

Not everyone is a leader

Education consultant, Russell Boyle, says Australian schools have opportunities to teach young people leadership qualities which will take them, and possibly the country, into a better future. Instead, most schools focus on students who "toe the line", rewarding compliant students with leadership positions while the lateral thinkers are left out in the cold.

"A political leader must keep looking over his shoulder all the time to see if the boys are still there. If they aren't still there, he's no longer a political leader."

These words, of American financier and presidential advisor Bernard Baruch, were published in the *New York Times* on 21 June 1965.

More than 30 years on, and Baruch's words are anachronistically gender-specific yet particularly appropriate for the men who lead the two most powerful nations on Earth.

Presidents Clinton and Yeltsin are skilled in the machinations that enable them to remain in power but sadly lacking in the qualities of leadership. As one points to the strength of the American economy to divert attention from his personal indiscretions, the other continues to stumble and improvise as the Russian people suffer increasing deprivation.

Schools have a responsibility to nurture the gifts of young people who are blessed with the capacity to lead and to inculcate amongst them the importance of honesty and integrity and of serving others with wisdom, tolerance, compassion and humility. Bill Clinton and Boris Yeltsin are not the exemplary models that we would want our students to emulate.

"I want to speak about someone who is venal. I want to speak about someone who is unscrupulous. I want to speak about someone who is mercenary. I want to speak about someone who is the most useless and abominable representative the Federal Parliament has ever seen."

These were the words used by Australian Labor Party Senate leader, John Faulkner, to describe Senator Malcolm Colston during a parliamentary debate on the privatisation of Telstra on Saturday 11 July 1998.

They are interperate and impertinent words. They taunt, tease, bully, harass and vilify a fellow senator. They are not the words of a leader. They are not words that we would wish to hear echoed in the school-yard. They are a travesty of parliamentary debate yet they are tolerated under parliamentary privilege.

In a house of representatives debate on the misuse of travel allowances, Federal Treasurer, Peter Costello, gave what many in his party regarded as a masterful display of parliamentary leadership. In responding to criticism by the

Opposition, he got personal as he mockingly revealed the travel claim indiscretions of one of its members who subsequently attempted suicide.

Costello's performance drew praise from former prime minister Malcolm Fraser whilst incumbent prime minister, John Howard, who had earlier promised to improve the standard of parliamentary debate, remained conspicuously quiet.

Is it the adversarial nature of politics that tempts our elected leaders to so readily resort to invective to denigrate their opponents? Parliament in Australia, as in most countries, is a cauldron of conflict where ego, jealousy and naked ambition inflict all who enter its domain. Under its thin veneer of parliamentary etiquette and protocol, its honourable members conduct their business with dishonourable intentions. Success is often measured by the ability to bring down a colleague and is too rarely focused on the implementation of change designed to improve the lives of the people that our leaders are elected to serve.

Outside parliament, politicians spend an inordinate amount of their time extolling the virtues of their policies, decisions and legislation. They behave more like salespersons than leaders as they endeavour to impose their party's narrow ideological "spin" on every issue and situation. They make extravagant use of data that flatter their performance and discredit those statistics that cause them discomfort. When they should be creating hope by articulating and working towards their vision for our future, they instead spend their time prevaricating and laying the blame for present problems on the misdeeds of their predecessors.

Many contemporary leaders lack an agenda and are bereft of vision. Their hunger for power, influence and success drives them to the top but once they get there they have little idea of what they should do. Some are obsessed with remaining in office; they become poll-driven, electing to follow public opinion rather than leading and shaping it. They essentially imitate the French lawyer and politician, Alexandre Auguste Ledru-Rollin, who, whilst trying to force his way through the mob during the Revolution of 1848, said: *"Let me pass, I have to follow them, I am their leader"*.

So what leadership model should students aspire to? What skills and personal qualities are required for leadership? How well do schools prepare students for leadership?

Not every student who is elected or appointed to a position of leadership in a school is a potential leader. Clever students can quickly learn what is needed to convince their peers, teachers and principal to elect or appoint them to office. Many spend much of their school lives working towards office by being involved in co-curricular activities, school sport and community service. They immerse themselves in the life of their school; they abide by the rules; wear their uniform correctly; are punctual, confident and well spoken; they volunteer as peer-mediators and as school-guides for prospective parents. Their approach is somewhat similar to the manner in which many politicians get themselves elected; by being there,



US General George S Patton was a famous leader of men...are schools enabling students to become leaders in their own right, or does the system reward compliant non-thinkers?

being seen and heard, having your photograph taken and being involved. These are excellent skills for students to develop for successful careers in marketing and public relations. They are also useful skills for leaders to possess but on their own they are insufficient for genuine leadership.

Schools frequently reward compliant, well-presented and supportive students with positions of leadership. Many of these students prove themselves as capable, hard-working leaders. But what do they achieve during their term of office? To what extent are they able to implement change that improves their school for those who follow? Student leaders are given little real power to implement change and because so many of them fit their school's ethos so well they are unlikely to threaten it by promoting change.

Schools are averse to risk-taking even though they often encourage their students to take risks. There is of course much at stake: school reputation, future school enrolments, and public relations and marketing strategies. Schools worry about potential school-captains who may more likely challenge rather than represent the status quo. If such students are to succeed in gaining office then they need to demonstrate their loyalty to their school and their reliability to say the right thing at the right time. In other words they must change themselves rather than

attempt to change their school. If they do succeed in attaining office they are often perturbed to find that they have lost their student followers. Whilst they continue to be respected by their peers for their achievements, diligence and hard work, they garner little real support. They are good role models for younger students who themselves aspire to school leadership but few students will seek them out for guidance, wisdom and encouragement and few, if any, will draw inspiration from their leadership. They hold office but have little power to implement change. They are so busy that they have no time to reflect on their leadership, to build an agenda, to generate ideas and to suggest new ways of doing things. Some find themselves entrenched as part of their school's hierarchy; as de facto teachers in the eyes of many peers; as protectors rather than reformers of the system.

This is not to say that some student leaders don't do a magnificent job as intermediaries between staff and students and as organisers, supervisors and even initiators of many of the activities that breathe life into schools. They gain insight into the difficulty of motivating others to lend their assistance and experience the hurt that follows when those who volunteer their assistance vanish when most needed. They develop their interpersonal and people management skills, learn the importance of organisa-

tion and how best to contend with difficulties when under pressure.

These are important life skills and schools should be congratulated for helping students to develop them. They are necessary qualities for management and useful attributes for leaders. But there can be no leadership without followers.

Leadership is about implementing change. Great leaders are not constrained by the status quo, by hierarchy, by fashion, or by political correctness.

They are unequivocal and confident when stating their views even when they know that their views will not be well received. They are thinkers and listeners as well as speakers, readers and writers. They will regularly reflect upon and synthesise their learning. Hard work, thorough planning and attention to detail may be the cornerstones of their success but it is their ability to inspire and to communicate their vision that differentiates them from their peers.

Their constancy, consistency, steadfastness, and long term vision carry them through those difficult times when, in the words of T S Eliot, *"between the idea and the reality falls the shadow"*.

Their will to prevail, despite the obstacles in their path and the machiavellianism of their detractors, provides an exemplary model for others to emulate. They attract followers, many of whom draw inspiration from their leadership. They empower and embolden their followers whilst allowing them space to exercise initiative and creativity. Great leaders are challenged, not intimidated, by the ability of their followers; they work hard to foster and fully utilise the available pool of talent. They never seek praise for the success of others. They are not consumed by power and ego; they are selfless servants of their communities; they are inspired by the need for change to improve the lives of others.

Society is not over-endowed with genuine, selfless leaders. Schools rightly place great importance on nurturing the leadership capacity of students.

However, I worry that we too often reward compliance over vision and in the process we stifle the embryonic talents of some potentially great leaders. It may be years, if not decades before students with the capacity to lead are ready to fulfil their destiny; to bring about the changes necessary to steer society toward the goal of greater social cohesiveness and a fairer distribution of wealth. I believe we could hasten the process by allowing a greater range of individuals to realistically strive for leadership positions in schools, and by giving student leaders more freedom to explore, greater opportunity to question and challenge the system, more time to reflect and some real power to change the status quo.

Russell Boyle is an education consultant, writer and commentator. The full text of his published and unpublished articles may be found on the Internet at the following address:
<http://www.sympac.com.au/~rboyle>



<http://www.sympac.com.au/~rboyle>