Reading the Signs of the Times: Regime Dynamics and Leadership Possibilities*

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'The times will suit me'

FORMER US president Richard Nixon and former Australian prime minister John Howard have one thing in common: they learned the hard way that time and timing are crucial in achieving electoral success and exercising public leadership. Both became leaders of their parties at a time when those parties were internally divided and whilst their parties' main rivals were rallying behind popular new leaders. Both lost the first major elections under their leadership, and paid the price: years in the political wilderness. The similarity does not end there. Both possessed an insatiable appetite for power, and a deep belief in their own capability to lead. Riding out the rebuffs and the derision, neither ever considered quitting. Instead, they waited in the wings. They never stopped campaigning, rebuilding their connections with the grass roots of their parties. After years of working in the background, their gambles began to pay off. Their immediate successors faltered, their less experienced leadership rivals made mistakes. When the governing parties at the other side of politics eventually ran out of steam, they knew they had a fighting chance. Both regained the leadership of their parties, and both achieved their coveted goal: to become the popularly elected leader of their country. 'The times will suit me', John Howard said, characteristically, back in 1986 fresh into what would prove to be a disastrous first go at the Liberal party leadership which ended in 1989. And yet he was proven right in the end: returning to the leadership in 1995, he won four consecutive elections and remained prime minister for eleven and a half years. Richard Nixon too won re-election, by a landslide, before becoming his own undoing over Watergate.

Reading the signs of the times surely is one of the chief arts of leadership, going back to Machiavelli and beyond. This is so not just in the race to become elected or appointed to leadership roles. It also shapes leaders' abilities to consummate the authority associated with these roles. What ideas to push, which battles to wage, which problems to address and which to ignore: considerations of timing are critical to all such leadership calls. Some politicians and CEOs like to tout

themselves as conviction leaders, but the reality is that if they want to be successful in making these convictions matter on the ground they also need to be opportunists. Momentum is crucial to leadership. Creating it cleverly, or seizing it when the possibility to do so comes, is a sine qua non for leaders.

Nixon and Howard again provide good illustrations. Both came to office with strong beliefs in some areas, and both proved adept at timing and pacing their attempts to do the leadership work required to put these beliefs into practice. Nixon patiently built his 'opening to China', and went public with it when it suited his political needs.[1] Howard was a great waiter and a great opportunist, holding off on controversial moves in areas like gun control, refugee policy and indigenous affairs until a triggering event came along that could be whipped up to a crisis, which then provided the sense of urgency and increased public acceptance of controversial reforms.[2]

This article explores how time in its various guises affects public leadership and vice versa. It first presents conceptual tools for analyzing the nexus between time and governance,[3] distinguishing different modes of time in human affairs: linear, cyclical and randomized time. Focusing on cyclical models of political and organizational time, it draws on the work of Stephen Skowronek and Philip Selznick to examine how the tides of political regimes harbour distinctive leadership challenges and produce different leadership types. This mode of analysis offers an entirely new way of understanding the predicaments, successes and failures of individual leaders, quite independent of these leader's individual skills and competencies. The article concludes by refining and extending the models presented, and by arguing the importance of scholars and practitioners of public leadership alike to 'think in time'.[4]

I. THINKING ABOUT TIME AND LEADERSHIP

Most of us think about time as a *linear* sequence of past, present and future. The past is the realm of what once was and took place. We access it by our memory, and we conjure up images, stories and artefacts to evoke it. The present is the realm of the now: our lives and those of others as they unfold in the moment and at the moment. The future is the realm of expectations, of things that we know, hope, fear or guess might happen later. And we see them as connected: we act in the present, but we do so guided by our interpretations of the past and our expectations of the future.

Much of our personal and public life is organized around these distinctions. We save money now so we have something to fall back on later. We plan our days. We 'factor in' or 'discount' parts of the future in the decisions we make

[1]Black 2007.
[2]Kelly 2009.
[3]Cf. Pollitt 2008.
[4]E.g. Neustadt and May 1986.

now—about how to eat, exercise, where to live, what to study, which employment to seek. In most of this, we imagine life as a sequence of scripted stages: childhood, adolescence, adulthood, old age. We design public policies and institutions based on these distinctions, taking into account the relative size of the populations that will be living in one of these stages at various points in the future, for example.

Likewise, societies make organized efforts to remember—and forget—particular parts of their pasts in ways that suit their present-day needs and values. Recording, recounting and interpreting past performance has become part and parcel of life in public organizations, largely because of deeply held beliefs that doing so will enable them to perform better in the future. Organized forms of looking back come in many guises, such as evaluation, accountability, performance management or benchmarking. Their driving assumptions and public justifications are largely the same, namely that thinking about the past helps us modify our present arrangements and behaviour in order to achieve better outcomes down the line.

The linear view of time, omnipresent though it is, does not exhaust the possibilities. Its chief alternative is the idea of *cyclical* time. Instead of thinking of time as a progression of finite (as in human life) or potentially unending (cosmological time) events and stages, the cyclical view stresses the idea of recurrence. Instead of stages, we talk about sequences: things still come and go, but they eventually come again, in identical or highly similar form. Think of clock time, calendar time, and nature's seasons. If we dig beneath the surface of the dominant linear script of how a human life unfolds, elements of circularity emerge: hormonal cycles, mood swings, the ups and downs in long-term intimate relationships. The same applies to social life. The ups and downs of economies as captured in the idea of 'business cycles' or 'waves' of alternating periods of economic buoyancy and sluggishness.

Many institutions in public life have explicitly been created around the idea of circularity. In the world of organizations and policy, budget, planning and reporting cycles stand out. In human resource management, there are periodic performance reviews and promotion rounds. In political life, the daily news cycle, the 3 or 4-year electoral cycle, and the more opaque and disputed recurrent 'tides' of public opinion and 'party realignment' are pivotal in shaping the considerations and behaviours of most actors.[5] Given their importance in structuring public life, anticipating, utilizing and perhaps even modifying the parameters of such cycles and the 'windows of opportunity' they present, constitute important avenues for exercising leadership.[6]

The third pivotal view of time is yet again different in that it dispenses with the idea of order, clarity and predictability that is present in the linear and the cyclical

[5]Burnham 1970. Erikson, MacKuen and Stimson 2002. Cf. Mayhew 2004.
[6]Kingdon 1984.

views. In the linear view we may not know precisely how long a particular phase lasts, but we have the certainty that it will come to end and will morph into another, never to return again. In the cyclical view we may not always know the precise duration of any particular sequence, but we know for sure that once it passes it will come again when the cycle repeats itself or the pendulum swings back again. The third view emphasizes *randomness*. Instead of order, chance rules. Instead of phases or sequences we have punctuations. Periods of relative stability are disrupted by 'events': surprises, shocks, big bangs.[7] Things speed up during those periods in which the pace of events seems to feed on itself, defying attempts of human or corporate actors to understand let alone contain it, and yet for that very reason handing the same actors major opportunities for reflection, change and innovation at the same time.

Even the random view of time can to some extent serve as a principle for regulating our lives. Luke Rinehart's famous novel *The Dice Man* depicts a bored psychiatrist who has made the decision to subject himself to randomness: when he faces a choice of whatever kind—from the mundane to the profound—he assigns an alternative course of action to each of the numbers of the dice, rolls it, and lives with the consequences. This radically reduces the predictability of his behaviour, and, not surprisingly, lands him in a lot of trouble with family, friends and peers alike. In contrast, the much admired ideal-type of the entrepreneur is fundamentally premised on the idea of time as randomness, the key entrepreneurial skill being the ability to both identify and exploit opportunities for profit or value creation when they come (and go), preferably before others do.

In the world of public policy, the so-called public entrepreneur ideal-type of public leadership is much the same. Predicated on the idea that the world of policy and public policy is fundamentally unpredictable, exercising leadership in order to transform public policies or grow public organizations becomes a matter of calculated opportunism. It is all about patience (not wasting energy and capital when the time is not ripe), preparedness (nurturing policy ideas and networks of like-minded actors so as to have a story and a coalition to back it up in case opportunities present themselves) and opportunism (moving into overdrive to forge policy change when events happen that allow the entrepreneur to connect ideas, actors and resources in ways that were hitherto impossible and may soon again become infeasible).

Table 1 summarizes the argument so far. Clearly, the three forms of time co-exist in the public sphere. They exist objectively, in the sense that clock time is omnipresent, many public institutions have established cycles in their governance arrangements, and shocks do happen unpredictably yet potentially consequentially from time to time. They also exist subjectively as social time—individual and shared beliefs about time. The latter implies that leaders and groups can and do vary in the conceptions of time they entertain and upon

[7]Shapiro and Bedi 2007.

Table 1. Types of time and their leadership implications

	Time unfolds in . . .	Examples in the world of governance	Leadership virtues	Leader idealtypes
Linear time	. . . progressive phases	Working days/weeks Scenarios Strategic plans Term limits	Memory Foresight Vision	Pioneer
Cyclical time	. . . recurrent stages	News cycle Budget cycle Electoral cycle Economic cycle	Anticipation Timing Endurance	Tactician
Randomized time	. . . bursts and lulls	Disasters/accidents Scandals/fiascos Elite rotation/removal	Patience Preparedness Opportunism	Entrepreneur

which they base their behaviour—contrast the ideal type of the 'poll driven' Western politician with the '5-year plan driven' Chinese government apparatchik.

In reality, these are unlikely to be simple either-or choices. It is more likely to be a matter of relative emphasis. Hence, some public leaders are most strongly drawn toward 'the vision thing', a long-term view of where society is coming from and where they want it to move to. Yet many of them will be astute enough to realize that the struggle to turn vision into reality will partly take place in the context of the predictable rhythms of institutionalized cycles which shape the constellation of actors, resources, and authority they have to work with. Likewise, the classical politician whose mindset is dominated by news and electoral cycles, may well realize the disruptive power of unscheduled contingencies. British prime minister Harold MacMillan for example, famously observed to a journalist that 'events, dear boy, events' were the main forces thwarting his best-laid plans. And the essentially opportunistic entrepreneur whilst being fundamentally attuned to the chaotic nature of political life, will still observe the realities of budgetary and policy cycles and try to turn those to their advantage too.[8] It is, therefore, the mix of temporal beliefs and practices that matters in shaping leadership styles.

Moving beyond types of time, it is important to acknowledge two further crucial dimensions of social time, each of which also can be thought of in objective and subjective terms. The first of these concerns *time spans*. We can 'cut' histories and futures in slices of differing sizes. In linear terms, we may look

[8]Bartels 2008, pp. 104–9.

back at events that occurred months, years, decades, centuries all the way up to millions of years ago, and look forward on similarly varying time scales. Subjectively, historians typically offer different ways of narrating and interpreting the past, with disagreements about periodization—did the country turn a corner and enter a new phase at time x or y?—being clearly a function not so much of the historical record but of their mental maps of what should be counted as important and less important benchmarks in the temporal trajectories of social systems.

In cyclical terms, the loops of the daily news cycle are extremely narrow, whereas economic cycles are measured in decades. The nature and length of social time cycles matter. Market analysts, for example, monitor the economic implications of political systems that operate on three as opposed to four year election cycles, and between systems that have fixed election dates as opposed to those where incumbent governments have leeway to set the election dates themselves.[9] Students of international conflict have found that 'aggressive behaviour is much more likely the farther the leader is away from a possible election. As the election draws closer, the public's ability to constrain the leader increases, which induces pacifism in the leader. This dynamic is stronger in endogenous election systems, when the degree of public constraint is even higher than in fixed electoral systems.'[10]

In terms of randomized time, the shape of 'punctuated equilibriums' may vary. Punctuated equilibrium (PE) refers to a mode of evolution of physical and social systems in which periods of relative stability are fundamentally disrupted by unpredicted and uncontrollable contingencies, which require actors to make adaptive leaps and forge some new equilibrium.[11] PEs contemplated by observers and practitioners of public policy typically encompass a few decades at most, whereas palaeontologists, seismologists, and climate change scientists observe 'big bangs', stagnation, and periods of incremental change on a wholly different time scale. To make politicians and bureaucrats see the relevance of thinking about environmental, energy and disaster preparedness policies in those terms has proved a key challenge for researchers in these professions.

The other dimension of social time that is crucially important for understanding public leadership is the so-called *ontological status* of time. The key question here is how 'real' and how 'immutable' time is.[12] One answer is to see time as a constraint: it is there, and we have to live with it. Whether in ordered (time as a constant) or more random (time as a contingency) fashion, things happen. Once they do, they create a new reality, a new balance of forces, that actors have to come to terms with, interpret and 'factor in' when deciding what to do next. The notions of 'organizational learning' and 'path dependency' are a

[9]Alesina and Roubini, with Cohen, 1997.
[10]Williams 2007.
[11]Baumgartner and Jones 1993.
[12]Lauer 1981. Adam 1990.

clear illustration of this objectivist take on time. The former is premised on the idea that institutional actors can document, remember and draw policy inferences from their own as well as other pasts. If they do so sensibly, they will be more likely to devise better policies and practices for the future; yet if they opportunistically forget, distort or exaggerate lessons of the past, they set themselves up for failure moving forward.[13] At the heart of path dependency lies the observation that social processes can become self-reinforcing, making reversals of past choices made by actors very difficult. Therefore, the specifics of timing and sequencing decisions or actions matter for the way in which public organizations and policies evolve over time. Through processes of stickiness (growing costs of undoing or even modifying current practices rooted in past policy decisions), social learning and amplification, large consequences may result from relatively small or contingent events.[14] The entire structure and size of the state, and the nature of state-society relationships in different countries are cases in point.

The other main way to answer the question is to see time as a social construction, not a physical but a mental phenomenon at its core. Time is what we make of it. In this view, politicians need not be slaves of the 24-hour news cycles, periodic opinion polls, or the latest crisis—all factors known to induce a collapse of time horizons in public policy makers. They have a choice of time horizons. They can organize against the dominance of short term-ism by making sure they have persistent inputs from institutions and advisers committed to longer time horizons. They can always model themselves on Mao and take a very long-term perspective on things (Zhou Enlai famously replied 'too early to tell' when asked about his view of the effects of the French revolution—but then again he ruled over a China without a free press and opinion polls.)

Moreover, politicians have choices in how to structure the very temporal architecture of their professional lives. The higher up the hierarchy, the greater the ability to impose time frames on others, and to reset institutional calendars. (Although this is not unlimitedly so: within government many of the crucial temporal parameters are embedded in laws and even constitutions.) As Goetz observes, decision-makers can 'learn how to manipulate time, that is, to turn it from an inexorably limited, linear and perishable constraint into something that could be scheduled, anticipated, delayed, accelerated, deadlined, circumvented, prolonged, deferred, compressed, parcelled out, standardized, diversified, staged, staggered, and even wasted.'[15] Leaders can make time work for them, for example by using delaying mechanisms such as inquiries and consultations in order to orchestrate 'crunch time' around sensitive public issues in such a way as to fit their political calendars. Likewise, in relatively new and still developing polities like the European Union, a fixed temporal order has not yet fully taken

[13]Neustadt and May 1986. Brändström, Bynander and 't Hart 2004.
[14]Lindblom 1979. Pierson 2004, p. 18.
[15]Goetz 2009a, p. 187, citing Schmitter and Santiso 1998, p. 71.

hold, and temporal considerations are therefore an integral part of ongoing institutional design and reform discussions.[16]

Time in other words, can be seen as weighing in upon leaders, but also a set of levers for exercising leadership. Pollitt even talks about this in terms of a 'toolkit for time'.[17] Whilst conventional historians may abhor the very idea of instrumentalizing time in such a crude fashion, practitioners of public management and policy will recognize it instantly. For them, the difference between things going well and things being in crisis is defined by the very difference in the status and relative power of time. In times of business as usual, leaders 'have time' whereas in crises 'time has the leader.'

II. REGIME DYNAMICS AND LEADERSHIP POSSIBILITIES

Temporal factors shape the scope of leaders' mandates and their chances of successfully pursuing their key commitments whilst holding office. A crucial factor here is 'political time' (see further below). And the crucial leadership skill is that of 'timing': understanding and utilizing the moment in time at which they find themselves.

A. POLITICAL TIME: REGIME DYNAMICS AND LEADERSHIP CHALLENGES

In the world of government, leaders' fates are determined to a significant extent by their placement in what has been called political time. Political time refers to the ebb and flow of regimes: sets of basic values, ideas and policy propensities around which the polity and its governance are organized. Regimes are equivalent to paradigms in the world of science: adhering to a set of basic premises and commitments means buying into a whole range of derivative theories and policies. Paradigms and regimes both persevere as long as they are widely held to possess problem-solving capacities. This is the case for as long as a dominant coalition of actors remains committed to tackling new challenges (thrown up by contextual changes or discrepant observations) with the paradigm's or regime's tools. Over time, as challenges accumulate and nagging crises stretch and outpace the adaptive capacity of the regime, support for it declines and the case for regime change becomes more compelling: 'incumbent party fatigue' sets in.[18] A death struggle ensues, and sooner or later a new dominant coalition is formed around an alternative regime. The cycle then repeats itself, and the 'tides of reform' unfold.[19]

The cycle is there, but it is not a mechanical process. At any stage of this developmental process, the actors in the system—be they scholars or in our case

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[16]Ekengren 2002. Dyson 2009. Goetz 2009b. Meyer-Sahling and Goetz 2009.
[17]Pollitt 2008, p. 142.
[18]Bartels and Zaller 2001. Samuels 2004.
[19]Light 2001.

Table 2. Leadership challenges as a function of political time

Leader commitment to regime ⟍ Regime viability	Ascending/High	Declining/Low
High	Articulation: Regime elaboration	Consolidation: Regime reconstruction
Low	Pre-emption: Regime destruction	Innovation: Regime replacement

Source: adapted by author from Skowronek

politicians and other key public stakeholders—have a fundamental choice to make: do they believe in, support, and therefore seek to perpetuate the paradigm of the day, or do they wish to see it replaced by an alternative set of ideas and arrangements? The shape of the life cycle of regimes as well as the selection of their eventual successor depends on the constellation of these choices, the skills and resources of the actors lined up on both sides of the argument, and the dynamics of the broader environment in which the regime operates.

Combining these two fundamental dimensions, US political scientist Stephen Skowronek developed a powerful theory of presidential leadership, which I suggest can be usefully modified to understand public leadership more widely across a wide range of other political systems and public policy domains.[20] It is depicted in modified form in Table 2. Political time in the table is constituted by the pendulum movement along the horizontal axis of regime viability (i.e., its perceived problem-solving capacity). Both the key challenges leaders face and the authority they enjoy are determined by their placement in the two-dimensional space.

Let's begin with *articulation* leadership. This refers to situations where a leader who is committed to the current regime takes office at a time in which support for this regime is ascendant. Their fundamental challenge is to use this propitious alignment of forces to firmly institutionalize the regime in norms, customs, regulations, agencies and programs. Such leaders are likely to enjoy broad support, as long as they convince the dominant coalition to which they belong that their proposed program serves this underlying purpose. Their key challenge is to bolster the regime, to broaden the base, and to deepen its roots in the fabric of society to make it as difficult to reverse as possible. A key risk they run is that of overstretch: to try and let the regime do more work than it can.[21] It is one thing, for example, to use Keynesian economics to curb the fiscal and social effects of the economic business cycle (as Franklin Delano Roosevelt did), it is

[20]Skowronek 1993; 2008.
[21]Cf. Patashnik 2008.

quite a few steps further to then use its key instrument of government-led spending programs to address other types of social problems than economic boom-bust cycles (as his political son Lyndon Johnson attempted to do with his Great Society programs combating poverty, urban degradation and racial inequality). The latter amounts to taking a tested formula into unknown territory, one that has proven to be considerably less amenable to yield benign and controllable multiplier effects. Articulating leaders who push their luck may end up being routed as megalomaniac, hubristic, or overly idealistic.

The main challenge of *consolidation* leadership is to stem the tide of a regime that has begun to run into serious headwinds. Leaders of this category need to come to terms with the 'paradox of dynamic conservatism' that in order to preserve the regime, some of its subsidiary ideas, policies and programs need to be adapted to changing circumstances and to placate a growing number of skeptics and challengers.[22] An example is the field of drug policy. Countries like the Netherlands as well sub-national governments in Switzerland, France and other places are committed to a regime that is premised on a public health rather than a law enforcement definition of the situation. They are consequently prepared to tolerate the controlled sale and use of cannabis and other recreational drugs classified as 'soft'—less harmful and less addictive—whilst continuing to lean hard on the sale of 'hard' drugs, yet providing needles and even free drugs to 'hard drug addicts' so as to manage their health as best as possible and reduce the petty crime they would otherwise engage in incessantly. This regime was well entrenched in the Netherlands throughout the 1980s and 1990s, but has since come under strong pressure from two sides: the overwhelming majority of fellow EU member state national governments who remain firmly committed to across the board hard line policies and who objected to Dutch exceptionalism; and changes in the manufacturing of cannabis and marihuana which have made them stronger and, so medical research has begun to show, more dangerous to the health of users, thus undermining a fundamental premise of the public-health paradigm. Successive Dutch governments have therefore faced the challenge of reconstruction: either finding new coalition partners for the existing regime, or being prepared to adapt some of its features in order to placate its critics.[23]

Consolidation leaders need a fine eye for the layered nature of public policy: the distinctions between stability and change in the settings of particular policy instruments; the nature or mix of the instruments themselves; policies in which these instruments are embedded; and the underlying ideas and values that constitute the regime's core paradigm.[24] If they are solidly committed to the latter, they can only save the day if they are willing to tinker with the former three. In fact, they will need considerable creativity and astuteness at it. In doing so,

[22]Schon 1971.
[23]Boekhout van Solinge 1999. Kurzer 2001. Garretsen 2003.
[24]Rose and Davies 1994. Thelen 2004. Kay 2006.

however, they must stop well short of unleashing a momentum that will undermine the very foundations of the regime they are seeking to protect.

The main risk for consolidation leaders is that of being overrun, trying to wage battles on behalf of a regime that is beyond saving. When they do, they are likely to be regarded as 'out of touch', politically incompetent, and anachronistic. Many government leaders holding office during or immediately following the latter half of the 1970s befell this fate: Jimmy Carter, Robert Muldoon (New Zealand), James Callahan (UK), Malcolm Fraser (Australia), to name but a few. In essence they all adhered to the post-war Keynesian interventionist, welfare state paradigm but faced an economic environment (stagflation) in which the money required to keep it going was getting in short supply and in which tried and tested policy instruments no longer seemed to work. All of them saw their governments end in division, disarray and voter repudiation. All of them were succeeded by radical reformers who were treated much more kindly by history. Were they 'bad leaders'? Should they have seen it coming? Should they have been more flexible in shedding their fundamental commitments and hitherto widely taken for granted 'theories in use' about public finance and public policy? Did comparable others do much better at that same critical juncture? Don't say 'yes' too quickly. Rather than bad leaders they are better understood as tragic leaders, whose moment in political time passed under the influence of forces well beyond their control while they were still on the job.

If consolidation leadership is an exercise in swimming against the tide, *innovation* leadership, in contrast, is much more like sailing with firm tail winds. It is potentially the finest hour for leaders, and it is fair to say that most non-wartime leaders who are consistently regarded by posterity as 'great' leaders fit into this category. It is a match made in heaven: the existing regime is mortally wounded, and the new leader is determined to get rid of it. In US presidential politics, think Roosevelt in 1932, and Reagan in 1980. Elsewhere, think Helmut Kohl and the collapse of the Berlin wall. Think Boris Yeltsin and the end of communism. Think Nelson Mandela in 1994. Think also (and pause to reflect upon) Benito Mussolini in 1922 and Adolf Hitler in 1933. Think, somewhat more reassuringly perhaps, of Barack Obama as presidential candidate of 2008 ('change we can believe in')—though as we know now his momentum faltered as soon as he started spending his political capital on health care reform, one of the 'no-go areas' of American public policy.

Innovation leadership evolves around the exploitation of existing regime crises. It is an exercise in political brinkmanship and in change management: highlighting the bankruptcy—economically, socially, politically—of the existing regime while offering a persuasive vision of a superior, feasible alternative. The job of innovation leaders is to kick start a new regime, and build a new coalition around it. That job is made easier the more visible, enduring, painful, and widely felt the problems of the status quo. Innovation leaders therefore thrive on recession, civil strife, predecessors' fiascos and scandals, and social instability.

But what they also need is ideas, and the ability to sell them. Behind many cases of successful innovation leadership stands therefore not a single 'great communicator' like Reagan or Obama, but in fact a much broader brain trust, some of who may have been unsuccessfully trying for years if not decades to find receptive minds to their long-standing vision for an alternative regime. Milton Friedman is a prime case in point: his neo-classical paradigm was considered outrageous and irrelevant for more than a generation after he first formulated its key ideas. He spent long years at the margins of the profession and without supporters in Washington. His time came when the Keynesian order collapsed in the late Seventies. In Reagan and his inner circle he found a bunch of true believers, and in the hundreds of former Chicago students that ended up in powerful positions in their home countries and international organizations, he patiently nurtured a veritable army of true believers, developing a storyline of economic growth and individual opportunity that resonated with the mood of the country, and subsequently spread the new regime around the world.[25]

The chief risk of innovation leadership is the failure to neutralize the 'rhetoric of reaction' of their opponents and galvanize sufficient support for a central alternative vision.[26] Take climate change. Building upon decades of research and advocacy by many, Al Gore's crisis rhetoric was incredibly successful in convincing large numbers of people that climate change was real, dangerous and man-made. He also convinced many that deep changes were needed: to public policy, to the modus operandi of our economies, indeed to our ways of life. But neither he nor any other leader was even remotely as successful in mobilizing similar levels of momentum for an alternative regime. With proponents of the status quo widespread and well-connected, climate change debates got bogged down in a nasty politics of fear on the one hand and heated exchanges about the benefits and risks of fairly arcane regulatory horse-trading. Ever more desperate warnings by scientists notwithstanding, in the absence of creative and coalition-building innovation leadership, the much-needed breakthroughs were elusive.

If consolidating leadership can be tragic and innovation leadership is prone to generate resistance, *pre-emptive* leadership is an exercise in political risk-taking that borders on a suicide mission. Pre-emptive leaders are committed to the destruction and replacement of regimes that are still seen as desirable and fungible by the dominant coalition. Skowronek argues that most of them fail, and are often chased from office—despised, friendless, tainted with a tar brush politically as well as morally by their opponents.[27] He cites examples such as Richard Nixon, Woodrow Wilson, and Bill Clinton.

This remarkable phenomenon raises questions. Why would anybody opt to become a pre-emptive leader to begin with, if the odds are so strongly stacked

[25]Klein 2007. Smith 2007.
[26]Hirschman 1991.
[27]Skowronek 1993, p. 449.

against them succeeding? And why do such dangerous heretics make it all the way to senior leadership positions? Skowronek argues that 'the distinctive thing about pre-emptive leaders is that they are not out to establish, uphold or salvage any political orthodoxy. Theirs is an unabashedly mongrel politics; it is an aggressive critique of the prevailing political categories. These leaders bid openly for a hybrid alternative.'[28] In his view, pre-emptive leaders are 'third way' politicians, straddling existing ideological divides, explicitly renouncing both sides of these divides as extreme trying to occupy an as yet undefined middle ground. In cultures where two-party contestation and winner-takes-all principles are deeply rooted, third-way leadership is a dangerous occupation. Skowronek continues: 'the characteristic risk of leadership of this sort is that in charting a third way the president appears to be wholly lacking in political principles. By exploiting the indeterminacy of his oppositional stance, he will be branded unscrupulous and cynically manipulative.'[29]

Whilst not disputing this interpretation of pre-emptive leadership, I think there is an alternative type overlooked by Skowronek: pre-emptive leaders as closet conviction politicians, ideological zealots who hide their true colours by tactical pandering to the middle ground, until they feel they have consolidated enough power. Australian prime minister John Howard had to wait for more than eight years before he could secure majorities in both the House and Senate, but once he did he wasted little time in making his biggest pre-emptive bid: to radically reform workplace relations in Australia away from its traditional collectivist towards individualist principles. He knew this policy ran counter to majority sentiment, but he had the numbers to turn it into legislative reality fast, hoping that by the time the next election came around voters would have moved on. They hadn't. Not only did they throw the Liberal Party out of government after 11 years, they also robbed Howard of his own seat (as only the second prime minister in history to suffer this humiliating repudiation).

These second type of pre-emptive leaders consist of contrarians, not shying away from opposing even a firmly established regime. They are driven to try policies based on non-mainstream values and beliefs. For them to actually be given that chance requires some form of exceptional circumstances to prevail in which voters or leader selectors, though still broadly supportive of the existing regime, are dissatisfied with one or some of its key policies, and/or with all of the regime-supporting leadership candidates. Think of times where public opinion is strongly concerned with deeply unpopular wars such as Vietnam and Afghanistan, or divisive policies from incumbents in traditionally sensitive areas such as health care, pension or tax reform. Selectors in such circumstances may give their single-issue 'protest votes' to a candidate that gives them what they want in those particular areas, without realizing or temporarily discounting the

[28]Ibid.
[29]Ibid.

radical (partly scary, partly infeasible) nature of the full package they are buying into. When they do wake up, they will use every opportunity available to disavow and eliminate them.

B. ORGANIZATIONAL TIME: LIFE CYCLES AND LEADERSHIP CHALLENGES

The notion of regimes developing, blossoming, decaying and being replaced in long-range cycles is not unique to the world of government. The dynamics of organizations have been analyzed in highly similar fashion, and with similar implications for leadership.[30] Without wanting to repeat what has just been said, let me briefly translate it from the macro stage of political and public policy to the smaller stage of organizational leadership. Rather than following common organic metaphors of birth, growth, decay and death to demarcate organizational time,[31] I take my cues from Selznick's influential ideas about the institutionalization of organizations.[32] Selznick argues that formal organizations, created to accomplish particular tasks, can evolve into institutions: organizations who have become 'infused with values beyond the requirements of the task at hand.' In a fully developed institution, three features coincide: a coherent mission, a made-to-fit and well-inculcated 'technology' to achieve it, and a strong degree of internal and external support for both. Institutions have become what marketing experts call 'strong brands', evoking a high degree of loyalty from their members and clients alike. In the public sphere, institutions are organizations whose existence is widely applauded as being inherently desirable. They are 'taken for granted' and for that reason receive the benefit of the doubt. This in effect buffers them—at least much longer than the average organization—from the kind of voice and exit behaviour that tend to follow substandard or otherwise controversial agency performance. But although much is made of the spectre of 'permanently failing organizations', the reality in today's high-transparency, high-accountability public sector is that even the strongest public sector brands can get into deep trouble when they repeatedly and conspicuously commit errors or transgressions.[33] What then ensues is de-institutionalization: the erosion of internal and external support for organizational missions and methods.

And thus a cycle of organizational development ensues: from creation (or reform) to institutionalization, to de-institutionalization, and to reform. The cycle should not be read as a catch-all straightjacket. Clearly, the pace, depth, and even the sequence of these developmental stages will vary greatly between organizations and sectors. Some organizations manage to reach long-lasting equilibriums at high levels of institutionalization and have fairly stable missions and technologies—think of the judiciary and the fire services in most Western

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[30]Cameron, Sutton and Whetten 1988. Adizes 1999. Miller 1990.
[31]E.g. Morgan 1986.
[32]Selznick 1957. See also: Boin 2001; Carpenter 2001; and Boin and Goodin 2007.
[33]Meyer and Zucker 1989.

Table 3. *Leadership challenges as a function of organizational time*

Coherence and alignment of mission and technology	Low	High
Level of internal and external support for organization		
Firm	Institution-building leadership	Consolidating leadership
Weak	Fire-fighting leadership	Reform leadership

states. Others, like the UK National Health Service, manage to remain fairly highly institutionalized in terms of their brand and their public taken for grantedness notwithstanding relentless and often highly unproductive efforts to tinker with their missions, structures and methods.[34] Yet others—like the police—tend to vacillate more between higher and lower levels of institutionalization, and tend to go through waves of reform as a result.

Perhaps most importantly, not a small amount of public organizations find it impossible to ever truly institutionalize. This may be because their mission is inherently controversial and internally inconsistent, because their technology is, or because the two are not effectively linked. Think of public agencies in areas such as social work, child safety, social security, parole, or even education. Their missions are complex and often fraught with value conflicts not resolved by the legislatures that set them up and fund them. Their professional paradigms are not universally recognized in the community. They have no black gowns, white coats or expensive offices to command respect. When their operations run counter to some clients' interests, they will not hesitate to dispute their authority. Clients think they know better. Also, their prime constituencies may be of low social status or political clout, thus making it difficult to obtain adequate levels of top-level attention and funding. And they often have to serve multiple clienteles with opposing interests and priorities simultaneously. Hargrove and Glidewell argue that leading organizations that combine these features—many police organizations, prison systems, social services and child protection agencies fit the bill—amounts to a (nearly) 'impossible job'.[35]

Leading these different types of organizations during these various times in their developmental trajectories entails a series of challenges.[36] And here the parallels with Skowronek's theory of political leadership set in. Table 3 clarifies

[34]Pollitt 2008.
[35]Hargrove and Glidewell 1990.
[36]See Boin and Christensen 2008.

this. It combines two of Selznick's three defining features of institutions (mission and technology) on its horizontal axis, and places the third one (internal and external support) on the vertical axis. This yields four distinct organizational 'states', each of which entails a set of strategic leadership challenges.

Institution-building leadership is about capitalizing on existing good will and political momentum inside and outside the organization to craft a coherent and consistent mission, and developing robust methodologies for producing the (public) value the organization aims to create.[37] Think of J. Edgar Hoover's first decade as leader of the newly created FBI. He capitalized on the will to combat the growth of organized crime to build his organization into a high-performing machine and into a public brand whose reputation and right to exist few would dispute. Other examples can be found in the European Union, where the European Commission created more than twenty new arms-length agencies between 1993 and 2009, covering a wide range of areas such as drug approval, safety and health at work, food safety, human rights, racism and xenophobia monitoring, plant variety, and vocational training. Given a mandate, a building and a budget, the directors of these new creations had to start from scratch in carving out a niche and settling the organization and its work into the already densely populated European bureaucratic space.[38]

Consolidating leadership occurs when organizations are at high levels of institutionalization. The challenge is that of preventing complacency. Concretely, it is about maintaining and fine-tuning the organizational story and its technology in view of changes in its relevant environments (societal, political, technological etc.). Think of Hoover's middle decades, when the FBI had become a formidable bureaucratic empire, but saw public concern for its original raison d'etre (crime fighting) abate somewhat. Seizing upon the new public and political fear of the era, the Cold War obsession with communism, Hoover re-positioned the agency and its modus operandi to effectively incorporate this growth market and thus solidify the brand.

Reform leadership is called for when the institution's taken for grantedness comes under threat: either because the organization's inherent performance has declined, internal disagreements have sprung up, or because it has not effectively adapted its mission and modus operandi to changing societal norms and expectations. Think of the criticism the FBI was beginning to achieve in the post-McCarthy era when the concern for communist infiltration of US society had all but abated and the issues of civil rights (and the excesses of the white backlash against it in the American South) and Vietnam started heating up. For a variety of reasons, Hoover's FBI was slow in adapting to this new environment. The agency's lack of effectiveness and particularly its lack of even-handedness in dealing with violent ultra-radicals on both sides of the tensions became a bone of

[37]Carpenter 2001.
[38]Groenleer 2009.

contention. The leadership challenge was to demonstrate in words and deeds that the FBI had the capacity to transform itself to tackle the new agendas and the changing societal value sets these implied.

Fire-fighting leadership occurs when de-institutionalization is complete. The organization is fighting for its survival amidst a clamour of voices disputing its relevance, its integrity and/or its effectiveness. It is about getting the organization off the front pages and the news bulletins. It is about surviving inquiries. It is about coping with efforts by political or bureaucratic superiors to micromanage the organization, or indeed to gobble it up. It is about (re-)connecting with key constituencies and the wider public. It is about leadership in what Mao once dubbed 'interesting times': a relentless pressure cooker of incidents, surprises, criticism, attacks, and negative emotion. Think of Hoover's successors in the post-Watergate era. Or think of heads of 'impossible job' agencies, as identified by Hargrove and Glidewell.[39] Many corrections, parole, police and child protection agencies fit the bill. They are: saddled with internally conflicted missions; employing professional technologies that are essentially contested; working for low-prestige clienteles; and torn by intense conflict among their various constituencies. Leading such agencies often boils down to hoping to stay out of the news for a more than a few weeks at a time.

III. LEADING IN TIME: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The political time and organizational evolution models of leadership presented above are heuristic devices, not fully tested theories. Some caveats about them are in order. Firstly, they should not be interpreted in a deterministic fashion. Some analysts and commentators flirt with the idea of regular long-range regime cycles in American political development of roughly the same duration, but the evidence for this is contested. It is safer to presume that the overall pattern is cyclical, but that some regime cycles last much longer than others. Successive articulating and consolidating leaders and leadership teams who are both creative and lucky may in effect preside over extended periods of regime continuity.[40] In contrast, if consolidators are inept, inflexible or confronted with unusual contextual adversity, regime demise and replacement may happen relatively quickly. Perhaps the clearest instance of this was the cascaded implosion of the Communist states of Central and Eastern Europe within a few fateful months in 1989 and 1990.

Secondly, Skowronek analyzes the American polity as one macro-level regime, likewise treats successive presidencies as units of analysis, and the person of the president as the one pivotal and immutable leader figure within it. This is not attuned to the diversity of sector-specific and even issue-specific temporal dynamics that chief executives and other policymakers routinely confront. If one

[39]Hargrove and Glidewell 1990.
[40]See Dowding 2008; Goldfinch and 't Hart 2003.

does allow for this diversity, a much more fine-grained picture of any given leader's stance and performance can be obtained. It takes us closer to the lived realities of leaders, where they chose to fight some but not all potential battles they face at any given point in time.

However auspicious the match may be between the overall health of the regime and their political stance when they take office, few leaders are likely to be articulators every time and all the time. They inevitably also inherit nagging problems of declining performance and/or support in some issue areas or parts of the regime. Or despite being generally supportive of it, they are likely find themselves in disagreement with particular policies and institutional features of the regime. Leaders can thus be articulators in one area, consolidators in another, and pre-emptors in yet another. For example, John Howard was an articulator in macro-economic and foreign policy, a reformer in areas like gun control, and a pre-emptor in industrial relations and, during his final months, indigenous affairs.[41] This is a daunting yet utterly plausible prospect, which they cannot hope to cope with successfully if they choose to take on all these diverse challenges by themselves and in parallel. The diverse and dynamic nature of the leadership challenges the average senior executive faces clearly force them to prioritize and sequence their interventions, as well as to rely on others to do part of the requisite leadership work.

Moreover, leaders may develop and change on the job. They may change their minds, or at least change their stances when they deem this to have become inevitable. As political chameleons, some of their commitments and choices will be attuned to the opening and closing of political opportunities through time, as cyclical regime time collides with the more randomized patterns of punctuated equilibrium that characterize most individual issue areas.[42]

Also, leadership, like public policy,[43] is partly its own cause. The very impact—intended or unintended—of leaders' own prior interventions in a regime may cause it to change, which will likely induce them to change their stances towards it. Likewise, articulators who stay on long enough to experience cracks in the regime's armour most likely evolve into consolidators. Pre-emptors who manage to make a dent in a once robustly supported regime yet fail to destroy it, may fall back on more pragmatic reformist leadership aimed at incrementally changing it. So did Margaret Thatcher with respect to the National Health Service: having unsuccessfully tried to get rid of it in favour of a market based model of health care delivery, she set about to at least get the NHS to operate in a more 'business-like' fashion.[44] Paradoxically, this may leave such pragmatic reformers only a hair's breadth away from consolidators who realize that in order

[41]Cf. Brett 2007; Errington and Van Onselen 2007; Kelly 2009.
[42]Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Jones and Baumgartner 2005.
[43]Wildavsky 1979. Rose and Davies 1994.
[44]Moran 1999. Harrison and McDonald 2008.

for the regime's core values to be preserved many of its structures and policies will need to be reformed significantly.[45]

Finally, changes of leadership stance within one office-holder's period in office may also be simple products of the taming and energy-sapping impact of life at the top itself. Initially energetic reformers and bold pre-emptors may deplete much of their leadership capital well before they leave office. They learn to tolerate and compromise more than they ever imagined at the outset of their careers. Some of the post-Stalin cohorts of Soviet leaders are a case in point: Khrushchev retained burning ambition to innovate and reform throughout his tenure but had essentially exhausted his authority among the inner circle in the wake of the wild, lost gamble of the Cuban missile crisis, and was removed by a palace coup two years later. His successor Brezhnev was an energetic, hard-line consolidator who turned into a nondescript time-server by the sheer effects of old age. In the UK, Harold Wilson's agenda and style varied considerably between his first (1964–1970) and second (1974–1976) terms as prime minister: not only had economic circumstances become considerably grimmer by the time he returned to power, he himself had also aged considerably and would in fact resign prematurely midway through his second term knowing he was in the early stages of Alzheimer's disease (though he did not state this reason publicly, triggering much speculation and conspiracy theories about the 'real' reasons behind his shock departure).

With or without these nuances, the models of political and organizational time presented above highlight the need for leaders to 'think in time.' Neustadt and May explicitly recommend they do so. In their view, leaders should not so much ask 'what the problem is' in the organization, polity or issue area they propose to govern, but rather 'what the story is'.[46] Figuring out the story of where entities have come from, how they have evolved and where they might be heading allows leaders to situate the present in ways that conventional diagnostics often overlook. This encourages them to think about how they themselves—their values, beliefs, identities, skills, experiences and support base—fit in. Thinking in time by being aware of the long-term and dynamic nature of their political and institutional environments allows leaders to make better informed judgments about whether and where the times will suit them.

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[45]Terry 1995.
[46]Neustadt and May 1986.

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