

Political leaders:  
devious, manipulative  
and ruthless?



## **Are Political Leaders necessarily devious, manipulative and ruthless?**

Politicians are often portrayed and are often thought to be ‘power-hungry’ and willing to stop at nothing to gain office. The purpose of this essay is to examine whether political leaders are devious, manipulative and ruthless; to answer this question this essay will look at the main characteristics that political leaders possess, also the political environments that these leaders operate within will also be explored, finally based on the characteristics of leaders and the environments they work within, a conclusion will be drawn to see whether political leaders are in fact devious, manipulative and ruthless. Political leaders vary from political institution, to political systems and so forth. To give this essay a direct focus; an emphasis will be placed on the former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and the British political environment in which she operated and led.

Leadership is not exclusive to the political area, it encompasses many aspects of daily life. In the broadest sense of the word; a leader can be described as a person who has a following; As a result when attempting to define leadership, many notions and concepts spring to mind; leadership is in fact a normative concept, in that it is based around ‘... people’s notions of leadership are images of a social contract...’ (Heifetz 1994 p. 14) so trying to establish an exclusive definition is somewhat of a futile task. However there are theories which attempt to construct value-free definitions of leadership, these theories can be labelled under the following categories; the trait approach, situational approach, contingency approach and the transactional approach. (Heifetz 1994) The trait approach to the study of leadership

focuses on the character traits of leaders, proposing that the personality, skills or even physical characteristics, influence an individual's leadership quest/experience. The situational approach on the other hand argues that it is actually the situation that individuals find themselves that determines their leadership quest/experience. The contingency approach merges both the trait and situational approach and argues that it is both the personal traits and the situation that an individual finds themselves in that actually decides their leadership quest/experience; knowing what skills to use when is the decisive factor in determining leadership. The transactional approach argues that the transactions between leaders and followers actually determine leadership. Heifetz argues;

' These four general approaches attempt to define leadership objectively, without making value judgements. When defining leadership in terms of prominence, authority, and influence, however, these theories introduce value-biases implicitly without declaring their introduction and without arguing for the necessity of the values introduced.' (Heifetz 1994 p. 18)

This highlights the normative aspect of leadership and the difficulty of establishing a definition. However for the purposes of this essay leadership will be described as '...the activity of a citizen from any walk of life mobilizing people to do something.' (Heifetz 1994 p. 20) On a further note in regard to this essay, political leadership will be viewed as the act of formal political actors mobilizing other actors to achieve particular ends. Due to the normative nature of the concept of leadership, other values attached to leadership must be examined in order to correctly examine leadership traits.

Politics (simply defined) is basically concerned with power relations. Those who exercise power are often thought to be leaders. As discussed previously when trying to understanding leadership, especially political leadership, values associated with the concept of leadership need to be explored. Power is a notion intertwined with leadership. A popular definition of power is the ability and the extent to which one actor (A) can get another actor to do something another actor (B) would not have otherwise done. Based on this (simple definition) the actor (A) can be described as a leader, this introduces the concept of authority. Authority although closely associated with power is rather distinct. Heywood succinctly draws the distinction;

‘ In its broadest sense, authority is a form of power; it is a means through which one person can influence the behaviour of another. However... power can be defined as the ability to influence the behaviour of another, authority can be understood as the right to do so. Power brings compliance through persuasion, pressure, threats, coercion or violence. Authority, on the other hand, is based on a perceived ‘ right to rule’ and brings about compliance through moral obligation on the part of the ruled to obey.’ (Heywood 1999 p. 130)

The sociologist Max Weber goes further and categorises authority under the following types; traditional authority, charismatic authority and legal-rational authority. It is charismatic authority that is of relevance to this essay and is defined as authority that is based on an individual’s personality. Charismatic authority is often viewed suspiciously because it is based on personality rather than specific office, and thus is not bound by rules, which could lead to a situation of totalitarian or authoritarian rule. (Heywood 1999)

Tied in with the notion of leadership, power and authority is accountability. Political accountability deals with the concept of responsibility and means of redress in situations where power and authority been abused. A simple example would be that of Parliament, constituents confer their mandate to MPs under the premise that they will perform certain duties. If constituents feel that MPs have failed to hold their own part of the bargain, they do not vote for the MPs in the following elections. However the definition of accountability is rather fluid depends largely on the political culture of a society;

‘...the public no longer sees accountability in strictly legal and organizational terms. For them, accountability is a broader professional, ethical and moral construct that is achieved only when public officials, both elected and appointed serve with a commitment to do the right things...’ (Hill 2005 p 259)

The changing nature of accountability leads to the widely held view that political leaders are in fact manipulative, ruthless and deceptive. The basis of authority such as charismatic authority on un-enforceable rules also fuels this notion. By examining the relationship between power and leadership it is clear in that mobilizing people to achieve certain goals a degree of manipulation does occur, but this does necessarily have to be a deceptive or negative manipulation.

The political correspondent Margach in his book *The Anatomy of Power* argues that ambition, courage, character, stamina, patience, the ability to

heed the advice of experts and ruthlessness as necessary personal qualities of a Prime Minister. However, he also argues that the above qualities;

‘...are all essential qualities which constitute the Personality of Leadership after the Prime Minister gets into No10 Downing Street. For my money the most precious asset before he makes it luck, and here I draw only on life and experience at first-hand, not academic theory at second. So I can confirm that all but two of the dozen Prime Ministers, and a couple of Opposition leaders, whom I knew well, would have never reached the top without having been blessed with incredibly good fortune for themselves, coinciding with misfortunes of their rivals and sometimes the country as well...The secret of power lies in how the great men exploit their luck once they get there...’

(Margach, 1979 p. 2)

Margach’s account of leadership falls within the contingency approach of leadership theory in that both personality and context determine leadership quest and experience of the political leaders in Parliament.

Ambition is the driving force behind leadership, without ambition the desire to lead is nothing more than a mere wish in the mind of an individual.

Courage is also an integral characteristic of leadership, leaders must have courage to act on their desire to lead firstly, and when in the position of leadership, they must be willing and able to have the strength to make ‘tough’ or ‘controversial decisions. Character or charisma is another quality needed for leadership. Charismatic authority is based on an individual’s personality, so a leader needs to ensure that they exuded charisma; because as Margach argues; ‘The sophisticated packaging by advertising and public

relations experts may succeed temporarily in creating illusion by cardboard images, but first Parliament and then the public have an instinct for detecting defects and counterfeits in character.’ (Margach, 1979 p. 1)

Whether ‘ manufactured’ or naturally endowed, character is imperative in order for leaders to mobilise their followers. The ability to inspire vision is a function of charisma and without this leaders are forgotten in the history books no matter how great administrators or managers they were. (Margach, 1979) Stamina and patience are required qualities for leadership. The road to and the nature of political leadership is not an easy route, thus endurance coupled with ambition is needed to ensure positions and is also needed to maintain the said office. Political Leaders especially Prime Ministers deal and make decisions on diverse and complex policy areas and it is almost impossible for the Prime Minister as individual to be an expert or even conversant in each of these areas, so they must be able to gauge the advice of experts and make decisions accordingly. Ruthlessness is an imperative prerequisite to leadership. Political Leaders need to be able to make tough decisions limited not only to policy areas but also about their colleagues no matter how close they are, and this trait is seen in cabinet reshuffles and leadership contests. For example, in the Conservative leadership contest following the 1974 General election, Margaret Thatcher is argued to have been successful because of the combination of her courage and ruthlessness, unlike William Whitelaw who was also a cabinet member but who decided to stand further into the leadership because he felt that ‘... because of old-style chivalry; he felt it would not be honourable conduct in the mess if the second in command were to seek to get his commanding officer reduced in rank.’ (Margach, 1979 p. 3) By the time he decided to

enter the contest Margaret Thatcher had garnered enough support for her to go on and win the position of party leader and consequently became Prime Minister.

To fully examine whether political leaders are necessarily manipulative deceptive and ruthless the former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher will be used as an example. As an individual Margaret Thatcher conjures mixed opinions, but it is safe to say that she was a prominent political leader. Before going into the detail of her premiership, it is important to understand the context of the role and the environment in which Prime Ministers operate in. In the United Kingdom's Parliamentary system the executive consists of Prime Minister, The Cabinet and Senior Civil servants; the overall duty of the executive is to initiate and implement policy in contrast to the role of the legislature which is to pass legislation and the judiciary which is to interpret law. In all Liberal Democracies there is a degree of separation of powers, in most cases a complete separation; where members of the legislature, judiciary and the executive are completely separate entities. This is not the case in the United Kingdom; the executive (Prime Minister and Cabinet) is drawn from the Parliament (the legislature). The notion behind the separation of powers is to ensure that each arm of the government is independent and also to curb arbitrary rule. It is the lack of complete separation between the legislature and the executive, which confers a realm of power in which a Prime Minister can act as an 'elected dictator'. The Prime Minister simply put is '...responsible for forming a government; for directing and coordinating its work; and for general supervision of the civil service.' (Coxall B., Robins L., 1994 p. 123) In order to fulfil his or her duties



the Prime Minister has special powers, which include patronage and the power of dissolution.

Patronage is an integral resource and element in the role of the Prime Minister. The power of patronage allows the Prime Minister to choose most importantly the members of the cabinet from Parliament (commonly from the House of Commons, but also the House of Lords), in addition the Prime Minister chooses certain members of the judiciary the attorney general and solicitor general. In this respect the Prime Minister has major scope to determine or arguably manipulate the composition of the executive and to a certain extent the judiciary. Patronage is an important resource to the Prime Minister because it is not static; the Prime Minister can 'reshuffle' the cabinet at any point. This aspect of patronage is crucial to the role of the Prime Minister as director and organiser of government, which involves developing policy objectives for government to pursue. Patronage allows the Prime Minister to allocate areas for cabinet member to work within, through the appointment of ministers.

The Prime Minister also acts as a chair in Cabinet meetings. This gives the Prime Minister scope to determine policy discussions and emerging results. In doing so, Prime Minister's may engage the 'manipulative' arts of chairmanship' which includes '...delay, obfuscation of the issue, verbosity, deliberate ambiguity, adjournment (followed by 'arm-twisting'), briskness (sometimes Cabinets have complained of being 'bounced' into decisions), sheer persistence, and authoritativeness.' (Coxall B., Robins L., 1994 p. 126). This goes against the notion of the Prime Minister being 'primus inter pares' (first among equals) within the cabinet; the role of chairmanship goes

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beyond that of functionality or the facilitation of meetings. The Prime Minister is also responsible for overall work of the civil service; this covers appointments, organisation and practices. Traditionally appointments of Senior civil servants by the Prime Minister were based on recommendation of a committee, however notably during the Thatcher administration, the Prime Minister has become more directly involved in the selection process, which has led to the claim that the UK civil service has become 'politicised' eroding at the traditional principles (anonymity, neutrality, and permanence) on which the civil service is organised (Coxall B., Robins L., 1994) Also the power of dissolution is exclusively held by Prime Minister, they can recommend during a five year term when parliament is dissolved. This is a useful weapon in relation to opposition parties, if calculated accurately a Prime Minister can call for a general election at time where the opposition party's position is weaker and thus strengthening their party and their position as party leader, by hopefully gaining extra seats. The Prime Minister has a unique role as national leader; this is clearly seen in situations of national security where the Prime Minister is ultimately responsible and matters are not brought to the cabinet. (Coxall B., Robins L., 1994 p. 125)

Another segment of the 'core-executive' is the Cabinet which is the top executive committee and consist of ministers who are responsible for government departments. The role of the Cabinet consists of formal approval, crisis management, brake, debating forum, legitimiser and symbol of collective executive. (Coxall B., Robins L., 1994 p. 134) In theory government policies are collectively the responsibility of cabinet although there are no formal votes on issues, this leads to formal approval role of

Cabinet. Due to the fact that the increasing scope of government and the fluid shape of public policy, not all decisions are made within the cabinet and it is the role of cabinet to formally approve decisions take elsewhere. The Cabinet is also responsible for managing crises and issues of major political controversy and does so through its execution of its role as 'brake' and 'debating forum' functions, in which the Cabinet influences the direction of government policy by '...Blocking, slowing down, amending and qualifying policies and legislation.' (Coxall B., Robins L., 1994 p. 134) Also Cabinet meetings are an arena for debate for between leading ministers. The legitimiser role of the Cabinet involves '...Conferment of authority upon government decisions.' (Coxall B., Robins L., 1994 p. 134), linked to the formal approval function and the fact that the cabinet is responsible for government policy. The Cabinet also acts a sign of a collective executive, opposed to that of the United States of America's executive where the President is the essentially the executive.

The civil service is the administrative branch of the executive and responsible for implementing government policy. The British civil service traditionally operates on the principles of permanence neutrality and anonymity. Civil servants are supposed to 'permanent' in that their positions do not change with a change in government. In addition civil servants are required to be politically neutral. Their personal political persuasions and political affiliations are not to guide their administrative and advisory duties. Civil servants are also anonymous in that responsibility of a department's action lies with ministers; who are publicly responsible for departments. The cloak of anonymity ensures that civil servants do not become

'...public figures, this might compromise their neutrality since they would become associated in the public mind with a particular policy; it also might undermine the frankness of the advice offered to ministers.' (Coxall B., Robins L., 1994 p. 151)

The principles of anonymity, neutrality, and permanence, are there to ensure that civil servants build up expertise and become a valuable resource to governments which often change hands. The civil service is supposed to be a source of stability. It is expertise and stability that give the Civil service a degree of influence in the policy process.

In examining the context in which Prime Minister operates it is clearly seen that within the 'core-executive' the role of the Prime Minister is formidable in comparison to that of the Cabinet and civil service. This gives rise to the notion that political leaders especially Prime Ministers are at the very least manipulative, with a scope for them to be deceptive and ruthless. This notion coincides with the ongoing debate over whether the United Kingdom has either a Prime Ministerial or Cabinet government. The debate centres round the powers of the Prime Minister, traditionally government decisions were made by the Cabinet. However Post -1945, in the United Kingdom there has been a move from Cabinet government style and a move towards a Prime Ministerial or 'Presidential' style of government, where it is said that due to the powers held by the Prime Minister, he/she can '... use the government to bring forward the policies which s/he favours and to stop those to which he/she is opposed...' (Coxall B., Robins L., 1994 p. 140).

Margaret Thatcher's tenure as Prime Minister is often cited as example of Prime Ministerial government. In addition she is often characterised as being an 'authoritarian' or an 'elected dictator'. These titles were attributed to her because of the manner in which she exercised her powers as Prime Minister which can be summed up as the following;

'...systematic bypassing of cabinet... the holding of fewer cabinet meetings... personal involvement over a wide range of government-policy making ... policy' 'on the hoof' in a conference speech or TV interview without consultation with ministerial colleagues... Brusque treatment of ministers regarded as weak, wet, 'not one of us'...Use of PM's Press Office to undermine ministers, sometimes as a prelude to sacking them...' (Coxall B., Robins L., 1994 p. 142)

In addition Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister made is also accused of the 'politicisation' of the civil service due to certain senior civil servant appointments she made when she came to power. (Coxall B., Robins L., 1994 p. 126)

When exploring whether political leaders are devious, manipulative and ruthless, it is important to firstly examine the concept of leadership. Leadership is a normative concept, so in many respects difficult to fully ascertain, but when leadership is simply defined as a person who mobilises another/others to achieve a particular end, concepts such as power, authority and accountability come into play. A basic definition of power close resembles that of leadership; actor (A) getting actor (B) to something that actor (B) would not have otherwise of done, can be argued to be actor (A)

mobilising actor (B). The resemblance between leadership and power shows manipulation to be an integral aspect of both leadership and the exercise of power. Authority is a concept closely related to power, and also shows the manipulative aspect of leadership, especially when examining charismatic authority, where leaders engage their followers based on their personalities, this can lead to disastrous situations as witnessed in the case of Germany and Hitler, whom 'mobilised' to commit mass genocide.

When examining the qualities of held by a leader, especially a Prime Minister, it is evident that in addition to being manipulative, leaders are also required to be ruthless to a certain degree. Based on the example of the Prime Minister, the manipulative and ruthlessness of leadership does not necessarily have negative consequences, and more importantly is not unlawful. For example Margaret Thatcher's ruthlessness in her quest to become party leader was not unlawful nor did it break any conventions, or societal norms, but it paved the way for her to become Prime Minister.

When looking at the role of Prime Minister it is clear that there is scope for the holder to be manipulative and ruthless, due to the powers conferred to the position. Margaret Thatcher is an example of a political leader who on the surface seemed manipulative and ruthless, but a closer examination reveals that she was not acting beyond her remit and was not being deceptive in her carrying her role as Prime Minister. This poses the notion that in fact political leaders are not necessarily manipulative and ruthless as individuals, but as a consequence of the environment they operate within, manipulation and ruthlessness become a function of their office, and thus characteristics of political institutions rather than individual personality. It <https://assignbuster.com/political-leaders-devious-manipulative-and-ruthless/>

would be inaccurate to portray the role of Prime Minister and Margaret Thatcher as that of completely consisting of manipulation and ruthlessness, even Margaret Thatcher acknowledges that there constraints to the extent to which political leaders can be manipulative and ruthless, much less deceptive;

‘ A Prime Minister who knows that his or her cabinet has withheld its support is fatally weakened. I knew -and I am sure that they knew- that I would not willingly remain an hour in 10 Downing Street without the real authority to govern (Thatcher 1993: 851). ’ (Kavanagh, D. et al 2006 p. 209)

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