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## 4 leadership takeaways from the UK election



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Nigel Nicholson

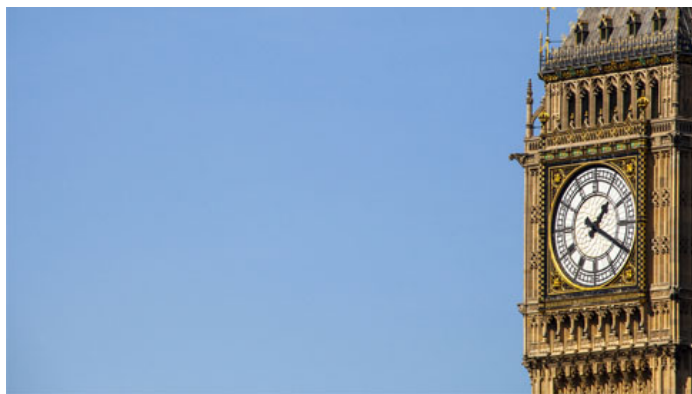
02 Jun 2017

Nigel Nicholson explores what really goes on during political campaigns – and what business leaders can learn from the process

◀ 16

◀ 145

◀ 110



What is the General Election on 8 June really about: leadership, policies or other issues entirely? And are there lessons for business? There are four universals that apply in both politics and business: First, leadership differs according to where you are in the leadership journey. Second, identity and character are mixed in with more primitive reactions to imagery. Third, the nature of the challenge is not a given. And fourth, the group identity of “followers” can hinder effectiveness. Let’s take a good look at each of these.

### 1. The sell and the delivery

Elections are a story of two chapters – the sell and the delivery. In the sell phase it is all about shaping reality through vision and willpower; in the delivery it is about agility in dancing to the tune that reality plays. So voters have a choice: to be consumers and pick the manifesto package that suits their needs and values; or be investors and pick the team they think will deal with the unpredictability of the future best. This is where Corbyn and Farron seem to appear vulnerable to voters – stronger on the former than

### About Nigel Nicholson

Nigel Nicholson is a Professor of Organisational Behaviour.

### He teaches on the following programmes:

- ✦ The Sustainable Family Business
- ✦ High Performance People Skills for Leaders
- ✦ Proteus
- ✦ Sloan



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the latter.

## 2. Looking right for the part

The election is not about followers picking a leader, though sometimes the leaders would like it to be that way, especially if they are winning the popularity battle. In earlier times personality was glimpsed less nakedly than we now see it, in the modern media glare. TV election debates influence voter preferences not because of cogency of argument, or even because of character, but because of imagery. This is the swirl of impressions that coalesces in people's minds from non-verbal behaviours that convey perceived dominance, likeability, and trustworthiness. We have more women would-be leaders in the frame than ever before and women are perceived to be more trustworthy.



## 3. You can't control the fight

Like the great generals of history, politicians like to choose the terrain on which they will fight the battle – Brexit, NHS, immigration, the economy – but once the battle starts, as Tolstoy depicted in *War and Peace*, we are taken on a journey of often violent uncertainty. As the smoke clears what we mainly see are commentators arguing about what caused the victories and defeats. The idea that one group or other can determine the issues on which an election is fought is a huge popular delusion, though factions do get lucky if attention, like a flock of starlings, happens to settle on their tree, where they have an advantage. May's attempt to make the election a referendum on her as the best person to lead the Brexit process looks fragile if it assumes other issues may not take centre stage.

## 4. People identify with a tribe

Elections take place in a many-layered social space, with networks of "interests" representing how voters see themselves in relation to the parties. But these "interests" are often quite vague attributions about identity. Some voters inherit their political loyalty from their parents, but these rarely last beyond one generation. The boundaries demarcating tribes are a mix of regional, social class, wealth, values and ideology. Many voters are unswayed by character or issues, but simply affirm, "This is my group and I will remain loyal to it." Demography, economic development and the changing complexion of parties shifts these boundaries, especially now. We are in a time of flux, where traditional loyalties are being tested and transgressed. UKIP and the SNP did much over the past few years to redraw the tribal boundaries, to the detriment of the formerly solid Labour constituency. All of this might seem a far cry from the boardroom and business leadership, but is it? Not if you examine them closely.

### Becoming a leader is not the same as being a leader

Different processes are involved, and many a business has come unstuck through failing to realise this. Not all number twos transition into great number ones. A chief reason is failure to realise how radically different the two roles are, and the need for a wider, more outward-embracing perspective than, say, a CFO or a COO is used to. It is also an unfortunate fact that in business the processes that select leaders are too often retrospective (past performance) rather than prospective (what they might do differently).

### Leaders are rarely appointed on merit

We like to think that the processes that lead to elevation to the C-suite or the board are based upon a rational appraisal of individuals' capability and fitness to lead, but the scientific instrumentation that might help verify this (psychometrics, IQ tests) is generally disliked at this level and seldom used by headhunters. Why? Because it suits everyone to keep the process fluffy round the edges so that misfitting can be fudged to ensure that the

the edges so that nothing can be judged, to ensure that the imagery is right, and there is a convincing sell to those who have to approve the appointment. These parties usually represent diverse constituencies and the best way to satisfy them all is to have someone who looks like a leader and sounds like a leader. Then everyone can pat themselves on the back for finding consensus around their common, superficial good taste.

### Every leader must decide what their challenge is

Business leaders are often hired on the basis of one of two extremes: the continuity ticket or the transformation ticket. But as one of management's most inspired thinkers, Mary Parker Follett, writing just after the First World War, presciently noted, leaders have to define the challenge they face for themselves, not on others' say-so, regardless of how grand and important these others may be. Listen to what the people who hired you think you should do but do not let them define your situation. They have their own perceptions and interests. The wise and effective leader comes to her own appraisal based not on conviction, like so many politicians, but by a ruthless, open-minded, unflinching gaze at what is and what might be. Follett called this "The Law of the Situation".

### Good leaders recognise and overcome tribalism

People want to belong, and the large part of leadership that is to do with building culture rightly wants to forge a strong shared identity in the firm. That communal sense is a powerful source of advantage – clearly visible in the best family businesses – but unlike in politics it doesn't typically define itself in opposition to other groups. That's where tribalism goes sour and works against the values of the organisation. You see it in the conflicts between divisions, functional groups and even between peers. It might seem harmless when directed outward towards competitors, but this kind of tribalism ultimately eats the soul. It sees markets and competition as a zero-sum game and fails to see how the best firms grow their markets together. The values that enhance the relationship between business, economy and society are cooperation, innovation and learning.

In politics and business, success means commanding the narrative – honestly and convincingly telling the story of how we got to here, the unvarnished reality of where we are now, and the promise of where we will seek to go next.

The more this is based on humility about the past, open-eyed perceptiveness about the present and moral courage about the future, the better served we will be by all our leaders.

You can read more of Nigel's ideas about leadership in [The 'I' of Leadership: Strategies for seeing, being and doing](#)" (Jossey-Bass, 2013)

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