

Robert S. Lomax

What new ideas and perspectives will characterize the successful leaders of tomorrow?

Looking at the world of today, it is hard to imagine a place for leaders tomorrow. We have never been so uncertain where we want to go, yet never so petulant in refusing the leadership that might show us. In an economically stagnant France, Dominique de Villepin seems at risk of political martyrdom by leading with measures to reduce youth unemployment. As a tottering exception, he proves the rule: throughout the Western world, the successful governments are those who follow. American Republican rule is the emanation of Evangelical Conservatism in the South, and Blairism has until very recently been the fullest imaginable expression of following as a political philosophy. Policy was formed in compliance with majority prejudices; widespread alienation over Iraq came not because of an identifiably personal standpoint so much as through a foreign policy that stalked others' strategies. Things have changed markedly with the recent Education Bill. The realization that he has done nothing with the imprint of his own personality has drawn the Prime Minister into collision with a *zeitgeist* which (he should have known) anathemizes leadership, and the damage has been all on one side. Truly Mr Cameron looks like a successful leader of tomorrow, quite because he is *not* saddled with ideas or perspectives which might be seen as new.

It seems safe to see the future of leadership lying with the appeasers of popular opinion. It seems impossible to imagine a forthright leader such as Geoffrey Howe,

who twenty five years ago had the confidence to increase taxes despite the apocalyptic prophecies of 364 economists (who with hindsight were wrong), or even a colossus such as Winston Churchill, surviving at all in the modern climate. At least for the near future - and certainly for tomorrow - the people will follow the leaders who follow the people. The body politic undermines all authority, and will continue to chase its own tail.

It is hard to explain how we have become so extraordinarily like petulant children. Perhaps we have been spoiled by prosperity. But maybe there is something deeper. The following anecdote from John Richardson's meeting with Felix Klee, son of the artist, seems to me peculiarly appropriate. Klee saw his family harrassed by the Nazis, after which he spent years in a state of legal conflict attempting to regain his father's works which had been sold while he was in exile. After a lifetime marked by imposed insecurities, his retreat was into bouts of childishness:

Felix was particularly happy to have recovered the set of thirty spooky puppets that his father had made for him out of odds and ends ... when he was teaching at the Bauhaus. If Felix was averse to lending these curiosities to exhibitions, it was because they were still his toys - the dramatis personae of his childhood. To watch this ex-Bauhäusler put on a falsetto voice and mimic the shrieks that these puppets once made was to be wafted back seventy years or so to the heyday of German modernism.¹

Not only a return to juvenility, but a clinging refusal to lose control of it mark Klee's senescence. Likewise with us. We have sunk collectively into a childhood wherein we sit on the rug surrounded by toys and smothered in gratuitous cuddles from nanny, yet

¹ John Richardson, Sacred Monsters, Sacred Masters (Pimlico 2002) p.154

scream and kick and demand to be opinion leaders. We elect authorities not to lead us and be judged for it, but to do as we (mediated by MORI) direct, week by week. Klee's return to childish behaviour followed a lifetime of personal and financial uncertainties. Perhaps ours follows something similar: we are the way we are because we are frightened.

Terrorism is liable to be a stock explanation for popular angst nowadays, but it is an inappropriate reason here. The problems we must deal with predate Al Qaeda. Moreover I am of the impression that we are not particularly, personally, frightened of terrorism: so far we have tended to conceive it as an event in the lives of other people. The terror that has driven us to childishness is not external: it is embedded in our culture and proceeds from it. It is a horror of not knowing where we are going, and of fearing that we have nowhere to go. When Sid Vicious yelled "Don't know what I want / But I know how to get it" the lie was the point, because his vision of 'Anarchy in the UK' was self-evidently a form of nihilistic stagnation getting nowhere². Our plight is similar, because we know how to get an awful lot without knowing what we want. Vicious wasn't lying when he proclaimed "Your future dream is a shopping scheme". Not a subtle or original message, but it holds true. We establish our momentum through life by continual acquisition, but have so little sense of emotional direction that we might as well all be characters from Mapplethorpe photo-portraits, icily frozen in space. We are not pilgrims, but neither have we wholeheartedly sold our souls, Faust-like, to Satan. We have no narrative, good or bad, to call our own any

² "Right! now! ha ha ha ha ha / I am an antichrist / I am an anarchist / Don't know what I want but / I know how to get it / I wanna destroy the passer by cos i / I wanna be anarchy! / No dogs body / Anarchy for the u.k it's coming sometime and maybe I give a wrong time stop a trafic line / Your future dream is a shopping scheme cos i / I wanna be anarchy!" etc. - The Sex Pistols, 'Anarchy in the UK'. See eg.

more.

We lack a narrative to share, and so we are painfully, confusedly aware that we are going nowhere. There is no political leadership that can help us; those who try to impose top-down direction to society quickly find themselves bottom-up, as we have seen. But there may be a place for leadership in redeeming us. Perhaps I am culpable of having looked for it in the wrong places. If the problem proceeds from within our culture, then that is where the solution can also begin to take root. The leaders of tomorrow must be people who can construct a narrative for modernity: poets, painters, musicians and philosophers. Their work must take us by the hand, and show us the way through our fears into adulthood.

This necessitates a strong change of direction, for current trends in cultural leadership are quite differently inclined: it too is trapped in the cycle of following. Our culture has become, almost without exception, a parasite of social mores rather than a leader of them. The most 'challenging' of modern art is only challenging insofar as it reveals to us what we already are. Damien Hirst's crucified sheep tell us that we have bestialized the sacred and no longer know what we follow - but they do not proffer an alternative, however outlandish or nominally offensive it might be. Writers who argue hopefulness are manifold, but there are few who can extrapolate a popular direction from this. I think of figures as diverse as JM Coetzee and Gabriel Garcia Marquez. This instance from the latter's work seems to me to typify the modern moral:

The last thing Lázara saw was the President's trembling hand stretching to grasp the cane and never reaching it, and the conductor who managed to grab

<http://www.lyricsfreak.com/s/sex-pistols/123592.html> for full lyrics.

the snow-covered old man by his scarf and save him in midair. Lázara ran in utter terror to her husband, trying to laugh behind her tears. "My God," she shouted, "nothing can kill that man."³

We are powerfully, repeatedly reminded how vulnerable we are, yet also how good we are at surviving. But this sense of human indefatigability, even at its most sophisticated, does not provide a teleology, nor even the slightest sense of direction.

I have tried to say what is the problem with political and cultural leadership today, and the intellectual leaders of tomorrow must rectify it. We need pioneers who can show us a path to discovering a collective identity. When Rousseau pronounced in a competition essay such as this that "man is an athlete who loves to wrestle naked"⁴, he found himself at the vanguard of a massive attempt to rediscover the self in primitivism. I am not sure that Rousseau was correct in his judgement, and indeed there is a cautionary lesson in the ferocity with which the French body politic subsequently eviscerated itself. Nevertheless we need such enthusiastically bold vision from people - even from a single person - prepared to tell modern mankind what it can be. We need to reject the sterile reportage characteristic of postmodernism. We no longer need to be told about the human condition, but instead to be shown our future state and a way to realize it.

I have offered a bottom-up view of how cultural leadership may liberate society from fear of itself and ultimately from political stagnation. In a sense I have failed in the task you have set, because I have provided a perspective on a need, but not in the end

³ Gabriel Garcia Marquez, 'Bon Voyage, Mr President' from Strange Pilgrims (Penguin 1994)

⁴ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Discourse on the Arts and Sciences, 1750

the ideas to rectify it which both your question and my answer demand. The person who can provide them, be they sculptor, singer or Fleet Street hack, will be a great leader for tomorrow.