8. Perceptions of Leadership¹

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Introduction

There is a massive literature on leadership and leadership qualities (for some reviews see Grint 2000; Porter and McLoughlin 2006; Hunter *et al.* 2007; Mumford *et al.* 2008). Much of this literature concerns leadership in private sector organisations, but a great deal also concerns leadership in politics (Peele 2005; Morrel and Hartley 2006). There can be no doubt that personal psychological characteristics help some people to become leaders, and such characteristics can also help determine which leaders come to be seen as good or bad, strong or weak, progressive or regressive, and so on (Hogan and Kaiser 2005). Most accounts of leadership in the literature concentrate upon these qualities in the leader herself. It has frequently been remarked that accounts of good leadership often resemble a checklist of good qualities. As has also been noted, these lists are not always consistent and are sometimes contradictory. The reason, of course, is that qualities useful in some circumstances ('a good leader will show willingness to take a risk') might prove disastrous in other circumstances ('a good leader will be cautious where conditions dictate' (Boin *et al.* 2005: ch. 1)). Furthermore, whether a given risk was justified, or whether caution is later seen as the best course of action, is judged in retrospect, and so, is often not helpful as advice to a prospective leader.

It cannot be denied, of course, that personal qualities make up good leadership, though there can also be little doubt that structural or institutional features will also help select among those psychological factors who will get the top and succeed in different countries. What helps make a US President, might not be the same qualities that can enable someone to lead an Australian political party or succeed in the parliamentary arena. To succeed in the Australian Parliament a politician must be able to deal with the daily rough-and-tumble of parliamentary questions. To be sure, Australian premiers have had many different traits and personalities, but certainly over the last 50 years each, in his own way, was quick witted enough, or able enough to deflect criticisms, to be able to succeed in a parliamentary setting. The requirement for success as US President is somewhat different; Presidents receive much more protection from such hostile environments. The closest are the Presidential debates that candidates have faced, but these rule-bound occasions are very different from the parliamentary setting. Some US Presidents might have been wanting in the Australian context, just as some Australian prime ministers might have been found wanting in the rather different cultural context of a US Presidency. Thus from the outset we

can see that whilst psychological attributes must play a role in who succeeds as a leader, it might not be the same psychological attributes in all institutional contexts. This fact demonstrates, at the very least, how important the individual and structural relationship is in any account of leadership.

The idea that both structure and agency are important in social outcomes is widely accepted in social science (Dowding 2008a). In leadership studies this view has been called the ‘contingency approach’ by Keith Grint (2000). It departs from what has been the dominant mode of analysis in leadership studies, which has tended to concentrate upon personal characteristics or ‘traits’ and so privileging individual over structure. However, leadership studies seem to be moving towards more contextualised accounts of leadership (Hunter *et al.* 2007; Yammarino and Dansereau 2008), taking into account the types of issues leaders face and the structures within which they operate. Grint identifies ‘situational approaches’ which draw attention to the fact that leaders emerge in certain types of circumstance and that leadership can be considered a niche that has to be filled. Through this literature there is a definitional issue over whether we see ‘leaders’ primarily as people who fulfil a role in an organisation or group, or whether the role is given an independent status, such that not all who hold such roles are ‘leaders’. In other words, ‘leadership’ is defined by ‘trait’. In this chapter I will assume that ‘leader’ means the role, but that we can talk of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ leaders in terms of their traits and the decisions they make *in the context* in which they make those decisions. I do not offer any objective definition of what constitutes good and bad leadership; there are plenty of claims in the literature (see for example Hogan and Kaiser 2005). Rather I offer some thoughts on how leadership is *perceived* by people and why some might be thought to be ‘strong’ or ‘weak’ given their actions in the context in which those actions take place. The argument is that how we view individual traits in terms of leadership characteristics is, in part, dependent upon the context in which those traits emerge. Furthermore, once those traits are perceived by people, including the subject themselves, they further develop as traits. Perceptions of someone as a strong leader can make that person a strong leader or, perhaps more pertinently, once someone is labelled as a weak leader there is little that they can do to lose that reputation or not be a weak leader.

This process occurs for two reasons. Firstly, actions that would have appeared strong if carried out by someone with a reputation for strength will be viewed as the actions of a weak person, perhaps trying to be strong. Secondly, the reactions of others to those actions will depend upon how they view the leader. Someone who is believed to be strong and shouts at a subordinate might lead that subordinate to quail and obey. The shouting leader the subordinate believes is weak might be laughed at, further weakening him. The analysis of strategic interaction through game theory has demonstrated how important reputation can be and the mere fact of a reputation for weakness can create (further)

weakness (for example, Binmore 2007: 282-3). The literature on leadership has tended to ignore its interactive and strategic nature and, thus, misses an important aspect of contextual nature of leadership traits. In other words, as noted in other social science contexts (Dowding 2008a) traits and context (individual and structural) are not simply different sides of leadership but deeply implicate and transform each other.

I first explain how leadership qualities might emerge through luck and, then, informally model how patterns of relationships can lead observers to perceive some leaders as weak and others strong. It is through those external perceptions that the lead subject and those with whom they interact can believe those perceptions such that weakness and strength are realities.

Strength through luck

I first argue that a person's relative strength might occur through luck. I am not making the obvious point that, in retrospect, who we judge as a strong leader could be determined by luck. For example, two people in identical situations make the same risky decision: for one it pay off but for the other it fails and we judge (somewhat unfairly) that the one who was lucky is strong and the one who was unlucky is not. In other words, I am not making Napoleon's point that he preferred his generals to be lucky. Rather, I wish to suggest that the *actual* strength or determination of someone might occur through luck.²

Let us be clear. It might well be that there are individual traits that emerge in behaviour that are genetically determined. There might be a gene for 'determination', or 'stubbornness' or 'collegiality' such that those who have that gene are more likely to display the behavioural characteristics of determination, stubbornness, or collegiality. However, all geneticists are aware that 'genes for' some characteristics only get switched on in some environments. Not all who have the gene will display those behavioural characteristics, and those without the gene might display some of them. In other words, in context, those with the gene are more likely to display those behavioural qualities. My argument does not depend upon such an account of 'genes for' emerging in context. My argument can assume that two people with regard to any 'gene' for, say, determination, are identical. But for one, through sheer luck, the behavioural trait emerges, and so the person is at first 'perceived' to be more determined (though by other measures is no more so), but then, because of that perception, actually does become more determined (by those other measures). This is the luck through which leadership qualities might emerge. I will explain that possible emergence through a sporting analogy.

What is viewed as 'luck' depends upon the identification of a pattern associated with a reward (Dowding 2008b). Given a set of rewards (in a sporting contest, in a lottery, in the 'leadership stakes') luck is determined. If the winner of a

lottery is lucky to have won, then we note that where there are lotteries there always will be *someone* who is lucky. Or with a nod to Napoleon, there will always be lucky generals. To the extent that life is a series of lotteries — that is, there are winners and losers — then there will always be some who are luckier than others. It might be responded that winners and losers are determined by their traits, but my argument here is that the emergence of traits also has an element of luck.

Imagine a simple Bournelli trial of coin tosses. In each trial we have a pattern of outcomes with probability p (success) and $1 - p$ (failure). What patterns do we describe as good/bad luck and what do we describe as ‘to be expected’? For each trial we know the probability of heads is 0.5 and for tails is 0.5. Let us concentrate upon the probability of getting heads as success. Each time the coin comes down heads, we see this as success. If the coin comes down heads on a trial we can see this as good luck. Sometimes winning the toss can be very important to an outcome. In cricket, winning the toss can, at times, virtually decide the outcome of the match. But in any coin toss, with a fair coin, coming down heads has a probability of 0.5. We can see that how much luck we assign to any given coin toss is determined by the reward. Tossing a coin in a laboratory, to say, generate a random set of outcomes, involves no luck. Tossing the coin to see who gets the million dollars does.

Now consider a sequence of tosses. If we toss the coin 100 times, there will be sequences where it comes down heads more often than 50% of the time. Sequence 9-18 might have four heads; sequence 33-43 nine. Both *sequences* are expected in the sense that we can assign the same probability to each sequence. But if we are betting on the coin coming down heads, the second sequence is luckier than the first. But how much luck do we assign to each sequence? That depends on the bet. However, what if someone continually tossed heads ‘more than expected’ when they bet on it? At what point would we decide they had some skill in determining when the coin comes down heads?

We might need to use evidence independent of the result. The ‘way’ the person tosses the coin. Do they note whether the head or tail is on top before tossing, the flick of the thumb, the way they catch and so on. We have theories about ‘looking right’ in sport — the stroke of the golf player, the stance and movement of the cricketer when batting. In leadership terms certain types of behaviour are thought to correlate with good leadership, broadly those associated with competency (McClelland 1973). I will consider these as what I will call *temperament*. In sport, temperament both enables us to get down and work hard at training, and also affects the outcome of matches. Some players are thought to have the ‘big match temperament’ whilst others are seen as ‘chokers’ who play well but do not win as much and all-too-often lose the big games. Sometimes the player who appears less skilful wins because she seems to have the ‘big

match temperament'. She may be beaten more often than not by her opponent, until it comes to the big tournaments and then she seems to always prevail. We might think this 'big match temperament' is a type of skill. We might hope to find some material manifestation of this skill independently of the results one achieves due to it. For example, we might think it appears in some DNA sequence. However, given what we know about the manner in which genes are switched on and off by environmental conditions, this is likely to be a forlorn hope since the big match temperament is likely to be highly path dependent.

Greg Norman was a choker, but when did he become so? After Jack Niklaus' charge at the 1986 Masters; the following year after Larry Mize's lucky chip? Or was it during one of the playoffs at the other three grand slams? He was a choker for sure in final round at the Masters in 1996. What we might see in Norman's Grand Slam history is an outcome space that is typically patterned into different subsets and that Niklaus and Mize beat Norman, but the fact that the pattern matters to him affects his play in future final rounds which then alters future patterns of the outcome space. Future patterning would have its own luck without the past patterning affecting today's play. But players' behaviour has been altered by their perception of the past patterning. The patterning of a subspace of sequences of coin tosses gains significance depending upon what was riding on each sequence. Similar sequencing has occurred for Norman, but with the added difference that previous sequencing (by supposition caused through luck) has affected subsequent sequencing. Norman's choking traits were in part caused by luck.

Perceptions of leadership

The sporting analogy demonstrates how genuine traits might emerge through luck. Certain leadership traits are genuine — some people have them and others do not — but those traits might emerge through luck. They emerge because of the outcomes caused by certain decisions; how others viewed those outcomes; and how the leader subsequently made new decisions; and, how others responded to those decisions. I now want to give a very simple spatial analogy that suggests that perceptions of leadership quality might be determined by context.³

Imagine the lines in Figure 8.1 below represent some issue-dimension, left-right, or hawk-dove or similar. But the issue crosses the legitimate boundary of two different departments. We have three players: one minister from Department A, one from Department B, and the Premier (P). Their non-strategic (or 'naïve') preferred policy (their 'bliss point') is marked on the dimension. Cabinet government implies that there will be discussion across departments needing some bargain between the two. Furthermore, imagine, due to her greater institutional power, the leader can force her own bliss point, and does so. Our question is how do we view the leader in each situation?

Figure 8.1 Spatial Representation of Leader Reputation

In 1(a) the leader gets her way (by assumption) and it is seen that this is so despite her being an outlier from her cabinet colleagues. She is determined and pushes her view. In 1(b) she is seen as concessionary since she forces policy through as a compromise between the two ministers. Indeed, if A and B were equal in power, this might well be the bargained compromise. We can note that, as drawn, the Prime Minister's bliss point has not changed, only the position of minister B. We can imagine that the qualities (personal characteristics of the Premier) are identical in each situation, although our views of those characteristics may vary, according to the situation. If the 'leadership prize' is 'dominance', then the Premier 1(a) is lucky. If 'getting what you want with least effort' is the prize, then the Premier 1(b) is lucky.

Of course, real life is more complex. We might know the bliss points prior to the situation arising, which might affect our judgement. Players have strategic as well as naïve preferences. Player A might pretend to be at the Premier bliss point in 1(a) hoping that the Premier would not want to be seen to favour A too much and so shift policy slightly towards B (and A's bliss point). The Premier might be very careful not to reveal her true preferences until very late in the game, and so on. But I want to make a very simple point. In the UK, Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair have both been seen to have been strong British Premiers, and they were. But they also shared the feature that in their own cabinets they were preference outliers, both being further to the right than the median figure in their cabinets. John Major was perceived to be a weak leader, and he was, but he was also a median voter. He was perceived to be concessionary, giving way to one side on some issues, and the other side on others, and sometimes making compromises. But I would suggest he, just as often as Blair and Thatcher, forced his true bliss point.

If it is true that Thatcher, Major and Blair got what they wanted approximately equally as often, why do I also say that Thatcher and Blair were both strong leaders and Major a weak one, rather than claiming that is only our perception, and not the fact? I do so precisely because of the inter-activeness (and so ‘path dependency’) of perception and reality. Because Thatcher and Blair were seen to be strong leaders they were able to be so. Because Major was perceived to be weak, even when he forced the issues, which he did repeatedly, he was seen to be doing so from a weak position. And in each case their cabinet colleagues responded accordingly. Thatcher was not perceived as a strong leader in the first two years of her leadership (strident perhaps, not strong). Not concessionary certainly, but she was perceived as weak. She did not get her way on industrial relations, on Ireland, or on other matters.⁴

Success and strong leadership

Until the Falklands War, Margaret Thatcher was not seen as a strong leader. She was forced to concede in various areas of policy and whilst she held firm on the economy, the recession and mass unemployment her government seemed to do little to resolve did not make her seem a great leader. In her decision to send troops to win back the Falkland Islands she took a risk (against elite opinion) and it came off. She was seen to be a leader with authority. Furthermore, in retrospect economic decisions taken then have been viewed in a much better light by economists and public opinion. She was seen to be strong partly because she went against elite and public opinion and *has been viewed* as being right (whether or not she was ‘really’ correct is irrelevant to my argument). If you wish to be viewed as a great leader it is not enough to be thought to have done the right thing, but to have done the right thing against the odds of public opinion. I hypothesise, therefore, that how ‘great’, ‘strong’, or ‘authoritative’ we judge public leaders is based upon the relationship between their views and that of ‘society’ (say the majority or median voter); and *how often the leader was perceived to be right* (and since perceptions might vary, how strong a leader is viewed at time t_1 might change when t_1 is viewed at time t_2 — as indeed in retrospect has Thatcher’s leadership qualities in her first two years). I illustrate this point in Figure 8.2.

Figure 8.2 Authority of Leader

The idea is that a leader who, let us say, is viewed as choosing correctly, but follows the median voter's views, is only given credit for following the median voter. The leader who is viewed as choosing correctly, against the wishes of the majority, is given extra credit, not only for being right, but being right against the odds. The leader who chooses wrongly but follows the median voter is perceived as weak. The leader who chooses wrongly against the prevailing opinion, is perceived as disastrous. She chose against the odds and lost.⁵

In Figure 2 we have a stylised picture of such a claim. I have suggested that when the perception that the leader is correct is about even, then both the leader following public opinion (represented by F-F) and the leader who opposes majority opinion (A-A) have the same authority. I have no evidence of that, but if the shapes of the 'authority curves' A-A and F-F are roughly correct, the figure illustrates the claim that with only a slight increase in the perception of the probability that the leader is correct, the leader who chooses against public opinion is given much greater authority.

Going wrong

Strong leaders often fall spectacularly: Thatcher is one example, John Howard another. Why does this happen? There are no easy answers, but the analysis here suggests one cause. Leaders can come to believe the perceptions – the myths of themselves – too readily and perhaps forget the important coalitions that were forged that helped make them appear strong. (Reading the autobiographies of former ministers in Thatcher's government, it appears that virtually all them invented the privatisation program. What this might show, is that there was a broad coalition in favour, no matter who actually *first* proposed *which* privatisations.) Specifically because they made tough decisions against majority decision that were later viewed as correct, they think that same trick can always be played. But it is the nature of risk that the odds are against you always winning. Arguably the Poll Tax did for Thatcher, Iraq did for Blair and WorkChoices did for Howard.

Conclusions

I have argued that we cannot understand leadership by looking at the qualities of any given leader, nor indeed all leaders outside of: (i) the issues they faced; (ii) whether the decisions they made were in line with what (a) elite opinion, and (b) public opinion thought correct; (iii) and how far, given the stochastic nature of the outcomes of public policy-making, those decisions were seen to be correct. Underlying all these judgements is luck. Luck that a leader is perceived in a given way given everything in (i-iii) and, secondly, how those perceptions caused the leader to view their own leadership credentials and, thus, make decisions in the future given everything in (i-iii), and so on. Leadership qualities and environment continually interact, and who becomes recognised as a great public leader depends as much upon the elements of luck I have identified as any potential leadership qualities they enjoy. Nothing in this analysis, however, denies that those perceived as great leaders actually were great, or that those who are perceived to be weak, actually were weak.

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ENDNOTES

¹ I would like to thank participants at the 'Public Leadership in Australia and Beyond' conference, 29-30 November, 2007 at ANU for comments and Paul 't Hart for his written comments on the original memo contribution.

² The following six paragraphs are based on Dowding (2008b) though I use the example for a different purpose here.

³ Dunleavy (2007) uses more complex spatial analyses in his account of leadership though in a very different way from that suggested here.

⁴ Though in retrospect, tactically she got it right by getting her men into key economic roles, and that can be seen as a key leadership trait based on analysis rather than any form of luck or perception.

⁵ The stochastic nature of most policy decisions means that 'getting it right' is often hard to judge. Therefore we often make judgements about people, and their leadership qualities based on issues where it is easy to judge. Thatcher won the Falklands war. Did she win education policy? Or civil service reform? Or even economic policy? These are much harder to judge. Lesson for leaders, win some easy-to-judge decisions against prevailing opinion. (Opinion in the UK was split over whether to fight or negotiate over the Falklands, but certainly prevailing elite opinion was to negotiate.)