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Conflict Resolution: Introduction Transcript

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Conflict Resolution:
An Introduction

Professor Tim Connell

Today's Gresham Symposium will be looking at Conflict Resolution from a number of angles. It is of course a complex to as the world has (hopefully) moved from world wars, inter-continental wars and wars fought with the latest technology by major armies, to (regrettably) bush-fire wars, civil wars, border conflicts and ethnic disputes, to mention just a few. The underlying question is how to get warring factors to come face to face after years of conflict, though I rather fear that we will not come to an answer, let alone a solution in one afternoon!

Reasons for conflict can be many and various, based on territory, autonomy, types of governance, borders and resources. Historic grievances, colonial legacies and ethnic differences can all play their part, and at times it is hard for an uninformed outsider to understand quite what the undercurrents are and why differences can cause such friction, suspicion, animosity and downright hostility.

We might want to consider what the chances are of successful mediation in a country like Syria today, or whether a civil administration will ever be able to take charge of Congo. Can Somalia ever be brought back into the international fold - and what are the chances for the Afghan government when Western forces retire? Speculation is fruitless, forward planning may fail. However, it is really not possible to come to any conclusion while the conflicts are ongoing and it make take more than one go over a lengthy period of time before a viable long-term solution can be put in place.

The deep-rooted nature and undying hostility caused by civil war may, however, be studied from a historical perspective and the benefit of hindsight if we look at the case of Spain. This was a (fairly) advanced European country, mainly Catholic, with schools, hospitals and long-established universities. The government was not in the hands of dissident tribesmen, the country had not been afflicted with years of drought or plagued by natural disaster, and yet the hatred was never far below the surface and the outbreak of war was marked by atrocities committed by both sides. The war went on for three years and only recently have we learnt of the enormous number of massacres that took place, perpetrated largely by the Nationalist forces of General Franco, although the Republicans were far from innocent in this respect. Before they die out completely, the Civil War generation have started to tell the truth about the mass graves that only in recent years have been discovered across the whole country. They are thought to contain over 100,000 bodies, and modern DNA techniques have been able to identify many of them, which is of great importance even now to the families. However, the present Centre-Right government has withdrawn support both for this and an act passed by the previous Socialist government, called the Historic Memory Law, which was an attempt to recognise the events of the war years. It was controversial because it challenged the so-called Pacto de Olvido, the agreement during the years of transition to democracy not to investigate too closely what had happened, and which led to the Amnesty Law of 1977 which is still in place today. It makes an interesting contrast to the attempts at peace and reconciliation which were famously set in train in South Africa by Archbishop Desmond Tutu and others.

Some idea of the feeling of terror engendered by civil war may be seen with the case of the topos, the "moles" who spent nearly forty years in hiding in attics and outhouses, and who would only be persuaded to come out, not when Franco died, but two years later when the first democratic elections were held, in 1977. This may have been because of the systematic nature of the executions which went well beyond the initial fury of the war, in order to remove the people, as Franco said, who "did not think like us".

That all took place a long time ago, and as someone once said, in a far-away country about which we know nothing. But then we haven't even got on to Colombia, Chile or Argentina, and that's just within the Spanish-speaking world. All highly civilized and sophisticated countries, but which have had more than their fair share of dictatorship, repression and civil war, just in my adult life time.

But conflicts can arise even in countries with a long period of apparent peace and tranquillity - Yugoslavia under Marshal Tito is a case in point. The Arab Spring arose because of the build-up of tension which was caused by years of repression - how much the internet and the use of social media led to the outburst of popular frustration and anger has yet to be studied. Of course, the sudden removal of controls created a vacuum, as in Libya, and uncertainty as to what should replace them, as in Egypt. Yet transition is possible - the Spaniards showed that with a model transition to democracy in the mid- to late 70s, which was followed to a great extent by the Latin American republics when they emerged from twenty years of military dictatorship only a few years later. The Berlin Wall came down and most of the Eastern European states modernised and merged into a free market economy with relatively little friction and without violence. The break-up of the Soviet Union was perhaps less successful.

The trigger here is a change to the ground rules. De-colonisation took place a long while ago now, although some of the difficulties caused by colonial rule, such as boundaries which do not fit with the local ethnic mix, may still be present today. There may have been movements of population in colonial times which have led to points

of friction in the modern world, in the case of Fiji or Sri Lanka, for example. Changes in the post-War, decisions taken early in the Cold War may also have had an impact, the division of Vietnam or Korea being prime examples. Both these cases also indicate the extent to which the balance of power has changed, even in the nuclear age. Client wars were once fought between countries with backing from the super-powers, which vied with each other for control of countries by bloc, something which is less apparent now, particularly with the rising tension in the Far East with a small country like North Korea defying both its key ally China, and historic enemy America, with its own nuclear programme. Nuclear proliferation is not the key question here today, though it would make a good symposium in its own right. What is significant is the emergence of asymmetric warfare, with the greater availability of modern weapons and the ability of guerrilla forces to pin down conventional armies – something which the Afghans demonstrated in the 1920s and 1930s, as anyone who has read the works of John Masters will know.

Yet there are factors which perhaps are new: rapid population growth, which puts pressure on habitable land areas and natural resources, space for agriculture and even access to water supplies. It is possible that we will see both the food weapon and the water weapon being wielded by particular countries within the foreseeable future, whether or not climate change will have an impact. With regard to natural resources, there is increasing demand for raw materials to feed the new BRIC and CIVET economies and that in turn creates competition not only to control the border areas where they may be found but also to distribute more widely the wealth that the exploitation of mineral wealth can create.

A number of strategies have been devised by a coalition of organisations, mainly routed through the UN as a means of providing a basis of legality on which to proceed. Intervention perhaps takes place too late, when a country has gone past the point where liberal reform or external funding or encouragement are going to have a lasting effect. All too often, lawlessness has emerged with militant extremist factions or a criminalised political economy, where corruption and violence are endemic. When relief is sent in, it may require military cover to be able to do so, or it may have to operate on the basis of fragile agreements with local factions and warlords who may not themselves be in full control even of the areas or the groups that they command. So the question emerges as to how you can defeat militarised extremists and institute the rule of law. This may involve moderating political conflict and introducing both a political and economic system that all sides can support. Creating such favourable conditions may involve building up working coalitions in order to run a civil administration, which in turn means creating conditions in which non-violent processes can be set up and maintained, at least until normality has returned. There needs to be a common sense of direction not only among local factions but also amongst the various external partners, whether these be military, financial, social or even charitable. And planning needs to be coherent and based on proper partnerships. Mediating conflict may involve getting different groups to withdraw from areas of contention or to areas which they can control and where they feel secure.

Then of course there is a difference between negotiation, reaching agreements which be backed by treaties and with the backing of law, and implementation. The area of contention may be land reform for one group, the re-gaining of historical territory for another, or access to mineral wealth for yet another. There may not be universal buy-in, with groups trying to disrupt the process with tactics ranging from prolonging negotiations to bombing campaigns. Negotiations or periods of truce might be used to re-group, re-arm or even start trouble somewhere else. Agreement may not lead to action; some groups will feel that things have gone too far, whilst others will feel that they have not gone far enough. Mistrust and accusations of cheating may bedevil all sides and damage the effectiveness of new structures. Power sharing could even lead to fragmentation – over 700 political parties were formed in Spain between 1976 and 1978. Even then, some groups may still feel excluded – or may still not wish to be included, and former allies held together by a common cause may fall out, or revert to their original aims and goals. Recognition of regional rights may lead to fragmentation or even secession, and this may in turn lead to ethnic conflict. And the changes taking place may have a knock-on effect in the region and lead to interference by other states or the withdrawal of support by major powers in the region. Equally, neighbouring countries can become involved directly or indirectly because of pressure on their borders, concern over their own stability, and the vexed issue of the mass movement of refugees, desperately trying to get away from conflict. The case of Syria and Lebanon is worth studying in this context, but it is a problem surrounding many countries, whose neighbours are little prepared for such an influx of people.

Power sharing sounds like a straightforward solution, always supposing that the above issues can be resolved. But a number of new issues arise. Political parties will need to be formed and sustained, which may involve the recognition of groups that were previously illegal. In the case of Spain, the Secretary General of the Communist Party, a Civil War veteran by the name of Santiago Carrillo, returned openly and deliberately to Spain in December 1976 and dared the police to arrest him. One of the key turning points of the transition for me was a wonderful photo of the King of Spain (who is a non-smoker) sitting in a meeting with the proscribed Secretary General of the Communist Party (who was a chain smoker) – and handing him an ash tray. In the event, of course, both the PCE and the neo-Fascist group *Fuerza Nueva*, polled around 10% of the vote each. In this case, virtually anything was preferable to going back to where the country had been before, even though as contemporary problems began to bite, like unemployment, drug taking and terrorism, there were those who cried, “*Bajo Franco Vivíamos Mejor*”. A modern day worry however, is that there is a new generation which does not have first-hand experience or even memories of the dictatorship, and the very real economic pressures facing Spain now, which in turn is creating both social pressure because of high unemployment, and political

pressure because of regional dissent.

Today we will be looking at Conflict Resolution and how you can persuade what might be deadly enemies, former enemies with long memories, or even people who have absorbed or inherited old hatreds to step back, reflect, accept differences, recognise faults and even forgive others for what might have been atrocious behaviour going back over many years. It might even be worth thinking at both the micro level (families, former friends or rivals) through to the macro level of truces, ceasefires and the truth and reconciliation commissions which may be a way of alleviating deep and long lasting pain. I will also be making some final comments on that common denominator – the use of language and its role in adjudication, arbitration, conciliation, mediation and even negotiation.

A variety of negotiating techniques have been developed in recent years in order to arrive at a solution which may be viewed as satisfactory by both sides. The question then is how to make people accept compromise, accept a lesser deal in one area for something better in another – and how then to make it all stick. This crosses over into nation building, or rather the re-building of failed states with a proper system of government, law, policing and defence, plus a viable economy. At first sight this seems to be something of a tall order, but the experience of the last twenty to forty years has given rise at least to blueprints, templates and enormous efforts which we can only hope will ultimately lead to success in the form of stable societies where people can go around their daily lives with at least a modicum of security and comfort.

Today we are going to look at Conflict Resolution from three quite contrasting angles:

Simon Keyes is the Director of the St Ethelburga's Centre for Reconciliation and Peace in Bishopsgate, which was of course virtually destroyed by an IRA bomb in 1993.

Sir Geoffrey Nice is a QC who worked at the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, and in fact led the prosecution of Slobodan Milosevic. He has subsequently been involved with the International Criminal Court, and has dealt with a wide range of countries.

Ian Ritchie is well known as Director of the City of London Festival and has a long involvement with Music and Conflict Resolution, taking a very personal angle to today's subject.

As I indicated before, a pivotal element in the negotiations is language and its role in adjudication, arbitration, conciliation, mediation and even negotiation. If getting people to States and North Vietnam with a view to ending the war. Much of the preliminaries revolved around the shape of the table that the delegates were to sit at. Tone and manner can be important as body language sometimes transcends verbal communication. Then there are the nuances talk to each other in the first place is difficult, then actually getting them to communicate can be even harder, as in the case of the Geneva negotiations that took place between the United of shade and meaning that can soften or intensify what is being said. There is a story from the Congo emergency in the early 1960s when the young officer in charge of a UN military patrol assured some tribesmen that he did not want to cause any trouble. The interpreter conveyed that as, "You'd better not cause any trouble", whereupon everything kicked off again. There is also a story of a mistranslation whereby two Arab pilots in 1973 were heard to remark that the Russians were sending reinforcements, which would indicate boots on the ground, whereas the actual word indicated that they were sending additional supplies and equipment – which was not seen as an escalation in itself.

So how you say it can be as important as what you say, and you need to be re-assured that the message is getting across if one or more parties cannot communicate in the same language – which is not necessarily going to be English. And as well as the language, people need to be conscious of local sensitivities as well as what passes for common custom and practice when it comes to negotiating. Some idea of the complexities to be faced arise with the preface dis-, though not in the rapper's "Quit dissing me!" which refers to disrespect. We could look at:

Disaffected	disabuse
Disagree	disallow
Disappoint	disambiguate
Disapprove	disarm
Disarray	disavow
Disassociate	

And that's just the first page in the Oxford dictionary – there are eight more pages of dis-!

This is not to mention de-, though I have to say that I dislike "deconfliction" that I came across in my background reading and which I take to mean "to reduce the level of conflict in a given area". It is certainly more compact, but I just hope it won't catch on.

We have heard today how it is possible to mediate, to find a way forward so that people can find common ground, though it is interesting to see how much mutual fear, let alone ignorance can stop getting to the point where they are prepared to meet the other side on something approaching equal terms. Mutually assured

destruction may have been a key concept during the Cold War, but that will no longer serve in a modern world where there is so much diversity and indeed unpredictability in the system.

It is interesting to see that music can be used as a common denominator in bringing people together. Music clearly transcends boundaries in a way perhaps that language cannot, though perhaps poetry could run a close second. The celebrated Victorian author Jerome K Jerome wrote a sequel to "Three Men in a Boat" called "Three Men on the Bummel" where the three friends, slightly older now, go on a cycling tour of Germany in 1900. It is such a light-hearted and whimsical view of Germany that it was a school textbook in Germany for many years. At one point, Jerome, reflecting on the increasing tensions between Britain and Germany, suggests that the German government send over teams of lank-haired, pipe-smoking, beer-drinking German students in order to allay English fears. "You cannot be amused at a thing and at the same time want to kill it," says Jerome. " 'War with such?' they will say, 'It will be too absurd.' " It is a matter of historical fact that Jerome K Jerome volunteered for war service with the French Red Cross (he was deemed to be too old to serve with the British one.) It is said that his experiences at the front shortened his life.

All of the above leads into the critical question as to whether war crimes trials can have a positive effect in bringing closure, and whether they can form part of a range of after-care strategies that can bring peace to areas of conflict, and whether truth and reconciliation commissions can finally put the dead to rest and consign even the worst national episodes to the history books. Perhaps I can still hear that echo of Neville Chamberlain's remark at the time of the Munich Crisis, but we really cannot ignore places which are no longer so far away, and if we know nothing about them, then more's the pity.

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