The rules of the game: leadership coups in British party politics

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*The Labour party comeback at last week's local elections raised the possibility that the current leaders of the coalition may actually be standing on shaky ground. However, as the book **Electing and Ejecting Party Leaders in Britain** argues, parties have moved to make it harder to evict their leaders. **Timothy Heppell** feels the book distinguishes itself by examining the institutional obstacles in place which make it hard for parties to eject their leaders, rather than giving undue attention to personality clashes.*

Electing and Ejecting Party Leaders in Britain. Thomas Quinn. Palgrave Macmillan. February 2012.

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Just how secure are David Cameron, Ed Miliband and Nick Clegg as leaders of their respective parties? Given the level of criticism that they have received, both from the within their own parties but also from political journalists, what are the prospects of their forced removal before the next General Election, or after? Those interested in understanding how secure they are from the threat of eviction, would be well advised to read Thomas Quinn's recently published book *Electing and Ejecting Party Leaders in Britain*.

Quinn writes from an academic background, and has an established record of publishing on party organisation, although his audience in this case should be broader than solely the academic. What distinguishes Quinn's insights from those of political journalists is that whilst political journalists fixate on the *players* in the game, Quinn provides a lens through which observe the importance of the *rules* of the game. In this context one of his central arguments is that parties have moved to make it harder to evict their leaders, and that the greatest difficulty in terms of leadership ejection lies within the Labour Party.

This means that whilst political journalists covering the Blair-Brown feuding, or the attempts to unseat Brown, talk of failed coups, Quinn focuses in on the institutional obstacles that made removing Blair and Brown from the Labour Party leadership, considerably harder than removing Margaret Thatcher from the Conservative Party leadership. Whilst also noting the shifts to confidence motions for the eviction of Conservative Party leaders since 1998, alongside the attempts to remove Brown in the period between 2008 and 2010, Quinn identifies the importance of the eviction rules: that which serves the interests of under pressure leaders need not necessarily serve the interests of their parties if they prevent those parties from tackling leadership weaknesses head on.

 However, for political journalists profiling Brown's leadership, discussion of 'flawed coups' was easier to articulate than the convoluted eviction hurdles – i.e. the willingness of an in from the start challenger
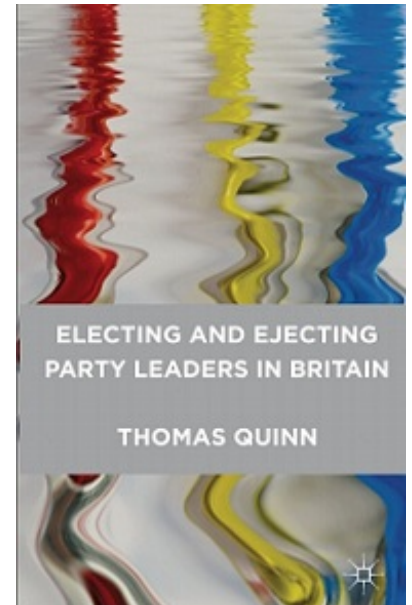
(not a stalking horse) with the backing of 20 percent of the PLP, who was willing to subject the Labour Party to months of leadership infighting simply to remove Brown. Here, Quinn's analysis of the 'costs' associated with challenging an incumbent provides a useful schema for our consideration in the future – disunity costs, decision costs (time spent not critiquing their opponents); and financial costs.

In addition to his assessment on the increasing security of tenure of party leaders, Quinn also argues that the processes of democratisation that have occurred have not made a significant difference to the types of candidates that have been selected. Noting that increasing membership participation might be expected to lead to the election of more radical leaders, Quinn actually explains how party members basically operate to the same criteria that informed selections made by parliamentary elites. Here Quinn utilises the criteria outlined in the classic Leonard P Stark book on leadership selection in British politics from 1996 – acceptability, electability and competence. In this context Quinn argues that members are just as concerned with the overarching party goals of internal unity and external appeal as parliamentary elites.

Overall, Quinn can take considerable pride in offering an original contribution to the literature. This book is the culmination of a wider research project on party leadership selection and ejection that has been evident in academic journals. The primary strength of his contribution to the party leadership selection literature is as follows. First, whereas more recent publications such as my own and that of Andrew Denham and Kieron O'Hara (2008) have been party specific and chronologically structured, Quinn offers more scope for party comparisons by incorporating the Liberal Democrats. Second, by advancing a more thematic approach Quinn also succeeds in offering the reader a more theoretically grounded assessment than others.

Does his analysis miss anything of substance in terms of leadership selection/ejection debates? Perhaps it is worth noting that the gendered dimension remains unaddressed. Are there factors endemic to the procedures that can explain why so many credible and well positioned female candidates decide to opt out of succession contests – most notably Harriet Harman and Yvette Cooper in 2010?

Ultimately, the real value of Quinn's contribution will become most evident at the time of the next party leadership election. Will he prove to be correct when he asserts that eviction hurdles are so high that leaders are more secure – i.e. will be leaders be unchallengeable before the next General Election; and will future leadership selection contests see radical candidates marginalised as Quinn implies? Whilst waiting for the next party leadership succession contest (crisis), this is a book that needs to be read by more than just a narrow academic audience.

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Dr Timothy Heppell is a Lecturer in British Politics within the School of Politics and International Studies (POLIS) at the University of Leeds. He is the author of *Choosing the Tory Leader* (2008) and *Choosing the Labour Leader* (2010). Read more reviews by Timothy.

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