

What kind of a leader can a democratic woman be?

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Our thinking about leadership has become confused with thinking about management, entrepreneurship, stardom. I am going to try to sort out some of these ideas in this talk. I think it is imperative that we **re-couple our thinking about leadership with our thinking about politics** in general and democratic politics in particular.

Politics is the name we give to those processes focussed on our collective power to organise and to govern - whether we are trying to augment or deploy that power, oppose or subvert its use by others, whether we are squandering it or winning it. Political power is agonistic and conflictual. Political harmony, it could be argued, is a contradiction. But politics brings us together, nevertheless, because political organisation requires that power be shared.

I'm taking it for granted that women here are committed, in some sense, to the democratic organisation of power. So our perceived need for improved leadership - in organisations, in government, in civil society, among our young people and the older - must be coupled to our need for improved democracy (for I assume, too, that none of us thinks that our democracy is just right as it is).

In the fields of business and administration the last few decades have seen the promotion of several models of leadership. The idea of leadership as **being on top** has been challenged. The **on top leader** commands and controls using rewards and sanctions and his own control of important resources and in this way increases efficiency and **minimises conflict**. The on top leader is distinct from the led by virtue of status and personal qualities.

One challenge to this model is leadership **from the front**. Instead of command and control **front leaders** motivate through inspiration and example. The leader is a kind of champion, a repository of excellence. Leaders from the front have to be backward looking, of course - they have to expend energy on team building and organisation aimed at unifying people's actions.

Another challenge has been the development of the idea of **leadership from the middle**. Many have thought that *this* is the leadership that favours and requires qualities associated with women in our society more than men - a commitment to equal participation and equal sharing of burdens and rewards, the capacity for organisation and cooperation, making and using networks of relationships, negotiation without threat.

Leadership from the middle comes in two versions. The **organic version** emphasises that everyone is part of one body. The **network version** is premised *not* on the idea of a body but on the idea of numerous shifting connections. For the organic version conflict is **pathological** - the body at war with itself is not the healthy body. For the network version conflict is OK - there is no assumption that all network nodes are in harmony, nor all aiming at the same goal. Network leaders take for granted conflict and the need to confront and work it through. The great skill of successful network leaders is to negotiate sufficient

resolutions to conflict so that it does not kill action and progress. Another important implication of the network model is that **leadership itself is decentred** and may be dispersed.

Leadership from the front and leadership from the middle have, in theory and in many actual social organisations, won out over command and control. And my guess is that the real movers and shakers, innovators and enablers, solution builders and structure busters are people who use a combination of being out in front and being in the middle of the network.

Success is wonderful, but **legitimacy and democracy matter**. That is, it's not enough to say, as some management gurus do, that the brilliant thing about leading from the front, or leading from the middle, is that they work. We also have to ask whether, in working, they are just, and whether they are good for our political society.

Democracy enshrines two key principles: first **popular sovereignty**; second, **responsible and representative government**. The first means that political power (the power to govern and the power to oppose government) belongs to people collectively - and that this is articulated as a principle. That means people must know they are sovereign. The second means that government is constrained by good, and constrained by the principle that the power to govern must be exercised responsibly and in such a manner as does for people what they, as political and moral beings, would do for themselves.

In practice, this means that government must be organised around four sub-principles. First **accountability**, which means that action and policy must be accounted for publicly. Second **participation**, which means that policy making and action must be organised in such a way that all can participate - be active, take responsibility, make one's voice heard. It also means that political and social institutions must be organised in such a way that people learn how to and want to participate. Third **freedom** - for participation and holding rulers cannot be learned or done unless people are free to speak, meet, organise. Fourth **openness** - which adds something extra to accountability. It means that boundaries between social organisations are permeable, that people can look into organisations.

Now, clearly, the extent to which any modern state meets this desiderata of democracy is decidedly limited. Numerous barriers, forces for corruption, and mechanisms undermine democratic values. And unfortunately, when we look to models for leadership, and ask how far they promote democracy, our researches generate dismal results.

There is, for example, no shortage of **entrepreneurs**, nor of recommendations that society needs more of them. Leading from the front, sometimes inspiring others with their charisma, capacity for action and ideas. But there is no ideal of accountability in the role of the entrepreneur, and in some versions (if we believe stories about self interest driving imagination and action) there is little in the way of responsibility. We see **statesmen** - men and women with wisdom and gravitas which has been earned by years and experience. These individuals have charisma and command respect and generate inspiration but their power is tied to their elevated status and can't serve as a model for leadership in general.

There are plenty of **warriors** and **stars**, who can inspire others to emulate their skills and can generate a following. There are also people offering religious salvation or magic - let's call them for short **priests**. This too, as we know, can generate followings. But for the responsible defence of democratic values - accountability, publicity, participation, freedom - we must look elsewhere.

When we look to those who lead from somewhere in the middle we again meet a democratic deficit. The **populist** speaks as the people desire to hear. But in speaking to desire populism is manipulative rather than open. Too frequently, of course, it is associated with projects that are exclusive rather than inclusive - that draw a boundary round the polity that undermines democratic politics. **Teachers** are respected (in some societies) but like **therapists** must engage with individuals and set those individuals on their own journey. This instillation of the capacity for autonomy in individuals is clearly necessary for democracy, but by no means sufficient.

Bearing these deficient (democratically speaking) models in mind where are we with democratic leadership? A key to political power is that as well as personal qualities power holders have the power of **office**. In democratic politics there are clear limits to the relationship of the individual with an office. Incumbencies are essentially temporary. Offices are the property of the whole polity (not the individual), and office is continuous. And because it is the property of the polity office must be public - open, visible, audible, ready to account truthfully and in good faith, based on the public and shared nature of the power that underpins it.

In the last four decades, in what is conventionally thought of as the most recent wave of the movement for the liberation of women, women took on politics once again. The **social basis of politician agitation** and action was asserted and underlined by the women's movement as it was by the Civil Rights and other social movements. The **network model of politics and leadership** can be seen to be a new social movement and especially a women's movement invention. Women's movements, like others, have sometimes been seduced by the ideals of community, solidarity, and the ideal of the body. But reality has seen the triumph of the web, the loose association, the capacity to organise when necessary. The imperatives of democracy - resisting stardom, not allowing individuals to own offices, insisting on transparency and accountability - all these are imperatives that women in this room have grappled with, perhaps been injured and frustrated by.

I want us to ask us to re-articulate our commitment to those old imperatives. If power and leadership cannot be properly political then it can only be personal, or economic, or familial, or cultural. None of these meet the desiderata of democracy.

Further, we need to re-connect these old imperatives to the realities we live in in modern states. So, as leaders, as movers and shakers, as structure-busters, how can we act? First, democratic leaders have to be **good at asking others to account for themselves** (for in democracy accountability must run in all directions) and they must be good at **giving accounts**. Second, democratic leaders have to **operate in public**. Third, democratic leaders must have a good feel for the **structure of power**, and the **constraints of office**, and to be able to initiate projects of changing power structures and reforming offices when necessary. They need to have a good sociological sense of **who is excluded** and who is included and to be alive to which exclusions are justified and which are not. They will **challenge** exclusions that are unjustified. Democratic leaders will initiate processes of **discussion and deliberation**.

Democratic leaders will constantly be working with the ideals of democracy at the forefront of their minds.

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