

Crumbs! We dropped the cake

Catherine Fieschi admires British understatement over the Brexit crisis

Anyone tuning in to listen on June 27 to David Cameron's statement to the House of Commons on the result of the European Union referendum might have been forgiven for thinking that MPs were busy reviewing who had tipped over the cake-stand at the village fête.

In the real world, the immediate aftermath of the referendum saw – in quick succession: the prime minister resign, the shadow cabinet implode and markets crash. In the days that followed, the tragicomedy of succession plots in both parties paved the way for repentance, consternation and shock from swathes of the general public and from Britain's stunned allies.

But in the House of Commons, having reminded everyone that they had voted 6 to 1 to set in motion events of near-planetary proportions, the prime minister simply conceded that it had all taken a rather regrettable turn ('It's not what I wanted for the country I love'), that there might be lots of cleaning up to do, and that it would involve some pretty hairy planning. Oh, and the markets weren't too happy.

And, said the leader of the opposition (suspected of, if not tipping over the cake-stand, then certainly of failing in his duty to the Remain cause), thank you everyone for turning out in such great numbers: we may have lost the trifle of EU membership, but we salvaged the sponge of participation.

Meanwhile, much as in *Midsomer*



Murders, the political body count rose in a riveting series of twists, turns, cliffhangers and betrayals – bizarrely disconnected from the decorum and apparent good humour of the village green.

Clichés about British understatement in the face of adversity don't quite capture the strange combination of genteel charade on the inside and political ruthlessness on the outside.

In fact, the events serve as a useful reminder that beyond the symbolic arrangements – cramped benches, cosy semicircles, or grand hemicycles – parliaments are indeed places of theatre. They are about 'representation', both metaphorical and literal. Spaces tasked with upholding and, above all, projecting, the nation's most deeply held views of itself and of its most powerful myths.

So, while we might have once thought of the relationship between citizens and representatives as linear – from voting to being represented – the metaphor of 'politics as performance' transforms the relationship into an interactive one: politics becomes a co-production, rather than simply a production. Performers and audiences are equally implicated.

In this co-production the performers' most crucial skill is to be able to reliably enact the audience's supposed collective political character, and hold themselves up as a mirror, at once dependable and unforgiving, of the nation's fantasy. On this late June morning, it was important that the rules of the Members' Club to which everyone aspires to belong should triumph

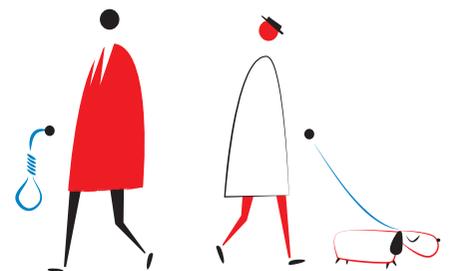
over bedlam: sorry about accidentally trashing the place, chaps. Now, ties on.

In grave situations the Americans resort to the touching tradition of filibustering, immortalized in the film *Mr Smith goes to Washington* in which the hero talks non-stop for 24 hours. This is the modern-day equivalent of demonstrating one's willingness to die on horseback for the sake of conquering new lands or securing cherished freedoms.

French MPs dutifully recall the storming of the Bastille (complete with a rendition of the *Marseillaise* at moments of the highest drama), and Italians have been known to turn up to parliament with a noose in hand as a sign of their displeasure. For particularly significant occasions, say the resignation of Silvio Berlusconi, choirs of hallelujahs can also be provided. Combined, this produces a nice mix of noisy family argument and pious gathering.

A successful co-production will blur the lines between triumph and defeat, mediocrity and greatness, belligerence and affability – all the while dramatizing the nation and without too much thought for the players who flit across the stage. As Freud said, not many people can be expected to 'subsist on the scanty satisfaction which they can extort from reality'.

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