# When to lead and when to follow

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**When must leaders lead and back their judgment against their followers, and when must they follow?**

EVERY political actor aspires to master the elusive art of leadership. During the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, men would turn to instructive handbooks about the art of statecraft.

Often written by sycophantic courtiers, these so-called mirrors for princes would contain exhaustive maxims about how new rulers should behave.

The most celebrated of these was Niccolo Machiavelli's The Prince, notorious for its prescription that leaders use whatever means necessary to acquire, maintain and extend their power.

One wonders whether Malcolm Turnbull, in his recent dark moments in Canberra, might have been tempted to consult Machiavelli. This isn't as far-fetched as it seems. Turnbull, himself a renaissance man, may have found some Florentine encouragement for his heroic, if ill-fated, stand against members of his parliamentary caucus. Machiavelli certainly counselled aspiring princes to make conspicuous displays of strength and bravado.

In language that may alarm modern sensibilities, he wrote: "It is better to be impetuous than cautious because Fortune is a woman, and if you want to keep her under it is necessary to beat her and force her down. It is clear that she more often allows herself to be won over by impetuous men than by those who proceed coldly.

"And so, like a woman, Fortune is always the friend of young men, for they are less cautious, more ferocious and command her with more audacity."

Few could fault Turnbull for lacking in ferocity or audacity. Rather than meekly accept that his partyroom wouldn't acquiesce to a negotiated agreement with the government on an emissions trading scheme, Turnbull chose to forge ahead against his internal Liberal Party opponents.

To everyone's surprise, he came close in the end to bringing Fortune to heel.

Turnbull, you may say, belongs to the school that believes leaders do not follow but must take charge so others may follow. However, there are times when leaders need to be more measured. For all that Machiavelli commended the leader who "makes his own luck", he by no means suggested that all princes should be blinded by their own courage. A less hurried reading of Machiavelli reveals he also warned leaders to avoid becoming despised and hated.

"One of the most powerful remedies a prince has against conspiracies is not to be hated, for whoever plans a conspiracy always believes that he will satisfy [others] by killing the prince," he argued.

Common sense confirms this. For the most part, those in positions of power cannot merely assert their superiority; they must earn their supporters' allegiance, trust and esteem. This is because leadership essentially involves a relationship between leader and followers. Leadership must be transactional rather than tyrannical. It must meet the mutual needs of leader and follower.

Thus understood, the effective leader is someone who knows that they cannot always be bold, but must on occasions accommodate their followers. Yet it falls to a leader's judgment to decide just when to lead and when to follow.

There is one thing, though, worth bearing in mind. As Turnbull may now rue, sometimes it is better not to pound Fortune into submission but to win her around with the power of persuasion.

Readers are invited to suggest subjects for future pondering. The email address:philosophercolumn@gmail.com

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