

Why is real leadership in such short supply in UK politics?

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In the aftermath of the referendum, the UK seems to be suffering from individual and collective leadership failure, write [Mark Bennister](#) and [Ben Worthy](#). The use of fear tactics instead of thought-through strategies and of quick fixes instead of long-term visions are some of the reasons behind this failure.



Long-serving leadership is in short supply in the UK. The longest-serving party leader is now Plaid Cymru's Leanne Wood, followed closely by the Green Party's Natalie Bennett (who will be stepping down) and the SNP's Nicola Sturgeon. With this short supply, we also now have a succession of political leaders avoiding responsibility: Cameron, Osborne, Johnson, Farage, and Corbyn. Leaders were complacent, with exaggerated beliefs in their electoral powers, in their political capital and in the machines they thought they led. But what exactly is it they failed to do?



On one level, leadership is fundamentally about winning and emerging victorious. Few losing leaders survive long. A leader must win something for the party or country, whether an election, a referendum or perhaps a policy victory. David Cameron will be remembered above all as a loser who gambled everything on a referendum. Corbyn also in some sense lost, less by some concrete failure but by the rather vaguer crime of 'failing to fight hard enough'. Both were fooled by [polls and analytics](#) that have gone from being tools to political agents themselves.



No vision

Leadership, some argue, is also about selling a vision, what George HW Bush called the 'vision thing'. Leaders need to 'sell', argue and cajole others to support their vision. They need to marshal the resources available to them, utilise them wisely and exert control. Cameron failed to sketch out any set of ideas, instead deploying a [lacklustre fear tactic](#), having spent the last five years bashing and fighting the EU. A largely unexpected election victory in 2015 bolstered his personal belief in his electoral powers.

Corbyn also appeared to offer only grudging enthusiasm. From both leaders there was no grand idea or vision of the EU, but simply a rather flat persuasion that the status quo was better than the alternative. They faced a powerful Leave campaign, pushed by men predominantly to further their own political careers, reaping the benefits from a

parallel UKIP campaign of dog whistle politics of the worst kind. The failure of leadership stems from an inability to see the reality of modern Britain. The Leave campaign, in a fact-free vacuum, exploited the deep anti-elite sentiment that had been building for decades and which united [authoritarian cultural strains](#) across class and geography.

Not teaching lessons

Erwin Hargrove offers the view that leadership is also about [‘teaching reality’](#): a leader must ‘help people face *reality* and mobilize them to make change’. Lyndon Johnson taught Americans of the need for equality while Churchill, for all his bluster, educated Britain as to the perils of the situation in the summer of 1940 when he reminded the country after Dunkirk that [‘Wars are not won by evacuations’](#). David Cameron failed to teach the UK about the EU or the reality of global migration. Indeed, fatally for Cameron, the referendum took place in an information-free – some would argue a reality-free – vacuum. Corbyn similarly failed to teach such a reality; or at least he spoke to the converted, avoiding those vital areas like the North-East or Wales where Labour votes were lost.

Disappointing everyone at once

[Ronald Heifetz](#) speaks of how leaders ‘disappoint their followers at a rate they can absorb’. This is where leadership meets reality and blends with the art of the possible: leadership, as Churchill put it, is about ‘predicting the future’ and then ‘explaining why it never happened’. Cameron failed to disappoint anyone at the correct pace. His euro-hostile MPs felt betrayed over the EU ever since 2012, while those who supported the EU felt Cameron constantly failed to confront his right-wing. Instead, Cameron’s premiership appeared nothing but an appeasing until his ill-thought promise of referendum in 2013.

Corbyn faces a rather different situation, heading a party locked in a stalemate between supreme optimism versus total delusion: his followers strongly believe in him, a belief actually strengthened by adversity, while the PLP appears suicidally unhappy and prepared to take drastic action to remove him.

No grasp of the changing democratic machine

Leadership is also about the machine that is being led. Both major parties have been ‘hollowed out’ by successive elections, fought only on narrow key seat strategies, unable to organise a proper national conversation from the ground up when faced with an election where every vote counts and an electorate largely unaware of the consequences of a Leave vote. This gave the populists a free run. Amongst much of the post-referendum comment, Matt Flinders referred to the [post political aspects](#) of the EU referendum campaign and Matthew Goodwin has [emphasised the underlying fractured voting patterns](#) which found expression in this bluntest of decision tools. Such analysis has opened up very real questions regarding the democratic deficit (not empowerment) of referendums and the hidden divide throughout the country.

The traditional machine now faces more fluid, movement-like networks from outside (UKIP or the SNP’s independence network) and from within (Momentum). As Andrew Chadwick and Stromer-Galley argue in this [excellent article](#), parties are now being ‘renewed from without and democratised from within’. Perhaps the referendum was truly a battle between traditional leaders and old party machines versus fluid, networked movements. As the UK seeks real leadership, vision and reality teaching, and supporters face the inevitable managed disappointment (‘the expectation gap’), the question is perhaps when leaders can learn as well as lead.

Note: the authors are co-editors (with Prof Paul ‘t Hart) of *The Leadership Capital Index: A New Perspective on Political Leadership*.

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