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Being more with less: exploring the flexible political leadership identities of government

ministers

Introduction

The concept of leadership within democratic structures is a longstanding point of interest and contention, with scholars identifying the seeming paradox of the notion of leading others within a context where the populous is cast as being ultimately in charge (see Hartley and Benington, 2011; Kane et al, 2009; Peele, 2005; Rhodes and t'Hart, 2014; Ruscio, 2008; Wren, 2008). Political leaders have a “grant of the popular will” (Kane et al, 2009: 2) via the legitimacy of elections but are also constrained by a range of institutional and informal checks and balances within arenas such as the government department, the constituency, the political party, the media and civil society (Morrell and Hartley, 2006). Moreover, rapid communication, especially through social media, has encouraged a perception that voters and stakeholders can readily challenge the legitimacy of particular decisions and those who take them (Trippi, 2008).

There is a “blind spot in democratic theory” (Kane et al, 2009: 2) as to how politicians deal with the complex and contrasting demands their contested power produces, and this article provides potential illumination by applying poststructuralist identity theory to the area of political leadership to explore how senior elected politicians experience the perceived requirements and demands of leadership. The focus is therefore upon empirically exploring the identities constructed by political leaders, unpacking how they think of themselves and their work in relation to perceived expectations of leadership. Through analysing 51 interviews with government ministers, we examine how people who occupy senior levels of government come to form a sense of self in

leadership: how they experience the dynamics, faultlines and contradictions of a discourse of leadership within a contemporary democratic environment (Wren, 2008; Ybema et al, 2009).

The core finding of the paper is that in keeping with our times of austerity, political leaders convey a sense that they are being asked to *be* more with less. We argue that political leaders feel that they are facing more demands from followers but under circumstances of increased democratic accountability. Just as public bodies experience the strain of attempting to be more flexible with fewer resources, so political leaders feel the identity pressures of holding a number of flexible identities in tension. Theorising from our data, we propose four contemporary political leadership identities, identities that convey how political leaders expressed a sense of expected flexibility: 'the consultor', 'the traveller,' 'the adjudicator' and 'the master.' We argue that these identities suggest very different senses of self and that holding each in tension suggests that political leaders experience contradictory and perhaps also unrealistic expectations of flexibility.

Our contribution lies in the area of political and public leadership, in shedding light on the identity work of government ministers within discourses of leadership, which we hope will enrich existing theoretical understanding of different forms of political and public leadership through demonstrating how the people subjected to such discourses (political leaders) inhabit and experience their demands. While the literature in political and public leadership has identified a "blind spot" (Kane et al, 2009: 2) in terms of understanding how politicians cope with the demands on self of political leadership within democratic structures, it has as of yet not presented an empirical response. From a practice perspective, we hope that our empirical data can contribute to the leadership development of politicians through providing insight into the tensions of leadership as experienced at the level of the individual political leader.

We interpret leadership from a poststructuralist perspective as a series of discourses, a “structured totality resulting from articulatory practice” (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 105). We therefore approach leadership as something articulated in language rather than as a label for behaviours or traits that exist independently and in advance of language (Ford, 2006; Ford and Harding, 2007), “within not outside discourse” (Ford, 2006: 79). Our sense of self and the self we are expected to be by others is experienced and known through discourse: discourses of leadership create a series of expectations for how leaders ought to conduct themselves and think of themselves. Such an approach foregrounds multiple meanings and interpretations of leadership, analysing how different constructions compete for legitimacy and primacy in a person’s identity work (Smolović Jones et al, 2016).

Adopting such a position does not mean that we interpret people as simply powerless products of pre-existing discourse, nor as free agentic beings capable of crafting autonomous identities through language and self-expression. Rather, identity work is interpreted as an ongoing and contested accomplishment, with people approached as both “being subjects and objects of control *and* subjects and objects of resistance” (Harding et al, 2014: 1214) (see also Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Brown and Coupland, 2015). We therefore interpret a leadership identity as something that can be un-accomplished and recast through language and practice: that a leadership identity can be ‘undone’ and worked upon (Nicholson and Carroll, 2013).

Our approach to identity and identity work means that we distinguish between leadership and leader. Leadership is interpreted simply as a range of discourses that compete and intermingle in order to form an account and meaning of leadership: we therefore offer no normative definition of leadership, preferring to analyse how people convey a sense of self in relation to the signifier

leadership. The word leader is adopted to refer to people expected to enact and even embody discourses of leadership (Harding, 2014).

The remainder of the paper unfolds as follows. The next section presents a review of the political leadership literature, drawing attention to the increased emphasis within the discourse of leadership upon collaboration and involving the public. We continue by enunciating in more depth what a poststructuralist view of identity in relation to leadership offers our analysis. Having described our approach to methodology, method and analysis, we present our four empirically-informed identities, before offering our conclusions.

Political leadership within democracies

In this section we present an overview of the political leadership literature. We argue that the literature has increasingly advocated a more collaborative approach to leadership but has not yet offered an empirical account concerning how political leaders experience the tensions and demands of leadership discourses at the level of the self.

As noted in the introduction, leadership within democracies requires finding a way through significant tensions between being placed in a position of authority to make decisions, yet being circumscribed both formally and informally by other actors, such as the media, institutional rules and the public. In countries such as the US, UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand – where the data in this paper is drawn from – political consumerism has risen, there is a crisis of public confidence in political leadership and the boundaries of citizen/leader are also blurring (Lees-Marshment, 2015). Kane et al (2009: 3030) note how the public, who were once just part of the

audience in the 20th century “now realistically aspire to play leadership roles on at least some public issues.”

A review of the political and public leadership literature reveals that expectations regarding what it means to enact leadership in the political sphere have adapted, with a greater emphasis placed on collective approaches as a means of reconciling the problem of leadership within democratic structures. Wren (2008: 135) states that substantial interest in leadership within democracies, rather than interest in the person of the leader, can be tracked to American independence and the rise of the notion of the sovereignty of the people, i.e. that the public ultimately has the power to remove rulers. Such a shift in emphasis required thought about collaboration between populace and leaders previously not considered as a matter of pressing concern (Peele, 2005). Hence the influential work of Burns (1977) focused on the transformative potential of the relationship between citizens and political leaders, the notion that political leadership should be theorised and worked with as a relational and collective concept. Relationality also underlines Ruscio’s (2008) notion of acts of political leadership relying on a basis of trust in democratic processes and institutions.

Hartley and Benington (2011) argue that thinking and research relating to political leadership within democratic contexts is particularly important within contemporary settings, as “we are witnessing some profound changes in society, which influence the ways in which political leadership is perceived, valued (or not), trusted (or not) and engaged with (or not)” (ibid: 212). The authors point to changes in the ethos and organising of public services as important in spreading responsibility for leadership amidst a broader group of people and organisations, although it has been well argued that this notion of autonomous and powerful political leaders has been exaggerated throughout history (Brown, 2015).

The notion of leadership being more distributed within contemporary social relations is relevant as it forces attention to the question of the identity and purpose of someone expected to inhabit the discourse of leadership. It could be argued that enacting the identity of an autonomous problem-solving agent in political leadership is made harder in practical terms because of the rise in awareness of perceived wicked problems. These are complex and apparently intractable problems where there is no settled definition of the problem at hand, let alone its solution, examples of which have been cited as climate change, obesity, binge drinking and the ageing of the population (Grint, 2005; Hartley and Benington, 2011: 206; Hartley, 2011: 333). As Sørensen (2006: 98) argues, “we are witnessing a change in the way society is being governed”; a move from a focus on formal institutions of governance to a more fluid and interactive process of governance where “an increasing number of public and private actors have a substantial effect” on how society is run. Kane et al (2009) therefore propose the notion of dispersed democratic leadership, and Sørensen and Torfing (2008) networked governance, where leadership is conceptualized in processual terms as inhabited by a range of actors, all responsible in their way for the healthy functioning of public services and policy.

Increasing attention has therefore been paid to how decision-makers can draw on the widest possible range of civic intelligence and stakeholder contribution in government (Sirianni 2009: 239), with the underlying suggestion being that political leadership can be conceptualised in relational and collaborative terms as well as in formal terms (Booher, 2004: 34; Crosby and Bryson, 2005; Head 2007: 443). Hence the growth of interest within political studies in exploring ways in which politicians and government can work in partnership with the public, drawing on such notions as active citizenship, co-operative inquiry and co-creation (Lees-Marshment, 2015: 48-51). Viewed from this perspective, the political leader is portrayed as someone who shares responsibility as well

as power with the public, engaging people to work together as partners with leaders to find solutions (Burkhardt and Glass 2010; see also Crosby and Bryson 2005).

Political leaders themselves increasingly talk of involving the public in decision-making: UK Prime Minister Tony Blair said “governments can spend...We can legislate. But we cannot cure the sick. We cannot be inside every classroom. We cannot police the streets” (Blair, 2005); US President Barack Obama said “government does not have all the answers, and that public officials need to draw on what citizens know”; Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard (2010) that “if you want to make a big change for our nation, the political process must be connected with the community” and New Zealand Prime Minister John Key that he and his government “know we don't have all the answers. We want your ideas about what could make a real difference” (Key 2009a).

The leader-subject within more collaborative portrayals of political leadership remains present, albeit as a discursive gathering-point for co-created solutions sourced from a range of actors in society (Bentley 2005: 29-30; Whitney 2007: 344); where stakeholders will be supported to think through and debate problems (Geineys et al 2004: 193-4; Klijn and Koppenjan, 2000: 385). A political leader's role is therefore envisaged as a facilitator and guide of debate and dialogue (Hartley and Benington 2011: 211). The collaborative political leader is thus portrayed as someone who is open to new ideas, to change and learning (Burkhardt and Glass, 2010: 567; Goodin, 2009).

Other authors emphasise the agency of the leader-subject to a greater extent. Heifetz's (1994) adaptive leadership and Grint's (2005) approach to leadership as problem construction, both hold a place for a strong agent able to provoke others into agentic action. Their approach is collaborative, in the sense that a group of people are envisaged as coalescing in order to work on problems which come to be constructed as important and complex, yet also highly agentic, in that such a process seems to require the authoritative intervention of individuals in order to maintain momentum in

the process. In the case of Grint, the subject is required to ask provocative questions of followers and in the case of Heifetz, leaders are required to maintain heat on followers, to push them into a state of productive discomfort.

The above highlights the scale of demands and roles seemingly expected of a political leader: someone who is expected to work across complex systems of stakeholders, to facilitate the views of others and yet also intervene in powerful ways to realign the framing of problems when needed. The accumulated discourses of political leadership offer an ambitious picture of sophisticated problem-solving, inclusive deliberation and agentic challenge. To date, however, no empirical contribution exists that outlines how leaders recognise themselves as subjects within such discourses of leadership: the tensions, contradictions and problems posed by such identity demands. We offer a poststructuralist account of identity as one valuable way in which such an empirical response may be framed.

Identity and leadership

A poststructuralist account of identity offers a salient means of analysing the identity work of government ministers within discourses of political leadership, of understanding the demands, expectations and contradictions such discourses generate at the level of the self. An alternative approach might have been a social identity perspective, exploring the identifications of leaders with various political constituencies (geographic constituency, political party, funders, media, and so on) and the account of leadership negotiated between leader and constituencies. Our emphasis and interest is more closely aligned with an inquiry into the disciplinary effects of discourses of leadership in relation to political leaders, however. We wish to foreground the self in relation to discourse as a site whereby identity is articulated, inscribed, regulated and re-articulated through discourse (Collinson, 2003).

A poststructuralist account approaches identity as regulated and “assembled out of cultural raw material: language, symbols, sets of meanings, values etc. that are derived from countless numbers of interactions with others and exposure to messages produced and distributed by agencies (e.g. schools, mass media) as well as early life experiences and unconscious processes” (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002: 626). Thus the process of forming an identity is approached as being “a complex, multifaceted dynamic interplay between internal strivings and external prescriptions, between self-presentation and labelling by others, between achievement and ascription and between regulation and resistance” (Ybema et al, 2009: 301). Focusing on identity allows an analysis of how a subject crafts a self in relation to available discourses in the wider social and political sphere: is subject to but also able to re-interpret the self (Brown and Coupland, 2015).

The literature on leadership identity from a poststructuralist perspective presents a view of leadership as a rich and complex set of discourses, where notions of individual heroism and insecurity coalesce. A leadership identity is experienced simultaneously as powerful, seductive and intimidating. Exploring heroic identifications in more depth, a body of work has explored the fantasy dynamics of leadership, with leadership positioned as generating a series of rhetorically ambitious attributions to leadership (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003; Sveningsson and Larsson, 2006). Leadership is often situated in language that seems to transcend the more pedestrian and functional lexicon of managerially-focused organisations (Harding et al, 2011). Hence Ford and Harding (2007: 482) in their study of public sector leadership development programmes report that participants engage in development work from a basis of strong, and usually heroic and individualistic, identifications with leadership.

Leadership can also introduce insecurities and dissonance, as subjects struggle to align competing demands on the self, they “can experience moments of being destabilized, unravelled and

deconstructed” (Nicholson and Carroll, 2013: 1226). Leadership may also, of course, be experienced as a disciplinary identity discourse. As Carroll and Nicholson (2014), Ford and Harding (2007), Gagnon (2008), Gagnon and Collinson (2014) have demonstrated in depth, leadership development programmes, which now populate almost every area of the public sector (O’Reilly and Reed, 2011), are rife with technologies that promote practices of ‘leadership’, with leadership placed in inverted commas here to indicate the fact that it is often adopted as an aspirational catch-all term for a range of diverse organisational practices and analytical tools.

Leadership in identity terms, then, seems to invite a number of notions of the self to co-exist within a single signifier. As Ford (2006: 95) notes, in the public sphere typical ‘macho’ notions of leadership “compete as one of many sources of power. The co-existence of macho-management and post-heroic leadership discourses (as well as the tensions between these two approaches) often combine with others including outside of work, gender differences and professional career patterns. Outside the leadership literature, Clarke et al (2009) have stated that the holding of a multiplicity of contradictory identity positions need not equate to an unstable subject. Rather, they make the case that:

Within institutions people tend to employ multiple, competing and often inconsistent sense-making frameworks to explain chronic problems and to rationalize inconsistent policies and beliefs. That is, identities may be stable without being coherent, and consist of core statements but not be unified. People may function more-or-less adequately, though perhaps not entirely contentedly, by incorporating antagonistic understandings into their narratives of self when their needs for self-esteem, self-knowledge and self-efficacy must be met in the face of [the contradictions of contemporary life] (Clarke et al, 2009: 341).

Adopting an identity focus can thus help us to see and understand often contradictory, partial, yet also demanding dynamics of public-political discourses and how such an interplay of discourses is interpreted at the level of the self. The remainder of the paper focuses on elaborating empirically on this identity work amongst political leaders.

Methodology, method and data analysis

Our methodology was designed in order to elicit how political leaders construct a leadership identity within a context of contemporary democracies. This necessarily entailed exploring how political leaders made sense of the expectations of leadership on the self. We thus chose to conduct elite qualitative interviews with government ministers to allow our research participants space to talk about their experiences with leadership (Rhodes et al, 2007; Stansfield, 2014).

Ministers and secretaries of state (or people of equivalent seniority) in central/federal governments were chosen because they meet the definition of being in a position of political leadership at a high level, enjoying enough discretion to be able to craft policy, make significant budget allocation decisions and lead others in particular directions. In the US, the sample included secretaries and deputy secretaries and in the UK, peers, who are not directly elected. The interview sample was purposive, drawing on ministers across a range of established western and liberal democracies - in the current or most recent federal/central governments. An appropriate balance was sought in the sample in terms of political ideology, gender representation, seniority and current/former ministerial position.

Obtaining access to people in senior levels of politics and government is notoriously difficult, due to the intense time pressures and high levels of scrutiny experienced by these individuals but we were successful in securing interviews with 51 ministers from the UK, Australia, New Zealand, Canada

and the US. This generated 155,144 words of text. Ideologically, 65% were on the right or centre-right and 37% left or centre-left, reflecting the incumbency of governments at the time. The gender balance reflected the unfortunate and typical imbalance in government at the time; thus only 16% of interviewees were women. In terms of being current office-holders, 39% were currently in position with 61% being former (but recent, within two years of holding office) ministers. No discernible difference was found in the nature of comments according to gender, ideology, national context or current/former status. In the analysis section, all extracts used are from different ministers.

Interviews were conducted using an appreciative inquiry approach (Cooperrider et al 2008), designed to start conversations and questions from a basis of what is perceived to work well. Politicians are subjected to high levels of public negativity and rejection, compounded by weak support structures (Roberts, 2015). We have found in our experience that opening interview themes with a positive focus helps to generate a more open conversation that usually allows for more critical exploration as the interview unfolds than had the initial question been framed in more critical terms.

In our analysis of the data we were guided by Knights and Clarke (2014), who emphasise the constitutive function of language. Leadership was approached as a discourse that does active work in shaping and influencing answers received. As a word loaded with prior associations (Ford et al, 2008) we were particularly conscious of not frontloading our questions with our own attributions of leadership, preferring to interpret leadership as a discourse our research participants were subjected to and a signifier that they adopted in their talk. The notion of flexible leadership identities was an “emergent theme, rather than part of any a priori agenda” (Clarke and Knights, 2014: 340), a notion that seemed to capture well the phenomenon of research participants talking

about a range of disparate leadership identities in relation to perceived extra demands in the discursive environment.

We employed template analysis (King, 2004; Knights and Clarke, 2014; Harding et al, 2014) to facilitate and structure the process of data analysis, using the NVivo software package. We marked our transcripts with “first-order probes and prompts from the interview guide to provide high order codes” (Knights and Clarke, 2014: 340). These higher-order codes reflected the questions in the interview schedule aimed at surfacing types and descriptions of leadership practice – i.e. broadly individualistic (behavioural descriptions, descriptions of traits) and more broadly collective (descriptions of leadership as process, as relational). We approached these higher order codes in order to explore more specific lower-order codes that reflected the subject positions and discourses drawn upon in the identity construction of participants. This stage resulted in a refinement of categories, where notions of individualism and collectivism were made more complex, with codes such as ‘tough’, ‘expertise’ and ‘control’ often sitting alongside codes indicating more vulnerability, such as ‘uncertainty’, ‘feeling threatened’ and ‘imperfection’. We then identified who these codes were being attributed to in the data (the public, journalists and officials, chiefly) as an important third-order layer that allowed for further refinement. In common with Knights and Clarke (2014), we returned reflexively during each stage of analysis to the bigger picture emerging from the data in order to present a meta-theme and title for the paper. In keeping with Knights and Clarke (2014), as a final stage of analysis we employed discourse analytic principles and techniques commonly employed in poststructuralist studies of identity to conduct a detailed textual analysis of our transcripts, seeking to enhance and deepen each identity construct. That said, we fully accept that any action of naming discursive phenomena, no matter the process followed in arriving at such naming, is inescapably to a certain extent a “creative endeavour”

(Clarke et al, 2009: 329) on the part of the researcher, a matter of reflexively mediating between the language of research participants, the impressions of the researcher and the lexicon provided by the extant literature. The categories of 'consultor', 'traveller', 'adjudicator' and 'master', as well as the notion of a flexible identity, are informed by this process but are not neutral categories (Clarke and Knights, 2015: 6): they are inescapably the product of us seeking to convey a plausible narrative that conveyed the identity work of our research participants.

Following Harding et al (2014) and Nicholson and Carroll (2013), we gave particular primacy in our analysis to the construction of subject positions, how people built a sense of themselves in leadership through language, via their identity work. We identified instances of identity work as any section of an interview where participants talked about themselves in relation to leadership, positioning the kind of person or practitioner they believed themselves to be alongside talk of leadership. We were interested in building an understanding of the identity work of politicians in relation to their perceptions of the societal and public expectations of leadership, the kinds of identity demands politicians believed were expected of them.

Such an approach necessitated an analysis of the verbs, nouns and adjectives used to support and construct a subject position (Nicholson and Carroll, 2013). We were particularly interested in how participants constructed their own identities in leadership and how this identity was constructed in relation to others.

Empirical analysis: ministers' flexible identities as consultors, travellers, adjudicators, masters

Our analysis suggests a complex, often contradictory notion of a contemporary political leadership identity. This subject is a flexible one; an identity stretched across subject positions to meet a more demanding series of leadership expectations but with less perceived discretionary power; someone

who performs very different and even contradictory identities; less a figure of verve and decisiveness than one who takes note of her finite place in a broader and complex system of democratic accountability, yet where traces of decisive and heroic leadership expectations seem to persist. In what follows we present four identity constructions surfaced in our data: 'the consultor,' 'the traveller,' 'the adjudicator' and 'the master.' This notion of flexibility reflects the finding in our data that, as public agencies experience tensions in attempting to do more with less, so political leadership subjects also feel the strain of flexibility: each identity is a constrained and semi-occupied identity, constrained by perceived and varying demands for decisiveness and openness. The headings used for each identity and supporting commentary are led by the language used by our research participants and informed by relevant aspects of the political and public leadership literature explored earlier, as well, of course, by our judgment. Each of these reflects the often contradictory ways in which political leadership identity was reported to us: demands to be more (flexible) but with less power and more democratic accountability. Such identity work was conducted against the backdrop of an ambivalent construction of the public: a public that seems to demand more voice but also expects its leaders to lead. Political leaders came to know themselves against members of the public who were cast as unreasonable, indifferent and ignorant but also as knowledgeable, real and authentic. In particular, when members of the public were experienced anonymously, via email or social media, they were often constructed in terms of dread, with ministers expressing weariness at confronting their "huge" correspondence, "a great pile of letters that have got to be answered". Being a leader amidst the demands of the public was often simply about survival, of overcoming the "constant wave of requests, demands, enquiries, petitions". Yet in the flesh, members of the public were regarded as true and possessing valued knowledge of real life demands and challenges. Being face-to-face with a member of the public was something that seemed to confirm an identity of leader our research participants felt more comfortable with, while

the depersonalised other of social media and email became a figure of struggle against whom a far more ambiguous and contested series of identities were constructed. The following summary table, Figure 1, is offered as an overview for readers as they navigate each identity.

[insert Figure 1: Summary of political leadership identities here]

The Consultor

Our interview data reflected the notion in the literature that political leaders need or are expected to be collaborative. When research participants spoke of leading with others, however, their emphasis was not upon full-blown collaboration, distribution of leadership or collectivism but upon a somewhat diminished category of consultation. Collaboration evokes a re-working of purpose, of negotiating and constructing what a policy or institution is for (Grint, 2005). Our politicians acknowledged the shift in public discourse towards a more inclusive approach to leadership but this was experienced in diluted terms, as listening more and seeking wider bases of information. Political leaders were prepared to be flexible in terms of moving *towards* a more collaborative sense of self but such collaboration was less comprehensive than the accounts one finds in the literature. As one minister put it:

I think political power is very much overstated these days. I think power in our community is very diffuse. And so, while politicians and ministers have a lot of power, I think the nature of democracy means that they very rarely have control of any particular problem and can't by themselves, or by the virtue of directing government, necessarily solve something.

Such a shift in the discourse was not embraced as much as accepted as an inevitable consequence of broader shifts in public attitude towards hierarchy and deference. One former minister said:

I do think there is an issue of the volatility of public opinion, which has a weakening effect on governments everywhere, even autocratic and dictatorial governments. Maybe not quite Mr Kim Il in Pyongyang in North Korea, not quite him yet - but all around the world tough guys are finding that they just can't keep control. They can't retain legitimacy or authority without making all sorts of concessions. And if they don't make concessions then they are going to find the whole system explodes in front of them. It's starting to show up for instance in Syria; in the Middle East.

This politician equates political leaders who try to keep tight control of their departments, governments or countries as ineffective. Being 'tough' or 'controlling' is equated with a backward view of leadership. The contemporary leadership terrain is characterised as one that requires co-operation in order to retain legitimacy. As another politician stated: "You have to be prepared to share power. You have to be prepared to give a bit in order to get a better outcome." While one might argue that political leaders have always made concessions in order to maintain power (see Brown, 2015), the change discussed in these interviews seems amplified as a result of leaders' experiences of forms of more direct engagement. Participants often spoke in terms of heavy scrutiny via 24-hour news, social media and organised online campaigns.

'Legitimate' political leadership was often equated to diminished agency and power. This is because the leadership subject was positioned by ministers as but one source amongst many others of both information and social leadership. As another minister noted, on the one hand the political leader is circumscribed by "the public, the electorate, [with] more information; everyone has laptops, or computers, or mobiles or whatever" and on the other hand the political leader is confined by the "tremendously powerful build-up of lobbies of public opinion" made possible by technological innovations. Amidst this swirl of discourse from members of the public and lobby groups sits the

consultative political leader, someone who has to recognise changing perceptions of what it means to lead in public.

Recognition of the limits of the knowledge of the political leader, “not pretending to be an expert in everything”, in the words of one politician, sat alongside what was characterised as an artful process of accessing knowledge from others. These others were professionals, “people who do the job”, and figures of expertise, “people who knew a lot more about these things than I did”.

Accessing a wider range of viewpoints and evidence served a practical purpose of coming to a better-informed decision. Yet there was also a sense in the data of the political leader as someone who had come to terms with his lack of power, but reframed this lack as a virtue. The political leader who embraces less power is the political leader best able to take an informed, rounded view of issues. In the words of one former cabinet minister:

I like to hear other opinions, even if they don't concur with mine. So I would have said that my leadership style was an inclusive style. Which I don't see as a sign of weakness - I see other styles of leadership which are very dominant and very imposing and maybe they work for those individuals. For me that's not right. I need to be convinced that what I'm doing is on balance as good a job, or as much a good job as I possibly can. And for me that involves taking on board other people's opinions and views. And then I make my decision and then I get on with it.

There's a benefit I think in so far as you satisfy yourself that you've exhausted your possibilities and done the responsible thing. But I think there's a down side as well because there's a misconception that you have to be very thrusting, out there and leading from the front. Whereas bringing people along with you, or listening to them and explaining why you're doing your own thing, is perhaps seen as weaker style of leadership I think.

But I think you are a very foolish minister - anybody at the top of any organisation - who doesn't approach every aspect of departmental activity with an open mind as opposed to an open mouth. I think you have to listen and receive and then you make your judgement.

In this passage the former minister plays with a discourse of strength, reflecting on "style" in reference to a more autocratic construction of a leader, someone who "thrusts", "out there". This traditional figure is described in quite narcissistic terms as someone "demanding" and "absolutely obsessed". Initially this passage begins with the minister outlining a traditional approach to political leadership as "dominant and very imposing". As the passage proceeds, however, this leader-subject becomes increasingly one of caricature, a "foolish" figure portrayed evocatively as bearing an "open mouth". The transition made in this passage represents a subtle subversion of what one might regard as the dominant subjectivity of the leader-figure, a subject position which has routinely been constructed in masculine terms as concomitant with symbols evoking decisiveness, rationality and charisma (Knights, 2015; Oseen, 1997).

Against this almost cartoonish figure is an alternative and more contemporary political leadership subject, someone with "an open mind", who "brings people along", and most importantly, in contrast to the 'open-mouth' approach, listens to others. Evoked in this description is the notion of the contemporary political leader as more akin to the informed corporate executive, someone aware of best practice in people management. In common with the discourse of new public management, the political leader is portrayed as someone who can learn from managerial practices within the private sector. As organisational managers are urged to be more open, even confessional, about their own weaknesses (see Townley, 1994), so the political leader is also positioned as someone who embraces her own deficiencies. The solution is posited as

appropriating a consultative subjectivity, one that will supplement gaps in knowledge with an 'open mind' and exposure to 'people who know more'.

The consultative political leadership subject may appear as a somewhat diminished figure from the traditional leader, as someone who experiences the pressures of increased visibility and scrutiny of a better-informed, if not always more enlightened, populous. Yet this consultative subject is also characterised as a somehow more contemporary figure, more aware of the dynamics of the modern workplace and more responsive to the limitations of proliferating arenas for democratic engagement and scrutiny.

The Traveller

The traveller flexibly moves between worlds: the realm of government (constructed as inauthentic, false or unreal) and the ordinary, day-to-day worlds of members of the public (constructed as authentic, true or real). Such movement is not geographical i.e. between the big city and suburbs or countryside, or the capital and constituency, but is about mediating between the somewhat 'false' and 'inauthentic' identities of government and elites and those 'normal' people in more 'authentic', 'true' or 'real' non-governmental worlds. It is about moving between different worlds/groups in society, between different identities, but never truly occupying either, exercising a flexible subjectivity between identities.

The perceived demand on the subjectivity of leaders here is quite different from a consultant: it is about an affective, even embodied, affinity with ordinary people. Members of the public are characterised as possessing a rudimentary and foundational wisdom. It is a sort of wisdom held in distinction to the public official or party political adherent who can know too much, or who can know so much in public policy expertise or ideological terms that he becomes "detached" from the

lived experiences of “ordinary”, “real” people. Realness resides in the experiences and relations of people whose thoughts are not dominated by policy or party political debates. Wisdom is constructed in negative terms, as not possessing certain knowledge but in nevertheless having access to a reserve of a less tangible but more authentic form of knowing, and leader-subjects are those who can successfully travel between these worlds.

There is a cleansing of subjectivity that seems to accompany the political leadership subject on her travels, with a distinguishing feature being someone who is able to remove the inauthentic and able to access authenticity amongst ‘ordinary people’, during visits or escapes back to the electoral constituency; like the person who attends a health spa to detoxify after a period of over-indulgence. Political leaders had to, in the words of one minister, “get some geographical distance” from the inauthentic. Staying in or around the “machinery” of government for too long, this politician stated, led to “a very warped view”. Another minister expanded on the same theme:

I like people quite genuinely. And I live in a normal house in a normal suburb and I attend my local market and I shop for my family. In that respect I think it’s quite healthy. And I leave [capital city] every week. And I think that’s healthy. I’ve kind of done that on purpose. So there’s that mix of how you keep yourself real and hear the voices of other people. There’s kind of that mix of how you stay connected. And then if I’m unsure I’m equally not scared to then either pick up the phone and start ringing around or think it’s about time I spent a day on the road...So each day that I’m out there I just try and go, I jokingly call it ‘squeezing a child’. You’ve got to get me breathing, touching, feeling. So we really need to keep our heads and remember that what’s important for them is what’s important for us.

There is a physicality to this contact and perspective of the ‘real’ public that is missing from the more depersonalised language adopted by those in and around government. Acts of “touching”,

“squeezing” and “feeling” bypass the perhaps seductive but ultimately unreal machinations of government. Here the leadership subject is able to maintain ‘reality’ while hearing “the voices of other people”, presumably those associated with government.

What constitutes the ‘reality’ of this destination our political leaders visit? Delving more deeply, we discover that the real is in fact quite banal, associated with routine: typically suburban-domestic and leisure activities, attending to the home and family. There was a wisdom and ‘reality’ to the suburban missing from government life. Another minister, for example, described his sons’ weekly soccer matches as a source of intelligence:

I always had a rule of never making a decision on a big public controversy during one week in [capital city]. That getting out, watching my sons play soccer on the weekend...just the most useful forums. Because if it really was an issue with people they would raise it. If it was just a [capital city] or press issue, an insider’s issue, people wouldn’t raise it with you...In some ways I think the same-sex marriage debate is a bit like that. I find the majority of people actually don’t care. For all the ferocity of the debate, and the fact that I think there has been a shift, I think the great majority of people actually take the view, “Well it doesn’t bother me. It’s not impacting on me at all.” So at the height of those debates I found very few people at the soccer raise it. They talk to you about [other issue] because that was an issue people did engage with.

Here we get a sense of the authentic/inauthentic identity dualism enacted as a matter of being inside a political bubble or outside that bubble where things *really* matter or do not. The temptation to get carried away with the unreality of a situation is described in intense terms, as “ferocious”. The forum and rituals of the soccer match act as an injection of ‘reality’ into the thinking of this politician. As to the positive content of the ‘authentic’, this remained more vague

and ill-defined. The form and content of the authentic seemed to matter less than its function as an alternative destination, preventing full absorption into the 'unreal' political bubble. The political leader was someone flexible, who could travel between worlds but never fully occupying either identity.

The Adjudicator

The adjudicator is a cool and detached subject, different from the warm subjectivity evoked by the traveller who needs to feel and understand the lives of ordinary people but also distinct from the semi-inclusive figure of the consultant. The identity demand at play is one of judicial fairness and neutrality, rather than inclusiveness or affective empathy. The language of the adjudicator is peppered with distancing, with the subject removing herself via the adoption of distancing verbs, particularly 'weighing' and 'balancing', and through the foregrounding of processes that are posited as placing boundaries around the agency of the leader-subject. When participants emphasised adjudication, this was accompanied by a concomitant emphasis on formality and process, the "checks and balances", "legal responsibilities", "committee system", "processes of consultation" that accompany ministerial life. In other words, this is a leader-subjectivity held in check by externally imposed systems of symbolic authority, operating autonomously and impersonally to circumscribe the agency of leaders and followers. As one minister stated:

When I was first elected it was a question I was asked by my constituents and I'm still asked: "how do you make your decisions and what is the guide?" And I think whether it's policy, whether it's private votes, whatever it is, I kind of have to balance three things that are all equally important. One is my own personal beliefs, my own personal philosophies and approaches. The second is my party policy, and what my party has campaigned on, and

what my government that I represent has also stated in terms of a policy and direction which may be different. But it's an important part of my decision making. And then, thirdly, what my constituents believe and what my constituents want. So that's what I'm constantly balancing. And I think it's kind of on an issue by issue approach.

Here we find the leader-subject as someone who places great emphasis on rationalizing subjectivity, which is evoked by the highly structured way in which the tasks of adjudicating are communicated via an organised list of three key points. As Morrell and Hartley (2006) characterised political leadership as a struggle for meaning and direction across a number of competing bases, so the adjudicator must come to terms with enacting a role of decision-making that is circumscribed by what is possible according to various formal requirements. The requirement of the subject here is that he is able to detach from the fray, even to the extent of holding his own self (and the moral and ethical preferences of that self) as one of a number of competing bases to consider.

Nevertheless, some traces of a feeling subjectivity remain in the talk of ministers. The adjudicator identity can feel "claustrophobic" and even threatening in agential terms, as political leadership subjects are "only a cog in a much bigger wheel". This identity is not one that can be empathised with at a distance but must be felt in order to be understood, according to our ministers. Hence our interviewees spoke of an important part of leadership as pulling others in to that position of the one who must decide:

I think more open engagement in policy formation is not perhaps suitable for all areas but I think it is the right way forward most of the time with the lack of trust in politicians nowadays. A lot of the problem with the lack of trust is the public don't always fully understand how difficult it is to make a particular decision. So step one is to show how difficult it is to make that decision and to engage the public in the difficulties. Draw them

into the debate so, if possible, they reach the same outcome as you have, which is: “This is difficult. This is what we’re going to have to do.”

A key aspect of this activity was portrayed as enabling others to become more aware of the indeterminacy of any discourse, or of the uncertainties of decision-making and in this sense bears some resemblance to the wicked construction of leadership by Grint (2005) and the adaptive construction of Heifetz (1994), where a wider group of people are made to feel the strains of leadership. Adopting such an identity seems to require developing the capacity for, and inviting people to appreciate, in the words of one minister, the “ambiguity and the non-linear processes of getting there”. Ultimately, however, this was a minority view, with the identity of an adjudicator usually presented as a safety valve of sorts, a means of escaping the identity demands of leadership via the familiar, quasi-judicial language of adjudicating.

The Master

Nowhere is the flexibility of leader identity seen more keenly than in the identity of the master; a sense of the more collaborative aspects of subjectivity are here placed in the background in response to a perceived demand to make difficult decisions but also to protect the public from the precariousness of certain security situations. This identity conveys a sense of being authoritative in terms of one’s ministerial brief but also in terms of a ministerial identity as someone charged with making assertive decisions in the face of contradictory demands: to pay heed to public opinion but also to decide. Conveyed in this identity is a sense of mastering one’s responsibilities and mastering one’s sense of self as a political leader. However, a sense of flexibility was also at play *within* this identity: there was a sense of a push-pull between appearing open to a more demanding democratic context and yet also needing to display competence and assertiveness. In one sense,

government ministers acknowledged a fundamentally altered political context. As one minister stated:

We're in a different game now. It's certainly not a get yourself into a leadership position and then tell people what to do thing because the world's not like that. The hierarchies of the western world are much more collapsed now.

Yet although the political leadership subject may be seen as increasingly having to adhere to contemporary demands of consultation, there nevertheless remained the strong sense in the interview data that political leaders retain a certain individualism and freedom from the symbolic constraints experienced by others.

Political leaders still have to make decisions; this is their job. There was therefore, quite logically, a sense of them needing to exercise that authority, albeit with reduced power, and within the same contested and challenging democratic environment which gives rise to a consultor, traveller and adjudicator identity. Political leaders still accept responsibility for changing and influencing the discursive environment, rather than be passively shaped by it. The notion of mastery of identity and brief in the face of contest manifested in terms of a struggle for legitimacy: a political leader who is flexible, but only up to a point. As one former minister stated:

Sometimes you have to form public opinion. You have to say 'this issue is not that important or it's not top of mind but I'm going to see if I can't make this part of the government platform one way or another.' And so you lead public opinion. You make sure that it becomes important.

The staccato, punctuated nature of this minister's talk re-emphasises the active and agentic dimension of holding a political leadership identity. Mastering is about stripping away complexity and offering the public a more certain opinion. But what were the targets of this mastery?

The first target was that of self. Courage in the face of adversity was posited as allied to adopting a leadership identity, particularly the notion of needing to decide one way or another on a complex decision. The image evoked here is of the solitary figure, with one interviewee describing the "decision maker...where you have to have courage and you have to say 'well I'm going to potentially do something that is different to public opinion and I'm going to explain why, and I think I'll win the debate in the long term.'" Note here how the politician steps outside his self – occupying the third-person pronoun 'you' - to deliver a message on behalf of the leader-subject that is within him. It is as if he is looking into a mirror and reminding himself that political leaders are expected to show a little 'something extra' than managers or public servants. Although the subject experiences demands for increased collaboration, for accepting the limits of the knowledge and capabilities of leaders, they remain able to add something in addition, thus doing more than just facilitating or listening.

The second target of mastery was the "follower" subject. One minister, perhaps drawing on Hegelian philosophy, described in evocative terms the relationship between politicians, their peers and citizens as a battle for mastery:

I think we're in changed circumstances. I think there are many more people that want their voices heard. I think it's much more difficult, much more difficult because people challenge you more; there's more information. I didn't have access to enough information to make my decision to support [Prime Minister] Blair but I believed what he was telling me [about Iraq]. And I believe he knew so much more than I did about the situation.... So I went through the

lobbies. I won't make that mistake again; I now question. And yes government ministers do know much more than other people. But I think people now know a lot more and have a lot more access to a lot more information. One effect a GP friend said is people come in to the surgery and tell him what's wrong because they have Googled it. And he has to tell them "that's not what you've got."

It's that whole blurring I think that's happening between who's the elite and who's expert and who's a member of the public. And who's the master or servant? It's all sort of changing in a funny sort of way. There's a lot now who say to me "you work for me, I pay your wages." I keep saying "I am not your delegate. You send me to Parliament for me to use my judgement. Not to do what you tell me to do." And that's the difference and people have now got such a strange feeling of empowerment...They won't believe that actually there could be somebody that's making a decision that in fact would be the right decision for them.

In this evocative and ambivalent passage, the speaker begins by recognising the changed nature of the relationship between political leader and citizen, which is shaped by access to information, according to the speaker. Seemingly accepting the increasingly contingent power of elected political representatives, the politician tries to enter the subject-position of the citizen-follower, claiming a certain empathy based on an experience of broken trust. Yet this subject-position also seems unsatisfactory for the politician and we note a contradictory section of speech, where she transitions to a point of identification with a professional friend, a doctor, who has to deal with 'empowered' but misinformed patients, who have self-diagnosed via the internet. The political leader's subjectivity is thus stretched between citizen follower, professional leader and political leader.

Note, however, that the professional identity related to is that of a doctor, someone who protects and nurtures the health of others. The symbolism evoked is that of a pastoral subject (a medic) who has a different knowledge base and source of judgement. Elsewhere, interviewees spoke more explicitly of the need to protect the public from uncomfortable realities. As one politician put it, there was a need to shield the public from some of the more intimidating problems of the day:

The dangers we face are not readily visible or calculable or understandable: pandemics that come out of apparently nowhere; the threat of biological warfare which people can barely conceive of but know at some level is there; terrorism of which you can be the innocent victim.

The traditional notion of mastery evokes the image of a craftsman or in a more extreme sense a feudal authority, someone getting his hands on objects, subjects or discourses, and moulding these to his wishes. But current political leaders approached an identity of mastery not as someone who *really* knows, or has 'the answer,' but who engages in a form of continuous struggle for mastery, with ultimate mastery viewed as a destination that will never be reached, held at bay by emboldened democratic subjects.

Discussion and conclusion

The paper has sought to analyse empirically the political leadership identities of serving and recent senior government ministers. Our contribution has been empirical, showing a data-driven glimpse into how politicians expected to offer and display leadership make sense of their selves and work within the challenges of a democratic environment. To recap on the identities presented, see Figure 2, *The Consultor* is collaborative-light, with an emphasis on listening and consulting, rather than a full-blown redistribution of leadership responsibilities or more radical involvement of others in

decision-making. *The Traveller* moves between the identities of government and the day-to-day worlds of members of the public, in search of a more authentic perspective on leadership but fully occupies neither world. *The Adjudicator* is cool and detached and yet also seeks empathy from others about the difficulty of making hard decisions in political life. *The Master* is defined as a contested identity, of political leaders asserting their perceived rights to be representatives, rather than delegates, but also acknowledging that such an identity is necessarily squeezed in an era of more ready access to knowledge and communication resources. Such identities were constructed alongside a public that was identified with in an ambivalent way, as both authentic but also as unreasonable and unsympathetic.

[insert Figure 2. Model of The Flexible Identities of Political Leaders here]

Our intention has been to contribute a rich empirical picture to the political and public leadership literature, a literature that acknowledges leadership within democratic structures as a problematic concept but that has yet to explore how leaders experience such problems in identity terms. Our data offers a glimpse into how contemporary leaders experience and feel the expectations of leadership as they seek to build a sense of self in the face of particular demands: demands reflected in the leadership literature to be more collaborative, in a popular culture that constructs leaders as decisive and masterful and from a public who political leaders think want a greater say in the decisions and policies of their governments.

To adapt a slogan of austerity politics, leaders felt they needed to *be* more (flexible) with less power. One day leaders might be expected to be decisive and certain problem-solvers, the next more deliberative collaborators. This flexibility of leadership is reflected in the sense expressed by our research participants that they are constrained by contemporary expectations of democratic

accountability, yet also acknowledge the leftover traces of cultural expectations inherent in leadership to know, to decide, to demonstrate strength.

What was apparent from the data was that the discourses of leadership are experienced as offering a broad range of flexible demands on the leader, much as government itself demands a similar response to austerity from public services; these are demands to: collaborate, be authoritative, listen, decide, and so on. Such demands, we posited, along with our research participants' own views and experiences of leadership, led to a flexible construction of leadership identities: this sense that leaders needed to be more in order to match particular demands from the discursive environment. The term flexible is used to convey that political leaders seem to feel that they are required to be responsive and active in a number of different ways and across a number of bases but that their power of autonomy to act is scrutinized and held accountable in a more intense manner than was previously the case, due to easier and quicker access to information and a public characterised as more demanding. As demands for flexibility within public services create their own problems, so a sense of a more flexible political identity seemed to generate tensions within the self. Flexible identities were held as somewhat incomplete identities, held in check by counter-demands: mastery by a democratic appeal for accountability; the cool and detached adjudicator by a desire for affective understanding; the traveller caught between worlds; the consultant by a pragmatic unwillingness to cede the power that full collaboration implies.

Approaching the political leader as a subject within discourses of leadership and democracy allows for a subtle, complex and contested account of what it means to perform and inhabit that role. This subject is someone who is increasingly expected to inhabit a range of flexible yet often also contradictory identities; someone who feels constrained along all of these dimensions. This was described in colourful terms by participants via a mix of venerating and antagonistic descriptions

and constructions in relation to other actors implicated in the leadership relationship: civil servants, the media and members of the public in particular.

Naturally, we acknowledge there are limitations to our study and draw particular attention to three such limitations. First, with a focus on identity work, our study did not explore alternative foci, such as a more detailed account of the mechanisms of public involvement and collaboration deployed by political leaders. Second, no discernible differences were perceptible in the identity work of political leaders across national contexts at the level of our adopted discourse-based methodology but we accept that a more detailed and context-led line of questioning within a comparative methodology would have produced different results reflective of such an alternative choice of focus. Third, interviews with senior figures are often criticised as being highly subjective, the charge levelled that they would have said what helped them present themselves in the best light.

However, our participants were asked not about their performance or effectiveness but about what they valued and how they interpreted themselves in leadership in a broader context. We appreciate and acknowledge that this data offers only one perspective – that of ministers - but hold that the view offered, a glimpse into the identity work of political leaders, both holds value in and of itself but also value as a complement to other empirical and conceptual studies of political leadership. We hope that our study can offer some rich material for future scholars wishing to construct new theories of political leadership, drawing attention to the identity work, and sometimes identity regulation, which can take place when such theories take hold in the world of practice.

Future research might consider other voices within discourses of leadership. Whilst it was not possible to interview or include the voices of members of the public in a necessarily tightly defined paper, data on public views of political leaders might be considered in future studies. Although

significant practical problems would exist in establishing such research, focus groups could be held between politicians, members of the public and political members of staff in order to explore diminished political leadership from different perspectives. Equally, research based on the observation of leadership development interventions for political leaders might offer a valuable means of capturing research participants in a particularly reflective and open frame of mind, or even adopting resistant stances in relation to development and leadership practices and discourses (Carroll and Nicholson, 2014; Gagnon and Collinson, 2014). Conceptually, from an identity perspective, other aspects of identity, such as social identity, could be explored.

Empirically, future research could draw on our model as a basis for exploring the identity work of government ministers in different national and regional contexts, including comparative analysis between countries, and between emerging and more established democratic contexts in a manner that was not possible in our discursive approach. This model could also be applied to research on state, provincial or local leaders. Alternative methodologies might also surface different readings of political leadership identity. For example, a focus group approach might also build rich insights through generative dialogue between politicians.

In terms of practice, the four identities of political leadership offered in this paper could be adapted for a practitioner audience, as a means of generating discussion as to the expectations of contemporary political leadership and preparing them for the complexities of leading in government. The tensions explored in the conceptual literature, and made more human via our empirical data, will only become more marked as the visibility of our politicians within social media, online and 24-hour news becomes more pronounced. Therefore, acknowledging and surfacing such dynamics of the job of political leadership might better inform decisions to seek public office.

Equally, interventions to develop the leadership capabilities of politicians, based on our data, might consider contributions from the area of critical reflexivity (Cunliffe, 2002; Hibbert, 2012). A critically reflexive approach to developing the leadership of elected politicians would seek to connect the affective with the discursive-structural, making connections between the felt discomfort, anger, frustration and even fear of political leaders and the intense demands of democratic structures. Such an approach, we believe, would help prospective and current politicians more clearly see the difficult and irreconcilable identities and expectations associated with the offices they seek: the problem of being more with less.

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