

Follow the leader

The name of the game has changed

By PAUL GRAHAM

POLITICAL leadership has been in the news recently. In Russia, Boris Yeltsin fired the parliament – first figuratively and then literally – and his actions precipitated a debate about the use of authoritarian action to promote democratisation.

In Britain, John Major's leadership of the Conservative Party was being counted down by the media until the party conference where it was "reaffirmed".

In the United States, Bill Clinton decided that the president is not "the country's chief mechanic" while presiding over the first official handshake between the PLO and the Israeli government by the leaders of both. Back home in Israel and the occupied territories riots broke out as followers disagreed with this handshake.

Here at home, stories in the newspapers of a leadership struggle within the Democratic Party have it that Zach de Beer is besieged by the "young Turks" while everywhere political activity is reduced by the press to the watching of an increasingly small group of individuals – the leaders.

This special preoccupation led *Time* magazine to



LOOKING TO THE FUTURE: No longer only the responsibility of the few at the top.

RODGER BOSCH, Soweto

portray some Western leaders as dwarfs in overlarge suits and ask the question – where have the leaders gone?

Those who are elected or otherwise emerge as leaders of countries, political parties or organisations have expectations heaped upon them – yet in an increasingly complex world the ability of one individual to affect the social, economic and political life of a country is limited. One of the dilemmas of the global society is the decreasing territorial sovereignty any government can exercise in the face of international markets.

In 1840, Alexis de Tocqueville travelled through the United States and wrote about democracy as it was emerging there. He wrote, "when the conditions of men are almost equal, they do not easily

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Negotiation News

Over the next 12 months, *Democracy in Action* will be accompanied by *Negotiation News* – a newsletter covering the details of the present multi-party talks and explaining the agreements reached during the process of transition.

Negotiation News is edited by freelance journalist Elsabe Wessels. We trust that the additional reading it provides to *Democracy in Action* will be of interest to all our readers.

As with *Democracy in Action*, opinions expressed in *Negotiation News* do not necessarily reflect those of IDASA.



SPEAKING FOR THE PEOPLE: A more traditional view of the role of leaders

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allow themselves to be persuaded by one another. As they all live in close intercourse, as they have learned the same things together, and as they lead the same life, they are not naturally disposed to take one of themselves for a guide and to follow him implicitly. Men seldom take the opinion of their equal or of a man like themselves upon trust."

Indeed, the virtue of democracy is to put leadership into the realm of the collaborative. People involved in education for democracy encourage "ordinary" citizens to take responsibility and not to allow themselves merely to be led.

Even elections are seen as an opportunity for each person to participate in establishing who will represent them and how that representation will be conducted.

So in a modern world, and in a South Africa in transition to democracy, what do leaders do? And what difference can they make? There are four ideas about what leaders in a general sense do which might help – affirmation, articulation, alignment and administration.

Individuals who inspire people by affirming their actions and contribution to the society can draw out the best in people. Or cynically manipulate people by encouraging them to act bravely in defence of the indefensible.

A more traditional view has leaders articulating the views of people. They become spokespersons for the views, at times inchoate or unexpressed, of others. In cynical moments, leaders are described as people who assess where their followers are going

and get to the front of the crowd.

A third possibility is that leaders, by their words and actions, draw together groups of people and align them to a particular direction or vision. The fear of charismatic leaders following egocentric visions and followers merely "toeing the line" is a spectre over all discussions of leadership.

Finally, leaders can administer, manage or organise individuals or groups of people to achieve common goals. While less glossy, the necessity of administration and its potential for changing a society remains a challenge for leaders.

In each of these activities, leaders accept a great deal of personal responsibility. They can engage in these activities for the general good – and probably will where the general good conforms with the interests of those they lead. But leaders are also linked to their followers. While we often assume a very strong relationship between leaders and those who follow them, the unwritten contract can be quite fragile.

So leaders regularly have to juggle the expectations of their followers against their vision of what may be necessary and courageous. In a situation where there is uncertainty, either because of a leadership struggle, or because of general political instability, or – as happens to be the case in South Africa – an impending election, it is very difficult for leaders to also achieve the "statesmanship" which newspaper editors demand. It might just be that the statesmanship might result in the breaking of the contract and the loss of the very followers his or her "statesmanship" is supposed to influence.

In South Africa, leaders are expected to "deliver" their followers – so that we can go through a transitional process agreed by cer-

tain parties and so that we can end violence and achieve peace. These seem sensible goals. Leaders who believe in them can affirm those of their followers who act towards them. They can ensure the organisation of people towards these goals. They can, through their actions, align them to ensure they are achieved. And they can articulate the feelings of ordinary people – as expressed in events like the Peace Day – for these goals.

Leaders who remain suspicious of these goals can choose to engage with the process or attempt to lead their followers in different paths – and the conflict between the different paths and the groups of people or parties could result in greater violence unless we are able to provide ritual and non-violent methods of resolving that competition. Democracy is one way of making sure that competition is contained non-violently and unfortunately we are not there yet.

So it is not surprising that there is violence. The transitional mechanisms are attempts to overcome that violence and the potential for still greater violence.

However, if De Tocqueville is correct, and if our recent history of the increasing impotence of the "great man" is right, the responsibility for ensuring peace and democracy will not be that of a few party leaders, no matter how great, but of citizens choosing to participate in the creation of a peaceful and democratic society. The task of empowering those citizens with the necessary attitudes, skills, and political environment is the responsibility of the negotiating leaders, political parties, independent institutes and organised civil society.

Paul Graham is the national programme director of Idasa.