

Will the 21st Century require new models of Leadership?

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Two of the modern world's most gifted orators and most remarkable political survivors have made their views on the demands of the 21st century clear in their own inimitable fashions:

In both our nations we have moved to build a government for the 21st century going beyond the dogmas of the past, focused on giving our people the tools to make the most of their own lives: a world-class education, the ability to move from welfare to work, a system of retirement security as strong for our children as it has been for our parents. In this new era a new Britain and a new America, true to our oldest and most cherished values, can blaze new paths for the world....

T.S. Eliot, who has been variously claimed by both our countries once wrote in the Four Quartets, 'The end is where we start from.' At the end of a century of friendship, let us pledge to connect our storied past to the unwritten promise of our future.

- President Bill Clinton, Welcoming remarks to Prime Minister Tony Blair, White House, February 1998.

Our people aren't any better than other peoples. Their historic greatness is derived from the singular fact of having been put to the test and having been able to withstand it. It's not a great people in and of itself, but rather a people which has made itself great, and its capacity to do so is born out of the greatness of the ideas and the righteousness of the causes it defends. There are no other causes like these, and there have never been. Today it's not a matter of selfishly defending a national cause; in today's world an exclusively national cause cannot be a great cause in and of itself; our world, as a consequence of its own development and historical evolution, is globalizing quickly, unhaltingly and irreversibly. Without abandoning national and cultural identities and even the legitimate interests of the peoples of each country, no cause is more important than global causes, that is, the cause of humanity itself....

The world needs some leadership to confront its current realities. There are already six billion inhabitants on the planet. It is virtually certain that in just 50 years' time there will be 9.5 billion. Guaranteeing food, health care, education, employment, clothing, footwear, homes, drinking water, electricity and transportation for such an extraordinary number of persons who will be living precisely in the poorest countries will be a colossal challenge....

To all of our compatriots, and especially the young, I assure you that the next 40 years will be decisive for the world. Before you there are tasks that are incomparably more complex and difficult. New glorious goals await you; the honor of being Cuban revolutionaries demands it. We will struggle for our nation and for humanity. And our voice can reach and will reach very far away.

- President Fidel Castro, on the 40th Anniversary of the Cuban Revolution, Santiago de Cuba, January 1999.

The 21st century raises startling new challenges for the political, business and social leaders of the world. These new developments require fresh perspectives. But fresh perspectives need not be new ones, rather, they are established but neglected models of leadership. In this short contribution to the

debate on leadership, I am going to argue that by appreciating the power of inspirational political rhetoric we can learn the importance of shaping these challenges to achieve great benefits.

I am by training a lawyer and political scientist. Both disciplines are primarily concerned with words. So I have spent my university career to date examining the power of words and ideas to influence institutional and behavioural outcomes in politics. Primarily my research concerns post-revolutionary Cuba, but I have a wider background in comparative politics, concentrating particularly on democratisation studies, Latin American and U.S. politics.

First, it is important that the conceptual limits of this essay are defined. Secondly, I will discuss how contributions from political science can demonstrate that political change is not deterministically caused by technological, economic or social development, but rather gains its social power by interpretation. Thirdly, using examples from the very different, but heavily inter-linked political environments of the United States and Cuba I will argue that political leadership in particular rests heavily on the talent of speakers (or their speech-writers!) to cast visions of the future and explain the struggles of the past. Thus, it is clear that the demands of the 21st century do not demand new models of leadership, but rather leaders must understand the changing contextual environment in selecting the most efficient and effective strategies of leadership.

1. The Terms of the Debate

There are a number of phenomena visible upon the horizon which could cause us to reflect upon whether a new model of leadership is required in the 21st century. Most obvious is the process of globalisation. As Rennan and Martens point out, globalisation is not easily definable, and is in reality ‘the interactive co-evolution of millions of technological, cultural, economic, social and environmental trends at all conceivable spatiotemporal scales’ (Rennan and Martens 2003, 137). Their solution to this conceptual challenge is to provide a detailed timeline of the major events in these trends, so as to capture the dynamism and complexity of the processes. However, whilst acknowledging their argument as a healthy warning against over-simplifying, some simplification is necessary for the purposes of this essay. Hay provides a useful definition of globalisation as ‘a process by which the interconnections between distant places and events at the same moment in time are intensified – in which, in essence, the distant becomes proximate’ (Hay 2002, 136). This captures one of the essential common characteristics of the technological, political and social changes of recent years, the developing sense of proximity.

Thus, for instance, as never before the behaviour of individual citizens in the richer areas of the world, as vehicle drivers and consumers is said to contribute to climate change which is endangering the

homes of poorer communities as distant as the Amazon basin, the Pacific islands of Tuvalu and the Canadian Arctic.¹

In the field of human rights there is now a greater obligation upon political leaders to address the abuse of rights than in earlier generations, even within the traditionally sovereign power of a government to rule its own country as it sees fit. Of course there were examples in the past of politicians taking responsibility for depredations far from their own borders, Britain's own William Gladstone devoted himself to publicising alleged Turkish massacres of their Bulgarian subjects in the 1870s (Gladstone 1876). But, the 1990s has seen a great growth in such foreign policy missions, with international intervention in the cause of human rights from Somalia to the no-fly zones of Iraq, Bosnia and Kosovo to Sierra Leone and the Ivory Coast, Haiti, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Sudan amongst others. The worldwide growth in media access, made possible by improvements in information and communications technologies, has made these matters of global concern. Now a videophone on a Kurdish hillside can capture the discovery of a mass graves and beam it in real time to millions of foreigners sitting at their television sets around the world.

A similar reduction in national sovereignty has been affected by another key element of these globalising processes: the massive increase in world trade. The World Trade Organization was established in 1995, a landmark in a series of multilateral trade negotiations, or rounds, which began in the aftermath of the Second World War. The Uruguay Round began in 1986, and concluded some 8 years later, with the agreement to create one of the most wide-ranging international trade regimes of all time (WTO 1999a, 12). Over 140 countries are now members of the WTO, and together they account for 97% of world trade.²

In its own words 'the WTO's overriding objective is to help trade flow smoothly, freely, fairly and predictably' (WTO 1999b, 3). Through mutual sanctions regimes which can be set in motion by the WTO dispute resolution mechanism, member countries are heavily incentivised to abide by their commitments under many agreements, from those governing intellectual property to anti-dumping measures. As Reichman has commented, 'to understand just how revolutionary this Agreement [the Uruguay Round Final Act] was, one need only consider the extent to which the new enforcement procedures potentially intrude upon the sovereign powers of nation states' (Reichman 1998, 586). Although some literature would argue that these changes disproportionately benefit established economic actors at the cost of poorer groups, such analyses are not the direct concern of this essay.³ Rather, the important and common dynamic of these different processes is the analytic importance of legal and economic proximity.

Developments in communications and logistics technology and the newly liberalised trade regimes have contributed to fundamentally new methods of corporate organisation. Although, there are some

¹ Witness the recent reports of Canadian First Nations communities seeking legal action against the US government for allowing its citizens to contribute to worldwide carbon emissions.

² www.wto.org.

³ For instance, Klein 1999.

important suggestions that global economic integration was at its peak in the late nineteenth century (Rodrik 1997, Kobrin 1996), there is no doubt that as compared with the first seven decades of the twentieth century, the last two decades and opening years of the 21st century require fundamentally different practices on the part of the economic actors within. But, social, political and other non-corporate leaders can have arguably more of an impact on the context in which they operate than businesses which are increasingly subject to the rule of the market. It is this construction of social reality to which we now turn.

2. Change, and Deterministic Analyses

There is an unfortunate tendency amongst some analysts and leaders to view globalisation as an inevitable process. Such a view is typically linked with technological development (Roseneau 1990). But, technological developments and other globalising processes are best regarded as facilitating change, rather than determining it (Grint 1998, 310; Hoffmann 2004, 255). Thus, in a political context, it might be argued that ‘Globalisation [here, in an economic sense] places pressures on western states to role back their welfare provision.’ But to more accurately reflect the role of political agency in interacting with the political context of globalising forces, it is more analytically sensitive to argue that:

Government X, acting on its belief that investors will leave high-taxation environments for low-taxation environments, has reduced the rate of corporate tax, with consequent effects for the revenue basis of the welfare state (Hay 2002, 115).

In political science, historical institutionalism has addressed many of these issues. Thelen and Steinmo, two of the founding voices of historical institutionalism, summarise the concerns of this approach thus:

Institutional analysis ... allows us to examine the relationship between political actors as objects and as agents of history. The institutions that are at the centre of historical institutionalist analysis ... can shape and constrain political strategies in important ways, but they are themselves also the outcome (conscious or unintended) of deliberate political strategies, of political conflict and of choice (Thelen & Steinmo 1992, 10).

This entails, therefore, a particular model of political change. As Hay and Wincott argue:

Change is seen as the consequence (whether intended or unintended) of strategic action (whether intuitive or instrumental), filtered through perceptions (however informed or misinformed) of an institutional context that favours certain strategies, actors and perceptions over others (Hay & Wincott 1998, 955).

Thus, one of the basic suggestions of historical institutionalism predicts relative stability. As historical experience and institutional frameworks constrain actors, politics is path-dependent (Pierson 2000). For instance, Berman argues that the ideational heritage of the German and Swedish social democratic parties conditioned their response to the challenge of the Great Depression: ‘party leaders repeatedly

evaluated the options presented to them not merely or even primarily on the basis of which was most likely to provide the greatest reward, but rather on the basis of their expected psychic return, the extent to which they fit the parties' traditional appeal and practice' (Berman 1998, 397). Past events conditioned behaviour in the present.

A developing area of this field seeks to explain, therefore, how historical institutionalism might explain political change. As Lieberman points out, exogenous system shocks are all too often used to explain change by authors in this area (Lieberman 2002). In a Cuban context, therefore, this might generate a tendency towards explaining changes in the leadership by reference to economic shock from outside (such as the collapse of Soviet Aid in the late 1980s). But this is overly simplistic – exogenous shocks have political consequences only in as much as political actors interpret them as having such consequences. Here, ideas may play a role in avoiding the theoretical suggestions of institutional stagnation punctuated by externally-imposed crises. Ideas are multi-faceted: affecting and being affected by institutional frameworks. As Lieberman neatly phrases it: ideas suggest 'the possibility that human agency can defy the constraints of political and social structures and create new political possibilities' (Lieberman 2002, 698).

The power of ideas as tools to be deployed by political actors can be seen in work on 'framing effects'. Béland and Vergniolle de Chantal demonstrate how US conservatives have appropriated the existing and well-established ideological repertoire in which 'fears concerning the expansion of the federal government and the resulting concentration of political power have remained a constant characteristic of the US political tradition' (Béland and Vergniolle de Chantal 2004, 245). At first sight, path-dependency might suggest that the creation of broad constituencies by the provision of existing social programmes ('positive feedback' from earlier institutional creation) constitutes a significant barrier to reform, raising the strategic risks for prospective reformers (Pierson 2000).⁴ However, by framing their opposition to federal welfare programmes as part of the 'underground feeling of distrust against government that runs deep in US history' (Béland and Vergniolle de Chantal 2004, 250) successive generations of conservative leaders have succeeded in cutting federal spending, and thus indirectly, the provision of welfare payments.⁵

This conception of politics emphasises strategic interaction between actors, who compete to secure their aims in political contexts which are shaped by contemporary interpretations of past events and visions of the future, rather than deterministically arguing that inter-subjectively identifiable past events or technology necessarily condition behaviour in a particular way in the political present. The significance of the challenges in the 21st century, therefore, are in their altering of the discursive-

⁴ For a detailed and informative analysis of the theoretical commitments underlying claims of path-dependency, see Ian Greener's forthcoming article in *Politics*: 'State of the Art – The Potential of Path Dependence in Political Studies.' His study emphasises that feedback can be negative as well as positive, and proposes a morphogenetic approach to social theory.

⁵ There is a similar developing literature on the ability of corporations and other organisations to communicate with and mobilise their members through the use of symbols to change the discursive environment so as to promote loyal and effective behaviour, eg. Pratt and Rafaeli 2001.

strategic environment in which leaders find themselves by increasing the speed and proximity of responses from other actors and from a greater range of locations around the world.

3. Talents for Rhetoric: Reacting to change, creating opportunities

To return to the opening passages of this essay, by looking at the contrasts and similarities between Bill Clinton and Fidel Castro's speeches we can learn some important lessons about the way in which they understand the challenges of the 21st century.

Both leaders use the processes of globalisation as a discursive opportunity to promote their ideational visions of the future. To President Clinton the 21st century requires the government to move beyond the 'dogmas of the past', whilst preserving the best elements of American history such as a pensions scheme 'as strong for our children as it has been for our parents.' He ends with a rousing demand 'to connect our storied past to the unwritten promise of our future'. Similarly, Castro's claims are initially humble, that the Cuban people are not 'any better than other peoples.' Yet, this admission transforms into a recognition of the past triumphs of the nation, and a call for the population to mobilise to tackle the new and even graver problems that face the world.

In other words, these two skilled politicians do not, as some of the globalisation literature might predict, reflect a sense of being constrained by inevitable processes. Although it might seem initially obvious that a leader might not admit to feeling impotent in the face of external pressures, politicians often use a sense of powerlessness to achieve desirable aims. For instance, when thousands of young Cubans rioted on the Havana seafront in August 1994 in frustration at the barriers to them leaving the island to find work, Castro openly blamed the US government, declaring that he had never sought to restrict the movements of Cuban citizens (Amuchástegui 1994; Aguirre 2002, 81; Gott 2004, 298-299).

In their remarks, therefore, Castro and Clinton interact with the potential challenges of the 21st century, in two ways. First, they use the strategic opportunities presented by the rhetorical significance of a new millennium to create an understanding of both past achievements and future challenges with which they seek to mobilise their listeners so as to promote political change. Thus, it has a semantic importance. Secondly, they now operate in an environment which increases their proximity to other actors. Both speakers appreciate that their words reach beyond the immediate audience of the speech, indeed both are available on-line. Castro recognises this with this claim that 'our voice can reach and will reach very far away.' Words are arguably now of even greater potential importance in shaping the strategic-discursive context of actors, given the speed with which they can be communicated to millions.

The 21st century, therefore, would not seem to require new models of leadership, but rather the traditional oratorical model of politicians who seek to encourage their supporters to form alliances around new ideas. This fresh perspective is not new in asking us to appreciate the power of rhetoric,

from Cicero to Lenin to Bill Clinton fine speakers have had, and will continue into the 21st century to have, an important ability to create political opportunities by inspiring listeners to embrace risk, to celebrate their common characteristics, and to dream of the future.

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