

# 'LEADERISM': AN EVOLUTION OF MANAGERIALISM IN UK PUBLIC SERVICE REFORM

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This paper argues that 'leaderism' – as an emerging set of beliefs that frames and justifies certain innovatory changes in contemporary organizational and managerial practice – is a development of managerialism that has been utilized and applied within the policy discourse of public service reform in the UK. The paper suggests that 'leaderism' is an evolution of entrepreneurial and cultural management ideologies and practices. An analysis of the articulation of leaderism with public service reform in the UK is presented. The paper problematizes the construals of leadership contained within these texts and reflects on their promotion of leadership as a social and organizational technology. 'Leaderism' is argued to be a complementary set of discourses, metaphors and practices to those of managerialism, which is being utilized in support of the evolution of NPM and new public governance approaches in the re-orientation of the public services towards the consumer-citizen.

## INTRODUCTION

The central argument developed in the course of this paper is that 'leaderism' – as an emerging set of beliefs that frames and justifies certain innovatory changes in contemporary organizational and managerial practice - is a development of managerialism and that it has been applied and utilized within the policy discourse of public service reform in the UK as part of the hybridization and evolution of NPM and new public governance practices in the public services. The paper substantiates this argument by undertaking an extensive and in-depth analysis of 'leaderism' – as both a set of emergent discourses about leadership and as a set of framing metaphors encapsulating ideas of the process of 'leading change' in the public services – through a quantitative lexical analysis and a qualitative critical discourse analysis of a corpus of UK central, health and education government texts from the 12-year period from 1997 to 2008 inclusive. Our analyses are thus a study of the performance of the discourse of leadership by government. This discursive performance involves repetitions that attempt to create and stabilize 'new imaginaries' that support, complement and promote the UK government's re-imaging of public services through its programme of reform.

Substantively, the paper starts by delineating how 'leaderism' within policy discourse is an evolution of entrepreneurial and cultural management ideology and practices which are focused on 're-imaging' the public service user as a consumer (or 'co-producer') rather than as a citizen or client (Clarke *et al.* 2007; Needham 2007). It is also contended, however, that this emerging belief in 'leaderism' has not supplanted or superseded New Managerialist ideology and NPM mechanisms and practices. Rather, it is argued that 'leaderism' is a complementary set of discourses and practices to those of managerialism, and that it is being utilized in support of the evolution of NPM and new public governance approaches in the public services.

The paper develops with critical reflections on the ways in which the government's order of leadership discourse has been a key feature of its drive for public service reform since 1997. The discourse of leadership potentially contributes to three essential

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elements of the reforms promoted over this period. Firstly, the discourse of leadership is constitutively associated with leading transformational, system-wide change; that is, it construes leaders as change agents, and, by extension, as change agents for reforms that will radically reshape the nature and content of 'public services' and the manner in which they are provided and consumed. Associated with this, leadership, as a practice, is promoted as an organizational and social technology which is construed as enabling and facilitating public service reforms. Secondly, it potentially alleviates and absorbs the endemic tensions between politicians, managers, professionals and the public inherent in NPM systems by drawing them together into a unifying discourse of a leading vision for their services in which they, collectively, play a major role. Thirdly, the core component of the discourse of leadership, namely leaders, is represented as an essential ingredient of the new governance of public service organizations, including not only public service managers, but also, variously, frontline professional staff, members of the public, and private and voluntary organizational members. The former construction of leaders as change agents for reform, however, lies in contradictory tension with the latter new public governance role of leaders as independently directing local public service organizations. This tension between the delegation of reform to public service leaders and the promotion of their future autonomy as authors of their own reforms, which is evident in the government's discourses of leadership, is symptomatic of the contested and contradictory nature of current government policies and mechanisms as they move into the 'new public governance' era.

Throughout the paper the framing metaphors of 'leaderism' within policy discourse are explored, including how it is distinguished from more orthodox conceptions of management entailed in NPM. Most notably, the framing metaphor of 'leaderism' prioritizes the role of 'agency'; this is of crucial importance in governmental discourses of reform to the extent that they attempt to represent and convey the political imperative of combating institutional inertia and managerial conservatism through forms of intervention that will initiate a paradigm shift in our understanding of 'public services'.

The concluding discussion points to some of the issues raised by the metaphor of leadership as applied to the public services and the role of leadership as a social and organizational technology. It is argued that 'leaderism' is a key component of the attempted ambidextrous re-orientation of public services to both poles of the new 'citizen-consumer' subject position implicated in policy documents. We conclude that 'leaderism' is a core normative component of contemporary managerialist discourse within the new public governance of services in the UK that is being used in part to justify these re-orientations. To begin, the section that follows demarcates what has been meant by managerialism, and sketches how particular variants of managerialism have been drawn upon in the development of leaderism within UK policy discourse.

## **LEADERISM AS AN EVOLUTION AND HYBRID OF MANAGERIALISM: A BRIEF OVERVIEW**

Managerialism as a doctrine of ideas and related practices has been advocated in the private sector since at least the 1970s (Peters and Waterman 1982; Reed 2007), and there has been continued advocacy for the implementation of managerialist ideas and practices in the public sector since at least the 1980s (for example, Osborne and Gaebler 1992). It is outside the scope of this article to explore in depth the relationships between managerialism and new public management, but in order to be analytically clear, the

former is understood to denote primarily a belief in the importance and efficacy of management as a system of organizational co-ordination, and the latter is understood as a set of management practices, techniques and precepts in the public sector informed by the former.

Managerialism has been defined as 'the belief that all aspects of organizational life can and should be managed according to rational structures, procedures, and modes of accountability in the pursuit of goals defined by policymakers and senior managers' (Wallace and Pocklington 2002, p. 68). In the public sector, government pursuit of managerialism has been viewed as an attempt to reconstruct the state by 'rolling out' state power between central government and organizations at the periphery (Pollitt *et al.* 2004). Two strands of managerialism have been marked in the 'roll out' of the state – entrepreneurship, which prioritizes devolved authority and service innovation within competitively designed environments; and culture management, which prioritizes the alignment of the beliefs and values of managers with those of policy-makers. A number of commentators have pointed out the ensuing contradictory tensions between control and delegation contained within both entrepreneurship and culture management logics of managerialism and their attendant practices (for example, Wallace and Pocklington 2002). It is precisely this nexus of control and delegation that is addressed by the rise of public service 'leaderism' within UK policy discourse – a particular evolution of managerialism which combines and develops aspects of both. Whereas management necessarily involves the conundrum of aligning principal and agent, the change in discourse to leadership resolves this conundrum through re-definition by making the issue the establishment of a passion for a common goal between leaders and led (Wallis and Dollery 1997). A further contrast between managerialism and leaderism lies in the fact that conventional NPM-style managing implies an onus on instrumental rationality via organizational rational planning and implementation, whereas leadership is construed as involving value rationality via strategic adaptation to, and shaping of, the social environment, the negotiation and overcoming of risk, and a sustained focus on radical change.

While we are primarily interested in the public sector it is important to note that the emphasis on leadership is not a new phenomenon, having been a topic of interest in the military and private sectors for a considerable period of time. Like any cultural ideology it has a long history (Grint 1997; Storey 2004). What is of interest is the rise of this ideology and its application to other domains, which necessarily entails a morphing and change of its character.

A number of commentators have pointed to the surge in the interest in and discourse of leadership in the public services (Newman 2005; Currie *et al.* 2008). However, the features of this discourse have not been adequately analysed. In order to substantiate these claims and to provide the necessary empirical backing to support our argument that there is a broad phenomenon that we are labelling 'leaderism', we conducted a search of items in the British Library Integrated Catalogue containing the word 'leadership' in their title. Approximately 50 per cent of the total number of records that contained the word 'leadership' in their title were from the period of 1997–2008. A further 26 per cent were from the equal time span directly preceding 1997 (1985–1996). This is indicative evidence of an increasing rise in the language of leadership, in English-writing countries, over the past few decades.

Three broad genres of leadership literature in the English-writing world are relevant – academic, popular and policy discourses – which necessarily interpenetrate each other. The substantive analyses presented in this paper are primarily concerned with policy

TABLE 1 *Number of digitally archived UK public administration documents with 'leadership' in their title*

Timespan	1 January 1988 (earliest date of digital archive) to 31 April 1997	1 May 1997 to 21 May 2008
UK public administration documents with 'leadership' in their title	124	1428

discourses. The second broad social trend of interest is the associated rise and spread of the provision of 'leadership development' programmes and support from consultancy, professional association, academic and government bodies (see Storey 2004; OPM 2006).

This societal trend of leaderism in the English-writing world, is a background to our particular interest, the trend towards leaderism in the policy discourse of the UK public services. Supporting evidence for this subset of the broader trend of leaderism comes from an investigation of the language of leadership in UK government public administration documents. A keyword search for 'leadership' was conducted of 'public administration' documents in the digital archive of the UK parliament. Table 1, above, summarizes the results.

While the two timespans are not of equal duration, the ratio of the total of UK government public administration documents containing the keyword 'leadership' for the period of the Labour government compared to the previous Conservative government is of the order of 11:1. This is a strong indication of the rise of the language of leadership in the field of UK public administration since May 1997. Having briefly outlined the trend towards leaderism both in the English-writing world and in UK public administration, in the next section we substantiate what we mean to denote by the term 'leaderism'.

## LEADERISM: AN OUTLINE

Leaderism is composed, firstly, of an explicit use of the language of leadership, that is, such linguistic terms of 'leaders', 'leadership', being 'led', and 'leading' are used and discussed as phenomenological entities in a variety of different ways. Secondly, this language of leadership draws upon and is posited on the framing metaphor of 'leading' – an image, or symbol, of a relationship of guidance or direction-giving. Leaderism is thirdly composed of a belief in the importance of this relationship of guidance or direction giving.

We do not attempt to define leaderism as we hold that any set of ideas and beliefs, such as nationalism or communism, are not reducible to a single necessary and sufficient encompassing statement. Rather, following Wittgenstein (2001), we see such attitudinal phenomena as being composed of a series of inter-related ideas and beliefs, which bear a 'family resemblance' to each other, but which do not necessarily evidence an essential attribute. Our outline, therefore, seeks to map out the main characteristics of the phenomenon we are interested in, but does not purport to exhaust or fully explicate it.

To begin, the metaphorical power of the word 'lead' (and the relative modernity of 'leadership') is indicated in its etymology.

*Lead* (v.): 'to guide,' (*Old English*) *lædan* 'cause to go with one, lead,' causative of *līðan* 'to travel,' . . . Meaning 'to be in first place' is from c.1380. The noun is first recorded c.1300,

'action of leading.' Meaning 'the front or leading place. is from 1570. . . . *Leadership* first attested 1821. (MLA 2008)

We outline leaderism as 'the belief that many core aspects of social life can and should be co-ordinated by one or more individuals who give direction and/or purpose to social activity conducted by themselves and others'. This can be seen to be composed, or supported by, a series of framing metaphorical narratives:

- that in an endemic situation of competition, survival and progress require social co-ordination;
- social co-ordination is best achieved through single or small groups of specially gifted and/or positioned individuals who lead;
- individuals that lead use particular moral, intellectual, interpersonal, conative, material, or politico-cultural, resources in order to achieve social co-ordination;
- such social co-ordination by those who lead places them in a pre-eminent role;
- to perform this role leaders must be empowered by giving them sufficient room to manoeuvre - the 'right', or authority, to lead (adapting Pollitt 1993, pp. 2–3);
- those who lead require effort and commitment from those being led;
- such social co-ordination leads to progress which benefits all those involved.

It is worth noting that in contrast to locating the co-ordination role in a small group of people, some versions of leadership stress that the process of co-ordination can be distributed across social groups (for example, distributed leadership, collective leadership Gronn 2002; Harris *et al.* 2007; Leithwood and Mascall 2008). Such versions utilize the image of a group leading themselves or self-leading, in the manner that an individual may be described as self-leading. While this metaphor of self-leading (either group or individual) would appear to be logically antithetical to the metaphorical narrative where the co-ordination role is located in a small group of people, in practice, these metaphorical images are often used interchangeably in policy and lay texts. The textual effects of the application and utilization of these metaphorical narratives of leadership to public service organizations and systems will be developed after outlining the research design utilized. A fuller discussion of the critical realist (CR) based discourse analysis methodology informing this research design is contained in appendix 1.

## LEADERISM IN THE POLICY DISCOURSE OF PUBLIC SERVICE REFORM IN THE UK

It should be clear from the above that we do not see 'leaderism' as a product of UK government discourse, or of specifically UK Labour party discourse. However, as supported by the rise in the lexicon of leadership in public administration documents since May 1997 in the UK, we hold that the broader social phenomenon of leaderism has been taken up, adapted and legitimated by the government presided over by the Labour party. The adoption and utilization of a discourse in a new setting, however, necessarily entails articulating together discursive elements that were not previously conjoined, which results in a new discursive formation, with attendant new conjunctions, limits and possibilities. As Fairclough (2003) notes, 'the new is made out of a novel articulation of the old' (p. 127). In this analysis we are interested in the articulation of leadership with the UK government's project of public service reform since 1997.

There are certain limits to such a textual-analysis approach – namely, little attention is given to the modes of production, dissemination and use of the texts. In addition, it cannot address how differentially situated actors use, interpret, mediate and contribute to centrally produced discourses or whether such centrally produced discourses are in fact used by other actors. Both Newman (2005) and Currie *et al.* (2008) show, however, that the discourse of leadership is used by public service managers. They focus on particular aspects of the government's discourse of leadership rather than drawing on a fuller analysis of the government's articulation of leadership with public service reform. Our textual analysis, therefore, is a necessary contribution to further research on the promotion, mediation, interpretation and contestation of the UK government's discourse of leadership.

In order to represent the government's project of public service reform over this time period we firstly had to identify a set list of lexical terms used by the government in its depiction of public service reform. This involved a literature search of documents produced by central government (used here to denote the cabinet office and the treasury) and the spending departments of health and education, which represent the largest departmental expenditures on public services in the UK, and more general documents produced by other government units, departments and agencies which touched upon the themes of this paper. This initial search surfaced a number of documents from the departmental levels that included explicit formulations of public service reform, either of a generic cross-service kind (9 from central government) or of reform in the education and health services (7 from the education department and 5 from the health department respectively). These documents were classed as 'versions of reform'. Owing to the large number of documents produced by central government and the spending departments it was decided to concentrate on these 'versions of reform' documents in specifying what the government's core lexicon of reform was since these were explicit statements by the various levels in government of what constituted reform. In each of these 'versions of reform' there was a set of what we have classed as 'headline elements of reform'. For example, in a 2002 central government document (OPSR 2002, p. 10), reform is depicted as being the attempt to achieve 'customer-focused public services' through the principles of:

- standards and accountability;
- devolution and delegation;
- flexibility and incentives;
- expanding choice.

These sets of 'headline elements' of reform were qualitatively analysed to produce a list of key lexical terms used by the government to describe generic cross-service reform, education reform and health reform. The list of lexical items produced from this analysis contains 67 core items (listed in appendix 2). The lexical item 'leader' is one of the third most frequent terms in these 'headline elements' of reform. This is clear evidence of the strong presence of the discourse of leadership in governmental representations of reform.

Lexical analysis was thus used to map out the key regularities and patterns of the government's discourse of reform and to show the prominent presence of the discourse of leadership within it. Lexical analyses, however, divorce wordparts from the contexts in which they are used, and as such can say little about the meanings attached to words.

For this reason the lexical analysis serves as a backdrop to the qualitative analysis of the government's discourse of leadership developed below.

Our interest in public service leadership lies not only in the fact that leadership is a frequent core lexical item within the government's project of public service reform. It is also associated with a number of the other core lexical items of reform. For example, in 2007, leadership is allotted the task of ensuring the personalization of services and ensuring that services provide for the 'hard to reach' (Strategy Unit 2007). Leadership is also identified as the primary contributing factor to successful performance management (Treasury 2000) and leadership is regularly referred to as the factor that will lead to services being 'excellent' (for example, DfEE 1998, DfES 2003). Leaders and leadership are also associated with particular policies or programmes, in other words, with particular reforms. As such, leaders and leadership is constructed as a, if not the, 'change agent' for reform. The importance of the discourse and metaphor of leadership will be developed in the sections that follow.

### **'LEADERISM' AS JUSTIFYING CHANGES IN THE ORGANIZATION OF UK PUBLIC SERVICES**

In this section we present evidence detailing how leaderism is evident in the re-structuring of UK public services. Leaderism is evident in an emerging discourse of public service leadership that frames and justifies certain innovatory changes in contemporary organizational and managerial practice. This discourse of leadership is used to put an emphasis on senior managers (leaders) as both the harbingers and the vanguard of new types of 'customer-focused' (OPSR 2002) continuously 'self-improving systems' (Strategy Unit 2006) or 'world class personalised' public services (Strategy Unit 2008). This is achieved through a number of mutually re-inforcing linguistic strategies.

#### **Leadership and legitimating narratives of reform**

Leadership is associated with a number of recurring narratives of public service reform, most importantly that of the 'cascade of change' of modern society. The 'cascade of change' narrative represents higher order changes such as globalization and changes in modern society as requiring shifts in the politics of nation states, which in turn place new requirements on the public sector to change and modernize, which in turn present the introduction of restructured public service organizations (with practices such as work standardization, cost cutting, flexible labour force strategies and a more competitive ethos) as inevitable requirements of the new contextual realities (see Clarke and Newman 1997). For example:

As in the private sector, public organisations face new pressures to adapt, learn, innovate and keep up with the best performers. Amongst these new pressures are:

- more rapid technological and other change, creating new opportunities and threats and allowing greater integration across a range of organizational boundaries (with a public sector commitment to put all services online by 2005);
- greater organizational complexity, as new technology and organizational forms combine to promote new ways of organising service delivery; and
- increased consumer expectations of service delivery, together with a more complex array of other demanding stakeholders.

... Taken together, these increased demands on organisations create a need for highly effective leadership and a requirement for new leadership skills. (PIU 2001, pp. 10–11)

The 'cascade of change' narrative is used to legitimate the need for public service reform, and in this particular instance it is also used to create an onus on leaders and leadership as the form of agency by which these pressures and changes are addressed and new services are developed. Leaders are thus construed as integrating services and functions, to meet the expectations of consumers and other stakeholders. Leaders are furthermore variously associated with reform or with crucial elements of the project of reform:

Our model for performance management cannot be effective simply as a system. The leadership of top managers is critical in bringing performance management to life and setting a prevailing culture in which it can operate effectively. If leaders are risk averse, encourage continuity over change and fail to communicate to their staff, performance management becomes little more than a paper exercise. (Treasury 2000, p. 9)

Public services reform requires support for and development of excellent leaders capable of tackling poor management and inspiring ambitious performance. (OPSR 2002, p. 21)

Over the last 5 years, significant effort has been put into developing specific leadership initiatives across the public sector, for example, the establishment of a National College for School Leadership in 2000. However, more recently there have also been efforts to develop a more flexible cadre of 'public service' and 'customer focused' leaders that can lead reform and collaborate effectively across the delivery landscape. (Strategy Unit 2006, p. 82)

In these instances, leaders, and leadership, are cast as the motive force for reform. Moreover, leaders are represented as being responsible for reform, it is on them that the obligation of instigating change falls. These instances rest on the metaphor of leaders leading, pushing, reform.

'Strong' or 'good' leadership, two of the most common adjectival descriptors of leadership, is thus leadership that is construed as rising to the 'challenge' of change and reform. This is construed as involving decision-making, courage and perseverance, all active ascriptions. In this way, senior managers that pursue negotiated compromise or incremental change are implicated as 'poor' or 'weak' leaders. This valorization of active leadership supports the implementation of reform and the government's narrative of the need for adaptation to the cascade of change.

There is more to the focus on leadership in the public services, however, than the construal of the agency of leaders as being for reform. Leadership has been identified by government as a core skill or technology in the re-orientation of the public services, for example, 'Fundamental to improved leadership is a clearer shared understanding of what leadership behaviours work in delivering today's public services' (PIU 2001, p. 5).

A focus on leadership as a social technology for co-ordination is evidenced in the creation or support by central government of at least 11 new bodies to provide and commission leadership development for publicly-funded services in the UK since 1997 (see O'Reilly *et al.* 2007). An overview of this emphasis on leadership development is provided in a 2001 report for central government which lists:

qualities, characteristics, and approaches to be utilized by leaders;  
principles of how leaders should operate in organizations;



leaders' orientations for working with other organizations;  
 cross-sectoral generic qualities of leadership;  
 sector-specific dimensions of leadership;  
 leadership styles for specific circumstances; and  
 a list (and examples) of leadership 'behaviours in action'. (PIU 2001, pp. 17–28)

As Newman (2005) argues, leadership development programmes based on such conceptualizations of leadership include an emphasis on the affective and symbolic aspects of person-hood, where leaders are charged with exercising their powers in order to 'nurture and direct' the individual strivings of both themselves and those over whom they have authority (p. 721). This aspect of the government's discourse of leadership represents leadership as a technique or skill in arousing passion within staff and public for changes in services. Leaders are construed as animating their environments via espousing visions, embodying values and modelling appropriate behaviours. In terms of leadership as a social and organizational technology, leadership is made concrete through leaders operationalizing the processes of change. In this way, leadership is construed as an attainable identity for senior managers, if they show their enthusiasm and ability to reform services.

### **Leadership as a tie that binds the new public governance**

One of the most important uses of the discourse of leadership is its use to represent and thus construe a social bond between government, public services and the public. This is crucial when public services are being consistently restructured. Not least, such attempts at creating a social bond are an endeavour to overcome tensions between conflicts of interest – whether they are principal/agent, hierarchical, professional, geographical, sectoral or class-based. One way in which leadership is used to create a social bond is through its promiscuous attribution to all parties that the UK government seeks to address. The following items show the government's liberality in its attributions of leadership:

The government-appointed Committee on Standards in Public Life attributed leadership as one of the seven principles for people in public life. This applies not only to those elected to public office, but also members and other senior officers of bodies discharging publicly funded functions (see OPM and CIPFA 2004);

Working alongside community leaders, parents and representatives of faith communities, we will work to break down the barriers to equality of opportunity and tackle the cycle of disadvantage (DfES 2001);

40 per cent of the 30 most senior managers in the DfES have been recruited from outside the Civil Service, bringing a richer mix of skills and knowledge to the Department's leadership (DfES 2004: 103);

The best local authorities are strategic leaders of their communities, listening to, and then speaking for their citizens. (DfES 2005, p. 92)

Developing school leaders into national leaders: [...] we will ask the College to identify, with the help of a range of partners, a new group of national leaders of education, drawn from those who are succeeding in our most challenging leadership roles. These top headteachers will work closely with the College to influence the direction and targeting of leadership provision across the school system. They will also be able to

advise Ministers on the future direction of education policy on the basis of their expert experience. (DfES 2005, pp. 89–90);

Cultural change of the order required will take time. Success will depend on every single member of the NHS demonstrating leadership in promoting the values and vision of the NHS. (DoH 2005, p. 26);

The essence of clinical leadership is to motivate, to inspire, to promote the values of the NHS, to empower and to create a consistent focus on the needs of the patients being served. (DoH 2007a, p. 49);

As world class commissioners, primary care trusts (PCTs) must take on the mantle of trusted community leaders, working with their local population, partners and clinicians, leading the local NHS. (DoH 2007b, p. 1).

In summary, in these extracts leaders are represented as leading systems, organizations and communities. Organizations are leaders, civil servants are leaders, politicians are leaders, professionals are leaders, governors of public service organizations have leadership, and members of the public are leaders. Leadership, therefore, is represented as a mutable and ubiquitous feature of the public services in the UK. Each of these attributions relies on the metaphor of leadership entailing a social collectivity – leadership binds both leaders and followers, implying a social commonality and commitment, and thus a social responsibility. This social responsibility, in turn, is related to the onus on network and partnership working, collaboration and community – aspects of what has been called 'the new public governance' (Osborne 2006) where local organizations are responsabilized for working jointly with other local and regional organizations and populations. This responsabilization of various agents through their attributions of leadership for collaborative working leads to a consideration of the re-orientation of accountability through these new local and regional governance arrangements.

### **Leadership and the re-orientation of accountability in new public governance**

One of the trends in the public service system in the UK attributed to NPM over the last two decades has been the onus on the measurement of the comparative performance of public service organizations, and the tying of this performance to organizational and financial incentives and punishments, what Clarke (2005) calls the 'evaluation/performance' nexus. Alongside this focus on the evaluation of performance, is the location of praise and blame, or accountability, for this performance. The representation of public service managers and staff as leaders serves to locate accountability with them rather than with politicians. This concern is rehearsed repeatedly in the following extracts:

In the context of leadership, a more fundamental debate is required about the respective roles of politicians and managers. (Treasury 2000, p. 21);

There is often unclear division of labour between elected ministers or councillors and officials. Official leadership is made easier where politicians are able to set clear objectives, and to leave officials to lead and manage within those parameters. (PIU 2001, p. 12);

Leaders are not always effectively challenged. Inspection regimes and non-executive members of management boards could be more effective in holding leaders to account and in challenging them to improve their performance. (PIU 2001, pp. 12–13);

standards can only be delivered effectively by devolution and delegation to the front line, giving local leaders responsibility and accountability for delivery, and the opportunity to design and develop services around the needs of local people. (OPSR 2002, p. 10);

Contestability between providers, user choice and/or inspirational leadership are all powerful ways of driving performance without the need for so much top down control and bureaucracy. (Strategy Unit 2006, p. 41)

These extracts show how the metaphor of leadership is used to frame public service managers, non-executives and staff as leaders, who are thus accountable for organizational performance. Politicians instead are allotted an objective-setting role (a superordinate aspect of leadership). In the jargon, government is represented as 'steering, not rowing' (Osborne and Gaebler 1992), and accountability for performance is then located with the personnel with the oars.

These analyses point to a number of inherent tensions in the government's order of leadership discourse. While senior managers are targeted primarily by public service leadership development as bearers of the social and organizational technology of leadership, leadership is located at all levels of the public services, and organizational staff (particularly senior managers) are responsabilized for organizational performance. While leaders are cast as agents for reforming services to focus on their customers, they are simultaneously cast as authors of local innovation in multi-agency partnerships. While leadership is implicitly construed as transformational and individualist, it is located at multiple levels.

One of the features of Labour party discourse is its concurrent ambiguity and synthesis of tensions in its policy documents without addressing how these tensions are to be synthesized in practice (Fairclough 2000). This reflection and the tensions evident from the above analyses lead to some generic policy recommendations in relation to public service leadership:

- the attribution of responsibility for organizational performance needs to be matched to a transparent weighting of the power differentials available to the different social actors at different levels of the public service system;
- the degrees and types of leadership available to different social actors (including government), and their respective reciprocal responsibilities, need to be specified and clarified.

Such specifications and clarifications, needless to say, should not necessarily be led by government.

## CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

Having outlined the content of leaderism as applied to the UK public services as evidenced in government texts, pointed to some of the inherent tensions in this discourse, and suggested some policy recommendations, in the final section we move onto a broader discussion of the phenomenon of leaderism in the public services. As this paper has shown, the metaphor of leadership has become deeply embedded in UK public administration discourse. Further research on the embeddedness of this discourse, and its possible contestation, by public service managers and public service users is warranted. Firstly,

the analysis presented sets a background for investigating the production, promotion, dissemination, mediation and usage of the discourses contained within these texts. Secondly, the analysis enables a fuller consideration of the adoption, interpretation and possible subversion of elements of the government's discourse of leadership, as well as alternative discourses of leadership used, by public service staff and users.

We would further suggest that a CR-based approach to discourse analysis, as utilised in this paper, offers a theoretical orientation and a practical systemic linguistic methodology through which 'leaderism' – as an emerging discursive innovation that has very real and practical consequences for the organization and delivery of public services – as a social and organizational technology might be better understood. As indicated, the emergence of 'leaderism' is very closely linked, in both analytical and temporal terms, to the increasing prominence and influence of 'consumerism' in contemporary policy debates and organizational restructurings concerning the future of public services in the UK (Reed 2002; Miller 2005; Clarke 2005; Clarke *et al.* 2007; Miller and Rose 2008). This is so to the extent that the emerging discourse of 'leaderism' justifies the growing influence, not to say power, of an ideology in which a model of the 'rational consumer', rather than of the 'dependent client' or 'informed citizen', is mobilized within policy debates and discourses that have fateful consequences for mundane, but vital, issues to do with the managerial and administrative practices through which scarce resources are allocated and deployed within public service organizations. Public service users, as 'rational consumers', still have to be organized and managed through social and organizational technologies that are at least minimally consistent with more abstract policy narratives and aspirations concerning the empowerment of service users as consumers and the rather different, not to say difficult, values and norms that the latter implies. This is especially the case insofar as the 'new consumerism' embodies contradictory and conflicting ideological priorities and operational realities in which, say, the interests of professional practitioners have to take more of a back seat in the 'brave new world' of co-produced service delivery and performance evaluation.

Hence, the 'brilliant ambiguity' of 'leaderism' as a broad-ranging and inherently flexible discourse that simultaneously provides underlying justification for innovative managerial practices and organizational mechanisms that prioritize 'user choice' and 'competitive collaboration' but also places professional practitioners in new subject positions and identities as inspiring visionaries for and leaders of service organizations in the 'new public governance' era. Considered in this way, 'leaderism' provides an overarching discursive framework within which the ideological and technical limitations of orthodox NPM – that is, its continued adherence to a managerialist ideology and practice that is fixated with the perennial problem of preserving organizational rationality and efficiency in the face of political and emotional distortions to hard business logic – are potentially overcome by an innovative discursive synthesis that combines consumer choice and professional agency in a vision of 'new public service leadership for the twenty first century'. The longer-term significance and impact of the rather more mundane changes to organizational technologies that follow in the wake of this new discursive regime – such as partnership policing, new audit and inspection regimes in local government, independent sector treatment centres in health care or quasi-contractual forms of working in social care – should not be underestimated. Both innovations in organizational technologies and discursive regimes:

Point to ways in which public services are considered to be a site of hierarchically organized professional knowledge and power that has become unsettled and tangled into new knots as other forms of knowledge are asserted and other claims to power – or empowerment – are made. Managers and professionals (the two categories are blurred in most services) see themselves as responsible for undoing the 'power/knowledge knot' and reconstructing the relationships between staff and users. Organizations, embodied in the authority of managers, have been trying to find new configurations of knowledge and power that would take account of a more active, participating, competent public. (Clarke *et al.* 2007. p. 117)

At the very least, the emerging discourse of 'leaderism' provides a potential way of unravelling this new 'power/knowledge knot' by repositioning service managers and professionals as strategic leaders and operational practitioners whose job it is to generate the long-term visions and develop the practical implementation technologies through which the needs and choices of much more demanding and discerning service consumers can be met. While some of this is consistent with the renewed emphasis on 'managed markets' that came out of NPM, at its discursive core 'leaderism' embodies an ideological and practical commitment to a consumerist ethic that takes us way beyond the limited and fragile compromise between 'autonomy' and 'control' that lies at the heart of 'bureau-professionalism' (Clarke and Newman 1997). This is so to the extent that it calls for a much more pro-active and powerful form of collective service leadership in which the changing demands and needs of service users, duly repositioned as 'citizen-consumers', now completely and utterly permeates the organizational arteries through which the life-blood of resources, both material and symbolic, flows. Of course, the extent to which this call is met by an appropriate practical response throughout the length and breadth of the service organization's operating core is another matter. But there is little doubt that professional and managerial leaders and operational staff within service organizations are now expected to respond to a complex array of, often contradictory and conflicting, service consumer needs and demands in what they do, why they do it, and how it will be assessed. Leaderism provides a discursive mechanism and organizational technology through which this structural and cultural repositioning of service users and service staff, and its potentially destabilizing consequences for prevailing relationships, practices and routines, can be mediated and legitimated.

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## APPENDIX 1

### **A methodology for the applied study of language, discourse and metaphor**

In this appendix the relationship between language and discourse is clarified; the inter-relationships between these and metaphor are outlined, and the relationship of each of these with the phenomenon of leadership is developed. We argue for the benefits of a critical realist discourse analysis and outline our methodology.

In overview, we understand language to be the spoken and written means of communication inherent in natural languages. Discourses, in contrast, are variously recurring and inter-related constellations of ideas, assumptions and practices expressed through language in regular but adaptable ways. Properly speaking, therefore, there are a number of discourses of leadership produced by different social actors which utilize the language of leadership, although, for simplicity, we have generally referred to the discourse of leadership in the singular. Discourses are produced and utilized by particular social actors through particular technological and social means. Discourses, thus, have a particular socio-historical texture, where particular words, ideas, beliefs and practices are associated with each other, which can change or be changed over time and place.

Metaphors are the symbolization of experience, usually, but not exclusively, through the means of language. Metaphors are repositories of potential meaning. In critical realist terms, they are potential generative mechanisms in the realm of meaning (or semiosis). Metaphors are one of the means by which the assumptions of particular discourses are conveyed and reproduced. While discourses are heavily imbued with a socio-historical texture, metaphors, although they are of course historically produced and employed, are not reducible to the context from which they were generated. Leadership, as outlined above, is a set of ideas and beliefs that draw upon a series of metaphorical narratives, which are variously assumed in a number of different discourses of leadership.

Our study of leadership in the field of UK public services was enabled through investigating the UK government's use of discourses and metaphors of leadership via critical discourse analysis. Critical discourse analysis is concerned with unpacking communication along the lines of structures and mechanisms, and investigating how social structures

are maintained and transformed in and through various forms of languages and discourses (Fairclough 1995, 2000, 2003, 2005; Jones 2004). As we were concerned with the use of the language of leadership in relation to the UK government's project of public service reform, we were particularly interested in how leadership was represented, both in material productions of the discourse of leadership by the government, and how these representations served, potentially, to inculcate the audiences of these texts into an acceptance of the legitimacy of this discourse, or into adopting and utilizing this discourse.

Representation is a crucial focus for analysis because '[r]epresentation is a process of social construction of practices . . . representations enter and shape social processes and practices' (Fairclough 2003, p. 206). The government texts analysed were specific instances of the performance of representations of leadership, in particular from central government, the departments of health and education, and more general documents produced by other government departments and agencies which touched upon the themes of this paper. These textual performances of leadership potentially affect how public service staffs enact their work practices. As developed above, senior managers are targeted by rhetorical strategies in the texts which represent public service reform, and the critical role of public service managers as leaders of reform (as well as others also acting as leaders). In doing so, these texts seek to 'inculcate' public service managers (and others) as leaders - for them to take on new ways of being, new identities that change the subject in a deep way, so that they come to "'own" discourses, to position themselves inside them, to act and think and talk and see themselves in terms of new discourses' (Fairclough 2003, p. 208). Fairclough argues that 'cultural effects can be achieved in so far as the Government can win acceptance for such shifts in discourse and the new identities and values they entail' (Fairclough 2000, p. 141).

Utilizing a CR discourse analysis methodology entailed the following:

1. Lexical analysis of the use and prevalence of the lexicons, or particular words, used in the texts in order to present empirical evidence for the presence, repetition and utilization of key lexical components of the language of leadership;
2. Comparative qualitative analysis of the narratives, metaphors and assumptions utilized and drawn upon in the texts in order to present empirical evidence for the representations, meaning-structures, arguments and imaginaries utilized by the UK government in relation to public service leadership.

A narrative is a generative sort of storyline 'that allows actors to draw upon various discursive categories to give meaning to specific social phenomena' (Hajer 1995, p. 56). Narratives are used to suggest unity in the bewildering variety of separate discursive component parts of a situation, process or problem that may otherwise appear meaningless or contradictory (Hajer 1995, p. 56).

Narratives can be composed partly through the use of particular lexical terms, phrases or slogans, but they also require a storyline that produces some degree of internal consistency and plausibility. Narratives are an essential part of the strategic use of discourse. It is through framing the relations of agents to particular social phenomena or processes via particular narratives that social agents can be activated or rendered passive in relation to these social phenomena or processes.

We further investigated the assumptions conveyed, evident in and relied upon through the lexicons, meanings and narratives produced in the government's texts. Assumptions



are the presuppositions that people make when they speak or write. Assumptions are pervasive in texts. As Fairclough argues:

All forms of fellowship, community and solidarity depend upon meanings which are shared and can be given as taken, and no form of social communication or interaction is conceivable without some such 'common ground'. On the other hand, the capacity to exercise social power, domination and hegemony includes the capacity to shape to some significant degree the nature and content of this 'common ground', which makes implicitness and assumptions an important issue with respect to ideology. (2003, p. 55)

The particular linguistic vehicles that carry assumptions that we investigated were metaphors. Metaphors are important because they are powerful shapers of perceived realities. For Lakoff and Johnson (1980, 2003) metaphor is not simply a literary device but has a deeper significance. According to Lakoff and Johnson metaphors are deeply entailed in the processes of perception and cognition. Lakoff and Johnson argue: 'Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature' (1980, p. 3).

We recognize, however, that it can be useful to view metaphors in terms of their degree of embeddedness. This approach has two advantages for our particular purpose. One is that it enables us to attend to the life histories of metaphors (as part of the socio-historical texture of discourses) and thereby map the process by which they fall into obsolescence, function at a superficial or functional level, or become deeply embedded in language. The other advantage is that it alerts us to the fact that some metaphors are more significant than others. We are interested in the degree to which the metaphors of leadership in the public services in the UK are in the process of becoming deep metaphors, thereby shaping the way in which public services are perceived and organized.

Some metaphors are so 'deep' that a degree of reflection is needed in order to discern how they might be relevant to the way in which social life is perceived. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) discuss what they call 'orientational metaphors' ... 'since most of them have to do with a spatial orientation: up-down, in-out, front-back, on-off, deep-shallow, centre-peripheral' (p. 14). Leadership is essentially an orientational metaphor since it involves direction giving. An awareness of the power of orientational metaphors helps us to appreciate that changes in the use of metaphors are predicated on a radical shift in underlying spatial metaphors and thus sensitize us to the process whereby structures emerge from actions rather than being pre-determined. Such a shift in language is itself predicated on a radical shift of power in society. This is to raise perhaps one of the most difficult aspects of metaphor (and discourse and language): the relationship between language and the realities of structures and power (Hoyle and Wallace 2007). It is precisely this relation between language and the structures of power that is highlighted in the analysis of the use of the language of leadership in the UK government's project of public service reform.

## APPENDIX 2

Government lexicon of public service reform evident in the headline topics in central government 'versions of reform', education 'versions of reform', and health 'versions of reform', 1997–2007 (table A1).

TABLE A1 *List of identified key lexical elements of reform from the qualitative analysis of the headline elements of reform*

Component of discourse	Number of occurrences
Service*	13
Standard*	8
Deliver*	
Choice*	
Improv*	7
Qualit*	
Free* / freedom	
Public*	
Perform* / underperform*	
Leader*	
Innovat*	
Partner*	6
Efficien*	
Account*	
Develop*	
Provi*	
Incentive*	
Staff*	5
Management*	
Strateg*	
Citizen*	
Equit*	
Personali*	
Excel*	
Empower* / power	
System*	
Profession*	
Govern*	
Reform*	4
Reward*	
Flexib*	
Interven*	
National*	
Support*	
Local*	
Modern*	3
Policy* / policy-making	
Principl*	
Needs*	
Information* / information age	
Devol*	
Value for money* / best value*	
Compet*	
Inspect*	
Voic*	
Workforce*	
Fairness/ fair*	

Invest\*/ return on investment  
 Front line\*  
 Progress\*/ progress reports  
 Technolog\*  
 Valu\*  
 Access\*  
 Tax-payer/ taxpayer\*  
 Funding\*  
 Regulat\*  
 Commission\*  
 Capacit\*  
 Collaborat\*  
 Suppl\*  
 Skill\*  
 Responsibilit\*  
 World-class\*  
 Consumer\*  
 Local authorit\*  
 Vision\*  
 Sector\*

2

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\*Indicates an open-ended wordpart, that is all word endings associated with the focal wordpart. Only lexical items that occurred in more than one of the sets of central government, education or health documents are reproduced in this table. Lexical items that only occurred in one sector were deemed not to resonate across sectors.