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Those who muddle through may inherit the earth

From Mr Daniel J. Aronoff.

Sir, John Lloyd argues that strategic planning trumps the traditional British “fetish” for “muddling through” as an approach to dealing with global complexity (“Class notes from a course on the age of complexity”, *Business Life*, December 24). He could not be more wrong.

Mr Lloyd emphasises one aspect of globalisation – the increasing interrelatedness of people and events around the world. Surely it is better to have an awareness of the external world than not. But such was Britain’s hallmark for centuries during which it built an unprecedented global trading and military empire, and its habit of muddling through did not then seem an inhibitor.

To the contrary, muddling through may have been a key to success, for with increased complexity comes increased uncertainty, which by its nature cannot be predicted in advance. While “to imagine dealing with an E.coli virus in Germany in mid-2011”, as was studied by executives attending a recent London School of Economics course, may help underscore the need for flexibility in responding to emergencies in general, it is near certain we will not encounter an event quite like that one.

Muddling through is a habit of accommodating and adapting to novel events that cannot be planned for in advance. It is tradition-bound and therefore evolutionary rather than revolutionary. It is spontaneous, empirical, inductive, tacit and emphasises learning; as opposed to strategic planning, which is deductive, focuses on mastery of pre-thought scenarios and calls for untested radical change from above if the articulated features of the imagined scenario appear to require it. The philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment – Hume, Ferguson, Smith and Burke – recognised and explained the advantages of muddling through, which was pithily expressed by the “longshoreman philosopher” Eric Hoffer: “In times of change learners inherit the earth; while the learned find themselves beautifully equipped to deal with a world that no longer exists.”

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