

Leadership, Authenticity and Representation in Troubled Times

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Leadership theory and practice has long advocated the need for leaders to both *represent* the groups they lead and to be *representative of* the communities they serve. Wicked problems that require collaboration between multiple stakeholders, however, pose a particular challenge in terms of the capacity for leaders to be perceived as legitimately representing the interests and identities of diverse (and often divided) communities and to enact their authority on this basis (Haslam et al., 2020).

For political leaders the tendency has been to assume legitimacy on basis of the democratic process and their capacity to act ‘in the interest of the represented, in a manner responsive to them’ (Pitkin, 1967: 209). A focus on the attributes, characteristics and behaviours of *the representative* rather than *the represented* mirrors the leader-centrism found within the wider leadership studies literature, which downplays the negotiated and relational nature of representation and the opportunities and challenges this poses. In complex environments, leaders need to enact ‘enabling leadership’ that spans both operational and entrepreneurial domains and creates ‘adaptive spaces’ for transformation and change (Uhl-Bien and Arena, 2017). Such spaces are rife with contestation and uncertainty where the capacity for an individual (democratically elected or not) to ‘represent’ their wider constituency is highly debatable. Such contexts highlight the part played by other actors – including leaders and those they seek to represent - in co-constructing the ‘representative claim’ (Saward, 2006) from which acts of leadership will be assessed as (non)credible, (in)competent and/or (in)authentic.

In this paper we draw on insights from political science and leadership studies to explore how dynamics of representation play out within place-based leadership. We focus on a case study of Marvin Rees, the Mayor of Bristol’s response to the toppling of the statue of the slaver trader Edward Colston during the Black Lives Matter protests in June 2020. Through analysis of a range of data sources, including media interviews, press articles and city events, we unpick the processes and practices through which Rees crafted a consistent and coherent narrative that created and maintained an environment in which he and other civic leaders could work through and tackle the issues surfaced by this incident. Taking a narrative storyline approach, we focus on events that preceded and followed the ‘leadership moment’ (Wood and Ladkin, 2008) in order to situate and contextualise the ways in which Rees, and other actors, were able to reframe this from an act of vandalism to an opportunity for open and constructive debate about the legacy of slavery and systemic inequality in the city.

This paper contributes to the literature on relational leadership, identity work, representation and authenticity that has implications beyond the domain of politics to any context where leaders must collaborate across boundaries in order to secure the active engagement of a wide range of stakeholders and constituents.

References

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