

The evil of "strong" leadership. Are Queenslanders tsarist?

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There is a growing need to "de-mythologise" strong leadership as a virtue in a democratic state. A recent book by Archie Brown, *"The Myth of the Strong Leader"*, was reviewed in the weekend *Independent* by Donald Macintyre. The reviewer drew comparisons from the British scene although the book itself has a wider compass – TJ Ryan Foundation readers will quickly see some resonance with Queensland's history of producing reputedly strong leaders.

The reviewer notes the British tendency to revere "strong leadership" which has persisted across the centuries and is epitomised by the awe afforded Churchill. This has become an attribute sought by politicians. "You need look no further than Tony Blair's taunt to John Major - 'I lead my party, he follows his', or the efforts of David Cameron and Ed Miliband to brand each other as 'weak' to realise how far 'the strong-weak' theme has become a constant of politics."

The author sets out to debunk this enthusiasm for someone who concentrates power in his or her own hands, dominates the party and cabinet processes and takes all the big decisions personally. He suggests that there are other qualities which matter more, such as collegiality and empathy as well as courage, vision, boundless energy and, in a prime example of the author's *abstractitis* – "articulacy".

He then goes on to distinguish "two categories which transcend or even contradict the conventional view of 'strength'". There are 'redefining' leaders who presided over distinctively collective Cabinets containing arguably 'stronger' figures than themselves and 'transformational' leaders. Somewhat surprisingly, Thatcher is identified in the first category, as someone less 'dismissive' of her party and her Cabinet than Blair. Despite the apparently immovable object of Gordon Brown, Blair is seen to have acted alone on the very big question of his term in office, Iraq, where his colleagues "allowed him to get away with the strange and eccentric notion that this was for him alone". This sounds a bit like Abbott's 'captain's call' - apart from the utter inconsequentiality of re-introducing imperial-style honours.

Perhaps in Queensland, Bjelke Petersen might be also included in the first category despite his general reputation as an authoritarian, particularly in his latter days when Hinze was so powerful in his own right, as is made clear in the *Queensland Speaks* interview with David Russell. Premiers from then on tended to be in the same category, inhibited by coalition or factional considerations from ignoring other powerful figures in their Cabinet. Beattie is the major exception, with a claim to be "transformational" in over-riding party sensibilities on issues such as electoral rorts and financial shenanigans.

We do not yet know enough about the inner workings of the Newman Cabinet to be sure about the balance of power and influence behind the scenes. Certainly in the wider environment of the LNP parliamentarians Newman gives a good impression of trying to be a strong leader with transformational intentions. The jury is still out on whether he has enough of the other skills mentioned above, especially empathy, to deliver on his authoritarian preferences.

In his wide-ranging overview, the author describes how after Kruschev denounced Stalin in his 1956 'secret speech' he received a letter from an old Bolshevik recollecting a discussion with Stalin 30 years earlier. "When it had been put to Stalin by Sergey Kirov that while Lenin had died, 'we still have the Party, the Central Committee and the Politburo', Stalin retorted that, although this was true, 'the Russian people are Tsarist. For many centuries the Russian people have been used to being led by just one person. And now there must be one.'" After over a century of long periods of single-party dominance, could it be the same for the Queensland people¹?

¹ Except that Putin rides a motorbike.