

IN SEARCH OF THE PERFECT EUROPEAN

By **Alexander Stubb**

When I moved to Brussels six years ago I, like most of us, had prejudices about other nationalities.

I was convinced that Spaniards love to talk, but hate operative conclusions. Finns love operative conclusions, but loath to talk – at least most of us.

The Dutch have deep pockets; the Portuguese want to get into them. Poles and Spaniards are the toughest negotiators in town. The Irish might seem tough, but they are actually quite soft, at least after a couple of pints of Guinness.

Germans love *Ordnung* (order); but the Italians do not know what it is. Austrians (“Herr Doktor Professor”) are obsessed with titles; Danes could not care less.

The French are unable to speak about anything unless they can present a three-point schema. The Brits want to cut the crap, and get to the point, preferably in English.

Does it all sound familiar?

In my experience different meeting cultures reveals it all. The Greeks can call a meeting at five minutes notice. The agenda, if any, is revealed during the meeting.

The discussion takes hours and the conclusions are left hanging in the air. That does not matter at all, as long as the debate was lively and things actually get done. Albeit last minute.

Then we have the Estonians organising the same meeting. The agenda is sent a month in advance and the operative conclusions are drawn up before the actual meeting takes place.

In the meeting the chairman hammers

Photo: Juha Roininen



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down the points, without discussion. The meeting is over and done with in 15 minutes and everyone is happy.

The Swedes are more tactful. A number of options for an agenda are sent out two months in advance. After elaborate negotiations an agenda is agreed a month in advance of the meeting.

Options for operative conclusions are sent out two weeks before the meeting. The meeting lasts eight hours. And just to make sure that no one feels hurt, the chairman finishes the meeting by asking whether everyone is feeling good.

So, what do I think after six years in the heart of Europe? Well, to be politically incorrect: my empirical evidence, gathered from odd jobs in the main institutions of the European Union, shows that all of my prejudices were well founded...but in a positive way.

There is no such thing as the perfect person, let alone the perfect European. But perhaps it is precisely our differences that make Europe tick.