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THE end arrived swiftly. On Thursday, 26 November 2009 Malcolm Turnbull reminded a media conference he was leader of the Liberal Party, and planned to remain so. When the blow came early the following week it recalled the legendary executioner, so expertly severing the head it seemed attached still to the victim's neck, while the swordsman wiped a tiny speck of blood from the razor-sharp blade.

With his colleagues divided over the government's emissions trading scheme, Malcolm Turnbull negotiated an amended policy with the government of Kevin Rudd. It proved a step too far for the party room. Turnbull survived one leadership spill but not a second. On 1 December Tony Abbott found himself elected leader of the Liberal Party, winning by a single vote. After just five hundred days as opposition leader, Malcolm Turnbull was again a backbencher. Within months he announced his departure from parliament, though he later recanted.

Such is the fate of many Australian leaders. There is a terrible but predictable rhythm to these regular assassinations – first hints in news stories of party dissatisfaction, then talk of private polls showing the game is up, before corridor shots in Parliament House. Once the contest is called, leader and challenger phone evasive colleagues, while journalists wait for the first text messages from the closed party room. Media conferences follow, the victor claiming to be humbled by the result, the loser magnanimous in defeat. When journalists failed to ask the now standard questions after his defeat, Malcolm Turnbull interviewed himself with wit and verve, to ensure the obligatory statements of regret and respect for the party's decision found their way into the public record.

Just six months later, Labor followed. This time the coup happened so quickly many parliamentarians first heard of the challenge on television. A night of frantic exchanges on social media, a quick headcount, and the party room threw over a serving prime minister in his first term for the deputy, Julia Gillard. As Kevin Rudd farewelled the nation next morning from the Prime Minister's Courtyard at Parliament House his family stood behind him, the shock imprinted on their faces.

Labor has dispatched two of its last four prime ministers while in office. Opposition leaders fall even more often. The leadership bargain is ever more tenuous. Like professional sports clubs axing a coach after just a few losing games, political parties move at the first signs of vulnerability.

Hasty endings are made possible by a parliamentary system in which office is held by party room consent. While American presidents enjoy guaranteed four-year terms regardless of sentiment within their party, an Australian parliament offers no fixed terms, no sinecures. The parties exist only to win and retain power, and the parliamentary memberships retain absolute control over the selection of their chief. A leader who stumbles is at risk.

Few other leadership roles in our society are so fragile. Most leaders must seek permission from those they would lead, but politics in a parliamentary system is ruthless and unforgiving. Governments facing sustained criticism about key policy positions, such as Kevin Rudd faced over carbon and mining taxes, will shed a leader to restore the prospects for victory. Oppositions prove more pitiless. Photos lining the party room walls display those tested briefly, then swiftly discarded.

This is leadership in the raw – and a long way from the optimistic accounts provided by textbooks, personal coaches, podcasts and expensive residential courses. Most leadership literature draws models from business, the military or public service – from leaders who generally enjoy contractual safeguards and institutional norms against savage and instant dismissal.

The leadership industry is right to look outside politics for its exemplars. A business leader with a degree of security can pursue long-term strategies. Some falter, but most chief executives complete their careers peacefully. They can exercise authority with confidence, encouraging a science of leadership,

or at least some predictability about the qualities required for success. If they are forced to go before their time their departure is softened with dollars, to offset lost status and humiliation.

Not so for those who lead our nation. Parliamentary politics requires a level of guile and agility rarely demanded elsewhere. Political leaders know their influence is provisional. High office can be withdrawn without explanation. Such regular violence against leaders suggests that when the times change, the leader must adapt quickly or leave. In this elemental world only continued success buys more time. Prime Minister Bob Hawke could be a hero to his party in 1990, winning a fourth successive election and presiding at centennial celebrations for the Australian Labor Party, yet be thrown out by parliamentary colleagues just eighteen months later.

Because the task of political leadership shifts constantly with circumstances, there can be no single prescription for power and influence. Leaders must create their own accommodation with the times. The experience of others, no matter how successful, offers little guide for aspiring leaders. There are few reliable laws or formulae. We might learn from, but will never repeat, history. For politicians, leadership turns out to be an unpredictable negotiation between people and conditions. Such leadership cannot be reduced to a ten-point plan mastered on the flight to Canberra.

A bleak view of leadership is unlikely to inspire bestsellers. What value in knowing that talent and application may not be enough, given the vicissitudes of time and chance; that the race does not belong to the swift, nor the battle to the strong? As Robert Burton noted centuries ago in *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, it is not honesty, learning, worth or wisdom that people prefer. The evidence for the moody unpredictability of political life is stark – in more than a century of Australian politics, only two prime ministers and a handful of opposition leaders have left office on their own terms.

Yet we can learn something about the nature of leadership by studying leaders without tenure – famous politicians, but equally those from the margins. Political parties have interesting similarities to street gangs, those groups of disenfranchised youths who band together for mutual support and profit. Both provide unsettling insights into how leaders take and hold office in a world without constraints – and why so few endure.

THE STUDY OF street gangs has a long and intriguing history. The subject has inspired fictional gems such as *West Side Story* (first performed in 1957), and great works of scholarship such as *The Gang*, written by a young sociologist, Frederic Milton Thrasher, and published in 1927 by the University of Chicago Press.

The Gang is a forgotten classic, yet it speaks with authority about how and why leaders prevail. Thrasher studied 1313 gangs in Chicago and concluded that leaders matter less than conventional wisdom suggests – in gangs, as in political parties, leaders are chosen for a moment and then discarded. Leadership proves less a skill than a transitory play of luck. For those who would lead, Frederic Thrasher's neglected book is a sobering reminder of the randomness at work in social organisations. When structures are loose and membership voluntary, leadership becomes a bargain between leaders and followers, one always up for renegotiation.

The 1920s was a great period for social studies, as political scientists and sociologists embraced fieldwork as a way to understand their world. Thrasher was interested in organisations created for and by young people. His master's thesis examined the Boy Scout movement. When it came time for a doctoral dissertation, Thrasher set out to study a relatively new phenomenon in American cities: gangs of young boys who mark out a territory and defend it from all comers.

Thrasher set out to study every youth gang in Chicago. He discovered that street gangs are almost exclusively male. Indeed, Thrasher described a world largely without women, like politics in the same era. Later studies indicate that fewer than one in ten gang members, then and now, are female.

Thrasher wanted to understand the gangs of boys who grew up in the slums of his city, that 'broad twilight zone of railroads and factories, of deteriorating neighborhoods and shifting populations'. Street gangs dwelt 'among the shadows of the slum'. Though the surroundings are bleak, the street gang creates a world of its own 'far removed from the humdrum existence of the average citizen'.

Thrasher recognised the intensity of life inside these gangs – the romance and mystery of the city, comedy woven through tragedy, unvarnished emotions, and 'a primitive democracy that cuts through all the conventional

social and racial discriminations. The gang, in short, is life, often rough and untamed.' He took numerous photos of these gangs, many of which were reproduced in his book. Here are street-hardened boys, some just nine years old, with the average gang member aged between thirteen and sixteen. They stare at the box camera, young and bored, while a stranger from a university cross-examines them about their often brutal and short lives.

Hollywood later discovered these gangs for films such as the 1938 drama *Boys Town* with Spencer Tracy and Mickey Rooney. The scripts proved predictable – a gaggle of youths, tough but good-hearted, roams together having loveable scrapes, until reform school, war, marriage or worse breaks them apart, and so leaves room for a new gang to claim the streets.

By studying street gangs Thrasher sought to answer a pressing question: who becomes the leader of a gang? If Thrasher could predict the choice of leader, he had a way to understand both the nature of the organisation and the character of leadership. Yet he found himself frustrated and ultimately defeated by this simple inquiry. Despite crawling over railway yards and down back alleys with the boys, despite surveying a vast array of gangs, the professional sociologist could find no way to tell with confidence who the boys would choose as their leader.

Thrasher began with an assumption that physical and athletic prowess would be the principal characteristic of gang leaders, along with daring and a certain ruthlessness.

Yet he found that while some gangs indeed valued prize-fighters and other daredevils, many preferred more unexpected leaders – the hard rock, desperadoes, puritans, politicians or brains. Some gangs chose imaginative boys who could think up 'things for us to do', others the best card sharp, the most audacious thief or simply the oldest. One gang chose as leader the boy who taught them how to steal, another a boy who showed courage when a dog attacked. Thrasher encountered a boy with a serious disability leading an athletic street gang. Some leaders established their dominance through daring, others because they possessed something valuable, such as a car.

There were some fixed points. The leader must embody those attributes the gang most values. He must be of the culture. Yet the leader of the street gang, even at the height of his power, is not a monarch. He must bend to the

crude democracy that guides gang decisions. And sometimes, to add to the complexity, the designated leader, though elected with much fanfare, is not really in charge. Thrasher watched a large and blustering boy nicknamed Irish order boys about in one gang, though everyone understood that quiet, unassuming Jack was the real leader, able to control the nominal leader with absolute authority.

In short, Thrasher encountered a conundrum. Leadership in the gang does not follow obvious patterns. Despite knowing the culture and history of a particular gang, Thrasher could not predict reliably who might become the next leader. The succession was rarely obvious, even to those within a gang. When boys bullied their way to a leadership role through size and aggression, they found their tenure always uncertain. As a voluntary association, the gang could dissolve into airy nothing around an unpopular leader.

THRASHER DISCOVERED THAT gang members struggled to articulate reasons for their choice of leader – they were 'quite naïve about the whole matter; they do not stop to puzzle out why they follow one certain boy rather than another'. They understood, but struggled to articulate, a shared intuition about why a particular boy had the right skills – for the moment – to be leader.

Thrasher found some continuity across gangs. The leader 'goes where others fear to go. He is brave in the face of danger. He goes first – ahead of the gang – and the rest feel secure in his presence. Along with this quality usually goes the ability to think clearly in the excitement of a crisis.'

Yet it was rarely clear in advance who in the gang possessed this combination of skills. The same gang might choose muscles as leader for a time, but brains as his successor. And gangs select leaders, not the other way around. Thrasher found it rare for a gang to form around a leader. Rather, 'the gang forms and the leader emerges as the result of interaction.' The leader is an expression of the gang, not its focus or rationale. The leader 'grows out of the gang', providing the qualities it requires at a particular time.

Thrasher discovered that leadership attributes are not transferable. 'The type of boy who can lead one gang may be a failure or have a distinctly

subordinate role in another.' Moreover, the leader stays in the job only while the gang needs his particular skills or attributes:

> No matter how great the leader…his tenure of power is never certain. Some change in the personnel of his gang or in the situation…may bring his rule to a speedy end. He makes mistakes; the gang loses confidence in him, and he is 'down and out'. If he becomes conceited and bossy, he is sure to find himself summarily deposed, although he may for a time retain his power through sheer physical force. A new boy may appear, moreover, to contest the old leader's power through fighting him or in some other test of skill. The democracy of the gang, primitive though it may be, is a very sensitive mechanism, and, as a result, changes in leadership are frequent and 'lost leaders' many.

So leaders grow out of the gang and hold power at its pleasure. They can and will be moved on as soon as the needs of the gang change. Leadership is fragile and must constantly be renewed, *The Gang* concluded.

Where Frederick Thrasher led, others followed. From the late 1930s the junior Harvard academic William Foote Whyte lived in the slums of North End in Boston, studying street gangs among the largely poor Italian immigrant community. His *Street Corner Society*, published in 1943, confirmed the essence of Thrasher's observations about gang leadership.

Whyte also noted that the leader holds office only with support of gang members. Indeed, the leader must barter constantly to retain his pre-eminence. It costs to be leader. The head of a street gang 'always gave out more money and favors than he received'. In the transitory social organisation of a street gang, in which association is fluid and rivalry rife, leadership is hard won and held. Leaders have to deliver to their followers constantly or the gang drifts away.

Whyte confirmed that gang leaders cannot rule simply by domination of the strongest. There is a more subtle relationship between leaders and led. Loyalty is always provisional. Groups held together by one charismatic individual are susceptible to the charms of another. Leaders in turn seek to reinforce their hold by shaping the culture of their gang. They promote

activities in which they excel and discourage those in which they lack skills. Leaders stress their wider contacts, their ability to negotiate for the gang with the wider world.

Yet often the leader must work through lieutenants, and so become vulnerable to conflict. Whyte observed that gang leadership changes 'not through an uprising of the bottom men but by a shift in relations between men at the top of the structure'. When, as often happens, a gang breaks into two, the explanation is to be found in conflict between the leader and a former lieutenant.

As Whyte and Thrasher both concluded, the leader's style must make sense for the organisation. Thrasher observed that 'the personality of the leader is to a large extent a response to the personnel of his group.' The natural leader is one the boys want, the person who, for the moment, 'fills the bill'. Whyte added the important observation that leaders maintain office by delivering to their followers – often at their own expense. The gang needs a leader who can speak to its aspirations, but it has many choices and few incentives to loyalty. The gang marches on, leaving behind a trail of former leaders no longer required.

RECENTLY GANG LITERATURE was revived by the Indian-born American sociologist Sudhir Venkatesh, in his 2008 book *Gang Leader for a Day: A Rogue Sociologist Crosses the Line* (Penguin). In a research project the University of Chicago would have terminated had it known the risks to their doctoral student – at least two shooting incidents are recorded in the book – Venkatesh spent years in close contact with the Black Kings, a gang operating on Chicago's Robert Taylor Homes estate. He worked closely with its leader on the streets, known in the book only as JT.

The drugs and violence of Chicago in the 1990s might have made residents nostalgic for the world of petty crime recorded by Thrasher seventy years earlier. The 1990s gangs were much larger operations. JT led about 250 people, and reported to men further up the Black Kings hierarchy. JT's street gang provided the local distribution network for the Black Kings' illegal drugs business, running local prostitution and protection rackets on the side.

The scale of the Black Kings required sustained leadership skills. JT was more concerned with local politics than gang leaders of the past, and liked to be seen doing good works in the desperate housing estates where his gang operated. It was in JT's interests to keep tenants happy, so they did not disrupt his business. This required a finely tuned sense of who to keep on side. The Black Kings would finance after-school parties with the professed aim of discouraging drug dealing, and organise voter-registration drives.

To run his operations JT needed literate and numerate gang members. The Black Kings required teenage members to finish school. JT had completed a college degree and work experience in a legitimate business. He met regularly with his 'sales directors', posing many of the questions any manager might ask: are we losing customers, are there complaints about drug quality and, importantly, has there been attention from the police?

As Venkatesh discovered when JT let him be gang leader for a day, the judgements involved are not easy. Despite the greater sophistication of the Black Kings' operations, and a supply of weapons, the choices resemble those facing gang leaders in the 1920s. JT ruled absolutely but tenuously. Gang membership remained fluid: if the leader could not provide enough drugs to sell, or pay sufficiently for the work done, members moved on.

Eventually JT's leadership came to an end. The City of Chicago, appalled by conditions on the housing estate, began demolishing the buildings. Without tenants as customers there was less work for JT's men. Some sought work with other gangs, and so became rivals. Sensing the looming threat, JT left the Black Kings to manage a cousin's dry-cleaning business.

THOUGH AN ANALOGY is only ever approximate, the gang literature can be useful when thinking about political leadership. In political parties, as in gangs, much depends on the consent of the governed. Leaders must be right for the times, and embody the values of the party. To be successful they must win the support of a small, individually ambitious but collectively nervous and risk-averse group known as the parliamentary party. This is not the same as the endless personality rivalries recorded by political journalists, but something more intangible – an understanding among those in the party

room. It is a feeling impossible to gauge from outside, and perhaps hard to describe for many within: just a feeling about what sort of leader the times require.

Malcolm Turnbull's fall in December 2009, and Kevin Rudd's equally rapid dismissal in June 2010, suggests the pattern crosses the party divide. Only a few leaders escape. Edmund Barton left the prime ministership to become a High Court judge. Sir Robert Menzies retired while in office. A handful died: prime ministers Joseph Lyons, John Curtin and Harold Holt; opposition leaders Frank Tudor and Ben Chifley. For most, political leadership ends abruptly and unhappily, typically through electoral defeat for prime ministers and a party room coup for those leading the opposition.

Like street gangs, political parties sometimes split when leaders and lieutenants argue about direction. Division has characterised both sides at times. Conservative politicians contested elections under a range of banners during the twentieth century, until drawn together as the Liberal Party, following the slow demise of the United Australia Party, and the Country (later National) Party. Labor proved even more enthusiastic about sharp disagreement, splitting in 1916 over conscription, in 1931 in response to economic depression, and in 1955 over sectarian divisions and attitudes to communism.

On most occasions, however, party rooms handle leadership change without wrecking the party. As John Howard observed, in politics disunity is death. The risk of destroying the party constrains internal warfare. The defeat and then collapse of the United Australia Party in 1941 kept the conservatives out of office for eight years, while Labor spent seventeen years without power following its 1955 split. In 2003, with the ALP once again in opposition, two sons of 'split-era' parliamentarians contested the control of the party. The issue was resolved without creating an enduring break, though the outcome demonstrates that few can ever predict accurately who will lead the gang.

Kim Beazley and Frank Crean stayed with Labor in 1955, and both eventually became ministers in the Whitlam government. Their sons, Kim Beazley and Simon Crean, grew up with Labor politics. As children they played in the corridors of Canberra's original Parliament House. As adults each was elected to represent Labor, and served as successive opposition

leaders – Kim Beazley from 1996 until a second electoral defeat in 2001, when Simon Crean was chosen for the role.

By early 2003 circumstances did not favour the ALP. John Howard had prevailed in three successive elections, and had become a familiar and comfortable national fixture as prime minister. In the aftermath of terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, Labor faced difficult choices about its position on the invasion of Iraq, while Prime Minister Howard appealed to voters to trust him with the nation's security. Opinion polls suggested Labor should expect yet another defeat at the next poll, due in 2004.

Labor parliamentarians found themselves struggling with contending sentiments. Crean was liked by his parliamentary colleagues, and many argued it would be unfair to unseat a leader before his first campaign. Yet the prospect of another defeat was profoundly unsettling. Crean tested his numbers in the party room on 16 June 2003, and found them solid, defeating former leader Beazley fifty-eight to thirty-four. In a concession speech Beazley indicated he would not challenge again. 'I stood,' he told journalists, 'because I wanted to realise my vision of Australia…a nation in which health, knowledge and happiness are not the preserve of the rich, but the birthright of all.'

Still, argument continued behind closed doors, and late in the year a small group decided to challenge Crean before the Christmas recess. This time they judged Beazley had the numbers to prevail. On the evening of Wednesday, 26 November 2003 news broke of an impending challenge. Senior colleagues urged the opposition leader to resign immediately in light of continued poor opinion polls. Crean declined, indicating he would have dinner with his wife 'and some mates' before making any decisions.

The drama that followed illustrates the unpredictable nature of leadership in a gang. Crean did not follow the standard script and test his numbers against the challenger. Instead, he decided not to contest the leadership and supported Shadow Treasurer Mark Latham for the role.

To surrender the leadership in favour of the next generation was a courageous act, and a risky one. Few thought Latham could beat Beazley, a former

cabinet minister and deputy prime minister. Latham's experience was limited to Sydney's Liverpool City Council, and his published policy views suggested an eclectic mind. As Latham said himself, he was 'a bit of a wild man' – and he had much to say, in diaries that recorded harsh views on his colleagues when published two years later.

Crean announced his resignation on Friday 28 November and threw his standing into the battle for succession. Timing was tight, with little opportunity for Mark Latham to canvass colleagues or build a public profile before the party room ballot the following Tuesday. Yet by Saturday afternoon Latham could see a path to securing the numbers. No journalist, his diary noted, tipped him to win. Some suggested a Beazley landslide. This demonstrated, Latham observed, that reporters do not 'really understand caucus'. Latham could see a combination of support from Crean and doubts about Beazley that might, just, win him the leadership. A three-day campaign proved him right – on Tuesday morning Mark Latham won the ballot by two votes, with forty-seven votes.

Latham's rise to the leadership of the Labor Party is a lesson in the volatility of the gang in Australian national politics. The party room has its own logic. Canberra is awash with close observers of the shifting fortunes of politicians, from journalists and political staffers to public servants and lobbyists. Few predicted Labor would elect the second-youngest leader in its history, just as the insiders who promoted Kim Beazley found their careful plans were not enough to secure the prize. It turned out Labor parliamentarians did not want the safe hands of an experienced leader, but a 'crazy brave' with an appetite for risk. The gang chooses the leader who appears to 'fill the bill' at that moment.

It proved an unhappy decision, for Labor and for Latham. The new leader began with the goodwill accorded most contenders. Commentators contrasted his youth and boldness with a prime minister then sixty-five years old. Soon, though, questions surfaced about his judgement, and in October 2004 the coalition returned to office with an increased majority. Latham survived the defeat only to resign as leader in January 2005, citing illness. This time Kim Beazley won the leadership unopposed, only to fall to a leadership challenge in December 2006. He left parliament the following year, and now serves as ambassador to the United States.

AUSTRALIA'S POLITICAL PARTIES may look like highly structured formal organisations, but they are also overlapping and competing centres of power – parliamentary wings, a national secretariat, state and territory branches and members, committees and factions. All contend for influence, but only those elected to parliament get to choose the leader.

Once selected, leaders must shine in many settings. They are expected to be confidants to many, yet to hold their own counsel. It is a role of parts, given coherence only if the leader can always be on-message, sharing the same few policy prescriptions whomever the audience.

To be plausible the leader must embody and express the values of the party. A few, such as Sir Robert Menzies, get the opportunity to create a new organisation to reflect their preferred ideals. Most join a party with a long history and culture. The leader must find a style that draws together a disparate group of people, focuses their hopes and – by offering the prospect of unity, direction and spoils – keeps their support.

In this exchange, party leaders give more than they take. A leader works hard to nurture advocates, since the party can withdraw support at any time. It requires ability, guile and the right attributes for the moment to stay on top in a structure where power relies on endless shifting alliances. When Billy Snedden ran for the Liberal leadership after the party was defeated by Gough Whitlam in 1972, Snedden argued his more progressive attitudes made him 'the right candidate for the times'. The party agreed, but not for long. Snedden lost the May 1974 election, survived one challenge, then fell to a second in March 1975, becoming the first Liberal Party leader not to hold the office of prime minister. As the economic recession deepened, the Liberal party room judged Malcolm Fraser's more conservative image would serve them better.

Like street gangs, political parties rest on continual barter between leader and led, with parliamentary opinion influenced by conversation in the party room, and regular reminders of broader community sentiment through opinion polls. While the leader may publicly project power and strength, off-camera successful leaders play close attention to the needs and wishes of members of the group. When John Howard lost the 2007 election his party elected Brendan Nelson over Malcolm Turnbull as its new leader. This came as no surprise to the former Liberal deputy Peter Costello, who chose not

to contest the leadership. 'Although [Nelson] was not a major player in the Howard government, I was not surprised that he was elected leader,' Costello wrote, because Nelson 'kept close to his colleagues, takes the backbench seriously and actually listens when people talk to him'. Yet Brendan Nelson would survive just nine months in the role. He too departed parliament soon after defeat, and now serves as ambassador to the European Union.

A more enduring leader, Sir Robert Menzies, displayed similar interest in the wellbeing of parliamentary colleagues, at least during his second term as prime minister, from 1949 until 1966. Alexander Downer (father of the Liberal leader and foreign minister of the same name), a backbencher during those years, recalled with surprise that despite a formidable public appearance Menzies could be solicitous towards junior government parliamentarians such as him. 'Most members found him accessible when seeking his help with constituency or industrial problems,' Downer recalled. 'One seldom had to wait more than a day, never in my experience more than two, for an appointment. Upon being shown into his office at Parliament House he received one with encouraging courtesy, listened intently to the case you advanced, never seemed in a hurry to close the interview, appeared glad you had come to see him.'

Menzies' congeniality was learned from bitter experience. In 1941 he had been criticised, and ultimately dumped, by colleagues while Prime Minister in a United Australia Party government. He determined never to repeat the mistake. Returned to office, Menzies worked hard to know his backbenchers and secure their loyalty. He paid so little attention to the material rewards of office that on retiring from politics, aged seventy-two, Menzies did not even own a house. An anonymous group of supporters in Melbourne banded together to buy a home for the former Prime Minister and his wife.

Some contemporaries recall Menzies discouraging rival claimants to his throne. One Liberal MP who served briefly as a minister in a Menzies government, Sir Wilfred Kent Hughes, referred privately to him as 'Banyan Tree Bob' because, as he told a journalist, Menzies would allow nothing to grow in his shade.

On the Labor side, Paul Keating used his own distinctive botanical metaphor. Advising Mark Latham in 2001, Keating remarked, 'You've got to water the plants in caucus; we've all had to do it.'

This is realism rather than cynicism. A leader beholden to the parliamentary party must see colleagues as the first, and essential, audience. All understand the party room will be unsentimental with leaders who are struggling in the court of public opinion. Malcolm Turnbull and Kevin Rudd join a procession that includes Billy Hughes, Robert Menzies, John Gorton, Bill Hayden, John Howard, Andrew Peacock, John Hewson, Alexander Downer, Bob Hawke, Simon Crean and Kim Beazley. All were deposed as leader in their party room at some point in their career.

The axing of Bob Hawke is a paradigmatic display of gang-like ruthlessness. Hawke understood the dynamics of the gang. He played on party room concerns, using poor polling results to topple Bill Hayden as leader in 1983. Hawke then led Labor to a record four election wins. His consensus style and popular touch seemed to resonate with the electorate, and his command of key issues and willingness to delegate authority to talented ministers won praise in the party room. So when Treasurer Paul Keating made a controversial speech to a private audience in December 1990, it was widely read as an outburst of frustration – an ambitious leader-in-waiting could see little prospect of securing the top job.

Paul Keating believed in the transformational power of leadership. His speech complained that Australia had yet to produce leaders of the stature of Washington, Lincoln or Roosevelt. Keating suggested that leadership should be a conversation with the public. It was not about being popular, but about being right and strong. In an apparent criticism of Prime Minister Hawke, Keating observed that leadership was more than wandering 'through some shopping centre, tripping over television crews and their cords'.

It was an audacious bid. Labor focus group reports suggested many voters found Keating 'arrogant, cold, aloof, and gratuitously insulting' – not traits celebrated in many leadership textbooks. The Prime Minister was not impressed. Hawke advised the Treasurer that he would not honour an earlier Kirribilli House understanding to retire during the current term. Keating challenged in June 1991 and was soundly defeated, forty-four votes to sixty-six. He withdrew to the backbench. 'I had only one shot in the locker,' he said. 'I have fired it, and the result is there for all to see.'

JUST A FEW months later Opposition Leader John Hewson introduced *Fightback!*, a detailed economic policy package including a proposed goods and services tax. Hawke struggled to counter a resurgent coalition. The Prime Minister's standing slipped quickly, while a series of errors by senior ministers made the government appear vulnerable.

Suddenly the needs of the gang had changed. Labor required an aggressive leader, rather than a champion of consensus politics. Paul Keating, seen as too abrasive in June 1991, looked like the answer in December. His forensic skill could find *Fightback!*'s vulnerabilities, and turn them into liabilities for the coalition. The circumstances altered, Keating's skills now seemed right for the times. He challenged again and won this time, fifty-six votes to fifty-one. Prime Minister Hawke, the most successful election winner in Labor history (then and still), was dumped. His successor went on to defeat Hewson and win an unlikely fifth consecutive term for Labor at the 1993 election.

Times of crisis call forth particular styles of leadership. Prime Minister Billy Hughes, in office from 1915 to 1923, thrived amid conflict – a condition provided abundantly by World War I. As Donald Horne observed, Hughes's 'view of himself demanded high winds of continuous public turmoil to sustain his personality, but in wartime the turmoil he threw up could meet an answering public need. Many people wanted the war to be accompanied by loud and fearsome shouts; Hughes seemed the loudest and most fearsome shouter. More noisily than anyone else, he could sound as if he wanted to win the war.'

Hughes specialised in creating conflict. With thousands of Australian soldiers already serving on European battlegrounds, Hughes led a divisive campaign to introduce conscription for overseas military service. He knew this would split the Labor Party he led. Hughes lost the referendum, abandoned Labor, and used the prestige of his office to form a new government with those across the chamber. 'I did not leave the Labor Party,' he claimed. 'They left me.' Hughes remained prime minister until his party lost its majority following the 1922 election. The party room forced him out in favour of Stanley Bruce, though Hughes stayed in parliament another thirty years, dying in office aged ninety.

Prime ministers should be more secure than opposition leaders. They are more firmly in the public eye, have access to expert advice from the

public service and, importantly, hold patronage to dispense. They can give as well as receive. Yet even they can be forced out – just as Billy Hughes lost his premiership to Stanley Bruce, so did John Gorton to Billy McMahon. Bob Hawke eventually succumbed to Paul Keating and Kevin Rudd to Julia Gillard. In each case the prestige of office could not overcome concerns in the party room.

Opposition leaders have even less to offer their supporters, beyond the prospect of eventual victory. The Liberal Party endured six changes of leadership in thirteen years after its defeat in the 1983 election. Labor changed leaders five times during the eleven years of the Howard government. Any dip in popularity makes leaders vulnerable. Reflecting on Liberal party politics of the early 1970s, Minister for the Army Sir John Cramer observed: 'When members see the possibility of losing their seats they invariably blame their leader. Politics is a remorseless business and when the tide of public opinion turns against you, unless you can bring a miracle out of the hat, you must go down. Then no one cares tuppence about you.'

LEADING A PARTY is a great honour, but it is not the reason people enter the political arena. Despite public cynicism, politics remains a contest of ideas. The gang is given identity by shared values and agenda. Experience may temper idealism, but there would be little point to political life without some transcendent beliefs. A political career, after all, is stressful, poorly paid and often ultimately disappointing. Only the opportunity to make a difference keeps people in the game. The goal may be to win power, but this requires a persuasive view of what a government should do. The task of the leader is to define a program that both commands majority support within the party room and appeals to the electorate. As the saying goes, a political leader must give the public a tune they can hum.

In politics, as on the streets, loyalty is offered to a leader in return for opportunity and success. When these evaporate, so does support. It can be a sobering experience for a new party leader. After the excitement of winning office, and the obligatory media conference promising to lead for all in the party, the fresh leader surveys the terrain that must now be dominated. They

face the expectations of the party room and the enmity of those recently deposed ('in defeat malice, in victory revenge'). Along with the scorn of those members opposite, the leader must worry constantly about those who sit behind. The parliamentary delegation is guided, always, by a combination of local concerns and self-interest. Members seek advancement but must keep their place in parliament. The perceived popularity of the leader in their electorates will be a primary concern. No leader should make parliamentarians choose between loyalty to the incumbent and holding their seats.

To remain credible, the leader must perform strongly in the House of Representatives, before regular party meetings when parliament is in session, at weekly cabinet or shadow cabinet meetings, at committee meetings, and at any private gatherings demanded by factions and colleagues. Contact with parliamentary accomplices is continuous and exhaustive. The senior players have ample contact to build an informed view of the leader's abilities. With every disagreement the leader is reminded that political authority rests with the party room.

Even a successful leader, therefore, treats colleagues with caution. In his memoirs Alexander Downer, senior, said of Menzies:

> His aim was to arrive at a consensus in cabinet. Never, in my recollection, were any matters decided by vote. When he found the current of cabinet thinking differed from his own, then he retreated, expounding the majority opinion with a genius which made the rest of us feel as if the PM all along had considered this the best decision. On those occasions when most of his colleagues took a different view he showed no chagrin, no resentment in cabinet. Privately to friends he might voice his annoyance.

Leaders must balance policy, preference and party room. This is a juggling act of demanding proportions, even among a small number of parliamentary colleagues. The broader party is even more dangerous territory for the leader. The imperatives of policy and the interests of party members may not coincide. Opposition is about attacking your enemies, but government is about disappointing your supporters. In 1982 Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser felt impelled to embrace retrospective tax laws that hurt many senior business leaders. His successor, Bob Hawke, chose to hold down wage increases for

employees in the name of the national economy. Labor prime ministers have sold off government assets to the dismay of public sector unions, while Liberal Prime Minister John Howard banned ownership of some types of guns despite the opposition of his coalition partners. The leader is often caught between policy choices and the expectations of supporters.

If the hopes of the party offer a challenge to policy-making, so does the structure of political organisations. Australian political parties are aggregations of powerful state and territory branches. There is not one gang but several, allied on paper, each pursuing their own state or internecine interests. Decisions about whether to support the party leader may be affected by considerations such as state elections, the factional balance in particular areas, and mumbling from local branches. A prime minister and premier from the same party may still disagree. In January 1996 the Queensland Labor Premier Wayne Goss pressed Prime Minister Paul Keating to defer calling a national poll until a crucial state by-election was held in Townsville. Keating was unmoved by the request from a state colleague and Labor lost, in quick succession, the by-election, government in Queensland and then, by a landslide, the federal election.

Surveying their mark, the new leader can alread y see looming key party events, including national and state conferences, policy launches and closed national council meetings. Here is expected the formal stuff of leadership – commanding speeches, vision and a clear program – as well as the private deals necessary to maintain accord within any organisation.

Every few weeks the leader will be subject to new opinion polls. Whatever the validity of the numbers, polls are reported with enthusiasm by their newspaper sponsors. As a result, the leader faces continuous referenda on their perceived performance. If they perform strongly, backbenchers stay happy. When numbers fall, the first media stories about pending leadership challenges follow.

IT WOULD BE easy for a leader to lose control, to be overwhelmed by the interests and jealousies that comprise a political party. After all, the gang has no shortage of potential challengers, some with strong claims. The party contains a parliamentary core that will read decisions through the narrow prism of office, and a wider constituency ready to be disappointed. Those in the states and

territories, when expeditious, will attack their own in distant Canberra for local advantage. All are ready to demand from – rather than support – the new boss.

Yet the leadership bargain, like all good deals, brings returns to both sides. Members rely on the leader's skill to hold the show together, through forceful advocacy of the ideas that motivate and unify. The careers of backbenchers depend on the party attaining and retaining office. If they destabilise the party too aggressively they risk their own ministerial future and, perhaps, re-election.

Similarly, state governments depend on a favourable relationship with the national leader. Much state largesse relies on commonwealth money, so a vindictive national leader is a threat to a vulnerable state premier. All in the party fear the barrenness of opposition. As Adlai Stevenson quipped, 'power corrupts, but lack of power corrupts absolutely.' A party out of office has no opportunity to achieve its objectives, dispense patronage or enjoy authority. A leader who can deliver victory thus exerts a powerful attraction. The party must gamble on one person who can project the right message and ensure the required party discipline; if the wheel turns it will carry everyone higher. This trade-off, subordinating individual hopes to a greater cause, is the essence of the bargain. The leader does not have to be good or popular, just successful with their parliamentary colleagues. The public gets little say in this calculation; it is a deal between leader and party room. Some prove brilliant; others fail. Former MP Fred Daly portrayed Prime Minister Ben Chifley as a down-to-earth 'expert in human relations' who handled difficult ministers with ease, encouraged backbenchers by sitting with them in parliament, and stressed the value of loyalty given and received. As prime minister, Chifley held his caucus together despite a bitter confrontation with the mining unions. His successor, HV 'Doc' Evatt, did not possess the same skills, and watched the ALP fragment.

Malcolm Fraser too maintained unity amid the arrival of refugees on the northern shores of Australia. In the wake of the divisive Vietnam War, Fraser handled the 'boat people' issue with nerve and principle. John Howard negotiated an unpopular goods and services tax through parliament without splitting his own ranks. Julia Gillard has secured a tax on carbon despite internal party anxiety about public reception of the package. Such initiatives are hard-fought, and may undermine party confidence in the leadership.

To endure as leader requires courage, guile and good luck. Sir John Cramer helped establish the modern Liberal Party, and found much to admire in its first leader, Sir Robert Menzies. Cramer conceded that Menzies dominated his generation – yet Cramer struggled to understand the hold exercised by his leader: 'Lack of generosity of spirit was Menzies' biggest failing and the main reason why he never engendered a personal affection in his colleagues. I never knew him to give genuine praise to anyone for their work or ideas. Worse still, he could very easily kill a new idea and then later bring it up as his own. He was clever – outstandingly so – but he lacked that human touch which drew men to him in a personal sense.'

Cramer perceives the skill exercised by the leader even as he resents its consequences. As a backbencher Cramer was aggrieved to be passed over for the ministry. Eventually in cabinet, he discovered the Prime Minister was inclined to go over his head. Cramer describes Menzies making decisions affecting his army portfolio, including the transfer of senior personnel, without discussion. Yet Cramer could not but admire the finesse with which Menzies retained his position. He remains unsure how Menzies prevailed, though he mentions flattering private conversations designed to keep ministers on side, members being allowed to sound off in the party room, and careful treatment of would-be rivals.

Cramer eventually attributes Menzies' good fortune with the party to character. He might believe Menzies remote but, Cramer concedes, he was also 'a man of tremendous ability', a leader 'far above his colleagues in personality and ability' who survived a period of conservative collapse to become the embodiment of his party, the person who could 'fill the bill' and keep the Liberals in office. Such comebacks are rare in national politics, though John Howard too would suffer defeat in the party room yet eventually return to the leadership.

ONE OF THE few detailed and contemporaneous insider accounts of the disintegration of a regime is found in the diaries of the Victorian Liberal MP Peter Howson, who participated in the fall of John Gorton. On Sunday, 17 December 1967 Howson had just finished lunch when the phone rang with the news that Prime Minister Harold Holt was missing off Portsea. Within a

few sentences of describing his shock, Howson is busily recording speculation about the succession. Politics is indeed a remorseless business.

Several intense weeks of lobbying followed, in which Howson found his position as the Minister for Air threatened by pro-Gorton forces if he did not declare for their candidate. Howson hesitated, Gorton prevailed, and Howson lost his portfolio. He got mad first, and even later. As an aggrieved backbencher, Howson spent three years helping the party turn against the new Prime Minister. In May 1968 Howson observed that Gorton was drifting away from his senior ministers, and must either learn to value their advice or face an eventual challenge to the leadership. In July Howson felt his concerns about Gorton's leadership echoed in comments by other Liberals such as Andrew Peacock. In August he was sharing with colleagues his 'unhappiness with the lack of leadership'. By October Liberal backbenchers were speculating about possible successors.

Gorton survived the year, a number of scandals, and a close election on 25 October 1969, when the conservatives were narrowly returned after a loss of fifteen seats. With the poll barely declared, forces within the Liberal Party mobilised to toss their leader. They were helped by Gorton's protracted brawls with various state premiers, all from the conservative side of politics.

Though an initial challenge failed, in March 1971 Minister for Defence Malcolm Fraser questioned the prime minister's loyalty and resigned. In a scene now part of political folklore, the Liberal Party met to consider the leadership issue. When a no-confidence motion in the prime minister tied 33-all, with one informal vote, John Gorton used his casting ballot to remove himself from office. Shortly after Howson recorded the classic cry of the vindicated backbencher:

> When Gorton was elected three years ago I put in the diary what I thought would happen – and it happened. It has taken longer than I expected, and I think that in the battle that has gone on for so long the bitterness has entered a bit into my soul… I've had, throughout this whole time, to try to keep together a team whose aim was to get rid of Gorton and to get us back to the leadership that this nation deserves… Gorton was unfit to lead the nation. He has now been removed. We must ensure that he never returns to leadership.

Gorton is the exemplar of the leader who lost the support of his party. This did not happen quickly, but over time all sections of the organisation could find fault with their leader – experienced ministers excluded from his cabinet, influential state premiers disturbed by Gorton's 'centralist' policies, party faithful who watched the conservative hegemony threatened by a sometimes erratic and unpredictable prime minister. Peter Howson was only one of a number of backbenchers who believed they had a duty to campaign for Gorton's downfall. Nothing could be more undermining for a leader than a well-organised lobby, slowly obtaining the votes necessary for an execution.

Yet, as the veteran journalist Alan Reid noted, the great are not brought down easily. It took Howson and his colleagues three years to tear down their leader. Reid concluded that 'Gorton's downfall was not planned by his opponents. It happened because of things he either did or did not do. He was the architect of his own misfortune.'

Gorton demonstrated the ultimate vulnerability of a prime minister, but also the advantages of incumbency. It proved hard work to organise against the leader. Backbenchers do not want to risk the eternal wrath of a leader through involvement in an unsuccessful coup. Howson knew he had no future under Gorton, but those with a glimmer of hope for their own prospects remained cautious about revolt. Gorton may have antagonised from the start of his reign, yet it still required more years, near electoral defeat and an unexpected party room crisis before a bare majority for change could be mustered.

In time we may see published first-hand accounts of the fall of Kevin Rudd, and so understand better the organisation and lobbying behind the dismissal of a still electorally popular prime minister less than three years into his first term. It is likely such accounts will share with earlier memoirs a continuous anxiety among parliamentarians about leadership. Fred Daly revelled in Chifley's quiet authority and tough persona. Sir John Cramer may not have liked Menzies but he recognised his ability, and enjoyed the benefits of prolonged government. Peter Howson might talk of Gorton's leadership in terms of 'the nation', but his diary is a running exposition of how party confidence and direction is shaped by the leader. In return for loyalty, the parliamentary party wants stability, opportunity and success. Leaders who deliver these keep their side of the bargain.

Political leadership has long intrigued Australian academics, journalists and politicians. Yet much remains obscure. Key institutions and policy decisions are little studied. Few politicians publish their diaries. A number of former prime ministers and opposition leaders have not found biographers.

Amanda Sinclair from the Melbourne Business School argues that modern accounts of organisation are too concerned with the leader as a moral figure. In *Leadership for the Disillusioned* (Allen & Unwin, 2007) she questions the heroic accounts of leaders found in much management writing. Leaders are presented as larger-than-life characters with compelling personal narratives. They change organisations by force of personality. Through such stories leadership is presented as an art or craft that can be studied and then put into practice – to be learned much like a musical instrument or a martial art. Much management writing, she suggests, promotes an unrealistic understanding of leadership.

For Sinclair, such accounts are profoundly misleading, showing only how 'myths of leadership have come to have a hold on us'. In practice, she says, the power of leaders is overestimated. Organisations closely identified with an individual flourish nonetheless when the leader moves on. Leadership gives us all – and, dangerously, leaders themselves – an exaggerated sense of personal agency. This turns leadership change into tragedy, making choice and rejection evidence of cruel and capricious fate. As Peter Costello left Parliament in 2009, after serving as treasurer and deputy Liberal leader for more than a decade, he must have wondered whether party politics is the ultimate game of chance. The 'future prime minister' tag is hard to endure.

Perhaps while Costello packed up his parliamentary office he recalled the earlier fate of Paul Hasluck. At face value, Hasluck enjoyed an exemplary career – senior public servant, reforming minister and finally governor-general during the prime ministerships of John Gorton, Billy McMahon and Gough Whitlam. Yet, before his vice-regal years, as Liberal Member for Curtin in Western Australia, Hasluck seemed a probable future leader. When Menzies retired from politics, in January 1966, Hasluck refused to campaign for the position. He felt strongly that the party should choose the right person for the job without the need for self-promotion. Harold Holt proved the unanimous choice of the party room.

Fewer than two years later, with Holt lost off the Victorian coast, the party room reconvened. This time, reluctantly, Paul Hasluck put his name forward. Reports suggest he did so primarily to prevent the leadership passing to Billy McMahon, whom Hasluck and John McEwen of the Country Party strongly opposed. Even then, Hasluck found it awkward to canvass his colleagues while a lesser-known, younger senator from Victoria, John Gorton, campaigned energetically. When McEwen made clear his party would not serve under McMahon, Gorton was elected as Holt's successor. The decision ensured Hasluck would never be prime minister.

DID HE WANT the role? Personal ambition must be a factor in political leadership. Many have aspiration for high office, without ever coming close. A smaller number have office within their reach, but decline to grasp it. This leaves the leadership of political parties to individuals who combine drive and ambition with talent, luck and sufficient personal resilience to face possible, even likely, rejection by voters and colleagues.

The long story of dumped and discarded party leaders in Australia – like the story of street gangs – reveals something primal about the leadership pact. That leadership is a lottery is too unsettling to acknowledge. In any competition it is important to believe you are the best person to lead. It is even more encouraging when others share the view. But leadership proves a temporary blessing. The organisation moves on, as the gang searches endlessly for a leader who fits the bill – for the moment.

The street gangs of Chicago in the 1920s are long gone. None of the young boys who once stared defiantly at Frederic Thrasher's camera is alive. Yet the gangs Thrasher described persist. Contemporary street gangs may carry more frightening weapons, yet recent studies confirm they follow the patterns of earlier generations. Leaders still arise from the gang, and prevail through exchange; gangs still value success and shun the vanquished.

And so with the leaders of political parties. The pressures of office may have increased, pushed along by a permanent news cycle and perpetual election campaigns, but the basic relationship between leader and party is unaltered. The mechanics of politics have evolved but the leadership bargain

has not. Parties still offer allegiance in return for the prospect of office. Leaders employ the resources they control in return for support. This is still the transaction between leaders and led.

And because it is a relationship, the choice of leader will be determined by the need of the street gang or political party. No one leadership style will always prevail. As on the streets, in politics there is a sense of a leader being right for the times. The leader still 'grows out of the gang'. Malcolm Turnbull made such good sense for the Liberals they threw over Brendan Nelson as leader, though few could find substantial fault with Nelson's performance. Little more than a year later Turnbull faced defeat in his party room.

The story threads again and again. Leading a political party requires an astonishing array of skills. Scrutiny is constant and the chances of survival always marginal. We make much of sporting heroes in this country, but few team captains face the sheer complexity and odds that confront each prime minister, every leader of the opposition.

The point of comparing gangs with politicians is not just to enjoy the unexpected similarities, but to ponder the lessons. In both arenas, leadership requires an order of skills demanded of few others in our community. Joining a street gang is a matter of taste or situation, but encouraging talented people to consider a political career is difficult. The rewards are modest, the grief great and the risks daunting. To rise to the top requires a rare combination of guile and wisdom, judgement and luck. If the timing proves wrong, a talented individual can spend an entire political career mired in the frustration of opposition. No wonder few are called and fewer respond. Yet it matters greatly in our democracy that gifted women and men decide to make a difference through public service. Most will not become leaders, but each deserves encouragement. The quality of our elected representatives will determine, in turn, the quality of our leaders.

AS FREDERIC THRASHER looked back over his street gangs, he could see no clear pattern for who became leader. Because leadership grows out of the times, leaders are a diverse group. They may be the right person only

briefly for the job. A leader very successful at one point may quickly seem dated, wrong for changed circumstances. When the times change the leader must change too, or get out of the way.

Most Australians work in organisations less brutal than the rough and uncompromising worlds of street gangs and political parties. Politics is ruthless everywhere, but in Australia it is particularly cruel. Our political structures, with a weekly opinion poll peddled as news, encourage haste. Three-year parliamentary terms provide little space for brave initiatives followed by slow public realisation of the benefits. Single-member constituencies restrict diversity among a party's political representatives. The dominance of the parliamentary party policy, and the absence of accountability mechanisms such as recall elections, allows the party room to make leadership choices without reference to a broader constituency.

There are cultural factors informing these patterns. A political process with more women, for example, might produce different patterns of leadership. The few studies of all-girl street gangs suggest more stable and supportive patterns of leadership (along, curiously, with a much greater risk of imprisonment). We have no predominantly female parliaments to provide a comparison.

Local leadership is influenced by the structure of political parties. Australian party leaders are chosen exclusively by parliamentary members. In Canada and Britain parties have opened up the choice of parliamentary leader to broader groups – specially convened conferences, primary systems or even votes of the entire party membership. Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper was elected as leader of the Conservative Party by a ballot of nearly a hundred thousand party members, using a system that provides representation for each electorate. In September 2010 Labour in the United Kingdom chose a new leader through a complex electoral college of parliamentarians, constituency members and affiliated unions. More than 320,000 votes were counted in the final choice between brothers David and Ed Miliband.

Leaders chosen through a wider process endure longer in office. The difficulty of organising a spill works in favour of the incumbent. There is less indication such parties enjoy greater electoral success. Indeed, there is a

risk parties will prove dysfunctional if unable to renew themselves while in office. Yet recent debate in both Canada's Conservative Party and Britain's Labour Party is not about a return to parliamentary selection, but focused on making even more representative the electoral process for choosing a leader. The democratisation of party leadership, once begun, appears hard to reverse.

THIS TREND IS conspicuously absent in Australia. The ALP has committed to a limited trial of primary elections for individual members of parliament, but there is no debate about an alternative process for selecting leaders. Both government and opposition remain committed to parliamentary choice. The Australian Greens initially resisted nominating any leader, but at its National Conference in 2005 agreed the parliamentary party room should choose a leader. Bob Brown was elected, and remains in the role. His selection confirms a single process for choosing leaders across the political spectrum, regardless of ideology.

The well-established Australian pattern of rapid leadership change, developed over more than a century, seems set to endure. The party room will gravitate to alternatives who seem right for the times, only to abandon them ruthlessly when needs change. A few deeply talented individuals will grow and adapt in office. Most never get the opportunity.

This is sobering. It suggests that political leaders, to a large extent, are selected by circumstance. We hope great leaders with a compelling vision will be chosen on the merits of their attributes and the intelligence of their ideas. Yet good people are passed over because their skills are not those most in demand at the crucial moment, while poor leaders may be chosen because the times require a symbol.

As with a street gang, it can be hard to predict in advance what sort of leader a political party will pick. This time round will it be a prize-fighter, a daredevil, a desperado, a puritan, muscles or brains? Those who aspire to power and leadership must live with the game of chance implied by Thrasher's work – skills may come to the fore, or be passed over, for reasons that have nothing to do with merit and everything to do with timing.

Most Australians will never be part of a gang, nor participate in the tough world of politics. Yet we all live with the consequences. The structures and culture of Australian politics mean the dynamic of leadership remains an exchange between leaders and led, with the gang always in charge. Only a leader who fits the times, can inspire the gang and take it to success, gets a chance to walk these mean streets.

This article develops an idea raised first in a contribution to Pat Weller's fine 1992 volume *Menzies to Keating: The Development of the Australian Prime Ministership*. It was revived and expanded at the suggestion of Louise Adler from Melbourne University Publishing. I have appreciated her encouragement, along with editorial suggestions from Julianne Schultz, Pat Weller's critical eye, and incisive comments from John Ballard, Gwil Croucher, Margaret Gardner, Paul Gray, Rod Rhodes, Cain Roberts and Sam Rosevear.

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