

A CRITIQUE OF MODERN LEADERSHIP

Keynote address: The Hon. Justice Margaret White

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As 1999 drew to a close, *The Australian* newspaper published lists and profiles of great leaders of the millennium in politics, science, the arts, military achievement and so on. They earned their places as outstanding leaders, not necessarily as *good* people. I suspect that our personal lists would tend to exclude Attila the Hun, Stalin and Hitler, each an undoubted leader. Such personal lists for the twentieth century leaders might include political leaders, particularly those who have led their nations in time of national danger or struggle, such as Winston Churchill, Franklin Roosevelt, Mao Tse Tung and Nelson Mandela. Some would choose great military leaders like General Montgomery or Admiral Nimitz; while others would emphasise the humanitarian qualities of “Weary” Dunlop, Mother Teresa of India or Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

When I mention Pastor Bonhoeffer I am reminded of two great men from the distant past who were politicians, not religious, who have influenced greatly the western world by their prison writings and have shown inspiring leadership. The first is Boethius, born in about 480 AD and dubbed “the schoolmaster of the West”. He was the head of the civil service for the entire Roman Empire, or what was left of it, under the Ostrogothic king, Theodoric. In his spare time he translated Aristotle’s works on logic, wrote commentaries on Cicero and translated treatises on music, astronomy, geometry and mechanics - hence the title, “the schoolmaster”. Theodoric turned against him, preferred trumped-up charges and sent him into exile in Pavia where he wrote his final, beautiful and uplifting work *The Consolation of Philosophy* [c. 520]. We are more familiar with St Thomas More’s prison writings - *A Dialogue of Comfort Against Tribulation* [1534] - written while he contemplated with horror the prospect of his painful end, which he was able to meet with a courage which continues to inspire. So, too, Bonhoeffer wrote from the Berlin-Tegel prison of his vision of a “religionless Christianity”, which profoundly shaped the ideas of Martin Luther King Jnr [whose own Letter from Birmingham Gaol in 1963 was influential in its turn].

But I digress, for this subject of leadership tugs in many directions.

In Australia I suspect that sportsmen and women might be rather over represented on most lists.

Whatever the selection or the direction, the issue of leadership has become a subject of immense interest in the past few decades. It is taught in courses in Australia and throughout the world modelled on the great North American business schools of, for example, Harvard and Stamford, with an earnestness that at times seems almost absurd.

There are dozens of journals devoted to the subject of leadership. How to make one or how to be one. Books abound with titles as compelling as *Leadership A to Z: A Guide for the Appropriately Ambitious* [by James O’Toole, Jossey-Bass [1999]]; *Results-Based Leadership: How Leaders Build the Business and Improve the Bottom Line* [Harvard Business School Press, [1999] by J Zenger, D Ulrich and N Smallwood]. Mr O’Toole says that in the field of leadership practice the bloom is off the rose of the “one and only leader” and new buds of leadership - empowerment at every level - are opening as the way forward. [*Training and Development* March 2000 p 61] Most of this activity is predominantly related to the field of business and commerce, but the principles have been applied everywhere from the Church to the pre-school.

Fashion in the desired characteristics of leaders of commercial enterprises has changed significantly from the loyal, gifted employee who moved through the ranks and finally achieved the top job, to the regularly replaced chief executive officers of flat organisations whose greatest breakthrough, we are told, will come from the “softer” side of management based on the humanities and celebrating the success of those around them. [Discussion in *The Australian Financial Review*, Weekend 15-16 January 2000 pp 26-27].

It is said that a robust new repertoire of leadership skills is needed in the business world to deal with “globalisation, the sustained management of corporate growth, with disruptive new technologies and to leverage the benefits of e-business” [*S Yearout, G Miles and R Koonce, “Wanted-Leader Builders” in Training and*



Development March 2000 at p 34]. Of this field of leadership I will make little comment. That is for sociologists, psychologists and management consultants; but would observe that Professor Oprah Winfrey was such a resounding success teaching the Dynamics of Leadership course at Northwestern University's well-regarded Kellogg Graduate School of Management with her long time companion last year that she has been invited back for a second series. [*The Australian Higher Education Supplement*, 17 November 1999 at p 35 and *ibid* 19 January 2000 at p 32. The course includes ten three hour sessions and four hundred and seventy-five pages of readings].

I propose here to gather together some thoughts on types of leaders, individual leaders and the need for followers. The focus will generally be on politicians, but not necessarily so. This is, however, a posy of other men's flowers, and only the ribbon that binds them is my own. [Montaigne *Essais III.xii*].

It is stating nothing new to say that within our western communities people are disillusioned with their leaders and cynical about leadership. Paul Kelly, the former international editor of *The Australian*, writing in 1998 [*Politics and the Media Circus*, March-April 1998, p 19 at p 20] commented that the authentic politicians of the age, Bill Clinton and Tony Blair, grasp the real nature of contemporary leadership.

"It is not about party. It is about projections. It's really a fusion of ancient Rome and Hollywood; a fusion of power and celebrity. It's about establishing an emotional bond with the community...you engage at an emotional level, and in the media circus today, the dividends are money and influence. People living in a secular society invest their hopes in celebrities from the late Princess Di to Tony Blair to Bill Gates."

Kelly relates that a politician had recently told him the story of a man whose wife had died the day before the Princess of Wales' own death. The man confessed that he was more affected by the Princess's death than that of his own wife. As Kelly comments, *"This is proof of new, powerful and strange forces at work."*

Television blends politics with entertainment, "it's part of the pop-corn culture". A recent example of the politician as entertainment is Bill Clinton and his sexual encounter with Monica Lewinsky. It was dressed up as democracy in action but we were not deceived.

So despite the evidence of history to the contrary, many yearn for Thucydides' description of Pericles as leader:

".....a man clearly above corruption, [who] was enabled, by the respect others for him and his wise policy, to hold the multitude in a voluntary restraint. He led them, not they him; and since he did not win his power on compromising terms, he could say not only what pleased others but what displeased him relying on their respect". [Quoted in G Wills, What Makes a Good Leader? in *The Atlantic Monthly*, April 1994 p 63].

In fact this kind of leader did not keep his job long and, as Wills has observed, people rarely immolate their own needs and desires to conform to the vision of some superior being. Where they have done so has been in theocratic societies where the leader is God's representative whose will is manifest through the leader. The idea of a charismatic leader permeates history. The word continues to be used with unhappy frequency by the popular press to mark out a person of distinction. The late Professor SE Finer, Emeritus Professor of Government and Public Administration in the University of Oxford, discussed it thus:

"Charisma is a theological term meaning the gift of grace; sociologically it refers to extraordinary, often superhuman powers and characteristics attributed to an individual. The power may be military or religious or both. This charisma bespeaks a personality that breaks all norms. It is, literally, extra-ordinary. In its pristine state charisma is personal. It is also highly unstable, for it can vanish as quickly as it came". [*The History of Government from Earliest Times*, 3 vols [1997] OUP, pp 38-9].

In Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* [Act IX scene iii] as Antony is lying in his tent at night, his guards hear mysterious music:

*"What should this mean?" asks one soldier, and another replies:
"T'is the god Hercules, whom Antony love'd,
Now leaves him".* [Finer vol 1 p 39]



So too with Saul. A kind of divine madness, as Professor Finer puts it, came upon him as he ploughed and caused him to convene the men of Israel against the Ammonites [*1 Samuel 11 verse 6*]. But after victory Saul transgressed and Samuel tells him that he has been rejected by the Lord as King and the divine gift was taken away. [*1 Samuel 15 verse 26 and following*]. On the whole, a charismatic leader carries more deficits than advantages.

As the gift of charisma fades it starts to fuse with tradition and in that way a new ruler is recognised by the people. Leadership legitimacy thus rests on some divine or supernatural basis as, for example, the Emperors of Japan who are believed to be descended from the sun goddess, [Amaterasu]. In Europe we saw the concept of the Divine Right of Kings realised in a variety of forms in all of which the monarchs derived their authority directly from God and which, accordingly, set them above the people. In time the great revolutionary struggles occurred and now, virtually the whole of the contemporary world encompasses the model of the European modern state [invented by the French where the nation-state belongs to the people, Finer, vol 1 p 93] - the territorial nation-state that proclaims democratic and secular values. Of course, how it operates is another matter.

In such democracies the leader, in theory, and subject to the vicissitudes of the competitive party system, carries out the will of the majority. But, in fact, as Wills suggests, such a leader is essentially a follower, for in order to retain leadership, he or she must not displease those who keep them in power. This results, he concludes, in the unhappy choice between an authoritarian leader whose entitlement to rule in such a fashion is suspect, and the leader, who, in effect, cuts deals [p 64].

Wills draws attention to the curious apparent lack of interest in followers in the leadership literature and the ethos of great schools and universities. The “we train leaders only” syndrome is all pervasive. I have long thought that an educated [in the broad sense] and critical [in the constructive sense] electorate of a nation or some lesser body is the true creator of good [but not necessarily great] leaders. Interestingly, in light of the current discussion about the role of the Pope during the Second World War, a few weeks before Mussolini came to power, the Vatican daily newspaper, *L'Osservatore Romano*, ran an editorial rejecting the widespread public demand for a strong man to be appointed as the leader of Italy. Mussolini was seen as the longed for strong leader. The editorial said that a healthy, vital and lasting democracy depended on the strength of every individual citizen and not on one man. We know the outcome. [Discussed by Professor John Molony in an article “Lessons from Past” in *The Catholic Leader* of 16 January 2000 p 11]. However, a review of the leadership literature suggests a plethora of would-be-chiefs, but scant reference to the Indians.

In the burgeoning information technology field and in finance, sales and marketing and the professions, talented employees are calling their own employment packages. Pricewaterhousecoopers estimates that twenty to thirty percent of the elite skilled workforce change jobs every year [*The Australian Financial Review* Weekend, 26-27 February 2000, p23]. It is said that the biggest turn around in the employment market is the loosening of the ties of loyalty. Workers who would have been expected to stay with an organisation for life, or at least a very long time, are putting their names on recruitment databases. McKinsey research has found that potential recruits were influenced by a few key factors - such as autonomy, freedom, making a real contribution towards an organisation's success, as well as it having a reputation for being well managed. Job security and remuneration, the goals of the past, were not a dominant consideration. [*The Australian Financial Review*, Weekend 15-16 January 2000, p 27]. We can see this trend reflected everywhere. Once it would have been unthinkable for a judge to leave the bench before 70, except for ill-health, and take up another paid occupation. It now happens quite often and is threatened even more.

The requisites for leadership - determination, focus and clear goals; and a sense of priorities - rarely include the first and greatest requirement - followers. Without them a man might be anything else but he is not a leader. Wills quotes, aptly, *Henry IV Pt I, Act III scene i*: Owen Glendower desiring to let Harry Percy know how important a personage he is, boasts,

“*I can call spirits from the vasty deep*”

Hotspur replies:



*“Why so can I, or so can any man;
But will they come when you do call for them?”*

It is not the loftiest call that gets answered. It is the answerable call. [p 64]

Without followers a would-be leader, endowed with every attribute to lead and presented with the occasion for its exercise, is an isolated figure. Let me give an example. Duff Cooper, a prominent Conservative member of the House of Commons and Minister in Chamberlain’s Cabinet disagreed with his Prime Minister about how to deal with Hitler in 1938. As we know, Chamberlain was for avoiding irritating Hitler. He had returned to England with the infamous *Munich Agreement*. Duff Cooper decided that this was dishonourable and intolerable and said so in a long and measured speech in the House of Commons. He said that Chamberlain believed that Hitler could be trusted but that he saw nothing in his past to warrant such optimism. He concluded his speech,

“The Prime Minister may be right. I can assure you, Mr Speaker, with the deepest sincerity, that I hope and pray that he is right, but I cannot believe what he believes. I wish I could. Therefore, I can be of no assistance to him.....I should be only a hindrance, and it is much better that I should go. I remember when we were discussing the Godesberg ultimatum that I said that if I were a party to persuading, or even to suggesting to, the Czechoslovak Government that they should accept that ultimatum, I should never be able to hold up my head again. I have forfeited a great deal. I have given up an office that I loved, work in which I was deeply interested and a staff of which any man might be proud. I have given up association in that work with my colleagues with whom I have maintained for many years the most harmonious relations, not only as colleagues but as friends. I have given up the privilege of serving as lieutenant to a leader whom I still regard with the deepest admiration and affection. I have ruined, perhaps, my political career. But that is a little matter; I have retained something which to me is of greater value - I can still walk about the world with my head erect”.

As he sat down he received a note from Winston Churchill which read,

“Your speech was one of the finest parliamentary performances I have ever heard. It was admirable in form, massive in argument and shone with courage and public spirit” [Duff Cooper: An Authorised Biography by John Charmley [1998], Phoenix, pp 129-30].

Whatever effect Duff Cooper’s speech had, no-one else resigned. He had no followers. He was the solitary hero of Munich.

Without an occasion a leader may not be realised. There are many examples where the crisis has provided the moment. Winston Churchill had been a participant in the public and political life of England for decades before the Second World War. If blame were to be allocated, then he was at the forefront for responsibility for the disaster of Gallipoli. He had spent many years in the political wilderness. His time had surely passed. His personal habits - overbearing and an excessive consumer of alcohol - made him an unlikely choice for a war time leader. But as Prime Minister he inspired not only the people of Britain but all Commonwealth countries. He called Parliament together in special session just after he had been appointed Prime Minister in succession to Chamberlain in 1940 and began that series of declamations so apt for quoting. He gave the House no promises having

“.....nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat” [W Safire, Lend Me Your Ears; Great Speeches in History, [1992] WW Norton and Company p 132].

We identify certain individuals from the past and hold them up as exemplifiers of a good leader. There is, of course, a tendency to see the past in a golden glow. Some suggest that, for example, the present generation of parliamentarians in Australia is no worse than that which went before. Others believe that the era of the professional politician which we now enjoy [or endure] has proved a false dawn. [Christopher Pearson writing in *The Australian Financial Review*, 20 December 1999, p 13].

As an aside, it is said that electronic communication will change forever the face of politics. Just as the polity of Athens - fewer than 40,000 males - might, in theory, all have heard Pericles when he spoke, so now, in the foreseeable future there is the real likelihood that parliamentary leaders will communicate immediately



and directly with the people without the glosses of journalists and commentators or the controlled tactics of the television interview. But it has a further dimension - the constituents will be enabled to enter into dialogue with their representatives. The letter-box drop before the elections will become as outmoded as the town-crier. It may well be the means of redressing the skepticism and disconnection which resulted in the One Nation electoral success. [Extract from an RSA/Hansard Society Lecture to mark the 10th anniversary of the televising of British Parliament in *The Times*, 15 November 1999 p 17].

I think it the case that in every walk of life, in politics, in the Church, and in sport there is yearning for someone to emerge and be a great, or even just a good, leader. We feel the less for their absence. We fret about it in Australia more so than ever on the eve of our Centenary of Federation.

James MacGregor Burns, author of the ground-breaking book, *Leadership* [1978 Harper Row, New York] observed,

“Many acts heralded or bemoaned as incidents of leadership - acts of oratory, manipulation, sheer self-advancement, brute coercion - are not such. Much of what commonly passes as leadership - conspicuous position-taking without followers or follow-through, posturing on various public stages, manipulation without general purpose, authoritarianism - is no more leadership than the behaviour of small boys marching in front of a parade, who continue to strut along Main Street after the procession has turned down a side street towards the fairground”.

So I come back to the idea of the lists - we know a leader when we see one but have difficulty in reaching agreement on a definition. Mark Tredinnick’s description gives us something to consider [*Company Director*, 15 June 1997, pp 11-12. Mr Tredinnick teaches Leadership and Organisational Culture in the University of Sydney].

“Leadership is the process by which leaders influence followers towards the realisation of shared purposes.

Leadership is not done by one person. You can’t lead all by yourself, no matter how domineering and decisive you are. You will need followers. They are influenced by your ideas of where you and they should go; and they will influence your understanding of what matters to them - who they are, what they value and so on. All of this happens within a domain - an organisation, a team, a community, a nation.

Leadership is a process not an event. A dialogue not a monologue. It goes on and on. It is directional, not static - hence my idea “towards the realisation.....”. Leadership is about giving, finding and pursuing purpose, and taking purposeful actions. It is not about results and outputs. It is about why we want those outcomes. Getting results is the concern of management. Leadership is why we are doing what we do; where we are going; who we are. It is about meaning and identity.

Leadership is about providing meaning to events, and purpose to enterprise. It is about making the collaboration of individuals significant, meaningful, purposeful. This involves crafting, shaping and enacting a narrative that connects past, present and future - that both guides and explains the activities and fortunes of the organisation, or the nation.”

Interestingly, as one writing in Australia, he refers to Abraham Lincoln as the man exemplifying so many of the qualities which he develops and which we would respect and recognise. It is true that Lincoln’s great speech at the dedication ceremony at Gettysburg - 269 words following James McPherson’s [President of Harvard] two hours - might now cause the cynical reporting journalist to comment “The President was in Gettysburg to distract attention from his disastrous military campaign in the West” [K Burns *Civil War* presenter, quoted by Tredinnick at p 17], but it healed a people then and still has the power to move.

Burns offers his definition,

“Leadership is leaders inducing followers to act for certain goals that represent the values and the motivations - the wants and needs, the aspirations and expectations - of both leaders and followers. The genius of leadership lies in the manner in which leaders see and act on their own and their follower’s values and motivations”.



Although a number of commentators decry the focus on analysis of individuals for abstractions about leadership, it seems to me that there are a few whose acknowledged way of leadership may assist us to recognise the right path. Abraham Lincoln is one figure who is said to offer something new to contemporary leaders and in fact practised the techniques of leadership espoused today. He is a prime example of a transformational leader - one who aims for the evolution of a new level of awareness and understanding among all members of a nation or organisation. Such leaders attempt to motivate and mobilise followers by persuading them to take ownership of their roles in “a more grand mission that is shared by all” [Phillips p 172]. [Donald T. Phillips has written an interesting analysis, *Lincoln on Leadership; Executive Strategies for Tough Times* [1993] Warner Books Inc., from which much of which follows is taken].

Newspaperman Horrace Greeley who often disagreed with Lincoln and his administration during his lifetime, said of him after his assassination,

“He was not a born king of men...but a child of the common people, who made himself a great persuader, therefore a leader, by dint, of firm resolve, patient effort and dogged perseverance. He slowly won his way to eminence and fame by doing the work that lay next to him - doing it with all his growing might - doing it as well as he could, and learning by his failure, when failure was encountered, how to do it better...he was open to all impressions and influences, and gladly profited by the teachings of events and circumstances, no matter how adverse or unwelcome. There was probably no year of his life when he was not a wiser, cooler, and better man than he had been the year proceeding”.

Of how few contemporary leaders could this be said.

As Phillips comments,

“Lincoln’s grand mission, his “common purpose,” was essentially the American experiment and the ideals expressed in the Declaration of Independence. He aimed at the “elevation of men,” and was opposed to anything that tended to degrade them...”.

Leadership, as practiced by Lincoln, was realised by exerting quiet and subtle influence on a day to day basis and by frequently seeing followers and other people face to face. He treated everyone with courtesy and respect. His door at the White House was open to all. He said of these gatherings,

“I tell you, that I call these receptions “my public opinion” - for I have little time to read the papers and gather public opinion that way; and though they may not be pleasant in all particulars, the affect as a whole, is renovating and invigorating”. [Phillips p 17]

Needless to say a pleasant disposition is an asset if one is to proceed in this way. One of the shortcomings of our modern political leaders is a tendency to surround themselves with people of their own persuasion who tell them what they wish to hear. The public servants of old whose duties and obligations have been so well expressed by Sir Paul Hasluck is well in the past and I think we are the poorer for it. It is therefore essential for those who would lead to listen outside the close cluster of advisers and hear and absorb the unpleasant and the novel and the unattractive as much as the attractive with as much fortitude as can be mustered.

Abraham Lincoln lifted people from the ordinary and into a higher level of performance, achievement, and awareness.

“He obtained extraordinary results from ordinary people by instilling purpose in their endeavours. He was open, civil, tolerant, and fair and he maintained a respect for the dignity of all people at all times. Lincoln’s attitude and behaviour as President of the United States essentially characterised the process that symbolises acceptable and decent relations among human beings”. [Phillips, p 173]

Two of Lincoln’s most important attributes and essential for any leader worth following, are those of honesty and integrity. “Honest Abe” was his nickname from home at Springfield, Illinois and used to great effect and as part of his Presidential campaign in 1860. As Phillips comments *“it has remained in the American stream of consciousness to this day, as perhaps the most glorified part of the Lincoln myth”* [p 52]. But it was



no myth. We have been shattered by revelations of corruption and want of integrity in our parliamentarians and others in authority - from peculation to molestation. Integrity is the key stone that holds any organisation or state together. As Burns commented,

“Divorced from ethics, leadership is reduced to management and politics to a mere technique”.

Abraham Lincoln was a Christian whose daily life was guided and shaped by the sense of an ever-present God. It is now almost universally accepted that politics is entirely secular. The last vestiges of the spiritual hang on tenuously in the reference to God in the Preamble to the Constitution and prayers to open Parliament. I doubt that they will long survive. And yet, the very underpinning of western civilisation - the value of each individual - is spiritual, whether its source is seen as Greek or Jewish or a fusion, overlaid by Christianity. If that dimension is abandoned why should the weak and feeble be protected? Leaders should not turn away from God - or by whatever name the transcendence is known - for fear of alienating the fashionable philosophy of unbridled consumerism and mass entertainment. Whilst allowing for pluralism and a proper degree of tolerance we should remember the bravery of Pastor Bonhoeffer who defended the value of the individual against the values and philosophy of the leaders and many people of his own country. One of his prayers composed in prison was *“Give me the hope that will deliver me from fear and faintheartedness”*. [Quoted in G Tinder *“Can We Be Good Without God?”* in *The Atlantic Monthly*, December, 1989, p 85]. We must hope and pray that our contemporary leaders will be informed by true virtue understanding the basis for the call to virtue and seek by their policies and example to do justice to all - the rich and the poor alike without fear or faintheartedness.

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