

It's May-Day, It Must Be France
by Pat Dade

Well here we are in the final knockings of the most intriguing General Election in a generation – and I'm sitting in the sunny South of France enjoying a look at the Mediterranean and getting the long view of our "Media Made" election for the next leader of the Mother of Parliaments. Today I would like to share with you few thoughts about what has happened so far.

Readers familiar with some of my writings will know that I felt, before the election began, that it was going to be the task of the media to create an event – something beyond reporting – something that would raise the apathetic out of their daily routines and get them to the polling booths next Thursday.

The election looked like a vote not for the people standing to become Members of Parliament, but a vote for engagement with the political process itself. So deep was the anger, disappointment, disgust and, in many cases, apathy that the entire process of voting seemed a choice that many were contemplating "giving a pass" to in 2010.

Well, lo and behold, the media did indeed create an event and, yes, people have put aside their feelings of apathy – but not their disgust, disappointment and anger – and the political landscape just may have changed in a manner that will remain altered after the dust of this election is settled. In fact the landscape may have so changed that 2010 might become a "two election" year as the fallout from the reformation leads to new dynamics within the Palace of Westminster.

By now "the Clegg effect", "Clegg-mania" and all other manner of newspaper speak has been used to describe the result of the first televised debates between the leaders of the three largest political parties in the UK. For the first time a head to head description and debate of each party's position was conducted - without the intervention of media political interviewers/interrogators à la News Night or the Politics Show - before a live audience who placed questions.

My good friend Chris Rose at Campaign Strategy Ltd. has told me many times that this is the goal of all good campaigners – to get the underdog presented on equal terms with representatives of the dominant discourse. The little guy is no longer the little guy - he is an equal in the minds of the audience - and as a result can have an effect on hearts and minds disproportionate to the size of prior support - i.e. they will have the opportunity to increase their support after the event has completed.

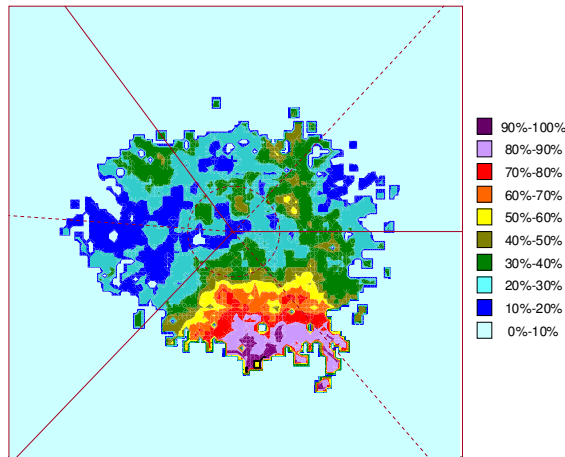
At the outset, this election campaign had been typified by false starts and media reporting of voter apathy. About the only "news stories" having resonance with voters seemed to be the prospects of a hung Parliament – effectively delivering a vote of No Confidence in the political process. This feeling lead me to the belief that disengagement was more likely than engagement in 2010.

It now looks like "the debates" may have changed that.

The Event and the impact it had on voters

As a political junky – unlike at least 88% of the British population – I have a range of research based sources that I consult regularly for my fix. The first, unsurprisingly, is our own research here at Cultural Dynamics. Here’s an insight into the values sets of the mere 12% who can be said to truly “live and breath” politics.

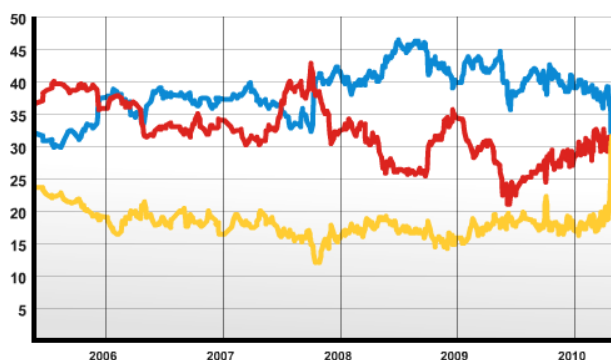
Important Factor in Self Identity- My Political Convictions 12 %



What this map shows is that it is the Pioneers with the greatest propensity to say that their political convictions are an important factor in their self-identity. Next, it’s the Settlers, while the least propensity is amongst the Prospectors. It’s the latter that were most disengaged and who are likely to be the newly engaged by the emergence of a new character on the stage.

Another regular place of research based tracking is the website UK Polling Report. A very comprehensive site containing lots of goodies to feed the political habit!

Voting Intention since 2005



Here’s a review of voting intentions tracked since 2005(!) and the day by day collection of published polls on today’s subject. (Image courtesy of www.ukpollingreport.co.uk). You can see for yourself the effect of “the event” on the polls compared to any other time in the last 5 years. The data says very clearly that “something different” occurred at the time of the televised debates.

The televised result was so unexpected that the newspapers and radio scrambled to find their “points of view” as the tectonic plates of political certainty juddered and threw them off balance and out of focus on the issues their readers, listeners and viewers felt were most relevant to them.

The voters were expressing their emotions – not really reacting to the policy differences – but reacting to a new face and new voice – a slightly familiar face and voice to be sure, but not one they equated with power as in the case of Gordon Brown and David Cameron.

The viewers were reacting to a new dynamic - 3 people who were setting out reasons for voting for their respective parties - not the traditional two. Television has created a new platform and the two-party system came out looking and feeling out of date.

The viewer/voters had already made their preferences felt to the pollsters and pundits prior to the event as they declared their apathy and disgust -with pride! Neither of the two parties was deserving of their vote – and the party they had traditionally voted for (a major factor in apportioning their vote) was now open to questioning at a very basic level – not who to vote for but whether they would vote or not.

I think this feeling was encapsulated in an episode of South Park in a satire of the American Elections in 2004. See <http://www.southparkstudios.com/clips/154575/> (Note that this link may not work for some in the UK because their ISP will redirect them to southparkstudios.co.uk, where Series 15 is not yet available).

The gist of the story is that the available electoral choices are described, respectively, as a “Giant Douche Bag” and a “Turd Sandwich”. I’ll let the reader decide which is John Kerry and which is George W Bush.



Giant Douche Bag or a Turd Sandwich? Not much of a choice - and the rational reaction was not to vote at all. This is what many potential voters felt prior to the British event. When the “it is your obligation to vote” card was played by the politicians and the media, the other rational choice was to hope no-one could form a majority by themselves and a hung Parliament would occur.

That leads on to the alternative – people actually voting for something that means something to them, getting engaged at level of their values and feeling their vote has an effect on their lives – not an obligation to participate but an opportunity to have an effect on their own lives and the lives of others. That’s for another article - to take a look at ways of understanding British values and the effect they have on “desired goals” in politics.

I hope I have provided some food for thought – preferably not the sandwich! As I sip a nice local wine and gaze out over the Mediterranean from my balcony I shall attempt to compose another pearl of wisdom. It’s a “doity” job but somebody’s got to do it!