
OCCASIONAL TOPIC

Peace and the Healing Process

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In one of the most famous pieces of political oratory, the Gettysburg Address, Abraham Lincoln spoke at the end of a bloody civil war about binding the wounds of the nation. This is probably the most famous example of a medical analogy being used to describe problems being suffered by, or processes being proffered to, the body politic.

It is not uncommon to hear people despair about the cancer of sectarianism or racism. References are made to paralysis, situations haemorrhaging, crippling effects, pain, hurt, trauma, fractures, mental scars and prognoses in many political commentaries, not only in situations where violence is, or has been, waging.

Over the years I have often talked of Ireland's need for a "healing process" and cautioned against notions of "instant cures". On numerous occasions I have found myself advising people to diagnose and treat causes of our political condition instead of scratching or picking at symptoms.

Medical or health analogies are particularly understandable in the context of a dysfunctional polity. They proliferate especially in circumstances where such political dysfunctionality manifests itself in violence, creating trauma which is all too real and literal.

The medical profession has to treat the consequences of such violence. In our own situation it has done so with distinction, dedication and determined cooperation spanning all levels and branches of the profession and associated professions. The political profession, on the other hand, has to identify, isolate and treat the causes of such conflict. Unfortunately a comparable concerted effort involving all politicians to match the response to challenge by the clinicians has not yet been brought about.

This can partly be explained by the fact that violence itself generates secondary political malignancies and complications. As Martin Luther King said:

"violence as a way of achieving justice is both impractical and immoral. It is impractical because it is a descending spiral ending in destruction for all. The old law of an eye for an eye leaves everybody blind. It is

immoral because it seeks to humiliate the opponent rather than win his understanding; it seeks to annihilate rather than convert. Violence is immoral because it thrives on hatred rather than love. It destroys community and makes brotherhood impossible. It leaves society in monologue rather than dialogue."

Recognising that violence can only frustrate what we want to further and end up destroying what it starts out claiming to defend, we must see if we can isolate violence itself. In our own situation the effects of violence were preventing and undermining successful treatment of the underlying problems. Only by securing total relief from violence could we progress from monologue to the dialogue which is needed to treat our problem and help us towards the healing process.

Securing relief from the harrowing and debilitating secondary condition or symptoms does not constitute a cure, and it does not lessen the need to go on to deal with the underlying problem. We need to be resolved rather than reluctant about moving on to the other phases or episodes of treatment and care without which we cannot have a healthy outcome. That is why I am concerned about the lack of movement by the British Government, which is supposed to be a sponsor of the process at hand, during this welcome absence of violence.

Fears, misgivings and nervousness about the process ahead are understandable. It will be uncomfortable for all of us, but we have no alternative course to stability. People want cures but do not like undergoing operations; people want to go to heaven, but nobody wants to die. It is surprising what some people will tolerate in terms of toothache before submitting to a dentist.

In our situation, those of all traditions should have no innate fear about having to give something up even if it is only vestigial. Anyone planning a successful intervention should be sensitive to such fears without being completely constrained by them. Feeding fears will not build the confidence and comfort necessary for us to undergo and undertake the appropriate interventions and exercises.

Politics is concerned with healing the wounds of society, just as the medical profession is concerned with treating the wounds of individuals. Given the attitudes of many people towards politics and its practitioners, this might seem an exaggerated or

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downright presumptuous claim. Nevertheless, I would argue strongly that healing is what politics should be about.

Conflict and division are at the foundation of politics, just as disease and injury are essential prerequisites for the medical profession. If there were no divisions and differences of opinion in society, there would be no need for politics. Similarly, there would be no need for doctors if there was no illness.

Just as no doctor welcomes disease or injury for the sake of it, no politician should welcome conflict. To do otherwise is to betray the trust that our fellow citizens put in us.

There are a number of similarities between medicine and politics which I would like to consider for a few moments. There are also considerable differences which I will examine afterwards.

First, we have a common interest in healing. While the medical profession tackles disease and injury, politicians have to deal with the problems of poverty, unemployment, and in much of the world, violence. It would be naive to believe that there is no connection between the individual illnesses that the medical profession treats and the social ills that politicians have to address.

Both politicians and physicians have a common awareness of the limitations of their knowledge and powers. Despite the great progress made over the years, there are still diseases that cannot be cured and great social evils that have yet to be overcome. Indeed, the great successes of the past are not irreversible. No advance is permanent and each step forward has to be fought for again and again. It is not realistic to expect miracle cures. Although we cannot resolve immediately all the problems that we face, we can play a part in paving the way for eventual solutions.

We have to take a long-term approach. We have to do our best to make breakthroughs, build on existing achievements and to prepare the future.

As far as the differences are concerned, the major one is the respectful gap between achievement and aspiration in our respective professions. The medical profession has a solid record of achievement, whereas politics often fails to live up to its aspirations. This outline of the nature of politics obviously contains a degree of aspirational thinking rather than being simply a description of politics as it is today. That is not necessarily a criticism, since politics is the realm par excellence of aspiration and without it we would still be living in caves.

The problem occurs when politicians decide that their role is simply to articulate and reflect the divisions in society. In a divided society such as ours in Ireland, every public representative is, to a greater or larger extent, a reflection of the deep

divisions that exist. That is inescapable, but one does not have to resign oneself to such a limited role or *raison d'être*. There is a challenge to extend ourselves to leadership rather than to content ourselves with spokespersonship alone.

Unlike doctors, politicians do not have to swear an oath to do no harm. It probably would not solve anything if they did, however, given that the divisions in our society mean that oaths are contentious in themselves. The real purpose of politics and the justification of political leadership is to find ways of overcoming such divisions.

A physician uses the symptoms to diagnose the illness; too many politicians use the symptoms to ignore the underlying political problems. The cycles of violence which have so disfigured our history perpetuated themselves because they were seen as the problem, not as a symptom of a general political failure to create adequate political institutions. In this divided island, only institutions which will accommodate the different traditions can guarantee a peaceful and democratic future. We need institutions which allow for the expression rather than the suppression of difference.

Without an adequate definition of the problem and some degree of consensus on the diagnosis, it is impossible to treat it and we would be restricted to the political equivalent of using leeches. Indeed, the progress made so far towards a peaceful island has been greatly facilitated by the gradual development of a minimal consensus on diagnosis, though unsurprisingly the prescriptions remain extremely diverse.

Politicians operate without anaesthesia. Even though some political leaders see themselves as amateur anaesthetists, it is not the job of public representatives to provide unjustified reassurance to their supporters. It is a politician's job to tell supporters that there are serious problems to be overcome and that this can only be done if all are prepared to engage in a radical re-examination of presuppositions, prejudices and inherited hatreds. This is perhaps the equivalent of the important role of Health Education and awareness programmes.

Bearing this in mind, I would like to emphasise a certain number of principles which have been important in the peace process so far.

First, we must address the problem of difference. There are three options in the face of difference: to pretend it does not exist, to combat it or to accommodate it. We have seen the failure of the Stalinist attempt to pretend that difference either does not exist or is an irrelevance. We have all been sickened by the efforts of the warlords in the former Yugoslavia to eradicate difference by killing and ethnic cleansing. In Ireland, the eradication of difference has been a regrettable part of our history. We have suffered from the activities of those who

thought that being Irish or British was a matter of life and death and who were prepared to make sure that it was. It seems that the only rational, human and realistic course of action is to try to seek arrangements which will allow different traditions to live together while preserving their identities. The only sensible way forward is to accept difference as inevitable and see it as a basic and a natural principle of human society.

The European Union is the greatest example of conflict resolution in human history. Countries which had spent centuries invading, occupying, expelling and massacring each other came together freely to work in their common interests and to ensure that war could no longer be a way of settling their differences. This example proves that it is possible to establish institutions that allow for common policies without submerging the variety of cultures and traditions. The experience of the EU affords a good many lessons for those who still have to deal with the consequences of difference being perceived as a threat, both in Ireland and further afield. There is much that can be adapted from the EU for our eventual domestic use.

Force, or the threat of force, is not a useful method of dealing with difference and often reinforces identities that might otherwise be only a minor part of a person's life. The use of force also generates more force.

Differences can only be accommodated by dialogue and agreement. The basis for the cease-fires by both loyalists and republicans is the acceptance of this principle. Those organisations previously involved in violence now agree that only through negotiation can a suitable settlement be worked out. Neither side can force the other to accept the unacceptable. The peace has held because of the common commitment to agreement. It is time we moved on to serious talks on the content of an eventual political accord supported by all traditions in Ireland.

We must be imaginative about political structures. No one should be scared by political change per se, though clearly change must be brought about by agreement. Change is as fundamental to human society as diversity: without it, stagnation is inevitable. Stagnation itself is a cause of conflict, just as its biological equivalent causes degeneracy and disease.

In a divided society, it is vital that the institutions reflect the needs and aspirations of all sections of society. Creating institutions that can command the consent of all citizens of whatever identity is not a simple task, but there is no doubt that it can be done.

Complexity and diversity are increasingly recognised by scientists as the crucial organising factors in the natural world. Why shouldn't it be the same in the social and political world?

We should denounce systems, simple or complex, which serve to exclude citizens of any or all traditions from the decision-making process.

The most urgent requirement now is to overcome the obstacles to comprehensive all-party negotiations. Though we have succeeded in putting a stop to violence, we have yet to make the peace.

There is a long way to go before a political settlement can be concluded to which all sections of our divided people can give their allegiance. Such a settlement will be necessary if our people are to look forward to a future where all our energies are devoted to overcoming the massive political, economic and social challenges facing our society. We have to ensure that the conflict which has so disfigured our society becomes and remains a distant and tragic memory.

To achieve this goal will require serious negotiations in which all relevant parties to the conflict engage in the overriding task of finding new political arrangements that will reflect the interests and aspirations of all traditions in Ireland.

The keys to the eventual political understanding for which all our people are crying out can therefore be easily identified: the need for a speedy beginning to all-inclusive negotiations; and the recognition that an acceptable political system can only be created by agreement. There is no place for any form of duress, physical or moral, in the creation of new genuinely democratic institutions. Nor is there any room for the type of thinking which is dominated by notions of victory and defeat.

The need for agreement on the future of Northern Ireland is generally accepted by all parties and by the Irish and British governments. The Downing Street Declaration made this clear, as have subsequent comments by the various parties and the two governments. Both governments have made it clear that they accept the right of the Irish people to define their own future political institutions and that their wishes will not be overridden by either state. The British government, for instance, has made it clear that it has no selfish or strategic motive to hold on to Northern Ireland against the will of its people. It is up to the people of Ireland, North and South, unionist and nationalist, to map out an agreement.

It is important that the opportunity to create political agreement in Ireland for the first time is seized as rapidly as possible. All-inclusive talks should take place at the earliest possible date. It is not helpful to impose pre-conditions on such talks, since the whole purpose of negotiating is to surmount the difficulties which the pre-conditions undoubtedly reflect. It is better to address the underlying conditions from which pre-conditions emerge, concentrating on the problems rather than the symptoms.

The crucial task is to take the gun out of Irish politics for once and for all. The only way to do that is to tackle the problems of division, mistrust, and hatred which led people to resort to violence.

Since the cessations of violence, the major preliminary question has been answered. Groups formerly committed to the use of force have made it clear that they are prepared to enter into negotiations on the understanding that they are determined to use exclusively peaceful and political methods to pursue their objectives. That is the major touchstone for all-inclusive negotiations.

Although all-inclusive negotiations are the only possible route to peace, the difficulties involved in bringing about a successful conclusion should not be underestimated. Clearly, the parties involved have considerable differences of opinion which will not be changed overnight. Our history of violence and conflict has left many wounds which will not easily heal. The extent of poverty and deprivation has alienated many people of all traditions from the political process. We do not have a culture of negotiation and agreement.

Three reasons can be cited to show that an eventual political agreement is feasible and can be brought to fruition: the underlying common interests of our citizens, international support for the peace process, and the emergence of political agreements in other divided societies throughout the world.

Despite political differences, there is a vast area of economic and social policy where our divided peoples are united and where they can work together without compromising on deeply and sincerely held convictions. As a peripheral region of the European Union, we have a common interest in adopting a united approach to our European partners just as we have such a common interest in our relations with the rest of the world. We have a common interest in developing our economic position within the global economy and in establishing fair patterns of trade in international markets. The more we get used to pursuing our common interests, the more we can address our political divisions.

The support and goodwill of our friends in the European Union, the US and the Commonwealth are assets of enormous value. The interest shown in the peace process by the outside world is very helpful in building confidence among our peoples and in combatting the tendency to think in narrow

and self-defeating terms. Seeing how diverse peoples throughout the world have ordered their affairs is a useful corrective against an excessively Anglo- or Hiberno-centric view of the world.

The emergence of peace processes in divided societies in other parts of the world is a massive boost for confidence in the possibility of negotiated agreements. In South Africa, Nelson Mandela and F.W. de Klerk have produced an agreement far more successful than anyone thought possible even two years ago. Given sufficient determination and imagination, political structures that respect diversity and difference and that reconcile former enemies are possible and indeed the only path to peace.

As with many medical interventions we cannot guarantee that there is absolutely no risk. Without taking a course with its element of possible risk, however, there may be no hope of recovery.

We can usefully reflect on some words from Martin Luther King who said on the evening of his death, '... I have seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know that we as a people will get to the promised land'.

On an earlier occasion Martin Luther King offered counsel which is valuable for the motivation and morale of clinicians and politicians alike and relevant to frustrations now being experienced – 'We must accept finite disappointment, but we must never lose infinite hope'.

He also challenged all of us to reach beyond the confines of our given orthodoxies or our own local and subjective perspectives and to embrace mutual acceptance and human solidarity. He offered a most meaningful interpretation for health and wealth in this world and at the same time tried to rally us above notions of narrow nationalism. With words that are a most appropriate reference for an international health lecture Martin Luther King said:

'As long as there is poverty in the world I can never be rich, even if I have a billion dollars. As long as diseases are rampant and millions of people in this world cannot expect to live more than twenty-eight or thirty years, I can never be totally healthy even if I just got a good checkup at the Mayo Clinic. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. This is the way our world is made. No individual or nation can stand out boasting of being independent. We are interdependent'.