

# Reflections on Leadership in Civic Education

By

**Dr Harry Phillips**

Leadership is a concept that is often associated with the political realm although it is clearly relevant to all dimensions of human activity. Rarely, though, do those perceived as leaders receive formal leadership training. Moreover, the qualities of leaders are rarely identified in a comprehensive manner. In a text titled *Key Concepts of Politics* (1982), written a generation ago by Harry Phillips and Cam Rielly, leadership was briefly defined as ‘the task of organising group efforts towards particular ends’.

In this brief the focus is upon my leadership in the context of promoting the ideal of better civic, citizenship and political education. This tradition can be traced back to Aristotle in ancient times. It is often contended that leadership in civic education has at least four key dimensions. Firstly, as an advocate of this ideal it is necessary to strive to accord with the model of a ‘good citizen’. Secondary, it is deemed advantageous to have relevant qualifications with publications and this be accompanied by knowledge of the organizational structure and key actors in the field. Finally, effective strategies have to be formulated and maintained over the short and long run.

From my point of view the promotion of civic education poses the formidable challenge of requiring its advocates to adhere to a model of being a ‘good citizen’. A perceived failure to reach such a notion or standard has the likely impact of undermining the quality of leadership in this domain. It is claimed that the ‘good citizen’ pre-requisite is also very important in broader political leadership as shortcomings in this regard reduce the possibility of achieving desired outcomes.

As I see it, another important requirement in the promotion of civic education is the need to have personal credentials in the field. This advisedly means suitable formal qualifications, a history of successful teaching in the area and membership of the professional associations which have such a focus. The conduct of research and writing of supportive texts and materials in the domain is also important. As in politics it is helpful to have a profile to assist the promotion of the cause. This profile, often more readily gained in a related area such as political commentary, has to be exercised on opportune occasions in the media.

A major advantage is knowledge of the organizational structure and its key ‘actors’. In civic education this means an understanding of the Commonwealth and State education bureaucracies, the role of the various civic agencies and the content of the civic and citizenship syllabuses in each jurisdiction. At the same time the legitimate demands of other curriculum areas such as numeracy and literacy, science and other social sciences have to be accommodated or support for the civic education cause won’t be suitably ranked.

Finally, effective strategies have to be devised to maintain the continual promotion of the cause. A failure to maintain this ‘pressure’ will mean that the objective slides from the public agenda. Submissions to parliamentary and governmental inquiries, the creation of suitable agencies such as the Constitutional Centre in Western Australia, its role in Parliament and the Electoral Commissions and its inclusion in Curriculum Council courses and Education Department syllabuses are all required. Ultimately, too, successors have to be trained to assume the necessary leadership role in the historic field of civic education.

*Dr Harry Phillips, Parliamentary Fellow (Education), Parliament House Western Australia  
Adjunct Professor Curtin University and Adjunct Professor Edith Cowan University  
11 April 2007*