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Phony leadership and the need for moral courage

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Protesters are occupying Wall Street, the City of London and financial centres in Sydney and Melbourne. They are opposing policies that enable the rich to get richer, the poor poorer. They are opposing the immorality of big pay rises for non performing executives and small percentage gains for workers already much further down the pay scale.

This greed is a feature of free market economic policies and the belief that efficient, often bullying type management is the way to lead political, corporate, and even religious organizations. It nurtures destructive ideas and ideologies about the qualities needed in strong leaders.

Such ideologies have encouraged people in positions of power - not the same as leaders - who are often authoritarian and incompetent, in love with themselves and show little concern for the circumstances of their staff, let alone the conditions of a society's most vulnerable.

Another form of leadership is not based on hierarchical ways of thinking, does not need deference, status or large salaries. There are leaders who achieve their authority because others trust them, enjoy their humour, value being with them in a supportive, egalitarian and effective work place. To encourage such qualities you have to challenge the conventional assumptions of leadership.

For many years, I served on committees to appoint professors in various disciplines at different universities. Committee members usually assumed that the best candidate would have an impressive list of publications and a record of generating research grants which university management would value. The chosen individual would be given the trappings of academic leadership - well furnished office, headed notepaper, computer services and even a personal assistant. With such credentials and resources, the new professor would be encouraged to avoid direct contact with students in order to compete for research grants and so dramatize his and the university's virtues.

On such committees, I would express a different view about the qualities needed in a professor who could be a leader: "If the newly appointed candidate is to lead colleagues and students, we should try to appoint someone who will find time and energy to help others, to enable them to develop their skills and knowledge." This point of view about leadership that inspires because it is selfless echoes Professor Richard Titmuss' dictum that the purpose of social policies is "to promote the dominance of altruism over egoism."

John F. Kennedy's "Profiles in Courage," highlighted a popular view that real leaders must be physically courageous. His examples merit attention, but in an age of corporate greed, amid a political culture which increases police powers and military resources and

which encourages that spurious management claim about the benefits of doing more with less, it is moral courage that is needed in public life.

With few exceptions, when Australian politicians have taken sides in the long running Israeli Palestinian conflict, they have not shown moral courage. They have displayed a sheep-like mentality, mouthing support for the policies of the most powerful, following whatever cues are given by the USA. But morally courageous leaders develop visions of their own, do not follow like sheep, do not wait to see which way a pollster's wind is blowing.

The Palestinian educator, politician and human rights activist Dr. Hanan Ashrawi showed considerable courage when she was chosen as the recipient of the 2003 Sydney Peace Prize. For months before her arrival in Sydney, this moderate, non-violent and highly articulate woman was pilloried by sections of the Australian media and by senior politicians.

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She was labelled a troublemaker, Holocaust denier and even as someone who encouraged terrorism. A petition organized by powerful interests demanded that she should be discouraged from coming to Australia and disqualified from receiving the country's only international award for peace. Hanan told me, "I have never been so insulted, never had so many lies told about me, not even in Israel. At a dangerous time for my people, why should I come half way around the world to receive threats and be insulted?"

In spite of the lies, insults and threats, Hanan kept her promise to speak in Sydney, to accept the prize, to face her critics. She displayed great dignity and impressive moral courage.

These examples suggest leaders who are unselfish, who have insight into their own behaviour and who are able to laugh at themselves and with others. They are also courageous and ethically bound without being morally self-righteous. They are constructive not destructive, capable of saying "yes let's try this option," instead of taking the intellectually barren and inflexible line of always saying "no!"

The ideal leader I have in mind does not have an MBA, has not attended leadership-training courses and to feel rewarded, does not need or want a large salary. That leader displays a joy for life, encourages others, even in the face of awful adversities. I'm thinking of my good mate, the ever laughing, gutsy humanitarian Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu.

There's a leader worth imitating. And I'm sure he is supporting those citizens in the world's financial centres who are protesting the consequences of destructive, selfish, phony forms of leadership.