

When Women Rule

The Right Honourable Kim Campbell, Canada's first and only female prime minister, reviews a psychological study of three 20th-century female political giants.

[Kim Campbell](#)

Women in Power: The Personality and Leadership Style of Indira Gandhi, Golda Meir and Margaret Thatcher

Blema S. Steinberg

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Blema S. Steinberg's *Women in Power* is subtitled "The Personality and Leadership Style of Indira Gandhi, Golda Meir and Margaret Thatcher." The author has admittedly not met her subjects personally and I am wary of such long-distance psychoanalysis because, having been a leader, I was the subject of similar attempts. I read this treatise through the eyes of someone who had experienced this: when I was in politics and was addressing an audience of my close supporters, I would sometimes end with the phrase "as my father would say, 'Consider yourselves hugged.'" My father had seen a bumper sticker that said, "Have you hugged your kids today?" and, struck by its message, called his two (adult) daughters who no longer lived at home to give them a "hug," and he used the phrase to conclude all telephone conversations with us thereafter. When he died in 2002, the obituary writer in, of all places, *The Globe and Mail*, came to the ridiculous conclusion that my father's phrase revealed that my childhood had been devoid of physical affection, leaving the reader to ponder what effect this may have had on my political personality and my life. No parent and no child are perfect, but a lack of physical affection from either of my parents was not part of my childhood experience. Throughout my career I suffered many similarly misguided attempts to explain my psyche, so I am cautious when I encounter studies such as the one under discussion here. Still, Blema Steinberg's exploration of how women lead interested me for obvious reasons.

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The book's approach is not meant to illuminate any general observations about women in leadership roles. It is primarily an academic treatise, designed to test the predictive qualities of a system of personality analysis for the way the subjects, three of the 20th century's most significant female heads of government, conducted themselves as leaders. Thus the book is not written for the layperson and the reader has to wade through long discussions of psychological methodology and repetition of narrative. However, the descriptions of the lives and political careers of her subjects are interesting and there are some genuine nuggets in Steinberg's analysis.

What is most striking about Steinberg's discussion of the leadership styles of her three subjects is that none corresponds to what has commonly come to be seen as the "feminine style of leadership," namely the "interactive" style as discussed by Judy Rosener in *America's Competitive Secret: Women*

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Managers and others. None of the three promoted the interests of women in any conscious way and, as Steinberg points out, under Gandhi, the position of India's women actually worsened. Nor could Gandhi's tenure support the notion that women leaders are necessarily less corrupt than their male counterparts. Not only do these women not correspond to the expectations commonly expressed in the social science literature about women leaders, but they also — in the dominant personality attribute — appear to rank higher than male leaders such as George W. Bush, Bill Clinton and even Robert Mugabe. Steinberg suggests that gender may well account for this surprising difference since male leaders are assumed to be suited to lead and, therefore, do not need to express dominance as a personality trait to the degree that women leaders do. This points out what I found most frustrating about the book: while the discussions of personality traits and leadership styles are interesting, there is no comparative data for male leaders (with the exception of this last *aperçu*) to give context to the discussion and thus justify the choice of female leaders to test the hypothesis regarding the ability to predict leadership styles through an analysis of personality attributes.

As I read the book I had some concerns about the methodology employed in the study. (For the faint of heart who do not like methodological critiques, I suggest you skip the next three paragraphs.) I found the descriptions of the various personality attributes somewhat problematic but I will leave it to academic psychologists to argue their validity. The personality attributes identified by this analysis are: dominant (controlling), dauntless (dissenting), ambitious (assertive), outgoing (extroverted), accommodating (agreeable), contentious (complaining), conscientious (conforming), reticent (hesitating) and retiring (introverted). I was puzzled by the parenthetical qualifiers of these attributes as they did not always seem to be synonymous with the main categories and in some cases provided a much more limited range of qualities. The author acknowledges that the typology devised by Theodore Millon for the examination of pathological behaviour and adapted by Aubrey Immelman for the study of non-pathological behaviour is only one of a variety of choices available to the student of psychology and that other schemes may be more persuasive.

The analyses of the three subjects are based upon content analysis of primary and secondary biographical sources and direct statements of the leaders themselves. These items constitute the data of the study. The data were analyzed by categorizing the items according to the personality attributes and then calculating the scores for each attribute as a percentage of the overall raw data. The range of attributes was then characterized as present (5–9), prominent (10–21) and mildly dysfunctional (24–30). Unfortunately, a clear explanation of the methodology is only to be found in the appendix. This makes following the argument somewhat difficult and the book would benefit by a clearer organization that set out the methodology in full at the beginning.

Leadership-style categories were defined in three clusters. Cluster A is individual style, which included motivation, task orientation, investment in job performance; cluster B is managerial style, which included cabinet management strategy and information management strategy; and cluster C is interpersonal style, which included relations with personnel, relations with the party, relations with opposition parties, relations with the media and relations with the public. The data are then matched to this scale and the author concludes by hypothesizing what sorts of leadership styles should be predicted by particular personality traits.

The way the raw data were generated raised some concerns in my mind because the same actions may be characterized differently in females than in males. The saying “he is forceful; she is a bitch” reflects the way certain behaviour seen as appropriate to men generates a negative evaluation when exhibited by women. Myriad studies of bias (gender and other forms) demonstrate that it is frequently unconscious and that gender bias is among the most deeply rooted forms of social stereotyping in any society. I am wary of the author’s reliance on the descriptions of the subjects provided by interviews with political colleagues and their memoirs for any purpose other than to demonstrate the subjective evaluations of those particular people.

Margaret Thatcher is described by people who knew her when she was young as not so much intelligent than as “a grind.” The backhanded compliment of being “a hard worker” is often used for women to account for their accomplishments without having to grant them any particular innate ability. Research on intelligence shows that it actually grows with application and this explains why people who are not identified as gifted when they are young often outperform their classmates who are so designated. In fact, one’s attitude to intelligence (whether it is innate or something that can be cultivated) can strongly influence success since those who hold the former view often become risk averse, fearing that a failure will disprove that they are “smart.” Given the difficulties that faced Margaret Thatcher in her striving (the need to help out in her parents’ store while attending school where she topped her class, successfully writing the bar exams shortly after giving birth to twins), it seems highly unlikely that she was not highly intelligent, even if she was rather dogmatic.

I am inclined to think that statements by the subjects themselves, particularly public utterances, may be less revelatory of personality than of the specific purpose to be served by the utterance. I am not suggesting that politicians cannot be honest in their discourse, only that politics is an activity deeply concerned with persuasion and those who practise it gear their remarks to an effective communication with a specific audience, not to revealing their own personal qualities. This does not mean that any such comments have no value, but Steinberg points out, for example, that Thatcher’s recollections of involving her ministers in decision making are very different from their own versions of that reality. Thatcher and her ministers all have “political” agendas to serve in describing her collaborative qualities, or lack thereof, and so their comments are not necessarily reliable in identifying a leadership quality or underlying personality attribute. If one accepts for the sake of argument the soundness of the methodological approach with respect to personality attributes, the expectations for leadership behaviour from these qualities appear conjectural. In the end, the author concludes that the personality profiles are imperfect predictors of leadership behaviour. This brings up another factor that is crucial to understanding political behaviour — context.

Gandhi, Meir and Thatcher all served in parliamentary political systems, which makes a comparison of their experiences useful. From my own experience of the political process, it is clear that how a prime minister deals with cabinet, caucus, the media, the party, etc., often depends on factors quite unrelated to a basic leadership style. Where issues are key to the prime minister’s agenda, he or she may be much more “top down” in directing the decision-making process than with less personally important issues where the leader may be content to let ministers work out problems and take them through cabinet and caucus. Similarly, the political capital of leaders varies through time — particularly where party fortunes in the polls change and depending on whether the leader’s position relies upon caucus support or rather, as in Canadian politics, the leader is elected by the party in convention, thus

militating against the type of process that dethroned Margaret Thatcher. Finally, where cabinet colleagues are concerned, one must remember that in a parliamentary system these appointments are the sole prerogative of the prime minister but may need to accommodate factions not close to the leader and this may affect the way the leader chooses to engage with cabinet or with particular ministers.

Meir and Gandhi appeared to become more dominant over time and this suggests that personality is not static but can change. If power can corrupt, it can no doubt alter the balance of personality traits that affect leadership style and behaviour. Gandhi is described as reticent and retiring, yet she developed into a “feisty” and effective public orator who genuinely enjoyed the opportunity to meet and interact with the public. Leaders who break the mould as did these three women may be even more difficult to predict since they may have to mask certain qualities and accommodate gender or other expectations in order to rise to the top at all. Steinberg points out that Gandhi’s gender was important in persuading her Congress Party colleagues that she would be malleable as prime minister. She deliberately played down any hint of ambition in her public utterances, but was much clearer about her goal to become leader in private correspondence with her son Rajiv.

There are some interesting observations in the book that address some of the common assumptions about women who rise to the top. Insights such as the fact that none had older male siblings and that each was regarded as unpromising leadership material by her political colleagues lead to an interesting discussion of how each was able to break the male dominance of the politics of her country and how gender may actually have worked in her favour. It is often asserted that such women must have a supportive relationship with their fathers. While this was certainly true of Thatcher, who rejected her mother’s realm and identified closely with her father, who introduced her to the world of politics and encouraged her ambition, it does not hold true for either Gandhi or Meir. One might assume that as the daughter of the founding prime minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, Gandhi was a protégé of her father. However, Steinberg asserts that in fact Nehru did not believe in political dynasties and did not consider mentoring his daughter to succeed him. Moreover, Gandhi resented her father and identified more closely in the family with her mother. She may have wanted to show her father that she could equal him, but she certainly did not have his support or encouragement in preparing for a career in public life. Even when she played the role of his hostess after the death of her mother, her role was relegated to that of domestic manager. Meir was not close to either of her parents and she left home at an early age to avoid their plans for her life — an early marriage to an older man and domesticity.

Steinberg relates an interesting anecdote about Margaret Thatcher visiting Indira Gandhi in India and pressing her for information on how she managed her role as leader. For most women who become political leaders, however, there are few if any role models of the same sex and this may explain why so many must emulate the qualities of the men who precede them. In the current U.S. primary campaign, a number of commentators have remarked that Barack Obama reflects the traditional view of “female” leadership — consensus building, etc. — more than does Hillary Clinton.

It is important not to criticize an author for not writing the book the reviewer would have preferred to read. This book is admittedly a first foray into an examination of the predictive qualities of a form of personality analysis. Steinberg’s study concludes that personality profiles are imperfect predictors of political leadership styles, at least for her chosen subjects. What would be interesting to see would be a

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larger analysis that would compare women and men in these roles in order to try to understand how the context of gender affects the kinds of personalities of each sex that are acceptable in leaders and whether there is greater or lesser correspondence between personality and leadership style among men than women. The topic is important and with all the caveats about long-distance psychological analysis, the question remains of how gender influences who gets to lead. I will be interested to see if Steinberg decides to tackle a broader study to come closer to understanding this.

The Right Honourable [Kim Campbell](#) was Canada's first and only female prime minister. She is currently active internationally in promoting the advancement of women and from 2001 to 2003 she taught a course called "Gender and Power" at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University.