

FROM CONTROLLED COMMUNICATION TO PROBLEM SOLVING: THE ORIGINS OF FACILITATED CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Christopher Mitchell

Other articles in this Special Issue have described and evaluated John Burton's theoretical and intellectual contributions to conflict research and to the study of International Relations. In this paper, however, I wish to focus on Burton's original contribution to the development of facilitated, small group "workshops" - those informal and unofficial processes that have since become known as "inter-active conflict resolution" or "collaborative, analytical problem solving" or "facilitated dialogues". In other words, all the variety of procedures that are now normally grouped under the heading of "Track Two" to distinguish them from processes such as arbitration, mediation, conciliation, good offices, or fact finding, carried out at the "official" level, through diplomacy or the intervention of inter-governmental organisations.

My main argument is that, while it is certainly the case that other individuals and organisations - the Society of Friends, Moral Rearmament, the Swedish businessman, Birger Dahlerus - had carried out tasks as disinterested intermediaries, "go-betweeners" or "honest brokers" with little power save that of integrity and persuasiveness, (Jackson, 1983; Yarrow, 1978; Bethel, 1972), Burton was, indeed, a pioneer in applying social theory to intractable and violent international, transnational and civil conflicts. He did this by developing a radically new means by which adversaries could be put in a situation whereby they could jointly analyse their mutual problems and disagreements, and try to develop options or solutions that would lead towards the now familiar conception of a "win-win" outcome. The work that Burton pioneered in London during the mid and late 1960's was both innovative and original, and led directly - I would argue - to the current proliferation of unofficial, "Track Two" initiatives that can, if used appropriately, underpin and assist "Track One" efforts at formal peacemaking and peacebuilding.

Intellectual Origins

Other writers, including Burton himself, have described the genesis of the first few initiatives that utilised facilitated and non-directive approaches to resolving protracted and deep rooted conflicts, such as those in Cyprus, Sri Lanka or Northern Ireland. (Burton, 1969; Fisher, 1997; de Reuck, 1974). In one of my own works (Mitchell 1981) I outlined the way in which the first exploratory exercises led to the enunciation of the principles on

which this new "problem solving" approach should be based if it were to be successful. These included the ideas that the interaction between those representing the views, concerns and aspirations of the adversaries in the short, intensive workshop should be characterised by its being facilitative, diagnostic and non-judgemental but above all by its absence of coercion, either by the facilitating third party or by the adversaries themselves.

The core characteristic of this new approach should be that it used analytical "tools" from the social sciences to understand the roots of the conflict. It would then be possible to explore possible solutions that might arise once both or all the adversaries had decided to abandon efforts to coerce one another into accepting their own, and only their own solution, rather than searching for options that might arise via a cooperative search.

It is also clearly the case that much of the thinking that underlay the development of the new approach had its roots in the "behavioural" challenge to the traditional and stultifying power political thinking that dominated International Relations - and especially British International Relations - scholarship at the time, a challenge which emphasised the importance of decision making processes (Snyder, Bruck & Sapin 1962; Holsti & North 1965), of the psychology of distorted perceptions (Kelman 1965), and of the potential instability of conflict systems in which a small input of new information made at a key point in the system could bring about major changes in structure and inter-action (Deutsch 1963).

These were obviously important principles and ideas for understanding and influencing a conflict. However, from a practical point of view the question in the period 1964-65 was how they might best be introduced as part of some process that would enable these and other new "behavioural" ideas to have some impact on conflicts in the real world of the 1960's that were then being handled by traditional means of deterrence, diplomacy or "development".

In the then fashionable systems terms, where might a "key point" be, and how could new information be introduced at that point so as to have maximum impact on the adversaries in the conflict system?

At the time, Burton's thinking on this problem was very much influenced by ideas from four sources. Firstly, he had been reading extensively into the subject of social case work, and was very much influenced by writers like Eileen Youngusband and Florence Hollis [Hollis, 1958; Irving 1966]. These writers strongly emphasised the need for the caseworker, first of all, to be supportive and non-condemnatory of "the client"; and secondly to be committed to the idea that the outsider's role should not be to try to impose solutions or "cures" but

merely to help clients develop their own responses and create their own solutions to problems based on their perceived needs.

These views very much influenced Burton's ideas about the nature and role of the third party in approaching protracted and violent social conflicts, and led him to the conclusion that a key part of any new process should be an informed, joint analysis of the conflict and their relationship by the representatives of the adversaries and by the facilitator. With this as background, it was not insignificant that, when asked by University College, London to present a public lecture on his experiences with the new "problem solving" process, Burton chose as a title "The Analysis of Conflict by Case Work".

Secondly, since his arrival in Britain in 1963, Burton had struck up a fruitful relationship with colleagues at the Tavistock Institute in London, and particularly with the leading figures in its Human Relations Department, most notably Eric Trist and Fred Emery. For some time, the Tavistock Institute had been developing new approaches to "human relations" problems, starting with the work of group dynamics of pioneers such as Wilfred Bion (1961) and others involved in the development of leaderless, self managed "study groups". Conventionally, these took the form of small groups consisting of individuals usually drawn from a firm or other organisation experiencing serious problems in working relationships within that organisation. The "study group" then used the inter-actions within its own meetings - carried out intensively over a number of days - to model, analyse and [hopefully] rectify many if not all the undesirable aspects of malign relationships within the organisation.

Trist and Emery had further developed this approach by introducing ideas and principles from the work of the psychologist, Solomon Asch and the pioneer of general systems theory, Ludwig von Bertalanffy. These involved having a group focus on a task which included, but was much larger than, their own personal or factional agendas. These could include: relations among environmental factors outside the boundaries of the immediate problem; relations within the boundaries of the problem system; the impact of the external environment on the system experiencing problems or conflict; and that systems potential for influencing its environment (Emery & Trist; 1964).

This procedure enabled participants to find common ground at this "higher" level, to engage in "unspecialised" teamwork within the group, and to share coordination and control of the process.

All these ideas later emerged, in modified form, as part of Burton's problem solving process. Emery and Trist's conception of a "whole systems perspective" was also to play a major role in the later development of Burton's systems analysis of international relations

and his "world society" model (Burton 1965; Burton 1968).

As a third source of ideas, Burton had also been reading some of the pioneering efforts at industrial problem solving used, among other firms, by Gulf Oil and pioneered by Robert Blake, Jane Mouton and H.A. Shepherd (1964). Aside from their development of the "managerial grid" as an analytical tool, these academic consultants [working at a time when this was a less familiar role than is now the case] had begun to develop discussion groups consisting of workers, managers and executives. The groups were charged with the task of reviewing or anticipating major problems within the organisation and coming up with some generally acceptable solutions for implementation.

Again, Burton was to take some ideas on procedures from these writers and incorporate them into his search for a process that might succeed in developing solutions to protracted conflicts in which the stakes appeared higher, positions more entrenched, suffering of a different order, and antagonisms so intense as to represent an [apparently] qualitative difference to those problems being tackled at Gulf Oil or at Tavistock.

Lastly, there was the issue of "problem solving" and its connection to the process of a self managing group setting an agenda that would enable it to analyse a conflicted system and envisage some solutions. Indirectly, Burton's thinking in this regard was much influenced by the contemporary ideas of some mathematicians concerned with the difference between puzzle solving and problem solving. This contrast focused on the difference between applying existing mathematical tools to investigate small and relatively well structured "puzzles" and developing whole new ways of characterising and resolving major mathematical problems through innovation and creativity.

By the early 1960's Burton was convinced that the only way to resolve many of the major conflicts currently confronting national political leaders and international civil servants at the UN, the OAS and elsewhere was to reconceptualise the conflicts they faced and to be creative in both the analysis of the problem and the range of solutions contemplated. Conflict resolution required thinking "outside the box" to use a later phrase, and a willingness to innovate. Hence, a new process should be one devoted to problem solving, not merely puzzle solving. Later, this element of the approach would become the now familiar insistence on discovering the interests and values underlying surface positions. Ultimately it led Burton towards the search for ontological needs that drove the conflict and the adversaries.

The Initial Workshops

Armed with these ideas, Burton faced a challenge from critical academic colleagues to demonstrate that the new "behavioural" ideas worked where diplomats and practitioners using more conventional approaches had failed to move conflicts towards a solution. Initially it was suggested that Burton should attempt to produce solutions to the Arab-Israeli conflict, then in its post-1956 phase in which the Palestinian issue was defined as one of "refugees".

However, Burton decided to use his contacts in Indonesia to launch what was initially planned as a single, one week meeting in December 1965 among representatives from Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia. The intention was to analyse and seek solutions for the low level but bitter dispute - known as "Konfrontasi" - over Malaysia's independence and the inclusion of northern Borneo [to Indonesia "Kalimantan"] in Malaysian territory.

The first meeting duly took place, supervised by Burton himself and a "panel" of academics playing the role of what would later become known as "facilitators". This included colleagues from University College, the London School of Economics, the Tavistock Institute and the CIBA Foundation, in whose offices the meetings actually took place. As this was a pioneering effort, the process was exploratory and had to be worked out "off the cuff".

However, at the end of the week's meeting it was tentatively decided that another meeting in early 1966 could be arranged if requested by the participants. In the event, the "workshop" continued through a series of meetings lasting until May 1966, at which point top leaders from all three countries were engaging in official negotiation to end Konfrontasi, a termination that occurred with the Bangkok Accords signed in May 1966. There was strong evidence that the ideas and drafts worked on in London contributed to the solution reached at the official level in Bangkok and Manila.

However, by that time Burton was already planning a second problem solving initiative. During the summer of 1966 he approached leaders in two protracted conflicts, calling at Cyprus to confer with Greek Cypriot President Makarios and Turkish Cypriot Vice President Fazil Kutçuk, as well as visiting Cairo and Tel Aviv to sound out the possibilities of an Arab-Israeli dialogue. In the event, and partly under the urgings of the UN Secretary General whose mission to the island had been stalled for some time, the Cyprus problem was first to be tackled.

Burton and his team held a second, week long workshop in London in the Autumn of 1966, this time involving representatives from the embattled communities on the island. No final resolution emerged from this series of conversations, but there followed a marked easing

of confrontation on the island [blockades of villages were removed, travel became easier, informal local negotiations took place] and the meetings and subsequent lowering of tension undoubtedly had some influence on the final arranging of official talks in early 1968.

Burton's first two initiatives in problem solving were thus marked by a considerable degree of success, and this had two immediate results. Firstly, Burton was able to establish a special unit at University College, the Centre for the Analysis of Conflict [CAC] with a prime mandate to carry out further exercises in conflict resolution through the use of problem solving workshops. The unit was initially established in the late summer of 1966, and was staffed by some of those who had participated in the Indonesia- Malaysia workshops and were to participate very soon in the Cyprus workshop. CAC was funded initially by grants from the British Social Science Research Council [SSRC], and from two Quaker Foundations, which enabled three full time appointments to be made to its staff, later supplemented by others working for post-graduate degrees at University College.

Secondly, Burton began work on a manuscript that reviewed the principles on which this new, problem-solving approach to conflict resolution was based, describing their application to the two cases successfully undertaken in 1965-66. At the time, there was considerable debate about both the appropriateness of publishing such a work when only two cases had been undertaken and - less fundamentally - about the appropriate name for the procedure.

Given that one of the major aims of the process was to direct discussions away from confrontation, posturing and repeating official bargaining positions ad nauseam, and towards a joint analysis of shared problem and possible solution, Burton favoured the term "controlled communication" but the eventual title under which the work was published was simply "Conflict and Communication". According to Burton, this title was originally suggested by Michael Young the then head of the SSRC.

Successors

It is always difficult to measure the impact of any particular book, especially when one is published at roughly speaking the same time as others putting forward parallel ideas or similar arguments.

Burton's *Conflict and Communication* (1969) was clearly part of an initial - if small - "wave" of works published in the late 1960's and early 1970's arguing for the use of new, facilitated and problem solving approaches to intractable conflicts at many social levels. All of these contributed to the new thinking and, more importantly, to the new practices that developed in the 1970's. (Young 1967; Walton 1969; Curle 1971; Doob 1970; Lakin 1972) Burton's was,

perhaps, the one that integrated theory and practice most successfully and, judging by citations, it had a major influence on the thinking of scholars and what Burton's colleague, Herb Kelman, was to call "scholar-practitioners" in his own writing.

However, Burton's practical work in the late 1960's did have a more direct effect on the field of conflict analysis and resolution than might be credited simply to his writings. What was particularly noteworthy about the first two London-based workshops was the composition of the facilitation panels that sat with Burton for the Konfrontasi and Cyprus workshops.

For example, in the first apart from Burton's colleagues from Tavistock was a Harvard lawyer on sabbatical at the London School of Economics, Professor Roger Fisher, who had just edited a book of readings on international conflict and its resolution (Fisher 1964) and who was thinking about launching his own centre for improved negotiation techniques. Fisher, of course, went on to become the driving force behind the Program on Negotiation at Harvard, a practitioner of vast experience, a leading light in the Conflict Management Group and, together with Bill Ury, the author of probably the best known guidebook in the field of conflict resolution practice, *Getting to 'Yes'*.

As well as colleagues from the newly established CAC, Burton's second, Cyprus workshop included three facilitators from the United States, Robert North, Chadwick Alger and Herbert Kelman (1965). The last mentioned scholar took up many of Burton's pioneering ideas and explored them both theoretically and practically. Kelman went on to become one of the best known "scholar-practitioners" in the field, conducting problem solving workshops on Cyprus, the Indian-Pakistani conflict and then concentrating his efforts for over twenty years on the Arab-Israeli and Israeli-Palestinian conflicts.

From both these beginnings in the United States, large programs of research, practice and - most importantly - teaching and learning developed. The use of problem solving approaches in environmental and public policy dispute, the growth of "Alternative Dispute Resolution" centres and programs throughout the United States, Canada and Europe during the 1970's and 1980's, the revitalisation of studies of mediation and innovative forms of third party intervention into conflicts at all social levels, all were given a boost by the Harvard programs and by the pioneering work carried out by PON and by Kelman's program, which eventually became the Program on International Conflict Analysis & Resolution [PICAR]. Both these leaders in the field, however, had their first experiences of the potentialities of problem solving workshops in London during the period 1965-66.

The London Centre

However, the subsequent experiences of the Centre at University College London might have provided some warnings that the successful development of the field of conflict

analysis and resolution, of problem solving practice and of the whole Track Two enterprise might not be as straightforward as suggested by the success of the first two exercises. Burton himself started to construct further intellectual foundations for the problem solving approach and the relevance and practicality of facilitated discussions, working through ideas from systems theory (Burton 1968) and eventually about the relationship between internal conflict and external belligerence (Burton 1984) before arriving at those ideas about basic human needs with which he is now chiefly associated.

Strenuous efforts were made to interest Track One practitioners in the potentialities of parallel Track Two activities, and a major conference on new approaches to "mediation" was held at CAC during 1969. However, the diplomatic world and the world of intergovernmental organisations proved highly resistant to such innovations. The ideas were, perhaps, "before their time". Track One practitioners in the era of the Cold War seemed to feel they had the tools and techniques necessary to deal with any inter-bloc or inter-state conflicts arising in that context. It was necessary to await the period of the late 1980's and 1990's, with its wave of apparently irrational and often unreachable transnational and intra-state conflicts before some of the benefits of problem solving initiatives at the Track Two level became apparent to governments and to organisations made up of governments.

Moreover, the series of projects aimed at convening further workshops under CAC auspices showed that what later became known as "the entry problem" did present serious obstacles to the frequent and systematic use of problem solving exercises. An early CAC project aimed at launching workshops on the conflicts in the Horn of Africa, particularly those between Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia occupied much time and effort during 1967. Visits were made to the region, contacts established and preparations made for a meeting in the Fall of that year, only to have the eruption of the Six Day Middle East War and its aftermath undermine previous arrangements. In the event, Centre members were consulted by Leonard Doob and Bill Folz from Yale University, who were successful in setting up the "Fermeda Workshop" on Somali relations with their neighbours (Doob et al 1970). They also made some indirect inputs to Somali and Kenyan thinking about possible solutions to their "border war" and traces of these subsequently appeared in the Arusha Accords, concluded in 1967 under the auspices of President Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia.

Burton himself had been working on the possibility of a major project involving a series of workshops with participants from Egypt and Israel. He made several trips to Cairo and Tel Aviv as early as 1966. However, the Six Day War in 1967 altered the focus of these efforts and much time and effort were spent in the months following that war on the idea of

discussions between Israelis and Palestinians, a relationship which Burton then saw - earlier than most - as the key to conflict resolution in the Middle East.

Interestingly enough, this enterprise made little progress for at least two reasons. The first was that, in the immediate aftermath of the war, the Palestinians particularly were in no mood to contemplate talking with their adversary. One influential Palestinian made the comment that they would no more think of talking with Israelis than would the British have thought of talking with the Nazis in the middle of World War II. The other reason was simply that the Palestinians themselves were in a condition of complete disorganisation, trying on the one hand to free themselves from Egyptian domination and the leadership within the PLO of Ahmed Shukhairy; and on the other to avoid having their movement taken over by left wing enthusiasts wishing to link the Palestine cause to that of the world wide revolution popular in the late 1960's. The failure of much time and effort to produce an agreement to meet brought about much thought at CAC on the question of appropriate and inappropriate conditions for meetings even as low key and unofficial as problem solving workshops. These internal debates raised practical issues of "timing" and "ripe moments" before these became academically fashionable.

Other projects involving the Rhodesian problem and the long standing conflict over Kashmir occupied much time and effort by CAC members, but the former was steadfastly regarded as a matter for Track One by the British Government. Arrangements for an Indian/Pakistani workshop on Kashmir came to grief at the last moment with the outbreak of the 1971 War.

Meanwhile, what had in the mid-1960's seemed a minor local problem had by 1971 escalated into province wide violence and destruction. The Northern Ireland conflict - "The Troubles" - began to pre-occupy the attention of the few British conflict research organisations that existed at the start of the 1970's. CAC was included in these, although it was having to change its structure with cuts in funding and the need of the founding personnel to find other posts. Almost the last project of the "old" Centre was the convening of a workshop of Northern Irish trade union members, ostensibly from "integrated unions" to discuss what unions might do to mitigate the violence in the province.

Some steps were agreed by the twenty or so union officials who came to the workshop, but again circumstances changed radically shortly after the meetings, with the introduction of internment without trial, the start of an all-out of violence by the PIRA and the eventual introduction of direct rule from London. Again, the lesson from this, CAC members agreed, was the importance of context in assisting or hampering the success of Track Two processes.

Conclusions

From this point on, CAC began its transformation from an institution to a network. Its members tended to go their separate ways, while John Burton himself became personally involved in bridge building efforts between the communities in Northern Ireland. These even included convening workshops involving paramilitary leaders from both sides of the sectarian divide. The Centre had lasted only 5 years in its original form, but most of its members continued to meet regularly, to discuss one another's work and to keep each other up-dated on research and practice activities. Ideas had been refined at CAC, practices explored and analysed, and a great deal of experience gained about the opportunities and the pitfalls of "Track Two" work.

Burton's original ideas about facilitated, informal and unofficial meetings were to spread through the writings of the group, through the involvement of other scholar-practitioners in Centre projects, and through the wave of interest that would develop during the 1970s and 1980s in alternative ways of coping with conflicts of all types and at all social levels.

To misuse a political slogan, Burton and CAC's pioneering work had shown that there were alternatives to "the rifle or the ballot box" for dealing with conflicts - even protracted and violent conflicts - although their subsequent efforts had shown that success was not automatic and that further thought and analysis were needed regarding those contexts that were conducive to problem solving and those that were not.

That work is still going on at university and other centres engaged in practice, theory building and theory testing in much the same manner and with many of the same hopes as those prevalent at Burton's original Centre.

References

- Asch, Solomon. 1952. *Social Psychology* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Bethel, Nicholas. 1972. *The War that Hitler Won* London: The Penguin Press.
- Bion, Wilfred. 1961. *Experience in Groups* London: Tavistock.
- Blake, R.R., H.A. Shepherd & J.S. Mouton. 1964. *Managing Inter-Group Conflict in Industry* Houston: Gulf Publishing Co
- .
- Burton, John W. 1984. *Global Conflict: The Domestic Sources of International Crises* Brighton: Wheatsheaf Books.

Burton, John W. 1969. *Conflict and Communication* London: Macmillan.

Burton, John W. 1968. *Systems States, Diplomacy and Rules*. Cambridge and London: Cambridge University Press.

Burton, John W. 1965. *International Relations; A General Theory*. Cambridge and London: Cambridge University Press.

Curle, Adam. 1971. *Making Peace*. London: Tavistock Publications.

De Reuck, A.V.S. 1974. "The Resolution of Conflict" *The Human Context*. Vol.6 No.1 Spring, pp.64-80.

Deutsch, Karl W. 1963. *Nerves of Government* New York: Free Press.

Emery, Fred E, & Eric L. Trist. 1964. "The Causal Texture of Organisational Environments" *Human Relations* Vol.18 No.1, pp.21-32.

Doob, Leonard W. ed. 1970. *Resolving Conflict in Africa* New Haven: Yale University Press.

Fisher, Roger. ed. 1964. *International Conflict and the Behavioural Sciences: The Craigsville Papers*. New York: Basic Books

Fisher, Ronald J. 1997. *Interactive Conflict Resolution* Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.

Hollis, Florence. 1958. "Personality Diagnosis in Casework" in H. Farad [ed] *Ego Psychology and Dynamic Case Work* New York: Family Service Association of America
Holsti, Ole R. & Robert C. North. 1965. "The History of Human Conflict" in Elton B. McNeil ed. *The Nature of Human Conflict*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Irvine, Elizabeth. 1966. "A New Look at Casework" in E. Younghusband ed. *New Developments in Casework* London: Allen & Unwin.

Jackson, Elmore. 1983. *Middle East Mission*. New York: W.W. Norton.

Kelman, Herbert C. ed. 1965. *International Behaviour* New York: Holt, Rhinehart & Winston.

Lakin, M. 1972. *Interpersonal Encounters: Theory & Practice in Sensitivity Training* New York: McGraw Hill.

Mitchell, C.R. 1981. *Peacemaking and the Consultant's Role* Farnborough: Gower Press.

Snyder, R.C. H.W. Bruck & B. Sapin. 1962. *Foreign Policy Decision Making* New York: Free Press.

Walton, Richard E. 1969. *Interpersonal Peacemaking: Confrontation and Third Party Consultation* Reading, MA: Addison Wesley.

Weisbord, Marvin et al. 1992. *Discovering Common Ground*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.

Yarrow, C.H. [Mike]. 1978. *Quaker Experiences in International Conciliation* New Haven: Yale University Press.

Young, Oran R. 1967. *The Intermediaries: Third Parties in International Crises* Princeton: Princeton University Press.