

Off the Couch – Contemporary Psychoanalytic Applications

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Chapter 1

Off the couch and round the conference table

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It was, at least in part, the struggle to find a more persuasive way of understanding the communal conflict where I was growing up in Northern Ireland, which led me to psychoanalysis. The political explanations which were current at that time amongst intellectuals answered my questions no more satisfactorily than the attitudes of the people on the streets who similarly understood the problem as a struggle between good and evil, though the intellectuals couched it in more sophisticated terms. It seemed to me that psychoanalysis had found a way of understanding how and why individuals engaged in self-damaging and self-destructive behaviour. I wondered if one could think of the community as an organism divided against itself, and apply psychoanalytical ideas to the violent political conflict in my community – a conflict that had intruded on my own life and family, though much less than it had for many others who lived in Northern Ireland. Since then I have devoted a good deal of my life, firstly to coming to an understanding of psychoanalytical ideas in clinical practice and then to exploring their application to violent political conflict, not just as a theoretical postulate, but directly in the development of an approach to negotiation in political peace processes.

After immersing myself in personal therapy and in training and working in psychoanalytical psychotherapy with patients for some years, I approached the theory of conflict and peace processes and the praxis of conflict resolution from a psychoanalytical perspective. It became my conscious default position when confronted by a challenge. While being assailed by all the normal emotional and political pressures, I tried to subject my own and others reactions to the same kind of scrutiny I would employ in the clinical context, attempting to apply a psychoanalytical approach to my way of working politically as well as to the way of understanding the problems. I have tried elsewhere to say something about using psychoanalytical ideas and formulations to understand political problems (2002, 2004, 2005, 2007, 2008a, 2008b). In this chapter I want to try to describe my efforts to take psychoanalysis as a method, off the couch and into the work of creating and using a political conference table. While much of this will seem entirely straightforward, natural, perhaps even banal, to the psycho-dynamically informed practitioner, it is not in my experience the commonly adopted approach in much political negotiation. I will use the model of Northern Ireland since that has been the basis of my experience, though work since then in other places tends to confirm that the principles have more general application, at least in this area of work.

Power and professional standing

We take it for granted that people in trouble in their lives may seek help from a professional psychotherapist, but this is a relatively recent phenomenon, and it builds on other foundations. It has often been remarked how there are clear connections with the cultural position of the psychotherapist today and that of the medical practitioner and the priest or with the shaman in the past. These professions became deeply entrenched in culture over thousands of years. Our psychotherapeutic work is made more possible because a person coming to see us automatically accords a degree of trust and respect to us, even though they do not know us personally, because we are occupying a place created culturally by many generations of professional attendants and confidantes. When you put your certificate up on the office wall, your brass plate on the door, or are working out of a clinic or office you are not only consciously creating credibility, but tapping into the deep cultural foundations of professional standing. I would note, en passant, how this professionalism is currently being consciously dismantled by people in government and elsewhere who are not really aware of the profoundly destructive nature for society of what they are doing. A perverse refusal to recognize difference is leading to an envious attack on academic life, the professions (including professions such as banking) and other important components of communal life who are seen as 'not of the people', without a recognition that in the absence of these boundaries, which are based on real differences in knowledge, ethical standards and commitments, chaos looms. Professional bankers learnt the lessons of the past from professional predecessors, sustained institutional memory and incorporated into themselves values other than mere profit-taking. They were replaced by businessmen bankers whose only motive was profit. The result was the securitization, untrammelled leverage and profit-taking which led directly to the current economic collapse. As Peedell (2007) pointed out in a recent article, the same drivers have led to de-professionalization in medicine in the UK, and, in the absence of a reversal of this approach, I fully expect equivalent disastrous results.

However, the professional standing I have described does not always transfer easily to other contexts. In the individual caring context, the cultural transference of the experience of generations of professional therapists and priests may well be accorded to therapists moving into work with families, groups and some smaller organizations, enabling consultancy work in these fields to be a relatively acceptable and natural progression. This is not so in the political world. Psychotherapists who approach me to express their interest in applying their ideas in the political world are often surprised that the engagement of consultants from a therapeutic background is rarely seen as welcome by politicians or diplomats. There is a very long diplomatic tradition, now identified not only with the foreign ministries of states but also much more recently, with major international institutions such as the United Nations, the European Union, and the developing network of NGO's which contribute to resolving disputes through negotiation; but the deep cultural roots of these professionals are very different from those of therapists. Diplomats represent a power interest, and are appointed by national governments – even when working for the UN or the EU. It is difficult to embark on a negotiation process

using a psychoanalytical perspective if one is also representing a power position. Credibility in a potential process may be enhanced by the involvement of negotiators who have international standing but if their backing is from major players who have military and economic clout this generally also represents a power interest which will sooner or later prove to have accompanying downsides from a psychoanalytical perspective.

In summary, when we offer to provide psychological help to an individual we have a head start because we stand on the shoulders of our predecessors, both in terms of the way in which we are regarded by our clients and in the understandings and posture we find ourselves adopting. These advantages must be developed from first principles when we move off the couch and towards the conference table, not least because all the prior models of obvious relevance have a different history and involve a conscious confrontation with and by political power.

Modes of communication

The modality of communication is closely related to the question of credibility. When the patient comes in and sits down in my chair, or takes the couch, we are already in communication. Perhaps the patient comes to me by referral from a colleague, or simply gets in touch by telephone or e-mail from a list of professionals. However they do so, they are immediately in direct communication with us, and when we instruct them in the fundamental rule of free association the scene is set for them to convey their thoughts and feelings in words and actions, and for the therapist to respond. When I approach the challenge of engaging in conflict resolution with a divided community, or in a conflict between communities, an early consideration is how to establish communication between me as an individual citizen and the community as an organism. If one can establish sufficient credibility, the public channels of the press and broadcast media can become an important potential route. Writing articles or participating in broadcast programmes can be a modality for such 'therapeutic' interventions. This can also be achieved to some extent at arms-length by meeting with pundits, columnists, public figures and government officials, who may then bring your interventions into the public domain. While they will rarely do this in quite the way that you intended, there are personal advantages to this method. The limited commitment of time necessary, the relative insulation from external pressures and the capacity to work along with other interested colleagues are not insignificant benefits. In most cases, however, the degree of influence is relatively limited.

Internal and external struggles and relationships

A more intensive application of the psychoanalytical approach has been undertaken over many years by Professor Vamik Volkan (2004). In addition to building and exercising influence through his direct contacts with political leaders and elected officials, Professor Volkan also engaged with groups of people who represented and gave to him and his co-workers a deep appreciation of the emotional components of conflicts in a number of countries

where he worked. This informed his interventions quite profoundly, not only through his understanding of the way in which groups evolve and then regress in the face of threats to their identity or welfare, but also by his finding ways to identify the powerful emotions which provoke and accompany political developments. It also gave him routes through which he could intervene, by private comments at various levels, including right up to that of senior political leaders and government officials (often encouraging initiatives with symbolic significance) as well as the use of the media and printed word to communicate with the general public.

I decided to take a different route by getting directly involved in political life. This suited my personality and permitted me to have direct access to other politicians who were also voices for the community 'organism'. It also gave me opportunities to make direct interventions in the public space. The most difficult challenge was to find ways of operating politically which enabled me to survive and make my way in the political domain, but which were not so power orientated and partisan as to close down my capacity to relate and work psychologically with other politicians and officials. Even with the experience of a personal training analysis and supervised clinical work it is not easy to work politically without getting caught up in the game of politics for its own sake; but it is essential if one is to be able to operate therapeutically in the public space. There are a number of ways in which it may be possible to maintain a therapeutic posture. I found that in addition to the structure provided by a psychoanalytically informed model of politics and political conflict, continuing with the 'scales and arpeggios' of regular clinical work was helpful, though this had its own challenges when one's time was under pressure with the immediate contingencies of day to day politics. Self-evidently being a public figure is also a difficult matter for one's patients and generates a great deal of work in the therapeutic context. I also found that if it was possible to maintain relationships outside politics with people who could understand the problems without getting involved in the rivalry intrinsic to politics one could get occasional 'supervision', or 'intervision' as an old psychotherapist friend who helped me in this way for many years described it.

Remaining faithful to the psychoanalytical posture is absolutely key. One element of this is the constant submission of one's thoughts and responses to internal scrutiny; trying to understand what is going on in one's own self and one's relationships. It also means seeing political life not as a mere power play but as a more complex matter of relationships between individuals, groups and communities. In Northern Ireland the political conflict had always been spoken about in terms of historic injustices, wars and power struggles, and different political theories. Almost inevitably when someone attempts to find out about or engage with a divided and violent society they will think in terms of solutions to the problem. "If only," says the well-meaning outsider, "this side could come to accept this or this, and the other side could be more reasonable on that and that, it could all be resolved."

From my own experience in Northern Ireland and elsewhere I have become convinced that we should talk a good deal less about the content of conflict settlements. Those who are interested in addressing such contentious

political problems often enjoy arguing about the relative merit of different solutions, the detail of constitutions and whether this or that part of a set of proposals is more acceptable or more reasonable. This rarely contributes much towards achieving peace. During my time as a political leader in Northern Ireland I received hundreds of letters from people in different parts of the world, who had the solution to the Northern Ireland problem. It was almost as though one day Gerry Adams, Ian Paisley and the rest of us would read one of these proposals and suddenly realise that the author of the letter had the solution. Of course, this was never going to happen. Even the best solutions solve nothing on their own, and some rather poor suggestions can actually contribute to bringing peace if they arise in the context of a process of building relationships.

The new contribution which emerged in Northern Ireland was to begin to see our problems in terms of disturbed historic and current relationships between groups of people. The main nationalist leader at the time, John Hume, often pointed out that it was not the physical island of Ireland that was divided, but rather the people of Ireland that were divided, and our task was to find a way for them all to live together. When the old problem of the political partition of the island was reframed as a relational problem, new ideas began to emerge about finding a political way forward. The key political difficulties were increasingly identified as being contained in three sets of relationships - between the protestant and catholic (or unionist and nationalist) communities within Northern Ireland; between the people in the North and in the South; and between the peoples of Britain and Ireland. The Talks Process was then quite consciously constructed in three separate but related strands whose participants and agendas reflected these three sets of historically disturbed relationships. The three strands of the talks were identified as being among political leaders of the parties within Northern Ireland (including the responsible British Government), between these Northern parties (with the British Government) and the Irish Government (representing the people of the twenty six southern counties which made up the Irish Republic), and thirdly between the sovereign governments in London and Dublin. This notion of negotiations addressing key sets of relationships was novel, certainly in the history of Ireland. The process of constructing the institutions of the Talks Process provided an opportunity for people to start negotiating with each other, and to get into the habit of building relationships with each other over a period of time. It was also a chance to develop a shared culture, a shared language, and a shared way of talking about things.

A talks process must be able to withstand all kinds of assaults from inside and from outside. It will inevitably break down from time to time - if it doesn't then there probably wasn't a very difficult problem to begin with. There will be elections, switches of government, changing attitudes in the community, and there will be 'events' - murders, shootings, bombings and unexpected shocks. All of these things will happen, but the structure needs to enable people to keep coming back again and again to the table after each election and every assault, to continue working away at the same problems.

Building a talks table

Let me give you some idea of what I am talking about in practice. While the thinking about how to move on from the apparently intractable nature of our feud had been going on in the minds of some people for years already, I myself started in 'talks about talks' in Northern Ireland in 1987. We continued with meetings every month for the next four years. These bilateral meetings were held with the British and Irish Government ministers and officials and the leaders and representatives of the various political parties in Ireland, North and South (though at this point only with those parties which were not supportive of the use of terrorism). These meetings were not about the potential outcome of a settlement, but about how to get into a talks process. We commenced in the three stranded Talks Process proper with the British and Irish Governments and the four 'constitutional parties', as they were called, in 1991 and then spent the next couple of years consolidating and developing and building upon it. We were meeting regularly three days a week, from half past ten in the morning until six in the evening. At this point the loyalist and republican parties, which were regarded as the political wings of the terrorist groups on both sides, were still not involved.

When the IRA and the loyalist paramilitaries (the UVF and UDA) called ceasefires in the early autumn of 1994 a more inclusive process became possible, but the incorporation of these groups was very difficult and a series of other conferences and sets of arrangements were necessary to prepare for the full talks which went on from 1996 to 1998. These full talks were conducted at least three full days a week, often going on into the evening and, in the later part of it, going on for 24 hours a day for some days. Even then not everyone was prepared to be at the same table, and when the Belfast Agreement was achieved in 1998 one major unionist party was still opposed to the process and stayed outside the talks. Drawing that party – Dr Ian Paisley's Democratic Unionist Party (which ultimately became the largest party in Northern Ireland) - into the process and implementing all aspects of the Agreement was only nearing completion more than ten years later in 2009.

It will be clear that when I speak of institutions and talks processes, I am talking about the potential for a very high level of commitment and involvement. People have to be prepared to leave their jobs, to be financially remunerated, and to implement all sorts of new structures of support. There were many crucial components - a significant preparatory period of pre-negotiation; sustained political commitment over a long period of time whatever governments were in power; the difficult but necessary inclusion of the representatives of all parties, or at least as wide a spectrum as would attend; the creation of sustainable economic development and cross-border trade; the deployment of patient, imaginative and skilful mediation through a long-term talks process; an element of institutional creativity, and the embedding of international instruments of human rights protection; and the critical part played by influential international relationships, especially, but not only the United States of America and the European Union – these were all vital aspects of this conflict resolution process, but they were not themselves sufficient for success. There were at least two others.

Until people in any conflict begin to turn away from violence as a means of solving their predicament they are unlikely to be prepared to accept that the prize of peace is worth the price of peace. The community needs to be weary of war; prepared to give up the use of physical force and to accept an outcome which is less than their ideal – a compromise – for the sake of peace. Central to this is the rebuilding of the rule of law. Demilitarization, decommissioning of illegal weapons, and reform of policing and the criminal justice system were the most difficult and contentious issues of all in Northern Ireland, and constantly threatened to bring down all that had been achieved. This was an exceptionally complex and emotionally demanding area and closely linked to the position of minorities. Rights, responsibilities, and respect for minorities are all difficult issues in themselves but are critical in building any settlement agreement that has a chance of acceptance and success in a divided community.

The centrality of process

You will notice that I have generally referred to a 'process' and to 'finding a way forward', rather than talking about finding solutions or a settlement. Developing the language of process in the political context has been of great importance and is a substantial component in making progress. In Ireland this seemed to come more easily from the catholic nationalist and republican side of the community. Perhaps it grew not only out of the struggle of a minority which could not call upon political power, but also from a cultural and even religious perspective which regarded *how* one did things as having as much significance as *what* one did. The protestant and unionist perspective was more focussed on law and security, on doing the 'right thing', and was more linear in its thinking process. The default unionist approach would be, first to refuse to meet at all; then to insist on drawing up an agenda and arguing about the order of the agenda; and then to insist on working through it seriatim. This led to arguments about the 'real' intentions of nationalists, who would insist on clarifications or addressing underlying principles in a more circular approach to the problems. The difference in the mode or style of thinking between two sides in a political conflict is one I have noticed in many other places. The two sides do not just have a different perspective, history and set of interests, they actually have a different way of perceiving the world and thinking about it. The process of developing engagement and relationships requires the construction of a way of working that can contain both approaches. Later on I could clearly see that while arguments about whether the seating of the parliamentary chamber should be semi-circular or parallel and whether they should have benches or desks and chairs may have seemed to be either practical issues or political posturing, they were in fact representative of much deeper matters of history, symbolism and the expression of a culture and a way of thinking. And they needed to be heard, valued, contained, explored and expressed, even through such 'practical' matters as in the agreed furnishings of the conference room and ultimately of a shared parliament.

Jaw jaw and war war

In the psychoanalytical world we have no difficulty in giving value to talking and listening, but you will often hear people criticizing parliaments as being 'just a talking shop', not fully appreciating that when the representatives of our communities in parliament are talking they are in a very real sense exercising the alternative to violence. In stable, peaceful parts of the world it is easy to forget why we have parliaments – places where representatives of the community talk (and also listen) to each other – and in violent communities it is easy to dismiss talking in the face of the threat as an expression of weakness in contrast to decisive action. In Northern Ireland we lived through thirty years during which political differences were expressed through violent actions rather than words; but while it is most obvious in those places where there are deep divisions, violence is in fact always an alternative to talking in any community. There are important questions about why such deep divisions exist in any community but this is not the place to explore them. What is beyond doubt is that when such divisions have led to serious, prolonged inter and intra-communal violence there is grave damage to the capacity to think, talk and engage in those group psychological relational processes we call politics. Politics is not so much the way that we agree across the gulf of our differences, but rather the way in which we can express our disagreements without killing each other.

A great deal of work is necessary to construct a talking process through which differences can be addressed and ultimately an agreement reached on the political structures by which power can be shared. But the first step along that road is to explore with the political leaderships whether they believe that there may be an alternative to violence and physical force as a means of expressing and addressing political disagreements, and whether, if there is such a possibility they would wish to explore it. In deeply polarized communities where the usual environments for political engagement have broken down, some people have to find ways of meeting and developing a network of personal working relationships with political leaders outside the normal political channels, which are generally too public and vulnerable. Political leaders are not in their positions by accident. In their very personalities they represent the psychological positions of their section of the community and stand for certain aspects of the communal 'psychological' life. When communities are in violent conflict the capacity to listen to the other side is often limited to hearing those things which are necessary to confirm your prejudices and protect yourself. Engaging therapeutically in the political process during violent conflict involves not only making communications which are transformational interventions, but actually in one's self being part of the communication process within the community. This means finding ways of talking in a language that people can accept as legitimate political dialogue, while still being psychologically informed. It demands intellectual effort because the language of the clinical setting requires translation if it is to be acceptable in the political world. It is not appropriate to speak politically in the language of the clinic. I sometimes find that psychotherapists mistakenly do this to each other in meetings. Whether or not it can hope to be successful in such professional circumstances, it certainly has little chance in a political context. It is however possible to speak politically in a way which is relevant,

but guided by the same principles. One of the keys is to address the process as well as appreciating the content. When, for example, you first meet a group of people who are involved in violent political action they will be keen to explain to you why they are fully justified in what they are doing. They will be well practiced in defending their cause, so engaging in attempts at direct persuasion is futile. What may be possible is to explore whether, if there was an alternative way to address the problems and divisions, other than political violence and physical force, they might be interested to explore it. Very few refuse to engage with this question and most will say that they desperately hope that their children and grandchildren do not have to face the same problems.

From the couch to the conference table

Aggression is a very powerful instinct in the individual. In the group it can be overwhelming and terrifying. The capacity of 'talking' to express, and at the same time contain, the violent expression of that aggression in the group depends on how directly the issues are addressed, the personal human relationships developed between those involved and the robustness of the structures within which the talking takes place. If the key figures or those representing them are prepared to explore an alternative way of dealing with differences, the next challenge is to create a context in which they can engage. For the psychoanalyst in clinical practice the situation is fairly clear. The patient is invited to come along each day for a fifty minute hour during which the patient will (often) take the couch and speak (more or less) freely about the thoughts in their mind, in confidence and out of the hearing of anyone but the analyst, who may from time to time make interventions. In order to make the work possible someone, often the patient, will pay the analyst for his/her time enabling the analyst to make his living and be available to do the work. If one tries to adapt the approach to deal with less cooperative patients many of these assumptions have to be addressed in other ways. The patient may not take the couch, may not have the money to pay, may not wish to come to the clinic, and may act out in a troubling or even dangerous way. The analyst must decide whether he wishes to deal with such troublesome patients, but if s/he wishes to do so s/he will have to adapt the technique considerably.

This is even more the case in taking analytical work into inter-communal political conflict, but the process of negotiating the terms and conditions is crucial. While the partisans are not prepared to meet with each other or discuss the substantive issues, they may still be willing to engage on how talks could, in principle, take place. These 'talks about talks' are often mocked or found to be a source of frustration. However talking about everything from where meetings might take place and who could be present, through issues of security, payment of expenses and of course the more complex questions of agenda and content are all part of the exploration of relationships in a context of anxiety and fear. When agreements are reached they should be written down and signed off. The process may actually involve the development, through many iterations, of documents describing how the talks are to be constructed. The fact that it is written down does not solve all

problems, but when the inevitable disputes arise about the basis for the talks, there is at least something from which to work. Psychoanalysts are used to the idea of writing down their memories of the sessions and preparing academic papers, but they much less usually engage with their patients in written agreements. This is seen as more the province of a behavioural approach; however it must be remembered that while the memory of an individual and the internal change that analysis tries to achieve can be recorded internally in the brain of the patient, in dealing with groups of people it is necessary to make written records in order to sustain a group memory. In the history of all of our communities the absence of a written record leaves an irreplaceable gap. It is important to remind oneself at all points that, in moving from the couch to the conference table, one is moving from the internal world of the individual to that of the group. What is external for the individual may be part of the necessary 'internal' structure for the group. Written records are an aspect of this 'internal' group structure, and are an equivalent of the memory traces in the brain of the individual. (In describing how to create a process for enabling political differences to be addressed non-violently, I have been making use of understandings that come not only from psychoanalysis, but also behavioural and biological psychiatry. Sadly one sometimes feels that a peace process is needed between professional colleagues from such different disciplines, and even amongst the psychotherapies.)

This attempt to create a political 'therapeutic process' is necessary if politicians are going to be able to release the powerful feelings behind the political violence with sufficient passion to give convincing expression to them, without slipping into violent behaviour or provoking a violent response from the other. In the construction of and movement towards a conference table, convention or parliament, it is necessary to take this very seriously. The combination of containment and expression is the purpose of the conventions and standing orders of a congress or parliament, and of any set of peace talks whether formalized or not. The chair of a process of talks is not only there to make sure that the rules are protected but also that they are observed in such a way that their underlying purpose is fulfilled. If the representatives of the people are unable to give vent to the emotions of their community, the people will lose faith in their representatives or the political process to address their needs and feelings. If those same elected officials act *only* as a valve for feelings of anger and envy, then a descent into acting violently on those feelings becomes increasingly likely. Politicians, elected or not, have to fulfil a complex and subtle role between these two poles. In the same way the chairman or group of chairs of a set of talks must enable the participants to express their concerns sufficiently strongly to have them heard, but provide a containing environment for the inevitability of conflicting expressions.

Managing the process

Most people who are interested in politics will be familiar with the functioning of the parliamentary assembly in their own country. It may be useful to give some consideration to the role of the Presiding Officer, Chairman, President or Speaker in most parliaments because it is often taken for granted, but has

some relevance to the chairing of negotiations. There are a number of elements to his/her work.

The first is the observance of the standing orders, the agreed written rules for conduct of relationships. As observed already, without some rules and boundaries of time, space and behaviour, chaos reigns, and violence will break out. But these rules only have effect if they have the respect of the members of the assembly. If there is not an already accepted and culturally enshrined set of rules, the best way to ensure respect for the rules is for members to construct them together. They can then be modified from time to time by agreement, as seems necessary. Agreement in this, as in so many contexts, has to be across the political divisions among the members and the community in order for there to be shared confidence in the agreed rules.

Agreed rules are a necessary but not a sufficient requirement of working together with differences. Some aspects of working together require a degree of subtlety and flexibility that is hard to encompass in written rules. These requirements can often be accommodated in conventions or mutual understandings. What sort of problem might require this flexibility? In the normal course of events the chair may call members who represent each separate party, trying all the while in any debate to maintain both the diversity of parties and the relative strengths of their groups. This convention is not only reasonable but necessary if the range of views is to be expressed. A circumstance might arise, however, where a terrible tragedy occurred in a particular community or constituency, and the feelings generated might be such that some variation in this arrangement might be important. For example an over-representation of speakers might be appropriate where a community had just suffered a particular attack, atrocity or loss. If speaking arrangements are covered by a clear rule, such flexibility is difficult. If it is covered by a convention, then the chair can negotiate (formally or informally) some flexibility to accommodate the emotional and therefore political needs of the moment, going gently beyond the usual confinements. These modifications may have value, not just for that moment, but as guide for future conduct, and become precedents.

Even the flexibility of conventions needs to be enlarged, for the implementation of the rules requires a fluid appreciation of the emotional tone around the table at any moment – the ‘sense of the House’ as it is often described in a parliament. There are times of tension and high drama where an expression and experiencing of the anxiety of the community is essential if the parliament or talks process is to perform its function. At other times or even at other points in the same process of a speech or a debate it is of service to the participants and the wider community to find ways to dissipate the tension. For example, while on one occasion a careful use of humour may serve the purpose of relieving the tension, at another time humour will be felt as quite the wrong thing and a grave appreciation of the seriousness of the situation is what is needed. Allowing participants a degree of latitude in their time or speech or conduct may enable this pressure to be released in a constructive fashion, but will also create precedents, and handling this depends on the ‘therapeutic alliance’ the chair has established with the

participants as individuals and the group as a whole. The chair will need to use some of this capital to contain threats to the stability of the process, on occasion by exerting authority, at other times by being self-deprecating, always however recognizing that his/her personality and relationships are the key instruments, and not just the rules.

This facilitation of the life of the plenary meetings is also important in other aspects of its group expression. These might include social occasions with participants or invitees who contribute to the life of the process, as well as in the practical operations of its group life in the building, the processes of any sub-groups or committees, and its relations through the press with the community at large. The key to it all is allowing the fundamental purposes of containment and expression of aggression and other feelings, through a sensitive conduct of the process of relationships.

In attending to the needs of the process we should never underestimate the importance of practical human needs. If participants or staff cannot eat or drink satisfactorily, if they are cold or uncomfortable, or if they cannot hear each other speak clearly, we should not be surprised if they become disgruntled. If they cannot send and receive messages from their colleagues outside or the press they will be irritable. Their anxiety levels will rise when they are not reasonably clear about when they need to be in the building and when they can safely be elsewhere. Physical security may be too lax to be reassuring, or it may be too intrusive and obstructive of normal life and work. Personal and family security is affected by whether they can manage financially to devote the necessary time to negotiations. In a parliament this means salary levels, pension arrangements and severance payments, all of which seem currently to be begrudged by the community when they should be offered with some appreciation of those who act as vital channels for the transformation of the most powerful and destructive communal urges. In a talks process these matters all have to be addressed. They may seem pedestrian, far from the high ground of political discourse, but they are the foundation for human interaction no less in a political assembly or process of negotiations than in any other group of people.

Beyond the provision of these supports and facilities to all participants regardless of party, record or seniority, we should note that the allocation of the offices, access to research facilities and staff, and relations with the office of the chairman and his/her staff are of great significance. While there is great concentration on the chairman and the political leaderships, much of the burden of making it work falls to the staff and officials. Their ability to sustain the whole organism is based on their relationships with each other and on the knowledge of members or participants, procedures, current politics and pressure points which they share with the chairman and other senior officials, and which constitute the scaffolding or software which supports the whole operation of a legislative assembly or talks process.

There is one further and ultimately essential element in the conduct of a conference or talks process. Everyone likes to be treated with respect; indeed some would say that politicians in particular are almost insatiable in

this regard. Someone who is not treated with respect, but rather is dismissed or humiliated, will find it very difficult to forgive or forget the hurt and may well be provoked to a deeply angry response. It is very important in any process where one is trying to reach agreement that (paradoxically) people are enabled to find ways to disagree without disrespecting each other, and without a breakdown in the working of the institution. It is sometimes suggested that trust is a prerequisite for a successful peace process, but this is not correct. Trust is an outcome of a successful process and a result of undertakings freely entered upon and honoured during the process. Similarly it is not reasonable to expect people who have been at war to *feel* respectful to each other. It is, however, possible to persuade the participants to *behave* with respect for the process and the agreed procedures. In gradually building a culture of respectful behaviour many problems can be explained and contained and sustainable working relationships can be developed between long-standing political enemies. Language and conduct are key tools through which respectful conduct is mediated, enabling those who do not even like each other to express their differences forcefully without crossing the line of disrespect and damaging the prospects for working relationships.

One of the frustrations which I regularly heard expressed by Irish nationalists in their dealings with the British Government was the impression given by the British that they were kindly and well disposed contributors whose only objective and interest was to bring peace to these warring factions, while in truth they were historically and currently 'part of the problem'. Even the Americans, who with others in the international community played a critical role in helping us, could not be entirely objective and uninvolved in our historic difficulties. In international affairs, as I said at the start, this is almost inevitable, but it does mean that acting 'therapeutically' in this political context is even more complex than working with the individual on the couch when, at least in external reality, there has been no history of involvement with them or the emergence of their problems in the first instance. Transference is difficult enough to disentangle when there has been no actual prior involvement, but in political work this is rarely possible.

This brings me finally to the question of how, precisely, one conducts the conversations, negotiations, explorations and representations within the talks. Like the technique of individual psychoanalysis this could be the subject of a volume on its own, and many of the same issues arise. My own view is that it is really a combination of individual and group analysis, with a systemic component added in for good measure. I mention the systemic component because the lessons of family therapy are invaluable here. The group around the conference table are not merely a body of people who have been called together to address separate problems. They are in some senses a feuding community family with a common, albeit much disputed history, and all sorts of 'external' relationships which play into the system. When I referred earlier to 'the three sets of relationships' this was a pointer to the need to understand systemic relationships. All the skills we use in individual, group and family work are called into play. It is necessary to listen to the other politician with the third ear and facilitate the speaking aloud of what is going on in the mind of that person as an individual as well as with them as a leader of their party

and representative of a component of their community. We do not often think of political leaders as being frightened and they rarely admit to it; however it is important to recognize that they represent their community in their very personality as well as by their election. In the speeches made by participants there is often a degree of anger, hurt and blame as is felt by their community. Rather than reacting back with anger or hurt, it is crucial to search for the defensive component in the aggressive speech of the other, which actually represents their deep fears of being destroyed. The fear that by reaching an agreement with one's historic enemies one is betraying past generations who sacrificed so much in the struggle, inhabits the same person at the same time, alongside the fear of betraying future generations into endless years of death and destruction by failing to reach a peace settlement with those same historic enemies.

Dealing with resistance

There is a constant struggle within the participants of such talks to ensure that 'I survive politically, and if possible benefit from involvement in the peace process', while recognizing that taking risks for peace is absolutely necessary for success. There may be real physical risks to oneself, friends and family. There is also a genuine difficulty in understanding where the other is coming from, not intellectually but emotionally. All the time the other is seen as the powerful street-wise, aggressor whose aim in the end is only my defeat and destruction – and both sides see the other in this way. In responding therapeutically I am trying to contain the current fears and ancient hatreds and out of them build a working alliance - a 'working group' that has a complex task.

However it is not only fears which hold the process back; it is also destructive satisfactions. There is ambivalence about finding peace and settling for a normal life in society. It should not be forgotten that during violent conflicts there are gains for both individuals and groups which must then be relinquished in the cause of peace. This is obviously the case for individuals who in the context of communal violence find unprecedented authority, prestige and material benefit at the point of a gun and who may have to settle for mundane jobs and lives – a negative peace dividend. Some will even have derived pleasure from the powerful, exciting, abusive positions that violence offers those involved officially or illegally in the use of force. Persuading people and communities to give up the excitements and satisfactions provided by communal violence is a greater challenge than might at first appear and requires the setting down and enforcement of boundaries of acceptable behaviour. In Northern Ireland Senator George Mitchell negotiated a set of principles for the parties to the negotiations, which later became known as the 'Mitchell Principles' and have since been used elsewhere (1999). An Independent Monitoring Commission was also established for the normalization of the policing and security and to press the paramilitaries and their political allies to accept the boundaries of normal societal behaviour. Negotiated understanding is a necessary, but of itself not a sufficient requirement to bring peace in practice.

Surprising as it may seem it may be possible to help participants from different parties and even paramilitary organizations together to build working relationships with each other, separately and at times jointly under attack from the outside world. They may share the inevitable external criticism from the press for their past history and behaviour, for the possibility that this process will be a disappointing failure, or because there are ambivalent expectations and hopes for success of the process. These shared criticisms and threats can provide the potential for a shared group experience. At the same time however they must not lose contact with those outside whom they represent or they will make joint decisions in the talks which cannot be carried through. That outside community must also be enabled to work through their resistances, which is why such a process cannot be carried out in secret. The participants must continue to engage through the press and media, and also personally and directly with those they represent if real change is to take place. A leadership which makes agreements with the enemy without bringing its constituents along is merely a false self for the group and it will be destroyed, and with it the prospects for real progress for the foreseeable future.

Transferring and transforming

I have concentrated in this chapter on some of the ways in which technique must be adapted in moving from the couch to the conference table. This should not obscure my underlying assumption that the analytic attitude is the essential informer of the analytical and interventional engagement of the politician who tries to work in this way with a community in historic, violent, political conflict. This includes its evolutionary perspective and theoretical ideas of development and regression, instinctual drives, defence formation and transformation, and the challenges of transference and counter-transference. In addition there are many important contributions from group analysis, cognitive and behavioural approaches and systems theory.

We are, however, only in the earliest stages of this kind of work. We need to validate and calibrate it in other conflicts to see how far it is applicable, and where it differs in addressing other less violent contexts. I have become convinced, however, that our psychoanalytical perspective has a contribution to make. Whatever the dangers of being seduced into acting out the transference in the process of such work, taking psychoanalysis off the couch and around the conference table is not necessarily in and of itself a form of acting out (at least no more than any therapeutic intervention may be). It is, rather, a way of facing the reality of personal and communal violence, confronting the ravages of the descent into chaos and death and transforming aggression into the creation of better communal relationships.

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