

# Power and Influence in Responsible Leadership (Part 2)

*In the work sphere, as in broader society, established patterns of power and influence are in flux. As a result, the way leadership is exercised and understood is changing. What might a biblical response, and its practical implications, look like? In the previous issue of this journal (volume 24.2), Peter Heslam outlined this seismic shift, using the term ‘conscious unbossing’, and began his engagement with it by going back to the opening passages of the Bible. Here he continues his exploration by taking a brief look at four teenage girls who were international influencers.*

It is regrettable that teenage girls have been in the news recently for all the wrong reasons, as victims of abuse, but this article focuses on the capacity they have to play a very positive role.

Natasha Ednan-Laperouse is a vivacious and intelligent fifteen-year-old girl. She is at Heathrow Airport about to board a flight with her Dad Nadim from London to Nice. She feels peckish and gets a baguette from Pret A Manger. She is allergic to sesame, but the seeds are invisible and are not mentioned on the packaging. Shortly after take-off, having eaten the baguette, she suffers a severe allergic reaction. Two EpiPens are administered but she passes away in her father’s arms.

This July is the tenth anniversary of Natasha’s entirely preventable death. Back in 2016, food made on-site and pre-packaged for direct sale (PPDS) was not legally required to have allergen labelling. That posed a loophole that ultimately proved fatal for Natasha and consigned her parents to a life of grief. But as he held his dying daughter, Nadim had a vision of angels. Knowing that Natasha had recently begun attending Church, he and Natasha’s mother Tanya began a spiritual journey that led to their conversion to Christ. They also launched a campaign for tighter food safety laws and established in 2019 the Natasha Allergy Research Foundation (NARF).

Tanya and Nadim’s campaign led to Natasha’s Law, which requires all PPDS food to have a full list of ingredients with allergens (like sesame, nuts, milk) clearly highlighted. The law, which came into force in October 2021, ensures that anyone with food allergies can make informed, safer choices about what they eat. As food outlets, restaurants, cafes and schools have had to change how they handle food preparation and labelling, the whole landscape of allergy safety has been transformed. Partly due to the international nature of so many food products, this has had global effect. Such influence partly reflects Tanya and Nadim’s exceptional entrepreneurial gifts, demonstrated not only in their founding of NARF but also (22 years earlier) of WOW Toys (subsequently acquired by Smart Toys and Games). Their impact belies the fact, however, that they and their family were ordinary UK citizens of Pakistani, French and Serbian heritage, with no more political power than most other UK citizens.

Natasha’s story echoes that of three other teenage girls. One is the fifteen-year-old Claudette Colvin, who in 1955 was arrested in Montgomery, Alabama for refusing to give up her bus seat to a white passenger nine months before Rosa Parks famously did the same. Claudette became a key figure in the Civil Rights Movement led (amongst others) by the Revd Jesse Jackson, who died this year.

Another example is Greta Thunberg. She was only fifteen when in 2018 she launched a global movement to protect the environment. Her influence, often referred to as the ‘Greta effect’, has radically shaped environmental awareness around the world. The numerous honours she has received include two from *Time* magazine in 2019. When only sixteen, *Time* not only elected her Person of the Year but included her in **Time 100**, a list the magazine publishes each year of the 100 most influential people in the world.

A fourth and final example is a girl who, following her capture by foreign forces in a violent raid, was trafficked abroad to become a domestic worker in the household of an army officer, who had a terminal illness. One day, this girl suggests that the officer goes to see someone she knows in her home country who should be able to provide a cure.

This is the start of a story that is told, as the reader may have guessed, in the Hebrew Bible (2 Kings 5.1-19). It ends with the officer being healed and coming to faith in Yahweh. ‘Now I know’, he declares, ‘that there is no God in all the world except in Israel’ (2 Kings 5.15b). It all happens because a powerless girl of such apparent inconsequence that her name is unknown bears witness through her work to her faith. The episode demonstrates, in a similar way to the



Natasha Ednan-Laperouse  
Photo: CNN



Claudette Colvin  
Photo: wikipedia



Greta Thunberg  
Photo: Edinburgh Live

other three stories, that power is not a prerequisite for influence. Even in today's world, dominated as it is by a 'strong man' politics not dissimilar to the world in which the anonymous servant girl operated, powerless people can have powerful influence.

This should not, of course, be surprising to Christians. They follow a leader who, as noted in Part One of this series, has supreme and ultimate authority yet was prepared to wash his followers' feet, and to be mistreated, betrayed, humiliated, tortured and killed. Yet in doing so has influenced more people than anyone else in history. This truth is captured in the poem *One Solitary Life*, which began life as a sermon by the Revd Dr James A. Francis (1864-1928):

*Here is a man who was born in an obscure village as the child of a peasant woman. He grew up in another obscure village. He worked in a carpenter shop until he was thirty and then for three years was an itinerant preacher. He never wrote a book. He never held an office. He never owned a home. He never*

*had a family. He never went to college. He never put his foot inside a big city. He never traveled two hundred miles from the place where he was born. He never did one of the things that usually accompany greatness. He had no credentials but himself. He had nothing to do with this world except the naked power of his divine manhood. While still a young man the tide of popular opinion turned against him. His friends ran away. One of them denied him. Another betrayed him. He was turned over to his enemies. He went through the mockery of a trial. He was nailed upon the cross between two thieves. His executioners gambled for the only piece of property he had on earth while he was dying, and that was his coat. When he was dead, he was taken down and laid in a borrowed grave through the pity of a friend. Nineteen wide centuries have come and gone and today he is the center of the human race and the leader of the column of progress. I am far within the mark when I say that all the armies that ever marched, and all the navies that were ever built, and all the parliaments that ever sat and all the kings that ever*

*reigned, put together, have not affected the life of man upon the earth as powerfully as has this one solitary life.<sup>1</sup>*

One follower of that solitary life is the person noted but not named at the end of Part One in this series as someone 'whose influence may account for significant portions of the Bible to have been written, even though that person held relatively little formal power and authority and none of their own words have ever been recorded'.<sup>2</sup> The identity of this person may be more of a struggle for readers to guess than that of the trafficked domestic worker referred to above. But those strugglers who participate in the Faith in Business leadership retreat (24-25 April 2026) in Cambridge will be the first to find out.

In the meantime, four teenage girls without any special social standing reflect what is true of the greatest influencer the world has ever known: apparent powerlessness is no bar to influence. Anyone exercising such influence, however lacking in power they may be, has the potential to model responsible leadership. 

1. James Allan Francis, *The Real Jesus and Other Sermons* (Judson Press, 1926).  
2. Peter S Heslam, 'Power and Influence in Responsible Leadership, Part One', *Faith in Business Quarterly*, 24.2, p. 36.



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