Mails from Europe

Dear Simon,

To what extent is the UK, despite its being a 'global player', still a very 'insular' country?

This is a very interesting question, because the UK is more internationalised than before. From its self-image as a global player, to its profound links with Europe, th US, Commonwealth and beyond, the country has long considered itself to be part an international community.

However, despite all of this, there is a certain distance to the rest of the world. The usually benign sense of cosmic good fortune of being British sometimes drifts into a sense of superiority: others crave our success and want to have part of it, which we allow them to do.

A good way to think about this is the 'Wimbledon effect': we invent a British institution, based in Britain, which becomes globally successful, but those who participate (and win) usually come from elsewhere. Thus, even as we have something very international, we also have something very 'British', which no-one else can really properly appreciate. A bit like the Tour de France, in fact.

Coupled to this, the position of English as the global lingua franca creates an illusion that Britain is intrinsically a global player (because "everyone speaks our language"), even as it reduces the willingness to learn other languages and engage with other cultures. Being global all too often means being interested in the US.

This retreat into an idealised sense of self does come with some self-delusion about what being global actually involves. There is perhaps a contrast to be made with the French: they talk about how they dislike globalisation, but actually do a lot of it, while the British talk about liking it, and do it, but without really understanding what it's about.

Talk soon,

Simon

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