

Talking to terrorists: Lord Alderdice

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Terrorism has nowhere been defeated by military action alone. When men with guns have popular support political engagement is inescapable, the right thing that we turn to, as Churchill said of the Americans, only after trying everything else.

The principle is sound, Lord Alderdice says, not to talk to those currently engaged in violence, but if a ceasefire is in place we should pursue talks. John Alderdice was one of the architects of the peace process and a lead negotiator of the Good Friday Agreement. In 1988 his inaugural speech as leader of the Alliance Party "Governing with consent" launched the idea of a devolved power-sharing government and when that came into being 10 years later he was elected Presiding Officer (speaker). Alderdice was among the first to engage in talks with Sinn Fein after the ceasefire in 1994. He has since turned his experience to use elsewhere but progress depends on governments. Working as a mediator for Tony Blair it was suggested to Hamas that they should stand for elections and that Britain would be willing to talk to them as part of a unity government. Hamas won elections in 2006 and a unity government was formed 2nd June 2014 but instead of engaging we started arming Fatah. That, he says, is why we have Gaza.

American manichean world view

There were uncanny similarities between the IRA and Hamas and similar processes could bear fruit. When Nelson Mandela offered to help Northern Ireland he invited Sinn Fein to see what was being done in South Africa. A time comes when even the protagonists recognise that violence is no longer a means to an end but an obstacle. That becomes a potent message when someone like Martin McGuinness says it. Alderdice arranged a trip to bring Hamas representatives to Indonesia, a US ally and the world's biggest muslim population. They reached Hong Kong before Condoleezza Rice intervened with their hosts and the visit was cancelled. Such experiences have dented his faith in western governments. Britain, he says, no longer has a foreign policy and in America the 'with us or against us', good and evil, no-shades-of-grey attitude still prevails.

Ends and means

Peace means dealing with our enemies and recognizing as in Shakespeare's Henry V that a man's past will not necessarily shape the future. Seeing that has been a surprise from John Hume in Northern Ireland to Yasser Arafat and Ariel Sharon in Palestine. Whatever they want, however disagreeable telling people to abandon their aims will not work. Instead Alderdice asked Hamas:

'What is more important: where you want to get to, or the present tactics for getting there? And if you concluded that the tactics are not taking you toward the goal would you want to continue with them?' The answers are positive but they believe that there is no other way.

Political processes can start without those conducting violence but peace will only be achieved with them involved. They must be weary of war to be willing to accept the price of peace. It may take years of 'Talks about Talks' to set up but inclusion of all parties is vital even though as in the Northern Irish experience at no time were all sides at the same table. Asked 'what outcomes they want the two sides will be too far apart but they may be able to discuss 'in what areas are the problems?' and 'what elements would be included in a solution?' Other necessary components include: international mediation, sustained commitment through changes of national governments, economic development, plenty of institutional creativity and the settlement must incorporate human rights and protection of minorities.

The power of Them and Us

Sectarian divides are permeated with fear and distrust. In the Northern Ireland talks no one would speak first so alphabetical order was chosen to put Alderdice of the Alliance party first. 'Them and us' he says is a force that with caution can also be turned to good use. 'Outside this door' he warned 'a gang of journalists is waiting. They all think we are going to fail. And on our own sides they accuse us of betraying the heroes who died in the cause... but if we fail we betray our children.'

As an Irishman he felt duty bound to include a joke so he told us of Paddy and Billy on a rocket. They make a bumpy landing on the moon and Billy takes a tumble. When he gets up he is dragging his left foot behind him through the sand and Paddy shouts "What happened? Are you hurt?" "No," he says, "I'm just dividing the territory". Ireland is not divided - look at a map - only people have different ideas.

Parental contexts

Beyond his political life Alderdice is a psychiatrist and like Plato he draws parallels between individuals and nations. Sometimes a child presents at his surgery with psychological problems but it turns out the parents are playing out their relationship issues through the child. You can only help the child if the parents resolve their differences. Northern Ireland had the context of Britain and Ireland, Cyprus has Greece Turkey, Kashmir India & Pakistan, Ukraine Russia & Nato.



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Conflict situations are highly charged and emotion is like a powerful intoxicant. When a man presents under the influence of drink he wants to talk but it is better to tell him to come to the clinic at 9am. If he shows up then you can talk.

Socio-economic openers

If the political issues are too hot to handle then start with socio-economics. After WWII France and Germany engaged on coal and steel and the EU was born. The Middle East today can liaise on water.

Economics is never the root of the problem but there are always regional economic issues and addressing them creates a forum in which the parties can engage and form relationships and communication links. Compensation is also never the solution. Palestinians were asked how they felt about a series of scenarios: Q. No right of return but you get money. A. They were angry. Q. No right of return but you get a lot more money. A. They were a lot more angry! Q. Recognition of an injustice and an apology? A. That would be a place to start a dialogue. Political apologies are in vogue but done well they can be valuable. David Cameron's unreserved apology for Bloody Sunday was, as was the Queen's visit. She said little, only 'with the benefit of hindsight we can all see things which we would wish had been done differently or not at all'. It was little but symbolic gestures are powerful in politics.

This country saw out the end of empire in a gradual measured withdrawal over 20 years leaving things in an orderly condition and separating as friends. In Ireland it was clear that they no longer had a selfish economic or strategic interest. That is not yet the case of the US in Israel.

It may not be clear with whom we can engage in the middle east but the price of failing to support those prepared to engage is to hand power to the ones advocating violence. We may not like them but behind them is the spectre of something worse. In measured language he conveys an apocalyptic sense of what is to come if we miss chances. Perhaps we already have. Three hostages died in a café in Sydney earlier in the day and the following day Taleban shot 135 children in Peshawar and Pope Francis warned that we may be falling piecemeal into a World War III.