

## **CONFLICT PROVENTION AS A POLITICAL SYSTEM**

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### **Introduction**

For those of us who identify with the dispute or conflict fields, and their theories and practices, the pressing question is: "Where do we go from here?" I wish to argue that the future of problem-solving conflict resolution, perhaps unlike dispute settlement, lies not in remaining just an interactive process, but in establishing the basis of an alternative to the adversarial procedures in the legal and political systems that Western societies have inherited and promoted. Interactive problem-solving conflict resolution can deal only with a few special cases, and can make little contribution to reducing the escalating levels of conflict and violence now associated with developed societies. It is primarily a research tool, for the facilitated process gives important insights into human behaviour, human relationships and problems associated with existing institutions.

The significant and historical contribution that the theory of conflict resolution can make is to decision making - that is to the prevention of conflict - and ultimately to providing a philosophy and a political-social system that could replace those presently dominant. Indeed, taking account of the magnitude of environmental problems, increasing levels of deprivation and violence at all social levels, and dramatically the falling quality of life, civilizations have no option but to substitute long-term problem solving for their traditional short-term policies of interest group expediency.

It follows that research needs to be directed towards improved decision making (in all organizations including industry, and at all societal levels from the community to the international), rather than have an exclusive focus on interactive processes. Teaching needs to be directed towards potential and practising decision makers rather than having a concentration on students who seek conflict resolution careers. Furthermore, it needs to be noted that greater insights into decision making and into necessary institutional changes lead to more analytical and constructive facilitations.

Going one step further, it could reasonably be argued that the final aim of conflict resolution studies is so to alter the philosophies that govern all existing behavioural disciplines that separate conflict studies would no longer be required.

### **Our Inheritance**

Throughout the history of Western societies, the prime concern of national authorities has been the promotion of the interests of the groups they represent, initially land owners, then industrialists and other organized pressure groups, and, where it has had some influence, little-by-little, a wider section of the total society. Political institutions have evolved accordingly, resulting in party political systems that are adversarial and promote competition. Throughout, the goals have been "law and order" and interventions into the prevailing economic and social systems of the day designed to preserve those systems, and to promote further the immediate concerns of influential interests.

Political systems, accordingly, have been preoccupied with increasing benefits for only some sections of the community, have been concerned with real income distribution only to the extent that it is politically necessary, and have given little attention to the longer term consequences of policies on the social and environmental future. Currently there is an increasing social demand for political decision-making processes at both national and community levels that will give less attention to special interests, and more attention to longer term societal concerns. The environmental future is a major worry, and inherited decision-making processes seem incapable of dealing with it. Past neglect of the social future has led in most societies to high levels of violence and to conflicts at all societal levels, national and international. Despite this social concern, however, the focus of authorities remains on the present. Environmental destruction is defended as a means of reducing unemployment. Attempts are made to suppress violence when it occurs, but little attention is given to its sources, how it can be avoided, effectively contained, and better still, resolved rather than just suppressed.

Failure of this power-oriented system to respond to social concerns at its political level is due largely to the absence of any conception of an alternative system. Fascism, being an extreme form of capitalism, led historically to resource problems that could be solved only by aggression. Communism, with its emphasis on equitable distribution, failed because of an absence of sufficient personal incentive in work, and also because problems of total planning and management were beyond management capacity. Both factors led this system into a power political frame that neglected the future. The power political system of capitalism, undirected in its future and social goals, survives for the time being only in the absence of a viable alternative.

Traditionally it has been assumed that in the domestic version of this power political model, a central authority with enforcement powers, is the ideal. The United Nations Charter was drafted with the domestic model in mind. Chapter Seven anticipated contributions to a permanent force available to the Security Council. Aside from the failure

of this force to materialize (leading eventually to some members acting in the name of the United Nations) we now know that this model has its defects. Domestic violence is at a high level in all societies. It is clear that it cannot be reduced without dealing with its root causes, and the political system makes this impossible. So also in international society. Problems of ethnicity, poverty and exploitation of various kinds are some of the deep-rooted problems that are sources of violence. Indeed, international conflict is largely a spillover from domestic conflict.

The international system itself, having no effective central authority to promote special interests, and relying on functional co-operation between nations large and small, is probably less confrontational than the domestic. If preservation of the environment and protection of societies against self-destructive violence were to become political goals, far reaching changes would be required. Party-political decision making would require radical modification, if not elimination, rather than be accepted as essential features of "democracy". Major inequalities of opportunity would require attention. Quality of life rather than levels of exploitation of resources would need to be the measure of economic achievement. One has only to ponder the sources and remedies of specific problems such as street violence or ethnic conflict to be led into a whole range of questions that come under the heading of political philosophy. There are no ad hoc solutions to these specific problems. Indeed, for survival and to promote such long term goals, civilizations would need to seek and adopt an alternative political philosophy, and an alternative to the confrontational power political system. Anything less would be a delusion.

The question before us is, therefore, not how can some particular process be more widely employed to help to settle disputes, but how can societies at all levels be transformed so as to become less wasteful of resources, more far-sighted and less confrontational in decision making - and, as a consequence, less violent and self-destructive. What kind of system can be an improved alternative to the interest-driven, power political system which Western societies have inherited and passed on to others?

Our separate academic disciplines have not tackled this question. Each has had its own human construct designed to fit into the system. There has been, for example, "economic man" and a conforming "sociological man".

These convenient inventions have led thought away from human behaviour, and, therefore, from a holistic approach to problems. The focus has been on some aspects of these - economic, institutional, legal, social, or political. It has been as though solving an artificially constructed part of a problem could lead to its total solution. Employment is a partial solution for street violence, as is education, ethnicity relationships, perception of social justice, a sense of participation in decision making and a sense of recognition and

identity. All are relevant and all raise further political and social issues. The total social-political-economic-legal system must be the frame in which an analysis is made of the source of the problem and its remedies. As will be seen below, this is now changing, and broader perspectives are beginning to dominate the academic literature.

In this paper I argue that the transformations required are within the field of decision making, a field that, by definition, affects all societal levels, and touches on all other fields of human relationships, including processes of intended change. However, the contemporary trend universally is for authorities and "leaders", especially at the highest level of decision making, to deny responsibility and to hand everything over to "the market" - in other words, to allow events to take their course, regardless of consequences. Failed decision making, a failed system, has led to an absence of leadership and even less concern with the future. To go against this defeatist trend we must articulate alternative decision-making processes that offer better prospects for formulating and achieving consensus goals.

### **The Traditional Power Frame**

The history of societies is, as already suggested, a history of the promotion by dominant groups in their own short-term interests. Even a few decades ago the academic model of decision making demonstrated this. It showed a set of lines representing power inputs, meeting at a point, and another set of lines representing distributions of power, seemingly from that point (Modelski, 1962). The decision-making process itself was of no interest, represented only by the point at which the power inputs and distribution met. In more recent years the decision-making process has become more sophisticated, but the power frame remains (Deutsch, 1963; Burton 1990a).

While domestic and international law and politics have traditionally been studied separately, they have basic power and legal frames in common. There is little difficulty; therefore, in conceptualising domestic and international dispute settlement as being similar in principle. Power bargaining and negotiation, judicial settlements and, in some extreme cases, the employment of force are common to both.

There have been attempts, particularly at the domestic level, to speed-up legal procedures within this political power system, and to make them more readily available to the underprivileged. "Alternative Dispute Resolution" (alternatives or supplements to courts) is one such an attempt. But these procedures do not supply the added dimension required. That is, they do not seek to reveal the hidden institutional and behavioural causes of conflicts. They seek mainly to take the burden away from courts. In addition, there are "peace studies" and movements that seek to reduce means of violence. There is an approach to disputes that rests on introducing "good will" into situations that are confrontational. There

are community organizations that seek to deal with many social problems. (Burton & Dukes, 1990). These are all attempts to modify the dominant power structure of society. They seek altered attitudes and policies, though societies remain within the adversarial and confrontational power frame that governs social and political relationships. They have, therefore, an idealistic ring, and must be regarded as well intentioned but politically unrealistic.

### **An Alternative Frame**

Obviously many disputes are settled within the existing system: disputes that are over physical possessions, disputes arising out of agreed social and legal norms, and others that have little behavioural content. Laws, conventions, judicial and out-of-court settlements can be effective in many, if not most, disputes within a given society and between societies.

No less obviously there are many disputes that cannot be so settled. Despite legal norms, social pressures and deterrent strategies, murders do occur, violence is widespread within nations, and wars between and within countries are frequent. No amount of threat or deterrence prevents this.

In the 1960s an alternative frame emerged in response to failures in deterrent policies, domestically and internationally. While it emerged out of extensions to decision-making theory, it represented a jump from the power political frame in which one party could, sometimes at great cost, impose its will on another, to a problem-solving conflict resolution frame. In this, the parties to a dispute were helped to identify the sources of their problem, revealing possible options that would satisfy their needs. Applied to decision making generally, it was a frame in which decision makers assessed the consequences of policies before decision were taken, rather than relying on coercion in the event of adverse responses (Burton, 1969; Mitchell 1981).

From the outset it was claimed by those advocating the alternative frame that: the power political frame, defined as "political realism" by power theorists such as Hans Morgenthau (1948), was unrealistic, and had been proved so by failures at the domestic and international levels. Law and order had not been established domestically, and internationally great powers were being defeated in their attempts to deter, and wars had followed.

Deterrence does not deter sane behaviours, and the power political frame was unrealistic because no account was taken of relevant human factors: there are ontological, inherent human needs that cannot be suppressed, (needs of identity and recognition that are the bases of relatedness), which make deterrence sometimes irrelevant at all societal levels.

The only option, in politically realistic terms, was to resolve the social and behavioural problems that led to specific conflicts, and not try merely to suppress them or to settle them by coercion.

Let it be noted that there is no normative connotation in this alternative. There is no moral or idealistic basis. There is, however, the assertion that there are certain human drives or needs that will be pursued, regardless of cost and consequences, which, as is argued later, cannot permanently be suppressed. Hence, in time, institutions must conform to human drives, and not, as has been assumed to be the case, the other way around.

In the light of these political and behavioural realities we have no analytical option but to differentiate between "disputes" that can be "settled" and "conflicts" that arise out of problems that must be "resolved" and to find the means or processes by which those situations that cannot be settled can be analysed and resolved by the parties concerned.

The questions being posed in this article are what are these processes, what is the system these processes would imply, and whether such processes are applicable at all societal levels, from the family to the international.

### ***Attempts to merge the two approaches***

There is a reluctance by some scholars and practitioners to make a sharp distinction between disputes and conflicts, and to separate the negotiating process from the problem solving one. This may be a mistake. Mixing the two processes, negotiating compromises, or appealing to good will and to social responsibility to observe legal and social norms, can lead to outcomes that do not reflect behavioural needs, and, therefore, to agreements which are only temporary.

Furthermore, practitioners in negotiation and legal processes may be tempted to apply their techniques to situations that have their source in basic human needs and thus require an analytical process. At least at the present stage of thinking, the less confusion there is about appropriate processes the better. Perhaps at some later stage when the two different frames are part of general knowledge, and training in both is readily available, practitioners may be able to shift from one to the other as situations require. For the present it is better to allocate situations that seem to be disputes to persons trained in negotiation, and situations that are likely to have deep-rooted elements to others with relevant analytical and facilitation training. Ideally all "third parties" would have experience with both kinds of situations, as situations are rarely what they seem to be before intervention, and usually have elements of both disputes and conflicts.

### ***The nature of the alternative frame***

The idea that threat and deterrence do not deter was very upsetting to scholars and practitioners back in the 1960s. International Relations in particular had been taught within the Morgenthau-ian "Power Political Realism" approach, making power balances and deterrence the central themes. Decision making was studied within this power frame. There was no behavioural content other than the assumption that deterrence deters. The fear was that the study of International Relations would fall apart if "the person" assumed within the power frame turned out not to resemble any real person at all. Indeed, if deterrence did not deter, then the whole law and ordersystem would be undermined.

History was, of course, full of cases in which threat had not deterred. There being no conceptual alternative, rationalizations were the way out. Insufficient force was employed, or there were false communications. Korea and Vietnam came as a shock to power theorists as well as to the US Administration, and gave support for a search for an alternative theory by undermining power theory.

A small group of scholars in London brought together parties to conflicts in a neutral, academic setting (Burton, 1969), and were able to see at first hand that there were influences on decision making far greater than deterrent threats. They gained insights during their facilitation processes that disturbed their thinking and their teaching. It was felt necessary to withdraw from this applied side until there could be rethinking. Many subsequent publications helped rethinking and were evidence of it (Burton 1979; Burton, 1984).

Since then an extensive literature has emerged (Burton, 1990b; Dukes, 1992). This includes consideration of human behaviours under the heading of "Needs Theory" and practical applications of analytical problem solving conflict resolution. The separation of dispute settlement and conflict resolution, referred to above, was a logical development. This change was not just a transition or a development in thinking within an existing frame. It was a paradigm shift from one approach to a quite different one. Now there are many universities offering courses and degrees in conflict analysis and resolution attracting students who have had experience in negotiation and management but who are aware of limitations in these fields. A new a-disciplinary discipline has emerged.

### **Needs Theory**

Such a conceptual alternative would, clearly, have to include the creation of less confrontational institutions that would be able to tackle thoughtfully and constructively problems such as environmental destruction and increasing violence within and between societies. It is not sufficient, however, to have means of suppressing, or even resolving

conflicts, and picking up the pieces afterwards. They must be provented. (Prevention implies suppression: provention is intended to imply anticipation and avoidance). But unless and until the costs and consequences of decisions can be assessed accurately before they are made, conflicts cannot be avoided. This calls for an adequate theory of human behaviour, and processes by which the consequence of decisions can be assessed.

The theoretical basis of this alternative problem-solving approach is "Needs Theory" or what purports to be a holistic theory of human behaviour. It so happened that quite outside the conflict resolution or decision making fields, a conference on Human Needs was convened in Berlin in 1979. An international group of scholars, dissatisfied with current thinking on social problems, came together to share ideas, and a year later brought out a book containing their papers (Lederer 1980). Many of these same scholars were brought together in 1988 by the Center for Conflict Analysis and Resolution, George Mason University, with the help of the German Marshall Fund, to meet with scholars concerned with conflict resolution. All participants arrived with prepared papers. The connection between conflict resolution and human needs had not previously been made, and the effects on all concerned were clear when all participants, those on the conflict side and those concerned with human needs, felt impelled to reconsider their papers before they were published (Burton, 1990b).

The concept of human needs went beyond that advanced by Maslow (1954). The focus was far less on wants, and far more on inherent needs that would be pursued in all circumstances, except total individual despair and apathy.

At the same time all concerned were aware that we do not have any clear language or definition of "human needs" reference being made most often to identity, recognition and security. The latter implied not simply physical security so much as security of the other needs. It is as though the existence of the particles of the atom had been discovered by deductive processes before there was empirical evidence of their existence. However, there is within this thinking an explanation of many problems, including political protest, "aggression", violence, and protracted conflict. Contemporary events are more readily understood within this ontological human needs frame than within a power political one. The framework helps to explain why the international system based on nation-states is in decline; why former colonial boundaries cannot be maintained; why minority ethnic communities are demanding increasing degrees of autonomy; and why there is widespread and protracted violence wherever nation-state authorities seek to suppress secessionist movements.

Similarly, the problem of inner city violence and unrest can be explained not just by the break-down of family values, not just by unemployment, not just by the absence of

educational opportunities, but also by the lack of recognition and identity that these conditions promote.

### **Process**

A theory of human needs suggests the facilitation process that is required to analyse and resolve conflicts. The word "analyse" has become important in any description of process. The Centre in London was called the Centre for the Analysis of Conflict. There is an Institute at George Mason University called the Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution. The facilitation process (Burton & Dukes 1990) is essentially non-bargaining, non-negotiating, at least until the analysis of the situation is complete, until there is agreement on the nature and sources of the conflict, and until details of options have been discussed.

### ***Provention***

As has already been pointed out, however, conflict resolution is not the most important contribution to be made by this analytical and problem-solving approach to conflicts. Decision making to prevent conflict is the main focus.

True the starting point was resolution, and many university courses continue to respond to student demand for skills that they can offer the market. Resolution has been important in research, for it is the interaction of parties in a facilitated setting that gives insights into the nature of conflict, and the deep-rooted causes of it. It is these insights that feed back into decision making. It is these insights that enable decision-makers to assess the costs and consequences of their policies in the longer term, thus encouraging them to take those steps that will prevent conflict.

### ***Problem-solving institutions***

But even decision making is not the final outcome of this problem solving approach to conflicts. The ultimate challenge is the establishment of social and political institutions that are problem solving, and not adversarial or confrontational. If street violence or ethnic conflict is to be avoided, then party political and ideological approaches must give place to interactive analysis, even at a political level.

In some administrations there are processes by which public servants can interact freely in search of solutions to problems. In some political systems there have been moves toward parliamentary committees that represent all parties, and there is consultation with specialists. But within the traditional political frame, deliberations at both political and public service decision-making levels have imposed constraints. The shared political philosophy gives priority to the enforcement of law and order by coercive means, rather

than by getting to the roots of the problem that gives rise to disorder. As yet the alternative is not part of conventional wisdom or consensus thinking. Parliaments, courts, industrial relations, ethnic relations, and every aspect of contemporary societies remain interest driven and adversarial.

### **Is a Problem Solving Philosophy and System Practical?**

Is analytical problem-solving conflict provention a practical alternative to the inherited power political system?

It is now apparent that there is a popular reaction against the confrontational party political system, and against leaders whose only leadership is to appear to be tough domestically and internationally, leaving underlying problems unresolved. Intuitively, people are seeking institutional change that would make decision making focus on the long term and orientate it towards problem solving.

What are sought are leaders who do not have a defined political program which they seek to promote, but capabilities not unlike those of a facilitator whose prime function is to bring different view-points and interests together, and to help an analysis that can suggest constructive outcomes.

Domestic politics are universally undergoing change at an exponential rate, as are international relations. The drive for recognition and identity has affected both. Within nation-states and between them there are demands for autonomy, sometimes taking the form of movements for secession. The contemporary interest-driven party political system is a major source of this unrest. It is not perceived as being either representative or problem solving.

Many scholars are now trying to explain contemporary disquiet, its sources and its future consequences. One group of authors (Dotson et al. 1989) refers to more active interest groups; greater legal scrutiny of public actions; increased scarcity of government resources; higher public awareness of planning impacts, and more complex planning problems. Another group (Susskind & Cruikshank, 1987) refers to the tyranny of the majority; short-term political solutions for long-term problems; weaknesses of voting as a decision-making process; technical complexity; and winner-take-all thinking.

Yet another scholar (Gray, 1989) points to the growing inter-dependence that forces more cooperative and less confrontational behaviours in all segments of society, private and official: economic and technical change; declining productivity growth and increased competitive pressures; global interdependence; blurring of boundaries between business, government and labour; shrinking government revenues for social programs; and dissatisfaction with the judicial process for solving problems.

In reporting these and other academic responses, one conflict resolution scholar (Dukes, 1992) takes a broader view, and recognizes the inability of the existing order to satisfy conflicting wants and needs within the context of environmental, resource and population problems.

This scholarly questioning of traditional consensus beliefs is an important step in, first, pointing first to the need for an alternative system, and second to the directions of socially demanded and required change.

The task of those who are concerned primarily with conflict resolution and provention is to articulate alternatives, to set out precisely tested processes and procedures, and generally to provide options to societies desperately in need of them, but which have no clear indications of where to go from here. Then, but only then, is there any prospect of conflict provention becoming a political system that can replace what is proving to be destructive of the global environment and of civilizations.

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