative context.

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It is the thesis of this work that promise has played an important role in the contract law not only of those jurisdictions whose legal culture derives directly and unashamedly from Roman law and the medieval ius commune but also in those systems forming part of the Common law world, systems which are somewhat more reticent in acknowledging a debt to Roman or medieval European legal influences. The importance of promise in contract law derives from a mixture of sources: from the natural law tradition of Aristotle, Aquinas, and the late scholastics; from Roman law itself; from the canon law; and from the emphasis placed in later centuries upon the will, of which the promise is one specific manifestation. It is argued that, while promise was the paradigm voluntary obligation in medieval and early modern law, its primacy was largely supplanted by a model of agreement with the contract as its concrete expression, one in which promise was relegated largely to a description of the nature of agreement (as an exchange of promises) and of some unusual transactions which could not easily be accommodated within an agreement model, such as the promise of reward. Promise survived, however, as a discrete obligation in one European system, that of Scotland, and the functions which it is capable of performing in that system offer some inspiration for a possible rediscovery of the value of promise in other systems. Many transactions analysed in this work are only with difficulty fitted into a contractual model, whereas, it will be argued, it would be more honest to recognise that the unreciprocated or unilateral promise provides a neater and more apposite explanation for the basis of liability. It will also be suggested that the promise in the wider sense of a contractual promise is a concept which still illuminates much of the substantive content of contract law, despite attacks which have been made against promise by the reliance theory of obligational liability and other non-promissory theories.

It is not the intention of this work to suggest that *all* of contract law can be explained by the idea of promise. Indeed, it will be admitted that many controls upon parties' promises are imposed externally, without

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reference to the will or promise of the parties, in order to enforce societal norms embodying values, such as objective good faith. Nonetheless, the case will be put that the promise, especially the unilateral promise, might usefully be given a greater role in contract law than it currently plays in most legal systems, and that it is heartening that just such a view appears to have been taken by the drafters of model legal projects such as the Principles of European Contract Law (PECL) and the Draft Common Frame of Reference (DCFR). At the present time, the probable future of promise in European legal systems, and conceivably further afield in the US and South Africa, is a bright one.

This work contains, particularly in Part 1, a discussion of the various legal theories which have over the centuries been suggested as explanations for the normative force of contract law. It must be stressed, however, that the search for an 'ideal' theory of contract law is not the objective of this work, as it is for many works on contract theory. Too much contract theory gives the appearance of being based upon an ideal of what the law should be, rather than what it actually is, and of thus being disconnected from the law with which the courts are concerned. Projects for the construction of utopian contract law and theory are all very well, but the approach adopted in this work is largely one of attempting to discover what role promise has played, and still plays, in the law of concrete legal systems. Nonetheless, some suggestions are offered as to how will theory, in a reinvigorated form, might continue to offer an overarching explanation for the normative force of promises and contracts, given that there is a perceived crisis in the minds of some about how to justify the enforcement of voluntary obligations. In offering ideas concerning such a reinvigorated will theory, it will be suggested that promissory theory cannot realistically hope to explain all of contact law, as it once tried to, but that this incompleteness need not be seen as a weakness.

The present study is, as the title indicates, a comparative one. Promise as a field of study comes alive in a comparative context, in both a legal jurisdictional as well as disciplinary sense. In terms of legal systems, the primary focus is on one system from each of the three great western legal families: England (representing the Common law), Germany (representing the civilian family) and Scotland (for the mixed legal systems). Given the comparatively small size of Scotland as a jurisdiction, the mixed legal systems of South Africa and Louisiana are also considered in Parts 2 and 3 of the work. There is in addition some reference to Common law cases from the USA, Canada and Australia. In respect of non-legal disciplines, observations on the idea of promise are offered

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from the field of philosophy (especially linguistic philosophy), theology and anthropology.

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#### ABBREVIATIONS OF COURT NAMES

# (given in brackets after case citations in the table of cases)

A	Appellate Division of the Supreme Court of South Africa
BCCA	British Columbia Court of Appeal
С	Cape of Good Hope Provincial Division of the Supreme Court of South Africa
CAS	Court of Appeal of Singapore
CC	Constitutional Court of South Africa
CExC	Court of Exchequer Chamber of England and Wales
Ch	Chancery Division of the High Court of England and Wales
CP	Court of Common Pleas of England and Wales
CPD	Common Pleas Division of the High Court of England and Wales
CSC	Cape Colony Supreme Court
CSIH	Court of Session (Scotland), Inner House
CSOH	Court of Session (Scotland), Outer House
D	Durban and Coast Local Division of the High Court of South Africa
Е	Eastern Cape Local Division of the Supreme Court of South Africa
EWCA	Court of Appeal of England and Wales (incl. cases heard prior to 1875 by the Court of Appeal in Chancery)
FCA	Federal Court of Australia
HCA	High Court of Australia
HL	Appellate Committee of the House of Lords
KB	King's Bench Division of the High Court of England and Wales

KwaZulu-Natal High Court

Labour Appeal Court of South Africa

KZNHC LAC NC Northern Cape Provincial Division of the Supreme Court of

South Africa

NSCA Nova Scotia Court of Appeal NZCA New Zealand Court of Appeal NZSA Supreme Court of New Zealand

OCA Ontario Court of Appeal

PC Privy Council

QB Queen's Bench Division of the High Court of England and

Wales

SCA Supreme Court of Appeal of South Africa

SCC Supreme Court of Canada

SCNSW Supreme Court of New South Wales SCQ Supreme Court of Queensland SCWA Supreme Court of Western Australia

T Transvaal Provincial Division of the Supreme Court of

South Africa

UKSC United Kingdom Supreme Court

W Witwatersrand Local Division of the Supreme Court of

South Africa

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