

THE AMDAHL EXECUTIVE INSTITUTE**12TH AUSTRALIAN BUSINESS CONGRESS****LEADERS ... ON LEADERSHIP****SYDNEY, MONDAY 30 OCTOBER 1995****LEADERSHIP****The Hon Justice M D Kirby AC CMG***

THE QUALITIES OF LEADERSHIP

This is a conference on leadership. And I want to speak of features of leadership which I have seen. What is it that makes some people natural leaders? We have all looked upon individuals in whom we see this light. The ancients described them as having a charisma - a special grace or talent which exuded from them as a favour vouchsafed by God. Now even that word is thoroughly debased. Charisma - it is used for all and sundry. Yet in my life, I have met a few people with a light shining from them because of special gifts of foresight and insight: the two qualities working symbiotically upon each other.

It is no use trying to work out how this comes about. Adrienne Clark, Chairman of the CSIRO, told a 1994 conference that "the most important

President of the Court of Appeal of new South Wales. Personal views.

influences in the shaping of leaders, ... lie almost wholly in their early years."¹ Professor Clark told of her grandmother who had wonderful allusions and aphorisms as a guide to life. They included Madam Doasyouwouldbedoneby from Charles Kingsley's *The Water Babies*.² We have all had such instruction. I can vouch for the impact of didactic fairy tales on my life, as doubtless you can on yours. In my case, the terrifying stories of the brothers Grimm warned me against aspiring beyond my deserts. Like Icarus, I would then fall to earth as the sun melted the wax attaching the feathers by which I would aspire to fly.

Nor is there much use analysing the psychology or physiology³ of leadership. Books on these subjects are now written.⁴ But because psychologists and psychiatrists tend to get the abnormal case, such books tend to concentrate on the dysfunctional behaviour of leaders. I read recently of one general whose troops followed him, but only out of a sense of idle curiosity.

So far (in the manner of a lawyer) I have said a lot about what I am not going to speak about. The time has now come to approach the positive and the concrete.

It goes without saying that leaders must have some conception of where they are going. I realise that some thinkers on the subject have suggested that leaders only take the mass of people where they are going anyway.⁵ But I cannot accept this. However dimly formed the goal may be, a leader - of a nation, a business, a court, a sporting team or whatever - must at least have some idea of the general direction ahead. What then are the features of human personality that turn one individual, who began as a helpless baby, into a man or woman whom others would follow? Each of us could devise our list of qualities. I have

¹ A Clark, opening of the 1994 programme of the Williamson Community Leadership Programme, April 1994 in *Williamson Community Leadership Newsletter*, April 1994, 17.

² *Ibid.*, 18.

³ Manfred de Vries, *Leaders, Fools and Imposters: Essays on the Psychology of Leadership*, San Francisco, 1993 reviewed in *Newsletter* above n3, 9.

⁴ N McAdam, "In Search of the Sensitive New Age Leader - Brain Dominance and Leadership Style", in *Management*, November, 1993, 5.

⁵ B Evans, *The Spoor of Spooks and Other Nonsense*, 1994.

five main ones that I wish to identify. You will doubtless compare them to your own experience.

THE INVOLVEMENT OF OTHERS

First, it is often said that the best leaders are those who serve. The Chinese philosopher Lao Tsu in the sixth century said that a leader is greatest when people barely know that he exists. The leader's work done, the aim fulfilled, the followers will say "we did it ourselves".⁶

A bishop told me at dinner recently that Jesus was an especially striking example of the leader-servant. Most of us who were brought up in the Christian tradition, have the vivid image of Him washing the disciples' feet. Many great religious leaders and philosophers were extremely humble, self-effacing and respectful of the integrity of others. By their example and their works they could get into the minds and hearts of people around them. They could inspire a devotion and a willingness to follow. The Dalai Lama, whom I have met twice, undoubtedly falls in this class. His inner calm demands one's respectful attention.

I saw two further examples of this great quality in a recent visit to Cambodia for the United Nations. The proponents were not famous. You will have heard of neither of them. Yet each is an Australian of great personal character, with inspiring qualities of leadership.

The first is Warrant Officer Craig ("Shorty") Coleman of the Royal Australian Engineers. He was my escort officer when I went to Battambang in Northern Cambodia in my capacity of Special Representative of the Secretary-General of the United Nations for Human Rights. "Shorty" took me along the highway which leads to Pailin - the unreachable headquarters of the Khmer Rouge. He explained, with the support of other brave foreigners and

⁶ Cited in N McAdam above n4, 5.

Cambodians, the techniques of de-mining in which he was engaged. He talked with gentleness to the amputees, seen everywhere in that part of a long-suffering country. He directed and supervised 150 Cambodians, whom he and other soldiers had trained in the painstaking work of de-mining. The land is rich. But the harvest of mines is perilous. The plastic detonators contain minuscule quantities of metal. They are extremely hard to find - except by walking on them. The slightest lapse of concentration may mean death or grievous injury.

Whilst in Battambang I visited a Buddhist Temple. There in the ashram was a wonderful Australian nun of the St Joseph's order, Sister Joan. She had gathered together a group of brave men and women - all but two of them Cambodians - who are defending and asserting the human rights of their fellow Cambodians. If you know the least thing about Cambodian history, you would know what courage that requires. By gentle incitement, by good humour and patience this fine Australian woman, sitting with me on the floor with her pupils, is giving a daily example to people whose lives have been scarred by war, revolution, violence and the constant peril of land mines. "Do you teach them religion?", I asked. "Goodness, no", she replied - as if shocked by my question. Her life is all the religion and example of her beliefs that she will leave behind in the memory of her pupils. She is their leader and their encouragement. She is teaching of the needs of women to stand up for their rights and of villagers to give voice against petty tyrants and oppression. I am not myself a Catholic. But the life of Sister Joan brings the greatest credit on her Church and on our country. She leads by selfless involvement with others. So here is the first quality - the best leaders lead by *involving others*.

COURAGE TO DO UNPOPULAR THINGS

It is often said that human rights matter most when they are demanded by unpopular minorities and stigmatised groups. So it is with many leaders. They emerge from the ruck because they show courage. They see before others

injustice which, when revealed, demands redress. Their fore-vision is the essence of their leadership.

Mahatma Gandhi, the advocate of non-violent non-cooperation in India, was hauled before a British judge in Ahmadabad in 1922 for seditious libel. He immediately pleaded guilty. His speech to the court asserted that he had rendered a service not only to India but also to England by showing that non-cooperation was the way to bring to an end the unnatural state in which the two countries were living. He cheerfully invited the highest penalty that could be inflicted upon him; for his crime was deliberate. But he asserted his moral innocence.⁷ Martin Luther King was a leader of like moral strength.

The only man of this quality whom I have met is Nelson Mandela. Now there is a political leader of rare quality. Although imprisoned for nearly thirty years, he emerged unscathed in psyche and in moral power. His steadfast belief in the correctness of his cause was his strength through the long years of imprisonment when many others fell away. That strength became an inspiration to his followers - and a mighty challenge to his captors and his oppressors.

He invited me to the inauguration which followed his election as President last year. Ironical it was to see the commanders of the armed forces saluting him - their medals, won in battle against his army, gleaming in the sunlight. Typical of the man was his invitation to the ceremony of a number of his white prison officers on Robben Island. Over the long years and many conversations, they had become his devoted followers.

We in Australia have not been quite so sorely tested. But we too have had fine leaders who have helped to show us wrongs and to point us in the direction of righting them:

I think of the many brave men and women who have been mobilized in the struggle against AIDS in our country. Of Dr Neal Blewett who, as Federal

⁷ M Ghandi, "Non-Violence is the First Article of my Faith" in B MacArthur (ed.), *The Penguin Book of 20th Century Speeches*, Penguin, 1992. 82. 87.

Minister for Health, gave rare political leadership to combating the spread of the virus with its fateful course. With Peter Baume and leading politicians of all persuasions, Neal Blewett put together an alliance for life. For once our politicians showed admirable leadership. We need leaders of this character. Leadership is not just following the transitory opinion polls and popular opinion as so many politicians are tempted to do. Nor is simply looking at corporate balance sheets. It involves a commitment to improving the lot of fellow human beings, especially those who are suffering. It involves taking risks.

THE CAPACITY TO COMMUNICATE AND CONCEPTUALISE

The third capacity I would mention is the leader's ability to communicate and conceptualise ideas and to carry other people by the power of the ideas. In order to get people to follow, it is usually necessary to provide a reason. Napoleon, in his *Maxims*, asserted that "a leader is a dealer in hope". The leader must know. He must know that he knows. And he must be able to make it abundantly clear to those about him that he knows.⁸ It is no good having bright ideas if you cannot convey them to others; and inspire them to accept your ideas - preferably thinking of them as their own.

Of course, some people are born with greater gifts of oral or written communication than others. They have an ability to speak or write in word pictures. To express their ideas simply. To do it with confidence and with power. To be subtle and to sense opportunities and the way to mould communication to the immediate environment. This cannot be wholly learned. I think it is in part genetic. It has something to do with the signal mechanisms of the brain. But would-be leaders can be trained in some of the tricks of modern communication. Even Mrs Thatcher took speech training. King George VI

⁸ C Randall, *Making Good in Management*.

overcame his stutter by speaking to a metronome. Fear and nerves in public speaking tend to melt away with the years - and with confidence that disastrous performances will generally be forgotten in the afterglow of the post oratorical wine or in the morning.

Technology has altered leadership in the matter of communication. The modern media demand skills different from those of leaders of earlier times. Churchill, and Menzies (and to some extent Whitlam) were, or are, masters of the pause. But the leader today must be disciplined into the 30 second "grab" for six o'clock television. Now that really demands a concentrated ability to send a verbal data signal in vivid prose but with stern economy. It is quite a skill - but it may not always coincide with capacity for sustained thought and attention to detail.

It is not only by verbal messages that people lead. Kieren Perkins, Samantha Riley, Cathy Freeman and many other fine sporting leaders send golden signals of inspiration to thousands of young Australian schoolchildren who aspire to athletic excellence. In this sense, they are leaders. So are corporate leaders who see new chances, establish new enterprises, build new opportunities, provide new jobs, goods and services. Often it is the poet, the film maker, the book writer, entrepreneur, speech writer or the opera singer who puts large ideas into the mind of a nation. Those ideas burrow away until finally they come to fruition in resolute action. Twenty years ago, long before the *Mabo* decision, Kath Walker, Oogeroo of the Nunuccal Tribe, wrote down the idea of Aboriginal equality and white reconciliation based on justice:

*"Look up my people
The dawn is breaking
The world is waking
To a new bright day
When none defame us
No restriction tame us
Nor colour shame us
Nor sneer dismay.*

*Now brood no more
 On the years behind you
 The hope assigned you
 Shall the past replace
 When a juster justice
 Grown wise and stronger
 Points the bone longer
 At a darker race."*

Historians and poets are much disparaged in our country as "eggheads" and intellectuals. Yet the power of their writing can sometimes help shape the imagination and the ideals of their generation.

ACCEPTANCE OF RESPONSIBILITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

A fourth feature of leadership is the willingness to accept responsibility and accountability to others. This is where the going of leadership gets harder. The undoing of many leaders arrives when they come to be dazzled by their own charisma and eloquence. Then they become inflexible: unwilling or slow to change.

In Cambodia I have seen many leaders at work - striving to build a civil society in the place of despair. The judges at Battambang and Sihanoukville who work long hours for small financial reward to get through daunting court lists. The prosecutor who had to escape through a window of a courthouse to avoid a military attack in retaliation for the simple performance of his duty. And who was back in his office the next day. The prison commander who resolved to allow human rights groups to speak to prisoners about their collective and individual rights - conduct unthinkable even a year ago. The Minister for Education, a graduate of Monash University, who replaced corruption and nepotism in the matriculation exam by a national system to ensure the application of objective standards. The myriad human rights workers who are the children of the UNTAC period which two Australians - Senator Gareth

Evans and Lieutenant General John Sanderson - played a crucial part to secure. It is the nature of media today that we hear a lot of a small group of bandits and their terrible attacks on visiting foreigners. The news of the quiet work of determined people who are true leaders is lost in the clamour of the sensational. Their acts of leadership are often uncelebrated - and overlooked. Let us pause to reflect on them tonight - not bandits but leaders.

KNOWING WHEN TO GO

The fifth quality is knowing when to go. It is here that democracy - which often helps the process along - has it all over autocracy and dictatorship. Menzies alone of our post-war Prime Ministers departed of his own volition from The Lodge. A good leader, in management, politics, the judiciary or anything else will prepare for the unthinkable day when someone else will take over the reins. Each of us should see our lives in stages. Remaining too long at one stage, may not be best for those we aspire to lead. But it may also be bad for ourselves for there are always new worlds to conquer.

BUT WHERE ARE YOU LEADING?

For all this talk of leadership, we should not allow any leader unbridled rein. As free people, we should retain our own sense of judgment and discernment and scepticism. We should be reminded of the values that transcend even the importance of leadership. Leadership, as such, is only as good as the direction in which we will be taken. We should remain critical and self-critical.

The fiftieth anniversary of the Second World War has presented us with numerous opportunities to study the fanatical leadership of Hitler and Stalin. On their consciences rested the fates of millions of ordinary humans like you and me. These leaders with their crazed ideas have been replaced by a world of pettier tyrants, having an equal indifference to moral scruple and fundamental

human rights. We can all recognise them when we see them. They exist in most nations. With their puffed up vanity, they exist in every walk of life.

It is important to remember this in any talk of leadership. It demonstrates that leadership, as such, is not the ideal after all. There have been gifted leaders of the most horrible wickedness. A list of the top ten business leaders who came to mind of a survey of young Australians a few years back, now looks like a catalogue of discredited fallen heroes. Half of the list are bankrupt, in prison or charged before the courts.⁹ This is the kind of leadership Australia and its business enterprises can do without. It is proof that gifts of leadership, alone, are not enough.

There must be that extra dimension: a commitment to improving (in the words of the American founding fathers) "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" of ordinary people. My life in various public posts over twenty years has convinced me that such qualities of leadership exist in the world - and in Australia - in abundance. They exist in in corporate Australia. We must not unduly dampen their flame with cumbersome regulation which it is hard even for expert lawyers to keep up with and apply. Leaders of this kind deserve our unstinting praise. They give us their example. We may not reach their standards. But each of us, in our lives, can aspire to be leaders for a better world in the coming millennium. Let Oogeroo -- our fellow Australian - a poet - have the last word:

*"So long we waited
Bound and frustrated,
Till hate be hated
And caste deposed;
Now light shall guide us,
No goal denied us,
And all doors open
That long were closed.*

*See plain the promise,
Dark freedom-lover!*

⁹ Amdahl Executive Institute, *Attitudes of Australian Youth Leadership*, November 1993, 25.

*Night's nearly over,
And though long the climb,
New rights will greet us,
New mateship meet us,
And joy complete us
In our new Dream Time.*

*To our fathers' fathers
The pain, the sorrow'
To our children's children
The glad tomorrow."¹⁰*

¹⁰Kath Walker (Oogeroo of the Nunuccal): *Song of Hope* in *Collected Poems*.