

## Strong leaders or good governance?

What drives current politics? Thirty years after the fall of authoritarian communist regimes in Europe, old and young democracies the world over are experiencing challenges to the principles of democratic governance. At the same time, authoritarian leadership styles have gained greater attention and impact on the global political stage. Oxford political scientist and historian Archie Brown explains why “strong leadership” is a myth, why simple answers are misleading and how, even today, successful leadership is inspiring political change.

### **Professor Brown, was political leadership an important factor when authoritarian Communist rule came to an end 30 years ago?**

In the process of change in 1989, political leadership was decisively important – above all, the perestroika-era leadership in Moscow. Mikhail Gorbachev had already in 1988 clearly enunciated the principle that the people of every country had the right to decide for themselves the kind of political and economic system they wished to live in. While it remained to be seen whether deeds would match his words, his declaration at the Nineteenth Party Conference in June 1988, which was repeated at the United Nations in December of the same year, was a repudiation of the ‘Brezhnev doctrine’, devised as a justification for the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968.

### **In which way did Gorbachev’s initiative change the political outlook of the Soviet Union and Central Eastern Europe?**

The ‘Brezhnev doctrine’ stipulated that the Soviet Union had the right and the duty to intervene, militarily if necessary, to defend ‘socialism’ wherever the socialism of an existing ‘socialist’ (i.e. Communist) state was under threat. The Soviet ‘New Thinking’, together with the actual liberalization and pluralization of Soviet politics, with contested elections for a legislature with real powers taking place in March 1989, raised expectations throughout Eastern Europe. East Europeans would have cast aside their Communist rulers many years earlier but for their belief that this would be to invite a Soviet invasion and

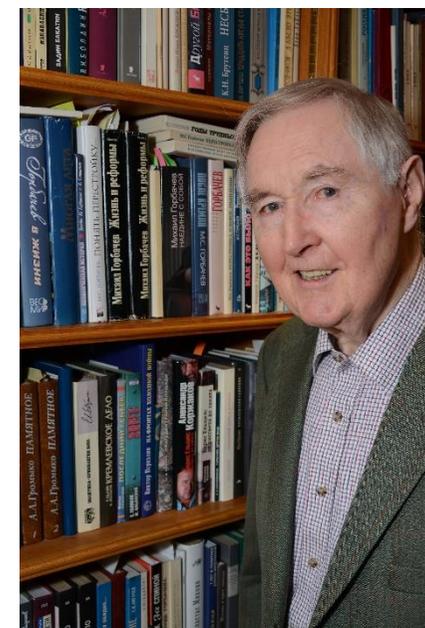
thus make a bad situation worse. Changing perceptions in the late 1980s of the likely Soviet response to assertions of political independence emboldened the populations of the East European states, as did the influence of one east-central European state upon another. Soviet acceptance of radical change in Hungary and Poland in the first half of 1989 had a big impact throughout the region.

### **How contested was this decision in Soviet leadership circles?**

There were many within the higher echelons of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and in the Soviet military-industrial complex who were acutely unhappy about the ‘loss’ of Eastern Europe and who were subsequently to accuse Gorbachev of treachery. However, the Gorbachev appointees to the top Soviet foreign policy-making team, especially Aleksandr Yakovlev, Eduard Shevardnadze, Anatoly Chernyaev and Georgy Shakhnazarov, were at one with him in their acceptance of peaceful transition from highly authoritarian rule to democracy in eastern and central Europe.

### **Looking back thirty years from today, has the hope for democratic change in the Soviet Union and its successor states proven too optimistic?**

The euphoria of 1989 has long gone. Increasing inequality, widespread corruption and unimpressive political leadership have all contributed to the growth of disillusionment in the post-Communist era. In Ukraine, this has led to the landslide presidential victory of Volodymyr Zelensky, a candidate with no known policies whose nearest approach to political experience has been acting the part of a worthy president in a television series. To be known only for his benign image as a comedian and as an actor – and, accordingly, someone on whom voters could project their hopes and expectations – turned out to be a great advantage compared with political incumbency,



Professor Archie Brown

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since Petro Poroshenko, seeking re-election, could be blamed for the manifold problems Ukraine was unsuccessfully grappling with.

**The ticket that Zelensky won on was essentially one of change and overcoming corruption...**

...and it is important to say that in Ukraine's case, the population has not – at least at this stage – sought a 'strong leader'. Elsewhere, the attraction of a 'strongman' who combines an appeal to traditional values and nationalist sentiments with the promise of imposition of order (including curtailment of freedoms and of democratic rights and institutions which had existed in the earlier post-Communist years) has been evident. Russia especially, Hungary and Poland are among the cases in point.

**What has led to the rise of "strongmen" in current politics, something we see throughout the World?**

This is partly a result of failures of leadership prior to the emergence of the current 'strongman'. In the Russian case, Vladimir Putin benefited from revulsion against the political influence, amounting to irresponsible power, wielded in the 1990s by wealthy 'oligarchs' who had been 'appointed billionaires' in shady deals with the presidential administration. Although Boris Yeltsin tolerated a more vibrant political pluralism than Putin has been prepared to accept, he displayed scant interest in democratic institution-building or in the construction of a rule of law. Personal relations, especially personal loyalty to him, mattered more than institutions.

**Is the recurrence of calls for 'strong leadership' as old as human history?**

The notion of calls for 'strong leadership' being as old as human history ignores the fact that for the greater part of recorded human history political leadership was authoritarian rulership, whether the ruler was called a king, emperor, tsar, khan, warlord or chief. The wishes of the ruled had little or no bearing on the kind of government imposed. Democracy is quite a recent phenomenon, ancient Greece notwithstanding. Even in the heyday of Athenian 'democracy',

only a fifth of the population at most were granted the rights of citizens. For the greatest expanse of human history, the role of 'the people' was not to make demands on their rulers but to show them unquestioning loyalty and obedience. What is also true is that while the rule of a single authoritarian ruler varied in severity from case to case, it was generally preferable to anarchy and civil war. If the choice is between a war of all against all within a given territory and an authoritarian ruler capable of maintaining some kind of order, the latter is a lesser evil. But if today the choice is between authoritarian 'strongman' rule, on the one hand, and democratically accountable government, on the other, the latter is infinitely preferable and the case for it and against authoritarianism should be argued vigorously.

**To quote the title of your book: Why is the 'strong leader' a myth?**

I have argued against the tendency to equate a 'strong leader' with a successful leader. If, of course, we use the term, 'strong leader' as a synonym for good leader, then we can all be in favour of strong leaders. But that is to render the term meaningless. By a strong leader, I mean one who maximises his or her power vis-à-vis colleagues, political party and governmental institutions and who insists on taking all the biggest decisions. There is a widespread disposition to admire that kind of leader and to regard as 'weak' a leader one who does not claim the last word on everything and who operates as captain of a team rather than as master of the government.

**What sets a successful leader apart?**

There are many qualities often found in a successful leader that are much more desirable than an insistence on one-person dominance and power maximisation. They include integrity, intelligence, collegiality, shrewd judgement, a questioning mind, willingness to seek contrary views, flexibility, good memory, courage, empathy and immense energy. Among contemporary political leaders, it would be fair to say that Angela Merkel has as valid a claim as any to have embodied those desiderata, and her political longevity within a

vibrant democracy is good reason to regard her as having been an outstandingly successful leader.

### **But is it not the case that even in established democracies, leaders with diametrically opposing qualities are on the rise?**

Yes. For a leader who lacks many of the qualities I have enumerated, and whose decision-making is uninhibited by ignorance, we need look no further than Donald J. Trump. His disdain for such fundamentally important American institutions as the separation of powers, the rule of law, and a free press would lead to outright authoritarian rule in the absence of an opposition determined to uphold constitutional and political countervailing powers. Trump presents himself as a strong leader, and he does not hide his sense of entitlement to have the last word on everything to which he turns his attention. He is regarded as a strong leader by his supporters and that perception even contributed to his election to the presidency. In November 2016, 36 percent of Americans said that what they wanted, above all, was a strong leader, whereas only half as many prioritised that attribute four years earlier when Barack Obama was re-elected.

### **How do people outside the United States regard President Trump?**

In a survey conducted by the respected Washington Pew Research Center in thirty-seven different countries, 55 percent described Trump as a 'strong' leader, but a majority also regarded him as 'arrogant, intolerant and dangerous'. In thirty-five of the countries surveyed Obama was evaluated more highly than Trump. The only two exceptions, in which Trump was preferred to his predecessor, were Russia and Israel. Since, however, that survey was conducted in 2017, and US-Russian relations have deteriorated further since then, the preference for Trump over Obama may now be confined to Israel alone. These data suggest that to regard a strong leader as synonymous with one who is admirable or successful is to perpetuate a harmful myth.

## **Brexit represents a failure of political leadership in Britain over several decades**

### **Does Brexit make clear the importance of political leadership? What went wrong?**

Brexit represents a failure of political leadership in Britain over several decades but especially on the part of David Cameron and, to only a slightly lesser extent, Theresa May. The longer-term failure lies in the unwillingness of British political leaders to stress the positive accomplishments of the European Union – its role in preserving peace and promoting democracy and collaborative international political and economic relations – and in their tendency to define themselves as defenders of British interests against the EU. That began with Margaret Thatcher. The last British prime minister to be unambiguously pro-European was Edward Heath, but within his own government he was no more collegial than Margaret Thatcher was and, ultimately, he was far from successful.

### **Why did Euroscepticism, which has been a staple of British politics for decades, turn into the manifest option of leaving the European Union?**

Rather than combat the Euroscepticism which had developed within the Conservative Party in particular, Cameron chose to appease it. Deciding that Conservative MEPs should not join the main centre-right grouping in the European Parliament, to which the German Christian Democrats belonged, was the first blunder. The second was to hold a referendum on a complex issue which, as survey research indicated, was at that time low on the list of matters of greatest concern to British voters. It was an obsession with a substantial section of Cameron's party but not in the country at large.

### **So the Brexit referendum was ultimately a political gamble, and a display of poor leadership by the political leaders in Britain?**

Once misleading propaganda linked the EU with issues the average voter did care deeply about – notably the National Health Service, with the claim that leaving the EU would lead to a vast inflow of NHS funding which the UK would no longer have to send to Brussels – membership of or departure from the EU became a more salient issue. As in most referendums, people voted for a variety of reasons which often had little to do with the EU. Although a majority of Labour voters opted for ‘Remain’, there was a substantial minority, especially in the North of England, who felt left behind and voted ‘Leave’ as an act of anti-elite, anti-Establishment defiance. There was also a significant anti-immigrant element, although much of the discontent in the North of England and the Midlands with the scale of migration related to Asia, especially immigration from Pakistan, which had nothing to do with the EU. Cameron was guilty of excessive complacency about the likelihood of victory in the referendum, while the merely tepid support of Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn for Remain also contributed to the campaign’s failure.

### **What role did political parties and their leaders play in bringing about the current stalemate and paralysis of British politics?**

Brexit was and is clearly a huge issue with many ramifications – including the Irish question and the Scottish question and the implications for the preservation of a UK within its present boundaries – which were given scant attention in the campaign and which simply could not be settled by an In-or-Out popular vote. The stalemate that has followed the 2016 referendum results from the almost impossible task of reconciling parliamentary democracy with plebiscitary democracy. Theresa May proceeded to make a series of miscalculations which were almost as great a failure of leadership as Cameron’s. She was certain that she could lead the Conservative Party to a

much larger majority than it already enjoyed, given her belief in the electoral vulnerability of Labour now that it was led by Corbyn, who had spent a lifetime as a left-wing backbench rebel and not a day as even a junior minister. She therefore chose to fight an unnecessary general election and turned a government with a small but workable majority into one without a majority which then proceeded to spend even more time negotiating with itself and its Democratic Unionist Party conditional ally than with the EU.

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### **Did Theresa May lose her political leverage because she was convinced that she needed to be in an even stronger leadership position to address the complexities of Brexit, something she hoped to achieve through new elections?**

She may have believed that, but she did not herself understand very much about those complexities. Theresa May fought the 2017 election campaign, above all, on the basis that she would be a strong leader. The constant theme of the campaign was that she would offer ‘strong and stable government’. It has become commonplace to note that it has, in fact, been ‘weak and wobbly’. But the most fundamental flaw lay in May’s personalisation of the campaign, unkindly described by some as a personality cult around a leader with no personality. She constantly used the first person singular and urged voters in marginal constituencies ‘to back me’, rather than the party, with the implication that a vote for the Conservative candidate in that constituency was a personal vote for the leader. Her style of leadership was non-collegial. Ministers responsible for particular areas of policy were presented with policies designed by May and her aides twenty-four hours prior to publication of the party manifesto. One senior minister told the political editor of the Sunday Times, ‘We were all complicit. We were spineless’. Leading a minority government has forced May to consult more widely than in the past, but collegiality does not come easily to her.

### **How much of “strong leadership” is earned, how much of it depends on others willingly forfeiting their say?**

The problem is not only with prime ministers and party leaders who try to expand their power and then hoard it, but with their colleagues who allow them to do so. The failure either to deliver on Brexit or to reverse it has now weakened May’s position to the point where she will soon be forced to vacate 10 Downing Street, but until her party lost its parliamentary majority, she was allowed to dominate the government through pulling rank rather than by influencing colleagues through reasoned argument. Real leadership in a democracy consists of an ability to persuade, and even - if we are fortunate – to inspire, to give colleagues room to flourish, and to draw upon collective wisdom, rather than on manipulation of the levers of power. Even the greatest political leaders were not chosen because they were believed to have a monopoly of wisdom. They should never be allowed to forget that.

### **Should we distinguish political leadership from political power?**

Certainly. Much of the time when we are talking about political leadership, we are discussing power-holders, simply because the offices they hold give them greater opportunities to affect political outcomes. But when another politician goes along with a decision of a prime minister, about which he harbours doubts, because he hopes for promotion within the government or, failing that, to avoid demotion, this tells us nothing about the leadership qualities of the prime minister, merely something about the powers of appointment attached to the office.

### **Could you give an example of political leadership that is not linked to the political power of office-holders?**

A purer form of political leadership is when someone with no patronage to bestow relies on the power of persuasion and the power of example to lead others into a political movement or, at least, to rouse them from apathy or a sense of hopelessness. For contemporary examples of outstanding political leadership, we need look no further than the impact made by two very young women, Malala Yousafzai and Greta Thunberg. Yousafzai was aged fifteen when, as a campaigner for girls’ education in the Swat Valley of Pakistan, she was shot in the head by the Taliban in 2012 and almost killed. After numerous

## **Malala Yousafzai and Greta Thunberg: That is inspirational political leadership, pure and simple.**

medical operations, she carried on campaigning, as well as studying, currently at the University of Oxford. She went to Nigeria in 2014 to seek the release of girls from a predominantly Christian school who had been kidnapped by the radical Islamist terrorist group, Boko Haram. More recently, she has campaigned against the practice of female genital mutilation practised by some of her fellow-Muslims. At the age of seventeen, she became the youngest-ever recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize.

Comparable moral courage, articulateness and determination to effect change has been shown by the sixteen-year-old Swedish schoolgirl, Greta Thunberg, who launched global student protests against man-made climate change and has pushed the issue far higher up the political agenda, even in Brexit-obsessed Britain. She chided politicians for turning ‘this into a question of what methods the protesters use’ when it is ‘about the fact that we face an existential crisis’. On successive days in Easter week (travelling everywhere by train), she addressed the European parliament in Strasbourg, the Pope in the Vatican, the Italian Senate, a crowd of 25,000 people in Rome, a vast crowd in London, and British party leaders and senior ministers. The former leader of the Green Party in the UK and prominent Member of Parliament Caroline Lucas noted that, as a result of the stimulus provided by Thunberg, party leaders, including Labour’s Jeremy Corbyn and Scotland’s First Minister Nicola Sturgeon, had ‘agreed to start regular cross-party meetings on climate policy, to open consultations with youth climate activists and to have an independent body assess whether party manifestoes were in line with the Paris Agreement’.

That is inspirational political leadership, pure and simple, from another thoroughly deserving schoolgirl candidate to become a Nobel Laureate. And it is clear that Malala Yousafzai and Greta Thunberg value prizes only to the extent that they signify concrete progress on tackling the issues they care deeply about.