Political Leadership and Contemporary Liberal Political Theory

John Horton
School of Politics, International Relations and Philosophy
Keele University


John Horton
School of Politics, International Relations and Philosophy
Keele University
Staffs
ST5 5BG
UK
j.horton@keele.ac.uk
Thinking about politics creates a unique dilemma, for it seems inevitably to lead to thinking about thinking; and the more we think about thinking, the less we think about politics. Human thought has a natural tendency to narcissism, and narcissism disposes it to reflexivity. Like the uncomprehending pet spaniel who stares curiously at his master’s pointing finger rather than the direction in which the gesture is intended to move him, we humans are often led to dwell introspectively on the processes of our own consciousness rather than gaze outward at the myriad objects that are its presumed targets’ (Barber, 1988: 3)

A paper with the title ‘Political Leadership and Contemporary Liberal Political Theory’ is likely to give rise to the quip, often associated with topics like ‘business ethics’, that it must be a very short paper. For the most immediately striking point that one notes if seeking to interrogate contemporary liberal theory with a view to exploring its ideas about or approach to political leadership is that it has virtually nothing of substance to say about it: contemporary liberal theorists appear have shown almost no interest in the role, meaning, value or ethics of political leadership. One can scan the indexes, contents pages and texts of the canonical writings of contemporary liberal political theory – whether it be the work of Rawls, Dworkin, Brian Barry, Raz, Galston or pretty much any of the other leading liberal theorists – in vain in search of any explicit reference to political leadership, let alone any even moderately extensive discussion of it. The topic simply does not figure in their writings as something relevant to or worthy of their attention. What I want to do in this paper, therefore, is to take this lacuna as my point of departure for an admittedly rather general and speculative enquiry into what, if anything, this tells us about the character of contemporary liberal political theory and the conception of politics typically at work within it.
It is perhaps appropriate to begin, though, by asking whether the lack of any concern with political leadership is of any significance; that is whether it is something worthy of comment. After all, it is not behoven of any political theorist that he or she discusses any particular aspects of political life, and nobody can encompass everything (although that has not stopped some political philosophers from trying!), even assuming that we have some idea of what ‘everything’ might mean in this context. All political theorists are inevitably selective in what they write about, reflecting their own sense of what is important, what intrigues or challenges them, and on what they think they might having something worthwhile and distinctive to say. There is no reason to expect, therefore, that any particular political theorist should be interested in the topic of political leadership. If liberal political theorists choose not to write about political leadership, why should this be seen as something that is especially worthy of comment?

While this response might well be adequate if we were concerned only with an individual theorist, or even perhaps a reasonable proportion of theorists of a certain type or school. However, it seems less obviously so, if, as in this case, it is true of pretty much the entirety of contemporary liberal political theory. If a particular issue is more or less absent from what is after all very much the dominant approach in contemporary political theory then that seems to provide at least a prima facie reason for regarding such an absence as systematic rather than merely incidental or contingent, and as more indicative of something about the nature of contemporary liberal theory or the outlook or assumptions of its practitioners quite generally, and not simply as the result of the miscellaneous interests and inclinations of individual political theorists. In short, it can reasonably be interpreted as part of a pattern, and such patterns almost always invite enquiry and explanation. That, at least, is how I shall proceed.

Secondly, it might be asked, whether contemporary liberal political theory is unique, or even at all unusual, in its lack of attention to questions about political leadership. For, if political theory generally, either now or in the past, has shown no interest in political leadership then there would be no reason to think that the explanation had anything specifically to do with contemporary liberal theory. And, although there might still be a question worth asking, that question would more likely be about
political theory in general. It seems to me, though, that in fact contemporary liberal theory is at least to some degree unusual in the extent of its complete indifference to such matters, although the picture here is not a straightforward one. In their different ways, both conservative political thought and Marxism appear to be considerably more concerned with issues to do with political leadership. That may be unsurprising in the case of conservatism, with a natural tendency towards elitism and hierarchy, notions of a governing class, sometimes associated with ideas such as *noblesse oblige*, and a historic fear of the ‘masses’, but it has also been the subject of extensive debates within Marxism, concerned with questions such as the role of a vanguard party, the place of intellectuals in politics and the implications of false consciousness for political leadership. In fairness, though, it would only be right to acknowledge that liberals are not unique among contemporary political theorists in their neglect of leadership, as much the same is true, for example, of their communitarian critics, and also of poststructuralists; and in truth it cannot be said that questions of political leadership figure prominently, although of course, a good contemporary theory is liberal of one stripe or another. Some of the strictures that follow, though, are not limited to contemporary liberal theory, but apply to some degree to political theory more broadly (Williams, 2005: Ch. 1 and 2006: Ch. 14).

It is worth remarking that in earlier incarnations, liberal theorists were much more interested in political leadership. It was a topic of abiding importance, for example, to J S Mill, whose passionate advocacy of social and political freedom was combined with a, less generally remarked on, serious desire to establish and maintain a leadership role for the best and most able minds, and with the social and political conditions that are necessary for such minds to flourish. And from at least Plato onwards, through Machiavelli and numerous later thinkers, and encompassing such seminal twentieth century political theorists as Weber and Schmitt, leadership has been a central issue within the canon of Western political thought, as it has been in many non-Western traditions, such as Confucianism (Fuller, 2000). So, while it is not a prominent concern within contemporary political theory, it would not be true to say that political theorists, either now or in the past, including an earlier generation of liberal thinkers, have all been equally indifferent to issues located around political leadership.
Finally, perhaps, it might be asked whether political leadership is really that important in the modern world? This question, however, only has to be asked for the implausibility of anything other than an affirmative answer to be self-evident. It is no doubt true that politics now, at least in polities with liberal democratic institutions and effective constitutions, is not about personal rule in the way that it was, for example, when monarchical government was the norm (although it is worth remembering that in much of the world, both today and in the past, any form of democracy has been something that only a minority of peoples have ever enjoyed). However, the conception of political leadership is not exhausted by a system of monarchical or personal rule. Nor need one go all the way with Carnes Lord when he writes that while ‘the theory of democracy tells us the people rule. In practice, we have leaders who rule the people in a manner not altogether different from the princes and potentates of times past’ (Lord, 2003: xi), to recognise that even in a democracy political leadership not only matters; it matters a good deal. Indeed, without reducing politics to personalities or denying the fundamental causal significance of events, structures and processes, it seems scarcely credible to suggest that leadership is unimportant in the modern democracies. For instance, can anyone seriously doubt that if the US and Britain had been blessed with rather different political leaders from Bush and Blair over the last few years then the current world situation would in some respects be significantly different from the way that it now is? And certainly some liberal theorists, either privately or in non-theoretical writings, or in their less cautious moments, and more or less tangentially to their theorising, are willing enough to lament about the quality of recent political leaders (Barry, 2005: passim)

Moreover, it might be thought especially odd if liberal political theory were to hold that political leadership is unimportant. More than most modern political theories, liberalism affords human agency, in the sense of the capacity to make decisions and then act on them, the ability to create and shape institutions and practices so as to conform to the preferred principles and values of liberalism. It is fundamental to liberalism that human beings can use their critical intelligence, powers of reason and capacity for action to reform and improve social institutions through the possibility of humanly generated political activity. Without that possibility there would appear to be little point to liberal political theory, at least in the normative form that is predominant
in contemporary liberal theorising, and little basis for any optimism about the potential for progressive change.

So, I contend, none of these potential explanations, which would seek to render the lack of concern with political leadership within contemporary liberal political theory entirely mundane and unworthy of comment, has much plausibility. There is no obvious and convincing reason why political leadership should not be of interest to contemporary liberal theorists. So, as they have not shown any real interest in it, our initial puzzlement about this neglect, and desire to dig deeper into its causes and consequences, remains an appropriate response: the question of what, if anything, this lack of interest in political leadership reveals about contemporary liberal theory still seems to be one that is worth asking. For this neglect appears neither to be incidental, nor to be justified by the unimportance political leadership in modern political circumstances, and while it does not figure especially prominently in contemporary political theory generally, this is itself to some extent a state of affairs that reflects the present dominance of liberal theory broadly interpreted, and has not always been true of liberal theorising in the past.

In the remainder of this paper, therefore, my focus will be on two, related questions. First, why is liberal political theory so completely indifferent to the whole phenomenon of political leadership? As liberals, at least so far as I have been able to discover, do not directly comment on this neglect or seek to explain it themselves, the discussion of this question will inevitably be to some degree speculative and inferential. In any case, I am not really interested in the actual motives of individual theorists, but in the kinds of consideration that could explain the broader pattern of neglect that has been identified. Secondly, I will be concerned with what the explanation of this neglect of political leadership tells us about liberal political theory, and in particular what light, if any, this aporia sheds on the character of contemporary liberal political theory, and its understanding of political life generally. In particular, I shall be concerned with whether this neglect indicates any deeper failings on the part of contemporary liberal political theory. So, although I hope to say a little of consequence about issues of political leadership and their relationship to democratic politics, my main focus of attention is on liberal political theory and the light that is
thrown on it when we view it from this perspective, rather than on political leadership itself.

II

If one looks at what it is that preoccupies contemporary liberal political theorists, it is clear that at its core is quite a narrow range of ideas and questions. The ideas of social justice, rights, equality, freedom/autonomy and, more recently, democratic deliberation, and the various possible relations between them, form the mosaic of the vast majority of contemporary liberal theorising. How these ideas are interpreted and justified, and how they are woven into a coherent vision, comprises a very large part of the substance of the work of the most prominent contemporary liberal theorists. Of course, these ideas give rise to a great many complex, difficult and genuinely intriguing theoretical issues, which it is certainly worth political theorists trying to sort out. So, in describing the range of concepts and concerns as ‘narrow’, therefore, I in no way mean to belittle either their importance or interest. And there is, it should hardly need saying, nothing wrong with liberal political theorists being interested in these ideas.

Another, obvious, general feature of these ideas is that they are all normative, in that they express values or principles. For contemporary liberal theory is overwhelmingly concerned with arguments for or against normative prescriptions. True, a theorist like John Rawls also attaches considerable importance to what he calls ‘feasibility’ and ‘stability’, but even the interpretation of these requirements has a strongly normative dimension, and he has been much criticised by otherwise broadly like-minded liberal theorists for allowing such ‘practical’ considerations such a relatively prominent role in the normative theory of his later work (Barry, 1995). Generally, the purpose of political theory on this view is to formulate justify and order normative principles that are designed to function as the appropriate measure or standard against which reality is to be judged, and ultimately as a goal and a guide to how politics should be organised and conducted. What contemporary liberal political theory is predominantly about is the articulation and justification of the basic political principles of a liberal political order. The underlying concern is above all to explain both how political coercion can be justified in a way that is consistent with liberal political principles,
thus avoiding anarchism, and the legitimate extent and limits of such coercion, thus avoiding illiberal authoritarianism. What are crucial within the narratives of contemporary liberal theory are normative political principles, with the coercive institutions and actions of the state being understood to be legitimate only in so far as they are justified by such normative principles. The problem of political theory is taken to be the articulation of principles that everyone should have good reason to accept. The problem of politics is institutionalising such principles, and ensuring that they appropriately constrain political action.

In undertaking this task, however, liberal political theorists pay little attention to what is ordinarily thought of as the day-to-day ‘stuff’ of actual politics. Liberal political principles are the theoretical constructions of what Rawls calls ‘ideal theory’ (Rawls, 1999: 7-8), and all other questions are consigned to a nether world of non-ideal theory or partial compliance theory. This means, as Glen Newey observes, that:

> Most political philosophers are currently not providing very much philosophical reflection on politics – at least not on politics as it is. The central concern of political philosophy since the publication of *A Theory of Justice* has been to arrive at a set of ideal prescriptions rather than attempting to provide a descriptive account of politics as it non-ideally exists (Newey, 2001: 15)

If one’s knowledge of politics were derived exclusively from the writings of contemporary liberal political theorists one would likely be left almost entirely unaware of the nature of some of the most basic political institutions and practices of diurnal political life in liberal democratic states, including for instance the importance of such mundane but ubiquitous institutions as political parties and pressure groups, and although there is frequent reference to the right to vote, there are few mentions of elections. While generally not, in principle, inconsistent in some form or other with liberal prescriptions, the way in which they almost unavoidably actually function is potentially more troubling, but they simply do not figure as of any significance in the idealised representation of politics within liberal political theory. Similarly, democratic deliberation is typically described in a way that makes the process sound much more like a well-conducted and unusually egalitarian and polite seminar than the rough and tumble process that it is in political life. Moreover, while it would be unfair to suggest that most liberal political theory is other than inspired by some
genuine political concern, it often moves very rapidly from that concern, and there is an increasing tendency for theory to become insular and feed off itself (of which this paper is a good example!).

The fundamental conception of politics implied within contemporary liberal theory is one that sees the point of politics as essentially the implementation and observance of suitably justified, moral principles. Fundamental political and distributive principles are supposed to determine the distribution of rights, opportunities and resources in society. The political is subservient to the moral; and while this does not of course mean that there is no place for democratic political decision-making within the liberal picture, its scope is significantly circumscribed by liberal principles within which it is expected to operate. Moreover, even within that restricted scope, the kinds of reason for political decisions that most liberal theorists allow is still further limited. There is quite properly some room for differences of opinion about how exactly the fundamental principles should be cashed out, to take account of local circumstances and an unavoidable measure of indeterminacy of application that is common to virtually all abstract principles. However, even those opinions must not, for example, be based on simple self-interest or inappropriate concerns, such as a desire to restrict the freedom of others or to promote one’s own social values at the expense of those of other people. To a significant degree, therefore, politics is taken to be the handmaiden of liberal political theory.

Political leadership on this account implicitly consists in the bringing about and maintenance of a liberal political order. But there is little if any attempt by liberal political theorists to consider what this might involve, or about how political leadership might, for example, mediate potential tensions between liberal values and democratic institutions. Political theory is about normative prescription, about setting the goals for political action, while the ‘how’ of effecting what are deemed to be desirable changes belongs to the province of political science, or the policy sciences more generally. In this respect, as we have seen, liberal political theory pays relatively little attention to politics as it actually exists and as is practiced in liberal democratic states. However, in another sense this way of conceiving of political theory makes it directly rivalrous to the aims and purposes of many of those actively engaged in political action. For many people engaged in politics are also motivated by a desire to
bring about their cherished values and to realise their own ideas of a just or legitimate political order, which may not coincide at all closely with those of liberalism. In an important respect, liberal political theory seeks to usurp that role for itself. Although many (although not all) of them would hesitate to express the matter in this way, political theorists are conceived as ‘experts’ in normative argument, and it is therefore for them to determine appropriate principles of justice, and to set out the normative constraints to which political action should conform. What is left to politics is not nothing; but it is not much.

The foregoing is to some extent unavoidably a gross simplification, even a caricature, of contemporary liberal theory. It is much richer, more complex and sophisticated in many respects than the above characterisation makes it sound. But in relation to the topic of concern here, I think it is sufficiently accurate not seriously to mislead. As liberals themselves show no interest in political leadership, it is perhaps not that surprising that the ‘implicit account’ of it that can be elicited from their work lacks the sophistication that is in abundance elsewhere. On the basis of their writings, it is simply not something that liberals seem to have thought much about. What emerges, therefore, is, in my view, an extremely limited and rather shallow, and perhaps surprisingly mechanical and instrumental conception of political leadership. It is a conception that the idealisations of liberal theory leave etiolated, and emptied of most of the complexities and difficulties of political leadership, and which fails to address the circumstances and political constraints within which it is exercised in the context of democratic politics.

III

What, then, is the wider significance of this neglect of political leadership within liberal political theory? Why does this matter? What does this tell us about liberal theory? No doubt there is much that could be said about these questions, but there are three implications of the liberal indifference to political leadership in particular on which I want to focus in what follows.

The first, and probably the most important, is this strand of liberalism’s lack of any theory or remotely adequate account of political agency. In this regard, the neglect of
political leadership is but a symptom of a deeper failing. For, liberal political theory’s idealising assumptions and narrow focus on normative principles of justice mean that it has nothing of interest to say about how political agency is to be understood, and is indifferent to the problems and issues that confront the exercise of political leadership in a modern democracy. It is not really even interested in the conceptual possibilities and normative conditions of political change designed to realise liberal values: this is something that human beings could simply bring about, if they chose to do so. That there are interesting theoretical issues to be explored here, for example about political styles for effecting change can be seen in a work like George Klosko’s *Jacobins and Utopians* (Klosko, 2003). Ultimately, the implicit conception of political agency embodied in liberal political theory is so distressingly naïve and simplistic that it scarcely amounts to a conception of political agency at all. For, on this view, political agency is simply about realising the political principles that liberal theorists claim to justify, and it seems to amount to little more than the idea that people should be persuaded by the arguments of liberal political theorists, and then act accordingly. But it has nothing at all to say, for example, about how to act when the arguments for particular liberal principles are politically ineffective and the political difficulties leaders face, given the realities of electoral politics, when liberal principles cannot command sufficient assent. Indeed, given that there are some sharp disagreements even between contemporary liberal theorists, it is not even clear which political principles it is appropriate to adopt.

That there are some interesting theoretical questions that could be asked here can be seen, for example, in some of the work of Bernard Williams. For instance, in a paper on ‘Politics and Moral Character’, he asks: ‘What sort of person do we want and need to be politicians?’ And as he immediately goes on to remark that such a question ‘is importantly different from the question of what the correct answers are to moral problems which present themselves within political activity’ (Williams, 1985: 54). I am not in this paper particularly interested in the details of Williams’ discussion, insightful though it is, which mostly explores the so-called problem of ‘dirty hands’. But what is of relevance in this context, though, is how Williams’ question acknowledges and opens up an issue that most liberal political theory simply passes over. Politicians are individual human beings who, at least if they obtain high office, are sometimes likely to have to act quickly, decisively and effectively in highly
pressurised and unpromising circumstances. They will sometimes have to deal with people and groups who are, at least in most people’s view, unreasonable and politically ruthless, who engage in political blackmail, and who may, therefore, sometimes have to appeased, and undeserving groups may be given preference to more deserving ones, if they the success of other, important political aims is not to be put in jeopardy. And how far do we really want our political leaders to be ‘principled’, attractive though that quality is often made to sound, rather than pragmatic and willing to compromise, even at some serious cost to their own convictions.

Where liberal theory is simply blank about such questions, Williams encourages us to think about the kinds of qualities that we want and need effective and decent political leaders to have, and about how those qualities relate to the political system and wider social context in which political leaders have to operate. Does the political system select for the kind of people we want, and if not what are the likely implications for the quality and character of political leaders, and indeed for political life more generally? For instance, what sort of people can we reasonably expect to enter politics and to flourish in the sort of tabloid culture that is now very much the stock in trade of political journalism in Britain? Or, what kind of politicians can we expect if every political debate and disagreement is presented as a ‘row’, a ‘squabble’ or a ‘split’? These questions, and many more like them, challenge us to think about politics in a way that has claims to be no less ‘theoretical’ than liberal theory, but which are much more concretely ‘located’ within political life as it is. And one might also think in this context of the work that has been done in relation to political leaders on the idea moral capital (Kane, 2001). But my point here in raising these questions is not to try to answer them, but simply to recognise their importance, if we are to engage seriously, as surely we should, with role of political leadership in a democratic society.

Secondly, the neglect of political leadership leads to an underestimation of its importance, and also to a devaluation of politicians and political leaders. Political leadership is a precarious art, fraught with difficulties on all sides, but one would get no inkling of this if one read only contemporary liberal political theory. If we view politics exclusively from the perspective of liberal political theory, then it seems to
me that it is almost guaranteed that we will be disappointed by our political leaders, and very likely disillusioned with politics. This is not to suggest that we should all be like Voltaire’s Pangloss, thinking that we live in the best of all possible words. Some modest measure of cynicism about politics and a pair of less than rose-coloured spectacles through which to look at politicians are no doubt highly desirable if we are not to fall prey to the various dangers to which an excessively reverential and respectful attitude towards political leaders can give rise. However, these are not the dangers that face most of us in the West at the present time. Rather, the principal dangers are those associated with dismissiveness towards and a withdrawal from democratic politics, and complete cynicism and contempt for political leaders of all stripes.

The sources of the widespread contempt felt towards politicians are no doubt many and various, and it would be absurd to apportion much of a causal role in this popular perception to the work of liberal political theorists. However, the failure of liberal theory to show any interest in the difficulties of political leadership, and the inclination liberal theorists to encourage the assessment of political leaders solely in relation to their own rather high-minded and politically naïve ideals is of piece with this general mistrust and hostility towards political leaders. Because real politics is so distant from the idealised conception of what it should be within liberal theory, the gap is likely to be filled with disillusion and despair towards politics, and for political theory to become ever more academic, in both the literal and colloquial senses of that term (Newey, 2001). Liberal political theory turns increasingly in on itself becoming a technical, edificatory and practically disengaged discourse that is exclusively practised by and of interest to only other political theorists. At best, it becomes no more than a stick that we can use to beat our political leaders, and a standing indictment of their moral failings.

Finally, as this panel has a specific focus on democratic theory, it would be appropriate to say something about the light that the lack of concern with leadership throws more directly on the relationship between liberal political theory and democracy. Although of course all contemporary liberals find a place in their theories for democratic decision-making, it is far from original to remark that democracy is also a source of unease for many of these liberals (Barber, 1988), and it is fair to say
that the tensions between liberalism and democracy have a history as long as that of liberalism itself. For one of the principal motivations behind the various theories of justice that have dominated liberal political theory over the last three and a half decades has been the desire to significantly to circumscribe the role for democratic decision-making, especially in so far as this is understood, no doubt rather simplistically, to be about majority voting and pragmatic trade-offs between conflicting interests. Particularly in relation to political and personal liberties, but also with regard to distributive justice, liberals have been worried by most manifestations of popular politics, and concerned to try to limit the legitimate scope for democratic control of such matters.

One can see this very clearly in the case of Rawls himself, as he wants to place fundamental political principles outside the normal processes of democratic politics. The two principles of justice frame, and set the limits within which, legitimate democratic politics should take place, and they are not amenable to change through democratic politics, no matter how large a majority may wish to reform them, or what the material benefits from doing so might be. As he writes on the very first page of *A Theory of Justice*:

> Each person possesses an inviolability founded on justice that even the welfare of society as whole cannot override. For this reason justice denies that the loss of freedom for some is made right by a greater good shared by others. It does not allow that the sacrifices imposed on a few are outweighed by the larger sum of advantages enjoyed by the many. Therefore in a just society the liberties of equal citizenship are taken as settled; the rights secured by justice are not subject to political bargaining…(Rawls, 1999: 3-4)

This desire to constrain democratic politics is even stronger in the work of Ronald Dworkin, where judges are often more trusted to make political decisions than elected politicians (Dworkin, 1985: Ch. 1).

The explanation of this suspicion of popular opinion, majority votes and elected politicians is fairly easy to relate to some aspects of the earlier argument. The focus on normative political principles, and on the role of political theory in articulating them, inevitably means that the scope for democratic decision-making must be limited by the theoretically justified moral principles. But neither popular opinion nor
politicians can be relied upon to limit themselves in the requisite ways. For example, they are seen to have a constant tendency to want to abridge and curtail some basic liberties, and are therefore a threat to the normatively prescribed liberal political order, needing to be controlled and regulated. In a world without any Rousseauian legislators, an unelected constitutional court, composed of politically unaccountable judges so far as possible free to resist the vicissitudes of democratic politics, is the closest we can realistically get (even if that is not very close) to having virtuous liberal political theorists as guardians of the political order. While one could perhaps interpret the role of such judges as one of political leadership, in truth this seems rather strained, and it would be still harder to see them as models of democratic political leadership.

Yet, there are specific questions about the relationship between democracy, liberalism and political leadership that should be of interest to liberal political theorists. For example, there are theoretically challenging and practically important issues surrounding the concepts of representation and accountability. Both are obviously crucial to any theory of representative democracy, but they also connect that to the role of political leaders. And, as none of the prevailing contemporary liberal political theories envisage any system of government other than representative democracy, such questions surely ought to be of interest to their advocates, too. What is the proper relationship between representatives and those they represent? How is it possible for one person to represent a large number of other people? What kind of democratic political structures best fit with an adequate theory of representation? What are the normative requirements and constraints on any adequate theory of democratic representation? How far is it consistent with their representative function and their accountability to those they represent for political leaders to lead? It is not that political theorists and political scientists have not discussed these questions; but that liberal theorists have not discussed them. Indeed, liberal theorists have shown little interest in the work that has been done in this area by other theorists.

IV

The purpose of this paper has been to explore contemporary liberal political theory, if only in an admittedly very speculative spirit, from the unusual perspective of what it
has to say, or, more accurately, what it does not say and the implications of that neglect, with regard to political leadership. In at least one respect, therefore, this paper succumbs to the fault with which I have charged liberalism. For I too have had little to say constructively about political leadership. My interest has been primarily in liberal theory rather than political leadership. I have, though, argued that the neglect of political leadership by the dominant strand of contemporary liberal political theory is not without consequences, and in doing so tried to show at least some the ways in which thinking about political leadership theoretically is both possible and desirable, and tentatively suggested some questions about it that should be of interest to political theorists.

Lest, too, this all appear far too negative and even hostile towards liberal political theory per se, let me also briefly suggest that there are other strands in contemporary liberal theory more receptive to the strictures that I have advanced here. What Judith Shklar has called ‘the liberalism of fear’ (Shklar, 1989) is no less general in its concerns than the dominant form of contemporary liberal theorising, but it is markedly less idealising in its approach, and also much less demanding normatively. For the liberalism of fear, which is more Hobbesian in its inspiration, focuses primarily on the risks and dangers that confront us both without politics and from politics itself. These risks and dangers are both universal, in the sense that the costs of the absence of an effective political authority and the threats from one that is all too effective are omnipresent in the human social condition. But these threats are also particular and circumstantial in the form that they take, which means, as Bernard Williams puts it that:

What [the liberalism of fear] offers or suggests in any given situation depends on that situation: it depends in particular on the politics of that situation. The liberalism of fear, once more like its natural counterpart, The Prince, does not displace politics, but is understood only in the presence of politics, and as addressing its listeners in the face of their politics (Williams, 2005: 59).

Williams’ mention of The Prince neatly connects the liberalism of fear with questions of political leadership. For the understanding of politics afforded by the liberalism of fear is one that gives to place to the realities of political activity, of which leadership is an important component. From this perspective we think more naturally in terms of political leaders being sufficiently empowered to do what they need to do, while being
sufficiently limited and accountable not to be tempted to try to do what we not want them to do. This is not, of course, itself, a theory of political leadership, but at the very least it is potentially receptive to such a theory, and enables us to see why and how a serious theoretical discussion of political leadership could matter.

Any adequate liberal political theory, I believe, needs to pay more attention to the realities of politics as it is practiced than has typically been done by its leading contemporary advocates (Honig, 1993; Newey, 2001; Williams, 2005). Political leadership is one such aspect of politics to which it would benefit liberals to be more attentive. Political principles and normative argument about ideals are important, as is the construction of institutional blueprints; but so too are the roles and character of the people who are supposed to be guided by the former and operate effectively but legitimately through the latter. It is important to understand the qualities that we want and can realistically hope for from political leaders, and to understand better the contexts and constraints under which they have to act. One such context and constraint, at least in societies with broadly liberal democratic constitutions, is democratic politics itself. Moreover, I also believe that our understanding of political leadership would be advanced through the meticulous and rigorous attention that liberal political theory at its best could bring to it. For not all that not all of the modest philosophical literature on leadership is especially profound or illuminating (Hodgkinson, 1983). I have also very tentatively gestured in the direction of how a different, and much less prominent strand of liberal theorising, certainly contemporary in its relevance, but perhaps also harking back to an earlier liberalism, might help to enable us to begin that task. The bottom line is that political leadership matters, and is worthy of some serious attention from contemporary liberal political theorists. The challenge is posed by how far the assumptions and structures of the predominant strand of liberal theory make this possible.

References


