Edge

To arrive at the edge of the world's knowledge, seek out the most complex and sophisticated minds, put them in a room together, and have them ask each other the questions they are asking themselves.

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2006 : WHAT IS YOUR DANGEROUS IDEA?

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A political system based on empathy

Imagine a political system based not on legal rules (systemizing) but on empathy. Would this make the world a safer place?

The UK Parliament, US Congress, Israeli Knesset, French National Assembly, Italian Senato della Repubblica, Spanish Congreso de los Diputados, — what do such political chambers have in common? Existing political systems are based on two principles: getting power through combat, and then creating/revising laws and rules through combat.

Combat is sometimes physical (toppling your opponent militarily), sometimes economic (establishing a trade embargo, to starve your opponent of resources), sometimes propaganda-based (waging a media campaign to discredit your opponent's reputation), and sometimes through voting-related activity (lobbying, forming alliances, fighting to win votes in key seats), with the aim to 'defeat' the opposition.

Creating/revising laws and rules is what you do once you are in power. These might be constitutional rules, rules of precedence, judicial rulings, statutes, or other laws or codes of practice. Politicians battle for their rule-based proposal (which they hold to be best) to win, and battle to defeat the opposition's rival proposal.

This way of doing politics is based on "systemizing". First you analyse the most effective form of combat (itself a system) to win. If we do x, then we will obtain outcome y. Then you adjust the legal code (another system). If we pass law A, we will obtain outcome B.

My colleagues and I have studied the essential difference between how men and women think. Our studies suggest that (on average) more men are systemizers, and more women are empathizers. Since most political systems were set up by men, it may be no coincidence that we have ended up with political chambers that are built on the principles of systemizing.

So here's the dangerous new idea. What would it be like if our political chambers were based on the principles of empathizing? It is dangerous because it would mean a revolution in how we choose our politicians, how our political chambers govern, and how our politicians think and behave. We have never given such an alternative political process a chance. Might it be better and safer than what we currently have? Since empathy is

about keeping in mind the thoughts and feelings of other people (not just your own), and being sensitive to another person's thoughts and feelings (not just riding rough-shod over them), it is clearly incompatible with notions of "doing battle with the opposition" and "defeating the opposition" in order to win and hold on to power.

Currently, we select a party (and ultimately a national) leader based on their "leadership" qualities. Can he or she make decisions decisively? Can they do what is in the best interests of the party, or the country, even if it means sacrificing others to follow through on a decision? Can they ruthlessly reshuffle their Cabinet and "cut people loose" if they are no longer serving their interests? These are the qualities of a strong systemizer.

Note we are not talking about whether that politician is male or female. We are talking about how a politician (irrespective of their sex) thinks and behaves.
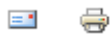
We have had endless examples of systemizing politicians unable to resolve conflict. Empathizing politicians would perhaps follow Mandela and De Klerk's examples, who sat down to try to understand the other, to empathize with the other, even if the other was defined as a terrorist. To do this involves the empathic act of stepping into the other's shoes, and identifying with their feelings.

The details of a political system based on empathizing would need a lot of working out, but we can imagine certain qualities that would have no place.

Gone would be politicians who are skilled orators but who simply deliver monologues, standing on a platform, pointing forcefully into the air to underline their insistence — even the body language containing an implied threat of poking their listener in the chest or the face - to win over an audience. Gone too would be politicians who are so principled that they are rigid and uncompromising.

Instead, we would elect politicians based on different qualities: politicians who are good listeners, who ask questions of others instead of assuming they know the right course of action. We would instead have politicians who respond sensitively to another, different point of view, and who can be flexible over where the dialogue might lead. Instead of seeking to control and dominate, our politicians would be seeking to support, enable, and care.

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