COALITION, CULTURE AND SYMBOL

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Category: Politics

I apologise for the lack of blogging over the last week or so. I'm pretty much preoccupied with another writing project at the moment and don't have a lot of spare time and even less spare energy! It looks as though my series on the election and mission may well never be completed - as is often the way with my series.

The opinion polls in Britain seem to indicate that none of the major parties will have an overall majority in the next parliament. One possibility is that a party will have to struggle on as a minority government which means that there will be endless horse-trading going on in back rooms every time there is a vote in Westminster. It will make the West Wing look simple.Â The other option is that two parties will form a coalition government. Traditionally politicians have said that coalition governments don't work, but more and more people are pointing to countries such as Germany and saying that they manage quite happily with coalitions, so there is no reason why we can't.

The problem is that we are not Germany. British politics and the legal system are built around an adversarial model. Two sides argue their contrary point of view as vigorously as possible and the better argument (and the most votes) wins. The Westminster chamber is built to reflect this way of operating, the parties sit on benches facing each other across a narrow gap like two armies facing off across a valley.Â Prime Minster's question time shows the British parliament at its best and its worst. The Prime Minister has to answer to the House for his actions (good) but the whole thing quickly descends into an adversarial shouting match (bad, though entertaining).

Coalition government requires a different way of working. Rather than taking contrary positions and fighting it out, coalition parties have to work to find consensus and common ground. It is no surprise that those parliaments which tend to have coalition governments have chambers which reflect a consensual way of working. The Bundestag, for example, has all of the members facing the front. The symbolism is of people working together towards a common goal, rather than two parties competing with each other.

For the record, I think that a coalition government, working towards consensus would be a good thing for this country. I don't think adversarial politics works very well. But, and here is the problem, changing the culture of an organisation is incredibly difficult. Simply putting two of Brown, Clegg and Cameron into a room and telling them to work together won't work. The culture of party tribalism and competition runs too deep. It will take a serious and prolonged effort of leadership to change our political structure from the ground up in order for coalitions to work well. If I were being asked to consult the party leaders at the moment, I'd tell each one of them to get Edgar Schein's bookÂ Organizational Culture and Leadership and to study it on their way too and from press conferences (I'll take my consultancy fee, now). If you are going to change an organisation's culture, you need to address some of the symbols which reinforce that culture. In addition to pressing for a reformed voting system in the UK, I would also suggest moving the house of commons out of the bear pit that is the palace of Westminster and into a building that reflected the new way of working. I

know that moving out of the House of Commons might sound like heresy and a lack of reverence for tradition, but as long as we keep the symbols of the old politics (especially a symbol which reinforces the old way of working) we will never develop a new politics.