

Rebuilding Empathy in the UK

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In an increasingly turbulent and polarised world, where fear and anxiety are on the march and divide and rule is more in evidence, it is tempting to circle the wagons to keep those who disagree with us at bay.

In this sort of environment differences are magnified, positions become entrenched, interests are overlooked and others are demonised. Empathy is very much in short supply. We are quick to put down those with whom we disagree, rubbish what they have to say and treat them as fools - particularly if we feel they have had the wool pulled over their eyes by malevolent forces.

In the background cognitive biases will be very influential in shaping what we see and hear. For example, reactive devaluation (paying less heed to something that comes from someone you disagree with), confirmation bias (interpreting new evidence in a way which supports your views) and attribution error (viewing others' behaviour to be a reflection of who they are, while explaining your own behaviour with reference to context), to name but three.

Whatever happens to UK/EU relations in the months ahead, the damage done to civil discourse by Brexit will take a long time to heal. Many people will feel let down by their fellow citizens, no matter the outcome, and as a result will feel very angry, upset and resentful. Trust in each other and trust in society's institutions will have taken a real battering.

It feels like we are in the latter stages of Fredrich Glas's nine stage model of conflict escalation, where we become more concerned with damaging our opponents, even if it is at a cost to ourselves. This chart provides an excellent summary of the stages.

Hopefully it is not too late to begin to try to repair the damage. As a starting point we may need to pay less attention to the apparent rights and wrongs of the many arguments that are involved and begin to try to empathise with others who hold different views to our own and to try to understand the hopes, fears and interests that lie behind deeply held beliefs.

This will require us to acknowledge and accept the views of others, even if we don't agree with them, recognise the impact on all concerned and reassure them as to our intentions and motives. In doing this we might begin to lay the foundations on which we can engage and rebuild civic space (both real and virtual), where we can discuss differences in a robust yet respectful way and begin to explain and explore what lies behind our respective views.

This might go some way to beginning to rebuild trust, although it will no doubt be a long road to travel. There are many concerns about possible shortages of supplies in the future - perhaps replenishing stocks of empathy should be high up our collective contingency plans.