



Tipping Point or Falling Down? Democracy and the British General Election 2010

Introduction

In 1973, over 50% of civil society inhabited the Settler values set and less than 20% the Pioneer set, with the remainder holding Prospector Values.

By 2005 we had measured a major values shift - slow but relatively consistent over time. The proportion of Settlers had fallen to the mid-twenties percent, while the Pioneers and Prospectors were about even. That shift had led to a total redefinition of what it was to be British – our beliefs about ‘who we are’ as a nation and our personal place within in that society, as well as the values that drive us to find psychological comfort, alleviate anxiety and achieve self-esteem and happiness.

But then something fundamental changed. We began measuring a retreat from an optimistic view of the future and a more pronounced, troubled questioning of the dream of a better tomorrow.

In difficult economic times we had traditionally seen a minor and temporary retrenchment of values from Prospector to Settler as the psychological difficulties of maintaining a forward thinking set of attitudes became more pronounced. A Prospector future has always been defined by the accumulation of materialistic symbols of value. When economic factors no longer facilitate the dream, they block the dream - economic factors make it difficult to acquire and display symbols of value.

In 2005 the economic situation was good for most people. Gordon Brown, then Chancellor of the Exchequer, had said, along with most central government financial regulators in other countries, that he had conquered the cycle of ‘boom and bust’. The dominant narrative emerging from governments and market gurus was that we were all in for a whole new world of globalised production and specialised provision of services, driven by democratically organised market economies – Communism as dead, Socialism was dying, religious fundamentalism could be replaced by jobs for all and everyone would live happily ever after.

The problem that was stored up was that this was not believed, at a personal psychological level, by millions of people in Britain. At a deep values-driven level this story was being questioned and found wanting. A shift was occurring at a greater rate than anytime in the previous 30 years – a shift back from Prospector to Settler.

By 2009 ‘astute’ political and economic commentators had nailed the changing economic and political behaviours (about which they were ‘expert’) down to – surprise, surprise – economic and political factors. Less money to spend and less choice between political parties indicated a malaise at the heart of the econo-politico story they were peddling in the media.

Our on-going cultural research indicates that the real issues - and by golly they **are** real issues - in the econo-political world are driven not by economics or politics but by a general retrenchment in the values sets of the population - values that determine attitudes to events in the econo-political sphere of their lives, and that under-pin the changing attitudes that drive behaviours.

No longer was the dream (and the stories that created and supported the dream) blindly accepted as being either possible or sustainable. Without this firm belief in a better future, the present was no longer seen as a stepping stone to that future, but as a way-station, a



place to stop and re-assess the future and re-visit the past. As they weighed up the options for their personal future, that of their families and the communities of influence they inhabited, millions of people came to the conclusion that maybe it was more important to establish deeper roots in their relationships – social, economic and political - than it was to become the coolest person on the block.

Over the last five years this new dynamic has had a significant impact on people's reactions to events in the political arena. Policies that once were accepted as ways to create a better future were becoming less acceptable. The rhetoric of freedom and individuality - defined as 'choice' – was becoming socially divisive and not socially cohesive.

The story tellers - the experts - are always the last to realise that their stories are no longer working, but the people in democracy-supporting countries know long before the story changes that the 'Emperor has no clothes'.

The Emperor's courtiers, the story tellers, the experts - and the media they use to tell their stories – will persist in peddling their wares until they realize the dominant narrative is changing or has fundamentally changed. Most importantly, this will be set in the context of people's reactions to the opportunity to 'exercise their choice' by voting in the General Election – and the media narrative that frames this choice.

The impression gained by our network of researchers and social observers suggests to us that the General Election 2010 could be as much about exercising the democratic options of not voting - or deliberately voting in a manner contrary to past beliefs and behaviours in an attempt to force a chaotic element into a tried, tested and refined system of political representation that is becoming less and less relevant to the lives of those it is supposed to represent.

Such behaviour would be less an exercise in democracy than it is an extension of the 'Me Too' vote mentality of a media generated and mediated event like The X Factor or Strictly Come Dancing – both arguably more relevant to the lives of the millions who vote in them than the shenanigans and machinations of a select 600 plus individuals sitting in the House of Commons, or the even fewer who sit on the front benches.

In our current phase of culture change it is the media - the delivery channel - not the messages and policies or the politicians that will determine what people do and how they do it. The stories the media – in all its myriad forms – chooses will frame the issues and the actors. Inevitably, this will lead to a further erosion of representative democracy as it has been understood historically - the casting of your ballot for the tribe/political party that best represents your values.

As the internal story of our democracy changes, so too does the external story of our drive for choice and democracy. One of the stories that the media frames is the use of military force to bring democracy to non-democratic countries. Whatever feeling you, the reader, may have about this, it does present a couple of very relevant questions. The first is this – "How many people do you know, including yourself, who would brave bullets, threats of assassination and long queues in outdoor conditions to place your vote"? Or another question – "How many people do you know, including yourself, who would see a blue finger tip as a sign of a better world – not just another sign of Big Brother encroaching on your rights"?

The basic premise of this set of articles and thoughts is that the last five years has seen changes, at the values level, in the population that means no-one can reliably predict the outcome of the coming General Election, least of all predict how many will vote.



We begin by looking at the supporters of the three main political parties and their differences from the general citizenry. This will provide a platform for the thesis that the media will define this election more significantly and in a different manner from previous elections, and that as a result the votes cast are likely to be less ideologically based and more culturally defined. The rider is that many will exercise their democratic choice by **not** voting – in the support of freedom of choice.

About the Cultural Dynamics “Values Space”.

Throughout these articles, you will encounter various ‘maps’ and diagrams that illustrate things in ‘values space’. The key thing to understand is that this space has three fundamental areas, corresponding to the three Maslow Groups – Pioneer, Prospector and Settler. The diagram below illustrates this.

