

The Sermon Before The University 2023

King's College Chapel, Cambridge

Faith in Doubt

What if one part of why we lack the leaders we need is how we think about doubt?

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This morning, I would like to reflect on the connection between three things: that we need new solutions to the world's problems; that this requires us to change who leads and how; and part of this requires us to change how we think about doubt. What if one part of why we lack the leaders we need is how we think about doubt?

So what's your view of doubt? Is it something positive and powerful? What about those in positions of authority? When did you last hear a CEO or politician say, 'I'm not sure'?

What about doubt in the Scriptures? What's the narrative there? What about Moses with his imposter syndrome or the disciple Thomas whose doubts earned him renown?

Doubt, it would seem, is bad.

Research backs this up. For instance, [a study](#) in 2015 by the Pew Research Centre showed decisiveness was the characteristic Americans most valued in leaders. This finding holds up internationally too.

The implication: those with doubt – about their decisions or themselves – are viewed negatively. So existing leaders hide their doubt. Doubtful potential leaders are deterred from entering the fray.

That was my personal experience. At 14, I stopped going to church convinced that my doubt in God's existence might rule me out from a life of faith.

At 18, I was bold enough to apply for a place in Cambridge, but I walked out of my interview convinced I'd made a hash of it and would not be awarded a place.

Once here, it took my activism and desire to solve problems to overcome my qualms and put myself forward to run KCSU, the students' union here at Kings. But I did so

beset with near perpetual angst that I lacked the political certainties of the cabal of male students belonging to the Socialist Workers' party whose questions and challenges dogged KSCU meetings.

In my working life, I've held myself back from positions of authority for fear that my doubts and uncertainty would be exposed and revealed as a deficiency. Around me I saw others – often the uber-talented, mostly, but not only, women, gripped by doubt and convinced of their inadequacies.

I did my best to hide my doubts. As one friend said to me when I confessed some of my angst, 'But you have doubts? You sound so sure!' I sounded like a lion but felt like a mouse. Over the years, I found ways to manage my doubts to make it less debilitating. But I then had a revelation that I was seeing doubt wrong.

What if doubt is not a failing or a flaw, but a hidden source of power? And what if how we *think* about doubt is part of the problem in the leadership we have and getting the leaders we need and want?

The moment was significant: a meeting to honour my friend and former colleague Jo Cox, an activist and dynamo MP murdered for her tolerant views. Jo was passionate about women in leadership, so I joined a gathering of women reflecting how best to tackle the fact that across all sectors, leadership remains in the hands of white, elite, straight men.

I found myself reflecting on a paradox. I'd seen my own doubts as negative. I had seen others believe the same: that doubtfulness was inevitably bad and inimical to being a good leader. But, I asked myself, aren't the best leaders not the ones that say they have all the answers, but those who know they don't? Not those who say they see it all, but those who ask whose perspective is missing? Rather than a deficiency to be hidden, maybe doubt should be seen as a power to be harnessed? Maybe thinking about doubt in this way could help address our leadership deficit, spurring those with doubt to step up to lead, those hiring, promoting and leading to change their approach, so changing how leadership is done?

Friends listening to this encouraged me to explore this further. So, alongside my day job as CEO of [Crisis Action](#), an organisation campaigning to protect people from conflict, I set out to research a hypothesis: what if one of the reasons that we lack the leaders we need is how we think about doubt?

I've been talking to leaders across nationalities, genders, sectors exploring the stories and experiences of doubt. I've spoken to political leaders and Paralympians, psychoanalysts and CEOs, neuroscientists and entrepreneurs. What's emerged is that doubt has a dual nature and has left me determined to share and harness the *productive* power of doubt.

Doubt – defined as a lack of certainty about the way ahead or a lack of confidence in oneself – afflicts most of us to some degree, it seems. There's evidence of gender dimensions to this, and my conversations reveal that it afflicts more of us whose identities deviate from a male, white, heterosexual norm. But men aren't immune. Think of Moses. Or Thomas.

For those I've spoken to, doubt is often experienced as a destructive thing – the cause of emotional pain and stress, sleeplessness and breakdowns.

But there is another side to doubt that is productive and powerful. This is not the destructive doubt of paralysis and pain but a productive form of questioning and discovery. This is the doubt that lies at the heart of self-awareness and humility; it asks, 'How do others experience me or how can I better serve a cause?'

There is also the doubt that spurs curiosity and learning. What is it that I need to know? What is it that I can learn to do? There's the doubt that generates an openness to feedback. Perhaps others can advise me how to improve? Doubt can prompt us to interrogate our biases. How is my judgement clouded by stereotypes? There's the doubt that questions whether the status quo is good enough that goes on to become a thirst for innovation or a push for major social change. Is this the best we can do or be? Doubt is also a driver for greater inclusion and diversity within teams. What perspectives do I lack? How do others see this challenge?

I suggest these are all forms of **productive** doubt, every one connected to better outcomes for our teams, communities, countries and planet.

What's more, we are starting to learn more about the perils of overconfidence – the absence of doubt. There's now a wealth of data - including the brilliantly titled book of psychoanalyst Tomas Chamorro Premuzic *Why Do So Many Incompetent Men Become Leaders? (And How to Fix It)* - showing how we mistake charisma and confidence for competence – with grim results.

Whether in business or academia, what psychologists call ‘over-signalling confidence’ - stating that you’re surer about something that your knowledge base or competence supports - inhibits the drive for knowledge and leads to flawed decision-making.

Doubt turns out to be useful.

Of course, none of this means that certainty has no place. As human beings, we seek certainty. Our brains process millions of pieces of information every second to create order out of our universe. As communities and corporations, we seek direction and clarity. No General took his – or her - troops ‘over the top’ whilst proclaiming uncertainty about the plan of attack. From the civil rights movement to the grand battles of the Second World War, we’ve needed leaders that can show a degree of certainty that inspires or enables others to ditch their doubts and follow. And it seems hard to believe that Jesus and his disciples would have been so effective in communicating their message had the gospels been ridden with caveats and nuance.

But the idea of perpetual clarity about oneself or the way ahead is an illusion. This is all the more evident at this moment in history when certainty seems ever more elusive. Whether it’s climate change or preventing the next pandemic, avoiding conflict or tackling persistent gender inequities, it’s clear that we need new solutions, not business as usual.

So, what’s emerging from my explorations is that doubt is not a threat to leadership but is core to it. Changing our thinking about doubt could help change who leads and how. But our myths and narratives about leadership have yet to catch up.

That’s in part why I ditched my doubts about whether or not I should be here today.

I think we have to rebrand doubt and share the story that doubt is not solely destructive but productive in our lives and leadership. Let’s share the wisdom and experience of those that understand how to ditch destructive doubt and instead harness the productive power of doubt and questioning. Let’s change the narrative about doubt being inimical to great leadership.

The result? We help change who leads – more women, people of colour and doubtful men. We get leadership that is more curious, self-aware, humble, innovative, inclusive. And we get better solutions to the world’s problems when we clearly need them. As we mark only 50 years of women at King’s, let’s have more faith in the power of doubt.