



## Rethinking politics: Lessons from workplace mediation and the arts

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**W**itnessing British politics of late has been a stark reminder of the dangers of polarisation. In the EU referendum, an immensely complex issue was reduced to two choices: Remain or Leave. In the recent General Election, the entire political spectrum seemed to shrink to two political positions: Tory or Labour. Mediation theory tells us that when issues are polarised, the quality of communication suffers. And when the quality of communication suffers, the outcome of communication suffers too.

Polarisation is part of the fabric of western politics, and Britain, with its tradition of two-party politics, is no exception. The two-party system has many advantages. But we should not be scared to search for something better. The sheer weight of the issues that currently face us – most obviously Brexit and the global terror threat – provides reason enough to rethink the way we do politics. As it happens, politics is already in a state of flux. The pundits were at a loss to predict the outcome of elections in the UK and USA. In France, a fledgling political party won a strong majority in parliament. All this upheaval may be the perfect cue to do some blue sky thinking.

Imagine UK politicians from across the political spectrum coming together to discuss one of our most pressing issues – say Brexit. Suppose the conversation began with the participants sharing their perspectives as if they were artists rather than politicians. In art, self-expression is not a competition. So in this alternative Brexit convention, each person's contribution would be treated as equally true and equally important. The participants may prefer one perspective over another, but they accept that each person brings a unique perspective which is worthy of attention.

Another feature of artistic expression is that it makes use of a range of faculties, including intellect, emotion, imagination, intuition and body. It acknowledges the existence of doubt, it draws on metaphor, it knows a thousand shades of truth. In political debate, we tend to act as if human beings are nothing but their intellect. We acknowledge the power of emotion and body language, but grudgingly, as if they were cheap tricks. But the politicians in our alternative Brexit convention would have both the skill and the courage to express themselves through more than verbal logic, thus bringing greater depth to the conversation.

Through this kind of exchange, participants will get to know one another beyond their surface positions. A sense of shared humanity will begin to emerge. In the next stage of the

conversation, they deepen their understanding of themselves, one another and the issue of Brexit, through questioning and analysis. Here it is the workplace mediator's skill set that is most valuable. Participants ask one another questions not for the sake of setting traps or winning points, but in order to open up their courageous conversations to even deeper levels of understanding. They use the skill of reflection to repeat back to one another what they have heard, both to confirm their understanding and bring to light any misunderstanding. They are building trust and gaining new insights. Relationships are deepening. They may even start to like people whose opinions they dislike, because they have a sense of where those opinions come from.

Now they are equipped to begin the third stage of the conversation: to make decisions and plan actions. This stage will never be easy for complex issues such as Brexit, but as any mediator will tell you, it is a hundred times easier if preceded by the kind of exchange described above. There will be more goodwill in the air, more information on the table, hence more conflict resolution options to choose from and more room for creativity in designing a way forward.

Our current culture of polarising political issues comes at a cost. We risk losing sight of the myriad perspectives on the myriad issues that lie hidden beneath the surface of debate. We risk robbing ourselves of the opportunity to gain understanding of ourselves, one another and the issues, by sharing our deeper thoughts, feelings, values and doubts regarding the biggest issues of our time. And we risk diminishing our chances of finding better solutions to our most pressing political issues. Now is a good time to search for new ways to approach politics. Mediation and the arts would be two good places to search.

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