

My Evolving Views on Leadership | Final Reflection



DAVID EMANUEL ELCOCK (JR.)
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Trinity College Dublin
Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath
The University of Dublin

Before the Laidlaw Scholarship program, I held the common view of a leader being able to carry the burden of responsibility and decision making of their group whether a nation, a company or otherwise. Whilst applying to the program I spend time researching what leadership entails leading to a nuanced perspective: becoming the engine that drives projects forward, ensuring projects cross the finish line. The Laidlaw scholarship trains scholars to help achieve this using an ethical lens. How can we identify and help satisfy the needs members of our group, ensuring their growth? How do we maintain an internal balance and avoid the pitfall poor decision making? Whether character training or psychological models, we're introduced to approaches to help us make these decisions systematically and reliably. Now that I'm coming towards the end of the program, I've once again changed my view on leadership:

We should abandon this outdated idea.

A common analogy regarding leaders is the steering of a ship; you might be familiar with the phrase that '*there can only be one captain*'. But like the overuse of economic thinking^a in general aspects of life, perhaps we should question why we apply nautical science to heart surgery or pension fund allocation? Change the analogy but the principle remains the same, I'm yet to hear a compelling argument why a leader is needed? It is as if we have accepted the fundamental assumption of leaders being required, perhaps we should become comfortable challenging it.

Permit me to address this from a different perspective: undoubtedly there is and always has been a problem with leadership. Most conflicts arise out of leaders accusing each other of improper leadership in one way or another^b. Humanity's solution in all these instances has been the same: to seek a '*better*' leader. Whilst it is factual that a '*bad*' leader is harmful to any decent objective, little evidence supports the claim that good leaders seeking 'good' outcomes were successful^c.

If an approach has been attempted in multiple ways, cases and scenarios, does it not become fair to consider alternatives, especially given the stakes in some of these decision makings? After all, given the influence of humanity on Earth these stakes currently involve concerns about genocide, climate catastrophes and upcoming threats to the nugget of life on the blue planet against the voracious nature of the Universe. Remember, Luna is tidal locking Earth, our sun has a finite lifespan, heat death follows and the protons and neutrons that comprise us aren't fundamentally stable. At some point we'll have to solve these problems if we are to make it long-term, a survival that isn't guaranteed. I therefore think that it is overdue to overhaul our addiction to the concept of leaders.

^aThe use common of Key Performance Indicators (KPI) that don't reflect progress or success, the dating 'market': commercialising romance in online dating and views over content in social media, etc.

^bThe cold war from the clash of ideologies, justifications for colonialism (education, infrastructure, etc.), investors vs. CEO conflicts, the Russian-Ukraine War, conflicts in the Middle East, etc.

^cConditions in India and South Africa demonstrate a continuation in corruption and oppression. Ireland has resumed an artificially created housing crises akin to under British rule and the prevalence of global refugees hasn't declined with the number of active war/conflict zones persistently high.

Let me return to the Laidlaw program. A key problem with leadership I felt hasn't been addressed throughout the Laidlaw scholarship training: Why do leaders turn bad? Some suggestions have been made, but the crux of the phenomenon has not been pinpointed. Whilst a thorough analysis warrants a social studies thesis, I would like to discuss briefly some key factors I have identified:

1. *Excess expectations*, 2. *Self-interests*, 3. *Conspiracy*, 4. *Power deficiency* & 5. *Bad players*

Like with my first understanding of leadership, it is generally the accepted view that the burden lies fully with the leader. When things go wrong, we are easy to insist the leaders should have known and solve the problem, often without considering the reality of the chaotic nature of life. E.g. *Covid-19*, a pandemic that wasn't easy to navigate, even the best-intended individual would have made mistakes simply as in the initial phases of the pandemic, little was known about the virus resulting in chaotic responses. The result is politically disastrous, a leader start acting on self-preservation under political pressure from others. We often forget that leadership like is often a career. Thus, instead of dedicating time to address problems, time is favoured to preserving the status quo leading to conspiracy accusations. Whether true or not, this can induce a downwards spiral of society's trust in the system. Another way for that trust to erode is through the deficiency of power that leaders hold. In practice a leader is less equipped to enforce decisions than commonly understood by people. This can be *systematic* (e.g. division of power) or even *competence* (knowledge and expertise) but often *reality*. For example, as former UK conservative MP *Rory Stewart* argued: it is unrealistic to expect the minister of health to fix the problems in a five-year period with the UK's National Health Service (NHS), an institute associated with millions of people. It would take that time alone to properly understand the problems the NHS faces.

We further forget that on top of this lies the sociological phenomenon that bad players tend to grind to positions of leadership to help enact their interests. Thus, even if you overcome the first four problems, you are left in a sea of opposition that constantly slows and wears you down. Whilst in principle you might be able to solve the bad player problem though obtaining a critical mass of good leaders, there is no secured pathway offered to addressing the first four problems. At this point I return to my thesis, can we have our societal problems solved by good leaders? If so, why hasn't this permanently materialised anywhere?

I've complained about the problem with leadership whilst recognising the appeal of the approach, at this point it is fair to demand something more than a critique. To put it bluntly, it is easy to criticise leadership even as a concept, but what else do I have to offer? Don't make problems, make solutions. So here is my suggestion: Reject leadership, geniuses, experts and other forms of elitism. Stop thinking as individuals or groupthink but recognise we are somewhere in-between individuals and tribes: a diverse society. The best idea most likely isn't yours yet your thought is as much of an important key to the puzzle as others. Let me clarify...

Science is often presented though a skewed lens of a leader making a big discovery. *I. Newton, A. Einstein, C. Darwin, A. Turing, M. Skłodowska, D. Mendeleev, etc.* Historians are quick to point out however that science evolves slower, more chaotic and most importantly via the influence of many players. We simplify the stories of scientific progress by leaving out most researchers whose names you only learn if you specialise in a subject. We thus lost a perspective: science is a collective discourse with a community of scholars with different opinions. Ideas should be shared, contested and defended for the idea itself and historically have been unlike the history books would lead you to believe. The atomic model was revised countless of times for example and still remains an active topic of discussion in physics today.

If I suggested to you that a leader in science is needed as a person who decided arbitrarily what research is ethical, where funding should be allocated and what research papers get to be published you would rightfully be concerned. There is in fact a major problem well-known in the scientific publication regarding the misuse of power by editors exactly because of the leadership approach. Otherwise, ethics and funding are decided by a committee, not without its flaws but arguably less problematic as there are multiple such committees at various institutions all over the world. A leader could not realistically be tasked with such an enormous task, an unfair burden for anyone to hold and history agrees! E.g. *Sir. Isaac Newton* didn't make his discoveries on his own, and he has fairly declared his success was because he had been '*standing on the shoulders of giants*', referring to his predecessors and colleagues. Playing hot potato definitely seems more efficient in achieving our goals.

In a small group a leader might be effective, but on the scale, we experience today through the interconnectedness of our society in the digital age, this historic approach of leadership feels increasingly redundant to me. Sure, we value the opinion of a doctor over a mechanical engineer on surgery and the opinion of a plumber over a nurse regarding a leaking sink. But we value them not because they are leaders, but because they have demonstrated knowledge and expertise that is key to the issue at hand. We should however set reasonable expectations on any individual, have checks and balances and recognise self-interest. If this isn't clear, just consider the military industrial complex or pharmaceutical companies self-interest against the public's interest. Without war or disease these institutions don't function resulting in known examples of bad player behaviour^d. By removing the elitist tribe of leaders, their self-interest becomes the public's interest removing the internal competition in our society. Here is a historically proven approach on how we can achieve this:

The ancient Greek democratic system used a lottery system for elections in which any individual passing eligibility criteria^e could sign up as a candidate. Leaders are chosen at random, a process that has demonstrated more competence and effectiveness in decision making than our leaders. The reasoning is sound: a pool of random individuals is more creative and encompass more knowledge than a group of similarly educated experts. It also removes the gap between '*leaders*' and non-leaders as the difference becomes less after every election, the removal of elitism. A collective approach has several other benefits that I cannot discuss at length here without converting this work into an essay, but it suffices to say that the five identified problems with leadership are addressed through argument and more importantly through evidence. Talk is cheap, history is clear that leadership is problematic, and a different approach is in order. Perhaps it will be worth exploring a lottery-based electoral system and pooling our resources instead of lazily off-loading these to a leader and burdening them with unrealistic expectation.

There is another perspective I would like to add to my developing views. Leaderships can be defined as the servitude to your team to get a project finished. This definition requires leaders to adhere to projects that have a well-defined endpoint. If this definition is applied, leaders can be involved but cannot be the people that lead a nation or company or research field, etc. This is because the endpoint is never reached, when is the leader of a nation finished with their tasks? Prosperity exists on a continuity, equality is fragile, the world is always moving, security is never guaranteed. If we are to build on the notion that a leader is the person for this job, I think it explains why we are struggling to find good leaders.

^dClaims such as weapons of mass destruction (Iraq war) or the opioid crises are just some of plenty of examples highlighting the conflict of interest playing out with the support of individuals in leadership.

^eThese would have to be modified e.g. have a medical degree to make medical decisions.

I'm not advocating for the return of the feudal system. I'm also not criticising the short-term tenancy of those taking care of the nation, indeed I argued so far for the opposite with the original Greek democratic system. What I'm saying is that the people tasked with deciding the direction a nation takes don't have the benefits of working towards a finite project, so we shouldn't define them as doing such. If we are to avoid the fundamental instability of elitism, we are to recognise that the very people tasked with ensuring the survival of our communities and societies are burdened with an ugly reality that this survival isn't guaranteed. If we can accept this truth, only then can we start to discuss what ethical survival sounds like. I suppose that would be a better term used to describe those that have led their people (or tried to) towards survival: **stewards**. I chose this word as it relates to leadership but is defined as a person whose responsibility it is to take care of something. This can be a garden, institution, city, district, nation, union and even more.

Without the Irish Republican Army (IRA), Ireland would not have gotten independent. Without slave revolts, the conditions for independence would not have materialised. Without war, peace would not exist in many of the societies that enjoy it. Without fighting against diseases, Earth's human population could succumb to pandemics, etc. Given this history and the continuing risk of no people being safe from annihilation, a steward will need elements of leadership but recognise that perhaps they will also need more and must drop some parts too. I think per society we need to decide what that more should/shouldn't be and as a global citizen I'll be working towards developing identifying those aspects of character, leadership and other parts that should comprise the type of steward people can and should get behind.