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Brexit And The Tragically Flawed Mediator

Greg Bond (Bond & Bond Mediation / University of Wildau) · Friday, August 5th, 2016

If Brexit were an ancient Greek tragedy, David Cameron would be the tragic hero. I woke up early on 24 June to see a barometer on the BBC website slightly tipped towards Leave, and then to watch the rest of the votes come in until the text below the barometer stated that there could be no more swinging back.

I then turned on the television to watch the BBC World Service, where the veteran British television journalist David Dimbleby falteringly moderated a couple of hours of talk with politicians in which there was nothing meaningful to say. Then the curtain raised on the last act of the tragedy I was witnessing. The hero emerged from 10 Downing Street, his wife a solitary figure standing at some distance. Before the press, David Cameron held a dignified speech, acknowledging the result and announcing his resignation. He appealed to what his government had achieved for British society. He left the stage. If it had been Shakespeare, he would have fallen on his sword.

This was the moment I broke out into tears. Tears that stemmed from my huge disappointment in the result, fear for what it might mean for Britain's and Europe's future, and certainly great pity for Mr. Cameron, who – it was already clear – would go down in history as the prime minister remembered solely for his error of judgement on the Brexit referendum. David Cameron noted his successes in making Britain a more liberal society by legislating for same-sex marriage, but this will not be his legacy.

Remember the Aristotelean formula for tragedy: a hero with a tragic flaw, oracles of doom, the inevitable nemesis – and catharsis, an emotional purgation that enables us to leave the theatre morally heightened. If it were Shakespearean, we would have plenty of blood and intrigue too – Boris Johnson as the buffoon, and Cameron's opportunistic betrayer, now traveling the world in a role for which he has never even been understudy. Nigel Farage as the populist inciting the mob. The British tabloid press as the tragic chorus. Theresa May entering in the final scene of the last act, symbolizing a fresh start and a hope for the future.

If Cameron is a tragic hero, then his flaw was a misguided belief that he could create a fair process of dialogue and decision-making in which what he believed to be right would win out in the end. In short, his naivety. Perhaps this included his attempt to act as a mediator, and certainly his design of a decision-making process that should lay a conflict to rest.

Cameron was faced with sustained divisive conflict in his own party over Britain's role in Europe. The United Kingdom Independence Party was gaining ground. The United Kingdom was facing a challenge from Scotland, where Cameron's Conservatives had only one Westminster parliamentary seat. To take his party through this conflict and for it to emerge stronger and unified was Cameron's aim. Very weak opposition helped, with the Labour Party more concerned with introspection on its own political identity than with visions of leadership for the country. In living memory and longer, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland has never looked less united.

Cameron took his chance. He would talk to the interested parties – his own party, his European partners and the European Commission – and negotiate a new deal for Britain within the EU. This can be construed as Cameron's attempt to arrive at a mediated solution – an attempt at clarification. There were options on the table in what Cameron managed to agree with the EU. They were limited, but he bagged a “deal” that he hoped he could sell. To make the sale conclusive and bring his own party on board, what better way than have a third party decide, one whose authority no one in a parliamentary democracy would challenge? This was the electorate, in a simple stay-or-go referendum. Here, Cameron acted as a process designer, working out the best way to resolve a situation that seemed to have reached impasse. The outcome was open, as in all good mediations.

Cameron even put the intended process itself to a vote, by making it part of his party's 2015 general election manifesto. Once the Conservatives won that election with an absolute majority, Cameron had to follow it through. To make it all even more legitimate, he allowed his own ministers and members of parliament the freedom to campaign either way – something unheard of in modern politics. This looked like perfect fair transparent process.

Cameron's process turned against him. This mediator had his own interests and designed his process with these in mind. There, Cameron, who campaigned for Remain, lost. Ironically, however, as a process made to address the infighting in Britain's Conservative Party, this has been a success. The party looks stronger, particularly against the now imploding Labour Party. Theresa May is seen as the honest and pragmatic broker who will make the best of Brexit. David Cameron's mediation process has probably achieved its primary goal to settle the Conservative Party's internal strife.

Putting Cameron's personal tragedy aside, I ask myself what this sorry story can tell us about

mediation – which I see as the task of designing consensual decision-making processes. The biggest lesson must be for process designers to take a systemic approach. Who needs to be consulted? Who are the appropriate decision-makers? What is the conflict really about and does our process design really address that? Who will be affected by the result? If we decide in a certain manner, what will it mean for all the stakeholders? Is the outcome predictable? Will it be sustainable? Will it cause problems of a different nature? Is this really the right way to move towards resolution? What is the worst possible scenario that it might engender? What are the chances of that actually happening?

A solution on one level of the system – here the Conservative Party – may prove to be an even bigger new problem on another – here the status of the UK vis-à-vis the European Union. There must have been a better way for the Conservatives to resolve their differences, without taking a much more significant system of which they are only a small part to ransom.

In other words: David Cameron's tragedy reminds me that as mediators we have a responsibility to work out the right process for the conflict at hand.

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