

All it takes is just a little patience...

Kluwer Mediation Blog

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I'm not sure conflict resolution is quite what Guns n Roses had in mind when they wrote those lyrics but having survived the festive season, which in itself always requires a good deal of patience, I decided to reflect on just how important and valuable the gift of patience is for anyone trying to work with conflict. Actually, what really triggered my thinking about patience was not what I was doing over the holidays but rather what Richard Haass and his colleague, Meghan O'Sullivan were trying to do in Belfast over the holidays.

Against a background of a year of heightened tensions and increased violence in the North, Mr. Haass and Ms. O'Sullivan were asked to chair a series of meetings and negotiations with an aim to addressing some of the most challenging issues in Northern Ireland post-Good Friday Agreement, including parades, flags and emblems and dealing with the legacy of the Troubles. Six months, 33 days of meetings and negotiations and over 600 submissions later, the deadline of 31 December 2013 was reached without consensus having been achieved on the draft Agreement, to the disappointment of many and the disillusionment of many more.

One could forgive those living outside the Great Britain and Ireland for wondering what all the fuss is about. How could minor issues such as parades and flags prove so intractable when all the "major" issues were agreed upon during the peace process of the late 1990s. Even a few hundred kilometres south we hear about the latest incidents during the marching season, the flag protests and the arguments over how to deal with the past on the news, but then go about our business without paying it much further attention. It is easy to forget that for the citizens of Northern Ireland, and for all those directly and indirectly affected by the Troubles these issues are the ones that need to be addressed if real progress is to be made in Northern Ireland, and if real peace is to be found.

How quickly we have adjusted to the enormous political changes that have taken place in the North, to the fact that the border between here and there is no longer manned by soldiers who are armed to the teeth, to the fact that we no longer hear of bombings taking place every few weeks. And yet it was only 15 years ago that the Omagh bombing took place, one of the worst atrocities of the Troubles, which, in peacemaking terms, is a very short time. Contemporaries of mine (and I'm not that old) lost parents and friends in the Troubles, and grew up in constant fear and anxiety. And this, really is the key. While political institutions and structures of governance can change relatively quickly, change takes much longer at a community and individual level. Germans, for example, and of course many others, are still dealing with the legacy of the holocaust nearly 70 years on. How can we expect the citizens of Northern Ireland to put the Troubles behind them in a mere 15 years?

Without wishing in any way to simplify the challenges faced in Northern Ireland, the issues causing the current problems seem to be focused on two core human needs – the need to have and maintain an identity, and the need for justice. In dealing with such fundamental needs, and such a long history of conflict over identity, freedom, nationality, justice and much more, is it really reasonable to expect that six months of talks can reach consensus between five different parties, each representing a significant breadth of communities and individuals when the topics for agreement are so deep rooted?

And this is where, I hope, a bit of patience will come into play. The Oxford dictionary defines patience as "the capacity to accept or tolerate delay, problems, or suffering without becoming annoyed or anxious". Rather than throw in the towel, declare the talks process a failure, and revert to aggression and intolerance, which, as we mediators know is often underpinned by anxiety, let both the lawmakers and the communities involved look at the progress made, the fact that all the parties sat around the same table, a fact in itself unthinkable 20 years ago, and that dialogue took place and continues to take place. May they all find the resources to tolerate the delay, and the problems that they face on a daily basis, while they work towards change. As mediators we know that the road to consensus can be painfully slow, and that change, be it in attitudes, in behaviour, in opinions, takes time. All the more so when the history of a conflict is long, and when the wounds of that conflict are deep and still only beginning to heal.

Let us not write off any attempts to bring about peace, or even dialogue or a little more understanding just because a certain period of time has elapsed. Let us all be a little more patient and let the progress that has been made take root and lead to the next step and the next step. A whole new year stretches out ahead. Let's be patient, keep the dialogue going and continue to build a lasting peace in Northern Ireland.

Note – For the text of the draft Agreement formulated by Richard Haass and Meghan O'Sullivan see <http://panelofpartiesnie.com/> which also features a very helpful two page factsheet on the process.