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**Inertia or Change?
Crisis-induced Challenges for Political Leaders**

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Abstract

The short and long-term aftermath of 'crisis' is not only substantially understudied, but presents political leaders with some of their most daunting challenges. This paper provides a framework to help understand the challenges for political leaders as they negotiate their way through the complex world of post-crisis politics. First, it outlines the broad challenges faced by political leaders in the aftermath of crisis. The crisis or disaster typically becomes subject to investigation/inquiry in a number of formal and informal domains, including: legislative, bureaucratic, judicial, media and citizen. Such investigations may pose challenges to leadership legitimacies and preferred policies, and/or present opportunities for political exploitation to enhance leadership status and push through desired policy reforms. Second, it identifies a number of crisis-induced learning challenges, including dampening vs. sustaining mass arousal and blocking vs. creating reform momentum. The pros and cons of each approach are identified. Third, it explores a number of crisis-induced accountability challenges, including denying vs. accepting responsibility, hiding vs. exposing weaknesses and failures, and denying vs. accepting responsibility. Again, the pros and cons of pursuing each of these pathways are identified. Finally it concludes by addressing the questions: which way do leaders turn after a crisis? Are they more liable to exploit crises as opportunities for radical policy, programme and institutional reform, as well as a means of enhancing their own leadership credentials? Or, do they see crises as dangerous threats to the established order, and seek to waste little time in consolidating and reinforcing existing relations (including their own leadership position) as soon as possible?

Introduction

Rose (2001: 14) in his analysis of the role of the British Prime Minister, makes a point which might equally apply to all political leaders: Every problem...is both personal and impersonal. The impersonal question is: what should government do? The personal

question is: what effect will action have on my stock of political capital?’ Day-to-day problems can be demanding enough, but when crisis or disaster strike, pressures become more intense, the stakes become higher, and reputations are subject to their severest of tests. Yet the modern world is replete with conjunctions of extreme events and episodes such as tsunamis, hurricanes, SARS, chemical spills, urban riots, floods, terrorist bombings, water contamination incidents, dramatic policy failures and political fiascos.

Most research on the crisis challenges faced by political leaders tends to focus on decision-making in the acute phase. There is a particular focus on the challenges of responding to stress and avoiding a series of pathological behaviours (Janis and Mann 1977; George 1986; Flin 1996); engaging with advisors and colleagues in such a way as to overcome a number of potential decision biases and dysfunctions (Janis 1982; ‘t Hart 1994; Kowert 2002), and on the role played by leadership styles and personalities – some better able to cope with lack of information and high stress than others (Janis 1989; George and George 1998; Post 2004). Much less has been written about the longer-term crisis induced challenges for leaders as they attempt to engage with societal pressures to ensure that similar bad episodes do not happen again in the future, and that those responsible for causing or ineffectively managing the crisis are held responsible for their actions.

This paper seeks to unpack a series of political challenges which leaders face in coping with and perhaps even exploiting the aforementioned processes. It builds on some of the few pieces of work to deal with longer-term crisis induced processes for leaders (‘t Hart 1993; Boin and ‘t Hart 2003). In particular it develops the argument that crisis leadership is something of a ‘mission impossible’ (Boin and ‘t Hart 2003) with leaders facing pressures to consolidate, restore and show faith in the security and validity of pre-existing social, institutional and political arrangements, as well as facing pressures to reform these same arrangements and show commitment to learning lessons to prevent unfortunate repeats of undesirable circumstances. We conceive of these challenges as an initial deductive exploration, setting out a framework for future development through case studies. We recognise, however, that further research will produce more fine-grained analyses which will take into account, matters such as localised constitutional frameworks, governance networks, national cultures, political ideologies and leadership styles.

Our argument begins by setting the context of ‘crisis’ and the way in which it generates dynamic processes of learning and accountability. It then identifies a number of crisis-induced learning challenges for political leaders, including dampening vs. sustaining mass arousal and blocking vs. creating reform momentum. Third, it explores a number of crisis-induced accountability challenges, including denying vs. accepting responsibility, hiding vs. exposing weaknesses and failures, and denying vs. accepting responsibility. Finally it concludes by addressing the questions: which way do leaders turn after a crisis? Are they more liable to exploit crises as opportunities for radical policy, programme and institutional reform, as well as a means of enhancing their own leadership credentials? Or, do they see crises as dangerous threats to the established order, and seek to waste little time in consolidating and reinforcing existing relations (including their own leadership position) as soon as possible?

Crisis and After: Setting the Context

Faced with extreme events, we often turn to a broad family of words such as crises, disasters and catastrophe in order to help us describe, explain and even manage these extraordinary and acute episodes (Drennan and McConnell 2007). However, there is no universal agreement on what constitutes a crisis. For example, it can be seen as self-evident and not in need of definition (Nudell and Antokol 1988; Curtin et al. 2005); existing when a set of criteria are met such as high threat, surprise and time at a premium for action (Herman 1972; Williams 1989); an entirely subjective language construction (Bruck 1992), and a time of instability when a decisive change is impending (Fink 2002). A common theme emerges if we conceive of crises as ‘a breakdown of familiar symbolic frameworks legitimating the pre-existing socio-political order’ (‘t Hart 1993: 39). In such extreme circumstances, citizens, the media, lobby groups and others look to political leaders to make sense of what is going on and to take appropriate action to restore order and a *sense* of order. Equally, those individuals in leadership positions who have any intent to stay in post or shape the political agenda in the longer-term, cannot afford to opt out of restoring order and a *sense* of order.

Such leadership tasks are not straightforward. Crises induce processes which are not in the gift of leaders to completely control. They may attempt to do so (as we will see) but ‘success’ is not guaranteed. Crises typically become subject to formal and informal investigation/inquiry in a number of domains: legislative, bureaucratic, judicial, media and citizen. These crisis-induced investigations are the norm of post-crisis politics. They involve *lesson-drawing processes* though policy, institutional and cultural investigations to ensure that ‘never again’ will the crisis (or similar) repeat itself. They also involve, *accountability processes*, ensuring that responsibilities for failure are placed on the appropriate shoulders and that sanctions are imposed where necessary.

In the face of these pressures, political leaders can be presented with threats to their policy programmes and indeed their own legitimacy. Crisis may lead to the death knell for core policies such as the UK Poll Tax (Butler et al. 1994) and the Belgian commitment to Rwanda (Houben 2005). Leaders themselves may also suffer similar fates, damaged or ousted, leaving behind a legacy that will forever be tainted after their exit from office: Nixon and Watergate (Cutler 1999), Spanish President Jose Maria Aznar and the Madrid bombings (Olmeda 2005). However, not all crises are damaging for political leaders. Crises also provide opportunities to capitalise on the fact that existing frameworks, symbols and legitimacies have been damaged or destroyed. New alliances can be forged and new policies constructed such as US homeland security reforms post-9/11 (Bullock et al. 2006), and regulatory policies after the 2001 Walkerton water disaster (Snider, 2004). Crises can also rejuvenate leaders who might otherwise be destined for a quiet step down from office or even a forced removal: New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani and 9/11, Margaret Thatcher and the Falklands, German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder and the 2002 Elbe floods.

The lines between ‘hero’ and ‘villain’, and ‘policy reform’ and ‘policy immobilism’ is a fine one. Tipping the balance either way can be the product of many factors such as the nature, timing and severity of the crisis, availability of resources, inherited institutional powers and so on. Nevertheless, leaders are not simply victims or even beneficiaries of circumstances. They are able to exercise some degree of ‘agency’, amid a variety of ‘structural’ constraints (Goldfinch and ‘t Hart 2003). However, exercising such powers involves negotiating a number of challenges. Leaders and their advisors will not necessarily

be aware of all these challenges in the sense that they do not hold in their heads a framework which maps out competing pressures. Apart from factors such as cognitive, time, and information constraints which inhibit such rationalist thinking (Simon 1957), the individuality of each crisis episode (in terms of context, familiarity, scale, complexity and rhythm from speed of arrival and termination [see Boin et al. 2005]) means that some challenges will be more salient than others). Nevertheless, we contend that such challenges are often implicit and at times explicit.

Let us now explore the two main sets of longer-term crisis induced challenges for political leaders: those surrounding processes of *lesson drawing* and *accountability*. Combined, they present short and longer term challenges in terms of what government should do to restore the frameworks shattered by crisis, while attempting to protect and perhaps even enhance their own political capital.

Crisis-induced Learning Challenges for Political Leaders

Crises hold enormous potential for policy reform (Birkland 1997; Kingdon 2003). They highlight resource shortfalls, institutional weaknesses, decision making errors and cultural complacencies. In democratic societies based on plurality and freedom of expression, it would be difficult to find a single voice in the aftermath of a crisis which says that we should not learn lessons from what went wrong. In this regard, post-crisis investigations become a form of social catharsis, offering comfort that we will find out ‘what went wrong’ in order to ensure that similar crises or disasters do not happen again.

Such congruence in political discourse typically masks fundamental disagreements. In disrupting the status quo (in policy sectors or societies more generally) crises disturb and threaten the legitimacy of prevailing patterns (and inequalities) of resource allocations, institutional rewards, policy beneficiaries and so on. However, just because a crisis has occurred and there is a ‘whole of society’ commitment to learning lessons, does not mean that institutions and actors will easily give up their inherited rights, rewards, and ways of working. Therefore, beneath the symbolism of the need for post-crisis lesson drawing, the crisis aftermath presents the opportunity for a multitude of political interests, coalitions and policy entrepreneurs, to promote their own particular visions of what lessons should be learned (Birkland 1997).

The role of leaders in post-crisis lesson-drawing processes is something approaching ‘mission impossible’ (Boin and ‘t Hart 2003). Leaders face pressures to produce and promote reforms that will help to safeguard the system from future crises. At the same time, leaders feel the pressure to defend the core of the system as it existed before the crisis. If leaders wish to exploit the crisis potential for either buttressing the existing order and/or promoting reform, they must somehow make their definition of the event and its causes the most dominant one (cf. Rochefort and Cobb 1994; Cobb and Ross 1997). In doing so, they will find themselves at the mercy of operational vagaries, unforeseen events, and the welter of emergent issue coalitions with different views. By using facts and figures, arguments, symbols, and historical analogies (Brändström et al. 2004), political elites attempt to engage in building coalitions, marginalising opponents, and framing problems in such a way as to imply certain types of solutions. They also try to define the meaning of a crisis by ‘telling stories’ (Stone 2002), attempting to convince others what is at stake, how we should move forward and so on. Such tasks are far from easy. We can capture leadership plights in terms of three ‘learning’ challenges in terms of the restoration of order.

Dampening vs. sustaining mass arousal

Political elites face a choice of playing down or sustaining the mass arousal that a crisis tends to generate. Of course, the public mood may dissipate anyway in a classic ‘issue attention cycle’ (Downs 1972), but leadership strategies can make a difference in minimising or heightening social and political anxieties. Leaders may seek to quell a crisis for many reasons. An election may be looming, as happened with Tony Blair in 2001 when the foot and mouth crisis captured the agenda some two months before a planned General Election (McConnell and Stark 2002) and to much more dramatic and opposing effect, with José Aznar of Spain (Madrid bombings) (Olmeda 2005). Leaders may also seek to diminish the flak being thrown their way. They may be wary of establishing a reform momentum which they are opposed to, or they may need simply to reassure that existing structures, institutions, policies and practices are still legitimate and workable.

Several tactics can be deployed to diminish the public mood and thus keep the policy agenda free from unwelcome, crisis-induced alterations. The crisis can be portrayed as an unavoidable act of nature, a one off ‘fluke,’ or blamed on a rogue individual (or group) rather than procedural, institutional or social failings. In 2005, for example, riots in the Sydney suburb of Macquarie Fields were dismissed by Premier Bob Carr as isolated events caused by renegade families (rather than being the product of poverty, poor housing and social disadvantage). Later that year Australian Prime Minister Howard was quick to assert in public that severe ethnic riots in the Sydney suburb of Cronulla did not reflect any underlying racism in Australian society.

If highly targeted blame games are not feasible, the next best thing is to imply that the crisis has deep-rooted and wide-ranging origins which are not easy to ‘fix.’ Another tactic again is to use a combination of political pronouncements and institutional procedures (such as the cessation of a state of emergency), sending out signals that the crisis is over.

Whichever strategy is deployed, attempts to diminish the significance of a crisis can backfire (‘t Hart and Boin 2001; Boin et al. 2005). Counter-mobilisation may also gain significant momentum, posing real challenges to the status quo. Given the potential limitations of conservation, leaders might be tempted (or pulled) in a reformist direction. In doing so, they may seek to exploit rather than to try and dampen collective stress. They may deliberately seek to deepen and prolong the crisis, portraying it as one which is symptomatic of systemic failure. Indeed, they may even create a crisis. Such accusations dogged George W. Bush and Tony Blair, focusing on their exaggeration of Iraq’s capabilities in terms of weapons of mass destruction.¹

There are a number of reasons why political elites may take the path of crisis exploitation. At the most fundamental level, they may seek to create a climate of uncertainty and fear in order to force open a ‘window of opportunity’ for their electoral ambitions or preferred policies. Incumbent leaders may also seek to exploit or even invoke a crisis mood in order to dispel criticism of the government in a time of national emergency (‘t Hart et al. 1993). In 2001, for example, just before and after the start of an Australian federal election

¹ Indeed, such accusations and the absence of evidence reached the point of a ‘we got it wrong’ admission from Bush and Blair.

campaign that saw the Labor opposition soaring to great heights in the opinion polls, Prime Minister John Howard dramatised an incident involving a boatful of over 400 asylum seekers headed for Australia in an overcrowded and unsafe vessel. He did so by turning the issue into a ‘children overboard’ crisis, making allegations (subsequently proven to be inaccurate) that refugees had thrown their own children overboard in an attempt to be rescued. Were these the kinds of people, he asked rhetorically, that Australia should provide a safe haven for? Framing the crisis in these terms, Howard was able to exploit latent unease in the Australian electorate with the country’s border control and immigration policies, and this reset the focus of the entire election campaign, catching Labor by surprise and exposing it as ‘out of tune’ with the people (Marr and Wilkinson 2003).

Such tactics do not come without risks. There is potential for crisis creation, inflation or extension to backfire (‘t Hart and Boin 2001; Boin et al. 2005). Elites are open to the criticism of exploiting the crisis for their own ends. They may get stuck, fighting battles and devoting time to matters while the rest of society has moved on. In straddling this challenge, timing is crucial for political elites in the struggle to impart meaning during and after the acute phase of a crisis. A few days or even a few hours either way can mean the difference between a successful exercise in strategic agenda setting, or one which is ‘perverse’ (Hogwood 1987) in the sense that the outcome is very different from what was intended. Political leaders cannot foresee the future. Anticipating how their strategy will unfold is a combination of intuition, skill, guesswork and luck.

Whatever the conservative or reformist instincts of leaders as they seek to impart meaning on a crisis, there are forces that pull them in both directions. Typically they need to straddle both (even on a symbolic-rhetorical level) – even if their preferences heavily tilt towards one. For example, George W. Bush used the 9/11 attacks in a reformist way: setting an agenda that linked Al Qaeda and Saddam Hussein in order to legitimise an invasion of Iraq. One of the rationales, however, was to defend American values of liberty and democracy. In essence, the Bush administration’s ‘meaning making’ (Boin et al. 2005) was reformist (the need for policy reform) yet also conservative (the defence of core institutions and values).

Blocking vs. creating reform momentum

Crisis management experiences abound with examples of organisations that have effectively resisted calls for reforms in the wake of crisis. Political and bureaucratic leaders inherit and operate in powerful institutional contexts, which can inhibit their reform capacities (Peters 1999; Lowndes 2002). Existing institutional structures and values weigh heavily on political ‘agency’ and any attempts to reform. Many an activist president or prime minister has seen his or her career come unstuck as a result of all too impatient moves to ‘pack’ courts, nationalise banks or change tax systems. Interpretations of the crisis and possible future directions take place within the very same institutional context that is being challenged (Alink et al. 2001). Lagadec (2002) makes a much wider point about France and its lack of institutional and cultural capacity to learn from crises such as the 1978 Amoco-Cadiz oil spillage, the sinking of the Mont-Louis with its cargo of uranium hexafluoride and the response to Chernobyl. In effect, deep resistance to reform and learning was (and is) a product of a centralised, Napoleonic system with a cultural resistance to sharing weaknesses.

Yet the world of post-crisis politics is more than simply lack of capacity and pressures to minimise and thwart reforms. Political elites are faced also with counter-pressures: to learn lessons, to engage in policy reforms to ensure that similar crises don't happen again or that crisis response capacities are upgraded – and be seen to be doing so by legislatures and the public. In fact, some policy makers may even welcome and exploit a crisis as a means of breaking old deadlocks and pushing through reforms they had desired to implement long before. Margaret Thatcher, for example, was able to break many years of stalemate on alternatives to a local property tax, by exploiting a property valuation crisis to introduce a new poll tax (McConnell 1995). If successful reform leadership is about persuading key stakeholders and interests that this is 'an idea whose time has come' (Goldfinch and 't Hart 2003; Kingdon 2003), a crisis may be the best evidence in support of that argument.

The challenge for reformist-minded political elites is to secure early support for reform. If they do not, they are liable to find their grand ambitions, their political legitimacy and perhaps even their careers at an end. It is certainly difficult to imagine any responsible leaders refusing point blank to learn lessons after a crisis. Therefore, for more conservation-minded leaders, the most feasible strategy would involve rhetorical commitment to 'learn lessons' and to flag symbolic changes, but to ensure a quiet end to any reform momentum further down the track by squeezing resources and discreetly organising opposition.

Imposing vs. resolving deadlocks

Linked to the challenge of policy conservation vs. policy reform, is the more tactical challenge of how to proceed and deal with political opponents by imposing or resolving deadlocks. Leaders wishing to preserve existing policies and practices are more liable to impose deadlocks as a means of thwarting demands for change. Political language is more liable to be zero-sum, emphasising that reform would bring losers as well as winners. After the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989, for example, President George Bush adopted a business-as-usual approach, arguing that ending China's most favoured nation status with the US would damage American jobs (Schaefer 1998). Existing powers and procedures are also liable to be marshalled to their maximum capacity in order to thwart reformers. Collective responsibilities can be marshalled in order that government can 'speak with one voice,' inquiry chairmen can be handpicked, new laws can be introduced to suppress opposition, and procedures can be rigidly adhered to in order to deny agenda access for opponents. In sum, political elites can impose deadlocks through a 'mobilization of bias' (Bachrach and Baratz 1970), making use of all their constitutional and political resources in order to delegitimise reform opponents and prevent them from gaining any serious access to the government decision making agenda. Such strategies are often, but not always, powerful and effective. Leaders may have failed to judge the political mood. Or, the power of opponents may have been underestimated. Alternatively, another crisis can destroy their reassurances that reform is unnecessary.

Political elites seeking reform are more liable to try and resolve deadlocks. Certainly, they will use their constitutional authority to do so, but language and practice will tend to be less abrasive. The emphasis will be on positive gains for all, including negotiations and trade offs if necessary. There will also be willingness to adapt and be more pragmatic with rules in order to ease the pathway for reform. The reunification of Germany after the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989 is a clear example of reformist political will triumphing over a mass of potential deadlocks. Within a relatively short period of time, agreements were reached with parties ranging from Russia to the US, on matters such as membership of

NATO/Warsaw Pact, EU, residual power of the World War II allies in the governing of Germany, currency reform, and the legal basis of elections.

For political elites, negotiating these cross-pressures is a political minefield. Even the most reformist or conservative of leaders in a post-crisis situation will need to try and keep a grip on their long-term goals, otherwise the process may slip out of their control. Small misjudgements have the capacity to rapidly unfold and damage long-term strategy (Boin et al. 2005).

Crisis-induced Accountability Challenges for Political Leaders

The concept of public accountability holds that those in positions of power and authority should be held to account for their actions, particularly when those actions appear to jar with fundamental norms of what is expected (Schönbach 1990; Bovens 2005). Crises pose a near-automatic problem for political-administrative elites, if only because they strike at the very heart of the classical roles of government as conceived by social contract theorists such as Hobbes and Locke: the maintenance of social order through the protection of life, liberty and property. The disorder and threat perception that is typical of crises can easily make leaders look weak and incapable.

Crisis-induced accountability processes typically seek to answer questions such as ‘what went wrong?’ and ‘who should be held responsible?’ Generally speaking, this discourse of inquisition is evident on two broad levels. First, it is played out informally through popular debate, the media, party politicking and so on. Second, questioning and fact finding may be the product of official inquiries and investigations (Chapman 1973; Kitts 2006); ranging from ‘blue ribbon’ inquiries such as the 9/11 Commission, through to more internalised ‘routine’ inquiries by accident investigations boards. In the modern age, the spotlight shines increasingly brightly on inquiries, given the capacity to disseminate swift theories and facts around the globe. The increasing power of victims/family groups (who for example, were instrumental in the creation of an independent commission to investigate 9/11), as well as less public tolerance of failure, adds to the pressure for due public accountability, and for responsibility/blame to be suitably apportioned between low and high level decision makers. Faced with this onslaught of crisis-induced scrutiny and investigation, political leaders face a number of challenges. Here we identify four which seem to capture the cross-pressures faced in restoring legitimacy to societal frameworks and processes, while contending with issues of self-preservation.

Denying vs accepting responsibility

A key challenge that both political and agency leaders struggle with in the face of post-crisis scrutiny is whether to ‘duck’ or ‘bow’. In the face of criticism and controversy about the causes and response to the crisis, do they attempt to conserve their legitimacy by accepting responsibility or by denying it and blaming *force majeure* or other actors for damages, glitches and errors?

The latter happens more often than the former. The so-called ‘blame game’ is much practised in post-crisis politics (Hood 2002; Brändström and Kuipers 2003). Indeed, the blame game is made much easier for politicians by placing agencies at ‘arm’s length’ of government (Flinders and Smith 1999), and by the degree of decentralisation in particular political systems. The US federal system, for example, is built on the concept of democratic strength through the separation and sharing of powers at federal and state levels. One by-

product of such fragmentation, is the creation of constitutional `space' for multiple blame games – as evident in the post-Katrina blaming and counter-blaming on the part of the Bush administration, Mayor Nagin and Governor Blanco. Commitment to self-protection is one of the unwritten rules of political leadership. Therefore, blaming others for crisis failures (which can be couched in the more muted language of identifying responsibilities as resting elsewhere) can be politically expedient. Nevertheless, there can be serious repercussions, which may only prolong and even heighten the threats to leadership legitimacy and job tenure. Blaming may lead to accusations of failing to accept responsibility. In the 1998 Auckland blackout, for example, the Mayor took a back seat and passed almost all responsibility to the new created monopoly, Mercury Energy. This seemed to be a crucial factor in his failure to get re-elected later that year (Newlove et al. 2003).

The alternative to blaming others is accepting responsibility. This is a high-risk strategy that may lead to serious credibility damage. Interestingly, however, accepting responsibility for failings is sometimes seen as the noble and honourable thing to do, and may, in fact, contribute to enhanced legitimacy. For example, in the aftermath of the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami, Norway's eventual acceptance of slow and ineffective procedures for assisting in helping rescue their citizens and identify victims, probably enhanced the political legitimacy of the Norwegian government. This stands in contrast to Swedish Prime Minister Persson and his administration, which received substantial political backlash for continuing to blame a range of actors from low level officials to the King of Sweden.

More generally, playing the blame game needs to be balanced against accepting due responsibility, but squaring this circle is often not such a difficult task. It can be argued that a 'sorry' culture has taken root: political executives often apologise for operational failures and move on explaining there was nothing they could do about it.

Hiding vs. exposing weaknesses and failures

A closely related challenge pertains to the management of information. The opposing options here are to 'stonewall' by hiding personal and organisational errors and misjudgements, or to allow these weaknesses to be exposed. Transparency is always a thing that power holders are better at paying lip service to than practising, but in the context of crisis aftermaths the pressure to remain tight-lipped and put the squeeze on information given to investigators can be overwhelming. Whether doing so can be at all effective at a time when the full force of journalistic, political and sometimes judicial inquiry into executive actions is unleashed, is perhaps debatable.

If withholding information does not work, one of the last refuges of leaders backed into a corner in the wake of a crisis is lying (Osborne 2005). There are several variants on this – all amounting to economy with the truth. It may involve hiding the truth through a statement which is technically accurate, but conceals more than it gives away. It may also involve a play on words such as President Clinton's 'I did not inhale' (in response to allegations of pot smoking) and 'I did not have sexual relations with that woman' (in response to accusations about his affair with Monica Lewinsky). The most extreme version is the blatant lie, such as Margaret Thatcher's statements about the circumstances surrounding the sinking of the *Belgrano* during the Falklands War. She got away with it, yet lying in the face of post-crisis scrutiny remains not only a morally offensive but also

politically risky strategy which can backfire with devastating consequences – Watergate, Enron and Abu Ghraib symbolise this.²

Maintaining a tight grip on inquiries vs. allowing genuine independence

Formal inquiries constitute a key arena in which the politics of the crisis aftermath is being shaped. Political leaders in a democracy can do relatively little to control other theatres of inquiry such as the media and the courts, but official government inquiries are a different matter. The vast majority of crisis inquiries are indeed initiated by political executives, and take a variety of forms such as public inquiries (UK inquiry into serial killer Dr Harold Shipman), ad hoc commissions/committees (Phillips inquiry into BSE in the UK, Rogers Commission into the Space Shuttle Challenger accident), Royal commissions (Canadian Royal Commission on the Ocean Ranger Marine Disaster). In instigating and responding to these inquiries, leaders face the strategic choice of whether to keep a tight grip on their format and conduct – at the risk of being accused of manipulating them for self-serving reasons, or refrain from any attempts to control the composition, mandate and methods of such inquiries – at the risk of ending up with fundamentally hostile ‘inquisition-style’ zealotry.

It is easy to see why political leaders might prefer the ‘tight grip’ strategy. In a world where leaders and crisis managers are increasingly viewed less like heroes and more like villains (‘t Hart et al. 2001), this strategy allows them to retain some degree of influence (or perhaps control) of the investigations, minimising damage to their political legitimacy and their favoured policies. Tactics included hand-picked chairpersons, restricting terms of reference and so on (see Elliot and McGuinness 2002; Toft and Reynolds 2005). Such tactics may also rebound. Some inquiries have attracted with accusations about government manipulation down the years: the Warren Commission and the assassination of JFK, the FBI/NSTSB investigation into the fall of TWA flight 800 in 1996, and an RAF Inquiry into the 1994 crash in Scotland of a Chinook helicopter carrying secret service personnel. Less extreme are accusations that inquiries and their search for the ‘truth’ have been compromised to varying degrees by top-level interference, although they may still do considerable damage to leadership credibility and public support for the incumbent government.

The flip side of the coin would mean allowing genuine independent scrutiny, hence avoiding accusations of political manipulation. Such a strategy involves a true ‘blue ribbon’ committee being chaired by highly reputable, independently minded aided by top-level experts in the relevant professional fields. It also involves giving the committee wide terms of reference; making sure it is adequately resourced; allowing evidence to be heard in open forums, and resisting temptation to discredit the inquiry as it goes about its business. If allowing a large measure of investigative independence pays off, then it can save political careers. A politically dangerous crisis is well and truly over when a key political figure has been ‘cleared’ or ‘exonerated’ by an official inquiry widely perceived as having been truly thorough and independent. Tony Blair found himself in this position after the Butler Inquiry into the accuracy of intelligence rescued him from further political damage.

² Yet the experts tell us that there are probably many political lies of which we are unaware (Bok 1999; Osborne 2005).

This post-crisis strategy, once again, has the potential to rebound. An independent inquiry can produce findings that are damaging to the political legitimacy of leaders and their policy preferences – to the point of them having to leave office or see their chances of re-election fatally undermined. In 2000, for example, Justice O'Connor began an almost two-year long inquiry into a water contamination crisis in Walkerton, Ontario, which resulted in 2,300 people falling ill and seven people dying as a result of water contaminated with e-coli. The report was damning for Conservative Premier Mike Harris's 'Common Sense Revolution' of public expenditure cuts and deregulation. In effect, the report became a focal point for counter mobilisation by opponents and helped contribute to a broader 'failure of government' movement (Snider 2004).

Resisting vs. tendering resignation

The final challenge is whether or not a leader should resign in the face of mounting post-crisis criticism. The attractions of remaining in office are such that leaders do not normally depart unless forced to do so (by being voted out of office, being ousted by their party, succumbing to illness/death). In the face of post-crisis calls for their resignation, leaders can deploy several tactics to defuse criticism and maintain their legitimacy:

- Arguing that continuity is vital in a time of crisis
- Setting up an(other) inquiry to 'buy time'
- Sacking or sanctioning lower-level officials
- Announcing sweeping reforms to show that they got the message

In modern post-industrial democracies, the clamour of calls for resignation is so frequent that it has become easier for political elites to fend off such calls. Constitutional conventions of ministerial accountability for departmental failings are now virtually meaningless, save for media-driven resignation as a consequence of financial and sexual improprieties (Rhodes 2005). Criticism has to mount a higher hurdle if it is to have real salience. Many leaders have survived very serious threats to their legitimacy: Ronald Reagan and the Iran-Contra Affair, Tony Blair's claims about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction to name. George W. Bush and Hurricane Katrina, to name but three.

Despite remaining in office being the most common pattern, a dilemma can still exist. Elites may feel some moral responsibility to resign as a consequence of their role in a crisis. This was how Lord Carrington explained his quick and seemingly voluntary resignation as Foreign Secretary after the surprise Argentine invasion of the Falklands/Malvinas islands – and became famous for it up to the point of sheer mythologisation ('the Carrington doctrine'). Crisis-induced resignation or offers to resign may also stem from quite different motives, such as fundamental disagreement with the prevailing crisis policy response (US Secretary of State Cyrus Vance resigned in protest against the military rescue operation chosen by President Jimmy Carter to try and liberate American citizens held hostage at the US embassy in Tehran), 'lightning-rod' absorption of blame to protect the higher political leadership (White House Chiefs of Staff or Special Advisers often perform this function in the United States, see Ellis 1994), or face-saving gestures to pre-empt a forced removal (Nixon and Watergate, Margaret Thatcher and the poll tax). Leaders want to leave positive historical legacies. At times, resignation may be their last chance to leave office with some honour.

Conclusions: Leadership Decision-Making and Crisis-induced Challenges

The post-crisis challenges faced by political leaders will not always be obvious to them. Sometimes, awareness of the tensions may be little more than instinctive – gut feelings that difficulties lie ahead. Or, the tensions may be sketched out for them by their inner circle of advisors. With acute crisis threats barely quelled, very rarely will leaders have the luxury of clearly demarcated options. Amidst such messiness, leaders need to engage in some form of post-crisis activities, whether it is action, inaction, or a combination of both. Therefore, which way do leaders turn after a crisis? Are they more liable to exploit crises as opportunities for radical policy, programme and institutional reform, as well as a means of enhancing their own ‘political capital’? Or, do they see crises as dangerous threats to the established order, and seek to waste little time in consolidating and reinforcing existing relations (including their own leadership position) as soon as possible?

Such strategies are not ‘either’ ‘or’. In the absence of honourable and/or near inevitable resignation (such as the entire Dutch Governments’ resignation over the Srebrenica massacre), the vast majority of leaders will hold on tight to their position and try to use the crisis as a means to bolster their political legitimacy if at all possible. They may not necessarily succeed, but their political choices tend to favour the leadership status quo. In a world where crisis management has become part of the job description for political leaders, liberal democracies would be full of political casualties who struggled to even survive a year in office if they did not adopt self-protectionist strategies in the face of crisis. Thus, elite crisis exploitation to defend leadership positions, straddles all forms of leaders, from conservatives to reformers.

The way in which leaders tackle post-crisis learning challenges is less clear cut. We discern two broad factors which help us comprehend these ‘learning’ features of post crisis politics.

Structural factors: Bismarck was reputed to have said that ‘Politics is the art of the possible’. In the world of post-crisis politics, leaders face both constraints and opportunities, which to a certain extent are independent of whatever challenges they may face. Constraints include inquiry recommendations, powerful coalitions, budgetary balances, court rulings, public opinion, institutional and societal norms, political party views, media pressures and more. Yet crises also present opportunities for change, eased by the fact that a crisis can destabilise and raise serious questions marks over the legitimacy and veracity of policies, institutional procedures, powerful coalitions and so forth. In sum, for leaders to turn one way or the other in the aftermath of crisis, can be more or less ‘possible’, depending on the situational context. We might call these ‘structures’, as opposed to the ‘agency’ of leaders.

Leadership Styles: the actions of leaders are not determined simply by structures. Leaders and statecraft can make a difference (Goldfinch and ‘t Hart 2003). Even in the face of constraints and pressures, leaders can be obstructors, negotiators, galvanisers, builders and manoeuvrers. Keller (2005) neatly categorises leadership styles as ‘constraint respectors’ and ‘constraint’ challengers.

Constraint respectors tend to be pragmatists, whose ideological convictions will often be contingent on the situational context, and might well be altered by ‘crisis’. For example, Britain’s near bankruptcy in 1976 led to Labour Prime Minister Jim Callaghan adopting

austerity measures and reducing state expenditures and interventions in a way that was more in tune with the philosophy of the Conservative Party opposition. The logic for such pragmatism is that exceptional circumstances need responses which adapt to political/policy/institutional/economic realities. However, the danger for political leaders is a loss of leadership vision. The outcome may be substantial policy drift, with strategic agendas being knocked off course because of situational politics and knee jerk reactions (a case in point being the subsequent jettisoning of the British Labour administration's original 1974 redistributive aims and 'social contract' with the trades unions). Those leaders adopting the route of political pragmatism need to be prepared to counter accusations of weak and ineffectual leadership.

By contrast, constraint challengers tend to be driven by a core set of beliefs that remain largely consistent, whatever the context. We might call them 'crusaders' or 'idealogues'. The logic for such approaches is that long-term goals should not be knocked off course by short-term threats. Indeed, opportunities should be taken to exploit crises in furtherance of a longer-term vision. However, leaders adopting this 'vanguard approach', need to be prepared for a backlash from interests accusing them of 'politicising' or 'exploiting' the crises. Therefore, such crusaders tactics to deflate, immobilise or make of no significant political consequence.

A growing body of research (see Boin et al. 2005) tends to suggest that post-crisis periods are more liable to see a tilt towards maintenance of the status quo rather than a fundamental realignment of policies, institutions and policies. Public policies are produced, supported and legitimised by an array of powerful interests, who gain rewards from existing policies and institutions. While 'crisis' may challenge the legitimacy of such structures and rewards in the short-term, inherited powerful actors do not easily give up their rights and rewards. Over the longer-term, therefore, the threats posed by particular crisis situations are more liable to melt into a world of new problems, new crises, and new agendas. This 'conservative' tendency is consistent with an array of policy perspectives which focus on public policies change as being marginal, rather than routinely leading to the demise of cherished 'core' policies or the jettisoning of 'deep core' societal norms, values, institutions and policies (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993).

In sum, the crisis-induced challenges faced by leaders are real ones. However, reformist 'crusaders' may need to work harder than their pragmatic counterparts in order to promote substantive policy and institutional change. Such successes are always possible, but they must battle against the forces of political inertia. Political realities are such that astute leaders will often promote a mix of operational policies and symbolic reassurances which appear to appease most (if not all) camps in the aftermath of crisis. Pragmatists will offer symbolic reassurance of change and learning to avoid repeats of crises and disasters, despite the fact that policies 'on the ground' may be little more than marginal adjustments. Conversely, radical reformers will stress the importance of radical change in order to address key societal vulnerabilities.

Our broad contentions in this paper now need to be challenged, developed and tested through detailed research case studies. It is only by examining local contexts, institutions, personalities, historical pathways and more, that we can enhance our understanding of this underdeveloped area of the politics of crisis management.

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