

Kluwer Mediation Blog

Giving Peace a Chance – revisiting some lessons from history

Rosemary Howell (University of New South Wales) · Sunday, January 22nd, 2023



This week the facilitator of a conflict resolution group to which I belong posed this question:

‘What is the greatest challenge currently facing us?’

My answer came quickly – the threat of hyper-polarization in an increasingly dangerous world.

It was not particularly original or insightful of me – hyper-polarization seems to feature constantly in conflict resolution commentaries and blogs. I read it everywhere. I have been following the work of the **Conflict Information Consortium (CIC)**, originally based at the University of Colorado-Boulder (from 1988) and, since 2020, a freestanding organisation. Its **Beyond Intractability** newsletter describes hyper-polarization as the most serious and neglected problem facing humanity, stemming from our inability to handle intractable conflict constructively.

Its online discussion on the [Hyper-polarization Challenge to the Conflict Resolution Field](#) has become a long-running dialogue with many contributors.

Have we failed to value the lessons from the past?

Running parallel to the work of CIC, in challenging us to do things differently and better, is the excellent webinar series from the Program on Negotiation at Harvard called the ‘Kelman Seminar Series’. In April of last year it featured [Why Peacemakers Fail](#) – challenging conflict resolution

professionals in public and private spaces to look at the lessons failure brings. In September it provided a wonderful reconnection with history – [A Tribute to Herbert C. Kelman](#) which took us back to the significant work of trail-blazing peacemaker Kelman and his Interactive Problem-Solving Method of resolving conflict. The work of Kelman and his colleagues is remarkable and surprisingly relevant to the world in which we live right now although it is rarely referenced today.

It is worth revisiting.

Kelman's greatest influence appears to have come from **John Burton**, an Australian diplomat turned scholar. He urged us to look at the deep underlying human issues before we start to look at the conflict. He identified conflict as a problem between relationships that stemmed from failing to meet the five fundamental human needs of:

- Identity
- Recognition
- Autonomy
- Security and
- Sense of Justice

Readers familiar with the work of Dan Shapiro will recognise Burton's work as an important influence on Shapiro's [Five Core Concerns](#).

Much of Burton's work is out of print now, only readily available in [scholarly articles outlining his work](#). These note that as well identifying the fundamental, human needs, Burton gave us two lessons that are significant now:

- 'the conflict behaviour of communities and states comprises alterable components...' He linked this first lesson to a second:
- 'the labelling of conflictual behaviour as aggressive, deviant, terrorist, irrational or in some way pejorative reflects an absence of understanding of the problems concerned.'

We need to pay attention to these lessons.

More lessons from Kelman

Kelman brought Burton's work into an active peace-making model based on exploring unmet human needs. He emphasised the need for mutual recognition and responsiveness from both sides.

His most important contribution to our thinking is in his identification of three levels of possible change – [Compliance, Identification, and Internalization](#) which provide us with [Three Processes of attitude change](#). He identified conflict resolution as a change in the relationship with the other side – reminding us that sustainable peace is only possible if there is a measurable change in attitude and belief so that each party internalises a new way of being in the relationship with the former disputant.

He identified for us what we are experiencing in this hyper-polarized world – that reconciliation is the hardest internal change.

So...?

I am choosing to learn more of the lessons from these trailblazing peacemakers and to add their work into the small influence I am able to exert as a conflict resolution professional.

I am reprising John Lennon and choosing to ‘**Give Peace a Chance.**’


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The graphic features a black background with white text and a circular icon. The icon depicts a group of stylized human figures, with one figure in the center being magnified by a magnifying glass. The background is accented with horizontal lines in blue and green.

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