

## Political Leadership as Statecraft?

### Aligning Theory with Praxis in Conversation with British Party Leaders<sup>1</sup>

#### Abstract

How should prime ministerial and party leadership be understood and assessed? One leading approach posits that we should assess them in terms of whether they achieve *statecraft*, that is, winning and maintain office in government. This article supplements and then assesses that theory by drawing from Pawson and Tilley's (1997) concept of the realistic interview, in which practitioners are deployed as co-researchers to assess and revise theory. Unprecedented interviews with British party leaders were therefore undertaken. The article provides new empirical support for the framework because many of the key generative mechanisms identified within the neo-statecraft model were present in an analysis of the interviews. The interviews also allowed the limitations of the model to be demarcated. Statecraft focusses purely on cunning leadership where the aim is to maximise power and influence. This differs from leadership by conscious where the aim is to achieve normative goals.

Pre-print of paper accepted for publication in the *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*. Please cite that final version.

Toby S. James

University of East Anglia

[t.s.james@uea.ac.uk](mailto:t.s.james@uea.ac.uk)

## Introduction

The study of political leadership has recently become re-established as the focus of systematic academic attention within political science, after years of neglect. Writings on the significance of political leaders may date back to Aristotle, Cicero, Plutarch, Augustine, Erasmus and Machiavelli (Kane and Patapan 2014, 3), but it was widely recognised to have been given disproportionately little prominence in the study of politics and overviews of the discipline (Foley 2013, 7-9). Writing in 1987, Jean Blondel remarked that it was 'prima facie surprising that a general analysis of [political leadership]... should be so little advanced' (Blondel 1987, 1).

Fast-forward thirty years and a new range of conceptual frameworks have evolved to understand political leadership (Bennister, 't Hart, and Worthy 2015; Elgie 1995; Helms 2012; Kane and Patapan 2014; Rhodes and t'Hart 2014; Strangio, Hart, and Walter 2013). A prominent debate within this scholarship has developed about how prime ministerial and party leadership should be understood and assessed (Bennister, 't Hart, and Worthy 2014; Buller and James 2012; Byrne, Randall, and Theakston 2017; Greenstein 2009; Heppell 2014; Royal Holloway Group 2015; Theakston and Gill 2006; Theakston 2011; Theakston and Gill 2011). One leading framework for assessing political leaders is the *neo-statecraft* approach. Built on foundations laid by Jim Bulpitt (1986), this argued that leaders should be assessed in terms of whether they win office and achieve a sense of governing competence. Yet it has been criticised for, among other things, rarely being subjected to empirical knowledge and being untestable.

Pawson and Tilley (1997) have developed methods from within critical realism to evaluate theory, however. This article uses their concept of the realistic interview to assess neo-statecraft theory by asking political leaders themselves to reflect on neo-statecraft theory. Unprecedented, original interviews with former British party leaders were undertaken in which they were employed as 'co-researchers,' asking them to evaluate the framework. The argument of this article is that the interviews provide support for assessing leaders in statecraft terms because it is sensitive to the key structural dilemma that leaders face: winning office is a pre-requisite to making social change. This and other causal mechanisms at the heart of the theory were supported in the interviews. However, interviewees also provided some causes for criticism of the model because other generative mechanisms were found to be motivating leaders, that neo-statecraft theory did not directly acknowledge. In short, a leader's broader public and social value is not recognised. Statecraft is therefore argued to be useful for assessing *one* type of leadership. It focusses purely on cunning leadership where the aim is to maximise power and influence. This differs from leadership by conscious where the aim is to achieve normative goals. The complete leader, however, will need to

achieve by cunning and conscious leadership, and for that reason neo-statecraft theory is useful. The article therefore seeks to make an original contribution by testing and revising a prominent theory for understanding political leadership of relevance for all parliamentary democracies. New evidence is provided in support of the model and a matrix for the challenges that leaders face is identified. However, the limits of the model are more demarcated. More widely, it contributes a new approach to how elite theories based in critical realism can be subjected to empirical knowledge using interviews with a rare application and adaption of Pawson and Tilley's work.

Part 1 of this article describes how neo-statecraft came to be used to understand political leadership and assess leaders in parliamentary democracies. Part 2 discusses the challenges involved in assessing critical realist theory and outlines Pawson and Tilley's approach. The section explains why their concept of the realistic interview could be used in the study of elites. Part 3 then outlines the methods used in more detail. Part 4 explains the themes that emerged from the interviews while and Part 5 discusses whether these are evidence in support of the statecraft thesis or counter to it.

### **Political Leadership as Statecraft**

Neo-statecraft theory began from the work of Jim Bulpitt. His famous Statecraft thesis was first stated in 1986 as a contribution to a debate on Margaret Thatcher and 'Thatcherism' (Bulpitt 1986). Bulpitt argued that Margaret Thatcher was a politician driven by political expediency, making short term tactical moves to win elections rather than a leader driven by an ideological *raison d'être*. In more general terms, he argued, political leaders are primarily interested in statecraft: 'the art of winning elections and achieving some necessary degree of governing competence in office' (Bulpitt 1986, 21). Bulpitt therefore conceptualised party leaders as be self-interested, rational and cohesive actors. They will seek to achieve this through the use of 'governing codes' which are a 'set of relatively coherent principles or rules underlying policies and policy related behaviour' (Bulpitt 1996, 1097) and 'a set of political support mechanisms designed to protect and promote the code and objectives' (Bulpitt 1996, 1097). Bulpitt's original support mechanisms were party management, a winning electoral strategy, political argument hegemony, and most importantly, governing competence (Bulpitt 1986, 22). Leaders operated within a structural context, that Bulpitt called a 'natural rate of governability', which affected their ability to achieve successful statecraft (Bulpitt 1988, 185).

The statecraft approach has been asserted to be a useful method for assessing political leaders (Buller and James 2012). One advantage was that it allowed the key structural constraint that leaders faced, the need to keep winning elections, into consideration when we assess political leaders. In the winner-takes-all environment of British politics there is no prizes for second place. As Bulpitt expressed

himself: 'Party leaders must...aim to win general elections simply because the consequences of defeat...are so awful' (Bulpitt 1988, 188). Moreover, according to Bulpitt:

'[T]hese structural characteristics of modern British politics have produced party elites with common, initial, subsistence-level objectives, namely winning national office, avoiding too many problems while there and getting re-elected (Bulpitt 1996, 225).

A second advantage of the approach is that it treats leadership as a collective exercise (2012, 538-9). Executive decision-making is never collegial, and rarely will an individual leader be responsible for the leadership of a government. There will be a small number of senior ministers or advisors who will form a clique and act as a unitary actor over time. Bulpitt's focus was therefore on the 'Court' (a term used to refer to the 'the formal Chief Executive plus his/her political friends and advisors' (Bulpitt 1995, 518)).

Bulpitt's original statecraft approach has been subject to criticism. Firstly, the body of work that he wrote was light, often unpublished and sometimes contradictory, claimed Rhodes and Tiernan (2013), arguing that he was 'no system builder'. Secondly, Griffiths has argued that statecraft theory reduces ideology and values to 'a means for gaining power' but this is an over-simplistic account of the complex motivations of leaders. For him:

'this does not seem to ring true as an explanation for the role of ideology in politicians' lives... it does not simply seem to be the case that ideologies are no more than instruments to be picked up, tried and dropped at will, in a bid to win elections' (Griffiths 2016, 738).

Thirdly, the approach has been claimed to be untestable. Griffiths argues that 'politicians rarely chose to describe their actions in terms of Statecraft, preferring to provide other grander justifications for their actions' (Griffiths 2016, 739). Researchers therefore defend a statecraft account despite contrary evidence. He suggests that there is therefore 'no appropriate methodology to apply Statecraft theory.' Elsewhere, Rhodes has previously claimed there is no counterfactual to the approach (Rhodes 1988, 33) and even Bulpitt accepted that '...the thesis [is] untestable, [it] cannot be disproved' (Bulpitt 1983, 239). Fourthly, critics have asked whether Bulpitt's support mechanisms are in fact those which will secure successful statecraft. Why has governing competence been selected over and above all other factors? What role is there, for example, for personality (Griffiths 2016, 739-40)?

### *The Neo-Statecraft Approach*

Newer scholarship, acknowledging and responding to some of these criticisms, has built upon Bulpitt's foundations. A newer *neo-statecraft* approach has therefore been articulated (James 2016).

The starting point is to ground the approach epistemologically and ontologically in the critical realism. Although there is variation and tension between critical realist authors, there are common points, from which neo-statecraft proceeds. Foremost, it holds that there are multiple domains of reality – not all of which the researcher has direct access. The domain of the *empirical* realm, consists of experienced events which are directly observable. However, there are also the *actual* realm, consisting of events and experiences (not all of which are experienced), and the *real* which consists of the generative mechanisms (which are unobservable) (Archer 1982; Archer 1995; Bhaskar 2008; Jessop 2005; Joseph and Wight 2010). Using critical realism is useful because it overcomes the criticism of a lack of falsifiability. Such a criticism, is positivist criticism. The value of falsifiability is set out in key positivist works (for example: King, Keohane, and Verba 1994) and is commonly held, but it is inappropriate for a framework of this type. Critical realism also important because it provides a way of conceptualising of the relationship between structure and agency. In the neo-statecraft model Bulpitt's original concept of the natural rate of governability is dropped as it lacks development in favour of an approach anchored critical realism. The *neo*-statecraft approach borrows from Bob Jessop's (2001) strategic-relational approach in arguing that Courts are 'reflective and purposive agents...[within a]...strategically selective environment' (James 2016, 94-6).<sup>ii</sup>

Secondly, there has been some work to provide a clearer way to operationalise some of the concepts that Jim Bulpitt originally developed for empirical research. Work from electoral studies and comparative party politics has been used to provide a way in which concepts such as governing competence and party management could be assessed (Buller and James 2012). New concepts have been added based on empirical research. Courts are argued to often seek to change the constitution to maximise their chances of successful statecraft. Bending the rules of the game is therefore a fifth support mechanism that they will seek to achieve and by which they should be evaluated (James 2012).

Thirdly, neo-statecraft has been carefully delimited from rational choice theory and situated within historical institutionalism. Rational choice theorists make actors' rational and self-interested behaviour an *a priori* assumption to the analysis. For neo-statecraft theorists, however, the motives of elites derive from the institutional landscape in which they operate (James 2016). The winner takes all environment enforces a Darwinian logic in which they must fight for office or lose their job.

Fourthly, elites will not always act in a self-interested way. The extent to which they do so is contingent upon their knowledge of policy options and may require external triggers. There is an *elite policy-agenda* with peaks and troughs in the issue attention of the Court in any given policy area (James 2012, 209-22; 27-30).

## Using the Realistic Interview to Study Elites

These points aside, it remains the case that neo-statecraft theory has not been regularly tested against empirical evidence and there is further scope for doing so. But we are left with a troubling question: how can the theory be tested? A common point within critical realism is that conventional positivist methods are not appropriate for testing theories for two reasons. Firstly, generative mechanisms may not be directly observable because they may operate in the real domain. Secondly, a focus on whether the data 'fits' with predicted hypotheses is not appropriate. The absence of a correlation doesn't disprove the presence of a regularity because mechanisms are contingent (Miller and Tsang 2011). Andrew Sayer consequently suggests that theory evaluation more closely approximates making 'judgments of superiority and inferiority' rather than definitive falsifications (Sayer 2010, 206).

Similarly, the methods used by many political scientists might not seem to be appropriate. Semi-structured interviewing is a common approach that used in social science research for identifying causal relationships and critically examining theories (Berry 2003; McEvoy 2006; Richards 1996). However, it is a problematic approach when used with elite actors. There is the risk that individuals may wish to paint themselves in the best possible light and not answer truthfully. This is especially the case for elite politicians who are skilled at promoting their public image. Elite activity commonly takes place in *actual* and *real* domains of reality. The stated opinions of politicians, that which is experienced in the empirical realm, therefore misses what is unobservable.

One methodology that has been developed to test realist theories, however, is the *realist interview*, developed by Ray Pawson and Nick Tilley (1997, 153-82). This was originally developed to evaluate theories about public policy programmes, but is argued here to be helpful for elite interviewing. Pawson and Tilley differentiated between the types of knowledge that practitioners and subjects have compared to external evaluators. External evaluators (academics) come with theories which provide 'a common explanatory blueprint'. They can draw from previous studies and use social science theory. But they are not exposed to the generative mechanisms in the way that subjects and practitioners are. Interviewing subjects is therefore a vital research tool for testing theories about those mechanisms as lived experiences.

The realistic interview differs to the orthodox interview because the aim is not to obtain objective information about the interviewee or their behaviour as such. An important point of departure with standard interview approaches is that 'the subject and the subject matter are not one and the same thing' (p.155). Instead, 'the researcher's theory is the subject matter of the interview, and the subject (stakeholder) is there to confirm, to falsify and, above all, to refine that theory' (1997, 155). The subject is not therefore the quality of the leader's tenure, but the quality of the theory. Interviewees

can of course draw from the experience from their tenure to illustrate points about the theory. Interviewees are employed as co-researchers in testing and revising theory.

The interviewer has two key processes using the realistic interview. The first is the *teacher-learner* function in which the interviewer teaches the interviewee the conceptual structure of a theory. The theory and working hypotheses are not hidden from the interviewee in the way that they are commonly are in orthodox interviews for fear of having leading questions and balance. The second is *conceptual refinement* process where the interviewee delivers their own thoughts in the 'context of, and (perhaps) as a correction to, the researcher's own theory' and are given 'an opportunity to explain and clarify that thinking' (p.168). This allows them to agree with the rationale of the generative mechanisms and give examples of events which might provide evidence of them. But it also allows them to refine and challenge the framework.

It is argued here that this is a useful approach for subjecting elite theories to empirical testing in addition to the purposes that Pawson and Tilley original developed it for. Firstly, elite actors have unique lived experiences which researchers do not have and are better able to attest to the challenges and experiences that they faced. If elite activity exists in the actual real domain because it is secretive and involves entrenched interests, then elite actors are well placed to discuss them. Secondly, the subject of the interview is not the elite actor themselves so that there is less direct repetitional cost to them and they can 'give away' what information they want and this may lead to a more open conversation.

Falsification in the positivist sense cannot either be achieved or sought through this process. There remains an element of interpretation of the data collected, criticality of the subject on behalf of the researcher is needed and analysis/discussion of the implications for theory. Elite actors may still decline to reveal sensitive information and might be unaware of the phenomenon from the real and actual realms of reality. But this approach still holds some promise in allowing theories to be subject to empirical knowledge. As Colin Hay puts it, research can be 'empirical but not empiricist' (Hay 2002).

## **Methods**

The article makes a unique contribution by using Tilley and Pawson's methods which have not been used in the study of political leadership before. These methods are used to assess the utility of the neo-statecraft framework for evaluating leaders. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with past former leaders of the main three nationwide UK political parties between 1983 and 2010 (Table

1). The interviewees were semi-structured and lasted for around an hour in length. They centred around three research questions, which are the research questions for this article:

- Is the neo-statecraft framework a 'fair' test for a political leader in Britain?
- Are the statecraft support mechanisms the most important ones?
- What are the key features of the structural context that leaders face?

Interviewees were therefore provided with a draft book chapter which outlined the statecraft approach in advance of the interview.<sup>iii</sup> Interviewees were asked how they thought contemporary party leaders should be judged and then asked to evaluate the theory, drawing from their own experience. They were then asked questions relating to their own tenure using the framework as a way of ascertaining the sufficiency of the theory in how they narrated their time in office. The chapter also outlined a range of factors that might make statecraft more or less difficult, by suggesting some causal mechanisms based on a brief literature review of the comparative politics literature. These are provided in Table 2 but explained in more detail in the published chapters.

Seven of the twelve leaders were interviewed, with at least two from the main parties, as listed in Table 1. Other leaders of the three main parties were approached but declined to participate. Leaders of smaller or nationalist parties were not included. It is worth noting that only one was prime minister during this time (Tony Blair) but it was obviously for a very lengthy and significant period in British history. In terms of sampling theory, the population is relatively small and a significant sample was achieved. Although there is not a complete representative balance this is a very significant set of interviews given the difficulty that researchers inevitably face in accessing them.

There were too few interviews to use a formal coding system. However, the principles of thematic analysis were used to extract key themes under each of the questions set about. Thematic analysis involves analysing texts for common patterns (themes) within qualitative text, in response to particular questions (Braun and Clarke 2012). It is commonly used within psychology but has also been used within political science. Importantly, it is not the number of utterances of a theme that is significant because the importance of a meaning cannot be reduced to the frequency with which it is stated. Importantly, it is compatible with realist and constructivist research because the researcher is required to search for both semantic and latent meanings in the text. This inevitably involves judgement on behalf of the researcher and might be considered an interpretation of the data. In the following results section, quotes were selected thematically from the texts to identify the core themes from the interviews.

Leader	Party	General elections fought	Time in Office as Leader
<b>Tony Blair</b>	Labour	3	2 May 1997 – 27 June 2007
<b>Neil Kinnock</b>	Labour	2	2 October 1983 – 18 July 1992
<b>Michael Howard</b>	Conservative	1	6 November 2003 – 6 December 2005
<b>William Hague</b>	Conservative	1	19 June 1997 – 13 September 2001
<b>Paddy Ashdown</b>	Liberal Democrats	2	16 July 1988 – 11 August 1999
<b>David Steel</b>	Liberal Party / Liberal Democrats	3	7 July 1976 – 16 July 1988, 3 March 1988 – 16 July 1988
<b>Nick Clegg</b>	Liberal Democrats	1	18 December 2007 – 16 July 2015

Table 1: List of interviewees

Statecraft task	Contextual factors
<b>Winning electoral strategy</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Party resources and campaign infrastructure</li> <li>• Unfavourable electoral laws (constituencies, election administration, electoral system, party finance)</li> <li>• Partisan alignment of the press</li> <li>• Ability to call election when polls are favourable</li> </ul>
<b>Governing competence</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Party reputation</li> <li>• Conditions for successful economic growth</li> <li>• Foreign policy disputes</li> <li>• Time in office</li> </ul>
<b>Party management</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Presence of credible rival leaders</li> <li>• Rules for dethroning</li> <li>• Levels of party unity</li> <li>• Available mechanisms for party discipline</li> <li>• Time in office</li> </ul>
<b>Political argument hegemony</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ideological developments at the international level</li> <li>• Alignment of the press</li> <li>• Available off-the-shelf strategies in the 'garbage can'</li> <li>• Developments in the party system</li> <li>• Time in office</li> </ul>
<b>Bending the rules of the game</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Presence of policy triggers or favourable conditions to enact (or prevent) change</li> </ul>

Table 2: Contextual Factors in the Assessment of Statecraft

Traditional concepts used by positivists have also been adapted for assessing realist theory which are useful reference points for the analysis. Smith and Johnston (2014), sketch out how the concepts validity, commonly used in positivist social science can equally be used to test theories based in critical realism. However, the concepts have different meanings. When undertaking critical realist theory therefore are four useful measurements of validity. *Measurement validity* is 'a logical assessment of the relationship between data and event' (p.17) which involves looking at the chain of evidence and whether is sufficient evidence to detect the event. *Internal validity* is evidence that the proposed generative mechanism has been triggered to cause an effect. *Ecological validity* is evidence that the mechanism theorised by research is reflected of practice. Lastly, *external validity* is evidence that the mechanism causes the events in the domain, also causes external events. These concepts will be referred to in the analysis of the theory, which follows the results section.

## **Results and Analysis**

### *The centrality of statecraft*

The discussion of the interviews begins with the question of whether the interviewees thought statecraft to be a good test of political leadership. Is 'good' British party leadership all about power and statecraft?

The leaders were clear that there were other objectives outside of statecraft that were important. Leaders were clear that they had a variety of aims, each of which could be tests of their leadership, with some reservations made about the statecraft approach. Not all leaders entered politics wanting to become leaders. They were often affected by the context of their times and wanted to bring about positive social change either in policy or ideological terms. William Hague explained that:

'growing up in South Yorkshire... with a small business background, which was the family I was brought up in. The context was one of widespread nationalised industries, large local authorities, considerable state housing and Britain being the so-called, 'sick man of Europe'. You really felt change was necessary'

Meanwhile, Nick Clegg suggested that he was inspired by the anti-apartheid movement and was mobilised by the divisiveness of Margaret Thatcher's policies and politics. Leaders, Michael Howard suggested, typically want to 'make a difference and make your community a better place'. These differences could be on specific policies. Neil Kinnock said that by the age of 12 or 13 he wanted to work to address poverty. Describing those days, he said that:

'There was poverty, illness that occurred particularly amongst people who had had a poor upbringing, shortages of food, people permanently cold, and people with too little schooling. Around the area I could see ugliness imposed upon beauty and considered that all these things could and should be put aside.... That's

why I became political and that's why I joined the Labour Party. But there was no personal aspiration in it. There was an ambition to secure change and collective means was the only route available for doing that.'

Michael Howard was partly motivated in more ideological terms:

'from the time I started to think about politics, I always rejected socialism. It seemed to me that it was basically misguided and that the right way forward was to encourage the individual rather than to seek collective answers to the challenges that every community faces.'

Leadership was also thought of in more abstract terms. Leadership is, according to Tony Blair about setting a vision for a country in a changing international environment. He argued that:

'I think that the most important criteria is that you have a clear vision for the country and where it goes, and are prepared to locate that vision of the country in an understanding of how the future is going to work.'

One part of this was developing a domestic agenda which involved, what Blair described as the necessary reform of welfare and public services. The other part, he suggested, was reflecting and acting on the question of:

'What is your country's place in the world today? How does it maximise its influence? Without engaging in criticism of the recent leadership, it is hard to see where Britain fits today in the world that is developing and that is a significant challenge'.

Leaders were also inspired by other leaders to enter politics. For Hague, for example, this was Thatcher. For Kinnock it was Bevan.

The central theme, however, was that achievement of power was a key criterion for success and statecraft was therefore a fair test. While Tony Blair suggested that there were other measures of success, statecraft was a pre-requisite for this:

'It is an important test of a leader that you are sufficiently politically competent and astute so that you are in a position that you can lead. If you lose the election, then no one is going to end up asking that question about you particularly.... There will always be something in politics that will be about being sufficiently competent in the business of politics so that you are able to win and that will involve compromises and trade-offs and so on.'

The importance of winning power was also shared by Liberal leaders too, leaders who have historically had much lower expectations for vote share and could never have been expected to win power outright for themselves. For Paddy Ashdown:

'Listen, there's only one answer I can give you on that, which is how close did they get to power?

David Steel argued that 'there can only be one criterion and that is: how successful were they in terms of seats [sic].' Meanwhile, Nick Clegg, claimed that:

'I've always been a politician who believes that in politics you've got to grab the opportunity to put your views and your beliefs into practice. I still feel that very strongly. So I was unambiguously of the view that the Liberal Democrats should seek to make the journey from opposition into government'

For this reason, there was considerable support for the premise of the neo-statecraft approach, that winning elections, or moving your party towards that goal, is the primary criteria against which leaders should be judged:

Neil Kinnock: 'In the end it's about winning elections. There are contributing factors but in the end they are covered broadly by the statecraft criteria. But nothing replaces winning elections.'

William Hague: 'Well overall I think yes... do think overall, flexibly interpreted, it's a fair framework. '

Without winning elections, any wider goal such as enacting positive social change was not possible. Ashdown argued that:

'I could see no point in this great philosophy of Liberalism reduced to being a furry little animal on the edges of British politics, proposing good ideas that other people borrowed from and being satisfied with simply opposing. The party had to be prepared to take the risk of being in government in order to implement the things we believed in, to change the condition of people's lives. I've always wanted to move the party towards power and away from just opportunism and oppositionalism.'

Although unsaid, it is implied that they would be expected to resign. When asked about the consequences of defeat, leaders thought that their position would often be untenable after defeat. However, it would usually depend on the margin of that defeat and previous expectations. For an opposition leader, William Hague explained:

'I think if you are in my position, or Neil Kinnock's position in the 1980s, people understand that it would likely take two terms to get back into government... however, you can't lose in opposition for more than two terms'.

'Rules of thumb' therefore develop within the party and Westminster as to what would be an acceptable 'progress' on the previous general election or mitigating circumstances. Howard reflected that he had decided that if he had lost in 2005 but 'managed to destroy the overall majority then I would stay' but if Labour won with 'an overall majority then I would go.'

### *Revising the support mechanisms*

In order to win office or move your party in that direction, the neo-statecraft model suggests that five support key tasks should be achieved, admittedly with varying importance. The leaders generally agreed that the mechanisms proposed by neo-statecraft theory were accurate depictions of the tasks

that they faced. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, Tony Blair thought that governing competence was 'absolutely a precondition of winning again'. As a result:

'I was obsessive about the notion that we had to show in the first term, we had to establish the credibility to govern. Therefore you have to be careful.'

Conservative leaders Howard and Hague agreed that it was to a large extent it was 'the economy stupid' that shaped the results of elections and a focus on governing competence was therefore right. But it was the *perception* of competence that mattered, and not necessarily reality. Both stressed how the economy was doing well in 1997, but as Howard put it:

'the visuals of our emergence from the ERM and Norman Lamont standing on the threshold of the Treasury were so entrenched in people's minds that what was actually happening in the economy didn't cut through.'

The importance of party management was unquestioned. As Kinnock expressed it: 'Divided, irresolute and self-obsessed parties have no appeal to the electorate'. Moreover, poor management of the party can quickly undermine the credibility of leader for governing competence, especially when in opposition, and it is not possible to establish a record by governing. Party management had a particular importance for the Liberals, argued Clegg as it threatened the future of the party and reacted to prevent this.

'I had made the obvious observation that every time Liberals in the past had gone anywhere near the other parties, like a moth to a flame they had always suffered – but where suffering would have turned into semi-terminal catastrophe would be if the party had split. I have many, many flaws but I was very, very assiduous: I would be at every week's parliamentary party meeting, I would constantly try and absorb all the narkiness and bitchiness, the backbiting that you constantly get in politics, not least from your own side.'

Constitutional management (or 'bending the rules of the game'), was stressed too. Kinnock pointed out that:

'When I first entered Parliament in 1970 the question of the constitutional implications of a policy or strategy wouldn't have been asked. Now you've got to ask it. This is a new idea in British politics – certainly since Ireland in the 1920s or – to a lesser extent – Europe in the '70s. It should be one of the test questions for leaders: Is what you are about to do in this innocuous Green Paper going eventually to lead to an absolute car crash?'

Moreover, the failure to achieve the statecraft support mechanisms often contributed to the leader's downfall. Kinnock reflected that he failed to win the battle of ideas on key policy areas and this undermined his chances of success:

'I don't think that I or my colleagues, but certainly I, sought to really fight the battle of ideas. That was partly because I didn't sufficiently believe in the significance of doing so. I should have believed in that more, especially since, as it turned out, I had eight years to play with. From the start we thought that winning was going to take "a two innings match" – and I should have taken the "ideas bat" to the crease. ... This is not a mistake that Tony Blair, Alistair Campbell and their associates made....They started to build a *narrative*.... I didn't do it and I think that was in the end something I paid the price for.'

Although Kinnock would have been unlikely to have known Bulpitt's work at the time, he was asked whether, in retrospect, he was working statecraft criteria in mind. Kinnock suggested:

'I should have known it in any case, whether someone had defined this criterion academically or not.'

Interviewees were keen to stress other support mechanisms in addition to those present in the framework that was presented to them. The ability to demonstrate competence in foreign policy, as well as economic policy was put forward, although arguably this is covered by the concept of governing competence since this refers to all policy areas. A second suggestion was, for Hague, building long term capacity and institutional strength in the party. Hague bemoaned those leaders who left the party infrastructure in such a poor state that success for their successors would be challenging. This arguably should therefore be considered a key component of party management in the model. Lastly, and related, it was suggested that building institutional capacity in local government was important. Hague argued that 'active and numerous councillors with a ward level organisation are important for fighting campaigns':

'I gave a lot of attention to party recruitment in local government. I spent, what would have been for most leaders in those circumstances, an excessive amount of time on local government... Now, strength in local government happens almost of its own accord in opposition, but not entirely of its own accord. You need to put some time in.'

This point was also stressed in the Liberal interviews. Again, this may therefore need greater recognition as a part of developing a winning electoral strategy in the model and the evaluation of

leaders using the framework.

### *The structural context*

As noted above, a review of the literature was undertaken to identify some circumstances (or generative mechanisms) that could (dis)advantage leaders. There were no direct points of disagreement with those presented to them. Instead, additional challenges were stressed. The importance of contingency and context was continually stressed. As Howard suggested:

‘looking at election performances is a bit too mechanical. It doesn't really give full weight to what you call context and what I would call events’.

The Miner's Strike was cited as a challenging turn of events for Kinnock, while Steel argued that the Falklands War ‘wiped domestic politics off the map’ and hindered his progress in the 1983 election.

Discussion focussed on governing competence, party management and developing a winning electoral strategy and the relationship between these support mechanisms. When it came to governing competence it was noted that this was exceptionally difficult for parties in opposition to develop a reputation. The support mechanism remained important, but demonstrating competence required the government of the day to fail to demonstrate success. It can also take a long time for the public's perception of a party to change, suggested Hague, pointing out that he suffered from the Tories' blow to their reputation five years earlier and Labour's difficulties after 2007/8.

Party management can be made more difficult by internal party antagonism to potential partners. For example, Ashdown found that many within his party had developed ‘quite a strong antipathy to any closer relationship with Blair.’ Parties can develop internal cultures which are resistant to change. ‘The Labour Party has gone through the birth of quins,’ suggested Kinnock, ‘every time it has become apparent that a big societal or political change is on’. Creating a party culture can be a challenge when parties merge, as the SDP and Liberals did. Party management can also be time intensive with leaders needing to spend sufficient time massage egos, and visiting policy committees or executive meetings. Leaders who take over opposition parties who have been in recently been in power can be left to manage, as Hague noted:

“‘big names” who were substantial figures in previous governments but you need to move on from them. I gave a lot of time and attention to reshuffles, to changing the personnel of the party.’

A common challenge in developing a *winning electoral strategy*, suggested some of the leaders, is that public opinion can quickly shift. Changing an image can be difficult and needs to be done from the start, but 'decisions that you have taken earlier on, by the time you have got to the election, narrow your options very considerably,' Howard explained, and by then it is 'too late'. Blair argued that this was one of Attlee's failures:

'With Attlee, you see, I don't think that they noticed early enough that the public was moving on from the rationing era after the war. They did not quite get that the public did not just want a continuation of this time where 'the state must protect us'. Six years on from 1945, the public had moved on from that, frankly.'

Public opinion can also come into conflict with party opinion, presenting a conflict with the party management mechanism. As Kinnock noted, this presented him with the:

'constant dilemma of having a party that was so distant from the electorate, including people who actually cherished that distance, meant that if you appealed, even in modest and convincing terms to the party, you were going to get caricatured by the press and therefore misunderstood by the electorate. If you went straight for the electorate then you were going to get serious frictions and distractions in the party.'

The party's track immediate past electoral record can leave the leader well or weakly positioned to force change in the electoral strategy. According to Blair:

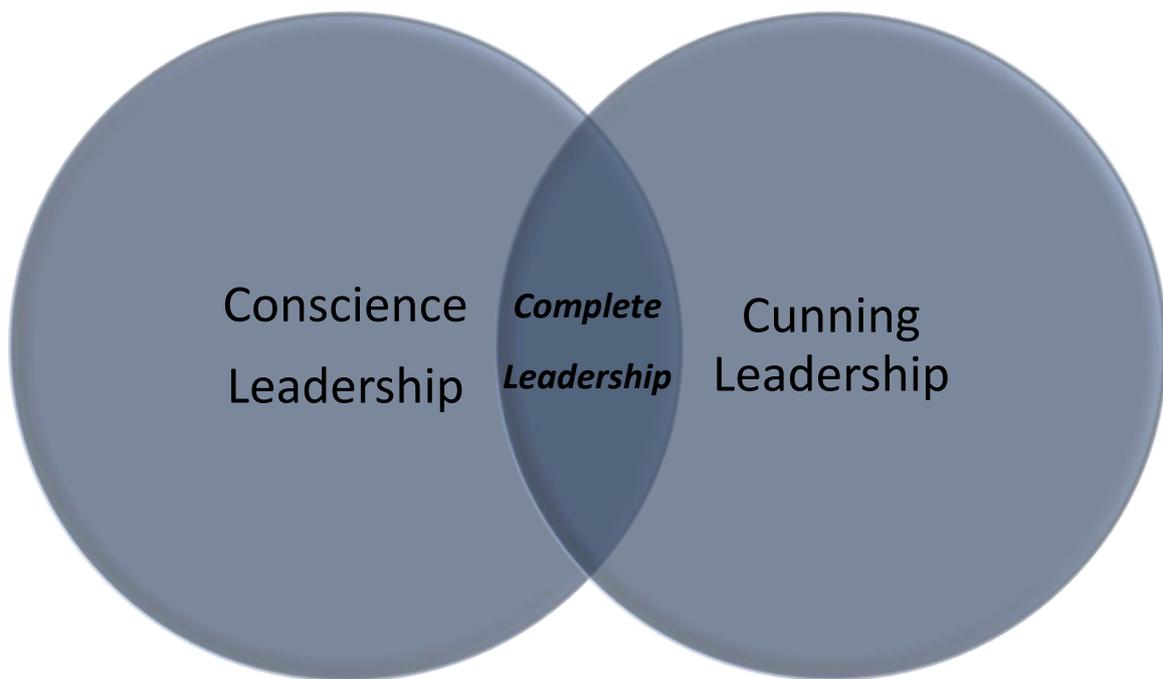
'Now, maybe I was lucky. One of the things that I often wonder about is if I had been leader of the Labour Party when they had spent four years in opposition. It might have been a different task! After eighteen years of opposition – all but the dumbest could work out that we are obviously doing something wrong. So the space was there for someone to say, look, I know where we are going, we are going this way, and provided it seemed to work, people were more less happy to go virtually anywhere.'

While some leaders thought that the blaming the media for poor coverage or misrepresentation would be making excuses, others thought that expressions of concern were legitimate. Clegg argued that his party faced the 'wrath of the press' while he was in government as they were: 'offensive to their business model, so they have to turn on us – and boy, did they'. The Liberal leaders also claimed that it was often more difficult to 'get noticed.'

## Discussion and Analysis

Returning to the first of the three core research questions - is the neo-statecraft framework a 'fair' test for a political leader in Britain? One of the core arguments made by Buller and James in favour of using the statecraft thesis to assess leaders was that it 'goes some way towards incorporating a sense of structural context into our evaluation of leadership performance' (Buller and James 2012, 534). For them 'the most obvious element of this environment was the electoral constraint facing all politicians' (Buller and James 2012, 539). The core generative mechanism at the heart of the statecraft thesis is electoral constraint. The need to win elections was fundamental to achieving any other leadership goal. There was clear support in the leadership interviews for this. In conceptual terms, there was a significant amount of measurement, internal and ecological validity with the generative mechanism playing out in the real world. This is one of the harder things for a leader to admit: that their actions are driven, at least in part, by the need to win elections. This is perhaps not a surprising finding. However, it is very significant because most of the theories used to assess political leadership do not have this criteria or causal mechanism as part of the theoretical framework.

At the same time, leaders were keen to stress the limits of statecraft theory. They wanted to achieve more normative and altruistic goals as leaders. For Hague and Clegg especially, there was some evidence that individual experiences of events early in their lives leading to them form normative positions, which are in part ideological, which partly motivated their actions as leaders. Leaders also commonly reflect on these in their own biographies (Ashdown 2010; Blair 2010). Blair's focus in the interviews on public sector reform and international statesmanship reflect a merging of ideological goals and leadership assessments. This is all evidence that leaders being motivated by factors other than pure power. In critical realist terminology, there are other generative mechanisms at play. The claim made by some of the leaders that the theory is incomplete as a measure of leadership success because it does not directly allow a leader's broader public and social value to be recognised should therefore be accepted, especially since it overlaps with academic criticisms of the theory described in the literature review – Griffiths' claim that leaders are also driven by ideology. It therefore seems necessary to recognise the importance, value and distinctiveness of the neo-statecraft in *measuring cunning political leadership* – the extent to which a leader is successful in winning power, office and influence. It is not a test of *leadership led by conscience* – where the aims, chosen methods and outcomes that are principled and morally good. *Complete leadership* will need to achieve both cunning and conscious leadership (figure 1). Successful statecraft, however, remains an important pre-requisite for realising many moral goal, especially in majoritarian political systems such as the UK, and for that reason statecraft theory is useful.



*Figure 1: The three C's of leadership: cunning, conscious and complete*

Secondly, are the statecraft support mechanisms the most important ones? Generally, there was little in the interviews to suggest that the support mechanisms were inaccurate. In fact, interviewees seemed to find them very useful for framing a discussion of their own leadership fortunes. As noted above, only one interview went on to become prime minister so different views may have come from other leaders. There is also the risk of 'group think': leaders' views were not formed independent of each other, but were created within a particular period of time when they were often in direct electoral competition. But governing competence, the most important support mechanism in Bulpitt's thesis, was dominant across the interviews, and was important even with leaders who didn't expect to become prime minister. The interviews therefore go some way to responding the criticism made of the choice of support mechanisms by Griffiths that 'it is unclear why those factors help to achieve the goal of 'winning elections and demonstrating governing competence' rather than others (Griffiths 2016, 739).

Thirdly, what are the key features of the structural context that leaders face? Few interviewees directly disagreed with the factors provided, but the discussions also suggested a wider proliferation of possible challenges – an infinity of scenarios in which different types of generative mechanisms, consisting of ideational and institutional contexts could play out to make leadership difficult. Based

on the evidence presented in this article, Table 2 therefore represents a first step forward in identifying some of the crucial contextual factors that can make statecraft more difficult to achieve.

Before closing this discussion, an ethnographic reflection can be added on how the interviewees engaged with the interview process and theory. The interviews were analysed above using textual analysis. *Being there*, however, the researcher is given an impression of the sincerity, seriousness and guardedness of the interviewee and the answers. The view of the researcher was that Michael Howard, interviewed in a committee room in the House of Lords, was the more guarded, sceptical and cautious respondent. The other interviewees were impressively engaged. William Hague and Neil Kinnock strikingly spoke much more freely and with admirable introspective self-criticism. William Hague, himself writing about political leaders, at the time (Hague 2005, 2012) seemed to connect his own personal experience with abstract thinking. Arguably, their answers could therefore be given greater weight. Importantly, the seriousness with which the interviewees took the process and the additional insights learned above suggests that the realistic interview is a useful research method that could be used more widely with elites.

## **Conclusions**

Leaders can have profound effects on people, economies, states and environments around the world. This article has sought to assess one of the leading approaches used to assessing political leaders: neo-statecraft theory. Critical realists such as Andrew Sayer stress that academic knowledge and theory is imperfect. Academics can only attempt to gain knowledge of the object of study within the cognitive and conceptual resources available in the language communities. Their ability to gain understanding of the object of study is therefore bounded by the availability of conceptual frameworks and language (Sayer 2010, 24). Academic knowledge should not be assumed to be the highest form of knowledge, Sayer warns, since knowledge generation is also a practical task. Those who work in the real-world of politics therefore have important knowledge that should be mined. This article has therefore sought to use an innovative but largely underused method, to realign theory and praxis. Past leaders were deployed as co-researchers to draw from their practical knowledge to appraise the theory in conversation with a researcher. This is the first application of the realistic interview method to political leaders and elites. It is argued to overcome some methodological problems and could be used more widely in future with political elites.

Overall, the interviews provide much reason to support the utility of the approach. Most importantly, the interviews provided evidence in support of the generative mechanisms that lie at the heart of the model – the pressures to win office and demonstrate competence. The concepts were not seriously challenged and provided leaders with a useful organising language for discussing the challenges that

they faced. The article has therefore made a crucial contribution by demonstrating some validity to the framework using empirical evidence. Evidence of ecological validity has been demonstrated bringing leaders themselves to discuss theory. External validity has been added by connecting the concepts and support mechanisms to the external literature from electoral studies and comparative politics on the determinants of voter behaviour, the management of parliaments etc. The approach has also been further developed by providing an initial set of contextual challenges that leaders face. This needs refinement with further research. It seems, however, that there are a greater and more complex range of elite-level circumstances that can (dis)advantage a party leader than their relationship with broader political-economic regimes, important as that is (Byrne, Randall, and Theakston 2017).

The interviews suggest that there are other causal mechanisms at play in political leadership as well. Leaders can be driven by beliefs and ideas too. Past experiences can lead them to enter politics to achieve goals, which might be normative and ideological in nature. The approach therefore does not provide an overall method of assessment because it only focusses on rewarding leaders for their electoral goals. We should seek to evaluate leaders in terms broader than this. We need to think about conscious leadership as well as cunning leadership. The complete leader, will achieve both.

Nonetheless, an acceptance that there are other generative mechanisms involved in leadership politics doesn't mean that they are all equally important. The need to win elections and the Darwinian nature of politics was central to the interviews and usually accepted as a *pre-requisite* for success party leadership in other dimensions. The neo-statecraft approach therefore usefully centres analysis on the cunning dimension of leadership and is therefore a useful knowledge framework for academics, practitioners and broader audiences.

## Bibliography

- Archer, M. 1982. "Morphogenesis Versus Structuration: On Combining Structure and Action." *British Journal of Sociology*, 33, p. 455-83.
- Archer, Margaret. 1995. *Realist Social Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ashdown, Paddy. 2010. *A Fortunate Life: The Autobiography of Paddy Ashdown*. London: Aurum.
- Bennister, Mark, Paul 't Hart, and Ben Worthy. 2014. "Assessing the Authority of Political Office-Holders: The Leadership Capital Index." *West European Politics*, p. 1-24.
- . 2015. "Assessing the authority of political office-holders: the leadership capital index." *West European Politics*, 38, (3), p. 417-40.
- Berry, Jeffrey M. 2003. "Validity and Reliability Issues In Elite Interviewing." *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 35, (4), p. 679-82.
- Bhaskar, Roy. 2008. *A Realist Theory of Science*. New York: Taylor & Francis.
- Blair, T. 2010. *A Journey*. London: Hutchinson.
- Blondel, J. 1987. *Political Leadership: Towards a General Analysis*. London: Sage.
- Braun, Virginia, and Victoria Clarke. 2012. "Thematic Analysis." In *The Handbook of Research Methods in Psychology*, edited by H. Cooper. Washington D.C.: American Psychological Association.
- Buller, Jim, and Toby S. James. 2012. "Statecraft and the Assessment of National Political Leaders: The Case of New Labour and Tony Blair." *The British Journal of Politics & International Relations*, 14, (4), p. 534-55.
- Bulpitt, Jim. 1983. *Territory and Power in the United Kingdom*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- . 1986. "The discipline of the New Democracy: Mrs. Thatcher's Domestic Statecraft." *Political Studies*, 34, (1), p. 19-39.
- . 1988. "Rational politicians and Conservative statecraft in the open polity." In *British Foreign Policy under Thatcher*, edited by P. Bryd, 180-205. Deddington: Philip Allan.
- . 1995. "'Historical Politics: macro, in-time, governing regime analysis'." In *Contemporary Political Studies Vol II* edited by J. Lovenduski and J. Stanyer, 510-20. Belfast: Political Studies Association.
- . 1996. "Historical Politics: Leaders, Statecraft and Regime in Britain at the Accession of Elizabeth II." In *Contemporary Political Studies, vol. 2*, edited by I. Hampster-Monk and J. Stanyer, 1093-106. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Byrne, Chris, Nick Randall, and Kevin Theakston. 2017. "Evaluating British Prime Ministerial Performance: David Cameron's Premiership in Political Time." *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 19, (1), p. 202-20.
- Byrne, Christopher, and Kevin Theakston. 2018. "Understanding the power of the prime minister: structure and agency in models of prime ministerial power." *BRITISH POLITICS*, p.
- Clarke, Charles, and Toby S. James. 2015. *British Labour Leaders*. London: Biteback.
- Clarke, Charles, Toby S. James, Tim Bale, and Patrick Diamond. 2015. *British Conservative Leaders*. London: Biteback.
- Elgie, R. 1995. *Political leadership in liberal democracies*. Basingstoke: Macmillan Houndmills.
- Foley, Michael. 2013. *Political Leadership: Themes, Contexts, and Critiques*. Oxford University Press.
- Greenstein, Fred I. 2009. *The Presidential Difference: Leadership Style from FDR to Barack Obama* Third Edition ed. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.
- Griffiths, Simon. 2016. "Statecraft as a Straightjacket: A Reply to Gamble and Hayton." *Parliamentary Affairs*, 69, (3), p. 735-43.
- Hague, William. 2005. *William Pitt The Younger: A biographer*. London: Harper Press.
- . 2012. *William Wilberforce: The Life of the Great Anti-Slave Trade Campaigner*. London: Harper Press.
- Hay, C. 2002. *Political Analysis*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

- Helms, Ludger. 2012. *Comparative political leadership*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Heppell, Timothy. 2014. *The Tories: From Winston Churchill to David Cameron*. London: Bloomsbury.
- James, Toby S. 2012. *Elite Statecraft and Election Administration: Bending the Rules of the Game*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- . 2016. "Neo-statecraft, historical institutionalism and institutional change." *Government and Opposition*, 51, (1), p. 84-110.
- Jessop, Bob. 2001. "Institutional re(turns) and the strategic - relational approach." *Environment and Planning A*, 33, p. 1213-35.
- . 2005. "Critical Realism and the Strategic-Relational Approach." *New Formations*, 56, p. 40-53.
- Joseph, Jonathan, and Colin Wight. 2010. *Scientific realism and international relations*: Springer.
- Kane, John, and Haig Patapan. 2014. "Good Democratic Leadership." In *Good Democratic Leadership: On Prudence and Judgment in Modern Democracies*, edited by John Kane and Haig Patapan. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- King, G., R. Keohane, and S. Verba. 1994. *Designing Social Enquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- McEvoy, Joanne. 2006. "Elite interviewing in a divided society: Lessons from Northern Ireland." *Politics*, 26, (3), p. 184-91.
- Miller, Kent D., and Eric W. K. Tsang. 2011. "Testing management theories: critical realist philosophy and research methods." *Strategic Management Journal*, 32, (2), p. 139-58.
- Pawson, R., and N. Tilley. 1997. *Realistic Evaluation*. London: Sage.
- Rhodes, R. A. W., and Paul t'Hart. 2014. *The Oxford handbook of political leadership*: Oxford University Press.
- Rhodes, R.A.W. 1988. *Beyond Westminster and Whitehall*. London: Unwin Hyman.
- Rhodes, R.A.W., and Anne Tiernan. 2013. "From Core Executives to Court Politics: from a bucket of rice to a bowl of jelly." In *Political Studies Annual Conference*. Cardiff.
- Richards, David. 1996. "Elite Interviewing: Approaches and Pitfalls." *Politics*, 16, (3), p. 199-204.
- Royal Holloway Group, P. R. 2015. "British MPs on British PMs: Parliamentary Evaluations of Prime Ministerial Success." *Politics*, 35, (2), p. 111-27.
- Sayer, A. 2010. *Method in Social Sciences*. Revised Second Edition ed. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Smith, Stephen P, and Robert B Johnston. 2014. "How Critical Realism Clarifies Validity Issues in Information Systems Theory-Testing Research." *Scandinavian Journal of Information Systems*, 26, (1), p. 1.
- Strangio, Paul, Paul't Hart, and James Walter. 2013. *Understanding Prime-ministerial Performance: Comparative Perspectives*: OUP Oxford.
- Theakston, K., and M. Gill. 2006. "Ranking 20th Century British Prime Ministers." *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 8, p. 193-213.
- Theakston, Kevin. 2011. "Gordon Brown as prime minister: Political skills and leadership style." *BRITISH POLITICS*, 6, (1), p. 78-100.
- Theakston, Kevin, and Mark Gill. 2011. "The Postwar Premiership League." *The Political Quarterly*, 82, (1), p. 67-80.

---

<sup>i</sup> An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 2nd International Conference of the Public and Political Leadership Network, 6-7 April 2017, at the Open University, Milton Keynes, UK. I am grateful to the participants of that conference and two anonymous referees whose comments helped to improve the article. The author alone is responsible for any errors.

<sup>ii</sup> Also see Byrne and Theakston (2018) who prefer strategic-relational approach.

<sup>iii</sup> This was subsequently published, alongside abridged interview transcripts in two edited volumes (Clarke and James 2015; Clarke et al. 2015).