



Esther Cameron

Growing leadership maturity

Brexit and other disruptors - a rough guide for leaders

This article attempts to draw attention to what's happening in UK politics, and to take a step back. How does this fit into a global picture of systems in chaos, and what can leaders of all types, including individual responsibility-takers, do to manage our anxieties and enable good progress?

If you're living in the UK and not feeling upset by the chaos that's going on here, you're probably in denial.

The mere mention of Brexit in social settings brings up tension and discomfort. Behaviour between those even in minor conflict can feel loaded and personal.

The news appears to lurch from event to event, pulling us in one direction or another, calling us to agree or disagree. It's become very difficult for everyone, including the politicians, to make sense of what's actually happening. Many have given up.

Rory Stewart, Conservative MP, and expert in Afghanistan and nation-building, is one of the few leaders of any political persuasion I've noticed managing to step back a little. In an LBC interview in December 2018 on the Brexit deadlock [\[1\]](#) he said:

A nation is like a family possibly, or a like a community. If you have very, very strongly polarised views and you have to live together for the next 10 to 20 years, you've got to try find a common ground. And the thing that worries me a little bit ... is that neither side seems to want to listen to the other, or actually give them any kind of legitimacy.

On being asked how this period will go down in the history books in 100 years time, and how Cameron and May will be viewed compared to other leaders, Kate Williams, Professor of History at the University of



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Reading, pointed to the importance of seeing the bigger questions at play [2]:

I think this period it [sic] will be a huge obsession for history books, but I don't think it will be based on personality in the same way as for Churchill and Thatcher. It's what's happened, it's public feeling and reflecting the fact that the Referendum was a public vote, and the whole question of where is sovereignty. Is it the Prime Minister, is it the Cabinet, is it Parliament, and that there are so many divided views.

It's one hell of a process we're in. People on all sides say they're fed up and want it to end so we can get back to normal. Others say in hushed voices, maybe trying to avoid being alarmist, that we are witnessing large, juddering movements tearing globalization apart, and that we should not expect 'normal' to resume any time soon.

These sensations are not just being felt in the political arena of course. This sense of chaotic, unpredictable disruption is affecting those who work in government, the law, manufacturing and service businesses, public sector, social enterprises, charities and activists and communities alike.

The book *Thinking the Unthinkable* [3] distills hundreds of recent interviews with global leaders in business and the private sector, and offers help with confronting the enormous challenges being faced. The authors claim:

The new scale of uncertainty and curved balls means we are enduring an inflection point of massive proportions. All your assumptions about your capacities and skills are at stake. What secured your job and role is being challenged and found wanting. The challenge might easily intimidate and



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overwhelm. Yet it is also a challenge brimming with those positives and opportunities of the kind that history has long primed us to expect from moments of adversity and 'shit' happening...

More pointedly perhaps, a paper from Jan-Erik Lane of the Public Policy Institute in Serbia [4] summarises the current global situation in seven points:

1. Politics as well as social change in the early 21st century have taken a dramatic turn towards instability, change and uncertainty, i.e. towards chaos.
2. This may be observed in domestic politics in several countries as well as in international politics in many domains.
3. The overwhelming fear among citizens and inhabitants is that the idea of progress has played out its role: "Things will never be the same!"
4. The most profound anxiety for the developments in the 21st century stems from climate change that may wash mankind from the surface of Planet Earth.
5. But there are many concerns: collapse of Islam internally, the growth of Euro Islam, the threat of nuclear confrontation in East Asia, the withdrawal of the US from international solidarity, the new imperialism of Russia, the resort to new search for the old nationalism as well as surging populism and the decline of the Left, especially Social Democracy, the politicians' opportunism.
6. I will bring up global warming last, because it is the most lethal source of chaos. It is now unstoppable.
7. The social sciences must start modeling real events with chaos theory, dealing with cataclysmic events and developments.



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This all brings to mind meteorologist Lorenz who showed how complex systems are naturally dynamic (see Gleick [5] for how this works in organisations). They combine order and disorder and do not necessarily tend to equilibrium, flipping from one patterned state to another as random, non-linear events trigger a sudden move from being under the influence of one 'attractor' to that of another. Hence there is a sense of lurching from one catastrophic or disruptive event to another. You can watch a rather beautiful video of this 'butterfly' effect as it grows if you have the time [6].

These 'attractors', which could be ideologies or figureheads or something else, ultimately define the way the system's behaviour will unfold. This is impossible to predict as densely connected systems are sensitive to prevailing conditions. In a social system, an attractor that offers true value for the most people will create the most powerful magnet. Those who are able to light up peoples' aspirations and trust - and/or allay their fears, across multiple stakeholder groups will pull people towards it in a powerful way.

Interestingly, systems moving from one dominant attractor to another experience struggle with paradox and this can have a draining effect on the existing energy for change. Focusing on either-or thinking, which can happen when complexity becomes too great, is not helpful to true progress. Mechanisms such as Citizens Assemblies [7] can be good ways of helping large groups and even nations to work through complex information and possibilities together, rather than referendums which tend to encourage fake news, either-or thinking and the building of walls.

So chaos theory doesn't quite explain or predict what's going on yet reassures us that what looks like randomness does actually contain order within it.

I sense that it's becoming important for change consultants like me to try to help people face 'what is' and find ways of working together to deal with this productively. That seems to boil down to the basic human tools of collaboration, creativity and compassion.

So here are my distilled bits of advice for being in this messiness, drawn from a wide range of sources and



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in no particular order:

- Openly acknowledge your own and listen to other peoples' anxieties about the future, with compassion
- Build networks where you can talk about what could happen in your domain and how you might respond or even get ahead of this
- Notice your tendency to conformance or risk-aversion... Take a risk or two as things are not going to stay the same. You might as well!
- Build trust with all those you deal with - strengthening your sense of purpose and values, and talking about this
- Clarify and share your own perspective on the key issues, and get deeply curious about other peoples' - stay flexible and kind
- Promote and listen to Millennials - they are already mapping out the way ahead. Tap into this rather than berating them for reacting to the world we've created for them. You do not know best, and you are conforming a lot more than you think (ask my kids)
- Consider taking part in, or somehow promoting/role modelling the principles behind Citizens' Assemblies - in your community, team, organisation...
- Get interested in self-organising systems and collaborative leadership
- Open up everyone you meet to thinking the unthinkable, or even the unpalatable about the future - become more imaginative about ways forward
- Be tolerant, encouraging and compassionate (rather than overly critical) to those who take on leadership responsibility - it's not easy
- If you're in politics, look beyond staying in power. If you're in a business, look beyond making money.
- If you're in a community build bridges not walls. If you're troubled, try to make peace with yourself. Ask for help.
- Care for your interiority - however you do it. This means looking after your mind, body and soul so that you keep closely in touch with how you are.
- Value your relationships, and gently support mutual understanding beyond your 'bubble', if you're in one
- Read widely, and try to discern the 'attractors' as they pop up, and how they start to pull people.

That's it. Do add comments or thoughts below and let's keep the discussion going.



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References

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6. Lorenz attractor film (2 minutes) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8qh2VGQcXik>
7. <https://citizensassembly.co.uk/>

Esther Cameron is a change facilitator working with organisations facing significant challenges. This involves partnering with leaders, and/or small coalitions of leaders, to help map out and enact a change process. She does her best to work collaboratively, creatively and with compassion.