
Kluwer Mediation Blog

Knowing our Neighbours – a Mediator’s Reflection

John Sturrock (Core Solutions Group) · Saturday, July 29th, 2017

I am travelling back from a couple of days in and around Dublin, discussing an initiative on respectful political dialogue with politicians, academics and conflict resolution professionals. It was a privilege to spend time at Glencree, the centre for peace and reconciliation which was one of those places where so much was done in recent times (and is still being done) behind the scenes to ease the conflict between communities in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland (<http://glencree.ie/>).

I was struck by a remark made by one of my hosts to the effect that most people in the Republic of Ireland knew very little about their neighbours in the north. This is on an island which covers about 32,000 square miles (a bit less than the size of Indiana) and where the distance from Dublin to Belfast is about 100 miles.

Two weeks earlier I had visited Moscow and St Petersburg for the first time. This trip to Russia was nothing less than a revelation. How little I knew about that great country, which spans nine time zones and has a land mass greater than the surface area of the planet Pluto. The traditions, the culture, the ethnicity, the language, the economics and, most of all, the geography. A country which has been invaded countless times in its history, suffering extraordinary losses, not least the over 20 million deaths sustained in World War 2. A country whose western and south western borders are with nations which were once a part of the Soviet monolith but are now viewed as satellites of a West which in turn is seen, perhaps unsurprisingly, as unfriendly. (It was interesting to learn that, for many Russians, “Ukraine” means “borderlands” of Russia). However tangible is the threat, the feeling of insecurity seems very real.

None of this may justify some of the Russian government’s contemporary actions. But it does help one to understand them better and to be thoughtful about what steps are most likely to ease tensions.

Separately, Russian youngsters in these cities have, we learned, very similar aspirations to those of our own: a good job, an opportunity to better themselves and to benefit from modern life. They experience too the frustration of property values well beyond their means. In the hinterland, it seems like life may be similar to that in the US hinterland. Shades of Hillbilly Elegy. Indeed, our very seasoned Moscovian guide pondered that the Russian psyche may be much more like that of America than we dare imagine.

How little we know about each other. How much we are prepared to assume however. And how easily we are led to judgements. These tendencies seem detrimental to building sustainable

relationships which will enable us to survive and thrive, whoever and wherever we are. The same applies, of course, to the commercial disputes in which many of us now participate as mediators.

How little the disputants often really know about each other: their financial situations, the problems of supply chains, the failures of sub-contractors, the effect of a change in senior staff, the discovery of an unforeseen physical problem with a project, the limitations of technology, the frailties of human nature. Contracts are designed of course to circumvent many of these imponderables. But we all know how expensive, time consuming and destructive a contractual dispute can become and how important getting under the surface to the real issues can be. That is where, even late in the day, a good mediator can add real value.

A good mediator will look for ways to enable people to get to know each other and understand more about how they really see things. I often invite all concerned to have breakfast together. That allows them to mingle: lawyers, experts, clients and support teams. After a few words from me, the principal decision-makers often stay behind for an informal chat together with me. How revealing that can be, how helpful to the establishment of a working relationship which can pay dividends later. In some matters, that moment can be cathartic, tough, difficult, uneasy, a revelation. The point is that it has the possibility of beginning the kind of change in tone which may be essential to move matters forward. And to enable those involved to find out what is really going on, what it is really about. What lies under the surface?

How much more might be done if we could reverse engineer some of our disputes and encourage business and individuals to consider and understand, at the contract/relationship-creation stage, some of the human and other non-legal or even non-commercial factors affecting their counterparts. More robust and sustainable deals might be done. Much cost and angst might be avoided. We might even hope that international diplomacy and foreign affairs would (re?)turn more to such an approach in the dangerous years ahead, rather than seeming to perpetuate stereotypes and often poorly founded mythology.

Funnily enough, I have just been reading the private memoirs of my mentor, Michael Westcott, who, a generation ago, was Secretary to the Edinburgh Conversations, a series of tripartite confidential meetings between military, academic and political experts from the USSR, the USA and the UK, which have been credited with helping to ease relations at the height of the then Cold War. I had the privilege to attend one of these in 1983. Just one anecdote: in the first meeting in Edinburgh, sessions took place in an informal lounge setting with easy chairs, no formal agenda, and good food and Scottish entertainment. The reciprocal meeting that year in Moscow was initiated in a very formal room with representatives of the delegations ranged opposite each other across a large table. On the crucial matter of seating arrangements, it took much skill by my mentor to find an acceptable compromise with his Russian hosts which would enable the conviviality of Edinburgh to be regained. Just as in Glencree, and Corrymeela in Northern Ireland (<http://www.corrymeela.org/>), so much was achieved just by finding a seating arrangement which encouraged sworn enemies to talk. And to find out that they had much more in common than ever separated them. In those talks, they agreed that using nuclear weapons against each other was unthinkable. A similar thought crossed my mind as I watched young folk enjoying an early evening drink in St Petersburg. Just like our own young people.

We return to the oft-asked question: Who is our neighbour? What do we really know about him/her/them? How much might we gain by really trying to get to know them? What do we need to do about it?

The Scottish poet **Iain Crichton Smith** writes in “**Neighbour**“:

*Build me a bridge over the stream
to my neighbour’s house
where he is standing in dungarees
in the fresh morning.*

O ring of snowdrops
spread wherever you want
and you also blackbird
sing across the fences.

My neighbour, if the rain falls on you,
let it fall on me also
from the same black cloud
that does not recognise gates.

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