

Sir Alex Ferguson – power, control and leadership – for every wo/man?

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Notes based on *New Statesman* article, Dec 2013 and LRB essay by David Runciman Jan 2014

1. What do we know about Sir Alex? According to John Bew, award-winning historian and a *New Statesman* contributing writer: Ferguson ‘...has been the dominant figure in the national sport for the past three decades presiding over arguably the best known and most successful of British cultural and commercial institutions’. Arguments following from that statement...
2. Alex Ferguson’s background and values are interesting. Early experience in the shipbuilding hub of Govan, Glasgow; working as toolmaker and seeing himself throughout as Scottish working class. ‘In 2010, Ferguson spoke at the funeral of the Glasgow trade unionist and fellow Govanite, Jimmy Reid, who led the “work-in” of shipbuilders on the Clyde in 1971. Most of all he admired Reid’ discipline and leadership. There was no vandalism, hooliganism... it was a dignified attempt to save the jobs of highly skilled working men’.
- 3 The world that Ferguson still evokes – a skilled industrial working class – has been in rapid decline for decades. Paradoxes and complexities: a socialist ‘to the left of Labour’ but hugely rich with race horses, a mansion in Cheshire, a flat in New York; ‘a hybrid world view somehow combining the shipyard socialism of Govan and a pioneer’s version of the American dream’.
4. His book *Ferguson: My Autobiography*, launched in October 2013 has been one of the fastest-selling books (nearly 100,000 copies a week) in British publishing history. Discussion also on the current popularity of biographies generally...
5. Are there lessons from Ferguson’s success that can be transferred to politics, business or any organisations and individuals?
6. Is the difficulty with this question the uniqueness of any individual’s background, history and possession of skills that are innate – a force of personality that cannot easily be replicated?
7. His approach to leadership - he makes a distinction between power and control: ‘Power is useful if you want to use it, but control was my aim.... Control is making sure things go your own way regardless’. Any relevant gender issues here?
8. But Ferguson is not a control freak. ‘He knows there are some things that aren’t worth worrying about. A lot (at least 50%) of what happens on the pitch is simply beyond his control... His focus is on the parts of the game over which he can exert a grip. His managerial genius is to know where the strength of will really matters and to exploit it... His primary interest is in human beings and their weaknesses, not in the ball and its bounces.’
Any general lessons and issues here?