

Body Possibilities in Leadership

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Abstract *Bodies and bodily performances – including physical stature, features, stance, gestures and voice – are central, yet ignored, elements in the accomplishment of leadership. In this article I offer some reasons for this neglect and attempt to redress it. My focus here is the bodily practices of two Australian leaders – the Victorian Chief Commissioner of Police, Christine Nixon and Chris Sarra, a school principal who was ‘Queenslander of the year’ in 2004. In these two ‘profiles’ I explore the way their bodies and body performances in leadership were important dimensions in bringing about radical change in moribund systems. Their ‘different’ body performances – a woman police commissioner and a high-profile Aboriginal principal – were also subject to regulation by the wider systems of which they are a part. This exploration reveals bodies as powerful sites in the construction of subversive leadership and new leadership knowledge.*

Keywords bodies; embodied; leadership; performance; physicality

Introduction

Leadership is a bodily practice, a physical performance in addition to a triumph of mental or motivational mastery. Though leadership works at visceral and sensual levels, activating appetites and desires, this fact has been largely overlooked in most business writing about leadership.

In this article, I offer some reasons for the taboo about leadership bodies, making the case that leadership, as a field of study, is distinctively resistant to bodies being revealed. Drawing on two case studies of Australian leaders, the article aims to embody – and change – our ways of ‘knowing’ leadership. The case studies are of Chris Sarra, an Aboriginal school principal and Christine Nixon, Victoria’s Chief Police Commissioner. Body theorizing (Butler, 1993) shows us that all bodies are gendered and racialized, it is just that some bodies have the privilege of invisibility. Gender and race are made explicit in the embodied leadership accounts I give here.

In the way I have written this article, I am seeking to hold bodies, in their fleshy version, prominent, and to focus on bodies as possibilities, rather than as constraints. Since the early 1990s, there has been an explosion of interest in bodies (Scott & Morgan, 1993) and there is now a substantial scholarship on bodies, gendered bodies and bodies in organizations. In much of this work, with important exceptions, bodies disappear under the weight of theorizing. They often become instruments and I want

to try to avoid that here. If the article seems ‘light’ on theory and heavy on example, it reflects that decision rather than an accident, though the execution of this intent may be very imperfect.

A good deal of research on bodies also shows how people are trapped in bodily performances by wider relations of power and discourse. They are played out in gender regimes (appropriately masculine and feminine performances), class-based assumptions (shopfloor versus managerial masculine performances), and around socially and culturally constructed taboos. This important work prefaces our capacity to understand what is going on when people inhabit and display their bodies in organizational settings. Yet another important part of the ‘body story’ is where there is disruption, and contestation, resistance and experimentation in what sometimes seems an implacable regime of body control. In focusing on bodies as possibilities, rather than as simply inscribed upon, I am following poststructural interest in the way individual embodied practices interrupt systemic power. Further, and in contrast to many accounts of leadership where leaders are seen as reinforcing systemic values, Christine and Chris sit in more complex relation to the systems they are charged with leading. They are both interested in radical change and look beyond their institutions to engage with wider communities in social, not just institutional, change. In both cases, embodied leadership practices challenge assumptions and norms.

I am seeking then not to ‘top up’ our knowledge of good leadership practice with some hints about body work or better body language. As Game (1991, quoted in Scott & Morgan, 1993: 4) argues, ‘we know with our bodies’ and I am keen to destabilize what we think we ‘know’ about leadership and provoke new understandings.

A developing interest in bodies

Immersing myself in the leadership literature over the last decade or so, I have grown disaffected. The bulk of books are righteous and banal, journal articles offer tediously empirical tests of little consequence. Much writing colludes with the lionization of leadership as a normative performance. Research behaves as if leadership was degendered and disembodied. The infatuation with transformational and inspiring leadership offers little consolation in its tired references to vision and charisma. As Bennis and Nanus (1985: 4) have admitted, ‘never have so many laboured so long to say so little’.

This inertness is in sharp contrast to my observations about what is often going on when people are doing or being instructed in the doing of leadership. Here, there is performance, frequently seduction (Sinclair, 2005). The accomplishment of leadership is often highly dramatic and full-bodied; there is intimacy, titillation, sometimes mystique. The bodies of followers or audiences are central too in the accomplishment of leadership. Power relations are mapped onto bodies (Haraway, 1990), then enacted in intricate but largely unconscious norms which govern physical distance or accessibility (Collinson, 2005) and physical relations such as deference, worship, revulsion and attraction.

Think of the scenes of many AGMs. The board sits on a stage elevated in a ballroom and magnified in a giant screen above – props designed to enlarge leadership figures to God-like proportions. Assaults are made on all the senses with choreographed sound clips which fanfare, video clips which dazzle. Board members

are suited, faceless and with the exception of the chair, speechless. In contrast are the shareholders, struggling up to the portable microphone, often decrepit and wizened, vainly and gamely seeking to have their grievances heard against an imperious gladiatorial gang. Even though the thumbs don't go down, the result of this physical performance is similar.

Think also about the impeccably crafted physical performances of management gurus (Jackson, 2001), now increasingly 'beamed into' conferences and conventions, magnified with their message twentyfold. Think about the security arrangements that are now commonplace and surround the lowliest of leaders. Only those on the trusted inner circle are blessed with the talisman electronic pass for entrance. In other situations, such passes dangle from necks or trouser tops as physical branding, condemning the wearers to company identification.

There is the bravura, feats of monumental endurance and withholding to seduction that are recurring features of accounts of corporate leadership. Like Odysseus resolutely returning to Penelope (strapped to the mast of the strategic mission and not being diverted by less heroic ventures of love or lust), leaders are adulated for their very capacity to be single-minded, invincible and immortal. In these examples and many others, the body is a powerful player in the construction of leadership as God-like, resolute and often to be feared because of apparent claims to conquer mortality.

So, why, in the face of this palpable evidence, has leadership writing largely ignored bodies? I want to suggest that leadership writing is strongly, perhaps uniquely, resistant to attending to, and allowing for, the body. Leadership research has made an investment in the idea of leaders being 'above other men' (Sinclair, 1998). Leaders are regularly portrayed as able to defy their bodies in what they do, in being able to be beyond bodies. Thus a recent English leader maintained that a capacity to master your own body (by eating sparingly and running in marathons) was evidence of a capacity to master or take charge of others.

Leadership is accomplished partially via establishing a hierarchy of body masculinities. In the Australian context, there are body-saturated rituals in which executives invite big clients to attend tennis and football matches. Here they sit in air-conditioned and elevated corporate 'boxes' drinking champagne while watching 'lower' bodies slug it out. New recruits into industries such as management consulting and investment banking are selected and rewarded at least partially on bodily norms of beauty and athleticism, legitimized as evidence of people's capacity to work the long hours that are 'necessary'. Bodies become sites in the fierce competition for designation as 'hi po' (or high potential for leadership). For example, in McDowell's (1997: 169) study, financial traders learn to exhibit a 'performance of youthful virility', charged with 'high testosterone' and evidenced by states of *deshabillé*.

While overt norms of bodily display are common in junior managerial roles, leaders more often display mastery through a subordination and denial of the body. There is also a privatization of bodies when executives are signed up to personal trainers, coaches and elite gym memberships. These bodies are not on public display but held in confidence, the mastered body is presented in its suppression.

Yet this leadership ideal of physical mastery is also a prison. Executives admit that they are driven to extraordinary lengths to maintain their fitness and the illusion of impregnability. Leaders who are seen as physically weak or frail – and we witness

this in the ‘spin’ that accompanies any illness or ailments among political leaders – become suspect in leadership terms. One director confided that a board had been seriously occupied with the question of whether to get an executive’s beard shaved off because it conveyed untrustworthiness (Roberts et al., 2005). Body management and control readily become obsessions in a society culturally preoccupied with the quest for perfect bodies and technically able to gratify with age-defying fixes. Leaders, their minders and the people who write about leadership have an interest in ignoring the body, and elevating ‘mental mastery’, in an effort to ward off the dreadful truth that we are all – leaders and followers alike – made of the same stuff, physically indistinguishable bundles of tissue and bone.

Leadership as a field of study marginalizes the kind of inspection that focuses on structural causes or limitations and privileges the great heroic tale. Calls for leadership need to be read as belonging to periods of history and reflective of dominant political ideologies (Czarniawska-Joerges and Wolff, 1991; Sinclair, 1990). The revival of interest in leadership, which has occurred since the early 1980s and been dominated by American research, is not neutral but reflects the economic agenda, cultural preoccupations and insecurities of that nation, with its belief in the power of individualism and conquest. The way in which the leadership industry has gained power and the ways the discourse of leadership have been constructed are products of these historical forces. As discourse scholars predict, the construct and the discourse shaped to elucidate the construct work hand in hand here. Leadership and leadership scholarship have a vested interest in constructing leadership as a bold individual, agentic and disembodied performance.

As further evidence of the proposition that bodies have been actively shut out of leadership, we can refer to the more extensive body theorizing that has occurred in management theory in the last decade or so, preceded in sociology and feminism (see Casey, 2000; Scott & Morgan, 1993; Turner, 1984). Bodies began to be discussed extensively in feminist scholarship during the 1980s and 1990s (Butler, 1993; Gatens, 1996; Grosz, 1994), followed by interest in bodies in pedagogy (Gallop, 1995, 1997; Luke & Gore, 1992; McWilliam, 1996). This work was generally focused on women’s bodies and the exploitation that presumed women and their bodies were one and the same. At the same time bodies began to make their way into studies of gender and organizations (Acker, 1990; Hassard et al., 2000). Again, while most early work was focused on the constraints and discipline exercised on women’s bodies in the workplace, studies of masculinities also brought male bodies into the organizational studies gaze (Collinson, 1992; Connell, 1995). The masculinities in management literature has mapped some of the ways leadership behaviour becomes invisibly saturated with bodily performances (Collinson & Hearn, 1996; Kerfoot & Knights, 1996; McDowell, 1997; Sinclair, 1998). However, turning to senior levels of organizations, the closer one gets to leadership, the more one is likely to escape scrutiny as a body. If one is male, powerful and senior, then one is more likely to be portrayed as bodiless – and this is precisely the point.

Intrigued by this taboo around leadership bodies, and turning to the burgeoning body literature, I faced a different problem, indeed a paradox. As feminists and post-structuralists (including ‘heavyweights’ such as Foucault) asserted the body’s place, flesh often vanished under theory’s crushing heavy-handedness. Turner made a similar observation in 1984, yet we don’t seem to have got any better at writing about bodies

in ways that hold true to their presence and their complex effects. With some exceptions,¹ the more the body has been talked about, the more ‘bodiless’ it has become. Theorizing has got hold of the body and rendered it to within an inch of its life leaving it inert and parched, in a corner of poststructural theory. The fleshy, sensual body is dissipated as ‘subjectively dissolved figments of discourse’ (Casey, 2000: 66).

Defining bodies and body work in leadership

So, my desire here, in the accounts of the two leaders that follow, is to keep bodies front and centre. This is hard to do with words – I’d rather they could be materialized from the page, but I will try. My focus of attention is physical bodies, the movements they make and voices which emanate from them, as well as representations of those bodies. I include stature, stance and posture, voice, gestures, appearance and costume.

Focusing on the physical version of bodies here does not mean that I see bodies as objective, static facts of immutable biology or physiology. Bodies cannot be understood outside of the social context, culture and history. They are seen, appraised and responded to according to pre-existing cultural norms, institutional practices and gender and racial regimes. The bodies of the two leaders here are instantly inscribed by race and gender. I seek to acknowledge the ways gendered and racialized bodies are read, but not make this the central story. Complexities of interpretation should not strangle us from saying something about leaders and bodily practice that is rooted in what we can see, feel and experience.

The leadership of Sarra and Nixon is also much wider than the fragments of body work described here.² However, I want to show that the body practices of both leaders was an important part of what they did to introduce change in moribund systems. Both leaders in very different ways were able to explore a destabilization of bodily expectations that accompanied them in their institutions. They were able – part consciously, part unconsciously – to model a way of being in their bodies that transgressed and subverted norms and initiated significant systemic change. Nixon and Sarra have also been disciplined and pressured to move back into more conventional body spaces.

The accounts that follow arose from my general research on leadership. I know Christine Nixon well and have been working with her since 2002, not long after she took the job as Police Commissioner. I have spent over three weeks ‘shadowing’ her at various times, have conducted at least three formal 90-minute interviews and have had many discussions with her. When I approached her to do some work on her leadership, she was very comfortable with its open-ended nature – a privileged position for a researcher! I admire her and this admiration has only increased as I have watched her in pressured circumstances. I have sought to provide a ‘rounded’ account of her leadership here and elsewhere, wanting to avoid lists of responsibilities (for ‘men, money and machines’) or achievements against performance measures. My desire to ‘write’ Nixon’s leadership differently has itself been tricky because in some ways my account (including its talk of bodies) may be read as reifying gender stereotypes and discounting her very substantial achievements, which clearly I want to avoid.

I have also been watching Chris Sarra for several years, though I have never met

him in person. I have followed his career, talked to people who know him, watched videos of him and communicated with him by email. I have also been engaged in a related research project of Aboriginal leadership, involving interviews with Indigenous leaders. My very different relationship with Chris may well reflect itself in this account.

Why these two leaders? Both called Chris, they seem on the 'face' of it very different. Among the leaders I research, however, they seem to show important things about embodied leadership. As mentioned earlier, I have had an interest in bodies – women's and men's – for some years, and I have been experimenting more and more with embodying leadership in different ways myself (Sinclair, 2005). As I studied and wrote case studies about Sarra and Nixon, their body work emerged as important but was hard to write about. I was also intrigued by the ways in which their gender (in the case of Nixon) and race (in the case of Sarra) seemed to free a different kind of bodily practice which was also then subject to discipline and regulation by the systems (or bodies) of which they were a part. There was a sense that neither had internalized conventional scripts about their bodies and both were creating a less self-regulated body practice as they went along. To draw on poststructural ideas which recognize the ways individuals self-discipline in identity regulation (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Collinson, 2003), these leaders occupied spaces between highly regulated systems. Despite their visibility, neither was completely compliant to, or captive of, the systems of which they were a part. Sarra and Nixon are rich leadership examples because their experiences enable exploration of these tensions: between bodies as sites of risk taking and conformity; between systemic context and agency.

Chris Sarra

Chris Sarra was appointed principal of the primary school in the remote Aboriginal town of Cherbourg, three hours' drive north west of Brisbane, Queensland, in August 1998. Sarra had previously worked as a high school teacher, university lecturer and in a teacher support role for Education Queensland, the body which administers schools in the state. There were no other applicants for the job.

Cherbourg is a small Aboriginal settlement of less than 3000 people which has considerable social problems and high unemployment rates. Its primary school was performing badly on almost every measure including academic performance, rates of attendance and transitions to high school. Sarra, whose mother is Aboriginal, had some ideas about how to run a school in an Aboriginal community and wanted to try them in practice.

Aboriginal education in general is in a parlous state in Australia with educational outcomes far worse than in notionally third world countries. These educational conditions are, in turn, part of a complex picture of institutionalized discrimination. Aboriginal men and women die, on average, at least 20 years earlier than their white counterparts and the gap between black and white life expectancy is not closing. The rate of infant mortality is two to three times higher among Aboriginal communities. The overall rate of Indigenous unemployment at 26 per cent is twice that of non-Indigenous populations, and the average Aboriginal income is, on an optimistic estimate, around 55 per cent of its average white counterpart. While 73 per cent of

white teenagers finish Year 12 at school, only 32 per cent of Aboriginal children do and while 10 per cent of the non-Indigenous population have university degrees, 2 per cent of the Aboriginal population graduate from university. According to the 1998 prison census, one in five people incarcerated were Aboriginal despite Aboriginals being only 2 per cent of the total population and Indigenous youth are 22 times more likely to be incarcerated than non-Indigenous.

Any leader seeking to make improvements in these conditions is tackling enormous and endemic issues. But because they are only 2 per cent of the population, Aboriginal people who put themselves forward are usually swamped with tasks and requests. They find themselves quickly burnt out by the combination of high visibility and overburdening. They are not just doing their jobs (and they are usually the first Aboriginal to occupy particular positions such as parliamentarian, judge and so on), they are seen to be, and asked to be, spokespeople, representatives and agents of reform in undoing centuries of history. An additional complexity is that Aboriginal people are typically very careful about which ‘country’ (area of land within Australia) or group on whose behalf they speak. White institutional practices which seek a single representative to act for Aboriginal interests thus routinely make assumptions about leadership that are untenable for many Indigenous people.

A word about Sarra himself

Sarra is the youngest child in a big family. His father was of Italian origin and his mother was from a local Aboriginal family. Sarra had nine older brothers and sisters, none of whom had gone to university. He was a talented football player and played in the school team and with a Bundaberg (Queensland provincial city) team as well: ‘they were happy to have me because I was good at sport but no one was saying you’re pretty smart, you could do better’. He completed Year 12 with an average score on his final exams. His physicality and success as a footballer had been an initial passport to confidence but he also found himself stereotyped by his physical prowess. He wasn’t invited to extend himself academically and scraped into university. It didn’t take Chris long, though, to realize that the stereotyping he had experienced in his own schooling was also a wider educational issue. At 18, when completing his Diploma in Teaching, Sarra describes:

It came as a bit of a shock to see just how much I had been sold short by the school . . . and how I had sold myself short as a result of subscribing to other people’s limited perception of who I was and what I could do . . . from then on I became determined to make other children . . . see the realities that surrounded us.

It was this understanding of the oppressive process through which young Aboriginals are stereotyped as bodies without brains (athletes, runners, football players, boxers), and his resolve to do something about it, that led on to his PhD looking at Aboriginal education and identity.

His memories of the damage done by his own lack of confidence greeted him at Cherbourg. The situation was embarrassing: ‘when it came time for children to participate in the Years 3, 5 and 7 tests for literacy and numeracy, most would jack up and walk out of the room, or not bother to turn up for school in the first place . . .

The Year 7 students left for high school like lambs to the slaughter, with no idea about how to conduct themselves in a regular classroom and nowhere near the personal skills, or the literacy or numeracy skills to survive', said Sarra.

In this example and elsewhere, Sarra's use of physical imagery is powerful and carries deep personal resonance. He has a commanding presence and in many of the leadership challenges he describes, his physical power and presence are central to what he does. In the role of principal

there are a lot of personalities to manage. Sometimes it makes you feel like a football coach. Cruising around the school, making sure everything is on track, keeping morale up. You don't feel like you're doing really hard work, but it's crucial. I'm not on the front line, but I need to be there to back the teachers up in the classrooms. They see me as a leader to turn to when they're frustrated or having trouble with parents. I've had parents say to teachers, 'If you pick on my kid again, I'll come in to school and bash you'. I've said we're not going to put up with that. They need to know I'm there backing them up.

A big and imposing physique is undercut by a generally gentle voice and informal tone. He talks with frequent colloquialisms – some of them distinctively Aboriginal – and without educational or managerial jargon.

Sarra set about changing what was happening at Cherbourg in both a deeply thoughtful and embodied way. One of his first problems was literally one of bodies – or their absence. Absenteeism was rife at the school and Sarra set about making the school a place where children would want to come and stay for the whole day (rather than go fishing). In morning assembly with the kids sitting around on the floor, Sarra literally yells good morning to the kids and they yell back – as if affirming with the loudness of their voices the importance of their presence. He made sure the school was cleaned up and addressed the vandalism problem so that it became a physically attractive place to be. This stands out in a community where many houses are in appalling physical condition and there is a general air of neglect.

In his interaction with the children, there is a lot of physical contact and acknowledgement of physical needs. He plays football at break times and worries about the little kids still milling about the school when it's dinner time and starting to get cold. He enacts physical authority – when a student is congratulated for special performance at assembly, Sarra lifts them up and holds them across his shoulders. In a very different physical performance he sits on the ground outside the classroom, joking with a group of young girls.

In terms of motivating, Sarra has adopted approaches which focus on physical well-being. Meetings in the staff room occur around food. Instead of penalizing absences from school, Sarra started rewarding kids who turned up with treats to eat. The class with the lowest number of absences would win an iceblock and then, at the end of the term, if they had missed five days or less, they would go to McDonald's.

Central to Sarra's approach was the articulation of a new vision for the school: 'Strong and Smart'. He says he chose the words 'strong and smart' because he was deliberately trying to tie these notions with being Aboriginal and being at Cherbourg State School. 'Strong' bodies are positioned first, alongside and not subordinate to 'smart', in a way that is hard to imagine being articulated in a white school. Yet Sarra has been studiously careful to avoid the stereotyping into physicality that he

experienced as a young Aboriginal. He has worked hard, for example, to ensure that Cherbourg children, in spite of physical isolation, are as electronically literate as any children in more privileged parts of Queensland. He has also appealed to the children's intellect, repeating that education will enable them to go on to do what they want in life. The 'strong and smart' vision and a jingle invented at Cherbourg is repeated often in public forums.

Sarra's physically visible and literally 'hands on' style extends to an Indigenous approach to disciplining called 'growling'. It was this style of disciplining that created problems in 2004, when Sarra was the subject of a complaint to Education Queensland. He was accused of grabbing and roughly treating two students at the school. The Australian newspapers and several television news stations covered the complaint because of Sarra's high profile as Queenslander of the Year, a much publicized accolade which honours a person from Queensland who has made a significant contribution to public life. Sarra says:

I guess I had a choice. I could increase the intensity of their reprimand, or I could suspend them for six weeks, and I hate suspending children from school. So I grabbed them from outside the classroom, took them in, grabbed them by the arm, took them inside the classroom in front of the others. I growled them. What that means is I raised my voice at them. I went off, saying, 'we're not going to tolerate this from you. Other children here are working hard. Why should you be any different?' As I'm saying this, I'm banging my fist on the desk and the wall because I deliberately wanted to create a scene to increase the intensity of it all. If they played up in class and stopped other children from learning, I growled at them . . . or I would go and see their parents and say, 'look, your kid's playing up. We're trying to change where we're going with the school, we need your help'.

Four of the seven complaints about Sarra were upheld by Education Queensland. He has made a commitment not to take this approach to disciplining students again.

Sarra sees that his approach to leadership is firmly rooted in his Aboriginal identity. His values have encouraged a respect for the community and its elders and a conviction that he couldn't be a principal of the school in isolation from its community. Indeed, implicit in many of the changes Sarra has made is a very different model of how a school fits within a community. By supporting and involving the community, he has strengthened the school: 'one thing I know for certain is that I will always be an Aboriginal person who is the principal of a school. I will never be a white person. I will always exercise and value Aboriginal approaches to doing things'.

At the same time, Sarra has also been careful not to position himself as a Cherbourg community leader because this brings its own expectations and problems: 'I'm from Bundaberg, not Cherbourg, which means something. There's something different about being brought up on the mission. And that's something I can never pretend to understand fully'.

Learning from Sarra's leadership – risks and opportunities

After six years under Sarra's leadership, performance at Cherbourg State School had improved dramatically. Vandalism at the school had diminished to about one-fiftieth of the level it was at when he arrived. Absenteeism was now below the state average. Academic performance had increased and student numbers at the school were rising. Sarra's work was being recognized and rewarded in the wider system. The school was being considered for an expansion plan which would see it being equipped to educate students beyond its current Grade 7 capacity up to Grade 9. In 2004 Sarra's success at Cherbourg was recognized in his being made 'Queenslander of the Year'. At the start of 2005 Sarra's leadership achievements were further recognized when he was asked to become Director of a new Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Leadership, designed to train teachers throughout Queensland in working with Aboriginal communities for better educational outcomes.

In Sarra and Cherbourg School is an example of leadership where physicality and concern about bodies is a central part. It does not exclude other aspects of achievement or well-being, but bodies – his own and others – are central to the vision Sarra articulates, how he engages children, parents and the community in change and the 'outcomes' then achieved.

What can we learn? At its most basic Sarra's story reminds us about the value of being attentive to and caring for the whole embodied person. This lesson is particularly powerful in a system where the neglect of the physical (in bodies and in physical surroundings) has become normalized – where alcoholism and domestic violence is routine, where vandalism and absenteeism are expected.

The account also shows the value of drawing on less conventional but culturally resonant methods of creating connection. Sarra is someone who trusts his knowledge and instincts about what a group needs and trusts himself to act on those beliefs despite attack from Aboriginal and white critics and the knowledge that these methods contravene conventional educational wisdom. His firm self-identification of himself as Aboriginal first, principal second, as always following Aboriginal ways of doing things, presents itself as an indivisible leadership package – head, heart, body, spirit, family, race and culture. Even if one allows for the tensions that would likely emerge in leadership practice, it is not a leadership that is bifurcated by home–work dichotomies or massaged into multiple identities for different constituencies.

His style has also created risks for him. It has provided ammunition for critics within the Aboriginal and white Australian communities. Aboriginal communities typically have very clearly prescribed leadership responsibilities and leaders of any kind will always be very careful to delineate for whom they speak – which tribe or region or dialect and which subgroup (family, gender) of that tribe. It is a mark of respect and tradition to do this which comes across as almost self-effacing among more openly assertive and boastful whites. It also means that any Aboriginal who assumes responsibility comes under scrutiny and is vulnerable to criticism by other Aboriginals. Sarra describes it with a quintessentially Queensland metaphor of mudcrabs:

I guess it would have been naïve of me to think that I could win such an accolade like Queenslander of the Year and enjoy such a great honeymoon with the media and everything would be great. It's probably naïve of me to think that

there wouldn't be someone out there to try to cut me down because in some ways its part of black fellas being crabs in the bucket, and (they've) got to pull each other down. There were questions about how I disciplined students and whether or not I was doing the right thing. And it just kind of blew up into a frenzy.

Sarra's size, physical confidence, masculine and racial identity create a charisma that is widely respected. But is it replicable and does this matter? Previous principals of Cherbourg had been white women: generally regarded as 'well meaning' but ineffectual. In his new role as Director of the Institute, Sarra will be under pressure to generalize and extrapolate from his experience – to distil, professionalize and impart knowledge about leadership that is extracted from identity and context. The processes that legitimize Sarra's leadership knowledge inevitably will change its form and character.

The very distinctiveness of Sarra's approach to leadership invites the criticism, marginalization and romanticization that these approaches are fine for an Aboriginal school but wouldn't work anywhere else. Physicality and body work suits the 'special needs' of Aboriginal education. Indeed it is hard to imagine most white principals of suburban Australian schools sitting in the dust of the school ground chatting to the kids. But in the very act of describing Sarra's leadership as bodily, we may risk being seen to support racial stereotypes of Aboriginals as bodies without brains.

Christine Nixon

Christine Nixon was appointed Chief Commissioner of Victoria Police in 2001. She was the first female Australian police chief (and indeed there are very few internationally), she was young (at 48) and she was an outsider (having spent her career until then in the New South Wales police). When she was appointed by a relatively new and reforming Labour State government, she faced many obstacles: inside the tradition-bound police force and in its heavily unionized workforce, and within political and bureaucratic quarters as well. She took on responsibility for one of the largest police forces in the world, with 12,800 personnel, over 380 police stations and annual expenditure of Australian \$1.2 billion.

Virtually from the start of my work with Christine, I had a strong feeling that body work – Nixon's own and opening up the body of the force – was an important part of this story. Boundaries are very tight in police work: uniforms, titles and work demarcations all preserve a defensive hierarchy. Because the police are an emergency service there is a propensity to be rigid about procedures: human lives are often at stake, discipline has to be tight, there is no room for individual discretion or flexibility. But these protocols – some explicit, many tacit – are sacred cows and have produced a high degree of bureaucratization that is dysfunctional in the changing world of police work. Domestic violence, child protection work and cracking very sophisticated drug rings require police forces to be closer to their communities, to build relationships and to not install themselves behind dark glasses and in police cars.

Christine's work with bodies has broken down boundaries such as a sharp separation between them (community) and us; between uniformed and non-uniformed police; habits of rule by instilling fear, hierarchy as the way people progressed.

Because her own body literally doesn't 'fit' the uniform, there has been a relaxation on some fronts, just as she has also tightened controls on others, such as holding regional commanders to account for their performance against budget. There is greater relaxation, flexibility and tolerance on some fronts and a tightening on others.

How Nixon presents: opening up, being accessible and informal

Meeting or watching Christine, she looks firmly grounded, standing squarely, square in shape, particularly in uniform. She is not intimidating and has an open, welcoming face which is remarkably unlined. Her expression is one of friendly interest and audiences sometimes interpret these bodily features as evidence of softness, maternal indulgence, everyone's favourite aunt. Sceptics – inside and outside of the police – have doubted that she was 'tough enough' for the job. Christine rarely explicitly counters the stereotype, but people, especially senior people, don't 'get away with much'.

I had met with and done work with preceding police commissioners, who though deemed to be effective, had stayed behind vast oak desks, in cavernous wooden panelled offices, on the top floor of tall buildings and behind three or four security checks. Visiting Christine (she is called that rather than the cumbersome Ma'am by her staff) is easy by comparison. Her relationship with her support staff is collegial. All the doors surrounding her office and including her own are open and people come in and out. Once when I was there a tough senior detective was hovering and waiting to show Christine a ring he had made for his wife for their 30th wedding anniversary. She is disarmingly frank and not just in private. On her relationship with government she says, 'I don't want to ride around in police cars with pollies'.

Because Nixon comes across as informal and relaxed, she puts people at ease. They confide in her, giving her a high level of 'intelligence' about the organization. Her friendliness disarms and the police don't close ranks in the way they once did although there are sometimes quips about the amount she finds out.

The physical openness created in police headquarters has also been mirrored in an opening up of the force to outsiders. A year into the job, Nixon set about restructuring the senior ranks. Many senior officers, who had spent their whole lives in the force and never applied for a job, were required to do so. And the selection panel consisted of outsiders with only a few police. Several of those appointed as new members of the management team were outsiders – a practice that had previously been unheard of.

In 2004, when Nixon was weathering a lot of criticism over police corruption and a series of underworld murders, there were calls for a Royal Commission and she arranged for experts from around the world to come and discuss the issues. As part of this she also invited journalists, including her most vociferous critics, to spend a day discussing the problem. The approach of opening up to one's critics and giving them as much information as possible was remarkable not only for itself, but for how different it was to traditional police caution and tightly controlled information.

First actions: being out and about, visiting communities, police stations and an open email policy

Once appointed and among her first actions, Christine embarked on an intensive process of consultation. She talked and listened to just about anyone who asked – from high-profile business breakfasts to Country Women’s Association afternoon teas in remote country towns. Within the police, she talked individually with the top 60 officers, consulted with over 3500 members and targeted the toughest and most difficult local police stations to do ‘whiteboard exercises. Tell me what your concerns are’.

This process of intensive consultation looks so sensible as to be obvious, but it was remarkable in the police context. Remoteness had been written into her predecessors’ job description: ‘there was actually a rule that said (to the members) you’re not allowed to write to the Chief Commissioner’. She introduced an open email policy where any member of the force could email her with comments, complaints and requests and receive a response from her. After initial tentativeness, she now receives a large number of emails from all parts of the organization.

Changing uniforms

Police uniform was an issue that quickly emerged from members’ emails as emblematic of the top-down rules that had governed, and disempowered, police members. Nixon tackled this with the characteristic no-nonsense style that echoed her mother’s impatience. She set up a uniform committee with the instruction ‘come on, fix this’:

The members had told me, ‘why do we have to wear things up on the border where it is 40 degrees, why can’t we wear jumpers not jackets?’ And so all of a sudden the uniform became a symbol of freedom for people. They wanted to wear baseball caps, and not have to wear their hat in the corridors . . . So, it was all of these things, and you could actually go, ‘Right!’ Getting rid of those barriers to the point where they could make choices. They were adults after all.

She wanted the members to be more comfortable – and that meant all members, women as well as men – but she also wanted them to have choice and not feel like passive victims of arbitrary decisions in a faceless system. As on a number of other issues, Nixon brushed aside convention, identifying herself firmly with the underdog and not the hierarchy:

I told the Assistant Commissioner, ‘you’ve only got a month, figure it’ . . . so he just went and collected a whole lot of good thinking that had been done by a variety of people over 10 or 15 years previously and just kind of said, ‘let’s do it’. Got a good team of people together, a mixture, which was what he was told to do . . . Did a road show, went around the State . . . ‘what do you think?’ ‘Looks good to us.’ Put it on the intranet so people could see it and analyse it. Went to the manufacturers, put the tenders in. Got on with it.

The unions were a bit miffed because this change – that they had been working on for years – happened very quickly. Publicly she gave them credit. Recently a woman

was elected president of the Police Association. The Secretary, a long-standing head of the police union, went on long service leave. At the time of writing he had not returned.

Nixon has also experimented with uniform herself, regularly leaving the uniform at home and wearing a suit. With these actions she was sending a new message about how uniforms were to be used, not to demarcate and not to intimidate, but to reinforce that police are part of the community, not above them. However, this has been a difficult process because many members of the community are disconcerted and disappointed by Christine without the uniform and she has come under pressure to uniform up.

Affirming diverse bodies and taking a stand on (or marching against) discrimination

Nixon has come face to face with discrimination on many occasions in her career and had been routinely ‘tested’ in the NSW police on the assumption that she wouldn’t last. She is under no illusions about prejudice. Even with the authority of her current role, she knows ‘some people prefer to deal with a six foot eight bloke, not small women like me’.

In March 2002 Christine was invited to attend and march with police in the annual Gay and Lesbian Pride March. She agreed, wanting to support the gay and lesbian police members who had invited her. It generated a media storm and a flood of rumours, including about Nixon’s own sexuality. The front page headline on *The Herald-Sun* was ‘Don’t Bring Your Sydney Ways to Melbourne’ (a reference to Sydney’s Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras). Looking at footage and photographs of Nixon marching along surrounded by gay police, as well as transsexuals and others in police drag, her actions are remarkably subversive. However, she was called to account by many in the force and political opponents. The pressures on Nixon to come back into line were intense and she has not marched again, though she has attended the parade.

Nixon has also been working to change the body, and bodies represented, in Victoria Police. In 2002, and picking up on an existing State Government commitment, a new recruitment campaign was devised and the police were flooded with female and male applicants and older women and men from many age groups, racial and cultural backgrounds were recruited.

Withstanding the weight of expectations

Christine is described as a ‘natural’ when it comes to people, a phrasing often applied to women and one that belies the skill and difficulty of what she does. Her diary is packed with public engagements and she dislikes ‘paperwork’. Her very groundedness attracts those who need her strength and sometimes the weight of their expectation feels precariously high.

It is not coincidental that Christine struggles with her own weight – as if to ensure she is solid enough to take it all on her shoulders. Her account of her first few graduation parades echo the feelings that sometimes creep in when it is assumed that she will fulfil every role, every duty with apparent ease. The expectations that

Christine will do everything, do it successfully, apparently effortlessly and without help also has a downside, for her and the organization:

I went to the Academy (for graduation). It's a bit like an amphitheatre. I get driven on, I was sent a video to see what I was supposed to do. All these people are there, waiting for me, I went 'Oh my God' . . . all waiting for me. Most of the time, I was the one doing the work. God why doesn't anyone else do anything here besides me, salute, give a speech, talk to them, give awards?

I thought to myself, 'God Christine you could fall over here and they'd go "what do we do?"'. It's a symbolic role, a bit of a symbol. But I thought 'Gee this is a lot of weight here'. I do feel it in that physical environment. When you have lots of people who want to talk with you, have their photos taken with you. It just builds occasionally, the expectations.

Christine says that marriage, at 38, changed her. In fact, there were a whole set of factors that came together at that time to help her, in her words, 'lighten up'. While the 1980s was a decade of battling consistent efforts to hound her into obscurity, she survived by taking herself out of the firing line for two periods: first in 1984, on a fellowship to study at the Kennedy School of Government and subsequently, in 1989, with the London Police. These breaks gave Christine respite, but they also marked the start of seeing herself and what she had to offer on a bigger canvas of leadership:

I'd been away lightened up a bit, I didn't have responsibilities. I could just wander around the London Met, none of the 'weight of the world' on me and it was wonderful. A lot of that meant, I just lightened up. I went to shows, concerts and stuff, didn't have to study or do homework. That lovely time of not having to front, be the one who was responsible all the time.

These experiences taught her not only that she didn't have to set such tough standards for herself, but that she could sometimes be a better leader by stepping back and adopting a lighter touch – on herself and others.

But events during 2004, when a series of organized crime figures were murdered in broad daylight was a challenging time for the police and for Christine personally. She has worked hard to delegate and ensure that, when crisis hit, she wasn't the only one to front the media. However, in this case, she felt she had little choice:

The personal stuff was really about having to front it myself. These were very critical issues. In a sense I am not the organized crime person but it was a big organizational issue. My media person said you have to front this, up until that time it hadn't been me . . . as we got closer there was this personal sense of . . . I don't think I ever got afraid but if they were to take me out there would be a whole lot of disorganization in the police that would occur. For a period of time I carried a gun . . . and would have used it. Had my security upped around the place. It wasn't much more than that. People got a bit concerned and so did I.

In these, most difficult, circumstances where her life was clearly at some risk, Christine's way of managing her sense of vulnerability is to be short, clipped and matter-of-fact almost to the point of dismissive. Here she reverts to the voice one

imagines she might have experienced from parents growing up (her father was a NSW policeman who was shot and often at risk): no point complaining, just get on with it.

On almost all commonly used measures of performance, and some less common ones, Nixon has been highly successful. On the basis of her consultations, she set the force four key performance measures: to reduce crime, motor vehicle thefts and road fatalities, and to increase community perceptions of safety. She has achieved on all targets, with crime down 17 per cent, car thefts down 48 per cent, road fatalities equal to 2004 and the lowest since 1959, and an improvement from a target of 91.4 per cent to 91.6 per cent of the community perceiving the environment as safe. Her performance has been rewarded by the government with significant extra resources and increases in police numbers. Nixon also enjoys huge recognition and popularity with the Victorian public.

These examples and quotes from my research show first, just how much body work can be involved in leadership, from meeting people and consultation through to presiding over graduations and managing threats to her life. These physical demands may be one reason why some leaders make themselves scarce. In her own account of these bodily pressures, Nixon uses the physical metaphors of experiencing the weight of expectation and also recognizes moments and opportunities where 'lightening up' is good for herself and for others.

Second, these examples show, as in the case of Chris Sarra, a recognition of the power of bodies as means of change: of using one's own body to make a statement (marching in the gay parade); of freeing up body regimes for others (allowing staff choice and determination in uniforms); of bringing in outside bodies to puncture the overly bounded police brotherhood (changes in senior management team and in recruitment); and in experimenting with looser and more accessible structures and spaces as a means of deflating hierarchy, but perhaps also increasing the robustness of the police body to criticism.

Both Nixon and Sarra have created physical proximity to instigate change (Collinson, 2005), though admittedly sharply delineated within gendered expectations. For Sarra, physical contact, confidence and at times intimidation has been an accepted (though occasionally problematic) means of increasing impact. For Nixon, reducing distance has been in the form of spreading herself widely in the community and being available and willing to listen. Christine's physical performance has been more circumscribed, by the context and factors including her gender, as in her 'giving in' to community expectations that she wear her uniform.

For Nixon, as well as Sarra, an individual capacity to experiment and subvert bodily conventions may have grown out of experiences of being an outsider. Because they were both already 'different', marked as outside the systems they have been intent on changing, their very visibility may have produced extra 'slack'. They were expected to contravene.

Conclusion

Leadership, I argued at the start of the article, has been constructed as an activity of brains without bodies. This construction is not accidental. By elevating leaders as beyond the impermanent bodily matter that constitute them, the interests of leaders

and the people who study them are advanced. Paying attention to bodies then becomes a political act with political consequences.

The two leader profiles in this article have shown that bodies are central to leadership, whether acknowledged or not. Further, individual experimentation with, and subversion of, body norms can act as ways to disrupt and enliven change in moribund systems.

In the cases of these two leaders, an unusual leadership agenda is evident. Already positioned by their gender and race as on the edge of legitimacy, both leaders have shown an appetite for invoking bodies to challenge the status quo and bring about radical change. Neither are part of the conventional leadership repertoire. Both leaders are experiencing pressures to conform and it is possible that their body work will be sidelined in systemically and individually driven processes of legitimization. However this plays out, new and different sides of leadership are made knowable through documenting bodily practices.

I have put Sarra first and Nixon second in this exploration. Nixon does not have the option of producing compelling physical charisma. Hers has been a more subversive process of loosening and permitting, of opening up (her office, her meetings in the community) and encouraging the juxtaposition of formally separated bodies (putting uniformed and non-uniformed police together on task forces). At the same time, the high stakes mean that she could not afford to relax too much, and the permissiveness has been accompanied by selective firming up on issues such as budgetary accountability.

The two examples of embodied leadership explored here – an Aboriginal and a woman – have bodies which are in contrast to most in leadership and already visible and problematic. The selection of these bodies for this article brings risks. In particular, there is the danger that I have reified the very dichotomies I have sought to deconstruct: that white men don't have bodies and women and Aboriginals do. Yet I have sought to show, in the first part of the article, that bodies are present in all leadership performances but we have been encouraged not to notice them. I have also sought to be clear about my purposes in choosing these cases and argued the need to challenge gendered and racialized constructions of leadership.

The risks described, I want to suggest, are counterbalanced by possibilities that emerge from embodying leadership. Leaders – men and women – are embedded in body regimes where certain performances are prescribed and rewarded, others punished. In a fundamental way, it is freeing to simply identify how these regimes operate, rather than being captive inside unspoken requirements – constantly adjusting one's own physical self and performance yet never quite getting it 'right'. A first set of possibilities accrue from this process of mapping the unmapped physical assumptions about leadership.

A second set of possibilities emerge for people doing the leading. In my experience of leadership development, encouraging people to note their bodies and be in their bodies more consciously changes their mindset towards themselves. It can also foster a capacity to read, register and feel compassion for what is going on for others, that is revealed and knowable through bodies. Body awareness anchor's people in the here and now, connecting to present experience, rather than being driven by anxieties about the future or regret for the past. Working with a sense of one's own body is a reminder of mortality and a check on feelings of

invincibility and hubris, which often have destructive consequences for leaders and followers. Finally, the body can be a mediator, influencing a leader's capacity for openness and learning. The body registers feelings. It allows us to take note, for example, of a hunched posture or shallow breath, and make bodily and mental adjustments.

Bodies potentially open up a third set of possibilities for leadership researchers and teachers. The body is personal and political, a reflection of individual and systemic characteristics, both 'active' and 'inscribed' (Pritchard, 2000). Investigating bodies and bodily responses, including our own, opens different ways of knowing leadership.

Notes

1. A comprehensive list is inappropriate here but some of the best body writing appears in edited collections describing empirical research in a range of contexts (see Scott & Morgan, 1993). As a reader, my eye always travels to the spots where people are quoted describing their bodies in work contexts.
2. Fuller descriptions of the leadership actions of both leaders are available in case studies. For Chris Sarra, these are the Cherbourg State School A and B Case available through the Australian and New Zealand School of Government (ANZOG) case library. Material for this profile was originally gathered and compiled into two cases by Tim Watts, whom I also wish to acknowledge. For Christine Nixon, there is a personal profile and a case study of Cultural Revolution soon to be available in the Melbourne Business School Case Library.

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