



**The Effects of “Nature and nurture” on Leadership: What Can We Learn from the Life of General Sir John Monash?**

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There was an advertisement for a University in *the Australian* newspaper last weekend which was headed ‘*Change-makers are not born: They are made. What would you like to achieve?*’ It depicted a former Young Australian of the Year winner. This begs the question: are leaders born or made? Hundreds of books are written on leadership and MBA courses around the world claim to be able to produce leaders in business and other fields. In this address I would like to examine two questions. First, what is the essence of leadership and second, can leadership skills be learned? Why me? I have worked in leadership positions for many years and have also worked with and for outstanding leaders particularly in the Australian Defence Force, in medicine and the university sector. The current senior leadership of the Australian Defence Force including the Service Chiefs, The Vice-Chief, the Chief of Joint Operations and the Chief of the Australian Defence Force, General David Hurley are all outstanding leaders. I have learnt a lot about leadership from them and from the previous Chief of Army, Lieutenant General Ken Gillespie and General Peter Cosgrove, a previous Chief of the Australian Defence Force, also all outstanding leaders. At the other end of the scale, I have also witnessed many examples of poor leadership in my civilian work and in public life.

I would like to focus on General Sir John Monash to try and answer the question of 'nature' or 'nurture' as determinants of leadership, and then analyse what I think is the essence of fine leadership and reflect on why leadership can fail. Why choose Monash? Because Monash was unquestionably one of the greatest Australians in our nation's history. He showed exceptional leadership qualities throughout his life. He looms large in the pantheon of Australian heroes. He was a great General as demonstrated by his ability to develop innovative and aggressive tactics and his successes on the battlefield. He was a great Engineer, a distinguished lawyer, a statesman, volunteer Reservist, subsequently a professional soldier. He was also clearly ambitious, determined and aimed for excellence in all his endeavours. Also, I am a Major General in the Australian Defence Force, I have an appreciation of 'generalship' and I am in effect a citizen-soldier as was Monash. I have studied the life of Monash and I am also a relative, with my great grandfather being General Sir John Monash's first cousin. So you might say I also have a more intimate connection with Sir John Monash.

Why was Sir John Monash such an exceptional leader? How can an appreciation of his life and deeds shape the performance of leaders of today? What is the essence of fine leadership? Can military leadership inform civilian leadership? Can leadership traits be learned? Or are these abilities predominantly inherited?

Monash was born into a migrant family. On the 5<sup>th</sup> June 1864 Louis and Bertha Monash (previously Monasch) arrived from Prussian Poland. On the 27<sup>th</sup> June 1865 John Monash was born in their rented home in Dudley Street, West Melbourne. Later the family moved to Clifton Hill, then Jerilderee in the Riverine in NSW. Monash transferred to Scotch College in Melbourne and eventually became the dux of Scotch College. He went on to study law and engineering at the University of Melbourne

He was highly sought after as a lawyer and engineer and learned the 'profession of arms' as a Reservist. It could be argued that Monash was an outsider in Australian Society having been a Jew of Prussian Jewish descent and he was also an outsider in the ranks of the professional soldiers before WWI because he was a Reservist ie part time soldier. Monash was a keen student of military history.

He was a meticulous planner and organiser. He introduced innovations in military technology and tactics. He was the first to provide support to infantry with tanks, mortars and aeroplanes and thus significantly reduced casualties on the battlefield. He also cared greatly about the welfare of troops under his command. Commanders today still study the battle victories of Monash.

Field Marshal Viscount Montgomery wrote '*I would name Sir John Monash as the best General on the Western Front in Europe; he possessed a real creative originality, and the war might have been over sooner, and certainly with fewer casualties, had Haig been relieved of his command and Monash appointed to command the British Armies in his place*'. In June 1918 Monash was promoted to the rank of Lieutenant General, General Officer Commanding (GOC) Australian Army Corps-France. At Le Hamel on the 4<sup>th</sup> July 1918, there was a landmark battle that Monash meticulously planned in great detail to last 93 minutes which it did and resulted in a victory for Monash and his troops. This was the first and only time where US troops have been commanded in battle by a non-US General, in this case Monash. On the 8<sup>th</sup> August 1918 Monash commanded the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) in a successful offensive against the Germans on the Western front which became known as 'Ludendorff's Black Bay' and which was followed by further AIF and allied victories and led over 100 days to the end of WWI. King George V knighted Monash on the battlefield on 14th August 1918, the first time this had been done in 200 years. Mr Charles Bean, official war historian and Mr Keith Murdoch, war correspondent (father of Rupert) tried to have him removed from command. It has been suggested that anti-Semitism was involved. They primed Prime Minister Billy Hughes so that when he arrived prior to the Battle of Hamel he would be prepared to remove Monash from his command. However, the Senior Officers' reports on Monash convinced him otherwise. Monash was also criticised by others for being too focussed on his own status and achievements and of exaggerating his achievements and those of his soldiers. But if this led to battle victories, I would submit to you that this criticism was misguided.

On the 16<sup>th</sup> March 1919 Monash wrote the words "*I hate the business of war, the horror of it, the waste, the destruction, and the inefficiency*". After the war, Monash was given the task of establishing the State Electricity Commission of Victoria and was its Chairman for 10 years. He pioneered Australia's adoption of reinforced concrete, designed many important bridges in Victoria and was instrumental in developing the Latrobe Valley coal deposits into an electric power supply for Victoria. He led the first ANZAC day march in Melbourne on the 25th April 1925. He was appointed the Honorary Vic-Chancellor of The University of

Melbourne and held the position until he died in 1931. He was instrumental in the development of the Shrine of Remembrance. The State President Returned Soldiers, Sailors Imperial League of Australia (RSS/LA) in August 1926 said the Shrine proposal was 'as dead as "Julius Ceasar"'. Monash did not agree and eventually prevailed. When he died on October 1931, 300,000 mourners came to his funeral. In 1934, The Shrine was dedicated with an inscription by Monash.

I believe that General Sir John Monash's life should be more widely known and appreciated by Australians of today particularly the younger generation.

Monash succeeded because of his exceptional brilliance and strong leadership ability. He overcame adversity including the forces gathering at various times to thwart him.

His persistence in the face of adversity is an important character trait of great leaders. Monash clearly had a supportive parents, a quality education and possessed a brilliant and inquisitive mind. He had a strong academic record of achievement in law and engineering and had experience in the civilian world in business and professional life but also had extensive experience in military life and war-fighting. He had wide ranging interests including the arts and was a very good pianist.

I am sure you will agree Monash was an extraordinary individual

Let's now look more closely at the anatomy and essence of leadership. I am not discussing leadership in the professions such as a senior scientist or a leading surgeon. I am referring to leadership of people within an organisation or in a team. It has been said that leadership is the capacity to turn vision into reality. This is a pithy statement but I think it does capture the essence of leadership. Leaders are judged principally by outcomes. Having a vision or a plan is fine but turning the vision into reality is the key challenge leaders face in driving change in the right direction for the organization they lead.

John Quincy Adams, the 6<sup>th</sup> President of the United States of America said that *'if your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more and become more, you are a leader'*. I think that this gets closer still to the essence of leadership because to effect the change in an organization, the leader must change the behaviour and performance of those he or she is leading. The bigger the organization, the more difficult this challenge becomes.

There are many characteristics of fine leadership which include in no particular order: honesty, integrity, selflessness, seriousness of purpose, personal insight and perspective, risk taking, imagination, creativity, leading by example, inspiring others, accepting responsibility, and realising that you cannot please everyone and not everyone is your friend as a leader. The leader must be prepared to make tough and sometimes unpopular decisions. Personal resilience is therefore a strong characteristic of outstanding leaders. Resilience includes being able to cope with and manage your enemies, detractors and critics, the jealousies, the thwarters, the sociopaths and the psychopaths in organisations who try and take the leader and the organisation down. Political nous and emotional intelligence are also prerequisites for high levels of leadership.

A leader clearly must be devoted to achieving the vision and the mission of the organization, must work hard, treat people with respect and dignity, be prepared to be in the public eye, possess an attention to detail, be able to learn from history, be compassionate and learn from observing good and bad leaders. Leaders should be able to delegate responsibility and not micro-manage. This is a common fault of many leaders. The leader must forge a strong trusted team with everyone pulling the same direction. The leader must design and implement change, develop a continual record and portfolio of achievement and have a strong record of service to the organization and beyond. The outstanding leaders will selflessly help and mentor others, and be competent managers with a detailed understanding of the financial status of their organization.

Having robust mental and physical health and having a strong loving and supportive family also loom large. Having drive, ambition, agility, creativity, foresight and the ability to able to motivate and captivate others are also highly desirable abilities.

Clearly, no one leader can be blessed with all of these traits and abilities, but the more they possess, the more likely they will achieve outstanding leadership at the highest level. Having a strong 'moral compass' is also a pre-requisite for a fine leader. The 'moral compass' is based on many elements, which include one's up-bringing from loving parents, a nurturing school environment which encourages talent and life-long learning. In recent times, and one's religion. General David Petraeus became a failed leader after many years of extraordinary leadership and came 'tumbling down in flames' due to marriage infidelity. Monash also had marriage infidelity in his life but managed to succeed as a leader regardless of this failing. Perhaps having a mistress in those days was not as problematic as it is now! General Stanley McChrystal an outstanding four star General always competing with General Petraeus (as described in the book by Greg Jaffe titled 'the Fourth Star' published by Crown) also came down in flames due to hubris and finally upsetting his boss the President of the United States (as described in the book by Michael Hastings called 'the Operators' and published by Plume). Leaders should always appreciate that they answer to the next level up. And there is always a next level up.

I believe that exceptional leaders (and outstanding performers in any field) also have usually experienced personal failure and that failure is necessary to breed future success. In my case, I was once told by a senior surgeon that I was not suited to being a surgeon. This was a trigger for me to prove him wrong which I succeeded in doing. Monash being a Reservist was not readily accepted until he reached senior levels. I think that Monash was very concerned about the military failure at Gallipoli and wanted to develop a better way of fighting war and of not losing so many precious lives in battle. I think that this probably spurred him on to a further analysis of war-fighting and he developed innovative techniques based on engineering and scientific principles which was highly unusual for those times. These strategies saved many lives on the battlefield.

Narcissism is damaging to leadership aspirations. In the Time magazine last week there was a lament by Joel Stein over the 'X' generation and the millennial 'Y' generation for being overly narcissistic and that this sense of entitlement and intense self-absorption would be damaging for their future and our future. Indeed, an intense inward looking leader always concerned about their own positioning in life will eventually become a failed leader.

An intense degree of narcissism and the development of an absolute power mentality may produce an addiction to power and eventually lead to downfall of the hero ending in Greek tragedy. I am sure we can think of many despotic leaders throughout history in this category. This brings up the question of the psychopath. This is the 'snake in the suit' described in the book by Paul Babick published by Harper Business. No doubt psychopaths and those with sociopathic personalities can be charismatic, charming and fearless and make excellent leaders (at least on metrics), but they have no empathy, are ruthless and usually intensely disliked. You can clearly have competent leaders who have no empathy, are ruthless and calculating but I personally would not want to be in their organization. There are probably many leaders in this category. Monash was clearly an empathetic leader and cared deeply about the troops under his command. In 1919 in London he organized and supervised the repatriation of Australian troops. During this year-long period, Monash established classes to retrain his men for civilian life and to give those with no trade or profession, an opportunity to learn one. He returned to Australia when the repatriation was complete.

There is no substitute for building a career over many years, gradually gaining experience and learning from one's errors, learning from the example of others and gradually honing one's own skills and leadership qualities. Clearly, Monash did this throughout his life. Another fine example is Captain Chesley B 'Sully' Sullenberger who seemingly miraculously landed Flight 1549 in January 2009 on to the Hudson River. He clearly articulates (in his book Making a Difference published by Morrow) that the successful outcome to this freak event, due to a bird strike on his aeroplane engines, depended on him leading a strong professional well trained and well prepared team. He had previously trained as a jet pilot.

Finally, a leader should give back to those less fortunate than themselves and have a generosity of spirit and a strong desire to serve the community.

What about the nature–nurture question? Clearly, fine leadership is a complex mix of 'nature' and 'nurture'. The first two to three years of a child's development are critical in shaping the rest of the child's life. The ground is prepared early on and the parental influence in those first few years is absolutely critical. However, many of the traits I have discussed above have a significant genetic component eg risk taking behaviour,

empathy, intelligence, personality type. Much can be learned in courses on leadership but this does not ensure that the leader will emerge. Outstanding leaders will emerge and lead and these individuals probably have a significant in-born component as well as the effects of their early up-bringing. The leadership courses could supplement and improve their leadership skills and insight.

I also believe that the nature of leadership is changing. I like to think of there being macro-, meso- and micro-levels of leadership with the macro being at the level of a prime minister, CEO of a multi-national organisation, a Vice-Chancellor, Chief of the Defence Force or Chief of Army, whereas the meso- would be a leader of a medium sized organisation such as the Alfred Hospital where I work and a micro-level of leadership would affect a small number of people in the team such as a surgeon in an operating theatre or a platoon commander in the army or an airline Captain pilot.

Let's just now distil leadership down to its absolute essence and to the 3C and 2C concept which was introduced to me by Brigadier Nick Janz who instructs on leadership within Australian Defence Force courses. The 3C's are the common traits and the 2Cs are the traits that lift leadership to the exceptional or 'magical' level. The 3C's are 'competence', 'collaboration' (ie. making people feel valued), and 'character', where there is a sense of honour, trustworthiness, reliability and integrity. The exceptional C's are 'communication' where the leader is able to inspire due to his or her passion and emotion and secondly, 'consciousness' which is the less common ability to think strategically, to think several moves ahead and have the foresight to know where the organisation should be going. I would add a third C and that is 'courage'. Courage to enact a plan where there are risks involved and one's career and even the welfare and lives of the team are jeopardised. That is the ultimate trait of a fine leader. There is a fine line between well conceived and directed courage and reckless courage.

I do support leadership training if it improves the quality of leadership from junior to senior levels but I am sure you will all agree that not everyone can be an exceptional leader. Producing leadership mentality in junior levels of an organisation empowers them, their teams and the organisation moves ahead. The Australian Defence Force is a very good example of this. The Australian Defence Force also has excellent leadership training. The Australian Defence Force regards every soldier, from private up to general, as a leader who should take the initiative but at the same time work inside the guidelines and policies set by higher leadership levels.

In this address, I have aimed to put leadership in perspective and answer the questions I posed at the start of this address. My advice to aspiring leaders is to work hard, to gain respect and admiration for your work, to be kind and courteous to others, to be the best that you can be for yourself, your family and the community. This is what I have tried to do throughout my career and this is what Monash did. As Monash said *'adopt as your fundamental creed that you will equip yourself for life not solely for your own benefit for the benefit of the whole community'* and certainly Monash did this throughout his life. Australia needs fine leaders at all levels. Australians should learn about Monash and take away many lessons from his life. To be inspired by him and understand the essence of good leadership, to understand about caring for others in your organisation and above all why race, religion, social class, sexual proclivity should be no barrier to achievement.

In conclusion, Monash had a multitude of innate abilities, a nurturing environment in his early years, and an excellent and wide-ranging education. He faced many obstacles but overcame them to become an extraordinary leader. There were no leadership classes in his day and he honed his leadership skills in the 'school of hard knocks' ie in everyday life. That is not to say that future leaders of today do not benefit from training in leadership, but I submit to you that only a select few will make it to the top at the 'macro level'. Many more will succeed at a 'meso' or 'micro' level.

Thank you.