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Leadership after Brexit must involve this

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Post-referendum, everyone upset about the result is talking about leadership. How could David Cameron have risked so much just to placate a minority in his party? How could Jeremy Corbyn have not done more to head off such a rebellion? How could Boris Johnston have been so juvenile? Why can't everyone be more like Nicola Sturgeon?

It is normal to focus on individuals in calamitous times. Indeed, it's also normal to focus on individuals in good times. That's what some psychologists have discovered with their experiments - we have an ingrained tendency to praise or blame the boss when things are either better or worse than we think is normal. But focusing on an individual like that means we can miss underlying trends and the importance of whether we ourselves are participating in change.

So with a summer ahead where we will hear politicians and commentators tell us what kind of leadership we need, let us check on what leadership actually means. One widely quoted definition in both community development and politics comes from Marshal Ganz, who is credited with teaching Barack Obama some of his tricks. He defines leadership as "Taking responsibility to enable others to have a common purpose, in the face of uncertainty".

On first glance, that seems both accurate and uplifting. But it leaves a key question unanswered. Who are the "others" being led? Political heads need to lead at least five groups: their cabinet, political party, supporter base, target voters, and nation state. And for more internationalist minded politicians, it is also important to consider how one leads across borders for humanitarian and planetary goals.

When politicians say we need "strong leadership" they are typically implying resistance to the views of some in cabinet, party or base, in order to deliver for target voters or the nation state. The risk with that view is it can lead to the invention of a mythical "national interest" or "normal person" by politicians to make their case. That view was taken to the extreme when Tony Blair said he needed to transcend the "demonic rabble" when he was PM. Of course strength can come from responsiveness and flexibility, rather than rigidity or imposition. It can come from inspiring and organising participation, rather than being the hero. But Tony didn't think so.

For David Cameron, strength could have involved resisting the Euro-sceptics in his party rather than promising a risky referendum. For Jeremy Corbyn, strength could involve resisting those in the Labour Party who want to cut off the left wing movement that got him elected last year. Many Labour MPs who rebel against their democratically-elected leader hope for someone new who could reassure the public that things are under control. Their hope is that a smooth-talking spokesperson within tabloid-defined notions of what's credible will increase support for the Labour Party. For credible, they really mean "uncontroversial." Which means not challenging either the economic neoliberalism or militarism made normal by the constant punishment of dissent by mass media.

Over the past year Jeremy Corbyn represented a different view. The centre-left movement that propelled him to the top of Labour involves millions who believe in challenging the structures of power in society, not just more compassionate or efficient management of those structures. That means changing the form of financial capitalism that has increased inequality and extinguished the chance for our young to live like their parents' did. Such a perspective invites people to become involved at all levels and play their part in a struggle for change. The challenge is understood as a collective one, requiring collective leadership by us all.

For people who see the challenge that way, then those with the media megaphone need to focus on changing the discussion in society rather than just appealing to where people are at. It means risking the wrath of journalists looking for the latest opportunity to laugh ignorantly at politicians. That can be a scary approach for professional politicians who seek a near term boost in status from the press and thus the general watching public. It is why so many Labour MPs abandoned Mr Corbyn.

Challenging dominant narratives to enable wider participation in real change is something that, the theory says, typify "transformative leaders." Such leaders lift people's perceptions and sense of community to a wider level, so we co-operate more widely. So before we stay excited by Ms Sturgeon, that theory puts a different complexion on her mobilising people within a group - Scotland - rather than transcending that for a wider shared interest across the UK.

The media invites us to consider the small details of public persona, such as the latitude of a bow or the misdemeanours of youth. This focus on the individual masks how leadership strength is rooted in the less visible processes of networks and organisations. The massive global outpouring of support for the late Jo Cox reflected how she was part of a worldwide community of people and organisations working for global causes. As part of that international community, I was reminded of the power of networks of purpose. Other politicians are part of national networks such as co-operative organisations, business associations and trade unions. Those networks don't just provide strength for a leader, they are a strength in themselves. Some MPs seem to understand that, with Stella Creasy working with co-operatives and Rushanara Ali with the community leadership initiative Uprising.

In the face of political rebelliousness, many career politicians nervously want to restore trust in their profession and think that will be done by avoiding "controversial" views. Yet in a time of rebelliousness, that impulse will continue to concede ground to populists who have less to lose. The stakes are high, as when the better future promised by Leaver politicians fails to materialise, they will likely inflame their supporters to blame more scapegoats.

But the ripples of political awakening going through Britain need not be feared by politicians. After the Brexit referendum, stronger leadership must be collective. The answer for the Tories and Labour is not in finding a safer pair of hands, but in engaging more of the country in politics. Post referendum, the strength of leadership will be in how it inspires people to become involved, not relax at home. This is a potential upside to the European referendum: more people are realising that if you don't do politics, then politics can do you.

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