A Game of Thrones: Power Plays and Politics in Public Collaborative Leadership

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The collaborative phenomenon

Collaborative leadership has become an increasingly influential paradigm of thinking within leadership studies, with the idea gaining interest amongst both scholars and practitioners (Bolden, 2012; Grint and Holt, 2011; O'Reilly and Reed, 2012). Pitched as a solution to ever more complex, even intractable, global and social problems, such as global warming, changing global political power dynamics and the financial crisis experienced in western democratic nation states, collaborative leadership is offered as a means of generating more imaginative and sustainable solutions across established organizational and political boundaries (Benington and Moore, 2010). Shifting terrain within major global economic and political issues, the argument goes, *necessitates* that managers, political leaders and citizens conceptualise leadership differently.

Can we therefore assume that there are plenty of live examples of collaborative leadership on the move within organizations and social movements? A body of practical experience developing alongside collaborative leadership philosophising? In reality it seems as though writing about the idea of collaborative leadership has overtaken the extent of its practice (Grint, 2010). What we are experiencing, rather than everyday collaborative leadership practice, is a collaborative zeal within the literature.

There are several potential explanations for this. Perhaps collaborative leadership is easier said than done, and that even in cases where those in positions of leadership claim to operate collaboratively, their employees might tell a different tale, the problem being one of an inconsistency between managerial rhetoric and action (Alvesson and Svenningson, 2003). Researchers, perhaps, have not looked hard enough for instances of collaborative leadership, and are more excited by the theory than the practice. Is collaborative leadership of interest, or just better understood, by policymakers and scholars, rather than members of the public and politicians, and so its application is necessarily limited? Or perhaps collaborative leadership is rarely reported empirically simply because it remains a rare phenomenon. Can we, as readers, consumers of leadership texts, as well as producers and practitioners, even agree on a definition of what collaborative leadership might look like in reality? Let alone what it might represent, what its purpose might be (collaborate for *what*?). In short, much

of the collaborative discourse around leadership remains mysterious and ungrounded in empirical research (O'Reilly and Reed, 2012).

What we can assert with more certainty is that as researchers of organisational and political life, we know very little about the environment in which collaborative leadership exists: the pressures it comes under as an idea; its proponents, detractors; the meanings associated with it. This paper sets as its task better understanding, empirically, constructions at play around the meaning and purpose of collaborative leadership. How do people in practice hold this idea of collaborative leadership? What can we learn about the context of collaborative leadership, the journey any collaborative leadership project must undergo to be accepted?

It is our contribution to knowledge to begin to answer some of these questions by attempting to make sense of the experiences and narrative constructions of people involved in a 'collaborative leadership' undertaking. Through developing our understanding of the context and meaning of collaborative leadership, we hope to inform (and enrich, temper) future writing in this area. It is also our wish to make a practice contribution, that through highlighting some of the issues live within a 'collaborative' leadership environment, we might draw attention to some perhaps unexpected issues for practitioners seeking to develop more collaborative practices. This latter point is not meant in any technical, performative sense, but rather, we hope to provoke more critical thought amongst practitioners (Spicer et al, 2009), concerning the dangers of oppressive, as well as the possibilities for emancipatory practices generated by this phrase 'collaborative leadership'.

So what is collaborative leadership?

This title may seem to offer an obtuse question, yet what is meant by 'collaboration' and the purpose underlying it can vary, depending on what one believes the purpose of leadership to be.

Within both organisational and political life, collaborative leadership could offer something quite different from traditional, hierarchical ways of organising – or not. Collaborative leadership could stand for a sweeping out of hierarchy in favour of a system of anarchism (Bakunin, 1970; Kropotkin, 2002). Socially and politically, theorists have identified the collaborative challenge as that of working with and holding difference in practice between social groups, organisations and individuals (Young, 2011), the challenge for political leaders as hearing and involving the voices of previously suppressed minority groups. Organisationally, increasing scholarly output has been put to work in the area of collaborative leadership – often under the rubric of distributed leadership (e.g. Gronn, 2002; Spillane, 2006). In contrast to the more radical work cited above, these authors do not suggest the abolition of a formal authority figure (the leader) but they do advocate viewing leadership as a social system whereby responsibility is distributed amongst many leaders (Bolden, 2012; Raelin, 2003). The belief is that through developing more robust practices and feedback mechanisms amongst employees and partner organisations, this phenomena we call 'collaborative leadership' can be strengthened (Tourish and Hargie, 2004).

Of course this discussion of distributed leadership raises the intriguing question of who does the distributing, for what purposes and in whose interests. In other words, behind the principle of collectivity lies a series of thorny power issues (Grint, 2005a). We will return to this issue of power

later, as it is at the heart of the focus of this paper. For now it is sufficient that we acknowledge that this construct of collaborative leadership is the subject of debate, if not quite hotly contested.

We define collaborative leadership, for the purposes of this study, as processes which involve the sharing of responsibility and authority across existing areas of accountability, either within a single organization (a cautious version of collaboration?) or across organizations (a more ambitious version of collaboration?). We acknowledge that 'leadership' itself is a contested terrain of meaning (Grint, 2005a) but believe our definition represents a pragmatic theoretical position, which enables the analysis of a range of constructions, while also differentiating collaborative leadership from other directive and organising concepts, such as 'command' and 'management' (Grint, 2005b).

Collaborative leadership and public-political leadership

Despite the rhetoric of corporate social responsibility and concerns over what constitutes value for the business sector (e.g. Senge et al, 2010), it is primarily within a public sector context that most discussion of collaborative leadership has taken place. Authors identify public organizations as crucial, leading bodies in the tackling of difficult, cross-boundary problems.

The godfathers of collaborative leadership, Chrislip and Larson, in their influential (1994) work establish the leadership problems to be addressed by collaborative leadership as essentially public concerns. The "health of cities", for example, is cited as an important issue which stretches beyond the purview of healthcare organizations (Chrislip and Larson, 1994: 10). Heifetz (1994), in his theory of 'adaptive leadership' (another collaborative take on leadership), turns to the public sphere for many of his case studies. The perception of collaborative leadership as a distinctively public concern held firm as the second wave of collaborative writers entered the scene in the early 2000s, with Gronn (2002, 2008) introducing his influential theory of 'distributed leadership' within the context of educational institutions. Collaboration across organizational borders lies at the heart of public value theory, which began within a neoliberal context, as open to integrating ideas from business into public management and leadership debates (Moore, 1996). In recent years the public value literature has adopted a far more publicly-delivered focus, with the core proposition behind public value being that it is something delivered by a range of *public* sector actors (the public sector demonstrating that it can deliver value) (Benington and Moore, 2010). The core belief underlying all of this collaborative work is that the public realm is up to the new, more difficult, challenges currently facing the world.

How public institutions might go about collaborating across boundaries in new, creative ways is less clear. The literature is replete with the language of inevitability. In other words, the problems facing us are so great that we simply *must* engage in collaborative leadership. For example, Chrislip and Larson (1994: 40) state that problems may be "sufficiently complex" so that collaborative leadership will be "necessary". Gibney et al (2009) refer to problems which "require" a more collaborative form of leadership in the public sphere. In the field of networked governance, another iteration of the collaborative ideal, readers are told of the "need" for collaboration (Sorensen and Torfing, 2008: 3).

The apparently obvious need for collaborative leadership seems to have overtaken any corresponding need to explain *how* diverse stakeholders may collaborate in their leadership

practice. Where the implementation of collaborative leadership is mentioned it is usually assumed that if people discuss their differences openly and clearly enough, then power can be somehow overcome and collaboration becomes more straightforward. This is "a belief that if you bring the appropriate people together in constructive ways with good information, they will create authentic visions and strategies for addressing the shared concerns of the organization or community" (Chrislip and Larson, 1994: 14). The idea that political philosophy can be opposed to the very idea of public collaboration, or indeed, might enable it, is not explored.

Elsewhere there is a deficiency of causal detail. Brookes (2011), for example, lists a series of contingencies, stating that leaders "will engage collectively" on the condition that there is mutual benefit, a favourable climate for collaboration and shared trust between leaders. While undoubtedly valid, these statements do not bring us closer to discovering how these conditions might be met. Bergström et al (2012) conceptualise the collaborative challenge in terms of the need for leaders to gain new "tools" of collaboration. In other words this is a technical challenge, not one of people's core political and cultural beliefs. Cultural theory (Thompson, 2008; Verweij et al, 2006) does bring people's political viewpoints to the foreground in discussing possible solutions to difficult social problems – but even here the suggestion is that if only we learned how to co-operate more across ideological lines, then we could better perform collaborative leadership. The idea that collaboration itself – or that what lies beneath collaboration (i.e. what kind of collaboration and for what purposes) – is a politically charged concept, is not considered.

Public value theory does approach the idea that collaboration may be viewed through a more political lens. Core to public value is the idea of an 'authorising environment' whereby what constitutes 'value' is thrashed out between relevant public agencies (Benington and Moore, 2011). Elsewhere such an environment is referred to as an 'arena' of development, where relations of power are made visible and negotiated between people (Burgoyne and Jackson, 1997). It is acknowledged by Benington and Moore that the authorising environment is potentially a "place of contestation where many views and values struggle for acceptance and hegemony" (Bennington and Moore, 2011: 6), yet both the implications for collaborative leadership of viewing value as a contested concept, and the detail of the processes of contestation remain underdeveloped.

Missing in the analysis is a more contested reading of collaborative leadership, one where more difficult questions are posed, such as collaboration for whom and by whom. What does collaborative leadership take for granted? Who does it seek to speak for? What are the interests at play within a collaborative leadership process? It is with these questions in mind that we suggest a more critical reading of collaborative leadership.

Critical issues for collaborative leadership

It is recognised that the area of leadership studies has been under-represented by insights from political science and, correspondingly, that political leadership has been an area of study under-worked within political science (Peele, 2005). One of the consequences of the de-politicisation of leadership studies, in our view, is that collaborative leadership theory has not been subjected to sufficient critical analysis. The analysis has stopped at the door of the civil servants. Danger lies in

the discourse of policy (and textbook definitions of collaborative policy) overtaking the political realities of delivery (John, 2010). The idea may become too far detached from the concerns, hopes and fears of the voting public. For Stoker (2006) the challenge is precisely to make public value meaningful for political debate. The challenge of meaningfulness suggests that the authorising environment needs to be one which holds value for members of the public, as well as the politicians who represent them – i.e. emphasis on value for the public rather than value as something delivered by the public. Gains and Stoker (2009) go further in stating that it is difficult to see how the public value project (and its stated collaborative imperative) can be further progressed unless its proponents and practitioners understand better the political processes underpinning it.

Objections to the very idea of public collaboration may legitimately be raised by politicians, who, they might argue, are elected precisely with the mandate to lead (Morrell and Hartley, 2006). Who do these unelected bureaucrats think they are coming along and telling the politicians and public that they need to cede power in the name of 'partnership working'? Perhaps assuming that politicians have the continuing support of the public for leadership is a naïve view, with the reality being that politicians are increasingly recognising that their mandate to lead is something which requires more frequent endorsement (Hartley, 2012; Hartley and Benington, 2010). Nevertheless it is worth bearing in mind that politicians, in practice, may hold priorities which are different, or even counter to, collaborative leadership.

And why wouldn't they be suspicious of a theory and practice which seeks to represent shared interests amongst a diverse group of people and organizations? Both political science and organization studies are replete with studies critical of attempts to claim unitary interests – be it on the basis of class, gender, race or sexuality. Collaboration at work has been identified as problematic (Grint, 2005a), with collaboration often used to propagate neoliberal ideals at the expense of more communal alternatives (McCabe, 2007). 'Leadership' itself as a legitimate area of study has been criticised as potentially allowing oppressive practices to slip into common organizational parlance and practice (Tourish, 2013). Leadership, it is argued, can be constructed in transcendental terms, involving faith and spirituality, our 'feelings'. The scientific or professional rigour seen as the cornerstone of other organizational practices may be overlooked within leadership (O'Reilly and Reed, 2012). This is a dangerous position, as vulnerable people may be asked to make sacrifices for the 'greater good' of leadership (Grint, 2010), which may do little more than enrich their oppressors.

As readers, consumers and practitioners of collaborative leadership, we should be suspicious of all claims of shared interest. The issue of who speaks for who within collaborative leadership is surely vital, and is one where power relations should be central to our analysis. If our analysis of social and organizational relations enables us to critically examine the validity of claims to speak on behalf of others (Latour, 1987; Law, 2005) it may bring us closer to understanding the complex power dynamics at play within public collaboration. Placing the role of spokespeople within collaborative leadership under the critical spotlight is an uncomfortable business as it calls into question the privileged positions of 'leaders' (political and administrative), not to mention academics. Who are they to speak on behalf of the interests of less privileged members of society (Grint, 2010)? The danger is that if we overlook such questions of representation, collaborative leadership may become at best little more than an unsubstantiated rhetorical vehicle for the self-glorification of managers (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003) or, at worst, a cloak for oppressive practices.

Problems do not arrive as naturally 'collaborative' or otherwise. To borrow a well-worn phrase from leadership: they are not born that way, but made that way. If organizational problems are viewed as constructed (Grint, 2005a, 2005b), rather than 'real' and 'fixed' then attention is drawn to how these problems are accomplished, rather than what may be 'necessary' in a particular situation. Grint has shown how problems are usually constructed as 'tame' (known problems requiring management), 'critical' (emergency problems necessitating a command response), or 'wicked' (unknown problems requiring collaboration, or leadership). Each construction comes pre-packaged with a set of learnt responses (e.g. to manage we seek known technical solutions), each of which entail degrees of sacrifice and silence on the part of followers (Grint, 2010). The meta-point here is that as critical enquirers of leadership it is our job to interrogate how problems are presented to us: what is being asked of us in the name of, for example, collaborative leadership?

From a critical perspective, 'collaborative' leadership problems can be viewed as political narratives which are pulled off, rather simply appearing as naturally occurring phenomena. For example, it has been argued that the electoral success of George W Bush can be attributed to his successful construction of leadership problems as 'critical', necessitating 'strong' (or 'undemocratic', 'unilateral', depending on your political position) responses (Grint, 2005a). Bush's construction of the leadership imperative were preferred by voters to those of the 2004 Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry, who preferred more 'wicked', 'collaborative' (or 'weak', 'flip-flop', depending on your political position) interpretations and solutions. She or he who has the most durable narrative construction of the problem is better placed to shape the narrative of the solution (Grint, forthcoming). So the challenge of political leadership in a contested terrain appears to be more about how political leaders, mediators of messages and audiences work on the level of symbolism and the dramatic, as it is about a marketing view of isolating demographic groups and speaking to the perceived interests of such groups (Alexander, 2010). Practices of evoking a compelling narrative and positing careful narrative interventions into a dynamic and contested political drama point towards a view of political narrative as shifting and vulnerable. Building a coherent political narrative may be interpreted as fragile, unpredictable work.

Our argument is that collaborative leadership should not be interpreted as in any way 'natural' or 'inevitable'. Rather, if we are to better understand collaborative leadership, we should seek to interrogate how it has been assembled as a construction, how it has been pulled off, or not, as a political project. It is our argument that one way this can be done is through exploring the narrative constructions and games of collaborative leadership.

Narrative ethnography and its value for leadership research

Narrative ethnography and the unfolding of leadership

The methodology adopted in this paper is that of narrative ethnography (Watson and Watson, 2012). It is a methodology which seeks to draw the strengths of both the contextual richness of ethnography (getting to know the characters and history of the setting), as well as upon the analytical rigour of narrative inquiry (becoming accustomed with the speech practices of the actors in the scene) (Gubrium and Holstein, 2009).

We adopt Watson's (2010: 205-206) definition of ethnography as "a style of social science writing which draws upon the writer's close observation of and involvement with people in a particular social setting and relates the words spoken and the practices observed or experienced to the overall cultural framework within which they occurred". This definition offers ethnographers three challenges. The first is that of deep immersion in a scene, embedding research through active and longer-term participation of a researcher, described by Watson (2010: 206) as an aspect of ethnography which "cannot be avoided". Simply stated, there are no shortcuts if one believes that developing contextual knowledge of research participants and their scene adds value to a piece of research. The second challenge is that of participant-observation, which suggests that a researcher may come to know a scene through both observing and, when necessary, participating in the cultural practices of research participants (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1996).

The final consideration raised by Watson, is that the distinctive value offered by ethnography is that it is well positioned to make connections between the private worlds of research participants and broader social, economic, cultural and political concerns (Watson, 2009). Such critical awareness from the researcher is akin to Mills' (2000) sociological imagination, which can be defined as the capacity to connect problems experienced as private, with bigger societal issues. Major social problems are unlikely, after all, to be experienced in abstract form by research participants but as everyday experience and struggle. The test of an effective ethnography, say Watson and Watson (2012), is whether the writing may help someone entering a particular field better understand that field empathetically (in terms of its rich personal context) and more globally (in terms of its capacity to generate awareness and criticality of social concerns). In other words, does the piece of ethnographic writing "help in some small way with the choices that people make in their social lives and, in so doing, shape their experiences of the world" (Watson, 2010: 213)?

As stated in the previous section, a constructionist view of political leadership holds that what distinguishes successful political leadership is its ability to create and maintain a credible narrative (Grint, 2000, 2005a). A narrative analysis of political leadership might therefore seek to isolate a particular bid for broader narrative acceptance. Analysis would seek out the strategies of the political protagonists in seeking to embed a particular narrative, as well as the strategies of others, in influencing, supporting or attacking the narrative in play.

Such a view of narrative analysis stands in contrast to the thematic analytical view of narrative as largely complete, structured stories related to a researcher some time after the action described has taken place (Riessman, 2008; Sims, 2003). While we do not wish to diminish the value of such research, we believe that an alternative analysis of narrative is demanded if we are to better understand the progress of a narrative of collaborative leadership.

The narratives we pursue will necessarily be incomplete, as they are in the process of seeking affirmation. Boje's (2001 and 2008) concept of 'antenarrative' is important here, as it directs the attention of the analyst to the unfolding, the coming to life of a narrative. Boje (2001: 1) defines antenarrative as "fragmented, non-linear, incoherent collective, unplotted and pre-narrative speculation, a bet" and continues by stating that "to traditional narrative methods antenarrative is an improper storytelling, a wager that a proper narrative can be constituted". The notion of a wager placed by actors is an especially valuable one within a political setting, as the risks associated with making narrative speculations appear heightened from more conventional organizational locales, as

threats may appear from a range of power bases (Morrell and Hartley, 2006). Political party, the public, partner organizations, civil servants, the media, may each offer significant narrative support, yet all also hold the capacity to sink, or at least wound, a narrative of political leadership (Smolovic Jones, Grint and Holt, 2013).

Analysis of antenarratives, or 'small stories' (Georgakopoulou, 2006, 2007 and 2010), focuses on the linguistic constructions and moves of research participants. Methods from the area of discourse analysis are drawn upon to shed light on the strategies of participants as they seek to gain support and legitimacy for their narrative speculations (De Fina and Georgakopoulou, 2011; Georgakopoulou, 2007). Such discursive analysis of narrative speculations is particularly interested in the power moves of participants. We interpret such moves as attempts by actors to gain legitimacy for their particular construction of narrative meaning. Of interest in our interpretation is the use of particular discursive strategies which might indicate a bid for power or acceptance. We are not interested in listing linguistic devices, but are interested in *how* participants appear to create meaning through the deployment of linguistic constructions.

Narrative analysis and ethnography may be viewed as two sides of the same coin. We suggest that an ethnographic ethos (Watson, 2012) contributes vital depth of understanding to what would otherwise appear as disembodied tracts of text. Likewise, we believe that the depth offered by a narrative analysis within the scene under study contributes further rigour to the research. Importantly, the pairing of ethnographic and narrative methodologies allows the researchers to bury down into the data, into the personal constructions of actors in the field, but also to zoom out to offer insights in the context both of the meso-level of the ethnographic scene, and the more macro-level of broader social issues and debates (Watson, 2010).

The research setting and data analysis strategy

The paper is based upon research conducted over three years with a government organization charged with developing leadership within the local government sector of the United Kingdom. Activities of the organization include designing and writing policy, running specific leadership-informed projects with councils, conducting research into leadership within local government and the organizing of one-off discussion events. Core to the operation of the organization is a flagship leadership development programme for local government political leaders and chief executives. It is this programme which acted as the point of entry for the researchers. The field researcher followed one cohort all the way through the programme, sitting in on all of the sessions, over a period of 12 development days, divided into four blocks. In addition, the field researcher sat in on five additional days from other cohorts, at the beginning and end of the research. Over the whole engagement, 125 interviews were conducted with participants (across four cohorts) and some of their workplace colleagues, as well as with organization staff. Two periods of fieldwork were conducted with participants of the programme, with the field researcher shadowing them at work each day for two months. One political leader and one chief executive were chosen for this part of the fieldwork, in order that a senior politician and officer was observed.

Chosen for this paper is the case relating to the political leader observed at work. Although we could have based this study on interviews across our engagement with the leadership development

programme, conducting a thematic analysis, we felt that more insight was offered by tracking a specific leadership engagement in depth. As stated, the case analysed here involved two months of participant observation at the workplace of the participant (involving full working days and the occasional weekend commitment), as well as continuing conversations held over the duration of the three years of research. Six separate interviews were conducted with the political leader at various stages of the research, to explore issues unfolding in the field and to make sense of how the leader viewed the progress of the collaborative leadership project discussed in the next section. A further 25 (31 in total) ethnographic interviews (i.e. these were interviews related to the specific events unfolding in the field) were conducted with a variety of actors deemed to be important to the success, or otherwise, of collaborative leadership. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, as was the data used from the meeting used in the 'first moves' section below. Interactions were captured by the field researcher using teeline shorthand, a method mastered through formal training as a journalist. This was a pragmatic choice as the reality of participant observation is often fast moving, with little time to set up recording equipment. Furthermore, as the time in the field progressed, the field researcher found himself increasingly accepted (indeed, often ignored) as part of the background, and it was felt that intruding into the scene further would risk compromising the integrity of interactions.

Following the constructionist preferences of the authors, collaborative leadership was selected as a focus for this research because it was held as significant both by the leadership development organization mentioned above and by the principal research participant. Of interest was the value and meaning attached to the concept of collaborative leadership by research participants. We would not hold this paper as an example of grounded theorising (Glaser and Strauss, 1999), however. Rather, we concur with the view of Watson and Watson (2012: 685), who state that the trick of a stimulating ethnography is to enter the field armed with a body of theory, with this theory "added to and refined" through observations in the field. In terms of episode and narrative selection, we tried to follow the priority setting of research participants: engaging with events, moments and actors deemed as important to them as they grappled with this notion of collaborative leadership. Such selection was backed up by findings from the area of political leadership, which highlight political groups, the officer cadre and other political actors as particularly significant bases for the exercise of political leadership (Hartley, 2012; Leach et al, 2005).

As linguistic points of analysis, we sought to analyse narrative constructions on the part of participants, along the following dimensions:

- *Attempts of participants to construct powerful and convincing narrative meaning*. Of interest here were the following linguistic devices:

- the story genres adopted by participants (to what effect and why would participants choose certain genres over others) (Gabriel, 1991);
- the adoption and use of framing (Carroll and Simpson, 2012) by participants to move and convince others of their perspective;
- the utilisation of metaphor, repetition, contrast and other rhetorical devices, well established within the study of political actors (e.g. Greatbatch and Heritage, 1986; Grint, 2000);

- analysis of what was not said, or, the intertextual allusions made through the use of indexical words (Goergakopoulou, 2007), signalling the assumption of taken-for-granted, embedded knowledge;

- Attempts by participants to represent others. This dimension of analysis considers the 'Othering' of other participants (Georgakopoulou, 2007), the construction of the identity and intentions of other actors. In addition, it seeks to analyse the appropriation of the speech of others, where participants claim to be speaking on behalf of others (Modan and Shuman, 2010; Shuman, 2010).

This textual analysis was juxtaposed with the fieldnotes of the field researcher, with each read against the other in a continuous sensemaking cycle, until the researchers felt that they had constructed a meta-narrative which explained the political work underlying this particular attempt to construct collaborative leadership.

The terrain of the game

'Tradshire' is a county of the UK with a rich history of conservative values. Stalking its stately homes and picturesque patches of countryside are established figures from recent Conservative Party history and members of Britain's gentry. While not necessarily in formal positions of power locally, these figures were described to the field researcher by the leader of Tradshire County Council (TCC) as the "hidden power", who exercised a real but concealed influence. Stray too far from the conservative values of such figures and there would be consequences, the field researcher was told. Theirs was not power by remote control – to be so hands on would be "vulgar" – but the parameters of the possible were drawn and known (if unspoken).

Perhaps unsurprisingly the political history of Tradshire is solidly Conservative, both in terms of control of the county council and its district councils. Nevertheless, some pockets of support for other parties exists, most notably the Labour Party, but also the Liberal Democrats and Green Party, with Labour and the Lib Dems controlling some district councils.

At the time of the field researcher's embedded time in the field, and indeed throughout the three years of direct involvement with the organization, the political make-up of TCC was solidly Conservative, with commanding majorities which would make even the most autocratic of dictators blush. Suffice to say that this was a period of Conservative Party domination, as the Labour Government nationally began to bleed support.

Hegemonic control would perhaps be too strong a construction of the politics of Tradshire at the time. As stated, pockets of support existed for other parties. Differences also existed in terms of the political beliefs of the Conservative councillors. The majority identified themselves as being on the "right" of the Conservative Party, which in practice meant that they favoured smaller government, low taxes and the outsourcing and sale of services to the private sector, and were suspicious of the socially liberal movement of their party in certain areas. Yet the leader of the council, Jeff, described himself in a moment of self-depreciation as a "wet", someone who, as reported to the field researcher, believed in the reform of the Conservative Party towards a more socially liberal set of

policies and who believed in a role for government (albeit smaller government) in changing social outcomes.

In leadership terms, TCC had a tradition of command-focused organization (Grint, 2005b), based around powerful individual figures. The previous chief executive, for example, was described to the field researcher as "charismatic, strong, sometimes tyrannical, flawed". The current chief executive, Bill, was a proponent of collaborative, cross-organisational leadership who tried to encourage "strong" chief officers, and who enjoyed brokering between organizations. This interest in leadership across organizations was shared by his political leader Jeff, who described his leadership identity as rooted in "collaboration, systems thinking". Importantly, both saw such collaborative leadership as a *public* value offering, i.e. a way for the public sector to demonstrate its relevance in the face of challenging economic times.

First moves

The Public Services Plan (PSP) was a co-crafted and co-authored project by Jeff and Bill, described by Bill as "a bringing together of some of Jeff's political vision from his leadership campaign and the thinking of the senior management team and myself about how we do leadership in the council and county". At the time of our involvement with TCC, the Plan had been worked into a document, which was a series of proposals to embed a form of collaborative leadership into the working of the council and related organizations. Proposals included an internal focus on reducing costs, with a commitment to, "completely review TCC's management structures with a view to streamlining the organization" and to "share across the organization back office support services such as finance, HR, ICT and procurement". The more explicitly collaborative aspects of the Plan, and the most radical in terms of scale of change, sought to involve other organizations, and even the public, in the leadership of TCC, with a commitment to "actively seek to share more services with other public sector organisations" and to "examining and discussing with residents and others, those services that are, and should, remain core (an essential part) of the council's business and the costs and benefits of making changes".

Despite its skeletal form, the PSP was far from a blank sheet of paper. It represented the core philosophical commitments of Jeff and Bill, the drawing of some discursive boundaries as to what could and could not be constituted as 'collaborative leadership' in this initiative. The document, and their initial declarations around the document, can be interpreted as antenarrative speculation, a bid for recognition and acceptance as the dominant story of collaborative leadership in Tradshire. Two aspects of the Plan are of significance. The first is that the language in relation to efficiency savings, and the management of these savings, is hard – the suggestion in the adverb 'completely' ("completely review" – quoted above) is an apportioning of past (inefficient) guilt to managers of the council, the suggestion that such guilt was spread throughout the organization and was deep-rooted. Perhaps more significant is the lack of blame allocated to the public realm per se. The public sector is not held as culpable for inefficiency. Rather, inefficiency is framed as a condition which can be addressed through the public realm, by public sector managers thinking and operating differently (in this case through collaborative leadership processes). The problem may lie within the public sector, but so too does the solution.

As the PSP was introduced, Jeff and Bill held a series of meetings, with a number of stakeholders. The following extract is taken from a meeting with an audience of staff members. In the following extract, Bill interprets (offers the story of) the public's response to the Plan, as expressed in some initial public consultation conducted by TCC:

> We talked to residents. It's great that they actually trust and respect us and actually they want us to continue to arrange or provide the kind of services that we currently do that keep the county prosperous and indeed safe but not surprisingly they are looking for a bit of belt tightening like they themselves are doing and better value for money. Those kind of aspirations are actually in tune with the political vision as set out by Jeff.

> A council that has a local face, what residents are looking for. A council in fact that offers fair access to services around the county. A council that is seeking to reduce the sort-of gap between those better off and those worse off.

> The council is constantly looking for new ways of improving the way we do leadership. We've also outsourced some of our functions to [another public provider] but yet keeping it within the public sector. And we're on this journey as you know through support services review and I'll mention that again in a second to bring services together to make savings but improve the overall quality of the services. We've not traditionally badged our work in a big transformational way like some other authorities. I believe that the Tradshire way is to get the results first then brag about it rather than actually do the opposite. So I'm really very pleased with our work to date that now PSP does in fact represent a step change in terms of us rising and we will rise to the challenges of the future.

Note here what Shuman (2010) refers to as the issue of the proprietorship of stories. Shuman urges us to analyse instances where the narrator speaks on behalf of others – the appropriation of voice, as such narratives provide an insight into the workings of power. Who speaks for whom and what are the effects of these claims of legitimate appropriation? In the extract above, Bill speaks on behalf of "residents", stating that these people support the council's work. Yet he goes further, in making a more ambitious narrative speculation: people in the county, and their interests, are aligned with those of the PSP. Namely, that both want strong publicly provided services, and that, in a time of recession, that everyone needs to be careful about their finances ("they actually trust and respect us" & "they are looking for a bit of belt tightening like they themselves are doing"). The actor of "resident" is equated as holding similar interests as that of "council". A third actor is then introduced to the narrative, that of the council leader, who, we are told, shares such concerns of efficiency and quality publicly provided services, with the suggestion being that Bill and Jeff share the values of local people and are therefore qualified to speak on their behalf.

The narrative moves on to even more controversial territory in paragraphs two and three, as Bill attempts to draw some lessons from the story of the consultation, in the form of an extended coda. The claim is made that a core shared interest is that of reducing the wealth gap and that this is a valid area of concern for government. The fact that this is more dangerous territory can be noted in the qualifier "sort-of" introduced to the speech. Interestingly, Jeff made a similar statement in his speech at the same event but no such qualifiers were present. Bill concludes his narrative with the rhetorical trick of differentiating his leadership ethos with that of an invisible 'other' (Riessman, 2008). First, the point is made that he sees the collaborative leadership endeavour as a distinctly

public sector endeavour, differentiating his approach with that of other outsourcing strategies. Second, by claiming modesty for TCC he differentiates his form of collaborative leadership from the "big transformational way" of others. The suggestion is that other councils who have taken a more "transformational" path (of privatisation, outsourcing and ambivalence about the wealth gap) are guilty of lacking substance.

The PSP balanced tough language on efficiencies and cuts, with statements around collaboration. One had to analyse these statements more closely in order to spot the promotion of one form of collaboration (publicly focused) at the expense of another (privatisation and outsourcing). These values were made more explicit in talk, with the appropriation of the voices of others (residents) as support for a wealth gap reduction and public (not private) collaboration strategy. Behind this notion of 'collaborative leadership' lies a trail of political value making. More specifically, although the point of focus here may be seen as a speech by a chief executive and a report about collaborative leadership, the micro problem (how to deliver services in Tradshire) is related to larger social questions around the appropriateness of private sector involvement in public service delivery and the role of government in reducing the gap between rich and poor (Watson, 2009). In appropriating the voices of residents of Tradshire, perhaps Bill makes the same assumptions as collaborative leadership writers: that what people hold as the 'value' of collaboration is similar.

So why might Jeff and Bill's constructions of the PSP be risky? Where did the threats lie?

An Opening in the Game

Put plainly, the most immediate threat to the PSP came from the Conservative group within TCC. As stated previously, Jeff readily admitted that the vast majority of his group held different political views to his own, ones much more aligned with the neoliberal, Thatcherite wing of his party. Below is an extract from an interview conducted with a Conservative councillor, Ann, where this politician tells the field researcher why she is supportive of the PSP:

> I support the PSP but we should have been looking at the staff situation long before now really. But Jeff probably felt we couldn't do it before the election. We have got xx staff on the payroll and god knows what they are doing. What concerns me about that is I think we should cut staff and we could do away with thousands without too much trouble and no one would notice. Nobody has said no to these people for 25 years. Why can't they just stick their heads up and see outside of their little patch?

In this opening section of the narrative, Ann sets up the problem, which she believes the PSP addresses – an over-abundance of publicly-paid staff. Her framing of the problem is clear enough, seen simply in her repeated emphasis of the word 'cuts'. More dramatic is her mystification of the role of staff, where the content and value of their work is beyond human comprehension and could only be understood by a deity ("god only knows"). The value of public sector staff is so mysterious to this politician that "thousands" could be removed (note that "thousands" equates to a substantial proportion of total council employees) without Ann noticing the difference. Collaborative leadership, at the end of this section, is unambiguously constructed simply as a means of sacking staff.

Ann continues her narrative by positioning herself in relation to what she views as staff of little value, and, furthermore, trying to make sense of her own support for her political leader (Jeff), who seems far too close for her liking to the council officers:

> If you are about cutting staff it can be so difficult today to do that. Jeff's very close to the chief executive. The chief executive is the top banana who has got all of the top managers around him and he can make life very difficult for the leader if he wants to. He has got to keep the chief executive onside or there will not be any cuts. You have to bear in mind they have been working together and have built up these good team relationships and you have to have respect for each other. It gets a bit too cosy I think in places like this. I think Jeff is too close to Bill. Quite honestly you could do it in a far simpler way but we have to go through all these stages and that is unnecessary. Our leader is not getting the best out of the inputs from other councils and learning from others.

The confusion felt by Ann is reflected in her structuring of this section of the narrative. One sentence critical of council bureaucracy is followed by another critical of her leader, which is followed by an explanation of her leader's behaviour, followed by yet another criticism ("it gets a bit too cosy"). Two uses of indexical words at the end of this section reveal what Ann views as an alternative to this "cosy" relationship with the council officers. The use of indexical words in narratives signal the presence of an intertextual reference which may be invisible to people outside the local context (Georgakopoulou, 2007). In this case, the field researcher was aware of Ann's reference points, because her assumptions about how to run the council and where valued knowledge for the task lay were held in common amongst members of the Conservative group. These points were clarified with Ann later on in the interview. Use of the word "it" within "you could do *it* in a far simpler way" referred to a particular view of 'collaborative leadership' which had developed within the group. Doing "it" had come to stand for a large reduction in staff numbers, combined with a radical selling off where possible, or contracting out, of services to companies in the private sector. Ann's use of the word "others" referred to notable examples from other Conservative-controlled councils which had earned a reputation nationally for such privatising of services. These examples had become celebrated amongst Conservatives within TCC.

In this narrative, Ann's preoccupation with what may seem to be a particularly local concern (politicians being too close to officers), reveals a connection to a bigger debate within the public sector, that of the appropriate role of government involvement in service provision, and the casual, taken-for-granted assumption from Ann (and many others in her position), as signalled in her deployment of indexical references, that neoliberalism offers an obvious solution. What is more surprising here is that Ann's, and her colleagues', advocating of neoliberal outsourcing and downsizing, is couched within the framework of collaborative leadership: collaborate in order to cut and privatise. The notion that public servants could offer value is seen as otherworldly, requiring supernatural powers of comprehension, whereas the neoliberal case is so obvious as to obviate explanation to the interviewer, as seen in the deployment of indexical words.

So far we have sought to present the construction of collaborative leadership by Jeff and Bill as rooted in publicly delivered value, albeit with a hard edge around efficiency, while the construction on the part of political actors within TCC was the adoption of collaborative leadership as a mode of introducing a neoliberal conception of service delivery. So how could these positions be resolved?

Playing both sides?

Both Jeff and Bill were aware that in order for the PSP to be developed in a direction satisfactory to them, Conservative politicians within TCC would have to be enrolled, as it would be their ongoing support, not to mention votes, which would determine the immediate fate of their version of 'collaborative leadership'. As stated in the above section, this challenge was far from straightforward, as the majority of the Conservative group in TCC held quite different perceptions of the purpose of collaborative leadership. This tension in the constructions of collaboration presented a challenge to Bill and Jeff. Their solution was to balance two conflicting demands within their narrative framing. The extract below is taken from a meeting of Jeff's political cabinet. Both Jeff and Bill knew that if their plan failed to win even the support of those politicians closest to them, then their vision for collaborative leadership would be lost.

Bill opens this passage by attempting to provide a politically charged narrative for the political handling of the PSP by politicians. The passage shows Bill stepping outside of his official authority, to offer highly political advice, perhaps expecting some form of cooperative response from the politicians. The response, however, is unexpected:

> Bill: This is a problem not of our making, but we will rise to it. Public services over the coming years will be decimated; there is no other word for it. This is because of this government's handling of the economy. It's as simple as that. But we will handle and find our way through the government's mess.

> Cabinet Member 1 (CM1): [grunts] I am concerned with claiming something which frankly we just might not be able to deliver. The problem is the ambition of the staff and really can they actually offer this flexibility and take on the cross-cutting responsibility we are asking of them. They are not nearly as good at the cross-cutting department working even inside the council as they think they are.

This is another attempt by Bill to appropriate the narratives of others (in this case, senior politicians within TCC). But this narrative is immediately disputed and countered by CM1, who abruptly changes the subject (signalled by a loud grunt). CM1 offers a straightforward reading of "the problem" to be addressed by the collaborative leadership endeavour: staff intransigence. Staff are constructed as over-confident of their abilities and achievements. The suggestion is that the council may be structurally incapable of delivering cuts, the background threat being that of outsourcing and privatising services. At this point Jeff steps in to the exchange, as he often did when he perceived TCC staff to be under attack:

> Jeff: You know, it's an aspirational vision and we want people, those people who work for the council to feel good about it and not at all held back in how they work and lead, delivering for people.

> CM1: [grunts] We're not structured for this at the moment, too many staff.

The above represents Jeff's attempt to alter the course of the narrative of "the problem" and to recruit CM1. His statement seems to concede that staff may be part of "the problem" but that they

may also provide a solution, as long as they "feel good" and are not "held back". The response, however, is a flat rejection of this construction, as CM1 counters with a plain re-iteration of his previous construction of the problem. Jeff's difficulties in holding together his narrative construction signal the re-entry of Bill, whose official role is to manage and speak on behalf of staff:

> Bill: We know that, the structure is too hierarchical. Look, it will not be without pain. There will be squeals. I can tell you though for certain that the officers are up for this, but I have to say that it will be tough politically because there are a lot of staff who have worked for the organization for many years who will have to go and it will be very tough.

Bill's strategy, again, is to concede some ground, while subtly refocusing "the problem" back onto the politicians. His deployment of metaphors at the beginning of this section is extreme ("pain"), his use of "squeals" evoking animals being led to a slaughterhouse. His dehumanisation of council staff exceeds any construction of these actors as problematic offered by the politicians. Yet this construction from Bill seems to act as a linguistic sleight of hand, as his next move is to turn the tables on the politicians: they are the problem, as they may not be ready for the discomfort, whereas he is ready to deal with his 'problematic' staff. Lost in his analysis is any questioning of the purpose of the collaborative leadership project – the only debateable point has become resistance amongst politicians and staff. The linguistic ground has shifted. So do the politicians follow Bill's conjuring trick?

> Cabinet Member 2 (CM2): We all know people will have to go but where does it say that in the report?
>
> Jeff: There will be a section on delayering. This is a financial Armageddon situation, but we need to be careful. This has to be handled well, so that when we are finished that staff be more positive.
>
> CM2: It should be more explicit. I do welcome what you said about our senior officers. But I just think we need to be more explicit about what we want to achieve, with the headcount.

CM2 steps into the exchange here, a more animated tone in her voice (perhaps inflamed by the suggestion that the politicians may be the problem) and attempts to reassert staff as the problem. From this point onwards, Bill withdraws form the exchange, seemingly content that the debate be conducted over the readiness of officers and politicians for change, rather than the more sticky issue of the nature of collaboration. The coda of this exchange is marked by further strong language (again stronger than that adopted by senior politicians) by Jeff ("Armageddon"), but again played on the territory of staff numbers.

What is evident from the above, is that far from engaging in any open discussion on what constitutes the 'public value' of collaborative leadership in the context of Tradshire, such talk is conducted elsewhere, out of the earshot of the political group, because such language is unacceptable in a context where the words 'value' and 'public' are not seen as belonging together in an adjacent pair. An antenarrative of public value would likely be swiftly countered by a neoliberal antenarrative. The antenarrative where the politicians, as well as Jeff and Bill, can coalesce, is around staff reductions. Of course the implication of large-scale reductions in financing from central government meant that all councils in the UK would have to make significant staff redundancies in order to survive. In other

words, such a choice was likely a Hobson's choice. Nevertheless, it is this nascent narrative of staff reductions versus the readiness of politicians for change which enabled the leader and chief executive to maintain some form of stability for their collaborative proposal, at least within TCC. The larger political debate as to the meaning of collaborative leadership remains subdued.

So far the analysis has focused on the institution of TCC. Of course the ambitions of Jeff and Bill extended beyond the council, as their PSP explicitly sought to draw in other organizations to their narrative of collaborative leadership.

A rainbow of antenarratives: Check Mate!

Given that, on paper at least, the political make-up of Tradshire seemed near-hegemonic, one might expect many of the narrative dynamics played out within TCC to be replicated outside of TCC. This was not the case. Instead, what became apparent from interviews conducted with the other political leaders of Tradshire, and from observing meetings with them concerning the PSP, was that they placed a range of antenarrative speculations around the value and purpose of collaborative leadership – some largely conforming with constructions already in play from within TCC, others less predictable. The effect was an almost bewildering array of colourful antenarrative speculations.

Some of these antenarratives will be described below, before the implications of such diversity are considered.

A narrative of environmental sustainability was drawn upon by one leader, who, early on in the process, criticised the lack of such an emphasis in the PSP and stated that the only viable form of collaborative leadership worth considering was one which placed environmental concerns 25 years hence at its core. Another leader deployed a localist narrative in a meeting to state that his council offered value merely from employing people locally and that cutting any staff would be counter-productive for the organisation and the community. A fatalist narrative was introduced by one leader in an interview, who would not move any further than stating that this was a problem created by central government and not a matter for councils to be concerned with. The same fatalism was witnessed from the local press and public. Both exercised a consequential (if powerless) narrative strategy: silence. Each of these partial, initial antenarratives were offered by leaders of the same political party as Jeff. Each speculation offered resistance to Jeff and Bill's construction of collaboration, but none seemed insurmountable, as they did not contradict the basic construction of collaborative leadership posited. Yet each acted as a form of narrative provocation, poking and weakening the original construction of collaborative leadership as posited by Jeff and Bill. Addressing these antenarratives was akin to wading through thick mud: it might be possible to emerge on the other side, but at what cost?

Other antenarratives were more problematic as they directly challenged the Jeff and Bill's narrative of collaboration. One leader, in an interview, outright confronted the value of collaborative leadership as offered:

> We need to think about what is the optimum size for services, not just sharing for sharing's sake. I'm not interested in this 'county-wide delivery unit' for the sake of it. We need

optimum sized services and to be more imaginative and radical about who delivers them. What's wrong with a bit of competition? Retail is in the detail. We can't lose that local contact or we won't know what our market is telling us.

Note here the heavy adoption of the language of the market ("retail"), combined with that of rational economics ("optimum size"). The suggestion in the phrase "imaginative and radical" is the involvement of the private sector in the delivery of services. The difference between the neoliberal positioning of this leader with that of the politicians at TCC, was that this leader positioned collaborative leadership across organizations as incompatible with his neoliberal ideals, whereas the TCC politicians were able to reconcile collaborative leadership as one route towards more neoliberal forms of organizing. This was a new antenarrative, one which was certainly present within TCC, but had been subdued.

Another leader adopted similar market-informed rhetoric in an interview, constructing a narrative of heroic, individualistic local leadership in contrast to a view of collaboration as the indecisiveness and weakness of collaborative leadership:

This sharing thing has been an uphill struggle. All that money that's been spent on this collaboration nonsense would pay for an environmental health officer for the whole year and I could get something done with that. What's been going through my head is I will be dammed if I am going to join that group if it is going to spend that kind of money. You wouldn't really want to be led by Bill would you. I mean he is not a leader is he. They have a much more managerial approach than we do and it gives people a reluctance to follow them over the top. What you really need in a county council is someone saying "come on, follow me", not someone with a clipboard saying, "Well oh gosh … perhaps … hold on a second." That way we're all fucked. I see myself at the front, going over the top.

In this narrative, the council leader both provides a definition of leadership and uses this definition to draw attention to perceived weaknesses in the collaborative project of Bill and Jeff. Old military traditions within Tradshire are tapped into ("over the top"), as the leader here addresses an imaginary corps of soldiers ("come on"). This no-nonsense, straightforward construction of leadership is contrasted with an imaginary tale of Bill following the troops over the top, stuttering over his words, clipboard in hand. This is a straight adoption of the comedic genre, which is made sense of by Gabriel (1991) as representing an anti-establishment delight in the misfortune of mainstream power. In this case, the listener (the field researcher) is invited by the narrator to enjoy the image of the overly bureaucratic chief executive meeting his match on the field of battle, suggesting that this leader feels the chief executive is playing a game outside of his scope of understanding. The defining image in this narrative is the heroic military leader waging war against excess spending, leaving the fussy chief executive trailing helplessly behind.

Support for the PSP did emerge, albeit from an unexpected source – a major opposition party, which controlled a council in the county. From the beginning, the leader of this council displayed a willingness to back Jeff and Bill. Caution, awareness of risk and the slow testing of the possible dominated her narrative work, however:

> I think they will not want to be seen as going in too much with us, too risky, too much risk involved going that way. There are people talking in terms that are too big at the moment. The only way is if we try a few smaller-scale things and work from there.

Note the repetition of 'too' in this extract, indicating that this leader recognised that by openly supporting a leader of a different political party, she would be placing the collaborative leadership venture in danger. She privately coveted more radical collaboration, but formulated a gradualist antenarrative, of taking things one step at a time. The counter-productive possibilities of cross-party cooperation seen in the field run counter to the dominant narrative of collaborative leadership, which precisely seeks to advocate the potential of political diversity.

The above rainbow of antenarratives were at work in a context which most would consider a politically rather hegemonic environment. This calls to attention the risks inherent in assuming that 'collaboration' or 'public value' are in any way stable constructs. Given the array of narratives competing for attention, what possibility for collaborative leadership?

Jeff and Bill's response was to retreat to search for safe narrative ground. In the case of TCC they were able to find such territory in a narrative of staff efficiencies. This was impossible once the issue of collaborative leadership became county-wide, rather than simply organization-focused. The efficiency rhetoric, while present, was largely placed in the background in favour of what we label as a 'crisis' rhetoric (Grint, 2005b). The invitation within a crisis narrative is for followers to drop their normal critical faculties and to follow the direction of an expert leader, or commander. So, both Bill and Jeff, in meetings with other county leaders would pepper their speeches and dialogue with crisis talk: "we're facing Armageddon"; "we're standing on a burning platform here"; "we just don't have the luxury to mess about"; "this is a crisis, not of our making, but a crisis"; "we can't afford to muck about", etc. The purpose of such antenarrative deployments is to generate urgency and obedience.

Given the antenarratives of the other leaders, one might argue that Bill and Jeff did not have much discretion in the matter. The narrative of efficiencies seemed unconvincing when all councils were already in the process of finding their own efficiencies. This meant that the leaders were not so easily thrown off by the strong rhetoric of cuts and were more prepared than the TCC politicians to overtly fight the case for neoliberal, market-driven leadership. And for them, collaborative leadership did not seem like a convincing construct for such work. Finding an agreed narrative of 'public value' may be impossible in a situation where one group of people interpret public value as 'value for the public delivered by the public sector', whereas another group of people agitate on behalf of a view of public value as 'value for the public which cannot be delivered by the public sector'. It is a case of narrative stalemate: Check Mate!

Discussion and conclusions

It seems fitting to begin the final section of this paper with the coda of the collaborative story as it unfolded in TCC. The outcome of the efforts and planning of Bill and Jeff, as we ended our research relationship with them, was mixed. The pair had succeeded in generating support for making their version of publicly-delivered collaborative leadership the accepted story of their organization. By accepted, we mean that their politicians were tolerant, and often supportive, of their efforts and

that staff were not visibly resistant. Wider acceptance of publicly-driven collaborative leadership was less successful. A number of smaller-scale collaborations between councils were being discussed and seemed as though they would at least be trialled. Broader, more ambitious collaborative leadership (publicly driven) across the councils did not materialise. The narrative of a publicly-led collaborative leadership endeavour was not one which could hold across a range of diverse stakeholders. The meta-finding here is that although collaborative leadership is discussed as though it were an inescapable reality of the way leadership is practiced in the future, several of the actors in our research project disagreed. They either held very different conceptions of the purpose of collaboration, disagreed with the very idea of collaboration, or, their voices were insufficient to carry the day.

The remainder of the paper will be dedicated to a more in-depth discussion of issues arising from this meta-finding. As a summary and heuristic to guide our concluding discussion we have included a sensemaking table, identifying our interpretation of the narratives at play within the collaborative leadership project observed:

Antenarrative in play	Summary of antenarrative	Narrative strategies deployed	Illustrative quotes	Relationship to 'collaboration'
Public collaborative leadership	The public sector can lead collaboratively to create public value.	Framing: alignment of interests	"A council in fact that offers fair access to services around the county. A council that is seeking to reduce the sort-of gap between those better off and those worse off."	Aligned
		Subterfuge (sleight of hand): making the case only to certain audiences; distraction with a 'cuts' and courage to cut narrative	"It will be tough politically."	
		Emergency rhetoric	"We're standing on a burning platform." "This is total financial Armageddon."	
		Appropriation of others' words	"They actually trust and respect us."	

Cutting collaboration	We must collaborate in order to cut staff.	Bloodlust Rhetorical contrast (public officials as problematic; politicians as straightforward, and vice versa) Dehumanization	"There will be squeals." "The problem is the ambition of the staff." "It will be tough politically." "We could do away with thousands without too much trouble and no one would notice."	Aligned
Privatising collaboration	We must collaborate with the private sector in order to provide value. Let the market determine value.	Framing: wasteful public servants; logic of the market Indexical references (taken for granted assumptions) [note – more straightforward strategies! – easier to pull off?]	"God knows what they are doing." "The optimum size for services." "You could do __it__ in a far simpler way."	Aligned
Sustainable collaboration	We must collaborate to improve future quality of life.	Framing: transcendental (above the fray of public-private)	"Only if we think about the world we want our children to live in 25 years from now."	Aligned
Localism/protectionism	Local people know best. Collaboration undermines local voice and accountability.	Framing: accountability and welfare Contrast: heroic localism vs indecisive and inefficient regionalism	"Over the top!" & "Follow me!" vs "Well oh gosh … perhaps … hold on a second."	Opposed
Fatalism	Public leadership concerns are not our problem. The debate has nothing to do with us.	Silence Withdrawal	" … " "The government got us into this mess. It's just terrible, what we're facing."	Neither aligned nor opposed

The first issue to note here is that, despite the language of inevitability of the collaborative leadership literature, the collaborative leadership observed in practice was anything but certain. Participants in the scene adopted a range of narrative strategies to convince, seduce, cajole, mislead others. Some of these strategies could be labeled as of a collaborative ethos, but others not. Narrative strategies observed in the research suggested that a dose of non-collaborative, even mischievous, subversive tactics might be required in order to win support for a collaborative leadership project.

This finding calls to mind the core principle behind Machiavelli's political philosophizing. Machiavelli was not advocating that political leaders behave dishonestly, or seek to trick their peers and followers. Rather, his point was that without informing themselves of political tricks and

connivances, good leaders would fail, while dishonest leaders would prosper. Political work can be viewed as artful, drawing on a range of tactics, some of which may run counter to the official discourse of collaboration, some of which may not. This may be an uncomfortable finding for aspiring leaders, or even for many who work in the area of leadership development because it suggests that over-idealizing collaborative leadership may not only be wasteful, but also counter-productive effort. It is not the intention of the authors to claim any form of 'best practice' on the part of Bill and Jeff. We would not wish to advocate any of the tactics described above. What did become apparent, however, was the shortcoming in weaving a purely 'collaborative' leadership discourse. Such a narrative would surely have proven too contradictory with the narratives of others, whose central tenets were fundamentally opposed to the ethos of collaboration and public value outlined at the beginning of this paper.

The second discussion point evident here is that the word 'collaborative' acted as a cloak for a range of different constructions. It is not up to us as authors of this paper to determine which of these is a suitable version of collaboration. On the contrary, it is our job to point out the co-existence of these collaborative constructions. At one extreme, it was noted that our leaders, Bill and Jeff, held a version of collaborative leadership fairly close to the textbook take on the concept of public value (or, 'public value delivered through the public sector'). Yet even these leaders deviated from this script, often framing the challenge of collaborative leadership as one of staff cuts – an adoption of both an emergency and a cuts narrative. At the other extreme, some actors were prepared to provisionally support the collaborative leadership project because they saw it as a means of embedding neoliberal solutions to the delivery of public services: downsizing and outsourcing (public value as 'value which is best delivered outside of the public sector'). In between these positions were a range of constructions of the collaborative narrative, some of which could be made compatible with Bill and Jeff's version of collaborative leadership. Only in the case of a fiercely local narrative was outright opposition to the collaborative leadership narrative experienced, where the contrast was drawn between a dithering collaboration versus the certainty and heroism of localism.

The position of the fatalist narrative is problematic. It is difficult to analyse as it did not destabilize any of the antenarratives in play. Its longer-term effects are unknown. What difference does it make to our public institutions and public services, and our capacity to think critically about our lives, if we are passive in the face of power? Critical thinking, in our view, is a valuable practice. Thinking elevates the relationship between body politic and the public beyond an ambivalent, arm's length relationship. Apathy was the dominant stance of both the public and press within the scene investigated. It was a stance which remained unchallenged and seemed to be accepted by politicians as out of their control, a bigger issue for society to grapple with. It is outside the scope of this article to offer broader insight. What we do believe is valuable to question is the effect that greater public interest in the future of their county's services and leadership structures might have had on the narratives, and narrative games, at play. Might it have tipped the balance one way or another?

The final discussion point raised by our research is that we found a (publicly-driven) cross-boundary version of a collaborative leadership narrative to be far harder to construct and mobilise than its alternatives. One need only glance at our table to note that the narrative acrobatics performed by Jeff and Bill were undoubtedly more subtle and complex than those from, for example, the localists. The task of building a plot around the value of public services seemed cerebral and disconnected in comparison to the heroic, leader-focused tale offered by the localists. Similarly, it seemed easier for

politicians to construct a story around cutting staff and selling off services than building new services across organizational boundaries. It was a more straightforward story. Cross-organizational collaborative leadership practitioners may need to become far more politically sophisticated than their opponents if their version of the story of leadership has a hope of prospering. Likewise, such a finding opens the possibility of a role for critical scholarship, in further highlighting both the political games of collaborative leadership and its rivals.

We see these findings as vital for the stretching and even the survival of the collaborative leadership narrative. Collaborative leadership remains a political choice: there are alternatives, even within this word 'collaborative'. It is only by engaging with the power at play within leadership that collaborative leadership will succeed in gaining more widespread acceptance.

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