AUTHENTICITY AND POLITICAL LEADERSHIP

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Authenticity has become a key battleground in contemporary politics. Authenticity is typically defined as the property of being genuine or true. However, the term means different things in different contexts. Art experts judge whether a painting is authentic. Consumers can judge whether an Italian restaurant is authentic based on its décor, its menu and perhaps also the accent of the waiting staff.

In the world of politics, authenticity is normally used to refer to whether a political leader is judged to be 'true to themselves'. Authenticity matters for winning elections (Parry-Giles, 2014; Enli, 2014; Seifert, 2014; Umbach, & Humphrey, 2017; Wahl-Jorgenson, 2019). Political scientists have pointed out that the characteristics of the leader can matter more than the policies of the party, something they call the 'personalization of politics' (Karvonen, 2010; Bittner, 2011).

Voters rarely get to meet their political leaders but form strong opinions of them through the media. This 'mediatization' of leadership places great emphasis on the symbolic aspects of leadership. This puts image to the fore. Politicians have long worked on their image. Harold Wilson (Prime Minister 1964-1970, 1974-1976), for instance, used a 'gannex mac' and smoking a pipe as effective props. Over the intervening years, the public seems to have developed a much greater appetite for stories about politicians. A leader's 'back story', qualities and characteristics are accorded much greater prominence than the party's policies themselves (McAllister, 2007).

Many qualities and characteristics are important for political leaders: charisma, charm, appearance and oratory skill. Some commentators have begun to claim that, today, authenticity is what matters most. According to Wahl-Jorgensen (2019: 71), "winning the battle for hearts and minds increasingly means winning the battle for authenticity".

The 2016 US election was described as 'the authenticity election'[1]. The 2017 UK general election was also pitched as a battle between the apparent inauthenticity of Theresa May and the apparent authenticity of Jeremy Corbyn.

Judging authenticity

Voters judge authenticity in different ways. For some, it is based on the way the political leader speaks, such as whether they sound "spontaneous and natural" (Sheinheit & Bogard, 2016: 973) when they talk. Accent could also matter, such as with the "*g*-dropping vernacular" of Sarah Palin (Seifert, 2014: 1).

[1] New York Times, 10/7/16; Washington Post 11/12/15; Wall Street Journal, 18/09/15.

Others judge authenticity according to whether the political leader appears to be an 'ordinary' person they can identify with. Here, being pictured in humble and 'ordinary' kitchens talking about food and hobbies enjoyed by "ordinary folks" (Seifert, 2014: 165) matters in forming these judgements.

Over the years, politicians have been 'called out' for trying to 'fake' their ordinary and humble homes and lifestyles. Ed Miliband suffered this fate twice. In 2015 there came the 'two kitchen' drama, where he was accused of posing in his second, smaller and more humble kitchen, to appear more 'ordinary'. Again in 2015, *The Sun* published the infamous 'bacon sandwich' photograph of Miliband in an awkward posing eating the sandwich, making reference to his apparent inability to eat the iconic meal of the 'ordinary folk' of Britain.

Theresa May later suffered the same fate in 2017 when pictured eating chips, another iconic meal of the 'ordinary folk' of Britain, in an awkward fashion. In these cases, authenticity is associated with the political leader appearing to be "just-like-you" (Seifert, 2014: 1) rather than a member of the elite or the 'establishment'. George W Bush – the son of a former President – famously cast himself as a 'man of the people' and railed against Al Gore as a member of 'the Washington Establishment'. Of course, they were both establishment figures, but Bush was more adroit at constructing a 'folksier' image in a delicately poised electoral contest.

In the UK, political leaders are unlikely to come from 'normal backgrounds'. Two of the last three Prime Ministers (David Cameron and Boris Johnson) were educated at Eton College, all three studied at Oxford. Even Jeremy Corbyn, champion of the underprivileged, was privately educated. This raises an interesting paradox. The electorate tell pollsters that they want 'people like them' in Downing Street, but their revealed preference is for leaders drawn from the gilded salons of the British elite.

Leaders who are unable to draw on stories of struggles against adversity can rely on other sources of judgements about authenticity, such as claiming to eschew spin, soundbites and scripting. To appear authentic, politicians have to appear to speak and act in an uncensored and spontaneous fashion, without preparation and without consideration for the popularity or political correctness of what they say (Enli, 2015: Ch 6). Judgements of authenticity are also tied up with assessments of the person's trustworthiness and honesty (Seifert, 2014: 16; Enli, 2015: 110). Voters ask: are they saying what they really believe, or just what they are told to say to win votes?

Why authenticity matters

Why does authenticity matter so much nowadays? One answer is that the electorate has simply grown weary and cynical about politicians. Politicians are associated with being 'fake' because they are thought to reproduce whatever their spin doctors and communication advisers tell them to based on triangulation from opinion polls and focus groups. It is no surprise, then, that voters yearn for someone who 'says what they mean' and 'means what they say'.

The yearning for a more authentic politician appears to bridge the political divide. In the UK, Jeremy Corbyn was broadly viewed as authentic, but so were others on the opposite side of the political divide. Corbyn was compared to Trump and Farage insofar as he was viewed as "straight talking" and someone with the courage to speak in unequivocal "moral terms about right and wrong" (*The Guardian*, 3rd June 2017). Even Jacob Rees-Mogg has been described by some supporters as the 'ultimate authentic politician' (*The Guardian*, 8th September 2017): the ultimate 'Tory toff' who is unafraid to express his views and dress how he wants to.

All of this begs a question: how much does being viewed as authentic really matter in politics? In voter polls, the answer is clearly that it matters a lot.

How, then, can we explain the dramatic rise and fall from grace of Jeremy Corbyn, one of the recent political leaders most noted for his authenticity?

Explaining the rise of Jeremy Corbyn

Some of the authors of this piece have been involved in recent research projects examining how Jeremy Corbyn fared as Labour leader. The first project, by Andrea Whittle (Newcastle University), Marian Iszatt-White (Lancaster University), Gyuzel Gadelshina (Northumbria University) and Frank Mueller (Durham University), looked at media coverage of Corbyn during the Labour party leadership race in 2015.

Corbyn's surprise election as party leader in 2015 – winning the contest after against odds of 100:1 at the bookies at the start of the contest[2] – was in no small part down to his 'authenticity'. Alongside the promise of a radical new political agenda, Corbyn was described as a new type of 'authentic politician': someone who would say what he really thought and actually stand by what he said. Corbyn seemed to stand out in contrast to the typical 'machine-like' politician, armed with their spin doctors and soundbites. Corbyn described his style as "honest, straight talking politics"[3], a slogan which was later adopted by the party with the strapline "straight talking, honest politics".

In the first paper we published from this project (Mueller, et al., 2019), we ask the question: how did journalists and commentators in the British press discuss Corbyn's 'authenticity'? We pin-point three ways that journalists and commentators established that Corbyn was really authentic: the consistency in his political position over time, his 'atypicality' when compared to the way that other politicians typically look, act and sound, and finally the perceived strength of his commitment to his professed beliefs. Even right-leaning newspaper articles that overall adopted a negative or sceptical assessment of Corbyn's politics described him as a new kind of 'authentic' political leader that could potentially gave him appeal to a weary and cynical electorate.

In the second paper we published from this project (Iszatt-White, et al., 2019), we examined how Corbyn's authenticity was *evaluated* in the press coverage during the 2015 leadership campaign. Authentic leadership is typically understood as a desirable and morally superior form of leadership. Authentic leaders are understood as the kind of people who know 'right' from 'wrong' and remain steadfastly 'true to themselves' when enacting their inner values. Within the field of business and management studies, authentic leadership is typically hailed as a leadership virtue.

However, our findings challenged this assumption. While Corbyn was almost universally framed as authentic, he was also widely criticised in the press, even before he was elected as party leader. The criticism extended beyond his political policies - which might be expected given his radical political agenda – and was also levied at his 'authenticity'.

This left us with a puzzle: if authenticity is such a 'good thing' for leaders, how could Corbyn be deemed to be authentic but also have his leadership qualities questioned?

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[2] https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/jeremy-corbyn-becomes-favourite-to-win-labour-leadership-race-in-latest-ladbrokes-odds-10424088.html

[3] https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3187718/The-rich-HAPPY-pay-tax-says-Jeremy-Corbyn-denies-make-Labour-unelectable.html

Commentators in the news media played out this puzzle by contrasting how Corbyn could be viewed as an 'ethical' leader (if one agrees with his political standpoint, that is), but also that he fell short of the qualities required to make a leader 'effective'. Being consistent, principled and true to yourself were presented as possibly noble *virtues*, but also described as *weaknesses* when considering the pragmatism, media and diplomatic performance requirements and electoral credibility supposedly required of an effective modern political leader.

The fall of Jeremy Corbyn

As a follow-up to this project, one of the authors (Whittle, 2021) tracked how Corbyn's authenticity was discussed in the press during his tenure as leader. Corbyn was elected as party leader in September 2015 and stepped down as leader in December 2019 following the general election defeat. Authenticity came up less often in media coverage than we expected, given how important it was in his party leadership campaign. When it was discussed, the press were mixed in their views about whether Corbyn was really as authentic as he had made himself out to be, and also whether his authenticity was a strength or weakness for him as a political leader.

Newspaper articles from across the political spectrum continued to recognise the appeal that Corbyn's perceived authenticity held for his followers. Some did this in praise, especially his supporters on the hard left, others in bewilderment at his appeal to certain sections of the electorate.

Commentators pointed to his ability to speak 'from the heart' and without seeming to have a script or repeat prepared soundbites. Being the very opposite of 'slick' in media appearances bolstered this view. His 'strong and steadfast' commitment to his beliefs, even in battles within his own party, was highlighted as evidence of his authenticity. Corbyn's apparent authenticity stood out most starkly during the 2017 general election when he ran against Theresa May, who was widely characterised as a 'robotic' and 'wooden' figure.

However, events during Corbyn's leadership led some commentators to try to 'burst the bubble' of his claim to authenticity. 'Traingate' in August 2016 was one such incident. Corbyn's press team had published a photograph of him sitting on the floor of the train, which they claimed was due to 'overcrowding'. The story was linked to promotion of Labour's policy for nationalising the railways. However, images later showed Corbyn apparently walking past empty seats. The press had a field day. Corbyn was accused of being just like every other politician by using spin and trickery to boost their appeal or advance their agenda.

Corbyn was also 'called out' for lying, fudging or obfuscating to avoid damaging his electoral popularity in December 2019 when he was asked in an interview on ITV whether, as a known republican, he watches the Queen's speech on Christmas day. His answer was widely berated as a far cry from the 'authentic' politician who was "honest" and "straight talking" about his views.

Moreover, the study found that some commentators questioned not whether Corbyn was as authentic as he seemed or claimed, but whether his authenticity was in fact a 'good thing' for the party or for the country, if elected as Prime Minister. Corbyn's authenticity was described as "both his greatest asset and his biggest weakness" (*The Independent*, 13th January 2017). Again in 2019, the day before the general election, Corbyn's authenticity was described as his "greatest strength [but also] his most devastating flaw" (*The Telegraph*, 11th December 2019).

What could possibly be bad about having an authentic political leader? The list from media commentators was extensive. Corbyn was criticised for having a poor record of media performances by lacking the 'art' of message discipline. He was criticised within his own party for being so rigid in his adherence to his far-left principles that he was unable to compromise enough to unite his own party. Being 'true to his beliefs' had led him to fail to unite the broad church within the party, some commentators claimed. Failing to adjust his position to one more 'moderate', supposedly in line with the majority of the electorate, left his party as nothing more than a 'protest party', according to some commentators. He was not to be praised as principled, rather admonished as dogmatic, blinkered and arrogant. Winning power, getting policies through parliament and leading international diplomacy were all deemed to require a political leader who valued pragmatism as much as principles.

For other commentators, Corbyn's degree of authenticity was not the problem, it was the political beliefs and values being 'authentically' practiced that was the problem. Corbyn's commitment to his principles were not in doubt, but those principles (such as his views on the Trident nuclear deterrent, on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the monarchy) were described as 'wrong' or even 'dangerous'.

The meaning of authenticity in politics

Some scholars view authenticity as a pre-formed cultural template that politicians – and other prominent people in the public eye – need to conform to. We take a different view. We are interested in what those judging authenticity - whether it is voters, critics or media commentators - think authenticity looks like and how they decide who has it and who doesn't.

This perspective allows us to notice an obvious tension. Some people judge a politician to be authentic when they act just like "ordinary folk". Sara Dickerman wrote in 2019: "Eating and drinking are ways in which political candidates reveal their humanity, their common touch. … This year, candidates' eating choices are already being scrutinized for signs of inauthenticity—perhaps more than ever."[4]

In this view, you can prove that you are authentic if you can drink a pint of bitter (Nigel Farage), eat a bacon sandwich (Ed Milliband), eat from a bag of chips (Theresa May), are still able to identify mushy peas and distinguish them from guacamole (Peter Mandelson), eating a 'parmo' or ice cream (Boris Johnson), remember that a hot dog is best not eaten with knife and fork (David Cameron), or be able to recall when you last ate a Cornish pasty (George Osborne). But, what if in all these cases, to be judged as authentic, politicians would actually need to *pretend* that they are something that they are not? If authenticity is being 'true to yourself', wouldn't it be more authentic for Milliband not to eat a bacon sandwich, May not to use her hands to eat directly from a bag of chips, Mandelson not to pretend he knows mushy peas, Cameron not to eat a hot dog with his fingers (or not to eat it in the first place)? Osborne told a Select Committee that he couldn't remember the last time he ate a Cornish pasty, which was seen as him being 'out of touch'

People who know Boris Johnson from his time at the Telegraph suggest that Johnson much prefers expensive Italian red wine to a pint of bitter[5]. His sudden passion for football during the UEFA

[4] https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2019/03/17/2020-candidates-food-225814/
[5] https://twitter.com/thattimwalker/status/1412684873278570496?s=12

competition feels as ‘fake’ as when David Cameron famously ‘forgot’ the name of his supposedly favourite football team in 2015.

Under the pressure of political campaigning, politicians may feel the need to conform to an imagined cultural template of ‘being an ordinary bloke’ or ‘lass’, but performed badly it only makes them look fake. By pretending to be ‘ordinary folk’, they are performing *in*authenticity. Jacob Rees Mogg, on the other hand, clearly rejects the idea of pretending to be like the ‘common people’. Instead, he plays up his image as a ‘toff’, with top hat and tails to prove it. People might disagree with his politics, but few disagree that he is unashamedly being ‘true to himself’, even if this ‘self’ appears to enjoy mimicking a Regency gentleman stereotype. This earnt him the nickname of the ‘Honourable Member for the 18th century’.

Other aspects sometimes associated with authenticity, such as displaying emotion or empathy, also display this paradox. Former Australian Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, was originally criticised for her “wooden” and “culturally inappropriate demeanour”, but later could redeem herself when she “could no longer withstand the strain…[and] her voice began cracking.” (Williamson, 2019: 1521). Here, displays of emotion are used to judge whether she was showing her ‘true’ inner feelings.

Emotional displays can easily backfire though. Take, for example, Theresa May. As public displays of empathy or emotion did not appear to come natural to her, any performance could easily be categorized as “faux empathy” that was “performed as part of the masquerade of mediatised promotional politics” (Yates, 2019: 357).

Gordon Brown also suffered the same fate. His attempt at displaying warmth in his awkward smiles to the camera backfired in the televised debates in 2010. Brown, in his memoirs, recalled:

> “But in recent years ‘connecting’ seems to increasingly include the public display of emotion, with the latter – authentic or not – seen as evidence of a sincerity required for political success. In a more touchy-feely era, our leaders speak of public issues in intensely personal ways, and assume they can win votes by telling their electors that they ‘feel their pain’. For me, being conspicuously demonstrative is uncomfortable.” (Brown, 2017: 5-6).

In contrast, the slick professional politician archetype, Tony Blair, was able to successfully carry off a display of ‘opening up’ his behind-the-scenes, private and personal sphere: “… based on unprecedented access to Number 10, [Blair] was shown deciding on matters of war and peace surrounded by children’s toys and his guitar.” (Langer, 2010: 63). His famous “People’s Princess” speech, delivered after the death of Princess Diana, was widely viewed as heartfelt and sincere.

Here lies the conundrum. For some politicians, a public performance of emotion and empathy can lead them to be viewed as authentic. However, for others, such displays lead them to be judged as ‘faking it’ and therefore *in*authentic. What is decisive here? The answer, we think, is consistency. Brown was hardly known in politics for his cheerful smiles, so his Cheshire cat grins to camera in 2010 smacked of him following the instructions from his communications advisors. Theresa May was not known for her spontaneous and exuberant outbursts, so her sudden dance moves to ‘Dancing Queen’ at the 2018 Tory Conference just seemed awkward and contrived.

In a different context, inconsistency also hit Nick Clegg. Nick Clegg’s performance in his debates with Nigel Farage in the run-up to the EU Referendum was described by one commentator as leaving Clegg “coming across as contrived and inauthentic, which ultimately undermined the persuasiveness of his pro-EU message” (Bossetta, 2017: 731). Clegg had changed his debate style, which had given rise to a perceived inconsistency.

The other archetype of the professional politician, David Cameron, was also attacked by his opponents for similar reasons. “Brexit campaigners, particularly Boris Johnson, were able to turn this argument against Cameron by pointing to inconsistencies in his position on Europe, thereby challenging the authenticity of his position …” (Lunt, 2019: 686). Andy Burnham’s Labour party leadership campaign in 2015 was beset with accusations of ‘flip-flopping’. The press reveled in pointing out the number of times Burnham had changing his position based on wherever the winds of public opinion were blowing at the time. Neil Kinnock, Labour’s leader in the 1980s, was frequently accused of flip-flopping and ‘U turns’ which undermined his credibility.

The archetypes of the ‘authentic politician’ – Farage, Trump, Johnson – cannot easily be accused of inconsistency. They all seem to know that perceived inconsistency is the death knell for the authentic politician. They also possess the skills of political artistry that enables them to gloss over inconsistencies. In the case of Johnson, “with his shambolic, apparently non-threatening presence” (Tomkins, 2020: 337), he can seemingly overcome the otherwise potentially fatal badge of his elitist education. Farage similarly manages to neutralize both his City banker and private education backgrounds with his convincing “ordinary bloke down the pub” image. “[The] consistency of Farage’s political communication is interpreted as bolstering his authenticity among parts of the electorate, who sanction him as a legitimate challenger to the political establishment” (Bossetta, 2017: 717). For Farage, his “rhetoric is delivered as political theatre” (Crines and Heppell, 2017: 246), but he is perceived as authentic because his position is consistent.

The future of authenticity in politics

In a political age when authenticity seems to matter more than ever, political leaders should be mindful that when it comes to judging authenticity, it would seem that it is consistency that makes it or breaks it.

This is important for the political battles ahead. The UK has lurched from a political crisis (Brexit) to a health crisis (Covid-19), which will probably lead to an economic crisis, amid a developing environment crisis (Climate Change), while caught up in a constitutional crisis (Scottish nationalism and the Northern Irish border). When ‘times are hard’, citizens look for leaders who they think actually believe what they say and will do what they promise. Boris Johnson was believed when he said “Let’s get Brexit done”, whereas May was widely ridiculed for her phrase “Brexit means Brexit”. Avoiding the pitfalls of hypocrisy matter here because politicians lose their credibility when they are deemed to fail to ‘practice what they preach. Matt Hancock has certainly suffered that fate, having breached the social distancing guidelines he proclaimed as Health Secretary.

Over the next decade, we suggest, authenticity will be an essential ingredient for politicians in the political battles that lie ahead. Boris Johnson’s longevity as Prime Minister, Keir Starmer’s ability to challenge him, and Nicola Sturgeon’s capacity to persuade floating voters in Scotland will determine the structure and form of the United Kingdom. The ability of politicians to steer a course through the current crisis depends on their ability to convince the electorate. In this endeavor, authenticity has never been more important.

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