



The Permanence of Change: The Challenges for Public Affairs & Politics

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As usual, Heraclitus said it best “Nothing is permanent but change”. As we approach the midsummer of this extraordinary year the pace of change can seem overwhelming. Political certainties are challenged everywhere. Public affairs practice needs to be more than usually agile to keep pace. The key to success for both politicians and public affairs practitioners is a mindset that is at ease with change.

What can the dramatic change in British politics tell us about wider trends in Europe? At first sight, the Conservative/Liberal Democrat Coalition Government in the UK looks like a surprising change. In fact, it could be predicted from first principles. I made a speech to the Surrey Conservative Group for Europe in June 2006 arguing that the next British Government would be just such a Coalition. The electoral arithmetic was already clear. It was extremely unlikely that the Conservative Party would be able to make the historically unprecedented gains sufficient to give them a working majority. For different reasons, both Coalition Parties were hungry for power and needed the credibility that comes from governing. It was apparent, even then, that the Liberal Democrats would not wish to be seen to be supporting a fourth term Labour Government. An understanding of these basic facts was clouded by the oft-repeated assertion that the British political system is adversarial and that Coalition Governments were literally “unthinkable”. Yet the British have regularly resorted to Coalition Government in times of crisis such as both World Wars and the Great Depression. A lack of historical perspective led commentators to believe that any Coalition would inevitably be of a Centre Left variety. A whole generation of politicians had grown up talking about a “Progressive Alliance” of Labour and Liberal Democrats. Such an idea had traction after eighteen years of Conservative Government. Few noticed that it made little sense after thirteen years of Labour Government. Two things were necessary to turn the possibility of a Liberal Democrat/Conservative Coalition into a reality: an external crisis of sufficient gravity to justify such a change of behaviour needed to be combined with the detailed electoral arithmetic of a so-called “Hung Parliament”. The financial crisis, with its undertones of systemic failure, provided the external justification, while the happy chance of the electoral arithmetic determined that only one Coalition was viable. The defenders of the intellectual status quo went through the normal phases of grief. In a matter of hours, they went from denial, through anger into bargaining, followed by despair and a grudging acceptance. The losers in this sense were not just the outgoing Labour Government, but included the Right of the Conservative Party and Eurosceptics of all parties. The truth is that British politics has always been much closer to the European norm than its surface colouring suggested.

Not surprisingly, those so suddenly dispossessed by change responded by casting doubt on the durability of the Coalition. It is my belief that the Coalition will last the full five years until an election in May 2015. The reason lies not in the personal relationship of Messrs Cameron and Clegg, but in the fact that they are locked together by the need to engage in massive fiscal retrenchment. Electorates are not stupid. They could see that none of the major political parties was prepared to break ranks during the election to talk about how they would tackle the £163 billion deficit, however often provoked by academics or the media. As the Governor of the Bank of England is reported to have said on 29th April “Whoever wins this election will end up being so unpopular, as a result of all the cuts and tax hikes they’ll have to bring in, that they won’t win another election for a whole generation”. True for any one party; not true for a combination of two. Once you decide to seriously tackle the deficit, you have to have a guarantee that you can be in power long enough to benefit from the sunlight of recovery after the darkness of unpleasant measures. The key element of the Coalition Agreement was therefore the establishment of a fixed-term Parliament. The worse the unpopularity of the Government becomes, the more firmly the Coalition partners will be locked together. The supposed difficulty of electoral reform in fact becomes part of the cement of the Coalition. The Conservatives are able to argue for the equalisation of constituency size that removes the existing in-built advantage of the Labour Party. The Liberal Democrats can accept the non-proportional ‘Additional Vote’ system and side step the endless debates amongst purists about the details of proportional representation systems. By starting with a Centre-Right Coalition, the Liberal Democrats can show both larger parties that they mean business and need to be courted on future occasions.

Some have wondered at the speed with which the leadership of the Coalition Parties has got used to the new language. British politics has always been about coalitions but they have been coalitions inside 'broad church' political parties on both the Left and Right. It helps that both David Cameron and Nick Clegg are of a new generation of politicians with an appetite for twenty first century change. Both are happy to learn on the job. As Eric Hoffer, author of "The Ordeal of Change", puts it "in times of profound change, the learners inherit the earth, while the learned find themselves beautifully equipped to deal with a world that no longer exists". Of course there will be difficulties and crises, not least because the detail of the British electoral system is still in transition. For example, countries with proportional systems do not have 'by-elections'. Continental colleagues may need to stifle their mirth while the British learn the ways of Coalition government. The up-side for Europeans is that there is now the likelihood of a stable moderately pro-Europe government in London for five years.

The preparedness of the British electorate to experiment with political change would seem to fit into an emerging European pattern. European electorates have not responded to this crisis of capitalism by a swing to the Left. The Czech elections last month showed the same pattern; a distaste for the behaviour and rhetoric of parties too long in power combined with a willingness to experiment with new parties and personalities on the Centre Right, led by credible individuals. Immigration and other populist issues will, of course, surface in a recession but not always in the form of Far Right parties. Immigration issues damaged the outgoing Labour Government but without a new shift to the BNP. Rather we should expect experimentation mixed with fragmentation. The Swedish Pirate Party is a good example.

We should stay alert to the possibility that even newly formed clichés may change and that even modern gurus cannot always predict the quicksilver of political change. At the Chester Forum in late May, convened under the benevolent gaze of the ever-present Professor Phil Harris of the University of Chester, Clive Thomas, Professor of Political Science at the University of Alaska, gave a fine example of this in comparing Sarah Palin and Barack Obama. He points out that both of them are skilled in a rhetoric which appeals to their respective constituencies. Both use symbols, body language and empathy in ways which excite their supporters. They use different rhetorical styles in the service of obviously different policies but they are both powerful communicators. Such eloquence translates well into the new media enabling both of them to build substantial political followings on line. This merging of ancient skills and modern technology may be the face of politics in the future. We should recognise that similar phenomena are possible in Europe. Certain aspects of the Treaty of Lisbon, such as the Citizen's Initiative, even hold out the possibility of an individual or a cause being able to leap over entrenched national barriers. The writers of the Treaty may not have had in mind "pan-European campaigns to ban the building of mosques" when they wrote into the Treaty such elements of direct democracy.

Most commentary on the Treaty of Lisbon has focused on the obvious and the expected. It has missed much of the really important change hidden in the detail and obscured by sloppy group-think and political expediency. It is too early to predict with confidence how the new Inter-Institutional balance in the European Union will pan out. During the long agonising process of ratification, political attention was devoted to the 'vertical' questions of a shift of power between Member States and the European Union. In fact not much changes along this axis. What changes is the horizontal relationships between the European Institutions. Rather than fussing about more Qualified Majority Voting, we should be watching the growth points in the Treaty closely, for example, the emergence of the European Council as an Institution separate from the Council of Ministers. The withering of National Presidencies means that policy change is likely to be linked to negotiated Inter-Institutional Agreements rather than to successive Presidency initiatives by Spaniards, Hungarians or Poles. Similar considerations apply to the mechanics that replace the traditional structure of comitology at one end of the law making process and pre-legislative lobbying at the other. The European Union will continue to change but will do so without new treaties.

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