

Navigating three faces of decentred leadership in the UK Parliament

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Abstract

Purpose – The Westminster Parliament is multifaceted, lacks cohesion and collective direction, appearing at times to challenge the very notion of a structured public institution itself. Within an environment with little collective identity, understanding who leads in the UK Parliament is challenging; there are multiple, contestable sites of leadership and governance. The purpose of this article is to explore the understudied concept of legislative leadership, to better understand what goes on inside the legislature. The author presents a decentred and nuanced disaggregation of “leadership as practice” in parliament, examining three faces of legislative leadership.

Design/methodology/approach – Interpretive approaches to studying legislatures have presented new impetus to research in this area and the author utilises such anti-foundationalism. The article draws on ethnographic research into “everyday practices”, conducted during an academic fellowship in the UK Parliament from 2016 to 2019, which involved privileged access to the parliamentary estate. The data used include observations, shadowing and elite interviews collected during the fellowship.

Findings – By looking at the legislature from the inside, the author can better understand elite behaviour. This helps to explain motives, daily pressures and performative skills deployed in displays of autonomous, decentred leadership. The legislative leadership the author observed was atomised and could be stretched to accommodate the incumbent office holder. There were multiple relationships both formally constituted and informally constructed, but little collaborative or consensus leadership.

Originality/value – This article fulfils an identified need to study leadership in legislatures – and in particular key elites – from the inside.

Keywords Leadership, Legislatures, Parliament, Decentred, Interpretive, Speaker

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There is no “voice of Parliament” that can be collectively orchestrated. [. . .] those accounts which say that Parliament should do this or that to make itself more effective fail to understand that there is no “Parliament”, in a collective sense, at all. (Tony Wright, 2004, p. 871)

1. Introduction: a relational ethnography of legislative leadership

Legislatures are not like other public organisations in terms of leadership. Legislatures are sites of contestation and places of symbolic and ritualised behaviour. They are complex and multifaceted. They lack identity and cohesion. There are multiple leadership positions and a plethora of networks and relationships. Political and administrative-bureaucratic leadership co-exists within the executive-parliamentary nexus. In this regard, unpacking leadership within (and of) the legislature presents a particular challenge.

With leadership studies at a critical juncture (Collinson *et al.*, 2018; Hartley and Bennington, 2011; Hartley, 2018), legislative leadership has been a strangely neglected

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scholarly subject. Crosby and Bryson (2018, p. 1266) called for public management scholars to continue to develop the view of public leadership as:

a collective, multilevel, cross-sector endeavour imbued with public values that provides a compelling bulwark against the highly individualised, autocratic solutions promulgated by populists and thinly masked demagogues.

Bryson *et al.* (2017, p. 649) highlighted the role that politicians, political leadership and politics can play in “public value production in a democratic society and the need to explore how politicians seek and gain authorisation from citizens”. As such, leadership in (and of) public institutions matters in generating public value in democratic societies. Legislatures however present a challenge for leadership scholars (of all disciplines). The literature examining leadership in (and of) legislatures has tended to focus predominantly on party leadership (see for instance Patterson, 1963; Peters and Williams, 2002 on the US legislature), although there has been a welcome recent focus on legislative administration and management (Niemi, 2010; Yong, 2019; Meakin and Geddes, 2020). However, legislative leadership in general has been a neglected area of public leadership research; it sits outside organisational or institutional analyses and also outside the political leadership discourse (Helms, 2014).

This article takes a decentred approach to studying legislative leadership at Westminster. Decentred theory emphasizes the diversity of governing practices and the importance of historical explanations (Bevir, 2013, p. 1). Here I argue that legislative leadership can be understood and examined as a diverse and decentred activity, contingent on actor’s beliefs, circumstance and traditions. In doing so, I draw together leadership and governance approaches in examining elite behaviour in the legislature from an ethnographic perspective. Thus, we can open up new avenues to understand everyday practices. I first examine the relevance and application of decentred theory to legislative study. I then examine notions of legislative leadership before presenting two case studies based on ethnographic work conducted in the House of Commons and House of Lords, during which I observed the Speaker of the Commons and the Lord Speaker at work. I conclude by integrating this examination of everyday practices into a re-imaging of legislative leadership.

Observing the formal (public) and (informal) bargaining and negotiating in parliament at close quarters, I concur with Rhodes (2011, p. 299) that the actors I viewed had “immediate priorities and pressing problems.” Actions were not necessarily path dependent, but rather based on the incumbent’s perception of the roles, whether Speaker in the Commons or Lords, or as elite parliamentarians. They have multiple pressures and demands and carve out routes through the daily political joust, via a mixture of personal skill, public performance and autonomous management. Yet, the responses were contingent on the individual agent. For instance, the Commons Speaker irritated the executive with his granting of Urgent Questions, extension of Prime Minister’s Questions and liberal interpretation of procedure relating to attempts to delay Brexit. Much is driven by an ideational approach (wary of officials, challenge to executive, voice for backbenchers). The Lord Speaker preferred the less confrontational tea room chat to any external activity on behalf of the Lords Chamber (navigating the leadership dilemma by soft relational activity).

2. Decentred theory and legislatures

Decentred theory, with its emphasis on contingency and contestability, offers a distinct perspective on the new politics of networks as alternatives to hierarchic bureaucracy. Decentred theory emphasizes the diversity of governing practices and the importance of historical explanations (Bevir, 2013, p. 1). Bevir’s use of decentred theory interprets how state actors respond to significant change. It gives credence to agency, ideas and beliefs and emphasizes the evolution and adaptation of traditions, practices and behaviours. Decentring

means privileging an analytical focus on “the social construction of a practice through the ability of individuals to create and act on meanings” (Bevir and Rhodes, 2015, p. 73). In relation to leadership, a decentred approach “promotes narratives of the contingent relationships in core executives” and its stress on the beliefs and practices of individuals “promotes a political anthropology of the executive’s court politics” (Bevir, 2013, pp. 165–166). Unpacking meanings, emphasising diversity of practices and promoting contingency can free researchers up to explore new less structured approaches. Recent applied examples include, for instance, Beech (2020) on Brexit and the decentred state and Geddes on parliamentary performance (2019a, b).

Legislative study in the UK is heavily rooted in the legal-formal tradition (Geddes and Rhodes, 2019, p. 90). The strength of this approach has been the emphasis on reform and a normative drive to improve the effectiveness of the institution in holding the executive to account (see Hindmoor *et al.*, 2009; Thompson, 2016; Russell and Cowley, 2016). Such empirical research has revived analysis of parliamentary institutional and behavioural power (see Russell and Gover, 2017), highlighting the impact the legislature can and does have on the executive in shaping policy and decision-making. Geddes and Rhodes (2019, p. 92) argue that legislative research amounts to a “shared interest in the efficacy of parliamentary processes.” Furthermore, they argue that this has led to a narrow research agenda, trapped in an empirical-descriptive model, honing in on rules, procedures and formal organisations of government and state.

This article agrees that we should seek to move beyond such a narrow research focus, to one that decentres the new politics, recognising diversity and contingency in legislatures. According to Bevir (2013, p. 6), this involves moving from formal explanations towards narratives and genealogies (Bevir, 2013, p. 6; Bevir, 2008). This is a post-foundationalist approach – with emphasis on the contingency of social life and historical narrative, whereby a genealogy is “a historical narrative that explains an aspect of human life by showing how it came into being” (Bevir, 2008, p. 263). People in any given situation can interpret that situation in all sorts of ways, and no institution can necessarily fix the way its participants will act. The decentred state approach to governance may stress networks and non-hierarchical approaches, but it ignores legislatures. Here, we see the historical narrative approach applied to leadership as the aspect of human life.

Such questioning of the positivist approach prevalent in legislative study, draws together not only political scientists but also social anthropologists and sociologists (Crewe and Sarra, 2019). In exploring relational and ideational impact within spaces that may be structured, not by organisational hierarchies and arrangements, but by norms, rituals and beliefs, new avenues of inquiry can be opened up [1]. As Crewe and Sarra (2019, p. 2) explain: “We share in common, certain epistemological positions: a view of objectivity as a process of inquiry rather than a position; an interest in both people’s social and individual experiences; and agreement that the trickiest intellectual task is to explain how and why individuals depart from norms or beliefs”.

Interpretive approaches, present new possibilities in the understanding and study of leadership in a parliamentary setting. Such approaches appreciate the “significance of individuals’ interpretations to make sense of their everyday lives” (Geddes and Rhodes, 2019, p. 94; Meakin and Geddes, 2020). Similar to Rhodes (2011) in peering “behind the veneer”, I seek to understand what some of the key leadership elites in parliament think they do (Bolden *et al.*, 2016; Cronin and Genovese, 2012; Laing and Walter, 2016). Additionally, performative analysis, brings the “self” into the frame: “Performers need to interpret the social norms, values, etiquette, expectations and accepted modes of behaviour associated with that situation, which consequently requires practical judgements as well as taken-for-granted or tacit knowledge” (Geddes, 2019b, p. 30). Rhodes (2011, p. 287) observed that ministers wear multiple “masks” relating to the multiple roles they perform and

Lees-Marshment and Smolovic Jones (2018) argued that ministers have to do more with less, adopting flexible identities in relation to the “self” in leadership. This channels Goffman’s classic text (1990, p. 9) in which masks are “arrested expressions and admirable echoes of feelings at once, faithful, discrete and superlative”. In parliamentary terms, Goffman’s performative approach is even more relevant whereby the “self”, the “performer”, and the “character” are enmeshed if not equated [2].

Political actors amend their beliefs, and therefore their actions, practices and wider webs of belief, in response to problems or questions that actors face (Meakin and Geddes, 2020; Geddes, 2019a). Meakin and Geddes (2020) furthermore demonstrate how “a clash of beliefs between situated actors” played out through power relations and practices in the 2014 furore over the appointment of a new Commons clerk, subsequently informing political outcomes. The row exposed challenges of introducing any stronger corporate elements into a historically determined and fluid administration.

3. Looking for leadership of legislatures

Roles, political traditions and cultures, organisational histories, structures and cultural norms shape what is seen as possible and how far and how quickly a political leader is able to negotiate support for policies and practices (Hartley and Bennington, 2011). Legislatures are clearly one of those “arenas” within which leadership is authorised, however *legislative leadership* is a slippery concept. Leadership in legislatures is understudied, “not least because legislatures as a particular species of institution are relatively neglected within political science” (Norton, 2012, p. 71). For Norton, legislative leadership is contingent and is in effect party leadership, dependent on the autonomy of the legislature in relation to the executive. But Norton also highlighted the leadership vacuum in governance terms when asking: Who speaks for, manages and exercises leadership in the legislature? (Norton, 2017). More specifically in relation to the UK, “it is not always clear who the legitimate representative of ‘the House’ is, and administrative staff have no leader, unlike their counterparts in government departments” (Yong, 2019, p. 91).

The disparate nature of roles and responsibilities and the interaction between political and administrative functions mitigates against any collective institutional dynamic (Svara, 2001; Getha-Taylor *et al.*, 2011). There is an emerging strand on the internal governance and management of legislatures, asking why there are no clear lines of authority and responsibility (Bennister and Larkin, 2018; Meakin and Geddes, 2020; Yong, 2019). It is a core component in establishing legitimate legislatures in new democracies (CPA, 2008; IPU, 2017). The challenge of administrative and management coherence aligned to political governance has been acknowledged by the House of Commons itself. The 2014 House of Commons Governance Committee report (HC 692, 2014, p. 9), precipitated by the furore over the recruitment of a new Clerk of the House (as noted above), set out the unique organisational character:

“constrained only by its own legislation which it may reverse.” and “run by its 650 [MPs] which places it in a different position not only from PLCs in the private sector, but from every other public institution”.

The House of Lords, with its self-regulating ethos and weak governance structures, is even less coherent and more opaque in terms of leadership (Yong, 2019).

This is a fundamental tension in terms of how legislatures govern themselves – are legislatures simply products of the elected representatives or collective entities? Judge and Leston-Bandeira (2018) point out that the collective and corporate nature of the institution has been neglected by the elected representatives. Parliament, according to Kelso (2009) “struggles with its identity as a holistic institution,” whereby MPs priorities do not include

sustained strengthening of the institution. Kelso's (2016) study of legislative leaders – in this case select committee chairs – exposed how many did not even see themselves as exercising leadership. Such are the multiple anomalies evident in the dichotomy between permanence of officials and temporal politicians, representation and stewardship of the estate, individualism and collective decision-making (Winetrobe, 2003; Loewenberg, 2007).

A leadership puzzle presents itself. The executive may seek to guide or dominate, but not lead. So where do we find leadership in the legislature? It is often said that the legislature is a “they” and not an “it”: that is, the legislature is an arena of shifting coalitions of representatives with no collective identity (Yong, 2019). But this is incorrect. All legislatures have administrative services which support members in their work as legislators, and ultimately, the legislature and legislators as a collective entity. These services are now governed and managed by commissions and presiding officers who act for the legislature in its institutional capacities. Moreover, presiding officers often act “for” the legislature as an institution, in representing the legislature to the public and the outside world. However, commissions and presiding officers often struggle to “govern” the legislature, as the legislative environment is intensely political – and they must represent the institution, and not any partisan interest. There are key individuals with agency in the legislature, but leadership is an interactive and collaborative process (e.g. Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011; Ospina, 2016; Sorenson and Torfing, 2019; Uhl-Bien and Ospina, 2012). Indeed leaders and leadership in general has a significant role in shaping and developing institutions (Boin and Christensen, 2008). Yet, as Collinson *et al.* (2018) argue, we should keep a critical perspective on the romanticism of leadership.

I concentrate on two research settings, conducted during a parliamentary academic fellowship (2016–2019). The fellowship gave me access to the Westminster estate and a privileged position from which to observe (see Cunliffe and Alcadipani, 2016 on access and field work) [3]. These settings represent points of leadership within the Westminster Parliament, they are observations of everyday practice, but also of power relations. The first setting was the Speaker of the House of Commons. The Commons Speaker has a strong claim to speak for the House as he has a threefold role as procedural lead, chair of the Commons Commission and as external face for the Commons (Armitage, 2010; Seaward, 2010). Commons Speaker John Bercow (2009–2019) challenged convention and altered perceptions, demonstrating how critical actors can drive or block change (Whale, 2020; Geddes, 2019c). The second setting was the Lord Speaker, a relatively new post – crafted to reflect the self-regulating nature of the House of Lords – though assuming the responsibilities previously held by the Lord Chancellor who had acted as Speaker until 2006. Lord Fowler, was only the third occupant of the post. Each actor, I observed negotiates multiple dilemmas, but here I present a snapshot of everyday interaction.

To conduct such decentred research, I deployed the narrative constructivist-interpretivist model of how to research leadership, utilising “inquiry from the inside” (Uhl-Bien and Ospina, 2012). Leadership studies generally, and the work on public leadership in particular, would, according to Kellerman and Webster (2001) benefit from an anthropological approach. As the large literature on the US presidency suggests, too much attention is paid to leaders at the top, and to leaders in positions of authority.

Conversely, too little work is done in the field, so to speak, where the leadership action really is (Kellerman and Webster, 2001, p. 510). This seeks to ascribe meaning to action and presents the value of seeing, observing and asking (Orr and Bennett, 2017). Here, I undertook ethnographic research, observing and interviewing the key actors and also support staff members. The intricacies of the day, the nuances, the body language and the variety of tasks were observed and noted in real time, and then often reflected on in interview with the subject (Boswell *et al.*, 2019). The interaction with other actors in a pressurised environment, was silently noted, as “being there” from a privileged position in

the corner of the room (Crewe, 2017; Fenno, 1978; Nader, 1972; Niemi, 2010; Rhodes, 2011, 2018). This method can be fruitful, but challenging, particularly as we need to “relax the taboo” on telling our own stories (Anteby, 2013) and be more reflexive about the politics of knowledge production seeing our own practice as a means of sharing valuable learning experiences. It requires the researcher to be sensitive to what is “going on around us” (Cunliffe and Alcadipani, 2016, p. 536).

I shadowed the Commons Speaker for two sitting days (on Wednesday 25 April 2018 and Tuesday 15 May 2018), sat in the Commons Chamber, sometimes in the lower gallery, and attended the Commons Commission (on Monday 14 May 2018). I shadowed the Lord Speaker on 11 September 2018 and attended the Lords Commission on the same day [4]. For both, I was given access to the official diary for the day, able to sit in on meetings (where both parties had agreed in advance to my presence) and sometimes discuss the contents of each meeting. Occasionally I was drawn into conversations and asked my own opinion. The following draws on notes taken at the time, informal discussions and observations. There is an important level of positionality in where I was placed and how actors interacted with me [5]. The impact of agency and the relationship with traditions is also most evident when observing the everyday practices of the Speaker. Rather than focus on the individual in the position, I seek out the interactions and narratives to feature in a typical day both frontstage and backstage. Here I focus on three key aspects (or faces) of the Speaker’s everyday leadership practices: the procedural, the governance and the place-based external face.

4. The Commons Speaker

The Commons Speaker is often only analysed within the context of parliamentary rituals (Armitage, 2010; Crewe and Evans, 2018, pp. 45–46) or personalised office holding (see Laban, 2013; Laundy, 1967; Kandiah and Staerck, 2005; Seaward, 2010; Boothroyd, 2001; Bercow, 2020; Whale, 2020). The lack of systematic analysis of the role of the Speaker, as opposed to (auto-) biographical accounts of the occupants is puzzling. Crewe and Evans (2018, p. 46) highlight the importance of the role, even if the occupant may be unpopular: “MPs recognise the need to venerate the office of the Speaker however they may loathe the individual who holds it, because that position is a lynchpin on which business of the House hangs”.

The Governance Committee (HC 692, 2014, p. 16) summarised the Speaker’s position:

The Speaker is elected by the House to preside over its proceedings and to be its representative both formally (for example, on state occasions) and informally (for example, through his or her involvement in public engagement activities: an area of much-increased activity in recent years). But as the statutory chair of the House of Commons Commission and as “householder” for the Commons areas of the Palace, he/she also has important administrative responsibilities.

However the Committee report pointed out that “The extent of the Speaker’s non-procedural responsibilities is not well understood. There is no published list of them. Sometimes the Speaker may be asked to act because there seems to be no one else who appropriately could do so” (HC 692, 2014, p. 16). Such fluidity means that the Speaker often steps into the void, developing a significant leadership role in the Commons which can be divided into: managing business in the Chamber; as administrative head; being the external face for the Commons [6]. In each role, the Speaker has to navigate conflicting beliefs over practices. The election of the more reform minded John Bercow MP in 2009 owed much to the fallout from the expenses scandal which had involved the resignation of his predecessor as Speaker, Michael Martin MP.

4.1 Leadership as procedure

The Commons Speaker is one of the oldest public offices in the UK and resides in the Speaker’s House within the Palace of Westminster. The position has a rich and powerful

history, conferring a level of authority and status on the occupant (Laban, 2013). Ceremonial duties are the outward expression of this authority and status, indeed “there is little ceremony in the House of Commons *not* attached to or centred upon the Speaker” (Armitage, 2010, p. 326).

On my days with the Commons Speaker, his movements were cloaked in ritual and symbolism from the start to the finish of the day. These rituals are formalised historical constructs that often structure relationships with other actors (Crewe and Evans, 2018). The Speaker is serviced by a small staff, but has a very large and imposing room in the Speaker’s House, in which meetings are conducted. One of the most important of these meetings is the Daily Conference (at 1030 each sitting day) which is chaired by the Speaker and acts as a vital clearing meeting for the day’s parliamentary business. Relational deference and theatre were evident from the beginning of the meeting, as officials stood for the Speaker when he entered the room. The meeting was attended by the Clerk of the House, who led on procedural issues, Principal and Assistant Table Clerks, Deputy Speakers and the Sergeant at Arms. The Speaker was not a passive recipient of the business from officials, but was actively engaged and sought to shape many of the decisions. The meeting was over within 30 min, as decisions impacted on the parliamentary business of the day. It dealt first with Urgent Questions, ran through the timings and order of business on the Order Paper (the parliamentary agenda for the day) adding any changes, considers possible Government statements [7]. The decision on which Urgent Question to accept was communicated immediately during the meeting by the Speaker’s Assistant Private Secretary, so that the sponsoring MP and the Government were notified as soon as possible. There is a convention that an Urgent Question is withdrawn if the Government makes a statement on the issue. The Speaker was keen to explain to me that he thought this convention (based on the advice of officials) should be ignored. The list of MPs to be called to speak in debates was considered, and adjournment topics were selected (there was some jocular speculation over which minister would respond to the day’s adjournment debate) [8]. Other issues of the day that may impact on the wider estate were also raised. The meeting was swift, informative and to the point.

The Daily Conference is the regularised, backstage activity of legislative leadership. The detail of each day that impacts on schedules, government, opposition, backbenchers and the parliamentary estate. Key relational leadership was in evidence during the exchanges with senior officials, but the Speaker was keenly aware of external contingency (how decisions would be viewed outside the House). Decisions require teamwork and efficient co-ordination between his own staff, Commons officials, government and parliamentarians. There was much redefining of the role as speaking for the House in championing backbench voices and MPs critical of the government (from all parties). The Speaker can be drawn into making an authoritative statement on behalf of the House, for instance to clarify the GDPR requirements for MPs [9].

4.2 Leadership as governance

The Commission is the highest political body in the Commons (although many decisions are delegated to the Management Board); meetings take place once a month, as with the Daily Conference, in the Speaker’s study. The location gives the Speaker a level of ownership of the governance process, more so as he is chair, though the administrative support comes from outside his immediate office staff. The Commission contains politicians nominated by the party whips, and 2 lay members. Senior officials also attend [10].

There was palpable political tension in the meeting, even though the agenda contained predominantly administrative matters. This can be partly explained by the rather public breakdown in relations between the Speaker and the Leader of the House. Seated in the corner of the room, I observed that though the meeting had a formalised structure there was an

interplay common in many elite meetings. [Brown et al. \(2017, p. 14\)](#) found: “meetings are spaces for the alignment and negotiation of distinct perspectives, and are constituted through the contextual interplay of similarity and difference.” [Abram \(2017, p. 29\)](#) encapsulates this as: “ritual performances in which rules are enacted, ritual correctness is met with manipulative political game-playing, and formal transparency is intertwined with relational and informational secrecy”.

The body is uncertain if it is acting in the interests of the Commons as a whole, Commission members, MPs, political parties or indeed Parliament. The Speaker therefore does have an important role in directing discussion and summing up debate on the issues. The meeting takes formal papers and is structured as you may expect a company or trustee board meeting to be conducted. Officials, and some other external actors, present papers and navigate through questions from the Commission members, on for instance the Restoration and Renewal programme which took up most of the time ([Meakin, 2019](#)). Often they entered, presented and left the meeting. Though the highest administrative body, which other House committees report to, decisions and progress on matters were still dependent on the government making time in the parliamentary agenda; multiple relational aspects were on display.

In this respect governance for the Commons Speaker is negotiated, utilising the ritual and authority of office and the dynamics of political space ([Norton, 2019](#)). As Commission Chair, the Speaker engages in “consequential talk” that seeks to make the orator a concrete embodiment of a corporate entity ([Abram, 2017](#)). The formal governance trappings enabled him to assert authority from the Chair, whether procedural or administrative.

4.3 Leadership as autonomous action

The Speaker spent a great deal of his schedule involved in external engagement and the promotion of the institution of the Commons. The Speaker can act as an autonomous agent in engaging with schools, universities, voluntary sector organisations and other bodies. He utilised the State Rooms for “in reach”, for instance making time to speak to a group of journalist students, during my shadowing period. Indeed much time during the morning staff meeting was taken up discussing requests by MPs and outside organisations to use the State Rooms. There were three events hosted in the two days I was in the Speaker’s Office.

The Speaker in particular actively supported the parliamentary outreach agenda, which included support for University Parliamentary Studies programmes. His outreach included a commitment to visit all universities that delivered partnership programmes. By touring the country visiting universities and schools, the Speaker established an external platform to deliver his particular message.

He also sought to drive an internal reform agenda (e.g. Digital Democracy and Reference Group on Representation). This is more *informal rhetorical power*. For instance, the Speaker moved from the private (backstage) offices to the public (frontstage) realm with each activity. He was keen to stress responsibility for internal reforms, such as establishment of the new education centre and nursery. He instigated Skype calls to schools each Monday morning to reach schools he could not visit or could not travel to Westminster. The outreach, in reach work and attempts to drive internal reform were defended by the Speaker. To his audiences he mocked critics who he said had described the activity as “below stairs work”.

Identity is challenged through place and authorising arena. The Commons Speaker’s study and offices in general are large and intimidating compared to the cramped nature of the Palace of Westminster. The rooms are imposing and the symbolic power relationship with any visitors can be asserted using space. Whoever the guest is, they have to wait outside the study for the Speaker, including Ministers. The Speaker utilises this ritualistic and symbolic authority to impose himself on political and administrative players, even if they have greater

decision-making power. The resource exchange, strengthened by tradition, gave him a limited predominance. The informal exchanges in the Speaker's Office are as important in agenda setting. Here the personal impacts on the relational, both inside the Palace and outside in his extensive outreach activity. Such activity, I observed, focussed more on the Speaker's identity than institutional identity (more "I" than "we").

5. The Lord Speaker

There are multiple contestable sites and claim-making individuals in Parliament, several embrace a leadership role, others play this down. The House of Lords deliberately plays down individualised leadership, drawing on its tradition as a self-regulating arena. Reform to the governance arrangements has tended to follow behind the Commons selected with a succession of reviews (see [Yong, 2019](#)). The position of Lord Speaker in its current form is a relatively new one. Lord Fowler, was only the third occupant of the post, prior to 2006 the Lord Chancellor was also Lord Speaker [11]. The role of the Lord Speaker is not as extensive or established as the Commons Speaker, leadership in the Lords is a shared endeavour, primarily with the Leader of the House, the Senior Deputy Speaker, (prior to 2016 the post was titled the Chair of Committees). This provides a triumvirate of leadership positions in the Lords. To the extent that there is leadership in the Lords, it is exercised unevenly, mediated through several veto players ([Crewe, 2005](#); [Yong, 2019](#), p. 96).

5.1 *Leadership as procedure*

The decentred nature of procedural activity is best demonstrated by the Companion to Standing Orders, which states "the Lord Speaker has no power to rule on matters of order" and instead "the preservation of order and the maintenance of the rules of debate are the responsibility of the House itself" ([House of Lords, 2017](#)). Furthermore the Lord Speaker has no role in the selection of legislative amendments; these and other roles rest with the Chief Whip and Leader of the House. Following the Constitutional Reform Act, 2005 which ended the tradition of the Lord Chancellor acting as the presiding officer and created the position of Lord Speaker, peers concluded that changing the role would be the "slippery slope" to the loss of self-regulation (see [Russell, 2013](#), pp. 85–86). The Lord Speaker also has no role in selecting peers to speak (there is a speaking list in the Lords), though he does choose Urgent Questions. Therefore the Lord Speaker has not been empowered as a presiding officer, but is essentially and rather counterintuitively the "defender of self-regulation", a phrase used by the Lord Speaker himself.

Ceremonies and ritual may be prevalent in the House of Lords, but the Lord Speaker is not always the central player ([Crewe, 2005](#)). The Lord Speaker's procession is a less formalised and less public event than the Commons procession. This is partly as the Lord Speaker's procession evolved from the Lord Chancellors, with the Train and Purse Bearers, previously associated with the Lord Chancellor's office, not now being required. Following the Lord Speaker from his office down to the Chamber, I saw the less formalised aspects of ritualised opening of the session. Indeed, the Lord Speaker forget his folder with his speaking notes and order paper which the Private Secretary had to swiftly retrieve. Unlike the Commons, there is no official present next to the Speaker in the Chamber to assist.

I observed the Lord Speaker walk a tightrope of non-leadership, which had seemingly evolved out of circumstance and painstakingly slow reform ([Russell, 2013](#); [Yong, 2019](#)). The Lord Speaker's office is not centrally located in the House of Lords; it is tucked away in the corner of the Lords estate. The office takes some finding and is small in comparison to the Commons. It is a good distance from the Leader of the Lords' office, which is much larger and more centrally located. There is a sense of physical downplaying of the role to ensure it is not

regarded as *head* of the Lords or comparable to the Commons Speaker. The Lord Speaker's staff consists of a Private Secretary, an overseas administrator, a press officer, two deputy private secretaries and an apprentice. There is also much less ceremony and ritual associated with the position. The figure is less public and less authoritative, deliberately so. He is reluctant to speak for the House of Lords and has limited authority in the chamber or in other areas – peers do not need to lobby him for speaking rights.

I observed a reluctant and minimal leadership role, reflecting the rather inward looking approach in the House of Lords. The Lord Speaker does not speak on the floor of the House as the House self-regulates speaking. Leadership is more relational than directional as the Speaker engaged via the tea rooms to gauge peers views on matters. I also observed little direct lobbying of the Lord Speaker, the office was not a hub of activity. There are multiple players who have procedural and administrative responsibility and the Lord Speaker had less imperative to strengthen relationships (lest he be accused of power building). He does not really *preside* over proceedings, nor is an *officer* of the chamber, responsible for its running.

5.2 Leadership as governance

The leadership aspects associated with the role are fairly ill defined and deliberately minimal. In fact the Lord Speaker was at pains, in interview, to downplay his leadership role in the Lords in general and also in administrative-bureaucratic terms. Many governance aspects were shared with the Senior Deputy and Leader of the House, on an issue by issue basis. The Clerk of Parliaments, as the most senior parliamentary official in the Lords, had a clear managerial role (the Clerk of the House in the Commons also doubled up on procedural and managerial responsibility). The corporate aspect is less fragmented than in the Commons, however the most senior administrator, the Clerk of Parliaments, does not answer to the Lord Speaker, rather he advises and consults. Therefore, the Lord Speaker's ability to direct is limited. The Lord Speaker does Chair the Lord's Commission, but largely a facilitating chair than a directional one. The Lord Speaker described his role to me as "Chairman of the Board" to "get business through." Much business shadowed topics already "live" in the Commons, though only a single individual sits on both Commons and Lords Management Boards. The Lord Speaker showed little desire to be personally involved in administrative matters, apart from matters of security, functions were primarily delegated (Yong, 2019).

Seated on the edge of the room next to several officials, it was difficult to gauge in whose interests the Commission was working; peers, the Lords, Parliament as a whole? The House of Lords Commission session contained 10 peers and two external or lay members. The Clerk of Parliaments attended, though not as a formal member. The meeting focussed on the Restoration and Renewal programme and financial support for peers, the later taking up a surprising amount of time [12]. The meeting received many papers and had, as you may expect from the Lords less political discussion, and much more delegation. The role of the Lord Speaker, was understated and facilitative.

5.3 Leadership as autonomous action

The Lord Speaker represents the Chamber in various formal settings, including jointly with the Commons at state and ceremonial occasions and representing the Lords to overseas parliaments. He also, according to the Lord Speaker's website, co-ordinates an outreach programme to engage the public in the work and role of the Lords. Although I observed little educational outreach activity, in contrast to his predecessor who spent much time engaging with universities, schools and so on, his office co-ordinated the peer to schools visits programme. Lord Fowler himself rarely visited schools and engaged in little public outreach work. In terms of in-reach, the Lord Speaker had discretion over the use of the River Room for

events other than functions on behalf of UK-registered charities and cross-party parliamentary events. The Lord Speaker for instance himself hosted an end of term reception, a memorial reception and a peers in school event in July 2018.

The Lord Speaker treads carefully when expanding his remit (though the remit is not formally defined). He described himself as an ambassador for the House (a phrase the Commons Speaker also used). I evidenced creeping authority over conduct issues relating to peers (and in response to media queries) and external affairs. In a nod to the outreach and identity role of the Lord Speaker, the Private Secretary was keen to draw my attention to the Lord Speaker's new twitter account. Such external activity suggests a gentle negotiation of the leadership dilemma, edging the Lord Speaker to speak on behalf of the Lords, whilst wary of his predecessor's approach in extending the external face too far. The Lord Speaker did however use his own positional authority to drive forward the Burns Report via the campaign for an effective second chamber [13]. This had an element of self-preservation for the Chamber, but was also recognition that the Office of Lord Speaker is the most obvious body to drive forward such internal reform. This approach was evident in the campaign meeting I attended on the Burns Report.

Yet, there are ceremonial roles such as state visits in which the Lords Speaker clearly projects a leadership role. On these occasions the Lord Speaker may double up with the Commons Speaker in public, but there was little other informal contact at Speaker level (it occurred at Private Secretary level). Letters from one office to another appeared on the Lord Commission agenda (for instance, the setting up of the sponsor board for the Restoration and Renewal project).

6. Reflections: collaboration and conflict leadership

The puzzles of legislative leadership are presented here as three faces of leadership, the procedural (running the legislature), governance (managing the legislature) and autonomous or external (promoting the legislature). Within each I observed two key leadership roles in the two constituent parts of the Westminster Parliament. Westminster with its centuries of traditions and eccentricities may be trapped in a historicism that limits reform. However this article is more firmly focussed on the nature of leadership, than on the normative aspects of constraints to reform. By utilising a decentred approach we can observe and unpack leadership in a variety of legislative fields. I argue that legislative leadership can be understood and examined as a diverse and decentred activity, contingent on actors' beliefs, circumstance and traditions. If we examine the three faces of legislative leadership evident to the observer, we see such contingency in the everyday practices.

On the *procedural* face, sitting, observing the ceremonial aspects of the roles, the formal refereeing in the Chamber and the less formal interaction with key players, I could get close to the exercise of parliamentary leadership and governance. I could also similarly observe a nascent form of (non-hierarchical) leadership in the Lords, as Lord Fowler navigated through the collaborative, consensual and often conflicting relationships in the Lords. These are the public fields of authority, contingent on individuals in positions of authority negotiating political and administrative agendas. In the Commons, the Speaker has control over the agenda, who speaks and for how long. He exercised it with a great theatrical flourish, more so of course when centre of attention during Prime Ministers Questions, less so when in the Chair for the adjournment debate at the end of the day. As a referee, he can not only uphold the rules, but interpret them too. The way he interpreted them (for instance, granting of Urgent Questions and allowing Prime Ministers Questions to run beyond 30 min proved to be highly personalised). In the Lords this procedural leadership was hidden, a subtle form of authority. Being there, is enough without the outward expression of command.

On the *governance* face, activity is concentrated in the back stage operation. The field or space is the office, the corridors and the informal spaces in and around the Westminster estate (Norton, 2019; Loewenberg, 2007). Informality and private exchanges are crucial. Public navigation, such as exchanges on the floor of the House, speeches, formal evidence sessions happen alongside informal and private bargaining. Private meetings are not minuted, exchanges in offices do not have observers or note-takers present, and pre-hearing sessions decide questions and collaboration. I sat in on one-to-one meetings then observed that when gaming is used to anticipate questioning in advance, the backstage impacts on the frontstage (Goffman 1990; Geddes, 2019b).

The *external* role of legislative leadership or outward face of the legislature is often embodied by the Speaker. Leadership has classically involved speaking for – and on behalf of – organisations, institutions and businesses. This rhetorical projection involves articulation or projection of a vision (Helms, 2014; Laing and Walter, 2016; Rhodes and ‘t Hart, 2014). This is very much the transference of the “I” into the “we,” whereby we think of interdependent relations and functions, rather than single, isolated functions (Elias, 1991). In political work, protagonists react both as emotional individual actors, but also within social webs of interdependency (Crewe and Sarra, 2019). These actors may appear autonomous, but the “I” becomes “we” when situated within the context, and responding to everyday dilemmas. Relationships with government, political parties, backbencher, administrative staff members, external actors (and occasionally academic researchers) come in and out of daily working life. Therefore the Commons Speaker impressed on me his institutional achievements and also those that had been stymied by political foes. He also stressed his external contribution, the Speakers Conference, engagement with universities and so on. The Lord Speaker was less expansive. His focus lay more in furthering the Burns recommendations to limit the size of the House of Lords. This of course in its own way was a legacy and a preservation issue.

In each case the “I” did not necessarily become “we” and the decentred approach of ideational influence on the whole was evident. The personal became institutional, even though neither spoke *for* the institution. They had a historicism that conferred symbolic presence and authority; the Commons more so than the Lords (as the Speaker is in the Chair, while in the Lords he sits on the woolsack). John Bercow, a divisive Speaker who himself became the focus of attention, reflected the public perception of the Commons (one which saw division and conflict, see Whale, 2020; Geddes, 2019c). Lord Fowler, a more consensual player, sought to preserve the institution and avoid conflict or expose the Chamber to charges of disrepute. Each was a product of cyclical contingency, post-expenses – a reaction to the previous incumbent [14].

In such a contestable arena with multiple actors attempting to assert political and bureaucratic influence, leaders require political astuteness (awareness, nous, political “savvy”). Political astuteness – here particularly relevant for parliamentary staff members managing the bureaucracy – has been identified as the key leadership skill in public managers, when faced with such “disagreeing tribes” (Hartley *et al.*, 2013, 2019; Hartley, 2017, 2018). On procedure, should the Speaker ignore clerkly advice? On governance, how far should the Commons Speaker get involved in administrative management or indeed as the Brexit saga demonstrated, set his judgements against the government of the day? Should the Lord Speaker break with the self-regulating nature of the Chamber to push further reform of the composition of the House of Lords, so perhaps safeguarding its future?

7. Conclusion

Legislative leadership in the Westminster Parliament remains elusive to the external eye. Collectively, parties are structurally advantaged (in procedural terms) in determining topics, amendments and the policy narrative. The executive maintains control of the

agenda, time and can even attempt to manipulate the uncodified constitution for their own political advantage. However, parties and governments may be *from* parliament, but they are not *of* parliament. Within the structure of the parliamentary “village”, leadership – in the form of an authoritative voice to speak for, lead, manage and defend the institution – is absent (Winetrobe, 2003; Norton, 2016). There are claim makers, some with mandates (Speakers and Committee Chairs), but few obvious followers and few clear goals and targets. Also absent in this highly competitive political space are orchestrators and facilitators, encouraging and embedding democratic governance (Laing and Walter, 2016). Autonomous agents roam – often unfettered – navigating through the multiple conundrums and unfolding dilemmas.

This article has presented a decentred approach to uncovering legislative leadership, the agency, beliefs and practices of those I observed mattered to how meetings, interactions and decisions were structured. The nexus of public management, political leadership and parliamentary scholarship allows greater understanding of legislative leadership, allowing different approaches to talk to each other. This revealed procedural, governance, and external faces. Assuming identities is a common theme, “So political leaders feel the identity pressures of holding a number of flexible identities in tension” (Lees-Marshment and Smolovic Jones, 2018, p. 461; Lees-Marshment, 2016). The players performed in each face, underplaying and overplaying roles on the front and backstage. The projection of “self” was evident even in the small detail (such as the final word at the door at the end of a meeting). By observing the small detail, we can understand the way elites operate within a democratic assembly, opening new research possibilities in an under researched area.

Politicians (who are of course temporary occupants) maintain a veto on *governance* arrangements impacting on (permanent) administrative staff members. There has been evidence of Westminster strengthening administrative *identity*, while actively avoiding *political* identity. The contingency of social (and political) life was on display to the privileged observer, decentred and often atomistic (Bevir, 2013). The value of being there is that the observer as researcher can appreciate the giving of “greater weight to the situated practices, social relations, and ethical complexities that are integral to the work of organizations” (Brown *et al.*, 2017). Elites confront daily dilemmas and act as actors would, sometimes in public, often in private (or “front stage” and “back stage”) (Goffman, 1990; Geddes, 2019b). They construct relationships and deal with multiple pressures and demands from internal and external sources.

The leadership of the legislature that I observed was atomised and could be stretched, to accommodate the incumbent office holder (Bennister, 2007). There were multiple relationships both formally constituted and informally constructed, but little collaborative or consensus leadership, even in the House of Lords. Leadership was constrained by externalities (parties, ritual, bureaucracy and executive). There was even less *interactive* leadership, whereby political leadership undertakes meaningful engagement with citizens, potentially to create public value.

Notes

1. See in particular Crewe (2005, 2015) and Geddes (2019b) who have demonstrated that the political anthropology approach presented by Rhodes’ (2011) observational book on government elites can be transferred to parliament.
2. See Geddes’ (2019b) application of notions of performative teams, audiences and stages (front and back) to the parliamentary arena and specifically select committees.
3. I was awarded a parliamentary research fellowship in the Commons (2016–2019) to research the prime minister’s appearances before the Liaison Committee. This facilitated access to parliament for the duration of the fellowship. See Bennister *et al.* (2016) and Bennister and Kelly (2020). During the

fellowship, I also shadowed and interviewed the Commons Speaker and the Lord Speaker, in addition to attending the Commons and Lords Commission.

4. See Commons Commission agenda 14 May 2018 <https://old.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/other-committees/house-of-commons-commission/news-parliament-2017/decisions-14-may-2018051411111111/> and Lords Commission minutes 11 September 2018 <https://old.parliament.uk/documents/lords-committees/house-of-lords-commission/2017-19/180911-Commission-record-of-discussion-12th-Meeting-PUBLIC.pdf>
5. The confidential nature of the exchanges means I refer only to matters of interaction, process and function, rather than the content of the meetings.
6. The Speaker has a fourth role, which is not considered here though I am grateful to a senior clerk for drawing my attention to this role. He remains a constituency MP and has casework responsibilities for his constituency. Speaker John Bercow represented the Buckingham constituency. Convention has dictated that the main parties do not field candidates against the Speaker allowing him a free run in 2010, 2015 and 2017. He sits as an independent, does not vote, but his office conducts casework on behalf of constituents. Here though I am only concerned with parliamentary leadership and governance roles, rather than representational.
7. MPs may request that the Speaker considers their application for an Urgent Question on topics of particular importance each day. Applications for urgent questions must be submitted to the Speaker to receive an oral answer on the same day.
8. An adjournment debate is a way in the Commons of enabling a debate to take place but without a question on which the House must then decide.
9. An issue which highlighted the confusion around responsibility and ownership of the issue between political parties and the Commons (BBC, 2018).
10. For current House of Commons Commission membership see <https://committees.parliament.uk/committee/348/house-of-commons-commission/membership/> for a record of decisions made at the 14 May 2018 meeting see <https://old.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/other-committees/house-of-commons-commission/news-parliament-2017/decisions-14-may-2018051411111111/>
11. Lord Fowler is a former Conservative minister, he succeeded Baroness D'Souza in 2016 who had previously been convenor of the crossbench peers. The first elected Lord Speaker was Baroness Hayman, a former Labour MP. Each Lord Speaker serves for five years and can only serve a maximum of two terms in office.
12. The House of Lords Commission public minutes available online, contrast with the list of decisions that resulted from the equivalent Commons Commission I sat in on.
13. The Lord Speaker's committee on the size of the House, which was chaired by Lord Burns (the Burns Committee), was established in December 2016 and the Report of the Lord Speaker's Committee on Size of the House (the Burns Report) was published on 31 October 2017.
14. See BBC 2015 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-35162083> on Baroness De Souza.

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