

What makes a great leader?

Kishore Mahbubani and Klaus Schwab

Not long ago, over dinner in Singapore, we attempted to define what qualities make a great leader.

For Klaus, the five key elements were heart, brain, muscle, nerve and soul. For Kishore, compassion, canniness and courage were key, as was the ability to identify talent and understand complexity. The extent of the overlap is telling.

It is no coincidence that both lists begin with heart. Like Nelson Mandela and Mahatma Gandhi, a leader cannot achieve greatness without showing deep empathy with his or her people – a sentiment that fuels the fight against the injustices those people may face.

Such heroic leaders are unlikely to emerge in normal times. But these are not normal times. On the contrary, today's unprecedented inequality in many parts of the world is precisely the kind of injustice that could spur the emergence of great leaders with compassion for those at the bottom.

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, the young leader who most radiates hope today, was elected partly because of his commitment to

helping ordinary people.

Then there is "brain" – the ability to sift through the masses of information with which we are constantly inundated, in order to make smart decisions in a complex and rapidly changing world. Here, some current leaders are showing plenty of aptitude.

For example, the Chinese and Indian economies' continued growth and development reflect the fact that President Xi Jinping and Prime Minister Narendra Modi, respectively, understand the economic and social challenges and opportunities implied by the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

They know that, in this complex context, they must develop dynamic new industries that place their economies at the frontier of scientific and technological progress.

The smart use of new technology is also helping to alleviate poverty.

The billion Indians who have signed up for Aadhaar, their electronic identity card, now enjoy direct access to welfare benefits without bureaucratic barriers.

The billion Chinese who use their smartphones to make mobile payments now enjoy direct access to all kinds of consumer products that enhance their lifestyles.

No one has yet reliably quantified

the boost to well-being that such technological advances produce. But optimism in both China and India is surging.

According to the Pew Research Centre, 87 per cent of Chinese feel positive about their country's current economic condition, and 82 per cent believe that their children will be better off than they are today. Similarly, 83 per cent of Indians feel positive about the economy, and 76 per cent think that their children will be better off.

The third critical quality of a great leader is courage – or nerve, as Klaus puts it.

The surge of refugees in Europe, especially Syrian asylum seekers in 2015, led to an explosion of populist sentiment, with political leaders increasingly calling for borders to be closed. Weak leaders buckled under the pressure, either aligning their rhetoric with that of the populists or getting steamrolled by their fiery competitors.

Not German Chancellor Angela Merkel. She set a powerful example by agreeing to accept a million refugees. At first, her standing with voters – and even many within her own party – sagged, to the point that some began writing her political epitaph. But her remarkable courage eventually paid off. She is now recognised

worldwide as one of the strongest leaders of our time.

In his own quiet way, President Joko Widodo of Indonesia has shown similar courage. Indonesia, like Europe, is confronting growing pressure from nationalist and populist voices seeking to displace the five principles of tolerance – the Pancasila – that underpin Indonesian statehood.

The imprisonment of Mr Joko's political ally, former Jakarta governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, also known as Ahok, for blasphemy against Islam has reinforced that pressure.

Yet Mr Joko, like Dr Merkel, has continued to fight back against the extremists, even outlawing the extremist group Hizbut-Tahrir.

Of course, translating courage into positive change requires muscle – the influence and authority to take action – which requires an astute understanding of political realities. Such canniness was vital to bring about the powerful shift in Ireland's political system, for example, with the deeply conservative country electing Dr Leo Varadkar, a gay man of Indian origin, as its prime minister.

Pope Francis shows how these various qualities can come together to produce strong leadership.

Shrewdness, courage, morality and

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intelligence have underpinned his effort to change the position and perception of the Roman Catholic Church in the world.

For example, while tradition prohibits the pope from endorsing homosexuality, Pope Francis had the courage to say: "If a person is gay and seeks out the Lord and is willing, who am I to judge that person?" Likewise, Pope Francis broke from the Church's traditional line to suggest that women exposed to the Zika virus that ravaged parts of Latin America last year could use artificial contraception.

More broadly, Pope Francis has shown courage and wisdom in

embracing a more decentralised Church structure, and envisioning an inclusive Church that is a "home for all". In yet another shrewd move, he pursued the turnover of senior officials at the Vatican gradually, rather than in one fell swoop.

Pope Francis also has what Klaus would call the soul of a leader. Most leaders succumb, at one point or another, to the comfortable trappings of office. Yet Pope Francis continues to live a simple and uncluttered life, without the perks that are often associated with leadership, even in the religious realm.

In a world that is changing more rapidly than ever, we should seek leaders who can protect and serve the interests of the people they are supposed to represent. This means not just criticising the failings of weak leaders, but also highlighting the successes of strong ones. They may be rare, but they do exist, and we should celebrate them.

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