



Journal of Intercultural Management and Ethics

JIME

ISSN 2601 - 5749, ISSN-L 2601 - 5749

published by

Center for Socio-Economic Studies and Multiculturalism
Iasi, Romania
www.csesm.warter.ro

Special Editor

Drs. Huib Wursten

Hofstede Insights Group, Netherlands

E-mail: huibwursten@gmail.com

TABLE OF CONTENT

Editorial	3
Huib Wursten	
Brexit and the Joy of Democracy	5
Berwyn Davies	
Culture and Brexit: A Catastrophic Partnership	19
Stephen I. P. Martin	
Democracy and the Need for Autonomy	25
Huib Wursten	
The Avatars of Democratization in Central and Eastern Europe. How Could Citizens Strengthen Democratic Integration in the European Union?.....	33
Anton Carpinski	
Democracy and Lifelong Learning, the Forgotten Sides of the Same Coin	45
Joseph Kessels	
The Great Indian Democracy	57
Divya Susan Varkey	
Democracy in Latin America	73
Fernando Lanzer Pereira de Souza	
Of Wise Old Men and Rebellious Youth.....	79
Adnan R. Husain Cornelissen, Loes B. Husain-Cornelissen	
Democracy in Africa and Ubuntu.....	91
Luc Zwaenepoel	

CULTURE AND BREXIT: A CATASTROPHIC PARTNERSHIP

Stephen I. P. Martin

Lecturer, De Montfort University's Castle Business School, UK

Director, Kimball Consulting Ltd, UK

E-mail: smartin@kimballconsulting.co.uk

Abstract

This article considers the cultural characteristics that have shaped UK politics before and throughout the era of Brexit, contrasting the principal drivers of the UK's approach with the prevailing characteristics of its' EU partners. Using an established model of national culture, this article provides a new perspective on the Brexit process, up to and including the recent 'accession' of Johnson to the UK leadership. While many of the UK's friends and EU partners remain puzzled and depressed at the UK's Brexit tactics, the cultural fundamentals – deeply rooted in the essence of what makes the UK and many of its principal EU partners different from each other – provide at least some rationale for the seemingly irrational. Finally, the article proposes a 'cultural reconciliation' that may, at some point in the future, allow argument to proceed in UK politics - without descent into 'win or lose'.

Key words: Culture, Brexit, Hofstede, Cultural Dimensions, Parliament.

1. Introduction: They just don't understand us

Iain Duncan Smith – a leading Brexiteer and ex-leader of the UK's governing (at the time of writing) Conservative party – recently said '*They never seem to understand how our parliamentary system works*' (BBC Radio 4 'Today' / 20th March 2019). 'They' of course are the European Union in general and its' leadership, Donald Tusk et al, in particular. It's true; they don't. But it is equally true that we Brits in general, and our elected representative in particular, don't appear to understand the nature of our own parliamentary system either. They may be clueless; we are deluded.

The UK and the EU institutions have been embroiled in an all-consuming Brexit process for the best part of three years. That process is failing, sending us towards the economic catastrophe (as identified by the UK government's own analysis) that is 'no deal'. While it seems only a tiny minority in Government, Parliament, business, the general population or across the EU argues for a no-deal Brexit, the current 'most likely outcome' of three years of mayhem is exactly that.

The observation Iain Duncan-Smith made was in response to Tusk, Barnier and others expressing frustration that there appeared to be no effort or even expectation in the UK governing body that an agreed compromise position could be reached. As so visibly demonstrated by the (previous) UK Prime Minister's painfully delayed and cursory flirtation with cross-party talks following the last of the three massive parliamentary defeats of the 'Withdrawal Agreement', such efforts just do not fit in British politics. Theresa May was finally forced to hold physical meetings - but there was no meeting of minds and certainly not of emotions; these were occasions to re-state fiercely held positions and to find an excuse to walk away, blaming the other lot. This was and is part of a pattern which her successor, one Alexander Boris de Pfeffel Johnson, personifies.

Theresa May held that series of meetings with opposition leader Jeremy Corbyn (a career-long anti-EU campaigner) with the stated objective of finding a compromise position that could succeed through Parliament. The vibes were not good; Corbyn's team complained that May had not shifted an inch or centimetre from her pre-negotiation 'red-lines' and the May team complained that the Corbyn team simply reiterated their public position of an unacceptably 'soft' Brexit. A meeting of minds was as far away as ever.

2. Culture Clash

So what is it that our European cousins – and most of us – do not understand? It all seems pretty clear; we battle it out and eventually someone, something, wins

And that is the point. The tradition and mechanics of most mainland European political systems reflect the cultures in which they have developed – where something beyond compromise works to enable *reconciliation* of otherwise contrasting and conflicting views to emerge, by design. It is no accident that coalition governments feature more commonly across other democracies in Europe, or that business management and business ownership structures are at least influenced by representative inclusion and over-lapping share-holdings and board memberships across competitors. These are not features of UK government or of UK business; indeed, 'coalition' is viewed and criticised as a weakness of foreign political constructs, and employee-inclusion in business decision making has successfully been resisted over decades in the UK by owner and shareholder interest groups on the basis that such processes would undermine effective management and would make 'tough but necessary' decisions impossible to deliver.

The two sides either side of the English Channel do not understand each other. David Davis, erstwhile Secretary of State for Leaving the EU, said just before he resigned: '*We are conducting this negotiation in a pragmatic, British way. We've had the most positive response....*' In the same week, Sabine Weyand, Deputy to Michel Barnier, (re)tweeted '*The way the UK has conducted these negotiations has burned many bridges and there are precious few allies and friends left.*'

National culture is at play here. But it is rarely, if ever, a discussed issue; and if it is, then usually in nationalist-tinged terms. But take a brave-pill; it is OK to talk about it. Culture is a thoroughly researched field, over many decades. The data, the evidence, the real-time and real-life demonstration of cultural difference is there to see for all of us, if we know how to look. Most post-grad business Masters students will have even written a module paper on it, having sat through lectures on Geert Hofstede's model of national culture; many business and professional managers will have been entertained at conferences and seminars by Fons Trompenaars as he works through stories of culturally-based embarrassing and sometimes calamitous interactions in business, government and society. But few take that learning on into our real-world, where dog eats dog, and winner takes all.

3. They are not like us. We are not like them.

Let us call it what Hofstede calls it. The research says that UK culture is significantly more masculine and task-based than is the case with many of our leading EU partners; 'we' are more individualist in our outlook, have less deference to hierarchy, think and act with a focus on near-term and practical outcomes, are more comfortable with ambiguity and uncertainty (ain't that the truth), and in general are relatively unrestrained in our self-indulgence.

Hey, there's nothing wrong with that, I hear most of you say; and indeed, there isn't. But the fact is that our business structures and relationships, our government institutions, our negotiating processes and our behavioural preferences, expectations and actions reflect all of that, for most of us, most of the time. That is what culture is – 'the collective programming of

the mind' (Hofstede, Hofstede, , & Minkov, 2010) as Hofstede has succinctly captured it, or even '...a network of artificial instincts.' (Harari, 2011) Individuals are often different – but collectively, and commonly – this is how we are, and this is how we prefer others to be.

So, it's official: they are not like us. And we are not like them. Take a real look at the 'mother of Parliaments' - the House of Commons. Not the chaos of the day-to-day combat, but the design of the building's interior. What do you see? Unlike most other political debating chambers, ours has two sides, facing each other, separated by lines in the carpet exactly two swords-length apart and a referee with a mace-weapon in between. By express design, it is a building that institutionalises combat and promotes adversarial debate with votes based on yes or no, winner takes all. Compromise is a long second-best, tending only to occur in a 'hung' parliament (we would never use the word 'balanced' to describe a parliament without one side having clearly won a majority). Membership of the battle-chamber is earned by a 'first past the post' electoral system – so get the usual pass-mark of about 30% of the constituency electorate and you are in, with full authority to express your minority views very loud, and very clear.

At the time of writing we have just seen through the end of Theresa May's tenure in #10. The fight to replace her was reduced down to two candidates from the seven men that survived the first round (yes, only men), almost all of whom were privately educated Oxford graduates from hugely rich families. And while all of them paraded their commitment to deliver Brexit, they were also united in their declaration that they would not consider an early election that might break the parliamentary impasse – for fear that the other side will win. So much for the 'will of the people'. A month on, with that fight over, many of those 'losers' are now fully embedded in a Johnson cabinet, extoling his virtues as a great leader despite only weeks ago telling us loud and clear that he was totally unsuitable for the job. He won. So now he is 'King'. And ironically, Theresa May decided to warn us of the consequences, after the event (BBC, 2019).

4. Culture Analysis

What does this say about our politics, and our culture? Well, the (Hofstede et-al) data scores the UK at 66/100 on the 'Masculinity' scale – high in the 60+ country data base. Sure, the original Hofstede study was some time ago, yet subsequent significant and on-going culture research reinforce Hofstede's work of 40 years ago, notably the 'Globe' studies and the 'World Values Survey' (very helpfully described and compared in Hofstede's own 2011 article) (Hofstede, 2011). The UK remains a highly 'masculine' culture relative to others, and culture does not change much (despite the internet and social media), if at all, over the near and medium term.

What does 'high masculinity' mean in practice? Well, it means that that there is a tendency to prefer these kinds of behaviours:

- Goal achievement prioritised over life quality
- Assertiveness, competitiveness and personal ambition are virtues
- Big and fast are beautiful; the dominant value is material success; performance counts
- The strong are admired
- Men are expected to achieve, women to care
- Failing in school is a disaster
- Conflicts are resolved by fighting them out

Of course, there are many people, possibly millions, who individually do not display these behavioural preferences; every society has a distribution curve with outliers at each end of the statistical norm. But the UK norm is significantly anchored at the masculine end of the masculinity-femininity continuum. And this includes most of our females – who, behaviourally, are relatively much more 'masculine' than say, females in more 'feminine'

cultures (Scandinavia, France, Spain, much of south-east Asia and Latin America, for example). This is who we are.

We then couple this characteristic with one of the highest ‘individualism’ scores in the data base. Again, relative to other cultures, we are way up there (89/100) in preferring behaviours such as:

- Focusing on management of the individual
- Self-interest coming before that of the group
- Separation of personal and professional lives
- Competition between individuals
- Efficiency prevailing over loyalty
- ‘Speaking your mind’ is characteristic of honesty
- Hiring and promotion prioritises skills and achievement over ‘fit’

Is it any wonder that our political and business systems, our structures for debate, our reward and punishment processes – recognise and emphasise winners and losers, victory and defeat, success and failure, ‘yes’ and ‘no’ – with very little in between. Secure c.30% in an election and it is enough justification to impose your brand of political dogma on the rest. Secure 52% in a referendum, a binary in/out vote on the most complex of issues, and you can take the ‘will of the people’ as licence to ignore the rest.

(Note: the actual number that voted ‘leave’ still was only c. 30% of the voting population in total, but hey, that’s our version of democracy).

In the UK political culture, ‘compromise’ is indeed a dirty word; it is an admission of failure, not to persuade, but to *overcome*. In many circumstances our preferred characteristics have proved to be a great strength – and continue to be so. Other characteristics, preferred by other cultures, have equally proved to be just as valuable and effective, in other circumstances. The challenge is when the same problem is presented to both, at the same time.

5. Loud and Proud

It is almost universally accepted that the UK’s political system has failed the test of Brexit. Whatever your view regarding the desirable destination, our political process is stuck, and is now quickly descending beyond farce into what many now call Johnson’s ‘coup’ – ignoring the conventions that have held our unwritten constitutional process together. It is true that our much-loved ‘first past the post’ winner-takes-all voting system has, until now, ensured that small minority extremes find it much harder to break-through than in many neighbouring European countries. The ‘Brexit Party’ breakthrough in the European elections was indeed under a modified ‘proportional’ voting scheme, which is ironic given that the policy of the Brexit Party rejects both Europe and proportional representation.

But the flip side of that protection against extremists turning-up in our Parliament is that we end up with dictatorship by the minority in Government – either by virtue of the number of seats, with the largest party put in charge regardless of their ability to get anything through tribalized Parliamentary voting – or by virtue of representing only a minority of the voting population but nevertheless hitting the magic c.30% in enough constituencies to be rewarded with a majority of seats in the House (like Thatcher – and elsewhere in a similar system, Trump!).

Over centuries, our minority-in-power system has been moderated by the representation of a broad span of views in each of the prevailing winning political groupings, expressed as an obligation on the winners to recognise the interests of ‘one-nation’. But that all ended with Cameron’s catastrophic decision to beat the (then) UKIP threat by adopting their only policy, to hold an ‘In/Out’ referendum on EU membership. Cameron’s outrageous complacency, and his literal and audible ‘ho-hum I don’t care’ attitude on his resignation was

staggering. But predictable. You win some, you lose some; I had a good run. Over to you Theresa, or Boris.

As a result, we have much more polarised politics; In against Out. Brexiteers against Remainers. Boris believers shouting ‘Out by October 31st – do or die!’ (the current Brexit date) against people’s-vote second-referendumers and increasingly, anyone who cares about representative democracy. Political debate reduced to labelling - ‘remoaner’ against ‘fantasist’ – or fanatic.

Given our cultural character, and our commitment to our current political systems, the future looks bleak. The winner of that the race to be the UK’s next PM was he who shouted loudest and proudest ‘..exit on 31st October or death’ (not quite a quote but near enough) whilst typically putting aside the truth concerning any of the real consequences for the rest of us.

Another of Hofstede’s dimensions – Time Orientation – has the UK as prioritising the short-term relative to many of our major EU partners. Our new PM was decided by a tiny minority on the basis of how the candidates said they would manage the following four months. God help us.

6. Conclusion: A Reconciliation

The die is cast, it seems, for the near and medium term. But longer-term maybe we can adjust our politics, after we have suffered and learned from the horror that is befalling us. Let me offer such an adjustment, or more accurately, a ‘reconciliation’. Consider this simple, three-point plan:

1. **Retain ‘first past the post’ in Parliamentary elections.** Keeping the crazies (a relative term) out of Parliament is of great value, more so in our context. Ex-UKIP now BP leader Farage has come nowhere near winning a seat in the House of Commons. Sure, other countries function successfully while suffering extremists in their parliaments – but commonly they have coalitions and cooperation across the main parties that ameliorate their impact. Our system has no such antidote and would simply amplify their impact.
2. **Give the biggest party the authority to form a Government, as now – but a Government that MUST proportionately reflect representation in the House of Commons.**

So if the Tories or Labour or anyone else has a majority – sure, they have a majority of the cabinet and senior posts in government. But if, as has been the case in two of three most recent general elections, the biggest party is a minority in the House – the Government team must reflect the make-up of Parliament and create a ‘coalition’ across the House, according to the proportional distribution of seats across the House. So no more dictatorship by the minority over the majority.

3. **Ban ‘referendums’ from our political system.** It is not that our electorate is too stupid to understand difficult questions, it is that our politicians have only asked us stupid questions.

This is not a ‘compromise’. It is a reconciliation. Taking the best of our current system but adapting it to deal with the realities of the new politics of the early 21st century. Cameron, Trump, May and now Johnson; they prosper through masculine, individualist, adversarial politics; we all suffer the consequences.

There are other features of our culture; pragmatism, creativity, agility. Let’s use them to fix it.

References

1. British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). (2019). May warns against 'absolutist' politics of 'winners and losers'. Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-49015559>
2. Harari, Y. N. (2011). *Sapiens: a brief history of humankind*. New York: Harper
3. Hofstede, G. H., Hofstede, G. J., & Minkov, M. (2010). *Cultures and organizations: software of the mind*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
4. Hofstede, G. (2011). Dimensionalising Cultures: The Hofstede Model in Context. Retrieved from <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1014&context=orpc>