



# Popular politics, populism and the leaders. Access without participation?

The cases of Italy and UK

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## Popular politics, populism and the leaders. Access without participation? The cases of Italy and UK

Emiliana De Blasio, Matthew Hibberd and Michele Sorice<sup>1</sup>

Contemporary democracies have seen the rise of political figures that Sergio Fabbrini (1999) calls “democratic princes”. The “democratic princes” as they are configured in the last decade, would have been unthinkable during the reshaping of the Western European public institutions following the Second World War. However, we still should remember that throughout the twentieth century the centrality of the executives has become ever more important (Fabbrini 2011). This is also due to the huge scale of functions that decision-making institutions have in modern societies. Note that “executives” do not always coincide with “governments”: the latter, in fact, may represent

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very different institutional apparatus according to the legal and political traditions and institutional history of different countries. It is not by chance that in the most recent texts of political studies, the term "government" is often replaced with that of 'governance', a transformation that involves a shift from hierarchical concept of political authority to a more open structure that recognizes significance less centrally coordinated, capable of directing public policy-making processes. In this transformation, the executives have substantially increased their role and they have far greater independence from Parliaments: in other words, the executives have become - even in parliamentary democracies - *the* leading political institution, reducing the authority of parliament. Moreover, other trends seem to have strengthened the role of the executive in the political system and, in particular, the role of the First or Prime Minister (or President of the Council of Ministers). Ludger Helms (2005) writes: "The chief's executive position within the executive branch has been strengthened by the increasing demands of policy coordination which, in turn, may be considered the results of an increased sectorization of policy-making, increasing budgetary pressures, and the rise of more complex policy agendas that requires increased public expenditure and core executive co-ordination". In other words, the complexification of public life and the increase of the specialized functions have contributed to the growth in importance of authority figures. They exercise huge power, although within a network of democratic checks and balances.

## 1. The leader and the democratic control

Here is a first important point, which relates to checks and balances, or still better, the question of the balance between decision-making and democratic controls. The discussion – regularly discussed in Italy – on institutional forms (and whether to adopt a Parliamentary system, a Presidential system, ie American-style Presidentialism, Semi-Presidentialism, ie French-style, etc) presents the great-unsolved question affecting the fragile equilibrium between various authorities that manage power there. In fact the discussion of institutional forms should not only be of great concern to political scientists, but rather should be of central importance to all organizations taking part in the democratic system and to citizens themselves. There are many common themes in Italian debates about institutional reform: for example, the French Semi-Presidentialism is often seen to provide more guarantees of control in that it provides a parliamentary system in which populist pressures can determine a “de facto” shifting towards authoritarian regimes. If, as happens in Italy, electoral laws do not guarantee social representation and real alternatives for citizens, the risks for democracy become very strong.

Political leaders, anyway, are not an invention of late modernity; the new trends relate to the different roles they have in liberal democracies (it is obvious that the “leader” imposed by force in totalitarian regimes is different to the debate on political leadership).

As well known, when speaking about political leadership, many scholars refer to Max Weber's theory on charisma. This is a very complex and ambivalent concept. Charisma, in fact, is defined by the German sociologist as referring to a set of qualities that a leader should possess; they are substantially "innate" (natural) characteristics, which can help the person with charisma to change the situation in which he/she is and to direct the people towards his/her vision of the world. The leader with charisma is, in this meaning, autocratic.

In a beautiful reconstruction of the leadership models, Carlo Marletti (2009) identifies three basic requirements for leaders: "1) attitude and personal qualities that make effective leadership, 2) the consensus that he/she can have from the whole political spectrum, 3) the conflict between leader and the parties' organization and, more precisely, the conflict between the leader and the political class of intermediaries". This last aspect is one of the most interesting features of the relationship between political leadership and the media. The conflict between the leader and "traditional politics" has its background in the process of personalization of political life. Simplifying we can say that the two main types of leadership - the populist and what might be called "**horizontal**" - are both connected to the media. The populist leader is (or tries to be) the body of the entire electorate and, in fact, he/she doesn't need the intermediary role of the political class. Hence the conflict between him/her and the party machine, but often also between the leader and the public institutions where he/she should exercise its mandate. The risk is the decline of the institutions and the loss of centrality of parliaments. It is no coincidence that these types of leaders always present

themselves as “new” and very often they express an anti-parliamentary rhetoric (in Italy, for example, the Berlusconi’s slogans against the ‘un-useful parliament’ or the definition of the same Parliament as “old” or “not efficient” and so on; in UK – of course at a very different level – some David Cameron’s discourses against “civil rights” and so on). The rhetoric of the populist leader is always deeply anti-political. Apart from Berlusconi, there are other interesting examples in Italian politics: from the language and themes used by some leaders of the Northern League, especially in the use of event or identity politics (popular meetings or rallies, endorsing pagan rituals, etc.) to the various aspects of some left campaigns, especially in anti-political opposition movements (whose leaders, such as the comedian and blogger, Beppe Grillo, often use communication strategies which are strongly populist).

The leader – that we have defined – “horizontal” analysing our field research findings is more difficult to bring out: it needs a variety of subjects which endorse him/her even participating, at least at a symbolic level, at his/her social legitimation, even before the media. Similar experiences are those that have led – in Italy – some candidates for Mayor (i.e. the recent cases of Milan and Naples) or – across Europe – the rising of popular but not populist leaders, as in the case of Alex Salmond, First Minister of Scotland and leader of the Scottish National Party, or in the case of the Norwegian Prime Minister, Jens Stoltenberg. They represent examples of “horizontal leadership” and, perhaps, not by chance, adopt broadly left wing concerns, such as nuclear disarmament, environmentally-friendly energy policies and a certain degree

of openness towards inward migration. The horizontal leadership can be legitimated by the media, but it also needs people who participate beyond “clicktivism logic”.

## **2. The role of the media**

And now we come to another crucial point: the role of media in the construction and / or legitimacy of political leadership. Much has been written about the phenomenon of the spectacularization of politics, which seems to be inherent to the media (particularly but not exclusively, television). The centrality of the media in this scenario produces what we analyzed in some of our recent research and charts the shift from “the rhetoric of mobilization” to the “*rhetoric of seduction*” (De Blasio 2009; De Blasio, Sorice 2010). In other words, there is a shifting from agency to representation. This aspect is a clear example of the affirmation of the visible aesthetics opposite to the social agency; this is not only a sociological formula, but is also a risk for democracy. If representation becomes more prominent than agency (which means the weakening of public intervention, common interests, social projects, local plans, and so on) politics loses its role of social mediation; so if MPs - as it happens with the current Italian electoral law - are not chosen by the citizens it provokes a disconnection between institutions and citizens. The risk of such divergence is the increasing of new populist and demagogic pressures on one hand and the explosion of protests and riots (with a dangerous resurgence of violence and social conflict) on the other hand.

Political spectacle has merged in recent years with the

personalization process. It brings together three different social processes:

a) the development of mass culture, whose highest expression what comes from the media representation: popular culture obtains legitimacy and even social ‚discursiveness‘ only in media discourses;

b) the tendency to overlap social functions of the political actors with their personal characteristics. In reality it is not a phenomenon born with the media, contrary to popular beliefs, because it was already present in many political systems of the past, for example, in ancient Rome, a political actor’s personal characteristics were almost always merged (and confused) with their political skills. Nevertheless, it is clear that this process has been greatly enhanced with the arrival of the modern media, which have produced a multiplication and acceleration of these trends;

c) the process of individualization is the phenomenon that is intertwined with the development of media and polling, in which individuals have become prominent in comparison to the weakening of political parties.

The personalization of politics has - at least in theory - even “positive” aspects: indeed, it tends, in some way, to “popularize” politics itself and at the same time it produces a strong communicative investment towards the so-called *emotional public* (Higgins 2008; Sorice 2009): a public composed of very differentiated individuals, among whom is an important part of those floating voters who often determine the outcome of elections. The media influence over these people seems to be very strong. The popularization process only minimally enables wider “participation” of people

traditionally excluded (for many reasons: cultural, social, information skills and language) from political discourse. More often, this tendency produces a “dumbing down”, a degradation of the themes and language of politics. In this regard, trivialization of ethical and religious issues and the adoption of sexual and “macho” metaphors in political language are only the most evident results of the process.

It is also true, as Mick Temple argues, that the so called “dumbing down” of political coverage, referring largely to the simplification and sensationalism of “serious news by journalists, is an essential part of the process of engaging people in debates about the distribution of resources in modern democratic societies” (Temple 2006: 257-258). Mick Temple is right, according to us, when he writes that “The public sphere needs to be reconceptualised in order to more accurately reflect that what Dahlgren (1995) has called the ‘mediated public sphere’ comprises many (and multi-dimensional) public spheres. All forms of popular entertainment are constituents of the mediated public sphere”. At the same time, Mick Temple also stated “the public has choice now – that choice may be largely illusory, but it does not mean that they are capable of constructing their own individualized public sphere” (Temple 2006: 271). This balance between participation and illusion of control, across the dumbing down and popularization are evidence of our research about the political leaders representation in Facebook, Twitter and more generally on the web.

### 3. Parties and leaders in Italy

The current state of Italian politics, however, seems to have passed this phase. The rise of "party leaders" is closely connected with the impoverishment in the social potential of political parties. Within this framework we can consider the "personal" or maybe better "patrimonial party", such as the "Popolo della Libertà" (the centre-right party led by Silvio Berlusconi). Even that party had a transformation: it is now "personal" and no more "personalized". The party does not act as a machine to select and support the leader; rather the opposite, the leader is the party creator; he provides rules and values, identity and organization. The party, in other words, becomes a spin machine for the leader. If the personalisation of politics affects the selection of political actors, the development of personal parties can produce real distortions in the mechanisms of recruitment, with the emergence of dramatic *Winnowing Effects*. This is a further threat to governance, increasingly entrusted to people with limited skills in public affairs management.

In Italy, the *Popolo della Libertà*, even with the appointment of Mr. Angelino Alfano to its political head, remains a personal party. It appears frequently from analysis (that here we can only mention) of Facebook profiles and Twitter messages, and even from the online discussions from centre-right activists, continue to speak about Mr. Berlusconi, while citations of Mr. Alfano are very few. He is the only "official leader" with a poor presence on the web. A personal party is unthinkable without the one person that gives it meaning and economic resources.

The problems concerning leadership does not concern, of course, only the *Popolo della Libertà* but affects people who grew up in the shadow of the leader and - it must be said - often at the service of the leader's spin machine. The case is different for the *Democratic Party*: the political formation of the centre-left is in part a new party, merging the traditions of the Christian Democrats and the Communist Party, although the new political party has very different political projects. Therefore it needs time to build up its identity: this is still its biggest problem, evident from the differentiated communicative styles of its leaders on the web. The Democratic Party has three perspectives. The first one is to try to ride new social emergencies but this would be a mistake and cause a boomerang effect. The second one is to try to build a new "tactical" transformation but in this case its electorate probably would not understand. The third one is to allow hybridization of participation by new experiences, becoming an open-collector, the frame of new popular needs in accessing to the politics. This last one could be a winning strategy, but Democratic Party must to leave the old logic of traditional politics and adopt a new language. In this logic, Primary elections (which are a great democratic potential) should not be the instrument of legitimation of the leadership but, in contrast, they should be the activation tool for the development of the "horizontal leadership" we talked about above.

#### **4. Need for participation?**

The new grassroots movement and the rise of a widespread need for participation are important signals. Not towards the abandonment of the politics, but rather to a reconquest of political action by citizens. Not to the denial of the democratic parties as an instrument of social mediation, but rather to transform them into transparent and really participatory aggregations. In this context, the “horizontal leadership” can be an important resource.

In 2009, we studied the relationships between the AIP (Access, Interaction, and Participation) model and the forms of political engagement. At that time we used focus groups to put in evidence the interrelation between “trust” and “participation” (De Blasio, Sorice 2010). We repeated the same procedures in 2011 to study the dynamics of trust in political leaders by the web 2.0 participants. We obtained the same findings of 2009.

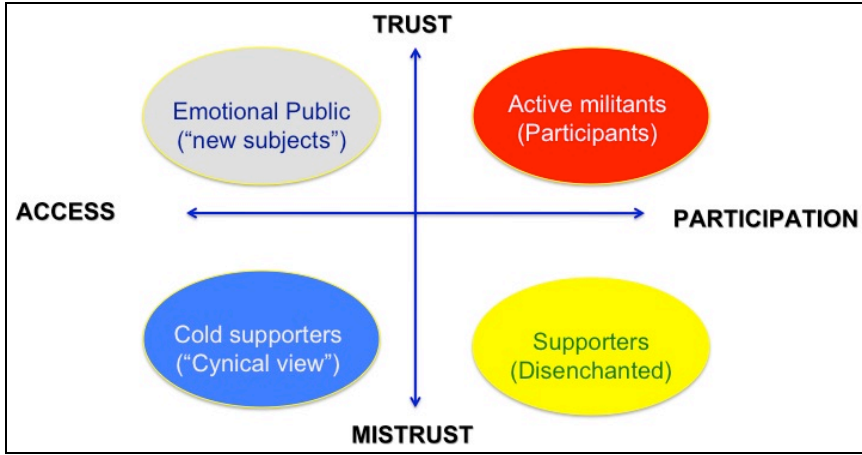


Fig. 1. Four ways to approach politics in Web 2.0

The findings that emerge from the focus groups confirmed that social media seem to improve disintermediation processes in the relations between citizens and political actors, particularly the leaders. At the same time, this trend is not always evident and in some cases a new form of re-intermediation replaces the old one. The dynamics of trust seem to play an important role in the mechanisms of legitimation of political leadership. In other words, if the new subjects of politics develop trust mechanisms within the same logic of “connectedness”, people more traditionally sensitive to politics (such as the cynics) feel the need for new mechanisms of intermediation: non-traditional ones, not exercised by traditional political parties, but still present and active.

Thanks to these considerations we can argue that - contrary to what many say - the social networks are not merely containers

of political issues but are, at the same time, *frame, content and tool of legitimization*. In some cases they seem to be opponent of the populist tendencies emerging from television consumption.

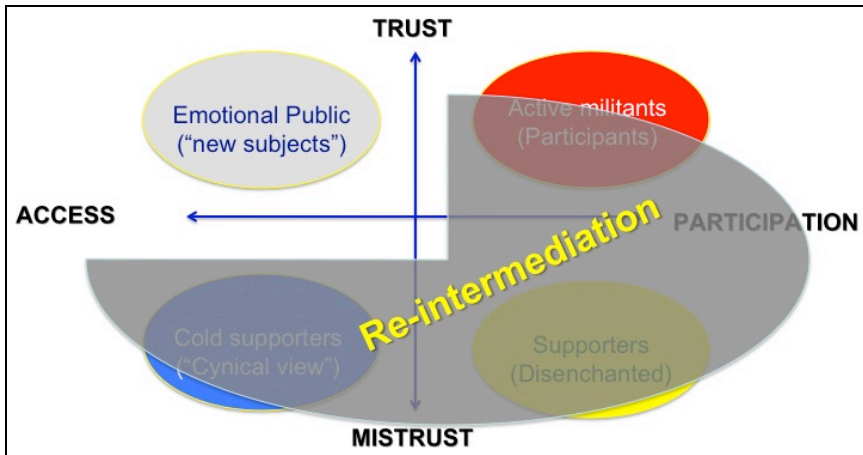


Fig. 2. Disintermediation and re-intermediation between trust and participation

In particular, the majority of our focus group respondents highlight not so much the presence of disintermediation processes, but a transformation of political mediation into horizontal and “dialogical” communication styles. It is not clear whether this result is an effect deriving from the transformation of the party-form and, more generally, from the radical re-shaping of the political community or whether it is just a “meaning-effect” coming from the relational architecture of the social networks. What is sure, however, is that the pseudo-dialogical style of the web 2.0 can increase both pushing towards horizontal leadership and populist leadership.

## 5. Parties and leaders in the UK

The focus of this part of the paper is to examine how political leadership has changed in the UK in recent decades focussing then on issue politics and the very heated debates, excusing the pun, surrounding climate change. Our argument, following from issues debated above, is that leaders now require more engagement with their electorates. They require vision and communication skills to win over doubtful electorates. In other words, political leadership in the UK, especially for those politicians that have enjoyed most success, has been transformed from the image of the rather grey and dour party leader exercising rational authority within a parliamentary system, to the charismatic presidential-like leaders, where power resides ever more in extra-parliamentary institutions. One key institution of new power is the mass media. This exercise of more populist authority has been demonstrated most classically by Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s and by Tony Blair from 1997 to 2007, although the legacy of both politicians remains contested. In Thatcher's case due to the social and economic upheaval caused to industrial cities; in Blair's case due to British involvement in the Second Iraq War. Latterly, David Cameron's victory at the General Election of May 2010 cautions against easy or one-sided analysis. Often seen as the most logical heir or successor to Blair and Thatcher, Cameron did not win an outright victory in 2010 and coalition politics in the UK has thus far had a very negative impact on the fortunes of another

young and charismatic politician, the Liberal Democrat leader, Nick Clegg. Indeed, Cameron's victory was almost blotted by a late resurgence in the fortunes of the Labour Party, despite having been in power for 13 years and being led by one of the most uncharismatic politicians, Gordon Brown. Our argument therefore is that publics can often see through the spin of modern day mediated politics, and this is also noticeable when looking at key issues, such as climate change. Such tensions between politicians and the broadcast media have existed since the very early days of the radio medium. John Reith's BBC, though, was highly deferential towards politics and politicians especially when compared to today's journalists who are more likely to take a far more aggressive tone with politicians (witness the infamous 1997 BBC interview between the Newsnight presenter, Jeremy Paxman, and the then Conservative leadership contender, Michael Howard<sup>2</sup>). In return, many politicians mistrusted, misunderstood or miscalculated the power of the new medium as Reith's report of the first general election speeches by party leaders demonstrates: October 1924 saw the first political broadcasts in the general election of that month. I had urged that advantage be taken of this new agency of popular enlightenment in the election of December 1923; had failed then; seemed to have failed again. But one morning the Prime Minister's secretary telephoned to say that each of the three party leaders would broadcast once; Ramsey MacDonald was to be taken from a Glasgow hall two nights later. I told him it was a mistake to append an invisible audience of a million to a visible audience of two or three thousand. He replied that that was what had been decided. Asquith also elected to be

broadcast from a public meeting in Paisley. Stanley Baldwin, wiser than either, took the opportunity seriously; came to Savoy Hill to see exactly what he had to do; asked many intelligent questions; spoke a week later from a studio (Reith 1949: 96-97).

The Conservatives, under Baldwin, won the election. This mistrust and misunderstanding between politicians and radio producers would remain for many years and it took the onset of war and for onset of television competition after 1955, especially in the run up to the ‘first’ television general election of 1959 when 70% of the population owned a TV (this became 90% by the 1964 election), before politicians took the task of political broadcasts seriously. By 1959, commercial television had introduced advertising and politicians were far more aware of the power of promotional culture. As Asa Briggs argues: “Significantly, the rise of Macmillan’s popularity coincided with his first major television success, in May 1958... The Prime Minister was very carefully prepared and coached. Before the interview, the Gallup Poll found that only 37% of its sample believed that Macmillan was ‘doing a good job as Prime Minister’. After the interview, the proportion rose to 50%. Television was not the only influence accounting for the change but it was obviously a measurable influence, as Macmillan himself realised” (1995: 241).

By 1964, too, rules governing party election broadcasts (those produced by the parties themselves) had been changed with the Liberal party being allowed to increase its share of broadcasts due to electoral successes in previous years. However, Northern Irish, Scottish and Welsh parties were given no space, inconceivable today with devolution in place

(Briggs, 1995: 443). Another major change took place in the 1970s and 1980s, with an increase in presidential-style leadership, or the cult of the leader, in many European countries, including Britain. This brought with it a tendency to relegate the importance of full Cabinet discussions and parliamentary debate. Over the past 30 years, the political system has developed in a direction, which limited the power of parliament and increasingly passed decision making to ministers. It is this process which also underlies the decline in the media reporting of parliament at Westminster.

At the same time, as discussed above, is evident that the role of the media has become much more central to the political process since the 1950s. But it is only with the pioneering work of Lord Bell, Gordon Reece and Saatchi and Saatchi for the Thatcher government and Conservative party, that we see the full development of commercial marketing techniques brought into everyday politics. The increased importance of the news media, especially, has interacted with the rise of advertising, lobbying, marketing, public relations and 'spin' or manipulation of information in politics, so that we now live in an era of promotional culture. Added to this has been the increasing use by politicians of celebrity endorsements. Labour Prime Minister Harold Wilson was famously photographed with The Beatles. As Brian McNair argues when talking about the 1980s and later elections: "During election campaigns rallies have become opportunities for parties to display the stars of stage, screen and sports arena who support them. At a rally in 1983 the Conservatives enlisted the aid of popular comedians like the late Kenny Everett as well as more well-known Conservative supporters like Cilla Black and

Jimmy Tarbuck. In 1992, 1997, 2001 and 2005 Labour employed ‘alternative’ comedians Ben Elton, Stephen Fry and others to emphasise that advisers hoped to present as a younger, more progressive sets of values” (2007: 135).

More notorious still was Tony Blair’s parties for celebrities, as Brian McNair again argues:

“In the Blair Government’s first year in office, the Prime Minister hosted several parties for celebrities from the world of art, entertainment and youth culture at 10 Downing Street. Meetings with Oasis’ writer and manager (Noel Gallagher and Alan McGee respectively) were photographed and widely published (although the Gallagher brothers’ alleged fondness for cocaine and marijuana was in contradiction to the new government’s anti-drug policies)” (2007: 135).

It is however the rise in the permanent campaigning in British politics and the emergence of the ‘spin’ doctors that has marked the main increase in the importance of the media in political life since the late 1970s. This led to the rise of the permanent campaign in the UK echoing earlier developments in the US. After winning her second election victory in 1983, Margaret Thatcher told party workers that the next election campaign started that same night. However, former press secretary, Bernard Ingham, argues: ‘Mrs Thatcher came to government with a coherent philosophy and was not one to be driven solely - if at all - by presentation’ (Ingham 1991: 235-236; see also Miller and Dinan, 2007).

Labour came to believe that the Tories had won due to spin and that they needed to do the same, so although ‘spin’ emerged under the Conservative administrations of the 1980s, it reached its pinnacle under New Labour. The invulnerability

of the modernisers was shaken early in the government's term of office by succession of scandals. But it was not until summer 2000 that Labour began to see themselves as vulnerable. The slow handclapping which greeted Tony Blair's speech to the Women's Institute in June that year was arguably the moment when large parts of the public saw through the spin of modern politics, reinforced by Blair's handling of the Second Iraq War in 2003.

## **6. Climate Change and Leadership**

The following section is based on research funded by Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland grant and a UKIERI grant awarded by the UK and Indian Governments through the British Council. The research examines young people – broadly defined as 16-30 – attitudes to climate change and their use of media.

Climate change, arguably, is one of the key political, economic and social issues facing the human race in the 21st Century. Expert predictions relating to climate change are extremely bleak with some arguing that global temperatures are likely to rise by about 3°C by 2100, ranging from 2°C to 5°C (Stern, 2009). The global rise in temperature in the coming decades will bring with it increased instances of flooding, drought and volatile weather patterns. This will have a significant impact on basic water supplies and food production especially if, as predicted, the world's population increases to around 11 billion people by 2050. Climate change will have an impact on all, but evidence indicates that developing nations will be

disproportionately affected by climate change. However, the whole issue of climate change is politically charged with vocal proponents and opponents voicing their views daily in the mass media and on social networking sites.

Leadership has been a constant feature of environmental debates both historically and in the contemporary age. Both Gordon Brown and Tony Blair, both cited above and two very different kinds of leader have been vocal advocates of climate change issues and have often argued the need for leadership in this issue. As Gordon Brown, in his speech to the UN in July 2007 argued: “Creating a sustainable planet not just for some but for all means doing much more to help developing countries invest to adapt to the immediate consequences of climate change... We know that the gains from global prosperity have been disproportionately enjoyed by the people in industrialised countries and that the consequences of climate change will be disproportionately felt by the poorest who are least responsible for it - making the issue of climate change one of justice as much as economic development”. In turn, Tony Blair argued in June 2008: “The world has woken up to climate change. Now it needs to know what to do” (Blair, 2008). This was an important phrase used by Blair as it signalled the move away from the need to raise public awareness, say through generating access to information sources, towards the need to organise greater public participation and behavioural change. But providing leadership in “what to do” is notoriously difficult. Many leading academic experts in the field, like Gordon and Berry (2006: 1), argue that environmental problems have characteristics that make particularly hard to solve therefore

making leadership more difficult.

Among the most interesting and daunting characteristics of environmental issues is the extent to which they permeate virtually all *boundaries*. Ecologists remind us constantly that ecosystems, at whatever scale we choose to study or manage them, are open to the movement of matter and energy both in and out. Actions in uplands forests directly influence processes on wetland that, in turn, alter the behaviour of aquatic and marine ecosystems. Today's global economies and communication systems ensure that information and human values that affect the ecosystems on which we depend are transmitted instantaneously with little regard for the boundaries of nations or regional alliances (2006: viii-ix).

They go on to add: we define environmental leaders as people capable of solving environmental problems. Essential leaders have to be exceptionally sensitive to the values of all those with a stake in their decisions and action.

The characteristics of “essential leadership” required by such leaders include:

- Vision, the ability to see ahead and communicate what you see
- Information, the ability to find, understand and transmit needed information
- Inclusion, listening and using all available skills and ideas
- Decision, defining and persuing action goals
- Dispatch, dong things now rather than later
- Standard Setting, formulating the definition of success

- Humanity, using empathy and humour in dealing with others

Robert L. Williams (2010: 79) and Gordon and Berry (2006: II, 35)

Other commentators, though, remain blunt in their appraisal of leadership and its contribution to climate change and, indeed, seek to implicate leadership in the very problem under debate. As Redekop (2010:5) citing Paul Hawken (2007: 19) argues: “Hawken provides a different view on the role of leadership in confronting ecological crisis. Hawken highlights the *bottom up* movement for social and environmental justice that, by his estimation, is constituted by over a million local groups and organisations worldwide that have no leader or ideology. In Hawken’s analysis, powerful, ideological leaders have gotten us into this mess, and it is going to take a pragmatic, grassroots approach to get us out of it. Yet he acknowledges the potential lack of ,connection, cooperation and effectiveness” of the diverse, leaderless movement that he describes.

At this stage we need to look to the US not the UK for the most prominent role model in the climate change debate. Al Gore is often seen as the key example of a senior statesman and politician who has brought the issue of climate change to public attention in an accessible and visionary way gaining widespread critical and commercial acclaim for his work. Gore is indeed to be admired for the directness and simplicity with which he espouses the climate change cause. And there is little doubt that *An Inconvenient Truth* did raise public awareness of climate change issues. Having had so much success with *An*

*Inconvenient Truth*, Gore has also faced a concerted and, at times, vicious backlash to his views, especially among the American right-wing and the powerful anti-global warming lobby in the US. *An Inconvenient Truth* has been accused of distorting the science and using scare tactics which, some argue, might actually dissuade audiences from adopting the climate change cause (Hulme, 2009: 81). Climate Change sceptics have sought to question many factual aspects of the documentary and have also questioned Gore's own 'profligate' lifestyle as a former Vice President of the USA.

And yet the role of the national leader is vital in this area. When we asked focus groups who should take the lead role in overcoming these barriers to climate change, audiences from our four countries, India, Italy, UK and Vietnam provided very similar answers. For greater climate change promotion and management, including at times of environmental crises, local government and national politicians were cited most often as the key important leaders in this debate. These politicians, along with multi-national corporations, were criticised most often for inaction or inadequate responses to the dangers posed by climate change. Audiences who took part in this research project argued that despite climate change being a global issue, national and local political leaders were often those who, it was argued, could best affect change in this issue. Audiences argued that local and national leaders could best relate the issues of climate change to their everyday lives and engage with broader publics.

Other groups were also mentioned in relation to climate change. It was recognised that climate change required global intervention to bring countries together to discuss the topic

and also to promote issues across national borders. In this respect, the UN, multi-national companies and Non Government Organisations (NGOs) were oft-cited as having a key leadership role in climate change the latter, especially, in countries where the role of civil society groups was still relatively weak and where over-reliance on government information prevails. Despite being criticised less than ‚lazy‘ or ‚incompetent‘ local and national politicians, global institutions or groups, such as the UN, or multi-national companies or NGOs, were often viewed as too weak (UN) or too radical (NGOs) or simply providing lip service to climate change issues (multi-national companies). So for one of the most visible of global issues, there was strong agreement that national and local leadership was most needed. Such are the barriers that Redekop (2010: 247) maintains that only the greatest leaders will be able to surmount deep level problems: The greatest leaders are those, like Mohandas Gandhi, have vision that is both cosmic and individual, univeresal and yet pragmatic, highly spiritual but rooted in time and place. The Indian political and spiritual leader Mohandas K. Gandhi would regularly preach environmentalism and the pernicious effects of modern living in his speeches. It is true to say, however, that Gandhi never used modern terms such as climate change when talking about the environment. It has been left to modern leaders to articulate the global dangers facing humankind through climate change, although similarities can be discerned between Gandhi’s message and modern day advocates of climate change. But one could argue that Gandhi did possess the ‘popular’ rather than ‘populist’ touch, as described in the first part of this paper.

Finally, we would like to finish this paper by relating the concept of participation to climate change. There are arguably multiple reasons for why people from all countries studied as part of our research remain resistant to altering lifestyles to in the face of apocalyptic warnings on climate change. Some of these reasons relate to the perceived inadequacy of leadership and suitable role models in this area. The first reason is what Anthony Giddens defines as the “Giddens Paradox”:

It states that, since the dangers posed by global warning aren’t tangible, immediate or visible in the course of day-to-day life, however awesome they appear, many will sit on their hands and do nothing of the concrete nature about them. Yet waiting until they become visible and acute before being stirred to serious action will, by definition, be too late... Giddens’s paradox affects almost every aspect of current reactions to climate change. It is the reason why, for many citizens, climate change is a back-of-the-mind issue rather than a front-of-the-mind one (Giddens, 2009: 2).

Other theorists have also identified this ‘lack of immediacy’ with Moser and Dilling arguing that ‘as a social problem, then, it is just not visible or experienced directly yet in the same way that job losses, obesity or traffic congestion are’ (Moser and Dilling, 2007: 5). This issue remains a major challenge for any would-be climate change leader. Moser and Dilling argue that: “We have come to see the importance of dialogue, of the genuine exchange other-than-scientific viewpoints and needs, and the integration of climate change with other-than-climate-change concerns. This has led us to a broader definition of communication in support of climate change as a *continuous and dynamic process unfolding among people that facilitates*

*an exchange of ideas, feelings, and information as well as the forming of mutual understanding and common visions of a desirable future.* Communication – etymologically rooted in the same Latin word as communion – points to meanings of participation and sharing, of imparting meaning, and making common” (2007: 15-16).

We would therefore conclude that lack of participation is key to overcoming the problems above. This participation requires leadership. Leadership that provides vision but also a common touch. Leadership that is popular but not populist. More horizontal, less vertical.

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## Popular politics, populism and the leaders.

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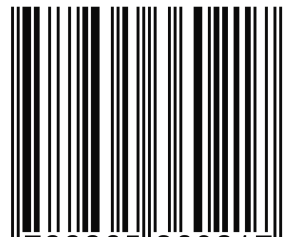
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