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# The Politics of Party Leader Survival and Succession: Australia in Comparative Perspective

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The processes of replacement of party leaders are well-published events in media outlets across the world's democracies, but are scarcely analysed by political scientists. In this article we examine the extent to which incumbent party leaders are able to control their own fate in the face of various types of challenges that herald a possible end to their rule. It discusses three related research questions derived from this main objective: (1) what makes incumbents quit? (2) How do incumbents respond to various types of triggers heralding a possible end to their rule? (3) To what extent does incumbent behaviour prior to and following succession affect the fortunes of their successors and their party? We draw on a four-country–eight-party data set of leadership successions between 1945 and 2005, and on findings of in-depth studies of Australian cases to show that not only do Australian leaders get challenged and replaced more frequently than do other leaders, but they are also forced to combat more internal rivalry than their counterparts elsewhere.

## Introduction

However good and powerful they may be, all leaders of political parties have a limited 'sell by' date. They get old, weary and sick. They get out of tune with the

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times, or anaesthetised by their own power. Sooner or later they become embarrassments to the people who put them in office, or those who keep them there. A leader who stays on for too long provides a painful spectacle. One of the charming features of democracy is that it seldom gets as far that. At the very least its rules for the acquisition and transition of political power limit the duration of these farces and dramas. A democracy, unlike other political regimes, has built-in 'stop rules' that protect society against incompetent or authoritarian leaders.

At the same time, a line of political sociologists starting with Michels ([1911] 1998) and Mosca (1959) has argued that, even in democratic settings, the leadership of political organisations does not rotate as frequently or flexibly as one might expect. They consolidate their positions against the backdrop of existing or evolving oligarchic or even 'monocratic' (ie strictly personalistic) structures of power and influence, which limit their accountability to the party's rank and file (Schonfeld 1981). Moreover, many leader successions do not unfold particularly smoothly. They often constitute a major political problem for the party and the individuals concerned. They involve considerable risks for all involved and they may have ramifications beyond the personal well-being and political power of the individual protagonists.

In this article we examine the extent to which incumbent party leaders are able to control their own fate in the face of various types of challenges that herald a possible end to their rule. It discusses three related research questions derived from this main objective: (1) what makes incumbents quit? (2) How do incumbents respond to various types of triggers heralding a possible end to their rule? (3) To what extent does incumbent behaviour prior to and following succession affect the fortunes of their successors and their party? These questions all relate to the plight of incumbent leaders faced with some kind of trigger to step down. Clear and empirically informed answers to most of these questions are currently lacking. Despite the fact that leader successions are a hotly debated and intensely reported issue in the daily practice of every political system, there is a relative dearth of systematic, let alone comparative, research on this topic, at least as far as leader succession in democratic systems is concerned. We attempt to fill part of this gap by drawing on a four-country–eight-party data set of leadership successions between 1945 and 2005, and on findings from several in-depth studies of Australian cases.

We proceed as follows. First, we review the existing literature and extract its main findings with regard to this article's research questions. Then we present data on leader longevity and causes of leader exits in the parties studied. Next, we examine how decisions about the termination of a party leader's career are being made, and discuss the ongoing changes in institutional mechanisms for leader (de) selection in various parties. These mechanisms matter because they contain both opportunity structures for potential challengers as well as defence mechanisms for incumbents. In comparison, the big Australian parties have a low threshold for leader removal, giving their succession politics a particularly brutal quality (Davis 1998, x; Weller 1994). We then present our findings regarding incumbents' behaviour in the face of succession triggers, focusing in somewhat more detail on the Australian case.

### **Studying Party Leadership Succession: Review and Study Design**

Is every instance of party leadership succession a case *sui generis*, or can we distinguish patterns to them? Can we even predict the outcomes of succession episodes

when we have knowledge about certain critical variables? What do we know about these processes? Apart from largely descriptive overviews (Calvert 1987b; Davis 1998), more detailed studies of individual countries or parties (cf Günther 1970; Jackson 1975; Courtney 1995) and in-depth accounts of particularly gripping leadership struggles (cf Reid 1969; Alexandre 1970; Kelly 1984; Koerfer 1987; Naughtie 2002), remarkably little research into party leadership succession in liberal democracies has been undertaken so far—the United Kingdom excepted (Punnett 1992; Stark 1996; Quinn 2004, 2005). This stands in stark contrast with the well-established tradition of candidate selection and cadre recruitment in party research (cf Norris 1997). The bulk of existing succession studies pertains to leadership in pre-modern, tribal, communist and autocratic regimes, or deals with chief executives in presidential systems (Burling 1974; Rush 1974; Bialer 1982; Bunce 1981; McCauley and Carter 1986; Calvert 1987a; Taras 1989; Lowi 1992; Swaine 1992; Castaneda 2000; Pina-Cabral and Lima 2000; Wong and Yong Nian 2002). The same goes for the voluminous literature on leadership succession in the corporate and non-profit sectors (Kesner and Seborá 1994; Giambatista, Rowe and Riaz 2005). The few more analytical contributions mostly examine different institutional mechanisms of leadership selection, survival and ejection (Weller 1983, 1994; Hecló 1992; Courtney 1995; LeDuc 2001; Bueno de Mesquita et al 2003; Quinn 2004, 2005) or the policy effects of leadership succession (Bunce 1981; Roeder 1985; Boyne, Ashworth and Powell 2001; Boyne and Dahya 2002). The former are of great interest here, the latter less so. Amidst all this, we know of no study that concentrates on analyses let alone systematically compares the role of incumbents in (democratic) party leadership successions, a noteworthy omission given their evident centrality to the entire process.

The existing research tells us that it is very hard for anyone—incumbents, aspirants, internal and external power brokers alike—to successfully plan and manage leadership successions (Punnett 1992; Stark 1996). Even when there is the seemingly cogent situation of one-party rule in an authoritarian state, it turns out to be exceedingly difficult for incumbents to successfully nurture an heir apparent to take over from them when they have had enough (Holmes 1986, 189; Rush 1974, 298). Single-party rule does not eclipse existing political fault lines—whether ideologically, ethnically, or regionally inspired—culminating in competing claims to control the party (Castaneda 2000). Incumbents who go too far in grooming one potential successor may disrupt the delicate tug of war. Likewise, incumbents whose hold on power is seen to be weakening are often unable to prevent the battle for their succession getting underway. The prize is simply too big, and the zero-sum nature of the court politics and bureaucratic infighting that tends to characterise these systems too bitter to expect restraint (Mitchell 1990, 6–24).

In democratic parties, the odds are stacked against any single actor controlling leadership succession, particularly but not exclusively so in cases where the leader (de)selection system is more inclusive—such as in the Canadian system of leadership conferences (Courtney 1995) and the American systems of presidential primaries (LeDuc 2001). That said, there are some important exceptions that confirm the rule. In particular, long-serving and still powerful incumbents such as MacKenzie King in Canada, Erlander in Sweden, and Den Uyl and Kok in the Netherlands did succeed in orchestrating the accession of a chosen heir, partly by effectively blocking aspirants they disapproved of. Different rules for party leader (de)selection do produce significant differences in the vulnerability of leaders to removal attempts.

In old-style backroom inner-circle systems such as that of the British Conservatives prior to 1965, incumbent prime ministers could pretty much prolong their time in office as they saw fit (Weller 1983; cf Stark 1996). Paradoxically, the same may apply to highly democratised systems where ordinary members select the party leader through direct ballot, since the leader enjoys a popular mandate he can use to stare down his parliamentary peers. As we shall see, leader survival is far more tenuous in systems where it is these peers in the party room who (de)select leaders.

Do successions matter? They do most certainly for the individuals involved. However they are constituted by party rules, succession struggles tend to make or break political careers. The bonds between key political players are tested severely, and often change durably as a result of the succession experience—and often not for the better. This may spill over into the party at large. This is perhaps why the standard reflex in parties and governments (and perhaps public and private organisations at large) is to shy away from successions. Removing an unpopular leader obviously has regenerative potential, but attempts to do so more often than not open a Pandora's box of internecine struggle. Hence, Punnett (1992, 173) sums up the conventional wisdom: 'other than when a natural vacancy occurs, leadership contests should be avoided because they can threaten party unity, provide comfort to the enemy and distract the party from its tasks in government and opposition'.

It is, however, important to emphasise the contingent nature of succession-induced conflict and destabilisation. Not every succession episode propels a crisis, and probably few successions produce a major shift in policy, although they may shake up the composition of the party's power elite (Bunce 1981; Roeder 1985; Boyne et al 2001). There are two relevant dimensions to be discerned here: the succession process and its outcomes, both of which can entail bigger or smaller threats to the status quo *ex ante*, depending upon the configuration of forces at work. The literature suggests that a succession *process* is likely to be more disruptive of a party's organisation, unity and popularity (a) the longer it lasts, (b) the more hard fought it is, and (c) the more leader-centred is the modus operandi of the party. The succession *outcomes* are more likely to constitute a major break with the party's past climate and policies (a) the bigger the leader's general autonomy vis-à-vis the party, (b) the more resentful the losing protagonists and stakeholders are in the wake of the leadership contest, (c) the smaller the intra-party and mass media support for the (new) leader, (d) the more reform oriented the new leader's policy ideas, and (e) the less incremental his reforming style (cf Calvert 1987a; Davis 1998; Boyne and Dahya 2002).

### *Study Design*

Our study comprises two components: a data set and a series of case studies. The data set covers the two major political parties of four Western democracies in the first 50 post-Second World War years: the United Kingdom, Australia, Sweden, and the Netherlands. We focused on parliamentary democracies, since the institutional logic of leadership selection and removal in presidential democracies is quite different (cf Hecló 1992; Davis 1998), and within this category on established, Western democracies to control for degree of institutionalisation of party offices and leader selection rules. Furthermore we focused on countries where there was a distinct top-two of major political parties (many multiparty democracies have more fluid party landscapes) alternating between government and Opposition roles, and wanted some variation on leader (de)selection rules: from informal

'inner-circle' systems to party room votes to more inclusive selection systems. Finally, we excluded countries whose languages elude us in order to avoid data access problems.

A codebook comprising 32 variables was developed; each case was coded for all variables. The codebook can be obtained from the authors. Sources included (auto)-biographies, newspaper accounts, and party and prime ministerial Websites. Random inter-coder reliability checks were conducted on five cases and yielded >95% agreement. A caveat is in order. Given the strategic behaviour of the actors under study, the phenomenon of leadership succession is less easy to demarcate than one might expect. One may, of course, limit the observations to cases when leader X goes and successor Y takes office (virtually all existing studies do so), but one has to remain aware that this is a mere tip of the iceberg. For example, unless we engage in in-depth case studies it is difficult to determine how often leaders' positions are actually at stake throughout their tenure. For every completed succession there might be any number of aborted attempts. Thus to really explain why some succession episodes lead to actual leader replacement and others not is exceedingly difficult, simply because it is nearly impossible to reliably trace and analyse the universe of cases. In addition to compiling the data set, we also conducted intensive case studies of individual succession cases from each of the countries in the data set as well as from German federal politics. These are reported in detail elsewhere (see, for example, 't Hart 2006a, b), but have informed our current analysis of the processes behind the 'numbers' that are at work and we draw on them for occasional examples here.

### **When and Why Party Leaders Go**

We start with the obvious question as to how long party leaders tend to stay, and how much this varies across individuals, parties and countries (cf Bienen and Van de Walle 1991). A reasonable expectation is for a newly elected leader to enjoy a grace period that lasts at least until the first general election to be fought under his leadership. This should allow him to consolidate power within the party and establish a posture as its primary representative on the national political scene. The numbers give us a fuzzy picture: 63.1% of the leaders studied in our sample stayed on for more than 48 months (ie the ideal-typical duration of an election cycle in most of the countries studied, Australia being an exception). This is probably a minimum for a leader to put his mark on his party. Remarkably, average leader tenure in our sample is 75 months, but the standard deviation is 61 months, highlighting the twin extremes of a number of markedly long and short tenures. In three cases, leaders did not get the chance to fight a single general election—they were ousted by their party colleagues before they could (Crean, Downer and Duncan-Smith). It is a valid question whether these individuals indeed can be considered 'incumbents' in any meaningful sense of the word, yet the politicking surrounding their aborted careers is too important to ignore. At the other extreme, leaders like Makenzie King, Churchill, Adenauer, Menzies, Palme, Trudeau, Thatcher, Kohl, Chretien and Howard managed to survive for more than a decade. Some, like Dutch social democrat Joop den Uyl, were leaders for more than two, with Swedish social democrat Tage Erlander topping the bill with 23 years of uninterrupted party leadership and prime ministership, a stark contrast with Canadian progressive-conservative Leader and Prime Minister Kim Campbell who lasted only six months in office,

swept out by an historic election fiasco in which she led her party to the loss of all but 2 of its 155 seats (Davis 1998, 56).

These examples suggest the obvious explanation for differences in leader longevity: political efficacy—leaders stand or fall by their ability to put the party in position to form a government (by winning elections; by consolidating gains made at prior elections; by manoeuvring deftly during post-election coalition formations), and once there, to hold onto government. In this logic, parties in Opposition should experience much more frequent leadership changes than parties in government—a proposition intuitively supported by the plight of the British Labour and Conservative Parties during their periods in the political wilderness in the 1980s and post-1997, respectively, as well as that of the Australian Liberal and Labor Parties during roughly the same period. Our data nevertheless provide little support for this proposition. Contrary to what Davis (1998) and others assert, it appears from Figure 1 that Opposition is not a good predictor of short leadership tenure at all: many Opposition leaders have enjoyed long stints at the helm of their parties despite their obvious lack of success in bringing them to government office, although this is less the case in contemporary politics as opposed to the first two post-war decades.

But the story does not end there. It does turn out that Opposition leaders are much more likely to be ousted following disappointing election results. Or, in reverse, the so-called ‘incumbency bonus’ comes through when we compare the effects of bad election results on prime ministers to those on Opposition leaders. In other words, as long as he manages to keep his party in office, a prime minister can usually

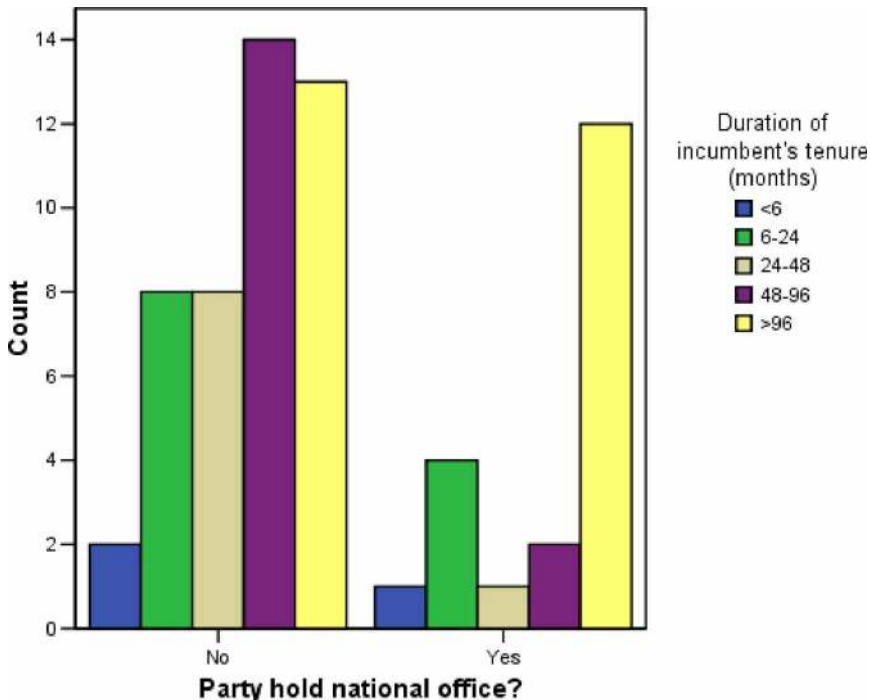


Figure 1. Party office holding and leader longevity.

absorb electoral losses unscathed. Our data do not give us the opportunity to measure the absolute impact of holding national office since we coded only successful succession episodes, but it is a telling figure that more than half (45 of 65) of the party leaders that were replaced were in Opposition at the time of succession.

What explains this differential sensitivity to electoral punishment? One reason might be that leaders of government parties are shouldering much bigger burdens—running the country, keeping the peace, managing the economy, dealing with crises, and so on. This is much heavier than just waging opposition, squarely aimed at driving the government out and getting oneself into office. The upside of this unequal leadership burden for incumbent prime ministers is, however, that they have many more exogenous factors to blame for a bad showing at the polls (but see Weller 1983). All other things equal, if an Opposition party does not gain significantly at the election, the leader has a lot to answer for, and has fewer excuses and scapegoats at his disposal. This increases their chances of being made scapegoats themselves, unless they are deeply loved by the rank and file, maintain an iron grip on any potential dissidence, or are exceptionally skilful in placating their critics or playing them off against one another.

### *Succession Triggers*

So what does make leaders leave office? Party leadership is seldom a safe possession. It only takes a faux pas or two for speculation about the future of the incumbent leader to start, particularly in Australia where the politics of leadership is ‘all-consuming’ (Weller 1994, 142). The nature and extent of such political gossip can itself be a good indicator of the state of health of the leadership. Moreover, it can become its own cause, as internal grumbling and speculation about possible challenges may serve to undermine the leader’s effectiveness internally as well as externally, thus fuelling further criticism and resentment. Below we shall establish how succession episodes that actually resulted in a leadership change came about.

### *Electoral Defeat*

As democratic theory has it, when the populace speaks leaders may suffer the consequences. This holds true only in part. Bad election results were the predominant exit trigger in 25% of the cases in our data set, making this the most frequent trigger, followed closely by internal rivalry (23%). These findings should be treated with some caution. For one, what is perceived as a ‘bad’ result is highly contingent: narrowly losing an election widely held to be ‘unwinnable’ is likely to help rather than harm a leader, as it did to Australian liberal leader Andrew Peacock in 1984. However, losing an ‘unlosable’ one is practically fatal, as Peacock experienced in 1990. Moreover, the defeat and rivalry triggers are difficult to hold apart in coding: a bad election result might be the last encouragement that a brooding rival needs to make his move; and a party torn apart by factionalism and leadership rivalry may do badly at an election, triggering the incumbent’s downfall later on.

As we observed above, the susceptibility to exit pressures following electoral defeat or disappointment is not distributed randomly across leaders. Not only may incumbent prime ministers be more impervious to this contingency, this may also apply to well-established but not yet ‘stale’ leaders (48–96 months’ tenure): 25% of the leaders ousted because of a bad election were less than 48 months in office,

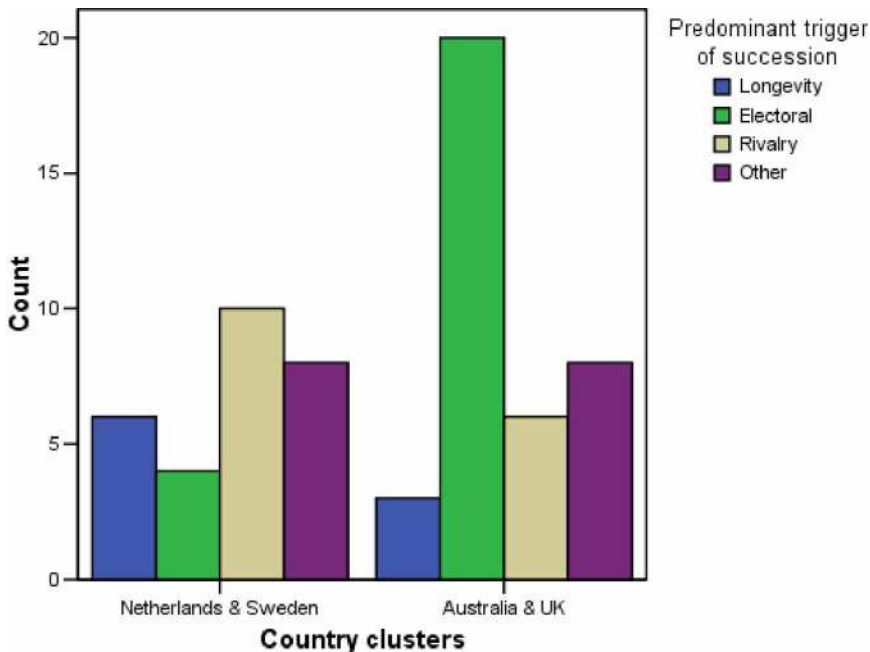


only 12.5% were in this middle ground and, as to be expected, the biggest part (62.5%) were long-serving leaders. From this one might infer a tentative principle of leadership survival: once a leader has survived his first election with his job intact, he is fairly safe for at least another period, and thus allowed to work to improve the party's fortunes.

### *Internal Challenges*

Numerous vendettas have been conducted in pursuit of the party leadership. Margaret Thatcher's ouster has a thicker plot than many Greek tragedies. Hawke's and Keating's leadership struggle virtually paralysed the Australian Labor Party and its government for more than a year, as did the Chretien–Martin struggle for the Liberal leadership in Canada. How frequent are these sagas? As stated, 23% of successions in our data set were triggered primarily by internal rivalry. Furthermore, almost half (46%) of the succession episodes contained rivalry as one of the principal triggers. But the propensity for rivalry is not evenly spread. For one, it is less common in governing parties than in Opposition parties. Second, there is a significant negative correlation between rivalry as (partial) trigger of succession and years in office during incumbency ( $r = -0.262$ , sig. 0.035), perhaps due to the incumbency bonus that prime ministers enjoy. Third, the role that rivalry plays in triggering leadership changes varies across the countries studied (see Figure 2).

Rivalry is the dominant succession trigger in Sweden and the Netherlands, but its role is modest compared to the dominance of electoral factors (responses to defeat as well as pre-emptive moves) in Australia and the United Kingdom. This finding is somewhat counterintuitive, considering the common image of the former as 'consensus'



**Figure 2.** Predominant succession trigger in Westminster and consensual systems.

democracies and the latter as presumably more turbulent and fierce ‘winner takes all’ democracies. This paradox might be explained by the fact that precisely because the Westminster system tends to create fewer but larger parties as the only road to national political power, its politicians will be more acutely aware of the fatal costs of disintegrating into factional battles. The Australian Labor Party kept itself in Opposition for decades precisely because of factionalism, and so have the British Conservatives in the post-Major era. Consensual democracies may not be that different though: the Swedish social democrats who enjoyed decades of political pre-eminence have had none of their leaders cut short by rivals or factional battles, whereas the Swedish Moderate Party, which spent decades in frustrating Opposition, has treated its leaders much more ruthlessly and has repeatedly been ridden by factional intrigue.

### *Scandal*

Our initial hunch was that scandals would be a decisive factor inducing successions, particularly in the post-Watergate era. As far as the cases in our data set go, this impression is simply wrong: not a single succession was triggered primarily by scandal, and in only six cases did something remotely resembling scandalous behaviour play a contributing role. At least two of these were very harmless, such as Swedish conservative Ulf Adelsohn caught on camera in a hula skirt on the Copacabana, and Michael Foot being criticised for wearing his now infamous ‘donkey jacket’ at a wreath-laying ceremony on Remembrance Day (Adelsohn 1987; Jones 1994). More serious scandals occasionally did contribute to a leader’s exit. One example is the Profumo affair, where British Secretary of War John Profumo was alleged to have an affair with a showgirl who was also seeing a Soviet naval attaché. Prime Minister Macmillan supported and believed Profumo when he denied the affair, which proved disastrous when Profumo was proved to be a liar. Macmillan resigned four months after Profumo’s admission (Horne 1989).

### *Fighters and Quitters: Comparing Leader Exit Modes*

When a leader eventually does leave office, does he go voluntarily or is he forced out? At first sight, one might be tempted to agree with the common quip that most leaders don’t know when it is time to go. Most have overcome great obstacles in their hard-fought roads to the top, and for that reason are likely to want to go to great lengths to stay there (Ludwig 2002). To take an extreme example, Richard Nixon clung to the presidency even when the overwhelming majority of the nation and even his party longed for his departure. He, who had suffered so many political defeats in his chequered career, had become president by simply refusing to give up. That, and only that, same instinct kept him in place when the net closed itself around him. It was only when impeachment was directly imminent that he agreed to go. And even then it was with the greatest possible reluctance, as he told his closest associates at the time: ‘How can you support a quitter? . . . I have never quit before in my life. Maybe that is what none of you has understood this whole time. You don’t quit’ (Nixon 1978, 1080). In fact, as he spoke these words, he had already embarked on his last, longest and ultimately unexpectedly successful political struggle: to secure his rightful place in history (Ambrose 1991, 555–75). Still, it is important to realise that even this man Nixon chose to leave office rather than continue to the very last moment (ie the formal impeachment by Congress). Two decades

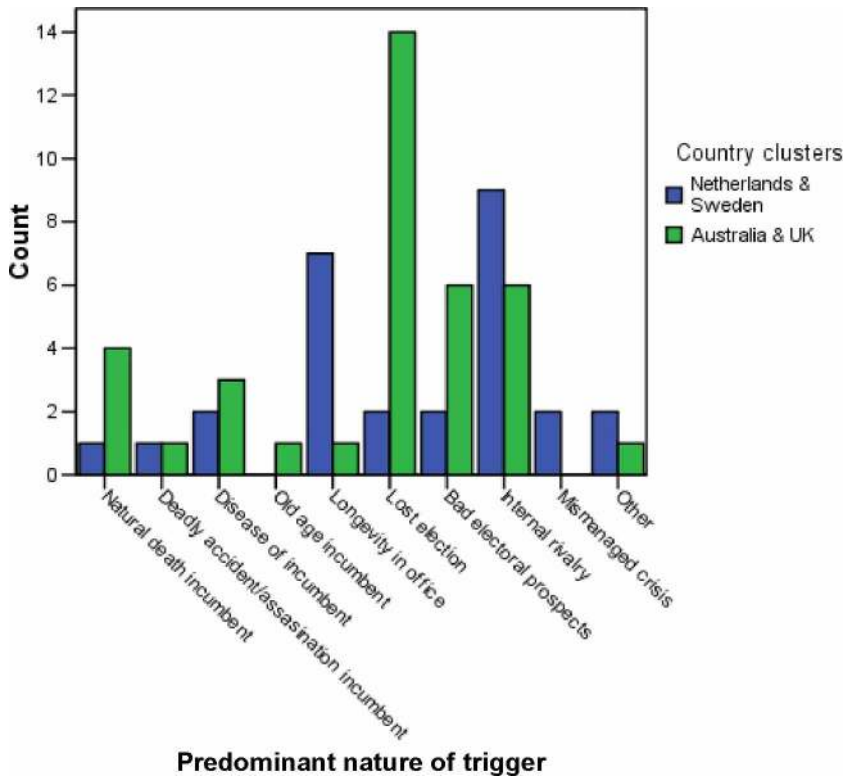
later, another political fighter, Nixon's successor Bill Clinton, successfully managed to stare down an impeachment procedure and even to restore some of his beleaguered presidency before relinquishing it to the constitutional two-term limit.

US presidents have a rather different relation to their party than the leaders discussed in this article, most of whom serve at the pleasure of their parliamentary party colleagues. How many of them fight on rather than resign when their position comes under pressure? In coding the succession episodes, we have distinguished between voluntary departures, where the incumbent himself takes the initiative to stand down, and not quite so voluntary ones where the leader does announce his departure himself but where the decision to go has been taken following advice and/or pressure by others. In addition, we coded for two categories of forced departure: party decisions to vacate the leadership and appoint another leader, and *force majeure* (incapacitation or death). Somewhat surprisingly, 65% of all exits in our data set are more or less voluntary (34% entirely voluntary, 31% after consultation and urging by members of the incumbent's inner circle). Not even a quarter (23%) of all exits proceeds by party decision, and 11% are due to bad health or death. Comparing the relative importance of forced versus voluntary exits over time, one may wonder whether politics has become a tougher game in recent years, with party leaders given less time to prove themselves than in the alleged more placid post-war political climate. Not so. With the exception of the first period, 1945–60 (with only nine successions in all), there is little evidence to support this belief. There was an equal share of forced exits in 1961–75 and in 1991–2005, with a slump in 1976–90. The same picture is seen when looking at the predominant trigger of succession across the four periods. Internal rivalry is second to lost election as trigger, but it varies over time in a manner that disproves the idea that rivalry is becoming more of a factor in party leadership succession: of the total number of successions in the period 1945–60, rivalry accounts for 11.1%; in 1961–75 for 35%; in 1976–90 for 20%; and in 1991–2005 for 19%.

We may, of course, suspect that some of the self-initiated departures are based on the expectation of a possible challenge and subsequent defeat in the party room: opting out before being forced to do so. These results should be interpreted with caution. Like other succession scholars we have found it exceedingly difficult to draw a firm line between voluntary and forced resignations, since party interests dictate that everyone concerned puts a brave face upon what in actual fact has been a rather messy coup or the apotheosis of a gradual, but strictly discrete waning of trust in the incumbent leader among the powers that be (cf Thornton and Ocasio 1999, 832). But still, the number of voluntary exits is striking. On the face of it, the common quip that most leaders do not know when to go appears to be simply wrong. It is even more wrong for long-serving leaders (more than two 'terms'), where an even higher percentage (66%) departs on their own initiative (or by *force majeure*).

Political system and party culture factors come into play here. First, there appears to be a significant difference between the incidence of voluntary as opposed to forced resignations in the Westminster (UK and Australia) and consensual (the Netherlands and Sweden) democracies in our data set. No less than 67% of all forced resignations take place in the United Kingdom or Australia. In contrast, 49% of all voluntary, self-initiated resignations occurred in the two other countries, which also exhibited higher scores on the average length of leader tenure (see Figure 3).

Second, our limited sample suggests that parties of the Left might on average be somewhat kinder to their leaders than parties of the Centre-Right. If we compare the



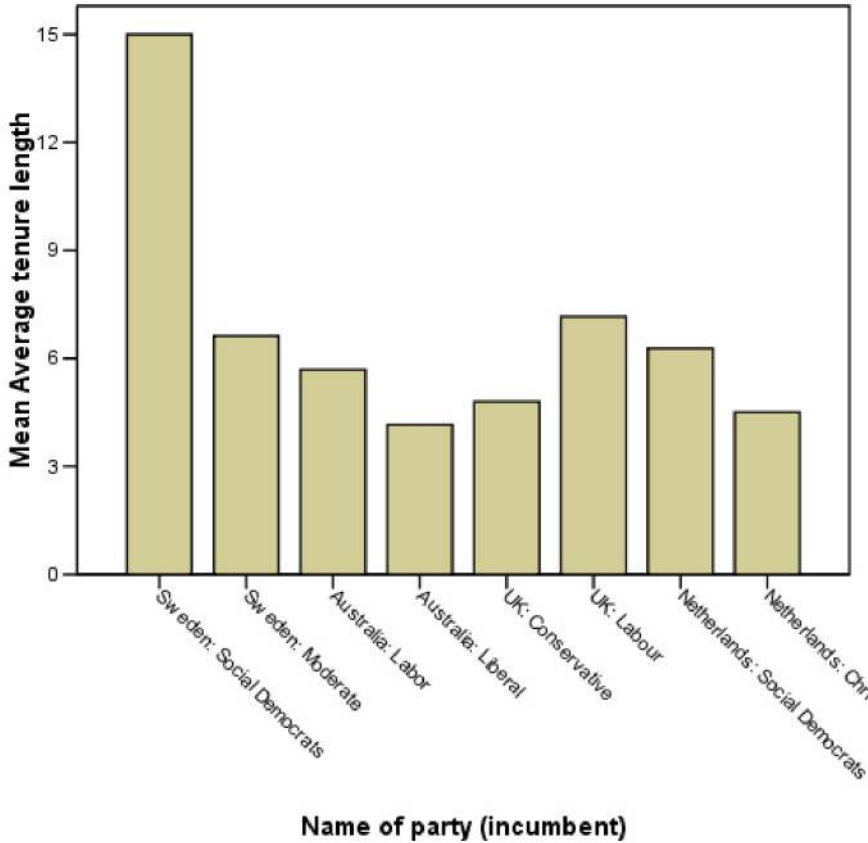
**Figure 3.** Predominant succession trigger: Westminster and consensual democracies.

leader tenure scores of the four parties of the Left to those of the Liberals and Christian democrats, the picture as shown in Figure 4 emerges.

In all four countries, the social democratic parties are easier on their leaders than their various counterparts. The division of party structures into ‘movement’ and ‘cadre’ types may explain part of this phenomenon: the more inclusive organisation arguably raises the bar for leadership challenge. Characteristically, the Swedish Social Democratic Party did not exhibit a single instance of forced exit and overall has seen its leaders enjoy very long tenures (with Palme’s premature death preventing him from what most likely would have been a much longer hold on political power, and on the other hand the murder of Foreign Minister and heir apparent Anna Lindh forcing incumbent leader and Prime Minister Göran Persson to stay in office for much longer than he otherwise might have done). In the Netherlands, the recent moves towards direct leader selection by ordinary party members in both the Social Democratic and Liberal Parties assure these leaders of a direct mandate which increases their leverage over their parliamentary colleagues. Toppling them by a party room coup is no longer a feasible option.

### *Does Leader Longevity Matter?*

If we assume that leaders in general strive to stay on, and knowing that electoral success is one effective way of achieving this aim, we might question whether



**Figure 4.** Average leader longevity: comparing parties.

there is some sort of virtuous cycle effect here: do long-serving leaders perform better in elections and thus create better opportunities for their parties to join governments? Our data gently suggest that this is not the case. The correlation between a leader's longevity in office and the party gaining government power during his tenure is actually negative ( $r = -0.143$ , sig. 0.127). In fact, and this is a result that is significant (sig. 0.018), the correlation between longevity in office and electoral impact as percentage point gains during the tenure is negative ( $r = -0.261$ ). Part of the answer to this rather unexpected finding is found when we correlate longevity in office with electoral reasons for departure (lost election and bad electoral prospects) and find that it is negative ( $-0.233$ , sig. 0.031). It is the negative that applies: long-serving leaders are more immune to election failure than their inexperienced colleagues; the positive—long-serving leaders fare better in elections and thus stay on—does not seem to apply.

### **Deciding about Leader Exit: Rules and Practices**

As explained above, parties may differ considerably in their formal leader (de)selection mechanisms but obviously much of the succession game tends not to be played by those rules alone. We have sought to determine the actual (as opposed to the

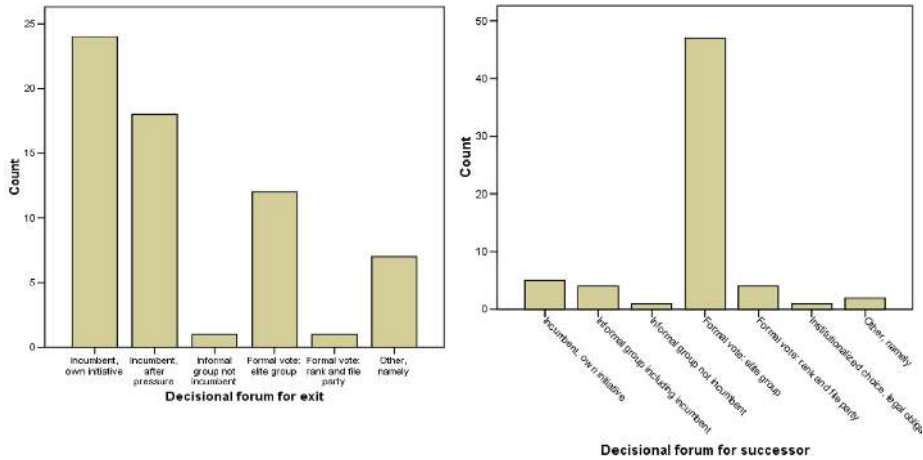


Figure 5. Decisional forums for leader exit and successor appointment.

*de jure*) locus of the decision regarding the exit of the incumbent leader and the appointment of the successor. Figure 5 summarises these findings.

A first finding is that this approach pays off: none of the formal leader (de)selection systems make much provision for the incumbent's own initiative and influence, but in the day-to-day reality of party politics this human factor turns out to be quite important—particularly in exit decisions. A second and related finding is that so many exits seem to be (more or less) voluntary: more so than we expected do party leaders decide to go voluntarily—at least as far as the timing of the exit is concerned. The fourth category, a formal vote of an elite group, is the only real competing mode of exit as the 'other' category includes *force majeure* factors such as death and incapacitation. Perhaps it is the cumulative pressures of the job—leaders being worn out by the long hours and burden of responsibility. Perhaps it is not such much the prevalence of leader-driven exit decisions that needs to be explained but rather the relatively low incidence of successful challenges. The formal and unwritten rules of leader deselection often ensure that the political price attached to challenging an incumbent is high, particularly when he is also prime minister (Weller 1983). Even challenges that are successful in forcing the incumbent out of office often ruin the chances of the challenger and throw up a third, relatively untainted, 'unifying' candidate (such as Mark Latham benefiting from the Crean–Beazley feud in 2003). As far as the decisional forum of the successor is concerned, our coding could not capture the full extent of informal manoeuvring that takes place. The many formal votes that are taken are often no more than legitimising rituals; this goes for party room votes as well as the seemingly more inclusive party conferences (Courtney 1995; Quinn 2005). If we want to understand the intricacies of leadership selection processes, we need to open the black box of the various cases deeper than any large n coding exercise can (cf LeDuc 2001; 't Hart 2006a, b).

### Giving in or Standing Firm? The Plight of Incumbents

The role choice of the incumbent is one of the crucial factors that may explain the course and outcomes of succession episodes. It is a crucial determinant of the

degree of interpersonal and inter-factional conflict that characterises the succession process, which in turn influences the successor's ability to lead and mould or maintain a cohesive party. Our data set is limited to cases where succession did take place, and hence lacking control cases of failed succession attempts. However, we have divided the succession process into two stages and we have been interested to know whether incumbents in general resign to their fate or continue to fight it until the end. In addition, we have controlled for length of tenure, assuming that long-serving leaders who are likely to have withstood challenges before may be more combative than less experienced and less entrenched ones.

The most common reaction in the early pre-succession period of the incumbents in our sample is *denial* that succession is on the agenda at all (23%), ie a refusal, often just publicly but sometimes privately as well, to acknowledge that forces are building up to question their continuation as party leader. In the period just preceding succession, naturally, that figure has gone down to two people (both of whom died suddenly). A large number of those leaders initially denying the precariousness of their future in office were eventually forced out by unilateral party decisions (36% versus 23% for the entire population), as opposed to leaving more or less voluntarily. Also, more than one in five (21%) of the leaders initially in denial were still taken by surprise by moves against them in the late pre-succession phase. These leaders risk leading without followers among the party elite; or at least leading with insufficiently numerous and powerful followers—and not even noticing it.

Australian Liberal leader Billy Snedden is one example. Busy rebuilding an outdated and internally divided party apparatus, he did not pick up on the growing dissatisfaction with his political performance. Snedden was trying to heal divisions by personal diplomacy and organisation building, but his MPs were waiting for him to articulate a clear and cogent political program with which to attack the Labor government. They also noticed that he was not strong enough in parliament, where Labor Prime Minister Gough Whitlam continued to dominate despite the internal upheavals in his Cabinet and party that could and should have been exploited by the leader of the Opposition much more effectively. Snedden was portrayed by many in the media as a political lightweight, but refused to see that this judgement was being echoed, albeit in muted fashion, in the party room. When the coup attempt came, perhaps significantly led by a young MP who had been his personal secretary for years, he was both flabbergasted and outraged. He survived an initial challenge, but was wounded severely enough to make his defeat in a second challenge, by Malcolm Fraser, a near inevitability (Kelly 1976, 40–58, 110–30; Ayres 1987, 231–51; Henderson 1994, 223–231). As Table 1 detailing all post-war Australian leadership successions in the main federal parties illustrates, the coup against Snedden (following that against Gorton in 1971) was the shape of things to come: in the three decades since, no fewer than three Labor (Hayden, Hawke and Crean) and four Liberal (Peacock, Howard, Hewson and Downer) leaders were either tapped on the shoulder or voted out of office by their party colleagues.

In many of these cases, the final apotheosis hardly came as a surprise. Many deposed leaders had previously survived one or more failed attempts to depose them. Surprisingly, in our cross-national data set only 19% of the incumbents initially actively resisted moves to terminate their leadership (down to 13% in the later phase), but this is probably due to bias in case selection (ie the exclusion of unsuccessful challenges preceding the final coup). In the end, however, the seriousness of the challenge is often realised by the incumbents and their most common posture in the

late pre-succession phase in our data set is, by far, *acquiescence* (36.5%)—a choice made by a mere 14.5% in the early phase. Typical Australian cases fitting this pattern include the ousters of Bill Hayden (February 1983) and Simon Crean (November 2003) as Labor leader: their initial determination to fight off the growing scepticism about their leadership as well as the thinly veiled campaigns of their competitors (Bob Hawke and Kim Beazley, respectively) was eventually broken and both agreed to go without forcing a(nother) formal leadership vote in caucus that they might very well lose. The same applies to Liberal leader Alexander Downer in 2005, whose poll standings were so horrific that there was no denying that a leadership change had to be made. Others, like Hewson in 2004, chose to fight until the very end, or like Snedden were completely surprised by the coup when it came (Howard in 1989).

It should be noted that virtually no Australian party leader who had a leadership contest forced upon him enjoyed a long life at the top ahead of him after winning it (cf Table 1). Once the cat of speculation was out of the bag, leadership consolidation proved to be elusive. Most found themselves in a downward spiral of post-challenge recriminations, retributions, disunity, bad publicity, sliding polls, brooding rivals and thus continued leadership speculation—in short a climate in which a new, more vigorous challenge became virtually a self-fulfilling prophecy. In a sense, then, there is very little that an incumbent Australian party leader confronted with signs of his eroding authority can do to ward off an exit short of uplifting his parliamentary performance and turning low poll figures around—both of which are hard to do in a climate of persistent succession speculation. He can at best postpone his departure, and perhaps manoeuvre to deny his chief rivals the succession, but even that appears to be hard to achieve.

Key challenges for incumbent Australian party leaders can be easily derived from Table 1. One is simply to survive one's first full term: the sheer number of successions, and the high proportion of them that were about rivals and/or backbenchers instigating a relatively recently appointed leader's (self-)destruction, a fact which prompted Davis (1998, 172) to observe that 'beyond doubt, party leadership in Australia operates on a Darwinian scale unmatched elsewhere in the Western parliamentary democracies.' During their recent decades in Opposition the Liberals and Labor saw through five leaders each. Other than Italy, no established democracy comes close. As Weller (1994, 140) observes, leadership challenges do not have to be victorious to be effective in heralding the beginning of the end for the incumbent, since the costs of a renewed challenge are comparatively low. Davis (1998, 170) puts it succinctly, more than anywhere else, 'in Australia, challengers often live to fight another day.'

Second, incumbents must cope with pervasive interpersonal conflict and rivalry at the very apex of the party/government. In our study period Labor leaders from Calwell onwards have often had deputies or senior portfolio holders whom they mistrusted or despised, and who coveted their job; the same goes for Liberal leaders since Gorton. These unholy alliances are imposed on incumbents by political necessities (Labor's factionalism, the Liberals' regional and personalistic groupings) exacerbated by the caucus-centred mode of leadership selection that prevails in Australia. This has produced a leadership setting in which hypocrisy, deceit and plotting are endemic.

Third, more than most of their peers in other countries, Australian party leaders are faced with the problem of dealing with their predecessors: many of them stay in politics and are thoroughly involved in power-brokering for years if not decades after their own exits (Menzies, Fraser and Peacock in the Liberal Party are poignant examples). Dealing not only with one's predecessor's political shadow but actually



Table 1.

Succession case and date	Exit context	Exit trigger	Exit type	Incumbent pre-exit posture	Inc–Succ pre-exit relations	Inc post-exit posture	Inc–Succ post-exit relations	Political impact of succession
ALP John Curtin–Ben Chifley, 1945	Stress-burdened and ailing Curtin successfully led wartime government. Relied increasingly on Chifley to manage Cabinet when overseas	Curtin died	<i>Force majeure</i>	Personally struggling; anticipating succession and implicitly grooming Chifley for the role in due course	Cordial, based on mutual trust and respect	n.a. (deceased)	n.a. (Chifley presented himself as heir to Curtin’s leadership and memory)	Stabilisation and continuation of ALP hold on government after sudden death of its leader
Ben Chifley–Herbert Evatt, 1951	ALP had lost government in 1949. Chifley continued as undisputed ALP leader, yet faced growing factional pressures on (anti-) communism issue	Chifley died	<i>Force majeure</i>	Persevering as Leader of the Opposition, determined to hold party together and win back government	Mutual respect and political collaboration despite considerable stylistic and ideological differences	Projecting continuity; on defensive by Menzies’ government tactical manoeuvring (anti-Communist Party bill; Petrov affair)	n.a.	Continuity of strong, activist leadership; no major programmatic changes
Herbert Evatt–Arthur Calwell, 1960	Under Evatt, DLP had split from ALP and doomed ALP election results. Evatt’s leadership grew erratic because of looming Alzheimer’s disease. ALP struggled to find dignified exit	Evatt was offered a position as Chief Justice in NSW Supreme Court	Age/illness: voluntary (but stage-managed by ALP power brokers)	Persevering as Leader of the Opposition	Calwell maintained façade of loyal deputy but in private was highly critical of Evatt yet refused to challenge him in caucus	Retired from politics: as Justice required to keep low profile and soon severely affected by Alzheimer’s disease	Evatt out of political limelight	Incremental modification of Left-leaning ALP economic policy; emphasis on continuity of Labor movement; near-win in 1961 election

Arthur Calwell–Gough Whitlam, 1967	After clear defeat in 1963 elections, his advanced age, the continued ALP–SDP split, and in the face of open warfare from Whitlam, Calwell’s leadership came increasingly under pressure	Third, now crushing, defeat under Calwell (in 1966 election)	Age/electoral defeat: voluntary (but in knowledge of declining support for his leadership)	Persevering as Leader of the Opposition, but resigned to exit after 1966 election	Calwell detested his ambitious deputy Whitlam whom he regarded as disloyal and arrogant; Whitlam undermined but could not terminate Calwell’s leadership	Remained MP until 1972, was openly critical of Whitlam and his reform ambitions; privately he was bitter and scathing	Open conflict, especially because Whitlam pushed all out for party reform, clearly projecting desire to make a break with the past	Foundation for end of ALP–DLP split was laid; party reform, policy innovation and Whitlam’s supreme parliamentary performances increased ALP’s electoral appeal
Gough Whitlam–William Hayden, 1977	After traumatic sacking as PM and being trashed at 1975 polls, Whitlam initially wanted to resign but kept going as leader when both Hayden and Hawke had declined to engage in managed succession. Whitlam’s leadership was increasingly criticised within ALP	Electoral defeat (in 1977 election)	Longevity/internal dissent/electoral defeat: voluntary (but in knowledge of declining support for his leadership)	Trying to reclaim government for ALP but weakened by the narrow (32–30) margin of his win over Hayden after leadership contest in May 1977 which reflected the growing internal dissent. Politically outflanked by Fraser during 1977 campaign	Besieged by many ALP enemies, Whitlam had workable relationship with Hayden. He invited him to stand for deputy leader at mandatory ‘midterm’ leadership ballots, but Hayden challenged Whitlam and came close	Posed as ‘grand old’ leader of the ALP, working to restore/embellish the reputation of the Whitlam government, regularly speaking out on current issues but generally not meddling with Hayden’s leadership	...	Created a convincingly ‘post-Whitlam’ ALP: programmatic innovation paved the way for unexpectedly strong 1980 election result

*(Table continued)*

Table 1. *Continued*

Succession case and date	Exit context	Exit trigger	Exit type	Incumbent pre-exit posture	Inc–Succ pre-exit relations	Inc post-exit posture	Inc–Succ post-exit relations	Political impact of succession
William Hayden–Robert Hawke, 1983	With Fraser government in trouble, Hayden seemed poised to win next election, but as by-election results lagged, ALP power brokers began to waver in their support and turned to Hawke, who had challenged him unsuccessfully in 1982	Caucus fear of possible loss at upcoming, 'unlosable' election	Forced: notified by factional power brokers that Hawke had their support and that for the sake of party unity Hayden should relinquish the leadership before Fraser could call snap election. Hayden finally agreed on same day that Fraser called election	Defiance, attempting to consolidate his position. Eventually succumbed to sustained pressure to make way for Hawke	Thinly veiled rivalry. Hayden outraged at Hawke for undermining his leadership	Hayden had negotiated role as foreign minister in Hawke government prior to relinquishing the leadership. Kept low profile afterwards; refrained from criticising Hawke. Later appointed Governor-General by Hawke	Polite formality, avoiding the uncomfortable emotional residue of resentment and bitterness (Hayden) and guilt (Hawke) that resulted from the succession crisis	Labor won 1983 elections on wings of Hawke's great personal popularity; Hawke led four successive governments
Robert Hawke–Paul Keating, 1991	Hawke led the longest and most successful government in Labor history. After years of close collaboration with Keating, tensions grew as Keating aspired to take over as leader, and Hawke reneged on a promise to step aside	Growing momentum of Keating lobby in face of perceived waning of Hawke's leadership allure and in the face of a reinvigorated Liberal Party	Forced: defeated in caucus vote	Defiance all the way: invoking his unprecedented record of electoral success and his belief that he could offer the better chance of another Labor win in 1993	From close collaboration in early years of the Hawke governments to open power struggle	Mixture of self-justification, condescension and bitterness towards Keating's leadership. Generally restrained in comments about government policy (about which Hawke and Keating mostly agreed)	Hawke's retreat from political front line eliminated potential source of problems for Keating. Interpersonal relations remained strained	Labor won fifth term in office in 1993; new policy issues (China, reconciliation, republic) emerged on Labor agenda

Paul Keating–Kim Beazley, 1996	ALP's hold on government was reaching end of its cycle; Keating's leadership, although undisputed, was uneven: lacklustreness and vigour went hand in hand	Devastating defeat at 1996 elections	Voluntary: loss at ballot box provided natural moment for exit of a battle-worn political veteran. Beazley then elected unopposed by caucus	Campaigned for new term in office in elections (but may have privately realised that defeat was unavoidable, and exit as leader therefore imminent)	Although Beazley had supported Hawke in struggle with Keating, there was no resentment either way; Beazley became front runner for succession	Resigned HR seat and shunned limelight for years	Cordial, but irrelevant given Keating's retreat from politics	Labor had great difficulty reinventing itself as Opposition party. Beazley's leadership criticised in first year, later gaining momentum
Kim Beazley–Simon Crean, 2001	Beazley came very close to recapturing government in 2001 election but (his 'flip-flop' during <i>Tampa</i> crisis broke this momentum	Narrow but second defeat at 2001 elections	Voluntary: decided it was time for another leader to try and recapture government for Labor. Crean elected unopposed	Campaigned for prime ministership in 2001 elections, but had resolved privately that he would resign when defeated	Unproblematic: collaboration in shadow Cabinet	Returned to back bench and stayed out of Crean's way (until 2003, when he started considering running for the leadership again)	Smooth initially, later (2003) turning into overt tension and competition	Crean failed to strike a chord in the electorate and took the party to the Left, causing concern to key frontbenchers
Simon Crean–Mark Latham, 2003	Crean's leadership imploded throughout 2003 through combination of negative poll ratings and growing internal dissent	Wounded by Beazley's June 2003 leadership challenge and terrible poll rankings, Crean got 'tap on the shoulder'	Quasi-voluntary: made to see that his position was no longer tenable. Latham elected in narrow (47–45) caucus win over Beazley	Defiance followed by resignation combined with determination to keep Beazley out of office	Latham was maverick member of Crean's shadow Cabinet; the two were bonded by shared abhorrence of Beazley	Constructive: aspired to and received front bench position as shadow treasurer	Constructive: Crean became loyal member of shadow Cabinet	Latham enjoyed honeymoon with voters and journalists alike and 'reinvented' Labor party's program
Mark Latham–Kim Beazley, 2005	Latham's leadership imploded in the wake of disastrous defeat in October 2004 election	Post-election atmosphere in ALP was poisonous: Latham bitter, his critics eroding his leadership	Voluntary: Latham resigned in disgust, at war with most of his party's elite and with the press	Defiance followed by resignation-cum-reproach	Cold: Latham had always been vocal critic of Beazley, who had refused a place on Latham's front bench	Bitter: published kiss and tell memoirs in which he spared nobody	Strained: Latham was publicly scathing about Beazley (as well as about many other Labor frontbenchers)	Beazley struggled to regain momentum for a thoroughly demoralised and faction-ridden party

(Table continued)

Table 1. Continued

Succession case and date	Exit context	Exit trigger	Exit type	Incumbent pre-exit posture	Inc–Succ pre-exit relations	Inc post-exit posture	Inc–Succ post-exit relations	Political impact of succession
Liberals Robert Menzies– Harold Holt, 1966	Mounting age and great longevity in office begin to catch up with LPA founder and long-time prime minister	Self-selected timing	Voluntary: managed transition of leadership to Holt; Holt elected unopposed in party room	Maintained control over timing and format of own exit	Cordial: Holt was long-time minister, deputy leader in Menzies' governments and undisputed heir apparent	Supportive: Menzies gracefully retreated to 'grand old man' of LPA posture in background	Continued cordiality	Holt led party to biggest ever election result in late 1966, but thereafter failed to contain sharp downturn in public support
Harold Holt–John Gorton, 1967	Holt went missing whilst swimming against backdrop of emergent doubts about his leadership in wake of LPA's fading electoral fortunes in by-elections	Death by accident	<i>Force majeure</i> ; Gorton elected by party after dramatic leadership contest that saw deputy leader McMahon voted by Country Party leader McEwen	Increasingly preoccupied by the growing political difficulties he was facing, but not considering exit	Businesslike: Gorton was senior minister in Holt government. At the time certainly no open critic or rival of Holt, nor a close ally	n.a.	n.a.	Gorton enjoyed brief political honeymoon but his idiosyncratic style soon put off colleagues and had voters wondering
John Gorton– William McMahon, 1971	After nearly losing government in the 1969 election, Gorton faced more and more vocal critics within his own party. His leadership style became a public issue. Key journalists criticised his every move	Party room revolt triggered by Malcolm Fraser's resignation, in protest over Gorton's alleged 'disloyalty'	Forced: Gorton voted out after he had had to call a party room ballot over his leadership in the face of mounting internal dissent. McMahon then voted leader, Gorton deputy leader	Laconic 'muddling through' in the face of crumbling support for his leadership. Defiance in the face of revolt. Resignation when voted out	Rivalry and mutual dislike: McMahon had been duped in 1968 leadership contest, continue to covet top job, was demoted by Gorton and plotted against him	Gorton forced upon McMahon as deputy leader guaranteed instability and conflict at the heart of Cabinet. Gorton would not hide his disdain of McMahon	Continued tension: Gorton wanted to destroy McMahon, and McMahon wanted to get rid of the former leader. Gorton was eventually sacked	McMahon's leadership was doomed from the start. He enjoyed no authority in Cabinet, was outperformed in parliament by Whitlam, and did not come across on TV

<p>William McMahon–Billy Snedden, 1972</p>	<p>In the run-up to the 1972 election it was clear that the Liberals would probably lose and that McMahon would go. Aspirants to the top job were considering their options</p>	<p>Election defeat</p>	<p>Quasi-voluntary: after losing government for the Liberals for the first time since the 1940s and given the low support within his party, McMahon had no option but to resign. Snedden voted in by 30–29 over Bowen</p>	<p>Fighting against the odds for his political survival during the election campaign</p>	<p>Snedden had been Treasurer in McMahon government; had kept his distance from the unpopular leader. Was urged by some to stand against him but refused</p>	<p>Bowing to the inevitable but continuing to be active in politics</p>	<p>Snedden retained McMahon on front bench. McMahon was left with few friends within the party</p>	<p>Snellen inherited a party in deep disarray and devoted much of his time to revamping it. He did not gain much momentum in parliament</p>
<p>Billy Snedden–Malcolm Fraser, 1975</p>	<p>Having narrowly lost the 1974 election, Snedden thought he was gearing up the party to win the next one; failed to appreciate the momentum building up against him in press and party</p>	<p>Party room coup by Fraser c.s.</p>	<p>Forced: voted out in head-to-head leadership contest with Fraser</p>	<p>Determined to continue: having survived one challenge in late 1974, Snedden thought it was over and misjudged the depth of his problems</p>	<p>Both Snedden and Fraser had long seen themselves as future leaders. When Snedden became leader first, he knew Fraser was waiting in the wings</p>	<p>Bowing to the inevitable but continuing as backbencher and later Leader of the House. Privately critical of Fraser’s leadership style and some of his policies</p>	<p>Distant: Fraser wanted to keep the former leader as far removed from the political centre of gravity as possible</p>	<p>A few months after gaining the leadership, Fraser managed to topple the Whitlam government and become prime minister</p>

*(Table continued)*

Table 1. *Continued*

Succession case and date	Exit context	Exit trigger	Exit type	Incumbent pre-exit posture	Inc–Succ pre-exit relations	Inc post-exit posture	Inc–Succ post-exit relations	Political impact of succession
Malcolm Fraser–Andrew Peacock, 1983	Fraser had won three consecutive elections but his government found no answer to the 'stagflation' in the Australian economy of the early 1980s. Labor was becoming a credible alternative	Election defeat	Voluntary: although there was broad discontent with his top-down leadership style, Fraser was not compelled to resign after losing the election but, traumatised by his loss, chose not to go back to Opposition and left parliament	Called snap election in the hope of outmanoeuvring Labor, a move which backfired. Campaigned uphill against the popular Hawke and was shattered by defeat	Ideological and personal differences and clashing ambitions. Peacock resigned from Cabinet in 1981, challenged Fraser without success in April 1982, and returned to Cabinet later	After self-initiated departure from politics, Fraser surprisingly supported Peacock in his leadership contest against Howard	When Peacock performed poorly as opposition leader in 1983–84, Fraser urged Howard to challenge him after the 1984 election	Peacock did not manage to develop a new policy platform for the Liberals and his parliamentary performance was weak. He campaigned well during 1984 election and got good result
Andrew Peacock–John Howard, 1985	Looming discontent with Peacock's leadership was muted after decent election result of 1984, but resurged in 1985, fuelling speculation about a Howard challenge	Self-initiated party room challenge from Peacock to Howard as deputy leader, which backfired	Forced: when Peacock could not get his preferred candidate to be elected to replace Howard as deputy, Peacock felt forced to resign himself	Tried to force the looming challenge to his leadership by Howard c.s., but mismanaged the process of doing so	Clashing personal ambitions and, to some extent, political philosophies ('dry' versus 'wet')	Peacock never accepted his loss and soon was working to topple Howard	Continued, and quite overt, leadership rivalry	Howard did not fare any better than Peacock as Opposition leader against a united Hawke government
John Howard–Andrew Peacock, 1989	Howard's leadership was undermined by mediocre parliamentary performance, deep policy disagreements, the 'John for PM' interlude, and the continued Howard–Peacock rivalry	Party room coup instigated by Peacock supporters	Forced: Howard lost to Peacock 44–27	Embattled defiance: Howard's leadership had been under various pressures for years. He was struggling to pick up momentum, but taken by surprise by the coup	Continued rivalry: Peacock had challenged Howard after the 1987 election loss, and was sacked after leak of scathing comments about Howard	Howard was relegated to backbench and gained status of 'political martyr' as he gained public sympathy for the rude way in which he was deposed	Howard deeply resented his treatment by Peacock. His (NSW) supporters were outraged and disunity plagued the LPA during 1990	Peacock had recaptured the leadership, but did not win much sympathy for the 'sneaky coup' by which he did so

Andrew Peacock–John Hewson, 1990	Peacock did not manage to restore LPA’s political fortunes and campaigned ineffectively in 1990 election	Losing ‘unlosable’ election	Voluntary: accepted the consequences of defeat, and realised his momentum as leader had come and gone	Resignation	Hewson was shadow treasurer under both Howard and Peacock. No close associates or clear enemies of either	Resignation	Supportive, if only because Hewson stood between Howard and the leadership	Hewson injected new, Thatcherite ideological zest into LPA and enjoyed strong momentum in 1990–92 period
John Hewson–Alexander Downer, 1994	Hewson was forced to make embarrassing retreat on his ‘Fightback’ policy document and was gradually worn down by Keating scare campaign	Losing (yet another) ‘unlosable’ election and refusing to accept the political consequences	Forced: Hewson fended off a post-election challenge by Howard, but his leadership was doomed with Fraser and others calling for a change. He lost a self-initiated leadership spill	Defiance: refusing to acknowledge responsibility for the 1993 defeat, Hewson blamed others in the party, dumped ‘Fightback’, yet proposed to continue as leader	Downer was one of the senior Liberals who undermined Hewson post-1993 leadership, but whom he was powerless to stop	Hewson remained bitter about his loss and left politics for good in 1995	Irrelevant: Hewson stopped being a political player soon after being deposed	The Downer–Costello ‘dream team’ failed to strike a chord among the public. Downer’s approval rates soon plummeted to unprecedented levels
Alexander Downer–John Howard, 1995	With the Downer experiment failing and another election looming, the need for another leadership change was widely acknowledged	Failing to lift LPA’s poll standings	Quasi-voluntary: Downer agreed to resign in the interests of the party, turning it over to the experienced Howard, seen as the only one able to fight Keating	Resignation: Downer was no political fighter and the poll results were loud and clear: he would never win the next election	Downer, like other leading Liberals of his generation, reluctantly acknowledged need for Howard’s return	Downer was reconciled to his fate and happy to become (shadow) foreign minister under Howard	Irrelevant: Downer’s authority on leadership issues had crumbled	Howard united the party behind him and won the 1996 election, ending 13 years of Opposition for LPA



dealing with the person—often bruised if not disgruntled, hostile and annoying—on a day-to-day basis is a fate that few Australian party leaders can escape, in contrast to countries such as the Netherlands where former leaders lose clout immediately and definitively and political comebacks in the Peacock and Howard vein are unheard of.

### Concluding Remarks

Party competition lies at the core of democracies. But in a world where loyal ‘partisans’ among the voters are on the decline, politics is becoming more personalised: although the formal rules of the political game have hardly changed, the de facto political impact of factors such as leadership personality and style has increased significantly (McAllister 2007). This being the case, it is important to engage in more systematic studies of the recruitment, careers and removal of party leaders and other political office holders (Borchert and Zeiss 2003). This article contributes to this endeavour. It shows that the fears of Michels and Mosca concerning the self-perpetuating power of incumbent elites do not really apply to party leaders in contemporary established democracies: their turnover rate is generally high enough to warrant the ideas that ‘bastards’ do get ‘thrown out’ from time to time—particularly so in Australian politics. The question is, however: by whom? This article shows that advocates of democracy within political parties have much to ponder about: direct member influence on the selection and fate of party leaders was minimal in all of the eight parties studied here. Things are beginning to change in countries such as the United Kingdom and the Netherlands (cf LeDuc 2001; Quinn 2005), but such moves towards democratisation of leader selection seem to bypass the main Australian parties, where leader selection remains a closed, elitist party room affair. It is court politics, often at its worst, punctuated by the occasional influence of powerful outsiders, such as regional barons (Henry Bolte and Neville Wran are cases in point), ‘star’ journalists (eg Alan Reid and Alan Ramsey are known to have played active, fate-shaping rather than mere fate-reporting roles vis-à-vis various party leaders) and media moguls such as Murdoch and Packer (cf Griffen-Foley 2001). Incumbent leaders depend exclusively on their parliamentary party colleagues for their survival, and doing well ‘out there’ in the public arena only goes so far in gaining and sustaining leadership. Their main challenge is to satisfy, placate, manipulate or cajole their peers, and our brief survey of post-war Australian successions illustrates how exceedingly difficult this is once leadership speculation gets going in Canberra’s coterie of party power brokers and political journalists. Ordinary party members do not come into play at all.

As we have seen, this essentially oligarchic arrangement generally ensures that Australian party leaders rotate more frequently than in most other democracies. But they do so at a price: the relentless focus on personal and factional politics and the ugly succession struggles it generates do little to enhance the parties’ waning ties with their partisans (cf Jaensch 2006), and it is doubtful whether it helps to bring to the fore those best suited to lead party and country.

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