Guest editorial: Leadership in times of crisis: the intersection of political and administrative leadership

In early 2020 just as the crisis was unfolding, this journal, like many others, attempted to expedite research related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Our concern was to draw some early lessons about how public leaders across the globe were leading and managing their countries through the crisis because, as Boin and 't Hart (2003, p. 544) noted, "Crisis and leadership are closely intertwined phenomena." Moreover, we know that in crisis situations, leadership, in varied forms and addressing myriad questions, is critical ('t Hart and Tummers, 2019; Hartley, 2018; Boin et al., 2017). The result was a very successful special issue published last year (Vol. 17, No. 1) entitled, "Public Leadership in Times of Crisis –Viewpoints on Political and Administrative Leadership in Response to COVID-19."

At the time that this special issue of the *International Journal of Public Leadership* in the time of COVID-19 issue was developed, we optimistically looked ahead to a time when this global pandemic would be behind us and simultaneously put out a call for a second special issue that would examine public leadership in response to crisis situations other than the one presented by the coronavirus pandemic. Specifically, we were interested in receiving in-depth, theoretically oriented research studies that addressed how politicians, public servants and civil society actors provide leadership in response to different kinds of crises –be they political (for example, responding to and preparing for Brexit), social and economic (such as a famine or drought in Africa or an Asian tsunami) or health-related (including the global severe acute respiratory syndrome [SARS] crisis, or the avian flu).

The crisis responses to the pandemic have uncovered the limits of our understanding and practice of public leadership. The varied ranges of responses and effectiveness nationally, in the contrasts between New Zealand, China, the USA, South Korea and South Africa, to name but a few, call for more robust ways of researching public leadership across significantly different societal and institutional contexts. Moreover, even within the same nation, such as the USA, the intergovernmental dimension of relations and authorities across federal, state, county and city governments calls for research specific to intergovernmental dimensions (Kizer and Callahan, 2021). The intergovernmental research begins to find varied leadership emphasis and divergent approaches even within the same level of government, such as counties (National Academy of Public Administration, 2021).

The challenges of leaders responding to the pandemic suggest the limits of our current understanding of public leadership. The traditional politics-administration dichotomy provides very little traction in explaining public leadership in governance structures that are "messy, disorganized, disconnected and unwieldy" and with significant power in informal networks (Abramson, 2021). The research utility of the political-administrative dichotomy breaks down in explaining the nearly 30 public health directors who resigned or were forced to resign in the USA in the first three months of the COVID-19 outbreak, as well as when administrators are not simply questioned but also threatened verbally and physically both by elected officials and the general public (Mello et al., 2020).

Research has revealed that crises, whatever their origin, have the potential to transform "leaders into statesmen" when successfully handled or "obvious scapegoats" if it is not resolved and a return to normalcy is delayed or prevented altogether (Boin and 't Hart, 2003,

p. 544). However, the diffused response in the USA suggests the difficulty of locating which leaders are in positions to be statesmen. The typical crisis response with a point person in the formal Incident Command Structure, such as Admiral Allen (2017) in responding to Hurricane Katrina or the BP oil spill, is not applicable in the COVID-19 response.

Given the prominence of political leaders during crisis situations and the expectation of the public that they will take action to address the situation, those are seemingly inevitable outcomes. However, such assessments serve to reinforce older, and what have come to be increasingly discredited, notions of individualistic, heroic leadership. The reality is that the public leadership literature has shifted to recognize more collaborative, collective, shared or distributed forms of leadership (Fairhurst *et al.*, 2020; Ospina *et al.*, 2020; Ospina, 2016; Morse, 2010), although Hartley (2018, p. 208) is apt in her assessment that while such claims are commonplace, "[. . .] the number of studies which go beyond rhetoric into why, how or with what success such distributed leadership occurs is relatively sparse." She then goes on to make an appeal for "[. . .] hard-headed and critical research in this field, rather than the recirculation of often normative constructions of distributed leadership."

This special issue was conceived with this ostensible transformation in the nature of public leadership in mind. It is our view that crises, such as the ones identified above, present unique opportunities to reflect on the nature and challenges associated with collaborative leadership in the public sector, particularly as it relates to the intersection of political and administrative leadership. While initially public leadership research was largely restricted to studies of political leaders (Mau, 2020), especially the US presidency (Kellerman and Webster, 2001; Neustadt, 1964), there is increasing recognition of the responsibility and obligation of public servants to provide leadership (Behn, 1998).

As the public leadership literature clearly reveals, political, administrative and civic leaders have three distinctive vectors of influence; they must lead upwards, downwards and outwards, and for the most part, the focus of the influence attempts for each category of leader is unique. For example, when politicians lead up, frequently the intended target of that influence attempt is the electorate, whereas upwards leadership for administrative leaders is usually directed at ministers and other politicians ('t Hart and Tummers, 2019). Moreover, for administrative leaders, the reality is that much of the work that they undertake (and their subsequent successes) typically occurs quietly in the background out of the public eye. However, a crisis situation affords public servants, who are at long last being recognized as key public leaders, an opportunity to emerge from the shadows.

As we noted in our previous editorial (Mau *et al.*, 2021), this has been no more evident than during the COVID-19 pandemic when political leaders shared the podium with various public health officials—hitherto relatively faceless, anonymous bureaucrats—to provide regular (and initially daily) updates on the spread of the virus and the measures that governments were taking to mitigate its spread. Therefore, rather atypically, administrative leadership becomes highly visible in these crisis situations. Furthermore, there is a palpable shift in the focus of their influence attempts rather than leading upwards to influence the thinking and decision-making of their political masters; in a crisis situation, political and administrative leaders work collaboratively to influence the views of the electorate and civil society more broadly.

Beyond the direction of public leadership, there is the element of time in crisis leadership. Drawing on extensive crisis leadership at the local government level as Public Health Commissioner for the City of Baltimore, Maryland, and at the US federal level as Deputy Commissioner of the Food and Drug Administration, Josh Sharfstein (2018, p. 7) proposes a model for crisis response: (1) identify the crisis; (2) manage the crisis; (3) address communications and politics and (4) pivot to long-lasting change. This pattern suggests that public leadership research needs to study the varied stages in which leaders address a crisis. Further complicating the temporal element is that a crisis not only unfolds in real time but

also leadership decision-making is profoundly affected by the past time line of an issue, calling for the needed skill described by Neustadt and May's (1986) study of leaders' decision-making as "thinking in time." In researching leadership in public health in the USA, for example, thinking in time starts with a recognition of long-standing underinvestment in the public health infrastructure (Maani and Galea, 2020).

Our hope was that this call for papers would produce research studies that explore more fully this particular dynamic of dual leadership between political and administrative leaders in a variety of crisis situations since this an important area of public leadership research that up to now has not received much scholarly attention. As Baddeley (2008, p. 177) noted, students of public sector leadership "[. . .] are focusing, separately, on managerial or political leadership but not on their combined dynamic." For their part, Orazi *et al.* (2013, p. 498) called for research to examine the "similarities and differences between political and administrative leadership."

In our view, crisis situations present some of the best opportunities for exploring this intersection of political and administrative leadership. One study described this dual relationship as "dancing on ice" to refer to the "delicate, symbiotic and sometimes precarious process of working together which [. . .] politicians and senior public servants have to undertake [. . .] The sense of moving together, giving each other space, sometimes one in the spotlight, sometimes the other, where sometimes the partnership may stumble and occasionally fall [. . .]" (Hartley, 2018, p. 209). To that end, we identified a series of important research questions that we wanted scholars to explore in order to shed light on the ways in which political and administrative (and potentially civic) leaders must work collaboratively to respond to a variety of crisis situations:

(1) What is the nature of the relationship between political and administrative leaders during crisis situations? Does the power shift from the politicians to various administrative leaders during a crisis because of an increased emphasis on the need for evidence-based decision-making?

(2) The public administration literature points to a shift to more shared and collaborative forms of leadership as a result of the shift to the new public management and new public governance paradigms. Does the need for shared leadership—between political, administrative and civic leaders—take on even greater importance in a crisis?

(3) Do crises provide more opportunities for innovative leadership by public servants at all levels?

(4) How do frontline public servants or street-level bureaucrats and their superiors provide leadership during a crisis? Does the nature of administrative leadership change during a crisis?

(5) Are charismatic administrative leaders more effective at motivating and inspiring public sector employees during times of crisis than other types of leaders?

(6) Are there best practices of leadership development in crisis management that can be applied in every situation?

(7) How can administrative leaders use foresight to conceptualize and understand future crisis events?

(8) What leadership lessons can be learned from the crisis situation in question and how can political and administrative leaders both learn and prepare for future crises?

Little did we know at the time that we would still be battling the ravages of COVID-19 into 2022 and beyond. Therefore, while disappointing, it is not surprising that many of the

submissions that we received for this special issue continued to focus on the various facets of public leadership in response to the COVID pandemic at the expense of other global crises. Notably, and more importantly, the research articles contained in this special issue have largely not explored the dynamic of the political and administrative leadership interface in the manner that we had initially envisioned.

The one question noted above that is addressed in this special issue pertains to some of the lessons learned in crisis situations. Specifically, we solicited an invited essay from the Honourable Anne McLellan, a former federal cabinet minister who led the Canadian government's responses to both the 9/11 and the SARS crises of the early 2000s to provide her insights on how to lead in such situations. One of the important reflections that she offers, which speaks directly to our interest in the interrelationship of political and administrative leadership, was the idea that while politicians should avoid the temptation to micromanage in a crisis and let the experts deal with the operational and managerial facets of the situation, it is equally inappropriate for elected officials to abdicate their responsibility to lead by allowing those nonelected officials to take charge. In short, there is not only an opportunity but also a necessity for both the politicians and the public servants to provide leadership in a crisis. Citizens want and expect to receive the factual, evidence-based information from the experts, but they also want the reassurances from their political leaders that the crisis will be resolved.

Furthermore, as 't Hart and Tummers (2019, p. 119) suggest, what begin as situational crises, that is to say "[. . .] disruptive, urgent, unscripted incidents that occur 'out there' [. . .]," can ultimately morph into institutional crises, "where it is the performance of public office-holders, organizations or governments themselves that is widely experienced as deeply problematic." McLellan infers that this is what happened in Canada in the early 2000s when the country was trying to deal with the containment of the SARS coronavirus. Like COVID-19, SARS originated in China and did spread across the globe, but not with the speed and efficiency of the current pandemic. Nonetheless, nowhere outside of Asia was the SARS crisis felt as acutely as it was in Toronto and the Greater Toronto Area. This crisis became institutional as it revealed a litany of deficiencies in the Canadian public health system and triggered a number of important institutional and procedural reforms.

Although the other contributions in this special issue do not systematically address the questions outlined above, they do, nonetheless, speak to the need for collaborative approaches to public leadership, and they contribute to the development of the crisis leadership literature, in part by moving beyond its typical North American and European focus. The article by Basir and Rahman, for example, examines the little studied Malay Islamic monarchy of Brunei Darussalam. In this viewpoint article, the authors argue that while His Majesty the Sultan provided both the requisite political and religious leadership for containing the spread of the coronavirus, the success of his efforts were ostensibly attributable to the whole of government (with the Ministry of Health as the lead department) and whole of nation approach that was employed there. Another article deals with the Ghanaian government's efforts to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. Kutor and his colleagues assess whether the decision to ease the lockdown restrictions in Ghana was appropriate by interviewing frontline healthcare workers (nurses) and conclude that the decision was a political one rather than based on wise reasoning. Pounder explores various leadership styles and the communication and dissemination of information by leaders across several Caribbean countries, while Giebe, Goswami and Rigotti, advocating a follower-centric view of leadership, examine the interplay between charismatic leadership and two follower characteristics in predicting safety behaviors during COVID-19 pandemic in Germany and India.

The final two contributions to this special issue address political leadership in the USA in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. First, the article by Owoye and Onafowora makes the

case that President Trump and a group of state governors and city mayors, through their promulgation of conspiracy theories and disinformation, impeded collaboration and coordination efforts to contain the spread of the coronavirus, which unnecessarily exacerbated the loss of life in the USA. They contrasted the approach of President Trump, who demonstrated contempt for science and the advice of medical professionals, with that of President Obama, who, when dealing with H1N1 and other infectious diseases, like Ebola, was prepared to share the leadership of these situations with the relevant public health officials. In doing so, he was able to limit the spread and fatalities associated with four separate epidemics and pandemics that he had to contend with while in office. Second, Lofaro and Sapat focus on the role and leadership of US governors in terms of reducing vaccine disparities and addressing vaccine hesitancy. One of the interesting findings to emerge from their research was the success that governors had as a result of leading collaboratively with influential community members to promote the message of vaccine safety with various marginalized groups in society.

Future research agenda for crisis leadership

The COVID-19 pandemic and other crises have opened the door for government to take more responsibilities for managing the lives of citizens. This is in spite of the old cliché of restraining government and the recent promotion of collaborative governance among different societal actors. Responsibility makes things happen. In the public sector, however, it is often too hard to work out who is responsible for what due to the matrix of overlapping organizations and complex social problems that require collaborative working. Amidst all these difficulties has come the question about the sort of leadership that is needed in the public sector to managing all these responsibilities and especially under crisis situations.

As already noted, traditional leadership traits, such as transformational, transactional and laissez-faire, have not helped, especially when examined leadership in terms of politics and administration dichotomy (Petridou, 2020). This is because, such traits, according to Tourish (2020, p. 265), "encourage leaders to concentrate ever more power in their own hands, and places impossible expectations on their ability to handle complex issues," contrary to what citizens expect during crisis. Another issue that has compounded the problem is ethical, especially in the midst of balancing healthcare and economic development against democratic rights and the kind of behaviors leaders must exhibit (Fiaz *et al.*, 2017).

In all these, one area that seems to have received less attention in the extant literature is the notion of responsible leadership. Crisis, as noted by Pounder (2021), usually creates a sensitive environment that in some cases can be hostile as leaders invariably have to make multifaceted and far-reaching decisions with limited or changing information. In the midst of this environment and the complexities of decisions, as well as actions that need to be made, what sort of behavior should a leader, be they political or administrative, exhibit?

While many leadership traits have been identified in the literature (see Tourish, 2020), less attention has focused on the responsibility of leaders. It is expected that in a crisis situation, leaders should be able to build a good, if not a better, relationship with citizens by showing that they are being responsible for both their economic and health needs. It is, therefore, not surprising that responsible leadership is seen as one that can achieve this objective.

Responsible leadership has been defined as "the art of building and sustaining relationships with all relevant stakeholders" (Maak and Pless, 2006, p. 104). Such leaders, as noted by Pounder (2021), make relational choices, which help them to provide vision, inspire, influence and guide others to contribute towards achieving organizational goals through the relational process. They are seen as standing up for what one believes is right (Hibbert and Cunliffe, 2015). This sort of belief has been more pronounced in the era of the COVID-19 pandemic as leaders struggle to balance science (health), economic and political

needs. How can we bring responsible leadership, which seems to be thriving in the business literature, in the discussion of political and administrative arenas? As Tourish (2020, p. 265) said, "we need more theories that explore how leaders can cope with radical uncertainty and make decisions where the margin of error is high and the consequences of failure potentially catastrophic." We think responsible leaders may be in the position to address these issues.

As public leadership research seeks to explain crisis leadership, the COVID-19 responses reveal understudied dynamics, including but not limited to the following four specific arenas of action. First, there is the role of leaders in developing and presenting credible and real time data for effective decision-making (Kirlin, 2020). The COVID-19 response has been complicated by a range of data shortfalls, not the least of which has been the initial tracking of cases, to the point where in the USA, in the absence of federal government capacity, Johns Hopkins University developed the go-to website for data. Second, the notable health inequities across race and ethnic groups within nations and globally call for research to address the role and impact of public leaders. Third, the range of simultaneous actions needed by those in leadership positions in COVID-19, including but not limited to developing effective testing, encouraging non-pharmaceutical interventions, vaccine development and distribution, facilitating supply chain and funding (Kizer and Callahan, 2021), suggests a further shift from research on individuals to the study of collective leadership and capacities for mobilizing action. Finally, the centrality of public leaders in developing and presenting credible information and combatting misinformation (Gavin, 2021) calls for extended research on the roles, practices and capacities of public leaders.

In our view, research on public leadership remains central to answer the three questions journalists researching COVID-19 responses have identified: Pulitzer Prize winning journalist, Yong (2020), investigates "how the virus won," while Quamen (2020) asks "why we were not ready for the coronavirus," and, looking to the future, journalists Sharon Begley and Helen Branswell (2020) pose the challenge of "how the world can avoid screwing up the response to Covid-19 again." These questions apply to the pandemic response, but more importantly, they also provide lines of inquiry for expanded public leadership research, informed but not limited by the complexities of the current response to a global crisis.

Tim A. Mau
Department of Political Science, University of Guelph, Guelph, Canada
Richard F. Callahan
School of Management, Univeristy of San Francisco, San Francisco, California, USA, and
Frank Ohemeng
Department of Political Science, Concordia University, Montreal, Canada

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Corresponding author
Tim A. Mau can be contacted at: tmau@uoguelph.ca