

# Cyrus the Great and the obedience of the willing

by Lynette Mitchell

# EXTENDED ESSAY SERIES

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A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jonathan Gosling". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large, sweeping flourish at the end of the name.

Prof. Jonathan Gosling  
Director, Centre for Leadership Studies

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## FOREWORD

The paper that follows was presented to the 2007/08 seminar series at the Centre for Leadership Studies, University of Exeter. The research interests at the Centre are focussed on contemporary leadership challenges and the theoretical and conceptual problems associated with them so this paper might appear to be somewhat out of place. Its author is a distinguished classical scholar and the subject matter is a political novel written in the 4th century BC about a ruler lost in the even more distant past, somewhere around the 6th century BC. What, you might ask, can be its relevance?

In this brief foreword I want to spell out the reasons why I think it is of tremendous relevance and I am sure that other readers will find the paper as stimulating in relation to present-day leadership if they approach it with an open mind. In fact, I would advise you to stop reading this foreword now and read the main paper itself before coming back to my comments, as I expect you will find the latter redundant and the former of self-evident significance.

The sub-title of the paper, "The Obedience of the Willing", is immediately evocative. This could easily be the politically incorrect but plain-speaking sub-title of so many questions about effective leadership: how do we secure the willing obedience of our staff?

Lynette Mitchell poses this question in reverse: on what basis do we willingly grant our obedience to those who lead us? This was the main question addressed by Xenophon, contemporary of Plato and author of the political novel in which he fictionalised the life and career of Cyrus the Great, a Persian ruler who had established a vast empire nearly 150 years before Xenophon was writing. Amongst the questions Xenophon poses and to which Mitchell brings acute insight are the following:

- On what basis should some people be given authority over others?
- Will people more readily follow a person or the law and what becomes of their allegiance if the two diverge?
- What is the basis for a feeling of companionship, of common purpose and destiny (what these days we might call "engagement") and what is the role of leadership in sustaining this feeling?
- What is the function of talk about meritocracy, fairness and willing obedience?
- What are the relations between leaders and followers?
- How should decisions be made and by whom?
- How should the rewards of collective action be distributed – according to differences in contribution; personal need; an equal share for all or by reference to inter-personal obligations and patronage?

These, and several other questions, posed explicitly and implicitly in Mitchell's paper, include many that are crucial in the real world of organisational and political life but are seldom addressed in such forthright terms in the popular leadership press or in even the most scholarly research. As one CEO remarked at a conference recently, following a day of naively anodyne assertions about how to be a good leader:

*"This all sounds very nice but I spend most of my time preventing people from shafting each other".*

I think there are three significant themes linking this paper to contemporary leadership studies.

**1. Transformational leadership:** the Ancient Greeks, according to Mitchell, made a distinction between a king and a tyrant, the former subjecting himself to the law, i.e. ruling within the law, while the tyrant comes to embody the law such that the only reference point for what is right is what the tyrant wants. Both kingship and tyranny were serious options in political organisation because of perceived weaknesses in democracy which, itself, was defined in various ways, ranging from an equal say by all citizens (i.e. males of a certain standing) to decision-making by a smaller and more select group of representatives or oligarchs.

Indecisiveness and mediocrity were chief amongst these perceived weaknesses so between these perceived weaknesses and the outrages of tyranny the ideal of the good king was as attractive as many people today find the idea of the good leader. Cyrus the Great, as presented to us by Xenophon, claimed his legitimacy as a monarch on the grounds that he was the most deserving of the kingship through proven merit. There is no question that he was or should be elected into his position; rather that his personal virtues and his achievements in command would speak for themselves and be commonly appreciated by those who thus willingly became his followers.

Cyrus therefore based his claims to the right to lead on the basis that his authority to do so had become self-evident to his followers: they should recognise his qualifications to do so because they have, themselves, experienced his pre-eminence in creating for them a hierarchical social order. However, in spite of these claims to the legitimacy of both bureaucratic order and proven merit, Cyrus actually strove to create enthusiasm for what might be termed transformational tyranny. His methods for doing so were primarily those of patronage and punishment informed by a carefully-constructed system of spies. In this system one might assume that the primary virtue is that of partisanship and hence at least the show of friendship which brings with it inherent risks of:

- (a) betrayal, ie a difference of opinion is more likely to be felt as personal betrayal and responded to as such;
- (b) corruption of the ideal rational order through favouritism, real or perceived; and
- (c) the narcissistic organisational processes because if what is “good behaviour” is equivalent to “doing what the boss expects”, the only way to operate is to try to get inside the mind of the leader; thus, an entire organisation can unconsciously conceive its task as being to imagine, reflect and embody the presumed will of the leader.

**2. Corporatism:** Sociologists from Max Weber onwards have remarked on the tendency of modern organisations to assert a unitary model of organisational life, bolstered by a rhetoric that the interests of each individual are, in all important respects, commensurate with those of the corporate whole; such claims tend, of course, to obscure inequalities in the benefits derived from corporate membership as well as conflicting interests for example between employers and employees, or even the simple fact of a multiplicity of quite differing motives and interests. Xenophon presents the willing obedience

to a system as rational, fair and justified by the fact that people apparently choose to be part of it even though in so doing they are choosing to give authority and choice into the hands of their leaders. They are, literally, giving their hearts and minds to the corporate enterprise. In this conception the ideal follower is one whose commitment amounts to a readiness to sacrifice his or her self-interest insofar as it differs from that of the whole.

This idealisation of corporatism was highly problematic for the Greeks for whom Xenophon was writing because the attempts at democratic processes that allowed for plurality of interests and projects were seen to have been a source of weakness in the war against the Spartans. It is as if he is arguing that in order to win we must all be of one mind and that mind is the King's. While this might be an uncomfortable argument in political terms it is most emphatically asserted by many private and public organisations in which loyalty to the corporate whole is generally seen as pre-eminent. However, in many contemporary institutions, universities in particular, this remains a matter of debate and Mitchell adroitly exposes the sleight of hand in corporatist arguments.

In pointing out that the requirement to be committed to common action could also follow from democratic decision-making processes. The legitimacy of the King does not, in fact, rest on the need for common commitment but rather on the perceived need to avoid too much debate. An acceptance of bureaucratic tyranny may be a practical compromise in order to simplify decision-making; it is not a necessary condition of united action. Herein lies the important distinction between corporatism and collegiality.

**3. Rhetoric.** In contemporary organisational studies we have become accustomed to taking a somewhat critical view of the way in which people talk about matters such as “distributed leadership”, “teamwork”, and “meritocracy”. This is not because scholars are critical of these ideas or processes; rather we are curious about the functions they perform in the realities of organisational life so, for example, the widespread use of the term “distributed leadership” in public sector organisations in the UK may be seen on one hand to authorise entrepreneurial initiative at all levels of the organisation while on the other hand obscuring the demise of formal consultative processes. In this case, the rhetorical function of distributed leadership has what might be called a shadow side as well as its overt and intended outcome. In this paper Mitchell shows us how the apparent reasonableness of “obedience” renders “politics” legitimate. In other words, the pursuit of personal or factional interests through political means is not simply obedient; it is also unreasonable and therefore not proper for a qualified citizen. If you are a good citizen you will not disagree with us.

As Mitchell shows us, this amounts in effect to a totalitarian system masquerading as a legitimate and law-abiding bureaucratic hierarchy. In other words, as Mitchell puts it, political arrangements are described as social relations thus disguising the inequalities of power within them. Xenophon describes how Cyrus would reward those who were obedient and punish the disobedient as if this was a natural extension of the perfectly reasonable order that placed him at his pinnacle. As Mitchell says – “viewed in this light, willing obedience appears less willing”. This is underscored by the tremendous bonus payments given to obedient followers under the guise of kindness and friendship.

## CONCLUSION

These three themes – transformational leadership, corporatism and the rhetorical function of leadership theory within organisations, do not form any part of the core structure for Mitchell's paper. However, her presentation of Xenophon's work clearly contributes to these important and contemporary themes. In addition, she raises many other important questions for those of us interested in studying leadership. Amongst these are:

(a) Is the best leader the strongest or the wisest? Even the wise must show their strength. Quietism (philosophical life) is not a real option for leaders who are bound to take action and suffer or benefit from its effects. Strength, whether it rests on force of personality or command of resources, is surely an indispensable resource?

(b) The nature of equality and fairness is neatly encapsulated in the distinction between numerical versus geometric fairness. Numerical fairness arises where everybody gets equal benefit regardless of their individual contribution to those outcomes; geometric fairness argues for some balancing of rewards to contribution. The confusion between these two ideals of fairness, both of which seem to be intrinsic in organisational life, probably lies at the heart of many of the day-to-day concerns of managers. We certainly want to recognise the fundamental equality of all people but also to distinguish between those who make a greater effort or achieve bigger outcomes. The problem, of course, is that the interpretation of individual effort and outcomes is seldom as clear cut and obvious as one might wish it.

(c) One of the most persistent demands made of leaders is that they should provide clarity along with decisiveness, yet in practice this often seems to be at odds with fairness and even with good decisions best made by democracy or at least widespread consultation.

I am sure other readers will pick out from this elegantly-written paper other themes relevant to their own interests and both Dr Mitchell and I invite comment and contributions from readers.

Professor Jonathan Gosling

## CYRUS THE GREAT AND THE OBEDIENCE OF THE WILLING

During the final years of the fifth century BC, the Athenians had been involved in a long war with Sparta, which they eventually lost in 404. Democracy was replaced by a brutal and violent oligarchy imposed by the Spartans, although within months the democrats had ousted the regime of the so-called 'Thirty Tyrants' and democracy was restored. And yet democracy and the democratic ideal had suffered during the long years of war, and particularly from among the Athenian intelligentsia there were, at the end of the fifth century and the beginning of the fourth, demands for new ways of conceptualising constitutional rule. It is in this context that Xenophon, friend of Socrates, mercenary commander, prolific writer of history and philosophy, and political thinker of some standing in his own time, wrote the *Education of Cyrus*, a historical novel about the rule of Cyrus the Great, king of the Persian empire in the mid sixth century BC. Through his portrayal of Cyrus, Xenophon creates a model for leadership in an ideal constitution in which democratic equality is rejected in favour of a hierarchical community of the 'willing obedient' serving Cyrus, who respects the law and yet also embodies it.

This paper will explore the nature of Cyrus' ideal constitution, and consider its importance as a theoretical model for leadership and constitutional rule. However, in order to understand the force of Xenophon's argument and before we can evaluate the success of Xenophon's political theorising, we need to situate Xenophon's thought within the wider discussion of political theorising at the turn of the fifth and fourth centuries BC. Consequently, this essay will have three sections. In the first, it will consider the development of democratic theorising in the second half of fifth century BC, and the backlash against these democratic ideas and ideals. In the second part, it will turn to the *Education of Cyrus* itself, and draw out the main points of Cyrus' ideal constitution. In the third and final section, it will analyse the main features of Xenophon's treatment of the ideal leader, and assess its significance and offer a critique of its value as a model for leadership and rule by one man.

## DEMOCRACY AND ITS OPPONENTS

As is now generally recognised, principles of equality lay at the heart, not only of fifth-century democratic thinking, but also of Greek political forms dating to the eighth century BC.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, in political thought as it developed during the fifth century, constitutional rule within the Greek city was also conceived hierarchically and formulated as 'ruling and being ruled'. Aristotle, for example, in the mid fourth century, is interested in the relationship between the ruler and the ruled (e.g., *Politics* I, 1259b32-1260a2), and says that rule in any city-state (not just the democratic one) was rule of citizens – at least in so far as citizens were equal in being free, and by their nature wished to rule and be ruled in turn (e.g., *Politics* I, 1255b16-20, 1259b4-6, 3, 1279a8-13).<sup>2</sup>

The rule of law was also fundamental to Greek constitutional thought in general. Herodotus, who was probably writing in the mid 420s, contrasts rule in Persia by the Great King, a despot who 'enslaves' his subjects (e.g. 7.135), with the rule of law when he has the Spartan king say to the Persian king that the Spartans are free, but not entirely free, since their despot is law, 'whom they fear more than your subjects fear you' (7.104.4). In contrast Xenophon, in his idealised account of Agesilaus the Spartan king, says that Agesilaus turned away from the opportunity to rule as the greatest in Asia (that is, to rule

autocratically as the Great King did), but chose instead to go home and rule according to law, and to be ruled according to law (*Agesilaus* 2.16).

Explicitly democratic theorising, on the other hand, which emerged alongside the self-consciously democratic reforms which took place at Athens in the 460s BC,<sup>3</sup> emphasised, in the first instance, the rule of the assembly of citizens. In Aeschylus' *Suppliants*, probably produced in the 460s, the Argive king, Pelasgus, cannot act without the permission of the citizen assembly. In what is probably the earliest formulation of 'the people ruling' (*demos kraton*),<sup>4</sup> Pelasgus says:

I could not do this without the people (*ho demos*),  
not unless they consented (*kraton*). (398-9; cf. 365-9)

Likewise, in Euripides' *Suppliants* (produced in the 420s), the emphasis is on the rule of the assembly (349: 'It is necessary for the whole city to decide this'; the city is also said to be 'equal-voting' [*isopsephos*]: 353), but there is also a concern for rule by rotation and for both rich and poor to have an opportunity to hold office (406-8) (so that the people ruled and were ruled in turn). In Herodotus' Constitution Debate (the earliest extant example of a systematic constitutional theorising),<sup>5</sup> Otanes defends democracy against oligarchy and monarchy on the grounds that:

When the multitude rules, first it has the finest name of all, *isonomia* ('equality under law'), and secondly it does none of the things a monarch does: it appoints magistracies by lot, it has scrutiny of office-holding, and it makes all decisions in the common assembly (3.80.6).

Rule is not just by rotation, but also decided by lot, and scrutiny of officials is important (in contrast with monarchy which is not scrutinised, so that a monarch can do whatever he wants: Herodotus 3.80.3). Later, the sovereignty of the assembly came to be justified in terms of the collective expertise of the people. In Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*, written during the thirty years of conflict, Thucydides has the Syracusan Athenagoras justify democracy (at Syracuse) on the grounds that, while the wealthy are best at looking after the money, and the wise are best at giving advice, it is 'the many' who are best at making decisions (Thucydides 6.39.1; cf. *Protagoras* in Plato, *Protagoras* 322d-323a).

In Herodotus, however, the emphasis is not only on the sovereignty of the assembly, but also on *isonomia*, 'equality under law'. In Euripides' *Suppliants*, the rule of law was fundamental for maintaining democracy. Theseus says:

There is nothing more hateful for a state than a tyrant,  
where the common laws do not hold first place,  
and one man, holding the law for himself,  
rules, and this is no longer equality.

Where the laws have been written down, both the weak  
and the wealthy have justice equally,  
and it is possible for the weak to tell off  
the fortunate, whenever he is abused.

And the lesser man has the victory over the great when justice is on his side.  
This is freedom [when it is declared]: 'Who desires to bring some good plan  
for the city to the assembly?'

Whoever desires to do this is famous; who does not want to  
is silent. What is more equal for the city than this?

And indeed when the *demos* ('the people') is manager of the land,  
it delights in young men near at hand.  
But a man who is king considers this hateful,  
and the best element, whomever he considers to have sense,  
he kills, fearing for his tyranny (429-46).

In this speech, Theseus objects to one man embodying law, and claims that equality can be achieved only when law is written down. Indeed, an important strand of political thought identified tyranny as the opposite of democracy, which was seen as exemplifying the rule of law (see, e.g., Hdt. 3.142-3). Here, however, Theseus is also engaging with another debate about the rule of law itself, and the importance of written law for democratic equality. Theseus needs to be specific about the need for written law because of the significant discussions that were going on among intellectuals about law and custom, and their relationship to 'nature' (*nomos versus physis*). The debate about the priority of *nomos* or *physis* hinged, to a certain extent, on an understanding of what might be meant by 'universal' law (which was defined – problematically – by some as 'natural' law: cf. Thucydides 5.105.2)<sup>6</sup> and its relationship to written law, that is law decreed by the assembly. Laws made by decree of the assembly, however, were also in themselves problematic because they lacked not only flexibility to deal with individual situations (compare Aristotle, *Politics* 3, 1287b4-8), but also any system for either their collation or interpretation.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, by the end of the fifth century, despite its importance to ideas of Greek constitutional government and democratic thought in particular, the idea of law itself and its authority was under serious review.

In fact, there were serious theoretical disagreements and uncertainties about how democracy should be conceptualised and theorised. In the first place, there were some who thought that democracy constituted rule by the whole citizen body (e.g., Thucydides 6.39.1), while others saw it as rule for the interests of the many as opposed to rule in the interests of the few (Thucydides 2.37.1).<sup>8</sup> Alternatively, in class-based (and morally loaded) terms it could also be considered to be rule by the poor against the interests of the 'better sort of people', that is the elite (e.g., Old Oligarch 1.1), 'for among the best people (*hoi beltistoi*) there is the least wantonness and injustice, and the greatest scrupulousness for the good things, but among the *demos* there is the greatest ignorance, disorderliness and wickedness' (Old Oligarch 1.4-5). Furthermore, for some there was not necessarily a great deal of difference between rule by the many and rule by the few, especially if the democracy was limited. In 411 BC, when the Athenians vote for the suspension of democracy for the sake of the war effort, Thucydides says it was argued that oligarchy could be democracy 'not in the same way' (Thucydides 8.53.1), by which the constitutional ambiguity of a limited constitution of 5000 citizens seems to have been meant.<sup>9</sup>

By the end of the fifth century, significant opposition to democracy and the democratic theorising of equality had developed. In the first place, it was argued that democratic equality was neither intelligent nor truly equal (Thucydides 6.39.1). Instead, it was claimed by the Athenian elite that there were two kinds of equality: numerical equality, which was seen as democratic, that is where all received the same rewards no matter what their political or financial input; and proportional (or geometric) equality which provided rewards commensurate with contribution (see, e.g., Plato, *Laws* 757b-d; Aristotle, *Politics* 5, 1301b29-

1302a8).<sup>10</sup> On these grounds it was argued that only the best should rule and that they should receive the greatest rewards. For Thucydides' Pericles in the Funeral Oration, it seems that the rule of the best was consistent with democracy (which he defines as rule in the interests of the many) as long as there was equality of opportunity for both rich and poor (Thucydides 2.37.1). However, he also rejected selection by lot for the most able men,<sup>11</sup> which was openly undemocratic. While in Athens the most important position of state, the generalship, was not based on selection by lot but on election (so in fact Pericles is reflecting reality), by foregrounding this (undemocratic) element of actual practice, Thucydides emphasises the potentially undemocratic nature of Athenian democracy; Pericles is effectively proposing a modified definition of democratic equality which was based on geometric (non-democratic) equality.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, Thucydides says soon afterwards that under Pericles democracy was democratic in theory only; in fact it was rule by the first man (2.65.9).

That the best man should rule came to form an important strand of political thought and anti-democratic theorising, which rejected selection by lot and privileged expertise (e.g., Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 1.2.9). In particular, monarchy, which in popular democratic thought had come to be seen as the antithesis of democracy, was suggested as a real alternative to democracy. Isocrates, in the fourth century (although he elsewhere advocates a limited democracy based on Spartan oligarchy),<sup>13</sup> also develops models for ideal kingship based on geometric equality. In his letter *Nicocles*, he says:

Concerning constitutions... I think that, for everyone, it seems a most dreadful state of affairs that the good (*hoi chrestoi*) and the wicked (*hoi poneroi*) should be thought worthy of the same things, but distinctions should be made between them, and those who are not alike should have the same things, but each should fare and be rewarded according to their worth. Indeed oligarchies and democracies seek for equality for those who have a share in the constitutions, and it is regarded as fair in these kinds of constitutions if one man isn't able to have more than another. But this is advantageous to the wicked. But monarchy gives most to the best man, and then second most to the next best after him, and third and fourth most (and so on) in accordance with the same logic. (14-15)

Isocrates then goes on to say that another advantage of kingship is that monarchs are also able to keep looking out for the best kinds of men, so that men of ability should naturally prefer monarchy over other kinds of constitution (16).

Other theoreticians developed this principle in different ways. While in the *Gorgias* Plato has Socrates criticise Callicles for his claim that the best men should rule (from which Callicles produces the argument that the strong should rule the weak: Plato, *Gorgias* 483b-d), it is not because he does not support geometric equality, but because he defines 'the best' not as 'the strongest' (as Callicles does), but as those who have pursued the knowledge of virtue, that is the philosophers. Thus in the *Republic* it is the Philosopher King who will rule and bring stability to the state (473c-e).

## **XENOPHON, CYRUS AND THE EDUCATION OF CYRUS**

Against this background we can now turn to Xenophon and his historical novel, the *Education of Cyrus*. Xenophon was probably born in the late 430s BC and died in the 350s. An experienced military commander and polymath, he wrote

a number of works, including a continuation of Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*, an account of the march of the mercenary army of the Ten Thousand out of Asia and back to Greece (a march Xenophon himself led for much of the journey), a text about household management (the *Oeconomicus*), a partly philosophical, partly political account of the Spartan constitution, as well as several short treatises, including encomia of ideal and idealised kings. Although framed as a historical account (the *Education of Cyrus* has sometimes been called the first Greek novel – Cyrus may have been an historical figure, but Xenophon's account of him is largely fantasy), Xenophon is quite explicit in the opening chapters that it is a political work and represents a meditation on the qualities of the ideal leader, the best kind of constitution for the ruling of men, and the principles of successful leadership (*Cyropaedia* 1.1.1-3).

Xenophon, however, was not the first to idealise Cyrus the Great, the sixth-century king of the Persians and Medes, who founded an empire stretching from the coasts of Anatolia to India. From the early fifth century Cyrus had been forming in the Greek imagination as an ideal leader and the embodiment of just rule within law.<sup>14</sup> In Aeschylus' *Persians*, produced at Athens in 472 BC, a triumphalist play which glories in the Persian defeat in the naval battle at Salamis seven years previously, Cyrus is described as 'fortunate' (*eudaimon*) and 'kindly' (*euphron*) (768-72). In Herodotus, Cyrus, in taking monarchy, brought freedom (*eleutheria*) to the Persians (Herodotus. 3.82.5; cf. 1.125-30; Aristotle, *Politics* 5, 1310b37-8).<sup>15</sup> In Plato, too, in the *Laws* (3, 694a-c), Cyrus is the good king, who maintained a balance of slavery and freedom by making the Persians themselves free (*eleutheroi*) and masters (*despotai*) of others. Furthermore, he allowed the Persians a measure of freedom (*eleutheria*) and equality (*to ison*), so that they felt respect for their commanders and loyalty in times of danger, and allowed them free speech (*parrhesia*) and respected their advice. As a result, Persian affairs prospered because of their 'freedom' (*eleutheria*), 'friendship' (*philia*), and 'community' (*koinonia*). However, for Plato (who seems on some level to be reacting to Xenophon's Cyrus), the king paid attention neither to education nor to household management (694c), and, by leaving his children to be brought up by women, set the course for Persian decline (694d-695e). Plato's Cyrus is no democrat, but he does support democratising values of freedom and equality. For Xenophon, on the other hand, Cyrus brings freedom, but at the cost of willing obedience.

Xenophon begins his account with Cyrus' childhood and boyhood education first at the court of his father, the king of the Persians, and then that of his grandfather, the king of the Medes. Under the Persian constitution children are educated by the state, and are taught justice (*dikaiosyne*), moderation (*sophrosyne*), and hunting (as preparation for war) (*Cyropaedia* 1.2.2-14). The numbers of citizens are limited to 120,000 men, who are called 'those equal in honour' (*hoi isotimoi*), and include only those whose parents could afford formal education (*Cyropaedia* 1.2.15). Any of the *isotimoi* can hold office, but the emphasis of the constitution is on strict regulation and law, so that if any one does not fulfil any of the requisite steps in preparation for full citizenship then they are excluded from the citizen body. Likewise, in decisions regarding justice, the rule of law is strictly maintained; Cyrus receives a beating from his teachers because in a trial-case put before him at school he decides in favour of commonsense rather than written law (*Cyropaedia* 1.3.16-17).<sup>16</sup>

When he reaches 12 years old, however, Cyrus leaves Persia and goes to the

court of his grandfather, the king of the Medes. In contrast to Persia, life at the Medish court is excessive (*Cyropaedia* 1.3.2-6). In fact, Cyrus rebukes his grandfather for drunkenness and lack of moderation (*Cyropaedia* 1.3.10-11). When Cyrus has to choose between remaining in Media and returning to Persia, Cyrus' mother, Mandane, compares the court of the Medish king to that of the Persian in strong terms:

At the court of your grandfather (she says to Cyrus), and among the Persians, there is no agreement about what constitutes justice. For your grandfather has made himself a despot of all among the Medes, but among the Persians it is thought that equality (*to ison*) is just. And your father (the Persian king) is the first one to do what is ordered by the state and to accept what is ordered, and it is not his will which is the measure for him, but law (*nomos*). So be careful that you are not flayed alive when you come home, if on your return you have learned instead of kingship (*to basilikon*) the ways of tyranny (*to tyrannon*), where it is thought necessary for one to have more than all the rest. (*Cyropaedia* 1.3.18)

The contrast between a king (who stands inside law and whose actions are regulated by the will of the people) and a tyrant (who is outside law and does what he wants) is an important and politically loaded one. But Cyrus does choose to stay in Media, because there he can learn to be the best at skills in which he does not yet excel (*Cyropaedia* 1.3.15), and he understands the problems of his grandfather's excesses. By staying with his grandfather, Cyrus quips, he will not learn to have too much, since his grandfather will never instruct anyone in having more than he does himself (*Cyropaedia* 1.3.18).

When Cyrus' leadership comes to be tested, however, he neither accepts nor rejects either the Persian or Medish model completely, but creates a style of commanding and ruling which is a balance of the two. Calling himself a king (*basileus*) rather than a tyrant (*Cyropaedia* 7.5.37; cf. *Oeconomicus* 21.12 – where a king is said to rule the willing, a tyrant the unwilling), on the one hand he rejects Medish hedonism and assiduously practices self-control (*Cyropaedia* 1.5.8, 5.2.18-20). On the other hand, he accepts that excellence can only be obtained by rivalry and pushing at limits (*Cyropaedia* 1.4.5, 2.1.22), and that merit is not limited by class or wealth but only by opportunity (*Cyropaedia* 2.1.11-18). Furthermore, while he understands that society must be regulated and that written law has its place, he also emphasises obedience to one's superiors (rather than acquiescence to the common will), and believes that a good ruler is 'seeing law', since he not only gives orders but punishes wrongdoers (*Cyropaedia* 8.1.22). What Cyrus produces, then, is a blend of kingship and tyranny. He rules and expects obedience, he rewards the good and punishes the wicked, he practices moderation and self-restraint (cf. *Cyropaedia* 1.6.8); in fact he provides the ultimate model of virtue (*Cyropaedia* 8.1.33), and so most deserves to rule (cf. *Cyropaedia* 7.5.83).

Indeed, Cyrus' ideal constitution is a meritocracy where the best people are given the highest rewards, and the lazy and wicked must be weeded out (*Cyropaedia* 2.2.22-5). Cyrus rejects completely the democratic notion that all should have the same rewards (*Cyropaedia* 2.2.18-21, 2.3.4; cf. 5-16), and transforms his army from one based on an elite of equals, the *isotimoi*, and a 'common' mercenary contingent, into one based on 'nobility', which is defined by the pursuit of excellence irrespective of social class or nationality (*Cyropaedia* 2.2.26). Excellence is achieved through constant training and practice

(e.g., *Cyropaedia* 8.1.39), and never sliding into complacency despite success (*Cyropaedia* 7.5.75-6; cf. *Memorabilia* 3.5.13). Nevertheless, what Cyrus creates is not a 'democratic' reorganisation of the army, as Gray suggests (despite the fact that Pheraulus, the man of the commons (*demotes*), anticipates with alacrity the 'demotic contest' with the elite: *Cyropaedia* 2.3.15),<sup>17</sup> since hierarchical rewards for excellence (despite equality of opportunity) ran against the most basic tenets of democratic theorising and democratic equality. Instead, Cyrus creates a system of hierarchies (*Cyropaedia* 8.1.4) rather like Isocrates' monarchic hierarchy, over which the king, as necessarily the best man, presides as ruler (*Cyropaedia* 1.6.22, 7.5.78-83). The theoretical innovation here is not that either rich or poor could excel (Thucydides' Pericles had already claimed that), but the recognition that the conditions for equality of opportunity have to be created through equality of education, training and equipment so that anyone can be the best. The result, however, of allowing equality of opportunity does not produce equality of either status or reward, but a structured inequality where the merits of the individual are recognised, and rewarded.<sup>18</sup>

Yet the model for Cyrus' constitution is not of itself innovative, but instead reflects a radical conservatism which institutionalises domestic models of leadership and popular morality. In the first place, this meant that the ruling of a state is compared to the management of a household or commanding of an army (*Cyropaedia* 1.6.7-9, 8.1.1; compare *Oeconomicus* 21.2-12; *Memorabilia* 3.2; note also Plato, *Protagoras* 319a). The role of a ruler, then, is like that of a father, who not only makes sure that his family has sufficient for livelihood, but also looks to its interests and ensures the training and education of all those who manage his household (*Cyropaedia* 1.4.2, 4, 1.6.7-8; cf. *Oeconomicus* 7.3-10.13 [the training of Ischomachus' wife in the management of the household]; compare Thucydides' idealised Pericles who looks to the interests of the state rather than his own interests; note also Plato, *Republic* 1, 338a-47e). In particular, while law provides the ground work, it is the role of a leader to show his followers how to implement the law until they realise that good and honourable men (that is, those who obey law) are the happiest, and that the wicked and most infamous are the most miserable (*Cyropaedia* 3.3.53). Through the comparison between the management of the state with the household, Xenophon provides for Cyrus an extended framework for his political thought, which was social and hierarchical, and where the emphasis is on community and the negotiation of social relations rather than power.

In line with this social model of ruling and statehood, in Cyrus' constitution social norms also become formalised as mechanisms for regulating the state. In ancient Greek society, popular justice was defined in terms of helping friends and harming enemies (Solon, the sixth-century poet and reformer, prayed to the gods that he might be 'sweet to friends and bitter to enemies, respected by some and others terrible to behold': fr. 13.5-6),<sup>19</sup> and repaying favours was central to the relationship between friends (*philoï*).<sup>20</sup> On his death-bed, Cyrus says: 'I have lived to see my friends made prosperous and happy through my efforts and my enemies reduced by me to subjection...' (*Cyropaedia* 8.7.7; cf. 1.6.11, 4.5.20), and asserts that if one does good to one's friends one will be able to punish one's enemies (*Cyropaedia* 8.7.28).

For Xenophon's Cyrus, however, these are not just popular values, but the cornerstones of the state. As a result, 'universal' (and unwritten) laws, such as

the repayment of favours, become as important, or more important, for the regulation of the state than written laws. The non-repaying of favours was an actionable offence when Cyrus was a child in Persia (*Cyropaedia* 1.2.7; compare also *Memorabilia* 4.4.24-5), and for Cyrus himself it is basic to his relationship with his subjects and the legitimization of his authority. In fact, Cyrus builds all his personal and civic relationships upon the giving of gifts and obligation (e.g., *Cyropaedia* 1.4.26, 6.24), and it is his friendships made through benefaction which holds the state together. As he prepares to die, Cyrus advises his son:

As for you, Cambyses, you must also know that it is not the golden sceptre that maintains your empire; but faithful friends are a king's sceptre, and the truest and surest one... (*Cyropaedia* 8.7.13)

The relationship between the king and his friends, however, was not equal (although the relationship between friends was normatively considered to be equal; Aristotle, for example, says 'friendship is said to be equality, and in particular this obtains in friendship between the good': Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 8, 1157b36-1158a1).<sup>21</sup> Instead, Xenophon's Cyrus insists on obedience, although he also required this to be the obedience of the willing.

Willing obedience was the central pillar of Cyrus' success and security as a ruler (*Cyropaedia* 1.1.3; cf. *Oeconomicus* 21.12). It was based on the good ruler, who is wiser, stronger and braver than anyone else (*Cyropaedia* 1.6.22-6, 3.1.20: 'If people think others are better than themselves, they will generally obey them willingly without compulsion'; cf. 4.1.19, 22-4, 2.11), and was generated, on the one hand, by kindness and benefaction, and, on the other, by fear and the punishment of wrong-doers (e.g., *Cyropaedia* 1.1.5, 6.20-1, 24, 2.2.10, 8.1.29, 8.6.23). Cyrus is so successful at acquiring willing obedience that it is claimed he is a 'king by nature' and that those he leads have a 'terrible passion' (*deinos eros*) to be ruled by him no less than bees wish to obey the leader of the hive (*Cyropaedia* 5.1.24-5). As a result, Cyrus rules, unlike a tyrant, without slavery:

We are different from slaves (Cyrus says to his friends) in that slaves serve their masters unwillingly, but for us, if indeed we think we are free (*eleutheroi*), it is necessary to do everything willingly which we think it is worthwhile to do. (*Cyropaedia* 8.1.4)

By insisting on willing obedience, Xenophon is not only being original, but is also further de-politicising political relationships. The power relation between king and subject is neutralised – since his subjects *need* to be ruled by him because of their desire for the relationship, rather than out of fear or compulsion. Furthermore, this social model for leadership obviates the need for written law, since society self-regulates, or at least has an internal and moral (although secular) mechanism for regulation, and does not require an external standard for measuring and imposing behaviour. In this way, Cyrus can be king rather than tyrant, provide freedom rather than slavery, rule by law and yet be law, and control his subjects through the positive pursuit of kindness and virtue rather than through fear.

## **XENOPHON'S POLITICAL THEORISING**

Xenophon's political theorising was deeply embedded in contemporary trends of political thought, and yet also managed to be both conservative and innovative. The conservatism resided in the formalisation of social norms and

hierarchies, whereas the turning of these values towards rule through willing obedience overturned existing anxieties about monarchy, the rule of law, and rule of the best man. Nevertheless, while Xenophon's Cyrus may have in these respects been original, the question still needs to be asked whether he represented a successful or legitimate model of leadership.

Even on a surface reading, Xenophon's analysis of successful leadership is not convincing. In the first place, the insistence on willing obedience may theoretically neutralise power relations, but actually distorts and obscures them. Cyrus' rhetorical emphasis on kindness as the basis for benefaction masks the fact that his gift-giving often takes the form of excessive financial rewards (*Cyropaedia* 8.2.7-8; though note *Cyropaedia* 8.2.2), which necessarily impose not only personal distance in the relationship but also create a political gap (I do not know, Xenophon says, any better reason for the people's attitude towards him than that he gave large benefactions in exchange for small ones: *Cyropaedia* 8.2.12; cf. *Memorabilia* 2.10). Further, while Cyrus gave munificently, he was also the only one allowed to give with such generosity (*Cyropaedia* 8.2.8: 'For it is not possible in Persia to have such things unless the king gives them'), and, although he gives rewards according to merit (*Cyropaedia* 8.4.32-5), his system of rewards is intended to produce hierarchies, and so also effectively to maintain unequal power relations. Cyrus also encourages the manipulation of exchanges for securing privileges. When Hystaspas asks Cyrus why Chrysantas has been preferred to him and rewarded more highly despite the fact that Hystaspas had always offered willing obedience, Cyrus replies that Hystaspas had only done what was asked, whereas Chrysantas had looked for ways of anticipating Cyrus' wants and desires (*Cyropaedia* 8.4.9-12).

There is also a darker side to Cyrus' benefactions. The boast that no one else but the Persian king could punish enemies who were a journey of many months away, or be called 'father' by those he had subdued, may be a veiled threat (*Cyropaedia* 8.2.9), but the threat becomes substantial when gift-giving is used to pay informers to be Cyrus' 'eyes' and 'ears', and to report on anyone who dared to speak or act against the king (*Cyropaedia* 8.2.10-12; cf. 1.45-7), so denying freedom of action and of speech (compare, Aeschylus, *Persians* 591-3). Disobedience at court was also punished not just by the withdrawal of honours, but also by the confiscation of all property, which was then given to someone else (*Cyropaedia* 8.1.20): 'In this way he would get himself a useful friend in exchange for a useless one.' On this level, Xenophon's political theorising not only lacks transparency, but also is disingenuous in the way that it represents power relations as (more benign) social relations. It is also disturbing, since, by disguising the real power inequalities in relationships behind the emotively-charged rhetoric of benefaction and kindness, it distorts actual and powerfully-charged relations of subordination. Viewed in this light, willing obedience appears less willing.

This politicisation of social relations is further complicated by the fact that Xenophon's Cyrus' simplifies social codes, and supposes an ease in relationships which they did not and could not sustain. Cyrus assumes that strong relationships would be based on a simple exchange of favours. However, as the Greeks themselves were very much aware, social relationships were by no means simple, and Greek literature is littered with explorations of the problems inherent in the exchange of benefactions (on the most basic level, what was an appropriate return? when had it been fulfilled?),

and knowing who one's friends (and enemies) were. Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics* engages with many of these issues, although not always easily or satisfactorily – he finds it hard to square balanced exchanges with relationships between those of a different status, such as between father and son or ruler and ruled (e.g., *Nicomachean Ethics* 8, 1158b13-29), and decides that balance can only be achieved by an unequal exchange, and different kinds of exchanges.

Furthermore, in practice the line between friendship and enmity was not necessarily clear-cut. In Sophocles' *Ajax*, Ajax is all too aware of the inconstancy of friends and the ties that bind them when he cries:

How shall we not come to be wise?

I shall. For I know so much that an enemy (*echthros*) must be hated as one who will some day be a friend (*philos*), and so much in assisting a *philos*, will I wish to help him as one who will not always remain a *philos*. For to many among mortal men the harbour of companionship is faithless. (Sophocles, *Ajax* 677-83; cf. ps-Demosthenes 58.39-40)<sup>22</sup>

Knowing who one's friends were may have been fundamental to the maintenance of social fabric, but it was not always easy to discern. Cyrus fails to engage with these issues; for him, the natural and unwritten laws have force because of both their simplicity and their own internal momentum (*Memorabilia* 4.4.24-5: 'Is not the repaying of favours a law everywhere?... And do not those who transgress this law pay the penalty by being bereft of friends and by needing to pursue those who hate them?'), but this confidence had little purchase in reality. While for Cyrus the social world provides a model for political life, it can only do so because he fails to offer a deep and critical examination of the real politics of social life, the intricacies of social negotiations, or the drama of betrayal.

Finally, and even more unsettlingly, the emphasis on willing obedience obscures Cyrus' relationship to law. One of the chief difficulties for Xenophon's Cyrus as a paradigm for rule is the requirement that he is so far superior to the others that he can embody law. Although Cyrus continuously and assiduously pursues education in virtue, there is no objective measure for his excellence apart from the relative excellence of his subjects. Aristotle, for his part, rejected the rule of such a monarch, because, he said, that man would have to be so far unequal to the others in virtue and political ability as to be 'a god among men' (*Politics* 3, 1284a9-11). While Xenophon suggests Cyrus has become god-like, or at least must have divine descent (*Cyropaedia* 4.19.24, 7.2.23), Aristotle thinks it unlikely that one man could be so superior in virtue as to deserve to stand outside law, and for this reason judges that the rule of law must always be better than the rule of one man (*Politics* 3, 1287a8-25).<sup>23</sup> Nor is there any clear sense how Cyrus' supreme virtue is to be defined except in being 'the best' (see esp. *Cyropaedia* 7.5.78-9). In fact, with his emphasis on physical superiority through training, Cyrus (dubiously) seems to imagine that moral virtue and intellectual excellence (*arete*) flows from bodily strength, and there is no clear system suggested for the training and education of the mind or the soul, beyond the education he receives (and completes) as a young child in moderation and justice. However, as Plato demonstrated, being the best in strength was not necessarily the same as being the best in the pursuit of an absolute moral good.

Further, while Cyrus claims to respect law, he is also its primary interpreter, and, as 'seeing law', is the only source for it. As a result, any sense of objective law is marginalised, and kingship itself is redefined. In traditional Greek thought kingship was rule under law and tyranny was rule outside law. Cyrus, however, replaces law with obedience (albeit willing obedience). Consequently, the legitimacy of Cyrus' rule depends wholly on obedience, which one is expected to give to one's superiors. Cyrus then becomes the single focus for the regulation of society, so that society must depend on the benevolence of his rule, although he himself is unregulated (and so, theoretically can do whatever he wants: Herodotus 3.80.3). While Cyrus underscores the importance of kindness, Xenophon is also clear that he rules with benefactions balanced by fear, and the threat of punishment. Cyrus, as the single arbiter of what constitutes obedience (and there is little room for disagreement or civil disobedience), is a king only in theory; in fact it is tyranny.

Yet, while Xenophon, at least superficially offers an unsustainable model for leadership and ruling in his *Cyrus*, there are also other, more ironic, ways of reading the *Education of Cyrus*.<sup>24</sup> For, Xenophon tells us (as Plato also did), after his death Cyrus' ideal constitution fell into decay: there was a decline in morality; dishonesty in financial matters; a lack of physical training; and the austerity and restraint of the Persians was replaced by the luxuriousness and the effeminacy of the Medes (*Cyropaedia* 8.8). While he was alive, Cyrus' empire was governed by a single mind; he honoured and cared for his subjects like children, and those he ruled honoured him like a father (*Cyropaedia* 8.8.1). As soon as he died, however, his children fought among themselves, the cities and tribes revolted, and all turned for the worse (*Cyropaedia* 8.8.2). Some editors have doubted the authenticity of this final chapter of the *Education of Cyrus*, but the motif of decline is familiar.<sup>25</sup> Herodotus' Darius in the Persian Constitutional Debate says that all constitutions decline into monarchy (so therefore, he argues, monarchy is the best: 3.82.3-4). Likewise (more significantly for our purposes), Thucydides says that after the (idealised) rule of Pericles, there was a period of decline since Pericles' successors were more on a level with each other and looked to their own interests rather than to the interests of the state, and so fell into rivalry with each other (2.65.10-11). In fact, Thucydides says, it is natural for all things to decline (2.64.3).

There are also other indications within the text that we ought to be reading it ironically. For example, Cyrus adopts Medish dress, Xenophon says, because he thought that a ruler ought not just to be superior to his subjects but even to 'bewitch' them, and the excesses of the costume would not only make him look taller, but also hide any defects (*Cyropaedia* 8.1.40.1; cf. 3.1). Xenophon also tells us that Cyrus encourages prostration by initially requiring people to do it, although he tries to pass it off as a spontaneous response to his magnificence (*Cyropaedia* 8.3.14). He also suggests that Cyrus' gift-giving was destabilising, as it encouraged rivalries for his 'affection', so that the most influential men 'loved' Cyrus more than they did each other (*Cyropaedia* 8.2.28). And Cyrus did come to think (though his mother had warned against it) that it was of the utmost importance for one man to have more than all the rest (cf. *Cyropaedia* 8.2.13); by the magnificence of his gifts, Xenophon says, he made himself preferred above all others, even brothers and fathers and children (*Cyropaedia* 8.2.9). The seeds of later decline have already been planted: excess, dishonesty, lack of trust and internal rivalries.

In writing such an ending for Cyrus, through which the fantasy of Cyrus' ideal monarchy declines into tyranny, Xenophon can be understood as engaging in a very acute and critical way with contemporary political theorising and with Thucydides in particular. I have argued elsewhere that Thucydides, in presenting Pericles as the monarch in democracy, is presenting an ironic interpretation of the theorising of the 'best man' in his necessarily modified democracy, although it is not democracy at all and ultimately declines into the potential tyranny of his 'successor', Alcibiades.<sup>26</sup> Xenophon, it seems, is playing with similar motifs. Cyrus' constitution is the elite constitution of 'best men', although the 'best' is defined by ability rather than class. But just as Pericles' idealised democracy fails, so also does Cyrus' monarchy. Against this edge, Xenophon's critique of the 'best men' or the 'best man' is sharpened – unless there is a 'god-like' man like Cyrus, who is better than all the rest, then rule by one man falls into decline. But the question is also left hanging – was Cyrus really 'the best' man after all, or did he rule more through fear than willing obedience (one thinks most of the 'eyes' and 'ears')? So is Aristotle right? Absolute kingship, *pambasileia*, even of the willing obedient, is ultimately unrealistic and such a god among men is unlikely to be found. As a result (as Xenophon himself argues in his *Hellenica*: I.7), law must rule.

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## NOTES

- 1 Raaflaub 1996; note also Morris 1996.
- 2 See esp. Schofield 2005, 318-20.
- 3 Rhodes 1992, 67-92; Raaflaub 1996, 153; id. 2005 47-8; *contra* esp. Hansen 1986, 34-6, 46-9; id. 1991, 32-52.
- 4 Rhodes 1992, 74 & n. 40, *contra* Hansen 1986.
- 5 On the Constitution Debate, see most recently, Asheri (2007) 471-6; cf. Pelling 2002.
- 6 Here the Athenians justify their aggressively imperialist policies by saying that they did not invent the law (*nomos*) that it is natural to rule whenever one can.
- 7 At the end of the fifth century and beginning of the fourth, because of the chaotic state of laws passed by the Athenian state, there were a number of attempts to systematise existing laws, and the processes for creating laws were reformed. Review of the laws: Thucydides 8.97; Xenophon *Hellenica* 2.3.2 (cf. *Athenaion Politeia* 34-5); *Athenaion Politeia* 35.1-2; Lysias 30.2-5. New procedures for making laws: Andocides, *On the mysteries* 81-7; Demosthenes 20.89-96; cf. Demosthenes 24.20-3. See esp. Rhodes 1980.
- 8 For this reading of Thucydides, see Rusten 1989, 143-5.
- 9 On the 'oligarchy of the 5000' and democracy, see Rhodes 1972.
- 10 Harvey 1965; id. 1966; Huffman 2005, 212-15.
- 11 On '*apo merous*' as 'in rotation' see: Gomme, 1945 2.108; Rhodes 1988, 220; Rusten 1989, 144-6; Hornblower 1991-, 1.300-1 (as opposed to 'from a particular class' as in the Penguin translation (transl. Warner, 1954), which gives the text a significantly different meaning).
- 12 See esp. Kerferd 1981, 152; note also Mitchell 2008; id. 2009. Rusten (1989, 143) reads this passage more positively and claims that Thucydides has Pericles present Athens' government as 'combining the best features of democracy (equality for all) and aristocracy (preference for merit)', but Thucydides also shows us where this kind of thinking leads: rule by one man.
- 13 For the importance of Sparta as a model for ideal constitutions, see Hodkinson 2005.
- 14 Breitenbach, RE 9 A 2.1708; Due 1989, 22-3. Compare also Isocrates 9.37-8, where Isocrates inverts the idealised image of Cyrus in order to praise Euagoras of Salamis (though the type is necessary to make his point and to give the comparison added force).
- 15 On Cyrus in Herodotus, see esp. Avery 1972.
- 16 For an interpretation of this passage, see Newell 1983.
- 17 Gray 2007, 11-12.
- 18 Pace Gray 2005.
- 19 See Blundell 1989.
- 20 Mitchell 1997, 1-21.
- 21 See esp. Mitchell 2009.
- 22 On this passage, see Blundell 1989, 82-8.
- 23 See esp. Newell 1991.
- 24 Pace Gray 2005 (who argues for a surface reading of the text).
- 25 Briant 2002.
- 26 Mitchell 2008.

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Cyrus' first great achievement was his conquest of Ecbatana, the Median capital ruled by Astyages. This event is first mentioned in two contemporary Babylonian sources: the Nabonidus Cylinder of Sippar and the Nabonidus Chronicle. Herodotus also gives us a detailed account of this event. The Nabonidus Chronicle states that Cyrus led a campaign west of the Tigris in 547 BCE, however, most scholars now agree that this campaign had a different target. Herodotus claims that it was Croesus (560-547 BCE), king of Lydia, who started the war by crossing the Halys River and sacking Pteria, a Cappadocian city within the Median sphere of influence. Cyrus II of Persia commonly known as Cyrus the Great, and also called Cyrus the Elder by the Greeks, was the founder of the Achaemenid Empire, the first Persian Empire. Under his rule, the empire embraced all the previous civilized states of the ancient Near East, expanded vastly and eventually conquered most of Western Asia and much of Central Asia. From the Mediterranean Sea and Hellespont in the west to the Indus River in the east, Cyrus the Great created the largest empire the world had yet seen... During the final years of the fifth century BC, the Athenians were involved in a long war with Sparta, which they eventually lost in 404. Democracy was replaced by a brutal and violent oligarchy imposed by the Spartans, although within months the democrats had ousted the regime of the so-called "Thirty Tyrants" and democracy was restored. And yet democracy and the democratic ideal had suffered during the long years of war; particularly from among the Athenian intelligentsia there were, at the end of the fifth century BC and the beginning of the fourth, demands for new ways of conceptualising constitutional rule. Keywords. Transformational Leadership Constitutional Rule Leadership Study Democratic Ideal Senior Civil Servant.