

Preface

Writing the second edition of this book has prompted me to reflect on how the world's political leadership landscape has altered over the last ten years. In 2010, when the first edition was published, President Barack Obama was riding high on the waves of popular opinion in the USA. In the UK, Tony Blair's 'New Labour' government had only recently been replaced by the Conservative Party under David Cameron's leadership. 'Austerity' was not in common parlance, and the idea that the UK would leave the European Union was laughable. Current political leaders such as New Zealand's Jacinda Ardern or France's Emanuel Macron were not on the political horizon. What is going on in our current historic moment to influence today's leadership landscape?

Perhaps fiction provides something of an answer. My husband and I have recently been watching 'Designated Survivor', a Netflix production in which Tom Kirkman (played by Kiefer Sutherland) becomes president of the United States due to the obliteration of the Capitol building during the previous president's State of the Union Address. Kirkman had been part of the doomed administration's cabinet, acting as Secretary of Housing and Urban Development. As the administration's 'designated survivor', he was removed to a safe house during the address and thus survived the attack. Kirkman has never been elected to office, he is more of an academic geek than a politician, and during the opening episodes his main task (as well as attempting to calm the understandably distraught American people) is to establish his credibility as president.

As a person who studies leadership, there are a number of aspects of the program which I find compelling. Firstly, given that as I write Donald Trump is president of the USA, I am struck by the differences between the fictional Kirkman and the current incumbent. Kirk is an academic, a person who has not been sullied by climbing the political ladder. He is committed to acting ethically and transparently in relation to the American people. He welcomes dissenting voices in his government; he invites a woman who has opposed his move to bomb a bunker to become his Chief Legal Counsel; he relishes difficult questions from the press as they 'keep him honest'. Even a speech writer who he overhears expressing the view that Kirkman should not be president (directly after he takes office) is welcomed into the president's inner circle.

In a time of neoliberalism he stands up to corporations that put economic gain ahead of people's welfare. He forces a pharmaceutical company that is not providing necessary medicine to a Black community suffering from a virulent virus to do so.

He insists that a trucking company responsible for the death of one of its Mexican workers provides his widow and family with compensation. Finally, throughout every trauma he encounters, he is caring – both toward his family but also toward those affected by the unending string of misfortune conjured up by the show’s script-writers. He continually thanks his staff; he is unceasingly courteous; he often puts the needs of individuals above those of himself. Although he is perhaps ‘too good to be true’, Kirkman enacts a leadership template which is radical in a number of ways: he seeks out opposing views, he places people first, and he often looks bewildered.

As I watch Kirkman, I wonder two things. Firstly, I question why this presidential depiction differs so markedly from that offered by ‘House of Cards’. In that series, which ran during the last years of Obama’s administration, corruption runs riot in a White House run by President Francis Underwood and his wife, the Lady Macbeth lookalike Claire. Underwood is clearly a power-hungry political pariah who cares only for himself. What do these contrasting fictional leaders, following one another in such quick succession tell us about contemporary (American) leadership fantasies?

Since the first edition of this book was published in 2010 a worrying trend has been the rise of populism throughout the Western world. One of the key aspects of populism, as explained by Yascha Mounk in *The Atlantic* is that it does not allow for pluralism. It is based in the ideology that one set of beliefs and values is ‘right’, and all contrary views should be obliterated. The leader model which accords with populism doesn’t allow for debate; it labels those who hold alternative ideas as the ‘enemy’, and it actively cultivates fear of ‘the other’. In times of great uncertainty, when globalism has not delivered its economic promise to many throughout the world, when climate change threatens our very existence on the planet, and when those who have held privilege for so long feel it slipping away, the certainty of such leaders can be seductive.

And yet . . . is there some collective wisdom which alerts us to the fallacy of putting so much trust in this approach to leading? The characterization of Tom Kirkman hints at what that might look like: seeking out and including dissenting voices, not being so certain of its ‘rightness’. This second edition of *Rethinking Leadership* includes even more evidence of the need for plurality in order for leadership to be effective. As a moment which arises from social relations, it depends on us all, those who take up the leader role but crucially those who follow as well, to either join or resist the purposes toward which leadership is directed. Furthermore it makes apparent the critical role context plays in our perceptions of who would best lead us. Unless we engage with that context and attempt to understand at least some of its dynamics, we stand the chance of looking to one-dimensional characters who provide easy answers. These times call out for true leadership – a collective response from us all, rather than ‘leaders’, be they saintly or otherwise.

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