

Bare knuckles, Bare Poles and polls:

A Reflection on the recent British Elections

It started as an unprecedented knock about by the leaders of the parties that was highly entertaining yet seemed to have little effect on the polls. It then culminated in an intriguing few days where the ship was drifting [running with bare poles - an old maritime expression from the age of sailing ships] while the party leaders made overtures to each other about coalition.



The recent British election has been fascinating to observe through the 'lens' of dialogue, looking at the interactions from before polling day and at the changes that took place beyond polling day to create a coalition government.

The crucial difference in this election has been the inclusion of the US style leadership debates – the 3 main characters being the serving Prime Minister – Gordon Brown and the then 2 opposition leaders David Cameron and Nick Clegg. The debates started quietly enough and gradually got a bit more knock about as the candidates settled into the unfamiliar process. There was no doubt that this was an entertaining spectacle, adversarial and bare knuckled with the potential for slip ups that could have dramatic consequences. Nick Clegg emerged much improved in the opinion polls by giving an audience-charming display, a good grasp of the issues and great skills in active listening [repeating the questioners name, making efforts to look directly at them and sticking to answering and repeating the question]. Gordon Brown, the elder statesman, despite being knowledgeable and politically astute fared poorly while David Cameron did much better appearing to acquire some of Nick Clegg's charm along the way.

In the event no party gained an overall majority in the election leading to a wooing of the Liberal Democrats as potential partners by the 2 larger parties.

So we started with **Debate**, moved on to **discussion** and finally got round to **dialogue**. Looking at these terms that we tend to use interchangeably there is in fact quite a distinction between them. Here is a dialogue view of the election:

Debate: *noun 1 a formal discussion in a public meeting or legislature, in which opposing arguments are presented. 2 an argument. verb 1 discuss or argue about. 2 consider; ponder.*

Clearly argument is the central activity in debating. In mediation or negotiation we would identify the fact that each side adopts a **position** and defends it, trying to crush the others. There are winners and losers and the intention of all parties involved is I win and you lose. It is as much about inflicting damage on the other side as it is about forcing your point across. Much of British public life is like this, politics, courts etc. The adversarial nature of debate is rooted in the Latin origin it shares with battle - *battere* meaning 'to fight'.

Discussion: *verb; 1. talk about so as to reach a decision. 2. talk or write about (a topic) in detail. ORIGIN Latin discutere 'dash to pieces'.*

Discussion sounds civilised enough but look at its Latin origin – dash to pieces! The original form of the word shared a root with percussion and concussion and meant literally to break apart. It has a strong analytical feel – pull something apart to keep what you want and discard what you don't. Here we lose things, we pare down to a

minimum, It is reductionist and selective. The Liberals and the Conservatives bargained back and forth losing elements of their own policy and adopting some of the others – negotiating and bargaining to stitch together a compromise from the pieces. It will take great skill and diplomacy on all sides to stop such an agreement breaking apart again. There will have been a mix here of **shared interest** and **negotiating from a position**. Both party leaders had to reach a compromise agreement that they could 'sell' to their parties i.e. persuade them that the advantages [governing] outweighed the disadvantages [losing some core policies that they had fought the election on]. The people who voted for the lost policies may understandably feel cheated.

Dialogue: *conversation directed towards exploration of a subject or resolution of a problem.* • verb - take part in dialogue. *ORIGIN* Greek *dialogos*, from *dialegethai* 'converse with'.

Interestingly we now switch from Latin to Greek. Here we start to explore a subject and try to resolve a problem. There is less emphasis on winning or selecting and a much greater feeling of inclusiveness and **shared interest**. Dialogue is where the truly imaginative solutions emerge. We are less focused on analysing and are more likely to express what we want not what we don't want. In politics this happens quietly and behind closed doors with the people who need to be included and will be happening now. Dialogue isn't persuasion though it is reaching genuine agreement about something, a generative and healing process. It is quite possible that a completely new solution will emerge from dialogue not simply a choice of one of the available solutions. The ancient Mayans had an explanation for this "we don't bring our ideas together, we bring our purpose together and then we agree"

It is worth reflecting on the nature of conversations in your organisation.

- Are they the superficially entertaining battles of will called debate, potentially destructive and divisive, leaving people feeling excluded and under valued?
- Are they analytical and problem focused discussions that potentially "lose the baby with the bath water" by tending to dismiss ideas early and follow the well trodden path of least resistance?
- Do you need to generate more open dialogue, releasing creative solutions and allowing voices to be heard.

Debate and discussion tend to be our cultural default settings. We need to appreciate the value of real dialogue and ensure that it takes place.

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