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Elite and Leadership Change in Liberal Democracies

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Abstract: In this lecture I discuss and assess the thesis that a shift in the character of governing elites and leaders has been occurring in several important liberal democracies during recent years. Ascendant elites are more leonine and top leaders are more pugnacious. I attribute the shift to strong centripetal pressures that now impinge on elites and leaders, and I ask about the shift's consequences for the operation of liberal democracies.

Starting with the ascendancies of Margaret Thatcher, Ronald Reagan, and Helmut Kohl during the 1980s, a shift in the character and style of political leadership in liberal democracies has been perceptible. It involves the rise of leaders disinclined to engage in a politics of compromise and consensus and disposed toward peremptory actions backed by force or its threat. These leaders have been gaining executive power through steadily more plebiscitary electoral contests, in which their own ostensibly superior instincts are glorified and their competitors' alleged defects are savaged. Once ascendant, they concentrate government power in core executives at the expense of legislatures and bureaucracies, and they wield this power with relative impunity.

The shift is not uniform across all liberal democracies, and in the countries where it is most noticeable the shift has not been linear – there are ebbs and flows. But a shift toward more determined and resolute leaders – or, at least, leaders widely perceived as such – is evident: George W. Bush and Tony Blair; Junichiro Koizumi in Japan; Silvio Berlusconi in Italy; Australia's John Howard and Denmark's Anders Fogh Rasmussen. José Zapatero in Spain, Stephen Harper in Canada, and Angela Merkel in Germany may prove to be further examples of the shift, while the aspirations of forceful individuals to national leadership elsewhere cannot be ignored – Nicolas Sarkozy and Jean-Marie Le Pen in France, Carl I. Hagen in Norway, for a time Jörg Haider in Austria, Pim Fortuyn in the Netherlands before his assassination. Although the label may be overly dramatic, 'Caesarist' leaders who gain power by plebiscitary means form a trend somewhat reminiscent of European politics during the interwar decades.

This shift in the character and style of political leaders is not the whole story. In complex liberal democracies leaders are embedded in, and their effectiveness depends significantly upon, political elites: tiny groups of strategic position-holders with the organized capacity to affect political outcomes regularly and substantially. Leaders with images of forcefulness are in important degree creations of elites – horses elites ride to power. The image of Ronald Reagan as a decisive leader was initially the handiwork of a public relations firm in California, and from start to finish his presidential leadership was carefully choreographed and staged by power-holders who knew much more about politics and issues of the day than Reagan ever bothered to

learn. This is transparently the case with the unworldly George W. Bush, who, possessing a household name, has been the puppet of a neo-conservative elite that plucked him from the politically innocuous Texas governorship in order to bull itself into executive power. In some situations a leader's aura of strength may stem primarily from disarray among an opposing elite. Margaret Thatcher, who never won a majority of votes, owed much of her leadership image to chaos in the Labour Party elite, just as Tony Blair's image has owed not a little to the Tory elite's wanderings in the political wilderness.

The ways in which leaders and elites affect each other is, of course, a knotty problem in political sociology. Few would deny that leaders galvanize and orient elites, but that without the power and influence of elites leaders can accomplish little. It is obvious that relations between leaders and elites display much variation. Like Reagan and Bush, some leaders appear to be little more than front men for well-formed elite groups. Like Tony Blair and John Howard, however, other leaders impose their wills on the elites around them. Everywhere, leaders act within the norms and structures of elite politics. In some cases elite norms allow leaders wide latitude; in other cases they constrain leaders sharply. At present in the U.S., for example, a considerable part of the political elite is seeking to punish George W. Bush and his White House mandarins and cabinet secretaries for breaching norms about the scope of presidential power and the degree to which it can be exercised unilaterally. Beyond loose or tight norms, leaders must contend with elite structures that may be quite concentrated or fragmented. A fair amount of research shows that in liberal democracies elite structures consist of extended circles and networks of political influence and personal acquaintance that tie together several thousand of the uppermost figures in politics, government administration, business, trade unions, the media, a bevy of interest groups, and so on. Such complex and far-flung elite web-works usually stifle a leader's single-minded pursuit of his or her political aims.

These considerations suggest that if a shift toward more forceful leaders is occurring, then a comparable shift in elites is probably also occurring. I want to explore the thesis that this is a time of increasingly forceful leaders embedded in more aggressive, tightly organized, and mutually antagonistic elites in some of the most important liberal democracies. I conduct my exploration from the standpoints of Vilfredo Pareto and Max Weber. Specifically, I combine Pareto's discussion of how fox-like elites governing 'demagogic plutocracies' give way to leonine elites and more forceful rule with Weber's discussion of how 'leader democracy' (*Führerdemokratie*) needs charismatic leaders to be viable. Both Pareto and Weber viewed politics from an elite and leadership perspective; they observed and diagnosed the same political trends in Europe (and to a lesser extent the U.S.) during the stormy early years of the twentieth century; they held unsentimental views of democracy and regarded effective elites (Pareto) and charismatic leaders (Weber) as crucial for its workings. In spite of different philosophical underpinnings – Pareto's positivism and Weber's neo-Kantianism – their political analyses were complementary. Pareto saw individual leaders as displaying all manner of foibles and stupidities, so he thought it more profitable to concentrate on the overall psycho-social physiognomies and dispositions of elites. Weber, as his concept of 'leader democracy' implies, regarded charismatic and statesmen-like leaders as vital, and he paid little attention to the characteristics of elites as wholes. Pareto largely ignored the social-historical and institutional contexts in which elites act, while Weber paid close attention to such contexts. When combined, the visions of Pareto and Weber dissect the vertical aspects of democracies. Pareto attacked the shortcomings and failures

of their elites; Weber worried about the quality of their leaders in the era of parliamentary and mass party politics; both outlined elite and leadership changes that would or should occur.

Elites and leaders after World War II

Pareto and Weber lived in countries and at a time when elite conflicts and rivalries between leaders were – and had always been – largely unchecked. Following national unification in Italy and Germany, deep ideological chasms and mutual distrusts separated opposing elite camps. Those camps disagreed fundamentally about the political institutions on which their new national states rested and they strove to defend or destroy governments of the day according to their conflicting stances and bases of support. The elites that Pareto and Weber knew best were, in a word, deeply disunited. In Italy, to be sure, right-wing monarchical and left-wing republican elite camps fused in the famous *trasformismo* of 1876, but this proved too narrow to accommodate spreading popular mobilizations of peasants and workers suffering the harshness of industrialization and led by emerging Catholic and socialist elites who had no place in the fused elite and thus no stake in the regime. Exacerbated by foreign misadventures such as the Libyan War in 1912, Italian elite power struggles became steadily more explosive during the years before and after World War I, and they led to fascist dictatorship after the assassination of Socialist leader Giacomo Matteotti in June 1924 and the withdrawal of Socialist deputies from Parliament. In the German Reich authoritarian rule by Bismarck and his successors and by elites associated with them kept the lid on a boiling political pot. But the Imperial regime was reviled by elites leading bourgeois and working-class organizations and movements, and the lid finally came off in the ‘leaderless’ Weimar Republic, the inception of which Weber witnessed.

The disunited condition of Italian and German elites was mirrored in nearly all other European countries (and in all countries of Latin America) before and after World War I. The exceptions were Britain, the Netherlands, Sweden, and Switzerland where, in much earlier and highly contingent circumstances, basic ‘consensual’ unifications of previously disunited elites had occurred – England’s ‘Glorious Revolution’ in 1688-89; elites in the Dutch Provinces banding together to free themselves from Spanish colonial rule in the late sixteenth century; Sweden’s elite-instigated constitutional revolution in 1809; the unification effected by elites in the aftermath of Switzerland’s short civil war during 1847-48. Politically, those four countries, with stable liberal oligarchies governing them, constituted marked deviations in a European landscape suffused by unbridged elite divisions and unstable, mainly authoritarian, regimes Pareto and Weber thus drew their lessons primarily from a particular pattern of elite relations – disunited – and from the capricious leaders and regimes to which it gives rise.

It is interesting to speculate about how their analyses might have differed if they Pareto and Weber had had greater personal experience of the consensually united elite pattern. In this pattern extensive communication and influence networks integrate competing factions and leaders who share an underlying consensus about most norms of political conduct and the worth of most existing political institutions. Elite factions and leaders accord each other significant trust, cooperate tacitly to contain explosive conflicts, and compete for political power in comparatively restrained ways. Power sharing is the hallmark of a consensually united elite, and the periodic, peaceful alternations in executive power that mark liberal democracies are its principal manifestation. Pareto’s grudging admiration for the politics practiced by Swiss elites

and Weber's praise for William Gladstone's leadership role in British politics suggested a fleeting awareness that elites are not always and everywhere as blinkered as Pareto found them in Italy and that 'leader democracies' are not always as bereft of capable leaders as Weber observed in Germany.

In ways and for reasons too varied to recount here, between about 1950 and 1980 consensually united elites and the liberal democracies they create formed in all West European countries where elites had long been disunited. Political practices by fox-like elites and clever leaders came to prevail. Tripartite deals were cut by government, business, and trade union elites to create neo-corporatist condominiums, and state power was used as a regulatory-welfare tool to expand social rights, a practice that was endorsed, more tacitly than explicitly, by all main elite camps. Elites and leaders of nearly all stripes professed to believe that with minor exceptions the activities of each social grouping contributed to the well being of all groupings. Accordingly, each had an interest in securing the cooperation of others in the common operation of social and political institutions. This sense of social interests meshing in some broad common interest, leaving special interests so limited as to be easily negotiable, was widespread among elites and leaders, so much so that it was for a while fashionable to talk about ideology having 'ended'. A period of Tweedledum and Tweedledee political contests undergirded by economic expansion unfolded – the 'halcyon years' that lasted until the oil shocks and stagflation of the late 1970s. Had they witnessed this, Pareto would have proclaimed his analysis of demagogic plutocracy vindicated, but Weber might have had second thoughts about the viability of democracies with leaders lacking charisma if he had observed West Germany under Konrad Adenauer, Ludwig Erhard and Georg Kiessinger; Italy in the time of Fanfani, Moro, and the raft of manipulators who followed them; Norway and Sweden under father figures like Einar Gerhardsen and Tage Erlander; a U.K. led by the uninspiring but devious 'two Harolds' - Macmillan and Wilson; the U.S. during the grey Eisenhower and conniving Johnson and Nixon presidencies; the game of musical chairs being played in Japan by interchangeable LDP leaders – the list could be made much longer. On the other hand, Weber might have found his analysis of leader democracy strikingly illustrated by the charismatic Charles de Gaulle's rescue of France from its leaderless Fourth Republic.

During the twentieth century's third quarter, building consensus through deals among major sectors, quieting the less well-off with welfare subsidies, paying off disgruntled special interests with tax breaks, and managing public opinion through increasingly powerful mass media triumphed to such an extent that these practices came to be seen as the normal form of politics in liberal democracies. In those years hardly anyone wondered if the combination of modern organization and advancing technology might be creating a social order in which it would be difficult to keep a reasonable proportion of the population engaged in activities that others could accept as contributing to the common benefit. Starting in the late 1970s, however, the practices of fox-like elites and sly if largely grey leaders were gradually undermined by problems or, as Pareto would say, 'disequilibria': the inability of welfare policies to stanch the growth of an impoverished and socially disorganized underclass; structural unemployment impervious to economic growth; high rates of inflation induced by the deficit-financed Vietnam War and OPEC oil shocks; declining state fiscal and regulatory capacities; a proliferation of single-issue parties and volatile voters contributing to the collapse of some of the elite coalitions cemented in neo-corporatist pacts.

These problems-*cum*-disequilibria were highly publicized in the media and in critical analyses questioning the effectiveness, even the legitimacy, of ascendant leaders and elites – in particular, Jimmy Carter and his administration, the premiership of ‘Sunny Jim’ Callaghan in the U.K., Helmut Schmidt’s chancellorship in West Germany. A backlash gathered force and champions of tougher practices captured public support. Economic rationalist and neo-laissez-faire principles that leave people to sink or swim on their own became fashionable guides to policy, and previously marginal elite factions and leaders espousing those principles came to the fore. Thatcher, Reagan, and Kohl signified the first wave of more tough-minded governance. Thatcher launched a bold military expedition against Argentina in the Falkland Islands and faced down the previously invincible mineworkers’ union. The elite around Reagan did the same to a union of air traffic controllers, undertook a massive military build-up, armed and bankrolled *mujhaddin* insurgents against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan and anti-Sandinist ‘freedom fighters’ in Nicaragua, and voiced unremitting hostility toward the Soviet Union’s ‘evil empire’. Kohl acted decisively to reunify Germany, he led the EU’s Maastricht Treaty effort, his government precipitously legitimated Yugoslavia’s break-up and it unshackled German military forces for previously forbidden foreign deployments.

Because the collapse of Soviet communism between 1989-1991 could plausibly be portrayed, *whatever the reality*, as a Reagan-Thatcher-Kohl victory, it enhanced the shift toward more forceful elites and leaders. In the U.S. demands for tough market rationalism and ‘getting government off people’s backs’ became drumbeats that in 1994 delivered control of Congress to Republicans under the self-proclaimed ‘revolutionary’ leadership of Newt Gingrich. The alleged folly of decreased US military spending in the wake of the Soviet collapse became the rallying cry of an aggressive neo-conservative elite that was now fully formed (e.g., Kristol and Kagan, 2000). This elite’s no-holds-barred tactics were soon evident in the Clinton impeachment proceedings. When the elite, astride George W. Bush, failed to win the 2000 presidential election outright, it ruthlessly exploited an electoral standoff in Florida to obtain the keys to the White House from a friendly Supreme Court majority. Donald Rumsfeld and other top members of the elite immediately began talking, albeit in secret, about the need to eliminate the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq; the Vice President, Dick Cheney, quietly concentrated executive power in his office beyond any US historical precedent; and a symbiosis of the elite’s congressional leaders and Washington ‘K Street’ business lobbyists began a thorough de-regulation of the energy, communications, financial, and other main economic sectors. In the course of 2001, especially after 9/11, it dawned on observers of American politics that an uncompromising elite had taken over. Coinciding with this US change, Junichiro Koizumi was installed as Japan’s prime minister that April; in May Silvio Berlusconi swept into power in Rome; Tony Blair won a second term, nearly by acclamation, a month later; and in November John Howard played the fear cards of asylum-seeking migrant hordes and terrorism to win a third and crushing election victory in Australia.

Current elites and leaders assessed

Elite alignments and alliances during these early years of the twenty-first century are much more complex than during the twentieth century’s ‘halcyon’ period. They involve international elite cartels – economic, political, military, and intelligence – whose national components support

each other's positions and policies. Elite positioning in these cartels is as important as positioning in the various national power games. Leaders of the cartels' national components consult frequently with each other, borrow freely from each other's policy repertoires, and shore each other up in crises and election campaigns. Non-stop electronic media promote political competitions that are much more stylistic than substantive. Appeals for support focus on personalities and leadership images rather than policy platforms, and they aim at gaining short-term public approval instead of long-term support. But because these changes have occurred gradually, taking place largely within the elite stratum, they are difficult to assess.

More leonine elites and forceful leaders are, nonetheless, evident in some of the most important liberal democracies. Exhibit A is the assertion of America's geo-political hegemony by the Bush elite. With its inner core of force-oriented 'Vulcans,' its Spartan élan, executive power concentration, and peremptory actions, the Bush elite has clear leonine features. Efforts by ruling elites and leaders in Japan and several European countries to ameliorate economic stagnation and unemployment are also more aggressive and forceful. In Japan, for example, Koizumi and his associates have ended fifteen years of deflation, stoked nationalism and military strength, and broken the hold that the 'iron triangle' of bureaucrats, businessmen, and LDP placemen long had on economic policy. Merkel in Germany and de Villepin and his shadow, Sarkozy, in France seek to act in tough ways to dispel high unemployment, especially among young people. Nearly everywhere in the face of post-9/11 security fears, governing elites deploy expanded intelligence-security apparatuses to put mass publics, especially immigrant Muslim communities, under close surveillance. Consider, for example, the Bush administration's secret and warrantless monitoring of phone calls and e-mails among what is guessed to be 45 million US residents, as well as its secret inspection of international transfers of bank funds by many residents. Or consider the Blair government's elaborate monitoring and tracking of two score UK residents intent on blowing up airplanes bound for the U.S. this past August. Add to these examples the complicity of European governments in the CIA's secret transport of what is said to be several thousand abducted terrorist suspects through airports and air spaces in order to imprison or 'rendition' them.

A leonine ascendancy is apparent in other respects. Acting forcefully against long Labour Party proclivities, Tony Blair and his entourage have given the UK core executive expanded resources and a streamlined capacity to impose policies. They trade peerages and honours for campaign contributions and provide business firms with lucrative opportunities to invest in the public sector. Like members of the Bush elite, most of those in the core executive elite around Blair have not served party and parliamentary apprenticeships but have instead parachuted into power positions from think tanks, public relations firms, business, and other locations. Blair and his lieutenants took the grave step of participating in the invasion of Iraq despite two cabinet resignations and vociferous opposition in parliament, the Labour Party, and the British public. In Australia John Howard and a surrounding staff elite similar in its extra-parliamentary origins to Blair's joined the 'coalition of the willing' in Iraq despite intense parliamentary and public opposition. The Howard elite has twice launched risky military peacekeeping missions in East Timor, intervened with force in the Solomon Islands, threatened pre-emptive attacks on terrorist redoubts in Southeast Asia, and won three re-elections through bare-knuckled campaigns that whipped up voters' fears. In Italy for four years, Silvio Berlusconi and the elite around him played fast and loose with parliamentary and judicial practices, exerted near monopoly control of

television, and followed the Bush, Blair, and Howard elites into Iraq in the teeth of public opposition. In Denmark, where public anxieties about immigration have tended to override foreign affairs, Anders Fogh Rasmussen's government has cut the number of asylum seekers by half, paid Afghan asylum seekers to return home, and restricted the entry of Muslim clerics, without as yet stanching growth of the anti-immigrant People's Party and its demands for even more stringent measures. As illustrated by Donald Rumsfeld's six-year tenure at the Pentagon, top elite figures responsible for policy disasters cannot be controlled by parliaments or parties and can be ousted only by the paramount political leader.

Yet it must be asked if the rise of more leonine elites and forceful leaders is really just a blip on the radar screens of liberal democracies. Do I mistake fairly normal alternations in power, perhaps made sharper by the magnitudes of today's centripetal pressures, for a basic and lasting change in elite and leader modes? There are many indications, after all, that the Bush elite has in its hubris and miscalculations disastrously over-extended US military power and destroyed the US claim to geo-political hegemony. Signs are numerous that the US political elite as a whole is deeply disillusioned by the course of events in Iraq and Afghanistan, by gross administration incompetence when responding to Hurricane Katrina's devastation of New Orleans, and by corrupt and craven deals between Bush elite allies and their clients. If Democrats regain control of Congress in the mid-term elections next month the elite's political paralysis will probably follow, and in any event Bush, Cheney and their top associates will exit power at the end of 2008. Extensive military repairs and yawning fiscal deficits will be crippling bills that their successors will then have to pay. The departure of Tony Blair and his entourage from power in London will precede the Bush elite's exit. Silvio Berlusconi is gone from power in Rome, perhaps permanently; Junichiro Koizumi has been replaced by Shinzo Abe, who is a somewhat unknown quantity; Australia's 2007 federal election is certain to be John Howard's last. In short, the pattern I have been exploring is ambiguous; it may be more ephemeral than lasting. Nevertheless, it deserves one or two concluding reflections.

Conclusions

For a start, today's more leonine elites and forceful leaders are still quite timid when compared with forebears in interwar Europe. The shift that I have been exploring bears little substantive resemblance to the revolutionary changes that then took place. This difference is at least partly anticipated by Pareto's thesis that deep and violent elite circulations occur only as the result of wars or other truly explosive crises. Although it is conceivable that the Iraq and Afghanistan military quagmires may produce a major crisis in the U.S., the shift in elites and leaders there and everywhere else has to date occurred more or less gradually within each country's elite stratum and in conformance, by and large, with established institutions. There has been no clear rupturing of liberal democracy. But although timid by historical measure, the current elites and leaders whom I have discussed dress their actions in nationalist and populist garbs and present themselves as champions of the morally upright 'heartland'. They portray terrorist threats to established ways of life as being so dire that harsh and peremptory actions, many of which cannot 'safely' be made public, are imperative. In a plebiscitary way, they enlist mass support by daily and carefully orchestrated appearances in the mass media where opponents are portrayed as dubiously patriotic cowards.

Second, the extent to which the shift is a by-product of US developments nags my exploration. Because of US influence – ‘hegemony’ if one prefers – the Bush elite’s aggressive actions promote comparable actions elsewhere. Thus governments led by Blair, Berlusconi, Howard, Rasmussen, and by José María Aznar in Spain joined the Bush elite’s military interventions in Afghanistan and then Iraq, as did governing elites and leaders in most countries of Eastern Europe. They did this for reasons having as much to do with maintaining their alliances and trading relations with the all-important U.S. as with assessments that their own security interests dictated the costly interventions. Likewise, clampdowns on migrant communities that might be harbouring terrorist cells appear to be instigated, at least in part, by the demands of US intelligence agencies. It can be asked, in short, whether the shift I outline is mostly a reverberation of what has been occurring in the U.S.

Another question is whether the US developments – the Bush elite’s ascendancy and actions – are themselves an aberration or fluke that will soon disappear. Despite a mountainous literature examining the Bush elite, there is no agreed understanding of it. In particular, the decision to attack Iraq baffles those who are outside the elite’s inner sanctum. After all, the 9/11 terrorist attacks, which have been the main public rationale for the Iraq venture, did not change the international situation of the U.S. one iota. Like the air raid on Tokyo led by Jimmy Doolittle in early 1942, the 9/11 takeovers of passenger planes for use as guided missiles were almost certainly non-repeatable, and, dramatic though they were, they exacted a cost in lives far fewer than the 17,000 homicides and 40,000 car accident fatalities each year in the U.S. While retaliating against Al Quida and its Taliban hosts in Afghanistan was clearly warranted and politically essential, the decision to invade Iraq was either a blunder born of hubris and historic miscalculation about the ability of the U.S. to implant ‘freedom and democracy’ where it has never existed, or it was part of a much larger, though equally dubious, secret strategy to establish in Iraq a military platform from which the Middle East could be made safe for petroleum supplies and for Israel. The consequence, in any event, has been an evisceration of the Bush elite’s political credibility, even its legitimacy, so that it serves decreasingly as a beacon for elites and leaders in other liberal democracies. In this respect, a US stoking of the shift to more leonine elites and forceful leaders may be ending.

Strong centripetal pressures on liberal democracies remain, however, and they are likely to increase. Elites and leaders sense that these pressures require bolder and more forceful responses. With leaders who may be less than genuinely charismatic, liberal democracies will nevertheless have strong plebiscitary features. Appeals for support utilizing emotional and irrational rhetoric and the careful management of leader images are here to stay. Behind their trappings are likely to be more leonine elites that benefit politically from alliances with large and propertied plutocratic strata. What remains to be seen is how strong and vigorous these elites will be, how much they will value loyalty over expertise and intellectual advice, how sharply they will centralize executive power in a few hands, and, therefore, how prone they will be to errors, overstretching, and to a new penetration by foxes.

