

Dirty Hands and Clean Heels: 21 days of political leadership in the UK

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Abstract

The paper discusses 21 days of political leadership in the UK following the EU referendum, the publication of the Chilcot Report on the Iraq War, and the appointment of a new cabinet by the new Prime Minister, Theresa May. It begins by modelling four possible approaches to political decision-making by taking into account the intent of the decision-maker, their acceptance or avoidance of responsibility, and the nature of the consequences. It suggests that 'Dirty Hands' exists when the decision-maker recognizes the deleterious consequences of what they deem to be necessary action – and intends to engender these – but takes responsibility. 'Clean Heels' embodies a decision where the decision-maker recognizes the consequences might be deleterious and intends them to be so, but avoids all responsibility. *Mea Culpa* describes a decision-maker who did not intend deleterious consequences but having seen them occur takes responsibility. Finally, the Spectator is someone who has no intention of making any difference to anything and thus takes no responsibility, but often plays a destructively critical role from the sidelines. This heuristic – and it is no more than a heuristic – is then illustrated by considering the actions of four decision-makers during this period: Boris Johnson, Tony Blair, Nigel Farage, and Theresa May.

Keywords

Leadership, Dirty Hands, Clean Heels, Chilcot, Brexit, *Mea Culpa*, referendum

Introduction

From the date of the result of the European referendum in the UK (24 June 2016) through the date of publication for the Chilcot Report on the Iraq War (6 July 2016) (an official report into the Iraq War) and onto the date when Theresa May, the new British Prime Minister, announced her new cabinet (14 July 2016), the UK witnessed three weeks of unprecedented political turmoil. In the next section, I want to consider how a decision-making

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heuristic might help us navigate our way through the 21 days that transfixed the UK in 2016. First, the events themselves will be sketched before an analysis is attempted.

On 24 June, following the referendum to stay or exit the European Union the previous day, the result – 52% in favour of exiting (the Brexit option) and 48% in favour of remaining – triggered a political crisis. First, the then Prime Minister, David Cameron, resigned (an archetypal Clean Heels response to a problem). Then, a consequent competition for his replacement saw the exit first of Boris Johnson, then Michael Gove (the two leading Brexit campaigners) quickly followed by the other contenders for Number 10 Downing Street (the official residence of the British Prime Minister), leaving Theresa May as the incumbent with a new Conservative Cabinet that included some Brexit leaders back in the fold and some Remainers out, George Osborne, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, in particular. The result also triggered the resignation of Nigel Farage from leadership of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) and a challenge to the leader of the Labour Party, Jeremy Corbyn, from inside his own Parliamentary party. Amidst all this, on 6 July, the Chilcot Report on the Iraq War was finally published after seven years of sitting, condemning, among other things, the poor post war planning and the dubious decision-making of the then Prime Minister Tony Blair.

May's new cabinet included several prominent Brexiteers, notably Boris Johnson as Foreign Secretary (the man who insulted more foreign dignitaries than anyone else including questioning the role of Barak Obama's 'part-Kenyan ancestry' and the predilection of the Turkish president for sex with goats), David Davis as the individual responsible for negotiating Brexit (who is suing the Prime Minister for her role in restricting human rights as the then Foreign Secretary in the Data Retention and Investigatory Powers Act (DRIPA)), and Andrea Leadsom as Environment Secretary (who recently suggested at a Brexit campaign meeting that 'It would make so much more sense if those with the big fields do the sheep, and those with the hill farms do the butterflies' (quoted Bourke, 2016)). Perhaps, the only real surprise is that Gove was not appointed Minister for Health having campaigned – as did all the Brexiteers – against a campaign bus painted with the logo suggesting that leaving the EU would enable £350 million a week to be returned to the NHS; a claim which turned out to be a total fabrication. But, this is an important point to note about political campaigns in general: they are not won by statistical analysis of economic trends, threats, or opportunities – it is not 'the economy, stupid'; 'it's the narrative, smart arse'. The story of 'getting our country back' is one that resonates on both sides of the Atlantic with Trump's campaign combining fear of 'the other' with a strategy that contains nothing except himself. As Clay Shirky tweeted on 22 July during the Democratic Convention 'We've brought fact-checkers to a culture war. Time to get serious'.¹

Politics is often regarded as the land of Dirty Hands – the place where morality is displaced by the political necessities of life; where the greater good of the community requires political leaders to take responsibility for the undertaking of rather unsavoury acts on our behalf. But, we have also witnessed a different phenomenon: Clean Heels – here political leaders take the opposite tack: they avoid responsibility for the confusion generated by their actions undertaken for what many take to be selfish reasons.

Dirty Hands is a relatively well-understood concept in political leadership, but Clean Heels is less so. This article is aimed at fleshing out the latter against the existing skeleton of the former and two other options available: the Spectator – who merely watches from the side-lines and plays no direct part in the action, and *Mea Culpa* (through my fault) – where the decision maker does not intend to have the effects that occurred but takes responsibility

for the consequences. In what follows, I consider the nature of each concept and seek to illustrate them with regard to the actions of various political leaders in the UK over the 21-day period.

Modelling the political landscape

To help navigate this political landscape, I wanted to work with three related concepts: whether the individual intended the effects of their action (or inaction), whether they accept or deny responsibility, and whether they are aware of the consequences of their original decision. The heuristic below captures the theoretical differences between these approaches and all of these attributes can have high or low significance (Figure 1). Of course, as with all heuristics, the complexities are discarded for the sake of conceptual clarity (for example, actors may wander across the model in reality) but in analysing any real case the complexities and contradictions need to be added back in.

Dirty Hands

The original phrase ‘Dirty Hands’ comes from the eponymous play by Jean Paul Sartre (1955) set in a fictional civil war in which Hoederer, secretary of the Communist Party, is trying to persuade Hugo, a young idealist, that to secure political power requires abandoning some ethical principles for the sake of the greater good:

How you cling to your purity, young man! How afraid you are to soil your hands! All right, stay pure! What good will it do? Why did you join us? Purity is an idea for a yogi or a monk. You intellectuals and bourgeois anarchists use it as a pretext for doing nothing. To do nothing, to remain motionless, arms at your sides, wearing kid gloves. Well, I have dirty hands. right up to

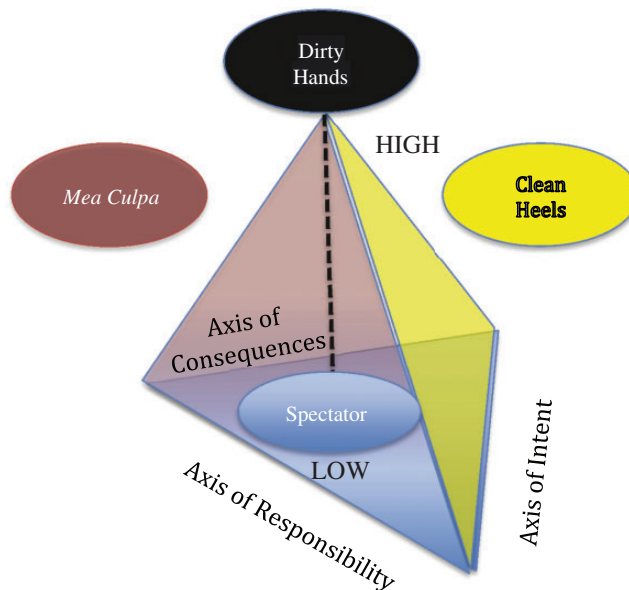


Figure 1. Modelling the political landscape: intent, responsibility and consequence.

the elbows. I've plunged them in filth and blood. What do you hope? Do you think you can govern innocently?

This, of course, reflects Machiavelli's concern that the Prince sometimes needed to act immorally in an immoral world for the greater good.

The fact is that a man who wants to act virtuously in every way necessarily comes to grief among so many who are not virtuous. Therefore if a prince wants to maintain his rule he must learn how not to be virtuous, and to make use of this or not according to need. (1975: 91)

Walzer (1973, 1977) subsequently adopted the term and, in the latter publication, argued that in what he termed a 'supreme emergency' (what Schmitt (1922/2006: 5) called a 'state of exception') could justify ostensibly immoral acts. For example, the area-bombing campaign in Germany by the Allied air forces in the first part of the Second World War killed thousands of civilians but against a backdrop where the existence of the UK was in grave doubt and the 1000-year Reich did not seem a delusional fantasy, this was regarded as legitimate by the decision-makers (Harris and Churchill).

This catastrophist justification for Dirty Hands is radically different from Machiavelli's argument that the Prince must do whatever is necessary for the sake of the community (but not just for the sake of the Prince). Both cases, however, still rely upon the leader making a judgement about the nature of the emergency (for Walzer) and the nature of the public good (for Machiavelli). We also know from the work of Mitchell (2004) that political and military leaders are perfectly capable of justifying the mass murder of civilians not because they pose a catastrophic threat to the community but because they hold the 'wrong' ideology.

Perhaps, a more difficult case is that which Lincoln faced with trying to abolish slavery during the American Civil War but without the necessary majority in the House to support this. Ultimately, as Goodwin (2009) documents, Lincoln engaged in some dubious political methods to cajole, bribe, and threaten members of the House to change sides and slavery was duly abolished – but only at the cost of rather distasteful – but necessary as far as Lincoln was concerned – political manoeuvring. This captures one of the significant elements of Dirty Hands decisions: they are often wrong/wrong dilemmas, so the issue is how to choose the least damaging option (see Sanders, 2015; Watters, 2016) and they fall within what Primo Levi considered a grey zone, beyond conventional ethics where the Utilitarian evaluates the consequences and the Deontologist assesses the overriding duty. In Dirty Hands scenarios, it is not possible to evaluate the consequences nor does adhering to a categorical ethic resolve the dilemma. As Levi (1989: 39–43) describes the entry of the newcomer to the extermination camp:

The newcomer was derided, [probably] the hostility was motivated, like all other forms of intolerance, in an unconscious attempt to consolidate the 'we' at the expense of the 'they'... As for the privileged prisoners, the situation was more complex... They represented a potent minority within the Lager but a potent majority among survivors... [to cope with] the hard labour, beatings, the cold, and the illnesses the meagre food ration was insufficient... Death by hunger, or by diseases induced by hunger, was the prisoner's normal destiny, avoidable only with additional food... Obtaining that required whatever it took to lift oneself above the norm... The ascent of the privileged... is an anguishing but unflinching phenomena... It is a grey zone, poorly defined, where the two camps of masters and servants both diverge and converge. This grey zone possesses an incredibly complicated internal structure

and contains within itself enough to confuse our need to judge . . . The harsher the oppression the greater the more widespread among the oppressed is the willingness . . . to collaborate.

For some political philosophers, the legitimation of unethical practices is anything but a grey zone. As Coady (2008) reminds us, for Thomas Hobbes ethical prohibitions against certain practices could not hold when compliance with the ethics led to self-destruction because it was ‘contrary to the ground of all laws of nature’ (1651/1982: 110); an interesting reflection on the dilemma faced by liberals seeking to protect freedom of speech even for those seeking the end of freedom of speech, or the democratic rights of those who seek to secure democratic election in order to destroy democracy (as of course Hitler did in 1933).

Hobbes was writing against the particular backdrop of the English Civil Wars, and war in general is a classic arena to consider the nature not just of Dirty Hands but of ‘blood-spattered hands’ (Rubenstein, 2015) in which – in this case – NGOs, though not guilty of any over wrong-doing themselves, are coerced into supporting unethical practices for the sake of the greater community.

Mea Culpa

Dirty Hands differs from *Mea Culpa* in that the former involves a decision that the decision-maker knows will involve ethical transgressions – but it is legitimated on the basis of the greater good (however defined) – whereas *Mea Culpa* (in this context) is an admission of responsibility after the event which was taken in good faith but had unforeseen consequences. So someone with Dirty Hands knows what will happen – but still acts – while an actor who admits *Mea Culpa* does not know what will happen. In effect, *Mea Culpa* is responsible because of consequentialist logic whereas someone with Dirty Hands is responsible because of a deontological transgression and the consequences.

The Latin origins of the phrase derive from the Roman Catholic Mass, or more strictly, the *Confiteor* in which ‘*Mea Culpa*’ is repeated three times. Its first use in English seems to be in Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde* but the important point is its link to the confession of sins and the acceptance of repentance. This, of course, also explains its popularity with various regimes in communist societies, most notably the Khmer Rouge (Ngor, 2003) and Maoist China (Kraus, 2012), whose penchant for self-reproach and collective admission of failure ended up in the Cambodian Killing Fields and the ‘re-education’ of intellectuals in China. However, these variants are usually locked into the authoritarian desires of the state, rather than the guilt-accepting desires of the individual.

Perhaps, one of the most well-known *Mea Culpa* messages of the latter variant was never transmitted: it was Eisenhower’s press release if the D-Day landings had failed:

Our landings in the Cherbourg-Havre area have failed to gain a satisfactory foothold and I have withdrawn the troops. My decision to attack at this time and place was based on the best information available. The troops, the air, and the Navy did all that bravery and devotion to duty could do. If any blame or fault attaches to the attempt it is mine alone (quoted in Grint, 2008: 57).

At the other end of the significance scale is the sign in the American furniture store – Pottery Barn – which reads ‘You break it you own it’ (Bush and Lewis, 2016) which shifts the act

from one of intended Clean Heels (nobody saw that just ignore it) to an enforced *Mea Culpa* (we saw you on store CCTV...). Interestingly, Eisenhower also shifted from Clean Heels to a voluntary *Mea Culpa* in the above D-Day quote when he replaced 'The troops have been withdrawn' with 'I have withdrawn the troops'; the shift from passive to active moves the responsibility too (Tavris and Aronson, 2007: 236).

Naturally, some *Mea Culpas* are better than others: Margaret Beckett, then a Labour MP who voted in favour of the Iraq War, said that she 'would take responsibility for her actions as long as Isis took responsibility for its'. Which really misses the point: Isis glorifies their responsibilities for atrocities rather than try to avoid them. Meredith McIver's admission of guilt for the plagiarism of Michelle Obama's 2008 speech used by Melania Trump at the Republican convention in July 2016 is a much clearer example of *Mea Culpa*, though Donald Trump is renowned as someone who rarely admits mistakes (Diamond, 2016).

Clean Heels

If the land (or should it be Primo Levi's metaphorical swamp?) of Dirty Hands is neither clean nor clear, what about the land of Clean Heels? There is self-evidently less land or swamp to navigate here because it appears to be a less obvious political phenomenon. I take Clean Heels to represent the action taken by someone who, having facilitated a decision for, or change of direction by, the community then washes her or his hands of the decision and (sometimes literally) runs away denying any responsibility. So, if Dirty Hands is an admission of responsibility for the act and an acceptance of the necessarily deleterious consequences for the community, Clean Heels is a denial of responsibility for the act and of any problematic consequences. Sartre (1993) calls this 'Bad Faith' – *mauvaise foi* – when someone either denies responsibility or claims they had no choice in a situation where there is always a choice, as long as the consequences of the choice are accepted. In effect, and this for Sartre is the tragedy of humanity: we are not as Rousseau claimed, 'born to be free' but 'condemned to be free'.

Perhaps, one of the clearest examples of Clean Heels occurred towards the end of the First World War when the German Kaiser and General Ludendorff, having presided over a disastrous war, ceded power to a cross-party government that failed to negotiate an armistice. So, peace was finally obtained by a replacement Social Democratic party, led by Ebert, and thus it became a simple process for the political right, having brought Germany to military catastrophe and the brink of revolution, to subsequently claim that it was the political left that 'stabbed the country in the back' and negotiated a humiliating peace treaty.

Of course, Clean Heels is not restricted to the actions of political leaders and we all spend considerable effort denying responsibility for actions that do not work out as we intended or indeed do achieve what we intend but we do not wish to be seen to be responsible. As we have known from the early work of Festinger (1957) on Cognitive Dissonance, the ability to rationalize our way out of responsibility is a skill that we all deploy in our self-defence. Or, as Gilbert suggests (2006) in his rumination on the movie *Casablanca*, had Ingrid Bergman stayed with Humphrey Bogart or gone with her husband is really irrelevant. She, like the rest of us, would have been able to rationalize both choices and lived happily ever after.

This is self-evidently not always the case: in 2008, Elisabeth Fritzl escaped after 24 years of imprisonment by her father, Josef, in a concealed cellar room in Amstetten, Austria,

where he repeatedly raped her and fathered seven children by her. Josef Fritz rationalized his behaviour thus:

Ever since she entered puberty she did not adhere to any rules any more, she would spend whole nights in dingy bars, drinking alcohol and smoking. I only tried to pull her out of that misery. I got her a job as a waitress but she would not go to work for days. She even escaped twice and hung out with bad people during this time and they were not a good company for her. I would bring her back home each time, but she would try to escape again. That is why I had to do something; I had to create a place where I could keep Elisabeth, by force if necessary, away from the outside world.²

David Frum, President Bush's speech-writer, played the opposite tactic: 'US–UK intervention offered Iraq a better future. Whatever [the] West's mistakes: sectarian war was a choice Iraqis made for themselves. There [was] no US–UK intervention in Syria, and it collapsed into sectarian war even more horrible than Iraq's' (quoted by Roberts and Jacobs, 2016). Note here how responsibility for the Iraq anarchy is displaced back onto the Iraqis – as if the US–UK intervention played no role in it, while the Syrian case is denied because the Iraqi disintegration apparently played no part in the Syrian disintegration.

But while rationalizing our decisions is often a means of protecting ourselves from a decision that only affects us, Clean Heels represents an action that puts the community at risk, is irresponsibly undertaken, and includes an escape route for the decision-maker. The final approach requires no escape route because there is never any real intention to act.

Spectator

Spectators come in two varieties: the first is a passive variant where you just watch what is going on and play no part in it, nor voice any opinion about it; the second is more active, but only as an armchair critic, articulating to anyone interested what you would have done, if you were in charge (or if you could be bothered to engage with the world in some meaningful way – an approach that Pericles castigates in his funeral oration: 'We do not say that a man who takes no interest in politics is a man who minds his own business; we say that he has no business here at all' (Thucydides, 1954:74)). To those who do participate in politics then the Spectator is often perceived as a utopian – the equivalent of one who thinks that the political good does not require dirty hands – that omelettes can be made without breaking any eggs. Indeed, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, the first known account of the phrase, 'you cannot make an omelette with breaking eggs' was delivered in French by the Royalist General François de Charette who was leader of the counter-revolution in the Vendée and was captured in March 1796. On being questioned about his role in the deaths of Republicans, he allegedly said: 'On ne saurait faire d'omelette sans casser des œufs'. He was subsequently shot.

This, of course, is one of the main defences for Dirty Hands, and thus a useful reversal would lead us to those who prefer not to make an omelette in the first place: hence Eggless Omelettes – a utopian dish involving no real ingredients and requiring no action or sacrifice. This would be significantly different from someone whose decision had unintended consequences for the community and therefore, from a Kantian/Deontological perspective would be able to deny responsibility because there never was any intent. Indeed, this is the land of self-chosen impotence, where the armchair critic pontificates on what should be done without actually doing anything about it. This has clear resonances with the internal

machinations of the Labour Party at the time of writing as it struggled to define itself as a party of the Left or a party of the Centre-Left, as a party interested in securing power and making the compromises necessary for that acquisition, or a party keener on maintaining political purity ahead of pragmatic power. As Jon Lansman (Chair of Momentum – the successor to the Labour Party organization that campaigned successfully for Jeremy Corbyn to be elected leader) – tweeted on 16 July 2016, ‘Democracy gives power to people, “Winning” is the small bit that matters to political elites who want to keep power themselves’. This is what Nick Cohen (2016) called ‘Empty Leftism’ or an assumption that an omelette did not require the breaking of eggs.

It also resonates with a political problem facing Cromwell during the English Civil War when many of the military commanders on the Parliamentary side secured their positions simply because of their nobility, and many of these were reluctant to engage in the military violence that Cromwell deemed necessary to bring the king to heel. As a result, during the Long Parliament in 1645 a ‘Self-Denying Ordinance’ demanded that members of Parliament must resign their military positions. This effectively weeded out the less militant military leaders on the Parliamentary side and led to the beginnings of the New Model Army that eventually crushed the Royalists.

Finally, I should also note that academics like myself often end up in the arena as professional critics, not as those engaged in trying to do something about the world: hence, as Marx would have said: the point is not just to understand the world but to change it. It is not without some truth that the term ‘just academic’ is used for an impotent and pointless suggestion. However, eggless omelettes might also cover those who are proved correct – but too late. Or, as the Russian Embassy tweeted on the day the Chilcot Report was published, ‘Keep Calm but I Told You So: No real WMD in Baghdad, unjust and highly dangerous war. The entire region on the receiving end’. (Quoted *Guardian*, 7 July 2016: 6)

In the next section, I take four political actors to illustrate some of these frames over the 21 days.

Boris Johnson: Attempted clean heels

Johnson’s rise, fall and return from the dead are no more than we should expect. From his days in Oxford University as President of the Students’ Union, he has made little secret of his political ambitions to lead the UK via his incumbency as Mayor of London. Alexander Boris de Pfeffel Johnson, to give him his full name, was MP for Henley between 2001 and 2008 when he was elected Mayor of London, a position he was re-elected to in 2012 to serve a second four-year term. In 2015, he became MP for Uxbridge and South Ruislip, and not until February 2016 – as the referendum campaign got underway, did he suddenly appear as a lead campaigner for Brexit. Indeed, in the week running up to his decision, he consistently refused to announce which side he would support, claiming that he needed to think about it and only decided ‘after a huge amount of heartache’ and an ‘agonisingly difficult’ decision (quoted *Guardian*, 21 February 2016: 1). Michael Heseltine, his predecessor as MP for Henley responded, ‘Given that Boris has spent so long agonising over this decision, his decision is illogical. If it takes you this long to make up your mind about something so fundamental and you still have questions, then surely the right option is to stay with what you know rather than risk our economy and security with a leap in the dark’ (quoted *Guardian*, 21 February 2016:1). The following day Johnson even floated the idea of

a second referendum to confirm the result of the first, an idea rejected by Cameron, but one that suggested Johnson was not a categorical Brexiter. Yet as the campaign progressed his position hardened to the point where some in the Conservative Party suggested it was all a 'fledgling leadership campaign feeding off the nasty handiwork of Nigel Farage'. (quoted *Guardian* 27 February 2016)

One of the most influential slogan's of the Brexit campaign was first uttered by Johnson on 20 June when he demanded that the country should 'take back control', a slogan that shifted the debate from the economic to the political sphere and began the slow build up for Brexit. In fact, 'Vote Leave, Let's Take Back Control' became a key slogan after a meeting in August 2015 in Westminster Tower when Dominic Cummings, the campaign director, dreamt up the slogan and painted it on the back of the now infamous red campaign bus. Cummings was interviewed by the Commons Treasury Committee on 20 April 2016 when Andrew Tyrie, the Conservative chair of the committee,

accused him near the start of the hearing of playing 'fast and loose' with the facts. During the hearing Cummings accused the Bank of England and the Treasury of 'scaremongering', described Treasury civil servants as 'charlatans' and accused the Cabinet Office of threatening people who did not support it on the EU. Tyrie said these were 'truly extraordinary claims' and challenged him to provide evidence to back them up. (quoted Sparrow, 2016)

Perhaps, the Remain campaign should have focused on the flipside of the control coin: (the apparent absence of) a derogation of responsibility.

However, the really interesting moment occurs after the referendum result persuaded Prime Minister Cameron to select a Clean Heels response and resign and left an open race for his position. As the Conservative MPs jostled for position, it became clear that Johnson was the favourite. On 24 June, most newspapers led with this assumption and noted his high level of support amongst the backbenchers. A week later, however, as the *Telegraph* described it: 'Boris Johnson was brought to his knees by the "cuckoo nest plot"' (1 July 2016). The cuckoo nest plot turned out to be a result of a dinner party on 16 February 2016 where Johnson was reluctantly persuaded, allegedly, by Gove (then the Secretary of State for Justice) to join the Brexit campaign. There, Gove's wife, Sarah Vine (a journalist for the *Daily Mail*), suggested Johnson was very agitated – again hinting that Johnson was always more interested in securing the keys to number 10 rather than an exit from Europe.

Roll the clock forward and we are left with Johnson as front runner for the Prime Minister's position, not in a stable environment but in a context where the Brexit decision has led to a financial scare on the markets and significant political disquiet both at home and in the rest of Europe; and all of this can be laid at the feet of the person likely to take over as Prime Minister and therefore to be responsible for sorting out the problems. On the morning that Johnson was allegedly about to announce his candidature for the position of Prime Minister, his campaign manager, Lynton Crosby, received a phone call from Gove, Johnson's erstwhile ally, to suggest that Gove was going to stand against Johnson and would say that Johnson was not fit to be Prime Minister. At this juncture, Johnson allegedly changed his mind about his lifelong dream of being the British Prime Minister because (1) someone else would run against him and (2) that person might say something unpleasant about him.

So, a man dedicated to the rough and tumble of politics, a man whose political life has been littered with gaffes and crass put-downs of rivals – and who has been on the receiving end of mountains of abuse down the years – suddenly quits because someone said something

uncomplimentary about him. Might not this be a good example of Clean Heels? Perhaps, Johnson never really wanted to lead the exit campaign and never thought it would win; indeed, he even began to write columns for the *Telegraph* that subsequently became known as Brexit-lite so radical were they in trying to reverse the consequences of Brexit. But, having assessed the uncertainty and potential crisis then facing the country, he desperately needed a face-saving scheme to allow him to walk away; enter Gove. What Gove's 'treachery' did was allow Johnson to wash his hands of all responsibility for any potential problems that were likely as a consequence of the vote. Of course, this was actually a difficult decision to make because Johnson has always sought high office and now he was walking away but, surely, if he left as a martyr to the cause he would be protected from any fall out and be in a position to return when the fall out had stopped? Michael Heseltine was never going to allow him to do that. As he said of Johnson,

He has ripped the Tory party apart, he has created the greatest constitutional crisis in peacetime in my life... He has knocked billions off the value of the savings of the British people... a general who marches his army to the sound of the guns and the moment he sees the battleground he abandons it... The pain of it will be felt by all of us and, if it doesn't get resolved shortly, by a generation to come yet. (quoted *Guardian*, 30 June 2016)

Or as Tim Farron, leader of the Liberal Democrats put it, Johnson was simply playing by the Bullingdon Club rules (a drinking club at Oxford University frequented by elite male students): you break something, then somebody else has to fix it. On the same day, Johnson compounded his Clean Heels' reputation by writing a column in the *Telegraph* headlined 'Boris demands post-Brexit plan'.

And then along came the new Prime Minister with an offer he could not refuse – Foreign Secretary – a position that sent shock waves though the country and indeed the world. We will return to this when we look at Theresa May below.

Tony Blair: Major Clean Heels/minor *Mea Culpa*

Tony Blair remains something of an enigma to many people outside the UK: how could a politician who achieved what no other Labour leader has ever done – three consecutive victorious general elections – who initiated Cool Britannia, and did so much to modernise the party and the country, end up as such a figure of public venom? The answer is simple: Iraq. Iraq was the anvil that not only destroyed that country, and triggered a series of events in the Middle East that are still playing out, but internally broke the promise of the centre-left and led to a general feeling of betrayal amongst many, though by no means all, Labour Party stalwarts. That complexity of response is also compounded by the dual thread of his defence: a Major Clean Heels response – I should have known what would happen but I am not responsible for the subsequent anarchy – with a Minor *Mea Culpa* – sorry, mistakes were made (some even by me).

On 15 February 2003, around one million people marched through London in a vain attempt to stop the slide to war that eventually killed around 251,000 people (including 180,000 civilians and 179 UK service personnel).³ Since the invasion in March 2003 Iraq, according to Jeremy Bowen (2016: 5), 'has not had a single day of peace'.

Thirteen years later, the 2.6 million word Chilcot Report (having been instigated by Gordon Brown, Blair's successor as Prime Minister in 2009) provided a damning review of the war and Blair's part in it. It had been, according to Blair, 'the hardest, most

momentous, most agonising decision I took in ten years as British Prime Minister'. This sounds like a Dirty Hands response on first blush but that is quickly compounded by a subsequent claim that 'I believe we made the right decision and the world is better and safer' because although he acted in 'good faith' (note the irony here) the data about Saddam Hussein having weapons of mass destruction turned out to be false, but British soldiers did not die in vain. But, and here is the switch from Dirty Hands to Clean Heels, a private note from Blair to Bush on 28 July 2002, two months before the now discredited dossier on weapons of mass destruction was published on 24 September 2002 by the British Government, suggested to Bush that 'I will be with you, whatever'. As Chilcot concluded, 'We have concluded that the UK chose to join the invasion of Iraq before the peaceful options for disarmament had been exhausted. Military action at that time was not a last resort'. Besides this fabrication of the need to invade at this time, the report also concluded that, despite warnings – especially from Colin Powell who warned in September 2002 of 'a terrible bloodletting, after Saddam' – that the preparation for the post-conflict was woeful, and that Blair deliberately exaggerated the threat from Saddam Hussein. Indeed, in January 2003 (two months before the invasion), Blair himself wrote to Bush saying that 'the biggest risk we face is internecine fighting between all the rival groups, religions, tribes etc., in Iraq when the military strike destabilizes the regime' (Quotes from Chilcot, 2016: 11).

Added to this cacophony of failures Chilcot concluded that the British military were ill equipped for the war, and the UK did not achieve its own published objectives. As Chilcot concludes: 'Mr Blair did not establish clear ministerial oversight of post-conflict strategy, planning and preparation'. Moreover, the Joint Intelligence Committee reports deny Blair's claim that Isis was a product of Syria not Iraq, while Eliza Mannigham-Buller (then the Director of MI5) had said as early as 2003/2004 that an invasion of Iraq was likely to increase the threat to the UK from terrorism.

It is also worth reiterating that Blair's Christian faith played a role in the justification of the war. As he said in 2006, 'the decision to go to war in Iraq would ultimately be judged by God' (quoted Wynne-Jones (2009) *Daily Telegraph*, 23 May). This, one might assume, is another Dirty Hands response, but Blair also linked the defence of his actions to the 'ongoing global struggle against Islamic terrorism', though it would be difficult to accept that the fall of Saddam had no effect upon the rest of the region that has been engulfed in civil wars ever since. Here, we can see a Clean Heels response being constructed that Blair locked into an argument that the post-war unravelling of order in Iraq could not have been known in advance. This Chilcot specifically denied, suggesting that the poverty of post-war planning made chaos more than likely and certainly not unforeseeable.

In effect, the evidence accumulated and analysed by Chilcot does simply not support the major Clean Heels element of Blair's defence, and the minor *Mea Culpa* aspect (I will take full responsibility for any mistakes without exception or excuse) is inadequate in the face of the death and destruction directly and indirectly related to his decisions, especially given the 11 key moments that Chilcot identified in the two years prior to the invasion when cabinet colleagues should have been involved but were not.

On 2 June 2003, two months after the invasion with Saddam in hiding and anarchy emerging, Blair visited Iraq and wrote to Bush:

The task is absolutely awesome, and I'm not sure we are geared for it. This is worse than rebuilding a country from scratch. We start from a really backward position. In time, it can be sorted. But time counts against us.

But rather than accept an error had been made Blair went on the offensive because Iraq was ‘a test case for how determined we were to confront the threat. My worry now is that the world thinks: well, Iraq was a tough deal, so they won’t try that again. *We have to be absolutely unapologetic*’ (*Guardian*, 7 July 2016; my emphasis). Yet Blair had already fretted – even before the invasion, ‘if it falls apart, everything falls apart in the region’ – so he knew what might happen.

The UK military also had a hand in the debacle, particularly in what Chilcot noted was its inability to speak truth to power. This was compounded by the military ‘can do’ attitude that led to ‘wildly over-optimistic assessments of what was really happening on the ground’ (Quoted *Guardian* 10). ‘At times in Iraq the bearers of bad tidings were not heard by military chiefs or ministers’ – a classic example of what Collinson (2012) calls ‘Prozac Leadership’ where blame culture proliferate and the senior leadership is either unwilling or unable to listen to the concerns from below. They were that military or political optimism was totally misplaced and the war could not be won. So if Tony Blair’s attempt at Clean Heels failed, where has it succeeded recently? Let us consider the case of Nigel Farage.

Nigel Farage: Clean Heels personified

Farage was hugely influential in securing the vote to leave the EU and then on 4 July (10 days after the result of the referendum was announced) uttered the infamous line – ‘I said I wanted my country back ... Now I want my life back’.⁴ Farage resigned (for the third time) from the leadership of UKIP (but not his MEP – Member of the European Parliament – role complete with £83,000 salary plus expenses). Farage first resigned from leadership of UKIP in 2009, to return after the 2010 General Election had revealed the limits of UKIP’s support, and then again in 2015 having failed to win the parliamentary seat of Thanet South for UKIP (though that resignation was limited to four days).

On the morning after the referendum (24 June 2016), Farage managed a perfectly executed Clean Heels responses on British breakfast television (ITV/*Good Morning Britain*) by first rejecting the suggestion that the infamous bus advert – that £350 million pounds a week sent to the EU would go back to the NHS – would actually be fulfilled and then denying any responsibility for it. There is some truth in this – he was indeed ostracised by the official Brexit campaign – but he never pointed out the fallacy of the claim and, having benefitted from the outright lie, promptly denied any responsibility for it. In fact, an Ipsos MORI poll had noted that half the population believed the figure, even though the Institute for Fiscal Studies had concluded that the net effect of leaving the EU would be a deficit of £36bn (Stone, 2016).

Farage was also involved in the controversial advert, ‘Breaking Point’, showing a long line of refugees waiting to enter the UK – although the photo was actually one of refugees entering Slovenia in 2015. Dave Prentis, leader of the UNISON trade union, condemned the UKIP poster as a

blatant attempt to incite racial hatred... This is scaremongering in its most extreme and vile form. Leave campaigners have descended into the gutter with their latest attempt to frighten working people into voting to leave the EU... To pretend that migration to the UK is only about people who are not white is to peddle the racism that has no place in a modern, caring society. That’s why UNISON has complained about this blatant attempt to incite racial hatred and breach UK race laws. (quoted Stewart and Mason, 2016)

On 22 June, six days after Jo Cox (a Labour MP) was murdered by a man shouting ‘Britain First’ (the slogan associated with a far right political movement), Farage said on television that he apologized for the timing of the poster but not the content: ‘I can’t apologize for the truth’. Since it was not a queue of immigrants seeking entry to the UK, it was not the truth, but those proficient in Clean Heels are seldom concerned with the truth. Nor did he seem concerned that the violent rhetoric of the campaign had done anything to encourage physical violence in the streets and he ‘derided the idea that he and his cohorts had gone too far with their infamous “Breaking Point” poster, and “the clear implication that, somehow, a bad atmosphere had been whipped up”’ (quoted in Bland, 2016).

Farage’s appeal to the ‘truth’ as a legitimation for his words is actually a common feature of his political style. On 24 February 2010, he was censured by Buzek, the President of the European Parliament, for behaviour that was ‘inappropriate, unparliamentary and insulting to the dignity of the House’ and docked 10 days expenses. But his characteristic response was that ‘it wasn’t abusive, it was right’ (quoted Long, 2010). Clearly a Clean Heels strategy requires a safe and easy exit route and, as neither a member of the official Brexit campaign, nor a sitting MP in Parliament, his only responsibility was to UKIP – which he resigned from as leader, leaving UKIP to find a replacement and the UK to find a way out of the EU. This duty fell first to the new Prime Minister, Theresa May.

Theresa May: Spectator to Dirty Hands

Theresa May, the British Home Secretary between 2010 and 2016 (and one of the longest serving in that role) was appointed Prime Minister on 13 July 2016 after her rivals for the position within the Conservative Party dropped out. She had played virtually no part in the referendum campaign but had voiced her intention to vote for the Remain campaign. In many ways, this was a politically sophisticated Spectator role: taking a prominent position in either the exit or the remain campaign was risky, but a Remain-lite approach would, as it turned out, leave her with a clear run at the Prime Ministership. Not that May has a reputation for avoiding risk, and her relationships with the police have shown her to be very willing to take a Dirty Hands approach, particularly with the Police Federation (the main staff association). In 2014, she admonished the police:

When you remember the list of recent revelations about police misconduct, it is not enough to mouth platitudes about ‘a few bad apples’. The problem might lie with a minority of officers, but it is still a significant problem, and a problem that needs to be addressed. (Quoted in Robinson, 2014)

But my real concern here is to consider her role as Prime Minister facing a thin Parliamentary majority, a country that had narrowly voted to exit the EU and a group of MPs that were politically divided and potentially rebellious. Her most intriguing decisions were to appoint three Brexit campaigners to the cabinet. Boris Johnson was appointed Foreign Secretary, David Davis was appointed as the minister responsible for exiting the EU, and Andrea Leadsom was appointed as Minister for the Environment. Or as Freedland commented, ‘Think of it as Brexit jobs for Brexit workers’.⁵

Johnson’s appointment was widely regarded as the highest risk. Sir Alan Duncan, appointed by May to be the Minister of State at the Foreign Office and thus Johnson’s deputy, had called his new (Italianate) boss ‘Silvio Berlusconi’ the previous month and

questioned whether Johnson had what it took to be Prime Minister (Hope, 2016). Tim Farron, the Liberal Democrat leader suggested,

Presumably Boris Johnson's first act as Foreign Secretary will be to apologise to the President of the United States, and then the leaders of our European partners . . . At this incredibly important time that will determine Britain's economic and cultural relations with Europe, it is extraordinary that the new Prime Minister has chosen someone whose career is built on making jokes. (Quoted by Mortimer, 2016)

On 21 July, a German reporter asked May 'Why are you putting – to put it in football terms – a player on the pitch who doesn't actually want to play?' quoted by Bulman, 2016). Given the context, the reporter might have also asked why she had put someone who likened the EU project to Hitler's campaign in charge but May fudged the response anyway and moved on. It is, however, a good question and actually embodies two questions: first, why did he accept and second, why did May appoint him? It may well be that – and having almost escaped with his Clean Heels strategy – Johnson realized that self-imposed exile was the equivalent of a living hell for someone as narcissistic as himself, and that the voters and his fellow MPs were wise to his manoeuvring and would still hold him responsible for a Brexit catastrophe. May's motivation seems to have been a Pottery Barn label – you broke it – you own it. This has three elements: first, Johnson is a maverick and a populist maverick loose on the backbenches is infinitely more dangerous than one held tightly to your clutch: as Sun Tzu and Machiavelli allegedly said but never did: 'keep your friends close but your enemies closer'. The second aspect is that if Brexit does lead to economic and political turmoil then Johnson – the chief architect of it all – will share at least some of the blame. Third, for May, this sharing aspect is the most dangerous because if it does go wrong then she will still attract the public's ire for appointing him in the first place. It may well be that whatever happens May will ultimately take responsibility for any catastrophe and in that case she may have judged that it is surely better to have Johnson on side than sniping from the safety of the backbenches.

May has replicated this approach with several other prominent Brexiteers, most notably Andrea Leadsom, and if the logic is sound for Johnson then it surely makes sense to do the same for Leadsom. In sum, the Prime Minister has shifted from her original position in the referendum campaign as a Spectator to one that has positioned herself to cut off Johnson's and Leadsom's Clean Heels by taking up Dirty Hands. If it all goes wrong then the public and the press will surely push her to *Mea Culpa* but, if she is deft enough, she could just avoid this and keep her head.

Conclusion

This article has concerned the antics and activities of four prominent British political leaders in 21 Days in 2016 that saw the UK vote to leave the EU, the Chilcot Report condemn Tony Blair for inadequate planning and poor strategic decision-making in the Iraq War, and Theresa May, only the second woman Prime Minister in the UK, appoint some leading Brexiteers to her first cabinet.

A heuristic frame was constructed to help analyse the decisions that combined concern for the intent, the effect and the responsibility, and this suggested we could consider (at least) four different options: Dirty Hands, where the decision-maker accepts that the intent is purposive, that the effects may be deleterious and the responsibility is accepted; Clean

Heels, when the decision-maker intends the potentially disadvantageous consequences but refuses responsibility by exiting the scene; *Mea Culpa*, where the intent was not to cause problems but, now that they have become manifest, responsibility is accepted; and finally, the Spectator, where no intent, consequences or responsibility is taken nor intended: this barren land contains both armchair generals, ivory tower academics and those simply confused or 'at sea'.

These four approaches, naturally given the fluid nature of the boundaries in a heuristic, are sometimes merged or transited across by various actors and four illustrative examples are used to consider the utility of the model. Johnston tried to inhabit the Clean Heels box until 'brought to heel' by Theresa May's cabinet appointment; Tony Blair combines a minor *Mea Culpa* (yes some aspects of the Iraq war were my fault) with a major Clean Heels (the effects that I was responsible for were beneficial and the problems were nothing to do with me); Nigel Farage, the archetypical Clean Heels ('I've done my best/worst, now I'm out of here, good luck with all those foreigners'); and finally Theresa May, whose Spectator saw her through the referendum with barely a scratch and then proceeded to do her best to make the Brexiteers sort the Brexit on the solid political lines that Machiavelli would no doubt have approved: 'you broke it, you own it'.

The heuristic may prove of value beyond the confines of the 21 days in British politics studied here. It would be interesting to consider whether the cultures of societies plays into this, so that, for example, authoritarian regimes are more likely to engage in Clean Heels when things go wrong than democracies or vice versa given the necessity of maintaining intermittent popular support in the latter. Or whether female leaders sit at a different position on the model than their male counterparts? It may also be of value to compare the fall out of the US Presidential election in November 2016 to that of Brexit in the UK. Finally, we – academics – might reconsider whether being a professional Spectator (an irrelevant 'expert' in the words of Michael Gove {the former British Secretary of State for Education Minister}) has (mis)led us not just into an ivory tower but into a room full of mirrors.

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Notes

1. <https://twitter.com/cshirky/status/756569546522263552>
2. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/may/09/joseffritzl.austria1> (accessed 15 August 2016). Thanks to Dennis Tourish for alerting me to this.
3. Data from the Iraq Body Count, <https://www.iraqbodycount.org/> (accessed 25 July 2016).
4. Readers interested in the twitter storm this provoked could start with Charlotte Church's infamous rant: <https://twitter.com/charlottechurch/status/749895799807541248>
5. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/jul/15/boris-johnson-in-charge-diplomacy-britain-insulted-world> (accessed 15 August 2016). Again, thanks to Dennis Tourish for this quote.

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