

Better Conversations And Respectful Dialogue

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So much to blog about this month. We had a really great time in Edinburgh with Ken Cloke recently. Ken kindly agreed to be our first Patron for [Collaborative Scotland](#).

We held an event in the Scottish Parliament for leaders of civic Scotland and a number of members of the Scottish Parliament, many of whom, inspired by Ken's words, signed our [Commitment to Respectful Dialogue](#).

Our day-long Story-Telling event with Ken further reinforced the importance of dialogue and collaboration in political and social issues, as well as in conflict resolution. We'll have video clips on the Collaborative Scotland site soon.

And then there was the mediation in which I started out with private meetings with the parties, while lying flat on a bed in a bedroom I had commandeered at the mediation venue. I had been hit by food poisoning on the sleeper train en route to the mediation and was quite unable to stand up at the beginning of the day. It certainly focussed minds and, as the day progressed and medication kicked in, we made progress. I have never before taken a bath during a mediation but that was one benefit of having the sanctuary of my own bedroom while the parties were working on other things. After ten months of stalemate, a deal was done at 7.29pm.

However, for me, the most remarkable experience has been [Collaborative Scotland's Better Conversations Bus Tour](#).

For a number of years, I have fantasised about organising a rock-band type tour of rural parts of Scotland, taking the message of mediation and respectful dialogue to the more peripheral areas of my country. This dream was realised last week as we set off in our specially-liveried mini-bus, operated by a top tourist agency, and sponsored by a number of regional organisations. In six days, I and the small team travelling with me visited thirteen towns, villages and even smaller communities in the north and west Highlands of Scotland, following much of the route of the now-famous [North Coast 500](#).

What a privilege it turned out to be. From town hall meetings with flip charts and group brainstorming about common goals for the future, to one to ones with imaginative innovators and battle-weary local politicians, to full-blown discussions about neuro-science and cognitive bias, to persuading an older resident that coming to our meeting might just be different to all the others. So it turned out: "This is the first time in 40-50 years that people have come here and talked with us like this", he concluded.

"Funny how it takes an outside facilitator to get us talking about these things but I am glad you came" was the feedback in another meeting. The response was almost universally positive. People want to be listened to, without an agenda being imposed on them. They welcome a structure, a bit of guidance on process and the freedom to take risks in a safe space.

What struck me most though was how important it is to return power to local communities, enabling them to take responsibility for their own futures. Declining public funding means that it is imperative to release local energies and creativity. More bangs for less public bucks. However, it is more than that. Returning autonomy and self-belief to communities which already have much of what it takes to thrive is essential. The future of our whole economy depends on it. And our work as mediators and facilitators has much to offer to this worthy goal.

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