CULTURAL CONVERGENCE: A REALITY OR MERELY WISHFUL THINKING?

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I wish you every success for your forthcoming conference, "Initiative 21" Enterprise Education for the 21st Century, to be held at the Sydney Convention Centre, Darling Harbour on 11 July, 2005.

I note that one of the conference topics is of the fusion of cultures within and across borders. I would like to point out that though this argument - that global interdependence is making cultural conflict counterproductive if not obsolescent - has been going on for many decades (for example by Norman Angell in 1910), it may be mistaken.

While cultural convergence can be seen in many aspects of daily life around the world (particularly in the spread of US-style capitalism; the revolution in information technology; and use of English as an international language) the power of nation states has increased - not decreased - with present trade globalization. Cultural differences between them - as identified for example by Hall (1959, 1966, 1976),

Harris and Moran (1996), Hofstede (1980, 1991) and Trompenaars (1997) remain strong and distinctive.

How many nation states would be willing to replace their traditional values with a one-size-fits-all 'generic' culture? One answer is provided in increasing numbers by students who travel from Europe, the Americas, the middle and far east, to study international business management in English-speaking universities, for example in Australia. They wear Nike trainers, Levi jeans and T-shirts decorated with western commercial logos; but their roots are in their own cultures, their national and local backgrounds. Ask any of them whether they feel less French, Thai, Romanian or Norwegian for planning to be part of an international workforce and they will answer, of course not.

Thus behind familiarity with the concept of multiculturalism lies potential for conflict. Marshall McLuhan's (1968) "global village" (based on Buckminster Fuller's (2005) vision)) is no metaphor for peace and harmony. In real villages dissensions and hostilities are not only maintained within their environment but actually created by it. Owen Harries (2003) points out that people who go to war often know each other very well indeed: Palestinians and Israelis; Catholics and Protestants of Northern Ireland.

This apparent paradox - that convergence and divergence are occurring simultaneously between national and regional cultures throughout the world - can only be understood in context of the drivers of globalization and the former barriers to convergence that these drivers have broken down. Charles Handy (1989) has identified four: the barriers of workplace; employment; technology and finance.

1. Traditional workplaces, like offices and factories, are buildings, fixed sites to which employees travel each day to produce goods and provide services - with all the limitations that such static

environments impose. Nowadays workplaces can be, and are, anywhere there is an electric power outlet or a wireless connection for a computer and a cellular telephone.

2. Information technology has broken the barrier of communication difficulties.

3. The barrier of fixed employment has fallen before a mobile, more educated workforce crossing and re-crossing flexible borders between countries worldwide.

4. The barrier of national economies has fallen with the internationalisation of financial markets.

Each of these former barriers is distinctive, but each relates to the others. Two critical common aspects of their breakdown are that the bulldozers are of western, principally American, origin; and communication across them is in the English language. Knowledge and technology transfers are blending into a global harmony sung by entrepreneurial global leaders. Time will tell whether they sing a siren song. Harries (2003) points out that nation states are among the most effective users of the new technologies - but to maintain their autonomies, not surrender them. In the USA the organisation that so far has made the most spectacularly successful use of information technology is the US military: - to transform its war-fighting capacity.

All we can say at present is that Anglo-Saxon culture has become a cultural force and English the medium of international communication. Even on the world wide web over a third of visitors write in English (Global Reach 2005). Every language carries values. English, especially American English, expresses the values of a dynamic, pluralistic, and rationally innovative world, including the organisational cultures of many MNCs.

In spite of these forces towards convergence, or perhaps in resistance to them, divisions between cultures may be increasing in importance. This is Samuel Huntington's (1993) view, widely discussed and sometimes disputed (e.g. by Ian Buruma, 2001). Nevertheless Huntingdon concludes that: "In the final analysis...all civilizations will have to learn to tolerate each other": and that global business leaders will have to learn how to manage cultural diversity in a world full of inequalities without leading to a "clash of civilizations". The anthropologist Janine Wedel (1998) suggests that present actors playing leading roles on the world state (she calls them "transactors") appear to be "members of an exclusive and highly mobile multinational club, whose rules and regulations have yet to be written". Who will write those rules, and to whom these new elites will be accountable, are yet to be decided..

Thus how should we define cultural fusion in the context of globalisation? Will it result in an international culture that honours individualism, free enterprise, competition and market forces? Or will it support the hegemony of a few MNCs? Is it to be a culture of individualism or of collectivism? Of exploitation or of sustainability? On the other hand, is the whole concept of cultural convergence more a matter of wishful thinking than practical reality?

Yours sincerely

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Resumé
Elizabeth Christopher has been both an academic and a practising consultant since 1979 for cross-cultural leadership and management training in Australia, Japan, the UK and the US. She still presents papers occasionally at international conferences; is a reviewer for international journals; and has published quite widely in her field. She is an Honorary Associate of Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia, where she teaches cross cultural management. She also supervises doctoral students on behalf of Charles Sturt University, NSW Australia and is a consultant to the university's Western Research Institute. Her publications include;

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