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COMMENTARY

Political Leadership and Democracy

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More than seventy percent of people in the world live under authoritarian rule, and for the first time in over 20 years the number of authoritarian states exceeds the tally of democracies.[1] A major 2025 study concludes that "Almost all aspects of democracy are declining in more countries than they are improving, compared to ten years ago."[2] Disillusionment with the way democracy is working has opened space for the rise of populist leaders who have a propensity, if they gain power, to be authoritarian. If and when a populist leader decides the time has come to turn a movement into a political party, it becomes the party of the leader. Scarcely less worrying, I argue, is the tendency of some politicians, who, having been chosen by their party to lead it, believe that this gives them alone the power to take the ultimate decision on a great swath of major policy issues. When the party leader becomes head of a government, the task of ministers, according to this doctrine, is to implement the leader's policies. The party members' role in such a leader's ideal world is to be cheerleaders for the policies and loyal followers of the person who handed them down.

I have argued elsewhere that granting one individual such a power is at odds with democratic values and that it leads to worse decisions than would be taken by a collective body over which no one person could pull rank.[3] There are several good reasons for returning to the theme.

First, the evidence of the harm that can be done by an overmighty leader in a major democracy is mounting by the day with the second coming of Donald Trump. In his earlier presidential term, there were weighty institutions (and people) constraining him. As Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way put it, in Trump's first term, there was "an energetic defense of democracy from the American establishment."[4] Trump could envy autocrats, but not emulate them. Now he is doing both. An authoritarian President of the United States undermining democracy and the rule of law in a country which, throughout the post–World War II era, has been widely regarded as the principal defender of both, has immediate political repercussions and immense historical significance. The opening section of this Commentary looks both at Trump's actions and at evaluations of his leadership by the American public.

Second, I touch on the rise of populism in other countries, on the worldwide reaction to the Trump presidency, and on the impact of Trumpian rhetoric and policies on British politicians and political parties.

Third, I look at justifications that have been produced for concentrating vast power in the hands of one person in a democracy, paying particular attention to what may be called "the Blair doctrine of political leadership." In a recent book,

[1] *V-Dem Democracy Report 2025: 25 Years of Democratization – Democracy Trumped?* (V-Dem Institute, University of Gothenburg, Sweden, 2025. (V-dem.net/documents/60/V-dem-dr_2025_low-respdf). "V-Dem" stands for Varieties of Democracy. There is a variety also of types of authoritarian regimes, so I use, as the overarching term for non-democracies, "authoritarianism," rather than "autocracy" employed by V-Dem. Communist party-states have often been more oligarchic than autocratic, with a ruling Politburo denying absolute power to the party leader. As Graeme Gill has elaborated, this was true in a majority of the seven decades of Communist rule in the Soviet Union. See Gill, *Bridling Dictators: Rules and Authoritarian Politics* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2021).

[2] *V-Dem Democracy Report 2025*, p. 16.

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[3] Archie Brown, *The Myth of the Strong Leader: Political Leadership in the Modern Age* (Bodley Head, London, and Basic Books, New York, 2014); and Brown, "Against the *Führerprinzip*: For Collective Leadership", *Daedalus*, Vol. 145, No. 3, 2016, https://doi.org/10.1162/DAED_a_00401.

[4] Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, "The Path to American Authoritarianism", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 84, No. 2, 2025, pp. 36–51, at p. 36.

Tony Blair, British prime minister from 1997 until 2007, has set out his exalted view of the power of "the Leader" (always with a capital "L"), not just in Britain but as guidance for leaders worldwide, generalizing points he had made in his earlier memoirs.[5]

The Trump Phenomenon

Donald Trump has been remarkably successful in turning the Republican Party into an instrument of his rule. Only Senators and Congressmen loyal to him will flourish, and he has made clear to any potentially recalcitrant Republican lawmaker that he will mobilize their base against them.[6] In Trump's second term, one authoritarian measure has followed another at speed. He has undermined the rule of law and politicized the Department of Justice, naming desirable targets whom he regards as his political enemies. They have included people who held high office in his own presidential first term, among them National Security Adviser John Bolton, and former FBI Director James Comey, who compounded their disagreements with Trump by publishing books on what it was like trying to work with him.[7] Asked how his second term felt different from the first, Trump replied: "The first time, I had two things to do – run the country and survive; I had all these crooked guys." In the second term, "I run the country and the world."[8]

Judges who thwart Trump are among those accused of being "crooked" or, alternatively, "monsters," "deranged," "lunatics," or "USA hating."[9] The independence of universities has come under attack. Harvard has been fighting back, but another major university, Columbia, is among those to have compromised, in order to avoid paying a severe economic price for non-compliance with the Trump administration's demands. More generally, Trump's de facto first head of the newly created Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), multi-billionaire businessman Elon Musk, wielded his "chainsaw" against a range of institutions deemed too independent or "woke," depriving them of federal funding, or simply abolishing them.[10]

The extent to which many Americans have accepted, or underestimated, the dangers of Trump's rule is far from being solely the achievement of Trump himself. The ground has been prepared over many years by the Heritage Foundation and other wealthy right-wing organizations, with the intent of purging the machinery of government. These bodies have spent, according to Levitsky and Way, "millions of dollars recruiting and vetting an army of up to 54,000 loyalists to fill government positions."[11] The replacement of equivalent numbers of non-partisan employees in government departments by a huge influx of reliably right-wing loyalists, whose task is to rid the administrative apparatus of suspected "liberals," if it is allowed to happen, will have a dire and long-lasting effect on American government.

Behind the Trump slogan, "Make America Great Again," it has never been made clear when the "Great"' period began and ended. For many of its advocates and adherents, it seems, however, to be about a time when only a white man could dream of becoming President of the United States, and even "liberal" women knew their place.

Trump's authoritarianism has not prevented heads of government in democracies from attempting to get along with him, such is the political, economic, and military importance of the country he heads. Leaders of major European countries have devoted a lot of time and energy during Trump's second term to trying to influence his thinking. They have not been averse to using flattery in the effort to steer him away from an economically damaging tariff war and into stronger support for Ukraine in its hot war with Russia, following the invasion of February 2022. They are doing so with an even greater sense of urgency than during his earlier term. When Trump first came to power in 2017, the German Chancellor Angela Merkel tried hard to establish good relations with the president, but she refused to be pushed around. When she put up "vigorous resistance" to Trump's complaints about Germany, "he abruptly ended his tirade and changed the subject." In a private conversation with Merkel, Trump plied her with questions about Vladimir Putin. "He was clearly fascinated by the Russian President," Merkel

[5] Tony Blair, *On Leadership: Lessons for the 21st Century* (Hutchinson Heinemann, London, 2024); and Blair, *A Journey* (Hutchinson, London, 2010).

[6] In Larry Sabata's blunt words, "the GOP of old … has been utterly destroyed and replaced by Trump's 'Make America Great Again' (MAGA) populist conservatism" (Larry J. Sabata et al., eds, *Campaign of Chaos: Trump, Biden, Harris, and the 2024 American Election*, Bloomsbury Academic, New York, 2025, p. 1).

[7] John Bolton, *The Room Where it Happened: A White House Memoir* (Simon & Schuster, New York, 2020); and James Comey, *A Higher Loyalty: Truth, Lies, and Leadership* (Macmillan, New York, 2018).

[8] *New Atlantic*, June 2025: https:www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2025/06/trump-second-term-comeback/682573/

[9] Gary O'Donoghue, "How Trump is using the courts to get what he wants – and changing the shape of presidential power", BBC News website, 22 July 2025, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c.3en0qwp44do.

[10] The thinking of Elon Musk, Trump's enforcer until two massive egos predictably clashed, has been described as "a chaotic mixture of neoliberal economics combined with the conspiracy theory-laden social politics of the alt-right, and on occasion a foray into the extreme far-right of cultural homogeneity and racial purity" (Katy Pruzzynski, "Trump 2.0 and the New American Oligarchy", *Political Insight*, March 2025, pp. 8–11, at p. 9.)

[11] Levitsky and Way, "The Path to American Authoritarianism", p. 41.

recalls in her memoirs, adding that in "the years that followed, I received the distinct impression he was captivated by politicians with autocratic and dictatorial traits."[12] She was far from alone in detecting Trump's "autocrat-envy."[13] This has extended well beyond Putin and includes China's Xi Jinping and even North Korea's dictator Kim Jong Un.

It is usual for American presidents to start with positive net approval ratings. Trump's approval ratings began with an almost equal split between approval and disapproval. Both first and second time round, the ratings quickly deteriorated. By September 2025, they stood at minus 15, as they were at the same stage of his earlier presidency.[14] The similarity is notwithstanding authoritarianism having become much more overt during his second term. A Pew survey of Americans, conducted in the same month, found that approximately half (49 percent) believe that Trump is "trying to exercise more power than previous presidents" and that this is "bad for the country." A fifth of (evidently inattentive) American respondents thought that Trump was exercising "about the same amount of power as other recent presidents."[15]

Reflecting the increased polarization of American politics, there were large differences of opinion on Trump's exercise of power between Democrats and Republicans. Eighty-three percent of Democrats say that Trump is trying to exert more presidential power than previous presidents and that this is bad for the country. Almost half the Republicans agree that Trump *is* "trying to exercise more presidential power than his predecessors" and a quarter of them think this is *good* for the country. Nevertheless, a small but not insignificant minority of Americans (14 percent) who identify as Republicans believe that Trump's increase in the exercise of presidential power is "bad for the country."[16]

The fact that far more Americans believe the excessive powers Trump is wielding are bad for the country than think it good should be electorally depressing news for the current president. A more concrete setback for Trump was the actual, and very convincing, 4 November 2025 wins by Democrats of the New Jersey and Virginia governorships, and the size of the victory and of the turnout, especially of young people, in the election of Zohran Mamdani, from the left of the Democratic Party, in New York. Continuation of that "electoral rebuke to Trump,"[17] however, depends in part on the president's adherence to the rules of the democratic game, and his respect for the result of any vote involving him. His track record suggests this would be a rash assumption to make. Beyond overt ways of escaping democratic accountability, there is a range of measures available to heads of governments who operate in a political system of "competitive authoritarianism."[18] That concept encapsulates states which hold elections that are, indeed, competitive (often fiercely), and which appear to confer legitimacy on the regime, but all the levers of power of incumbency are used to disadvantage the opposition and favor the ruling party.[19]

International Perceptions of Trumpian Leadership

Large-scale research on international perceptions of the United States and of its presidents by the Pew Research Center show that, even early in his first term, Trump's international approval ratings were low and esteem for the United States had declined. The 2017 survey found that, though a median of 55 percent across the different nations viewed Trump as a "strong" leader, a majority also believed him to be "arrogant, intolerant and dangerous."[20] Only 22 percent had confidence in Trump "to do the right thing when it comes to international affairs," compared with 64 percent who had confidence in Barack Obama. In the overall evaluations of Obama and Trump in 2017, Obama was more highly rated than Trump in 35 of the 37 countries surveyed. The two exceptions, where Trump was preferred, were Russia and Israel.[21]

[12] Angela Merkel, *Freedom: Memoirs 1954–2021* (Pan Macmillan, London, 2025), p. 566.

[13] The term is used and the point elaborated in Fiona Hill's excellent memoir. Hill was senior director for European and Russian Affairs in the Trump administration's National Security Council from 2017 to 2019 (Fiona Hill, *There is Nothing for You Here: Finding Opportunity in the Twenty-First Century*, Mariner Books, New York, 2021, esp. pp. 220–223).

[14] "274 days into Donald Trump's term", *The Economist*, https://www.economist.com/interactive/Trump-approval-tracker.

[15] Andy Cerba and Stephen Shepard, *Most Americans think Trump is trying to exercise more power than previous presidents*, (Pew Research Center, Washington DC, 1 October 2025).

[16] Ibid.

[17] "Mamdani leads electoral rebuke to Trump", *Financial Times*, 6 November 2025.

[18] Levitsky and Way, "The Path to American Authoritarianism", pp. 38–42; and for their fuller (pre-Trump) analysis of the political phenomenon, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War* (Cambridge University Press, New York, 2010).

[19] They include scrutiny of the tax returns of opponents, threats to remove tax-emption status on money donated to institutions that have harbored critics of Trump, and expensive lawsuits targeting television companies and critical newspapers or their owners.

[20] Richard Wike et al., *U.S. Image Suffers as Publics Around World Question Trump's Leadership* (Pew Research Centre, Washington, DC, 2017), http://www.pewglobal.org/2017/06/26/u-s-image-suffers-as-publics-around-world-question-trumps-leadership, pp. 1–14, at p. 8.

[21] Ibid., p. 1.

The findings of the latest Pew survey of world opinion of the United States and its president, published in June 2025, are largely consistent with those from the first year of Trump's earlier presidential term.[22] Asked in 2025 whether they had confidence in Trump doing the right thing in international affairs, a substantial majority again expressed no confidence. In the twenty-four countries in which the most recent survey was conducted, the median response was 62 percent expressing no confidence. Neighboring Mexico had the lowest confidence of all. As many as 91 percent of the Mexican population had no faith in the 47th US president, and a mere 8 percent had confidence.[23]

Evaluations of Trump differ not only cross-nationally but at least as sharply along ideological and partisan lines. The Pew 2025 survey found people "who place themselves on the right and those who have favorable views of right-wing populist parties in Europe" tend to view Trump more favorably. Trump was, for example, given "relatively high ratings" from supporters in Brazil of Jair Bolsonaro's Liberal Party, from Argentinian President Javier Milei's La Libertad Avanza, and from Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud Party.[24] The one word, however, respondents in the countries surveyed in 2025 most commonly associated with Trump was "arrogant." Of the seven characteristics from which they were asked to choose a description, the least selected adjective was "honest."[25] Two-thirds of people in this multinational sample consider Trump to be a "strong leader." Indeed, "strong leader" came second only to "arrogant" in the choice of characteristics attributed to Trump.[26] For those on the right of the political spectrum, having a *strong* leader is a higher value than for those in the center and left of center.

Previous American presidents have also interfered in the internal politics of other countries, but they would insist they were defending freedom and democracy. Hypocritical though this has sometimes been, it was a major step for an American president to give up even the pretence of caring about the rights of the inhabitants of another country. From Greenland to Gaza, Trump has viewed other people's territory with the eyes of an aggressive property developer. In response, the Greenlanders and the Danes have put aside their internal differences, with Danish prime minister Mette Frederiksen telling Trump, "You can't annex other countries," and Greenland prime minister Jens-Frederik Nielsen saying, "We will never, ever be a piece of property that can be bought by anyone."[27] Trump has enjoyed excellent relations with the right-wing, self-styled "anarcho-capitalist" president of Argentina, Javier Milei, so it was unsurprising that he wanted him to stay in power. But Trump carried interference in Argentinian politics so far as to announce, in the run-up to Argentina's 2025 midterm elections, a $40 billion bailout for the floundering Argentinian economy, continuation of the payment dependent on election victory (duly obtained) by Milei's party.[28]

Perceptions and Influence of Trump in the UK

There is ample evidence of Trumpian influence on British politicians and political parties. That is in spite of the fact that there is low confidence in Trump in the UK. In 2025, 37 percent of UK citizens surveyed expressed confidence in Trump in world affairs, with 62 percent having no confidence. Compared with 2024 when Biden was president, there was in 2025 a drop of 4 percent in the number of Britons taking a favorable view of the United States (from 54 to 50 percent). In the UK, even more than in most other countries, there was a wide gender gap in support for Trump, with only 28 percent of women expressing confidence, compared with 45 percent of men. In keeping with the general left-right differences in the countries surveyed, 62 percent of Reform party identifiers in the UK had confidence in Trump compared with 37 percent of the population as a whole and 21 percent on the left.[29]

Reform UK is, indeed, the British party most clearly influenced by Trump. Its right-wing populist leader, Nigel Farage, has been a warm-up speaker for Trump in American campaign rallies and has been very supportive of him. The Trump administration's influence on Reform could be consequential. As of autumn 2025, the Labour Party is in second place to Reform, which has a 10-point lead in the opinion polls, a little over a year after Labour won a huge parliamentary majority in July 2024, albeit with less than 34 percent of the popular vote and on a low national turnout (under 60 percent).[30] On that basis, Reform would be by far

[22] Richard Wike et al., *U.S. Image Declines in Many Nations Amid Low Confidence in Trump* (Pew Research Centre, 2025). 24,333 people in 24 countries, not including the United States, were surveyed between January and April 2025.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Wike et al., Pew survey, 2025, pp. 10–11.

[25] That was the choice of a mere 24 percent of respondents. Ibid., pp. 12 and 47.

[26] Ibid., p. 12.

[27] "Greenland not a piece of property, says PM after Trump threats", BBC News website, 27April, 2025, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cly1pjnpjpo.

[28] "Milei hails 'tipping point' as far-right party wins Argentinian midterms", *Guardian*, 28 October 2025.

[29] The figures cited in this paragraph come from Wike et al., *U.S. Image Declines in Many Nations Amid Low Confidence in Trump*, pp. 6, 7, 15, 20, and 21.

[30] yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/trackers/voting-intention

the largest party in the next parliament and close to having an overall majority. The good news for Labour, and bad news for Reform, is that the election need not be held until 2029.

Planks on the Reform party program with Trumpian echoes include an end to speedy transition to renewable energy, with North Sea gas and oil production to be fast-tracked instead; pulling out of international agreements, in this case the European Convention on Human Rights; immediate deportation for foreign criminals; and abolition of some categories of taxes and cuts in others, along with promises to end doctor and nursing shortages and provide substantial increases in the size of the police force, army, and the Criminal Justice Budget.[31] A former Conservative MP, Danny Kruger, who defected to Reform in September 2025, told a press conference the following month that Reform would cut the size of the Civil Service to pre-Brexit levels (the equivalent of 140,000 jobs),[32] make hiring and firing of officials easier, and get rid of a "woke agenda" in Whitehall. Asked if they were trying to emulate President Trump in taking on the government machine, Kruger said, "So on Trump, I mean, in a nutshell, yes," adding, "But I think stylistically, we'll be more British about it."[33]

Although probably influenced more by Reform leaving them far behind in the polls, the Conservative Party has also borrowed from the Trump administration's policies.[34] An important example is a pledge to create a "Removals Force," modelled on the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency. In addition, like Reform, Conservative policy now is for the UK to leave the European Convention on Human Rights. Party leader Kemi Badenoch (as of 2025) has gone as far as to say that no one will be allowed to stand as a Conservative candidate in the next election unless they support that policy.[35] The Conservatives also now say they will repeal the Climate Change Act which commits Britain to cutting carbon emissions by 80 percent by 2050. And, following in the footsteps of Elon Musk's DOGE, they are promising big reductions in the size of the bureaucracy, and government spending cuts of £47 billion, including £23 billion from the welfare budget.[36]

Badenoch has been supportive of the Trump administration, as were and are two of her predecessors, Boris Johnson and Liz Truss.[37] Right-wing American institutions have offered a forum for Truss and she has rewarded them with tales of her struggle with the "deep state" during the 49 days she lasted as British prime minister.[38] Johnson is the only British prime minister in the last hundred years for whom the term "populist" seems appropriate. His flamboyant style and ability to make an audience laugh won him, for a time, some genuine popularity, but his irresponsibility (on notable display in his evidence-free assertions during the campaign to take the UK out of the European Union), his assurances that people could have both their cake and eat it, his desire to be the principal policy-maker without doing the necessary homework, and his lax observance of rules he himself had approved during the COVID pandemic led to the loss of confidence in him of the public, and politically fatal, of members of his Cabinet and parliamentary party. Like other populist leaders, he performed relatively badly, as did Donald Trump, in dealing with COVID.[39]

Of the three major parties, the Labour Party has been least influenced by Trump. The most important similarity, though the bigger influences on the prime minister were closer to home than Washington, DC,[40] has been Keir Starmer's criticism of the UK machinery of government in language that aroused the ire of the Civil Service Union and former senior civil servants and which, with some hyperbole, was headlined on the BBC news website as echoing Liz Truss.[41] Moreover, at least one high-risk appointment would almost certainly not have been made had anyone other than Trump been President—that of Peter Mandelson, rather than a senior diplomat, as UK Ambassador to Washington. Mandelson, though extremely close to Blair, was twice forced to resign from the Cabinet Blair headed on account of misdemeanors, and he lasted only seven months

[31] "Our Contract with You", Reform UK Policy Documents, 24 October 2025, Reform Party website.

[32] Omitting to mention that it was "taking back control" from the shared administration of the European Union that had created the need for a far larger bureaucracy in Britain.

[33] *Daily Mail*, 28 October 2025.

[34] Their dismal opinion poll ratings notwithstanding, the Conservative Party is still the largest party after Labour in the British parliament and constitutes the official Opposition.

[35] https://www.bbc.co.uk/newes/articles/cc1181766g2qo, 5 October 2025.

[36] "7 policies Britain's Tories nabbed from Donald Trump", *Politico*, 8 October, 2025, https://politico.eu/article/policy-britain-tories-conservative-donald-trump/.

[37] Johnson's support is hedged with more (and ironical) qualifications than Truss's. In his memoirs, he writes, for example: "I had an enjoyable bilateral with Donald Trump and his giant inflatable personality. He gave me his enthusiastic endorsement, and in UK politics, if you can survive the endorsement of Donald Trump then you can survive anything" (Johnson, *Unleashed*, William Collins, London, 2024, p. 10).

[38] The "deep state" menace, as a rationalization of Trump's attack on many members of the administration, is noted, among others, by Bolton, *The Room Where it Happened*, p. 481.

[39] See, for example, A. S. Bhalla, *National and Global Responses to the Covid-19 Pandemic: Do Leaders Matter?* (Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2023).

[40] George Eaton, "The return of the Blairites", *New Statesman*, 11 November 2024; and Kieran Maguire, "Commons Confidential", *New Statesman*, 1 August 2025.

[41] Chris Mason, "Starmer echoes Liz Truss on reform of government", BBC News website, 13 March 2025, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cgq9e4nx5d2o.

as Ambassador. He was dismissed by Starmer in September 2025 when new revelations indicating his closeness to "best pal" (and convicted sex-offender) Jeffrey Epstein came to light. The special problems posed by Trump may have been a factor also in the appointment of Blair's former Chief of Staff, Jonathan Powell, as the British government's National Security Adviser. But the influence of Blair himself and the disproportionately large number of Blair acolytes who had already been appointed to important positions in Starmer's 10 Downing Street probably counted for more.[42]

"The Blair Doctrine" of Political Leadership

Discussing the international survey of opinion on Trump and the United States, I highlighted the finding that a majority of respondents regard him as a strong leader. What does "strong" mean when it is applied to a political leader? It is sometimes used vacuously as if it were a synonym for good leader, but that can hardly be what it meant for people who simultaneously regarded Trump as a "strong leader" and as "arrogant, intolerant and dangerous." I have argued elsewhere that when we are talking about party leaders and heads of government, it makes most sense to define a "strong leader" as one "who concentrates a lot of power in his or her hands, dominates both a wide swath of public policy and the political party to which he or she belongs, and takes the big decisions."[43] This, I would suggest, is what self-consciously "strong leaders" aspire to and think they are doing. It appears to sum up what Tony Blair regards as no more than a leader's due. It surely approximates also to what most people (even if more vaguely) have in mind when they are asked to evaluate a list of leadership attributes. It leaves open to argument the extent to which any democratic government really works like that and whether, to the extent it does, this is conducive to good decision-making and compatible with the norms of democracy.

Recent research on what members of British political parties most want from their party leaders, along with comparisons of their views with those of the general public, has produced fascinating insights.[44] What emerged is quite a sharp distinction between the priorities, and the values underlying them, between Reform and Conservatives, on the one hand (parties of the right) and Labour, Liberal Democrats, and Greens, on the other (parties of the center-left and left). Interestingly, "the general public's views on and expectations of leaders aligned more closely with those held by the members of the progressive parties than they did with those of their right-wing equivalents."[45] The researchers listed twelve qualities which might be deemed desirable in a leader (for example, "Being able to unite the party," "Being a good communicator," and "Being in touch with ordinary people") and asked the members of the various parties to rate them in order of significance. Two things, they report, stood out: first, that "when it comes to what is expected in a leader, the public are closer to Labour members than they are to Conservative members," and, second, "the overall gap between Labour and Conservative members is huge."[46]

Having "A strong moral compass" was the number one choice of Labour Party members for what they looked for in a leader (thus ranked by 61 percent of them), the number two choice of the general public (people who are not members of any party), and in fifth place for Conservative Party members. "Being in touch with ordinary people" came second only to "strong moral compass" for Labour members, was the first choice of the general public, and was in sixth place for the Conservatives. Most relevant of all to my critique of "the Blair doctrine" of political leadership, devotion to a leader who possesses "strength and authority" is one of the distinguishing markers between Conservatives, on the one hand, and Labour members, on the other. Whereas it comes in fourth place out of the twelve for Conservative Party members, it is in eighth place not only for Labour members but eighth also in the ranking by the general public.[47] In a different set of questions, the same group of political scientists found that "Tory members are far more inclined than their Labour counterparts (and, indeed, the general public) towards self-confident, charismatic, even show-off leaders who regard themselves as exceptional."[48]

Blair has been an assiduous promoter of the cult of the strong leader. In his memoirs, he is enormously patronizing to the Labour Party, the body of people who chose him as party leader and thereby opened up his path to 10 Downing Street. In the memoirs, he mentions "a huge debt of gratitude" to party members, but that was because, even though he "put them through a lot," they had taken it, "most of the time, with quite extraordinary dignity and loyalty."[49] He had

[42] For a well-informed book on Keir Starmer's transition from advocacy of policies at least as far from those of the "Blairites" as from the "Corbynites" when he was competing for intra-party votes in the 2020 Labour leadership campaign, to endorsement as leader and prime minister of policies pushed by Blair and his circle, see Patrick Maguire and Gabriel Pogrund, *Get In: The Inside Story of Labour under Starmer* (Bodley Head, London, 2025).

[43] Brown, *The Myth of the Strong Leader*, p. 1.

[44] Tim Bale, Paul Webb, and Stavroula Chrona, "What do Britons Want in a Political Leader*?", Political Insight* (Political Studies Association, December 2024), pp. 4–7.

[45] Ibid., p. 5.

[46] Ibid.

[47] Ibid., pp. 5–6.

[48] Ibid., p. 6.

[49] Blair, *A Journey*, p. xvii.

wished to put Liberal Democrats in the Cabinet in 1997, including their party leader Paddy Ashdown, but "despite *our cavalier attitude to our parties*" (italics added), Blair realized he couldn't get away with it because of the size of the Labour majority (or, in the formulation he invariably prefers, "I had won a huge majority").[50] Over time, the Labour Party membership became increasingly disillusioned with Blair and, perhaps not coincidentally, he came to the view that "parties with defined members" were out of date: "My vision was to discard the conventional notions of party membership and structure, to treat supporters as members for key decisions and to use the new technology not merely to build out into new support but also to interact with supporters and to campaign in a different manner."[51] On this period of 2005–2007, when both party and country (not to mention Gordon Brown) had made clear to Blair that the end was near, "I had complete clarity about what it was I had to do. I really did feel … at the top of my game. I appreciated the bitter irony that this had happened when my popularity was at its lowest, but I also knew that in May 2005 [the election] I had won, not lost, and there was a residual respect for and attachment to strong and decisive leadership."[52] Not surprisingly, then, if the party couldn't behave like a Supporters' Club, it was time to look for a more malleable way of mobilizing the necessary backing.

In reality, political parties, as they exist in democracies, are undervalued, for no democracy exists, or could last long, without a competitive party system. The top leaders can do some good or great damage, but leaders are always replaceable. There is no shortage of politicians who would like to be prime minister. A shortage of people who are prepared to exert themselves on behalf of a political party without any reward other than defending values they hold, and working at ground level for what their party stands for, would be more serious. Political party memberships have been in decline in democracies, but it is not only premature to write them off. It would also be profoundly dangerous if this occurred. Parties are among the most basic defenses of democracy against technocracy, plutocracy, or autocracy, unless, like the American Republicans, they are captured by a combination of at least two of those three. Parties themselves provide political leadership. Those on the center-left and left are especially unwilling to subcontract decisions on what is good for them and the country to one individual, even if, or rather especially if, he sees himself as a strong and exceptional leader. A vibrant political party, particularly one embracing social democratic values, which has a mass following, can be a major countervailing force to would-be autocrats and already existing plutocrats alike.

How can Blair justify handing to himself, when he first entered 10 Downing Street, supreme power to make policy for the government and country? In his recent book, *On Leadership*, he provides only a circular argument that doesn't begin to address the issue of justification: "the Leader" must prevail because that person is "the Leader." Making no distinction between a prime minister in a parliamentary democracy and an executive president, or even between them and an absolute monarch or military dictator, he writes, "The Leader has power precisely because they are the Leader," and, in case the assertion has not been taken on board, later in the book he asserts, "When you're the Leader, you're the 'Decision-Maker'. You will make the decision. That's your job. There may be someone better qualified … It's just that they're not the Leader."[53]

When Blair first sat in the prime minister's chair at the Cabinet table, he tells us, "I naively assumed that if *I decided something*, then that 'something' would happen. *My decision* would be transmitted through the faithful system and its substance and intent faithfully implemented" (italics added).[54] He soon learned that was not so, and given that he had not had a single day of experience in government (he acknowledges the anomaly), a natural reaction would be, "Thank God for that!" However, the answer to his inability to wield as much power on domestic policy as he wished was to be provided for him by an adviser, Michael Barber. Blair seized on Barber's idea of a Delivery Unit when it was brought to his attention in 2001. It subsequently became multiple delivery units in multiple government departments, and "Deliverology" (the term coined by a senior Treasury official Nick Macpherson and accepted by Barber himself[55]) became something of a panacea which the former prime minister has been peddling around the world ever since.

Secretaries of State in Britain are endowed with great powers, but they were to be reminded who was "the Leader." "When the Delivery Unit picks up the phone to talk to a ministerial department, or *even a minister*, the recipient of the call must know that they're speaking to the *source of power* and not merely to a functionary" (italics added). Blair wished it to be known that the Delivery Unit's "priorities were mine, that they were owned by me, and that the unit was doing my bidding and was accountable to me."[56]

"Don't listen to those who tell you to have a light touch, to let your ministers 'get on with the job', to assume that

[50] Ibid., p. 119.

[51] Ibid., p. 640.

[52] Ibid., p. 584.

[53] Blair, *On Leadership*,, pp. 9 and 282.

[54] Ibid,, p. 75.

[55] Michael Barber, *Instruction to Deliver* (Methuen, London, 2007), pp. 70–109. Barber worked harmoniously with Blair, but early in the development of the Delivery Unit, he wrote that he "was a little concerned that Blair's chief concern had been about presentation, not substance, but this was also an important part of my education in working for a Prime Minister" (p. 108).

[56] Blair, *On Leadership*, p. 79.

others in the chain of command will do what they're meant to do," Blair writes. "The people who proffer this advice are either academics trained in theory not practice, or civil servants who know that a weak centre allows them to rest easy."[57] The "chain of command" sounds more like Soviet "democratic centralism" than the give-and-take of political life in a democracy. Successive Cabinet Secretaries have not, in fact, wanted a "weak centre," but they do see themselves as not only one of the prime minister's principal advisers but also as defenders of the rights of Cabinet ministers.[58] They know the difference between a strong government, capable of getting things done, and an overmighty prime minister who wants to concentrate power in a narrow group of cronies in 10 Downing Street.

A prime minister can occasionally be subverted from within his own personal entourage, and would have fared better working through the civil service machine. For senior aides to take decisions in the name of the prime minister has become commonplace. Generally, they are fully in keeping with the prime minister's known views, but in Dominic Cummings's case, they could be independent of what Boris Johnson might happen to think. In Johnson's 10 Downing Street, Cummings was an extreme case of a power usurper. He didn't trust Johnson's judgement, so he preferred to take decisions himself. He also kept from the prime minister documents he should have seen, among them those expressing doubt about the legality of prorogation of Parliament (subsequently, and unanimously, declared illegal by the UK Supreme Court) in order to speed up legislative confirmation of the UK's exit from the EU.[59]

Jonathan Powell has come closest to developing a sustained argument for a "strong" prime minister wielding great power from the center.[60] Drawing on Machiavelli's advice, Powell is as committed as Blair to the principle of a strong leader, and he is dismissive of Cabinet decision-making because of the excessive size of the body for determining policy. He makes little distinction between informal meetings, in which the prime minister decides whom to invite, and formally constituted Cabinet committees. Any sensible defense of the role of the Cabinet not only subsumes Cabinet committees as part of the due process that the Cabinet Office should protect, but stresses their importance.[61] The real issue, which Powell evades, and some academic discussion of "the core executive" also evades, is the need to have not only the people with relevant knowledge and appropriate departmental responsibilities on the smaller committee, but also ministers of sufficient independence and party standing that they are willing to challenge the judgement of the prime minister and disrupt groupthink. The Chilcott Report of 2016 on Britain's role in the Iraq War noted that the government committee which considered the evidence for going to war would have benefited from the membership of Robin Cook, "as a former Foreign Secretary known to have concerns about the policy," and also that of the Chancellor Gordon Brown.[62]

Powell, in his book on leadership, in some ways contradicts Blair's account in his memoirs of how, as prime minister, he decided one important issue after another. "In truth," Powell writes, "political power does not reside in Number 10 but is instead widely diffused *in the British elite*, not just in government but outside it as well" (italics added).[63] Ministers who wielded great power in the postwar Labour government, Ernest Bevin, Herbert Morrison, and Aneurin Bevan among them, were not born into any elite, but rose through their own abilities, and wielded power by virtue of the office they held and by knowing how to use it. Clement Attlee neither could nor did give them instructions. Nor did he wish to, but he sometimes made suggestions.

[57] Ibid., p. 8.

[58] That is doubtless part of the reason why Dominic Cummings has spoken of a need for taking a "chainsaw" (echoing the language of Elon Musk) to the civil service and "abolishing the Cabinet Office in the process" (*The Times*, 17 October 2025).

[59] Anthony Seldon and Raymond Newell, *Johonson at 10: The Inside Story* (Atlantic, London, 2023), pp. 87–88.

[60] Jonathan Powell, *The New Machiavelli: How to Wield Power in the Modern World* (Bodley Head, London, 2010).

[61] I did so myself in an article written almost sixty years ago which, while identifying some areas where the prime minister's power had increased, emphasized the constraints on prime ministers: A. H. Brown, "Prime Ministerial Power", *Public Law*, Spring and Summer 1968, pp. 28–52 and 96–118. To stress the advantages of collegial leadership over "monocratic leadership," the term used by Thomas A. Baylis, does not mean being oblivious to the importance of *size* of the body that argues out and essentially makes the policy decision that, in most cases, is merely ratified, rather than reopened, in the larger committee of ministers (such as the full Cabinet in the UK). See Baylis, *Governing by Committee: Collegial Leadership in Advanced Societies* (State University of New York Press,, New York, 1989), pp. 17–18, 31–34, and 154–155; and also, Anthony King, "In Favor of Leader-Proofing", *Daedalus*, Vol. 145, No. 3, 2016, pp. 124–137.

[62] Chilcott Inquiry Report Executive Summary, C 264, 16 July 2016, Point 407. Brown and Cook had prickly personal relations (until they made it up in private after Cook had resigned from the government), so that would have added to awkwardness on the committee. But awkwardness would have been infinitely preferable to the decision to engage in a war which British Middle Eastern specialists knew was going to be a disaster. It was precisely because Brown and, still more, Cook would have asked awkward questions and come to different conclusions on the evidence before them that they were the last people Blair would have wanted on the Committee, since he had already made up his mind. For him, that was enough.

[63] Powell, p. 29.

The center of government in Britain is "not too powerful but too weak,"[64] complains Powell, who was at the heart of it as Blair's right-hand man throughout his premiership and is back at the center now, working almost as closely with Starmer. Accompanying Starmer on his trips abroad, he has ample opportunity to bend his ear.

This is not necessarily to Starmer's advantage. If Andrew Marr is correct in reporting that "across Whitehall, they say Starmer actively dislikes frank testing policy arguments with his ministers; and that once he's made an argument, he thinks he doesn't need to make it again," he has learned the wrong lessons.[65] Labour MPs have been more tolerant of their leaders than have the Conservatives, and have never been as ruthless as the Tories were in choosing four leaders in quick succession who did not need to do anything as inconvenient as contesting a general election in order to become prime minister: Theresa May in 2016; Boris Johnson in 2019; Liz Truss in 2022; and Rishi Sunak, also in 2022.

But the Parliamentary Labour Party has the power to make its leader's position untenable, and since Labour's decline in popularity has been sharp, and Starmer's drop in public support even more precipitous, the current prime minister may find that listening to the right of the Labour Party rather than its mainstream is not the way to achieve political longevity. Harold Wilson (and Attlee before him) held that the best position for a Labour leader to occupy was "from the centre or centre-left" of *the party* (not of the country, for the country's center could be moved by a successful party in their direction, as happened during both the Attlee-led and Thatcher-led governments, in spite of those two prime ministers' completely different styles of leadership and direction of travel).[66]

Among the numerous flaws in the arguments of Blair and Powell in favor of a prime minister's power to take all the big decisions in government is that capable and self-confident ministers would not put up with it. Gordon Brown certainly did not in the Blair government. Resignations of senior ministers from Margaret Thatcher's Cabinet weakened her position over time and, following Geoffrey Howe's departure, made her position impossible. More fundamentally, "all power to 10 Downing Street" only makes sense in Blair's and Powell's own terms if the head of government who inherits such power is a leader whose views they do not detest. Perhaps even more than the case of Liz Truss, a more tooth-grinding example for them would be a government led by Jeremy Corbyn, which after the 2017 general election (as distinct from 2019) did not seem such a remote possibility.

It is the unpredictability of who will come to hold the highest office that should make a prudent prime minister think twice before attempting to enhance further the powers of the office. Blair accepts the importance of due process in law.[67] It is a pity that he was "cavalier," to use the term he applied to his relationship with the Labour Party, in his attitude to due process in government. It might even have saved him from being held personally responsible for one of the two worst foreign policy decisions by a British government since the Second World War. The Foreign Office is not always right, but if it had been accorded the weight it was due on a major foreign policy decision, and those with knowledge of the Arab world, within and outside that department, had been heeded, neither the invasion of Egypt in 1956 (along with France, and in collusion with Israel) nor British participation in the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, would have occurred.

To return to where I began, it is pointless to expect that Donald Trump will ever take heed of due process, but if American democracy is not to slide further down an authoritarian road, other American political actors, preferably including some Republican legislators, had better rediscover it. Furthermore, the leadership of the American Democratic Party will need, perhaps stimulated by the striking electoral success of Democrats at state and city levels in November 2025, to discover a boldness that has deserted them, and the checks and balances built into the American Constitution will have to be activated. A president who makes the delusional claims that "only I can fix it" and that "I run the country and the world," and even British leaders who are tempted to think that they are the source of power and fountain of wisdom, need to be disabused. They are not Machiavelli's Prince, and they should not aspire to be. And those who are still in two minds about the desirability or absurdity of one-person decision-making across the range of government

[64] Ibid.

[65] Andrew Marr, "Shabana Mahmood is already being talked about as Britain's next prime minister", *New Statesman*, 10–16 October 2025.

[66] Harold Wilson, *The Governance of Britain* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1976), p. 35. Oddly, in that book, Wilson uses extensively a 20,000-word article I published in 1968, which I had sent the prime minister, following a conversation with him (he spoke, I listened) at a formal dinner in 1975. Numerous quotations he uses, with the page number listed, are verbatim quotes and references from the article (Wilson's p. 5, for example, is filled with them). Wilson was in a hurry to get his book out in the same year as he left office (having done so voluntarily, unlike almost every other prime minister) and he had no time to read the various works he quotes as if he had read them. Any concern I may have had about the mild plagiarism was more than allayed by Wilson, with his vast ministerial and prime ministerial experience, declaring on p. 1 that "the best commentaries on the [PM's powers] debate are by A. H. Brown, 'Prime Ministerial Power' in *Public Law* [with full citation, as in n. 61, above] … and an equally authoritative article by D. N. Chester [Warden of Nuffield College, Oxford, and an old friend of Wilson]," *Parliamentary Affairs*, Vol. XV, 1962, pp. 519–527, reviewing John Mackintosh, *The British Cabinet* (Methuen, London, 1962).

[67] Blair, *On Leadership*, pp. 123–131.

might pay heed to the wise words of Adam Smith who wrote that, while it is desirable for a leader to have at least a general idea of what they want to do, to insist upon:

> establishing all at once, and in spite of all opposition, everything which that idea may seem to require, must often be the highest degree of arrogance. It is to erect his own judgement into the supreme standard of right and wrong. It is to fancy himself the only wise and worthy man in the commonwealth, and his fellow-citizens should accommodate themselves to him and not he to them. It is on this account, that of all political speculators, sovereign princes are by far the most dangerous.[68]

[68] Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* ([First published 1759], Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1976), p. 234.

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