

Britain's Global Role in a Changing World

From a talk given at the Uniting for Peace Spring Conference 2015

The Peace Party

In case you haven't heard of us, I'd like to start with a few words about the Peace Party.

We were first registered as a political party under the full name of "The Peace Party – Non-violence, Justice, Environment" in 2001. We are, of course, anti-war, but peace means a lot more than that. Diana Francis puts it well in her book *From Pacification to Peacebuilding*:

If we are to be true peacebuilders we must face up to a challenge from which we cannot escape: the need to discover or create the means of upholding those things that are agreed by societies at every level to be for the common good, whether the agreements take the form of recognised custom, legislation or treaty. ... If the cruel and lawless destructiveness of war is to be overcome, we need to put immense effort into developing our own concepts and strategies of power, including, on occasion, non-lethal enforcement. We also need to devise and 'sell' the cooperative and ethical concepts and systems necessary for deciding what needs to be enforced, and by whom. All this will mean changing both minds and hearts (our own included).¹

In short, peace is political.

But if peace is political it needs a political voice. It has many voices, campaigning against arms trade, against arbitrary arrest and torture, for human rights and for gender equality, to mention but a few, but none of these is explicitly political. They work 'outside' the democratic system.

Consequently the peace movement is effectively disenfranchised when it comes to the democratic process. If your priorities are demilitarisation and disarmament who are you going to vote for?

As well as a political voice peace requires political action. Without candidates, activists and resources there will still be no political voice. Which means we need your support, whether that takes the form of membership, financial contribution, or standing as a candidate 'on the Peace Party ticket'. Help us to get peace on to the political agenda!

Britain's Global Role

The title of today's Conference is *Britain's Global Role in a Changing World*.

But before thinking about what our global role might be, it's worth considering whether we should even have such a thing. Some people would argue, no doubt, that we ought to let the world get on as best it can, and stop interfering. They will point out that many, if not most, of our interventions, from the East India Company to the Iraq war, have been pretty disastrous. Others may point to this same history and suggest that it actually gives us a responsibility, even if it's only to help clear up the mess we've made (and are still making).

It's a moot point. Personally, I'm inclined to think that guilt is not a very reliable motivation. We're not responsible for the actions of our forebears. Indeed it's questionable whether they were entirely responsible for them themselves.

Having said that, we have to accept that we live in one of the world's richest countries, and that, it seems to me, gives us a moral responsibility if nothing else. But surely this should be a responsibility to help, to make things better not worse, not to act solely in our own interests, or to 'punch above our weight in the global arena'.

¹ Diana Francis (2010), *From Pacification to Peacebuilding: A Call to Global Transformation* p109.

And right now things are particularly, and tragically, messy. Highly complex scores, rivalries, grievances and mutual resentments are being fought out in the Middle East. But whatever part our predecessors may have played in creating an inherently unstable situation in the first place, this time it's not, primarily, about us. We can't even identify where in the maze of conflicting sides our best interests lie. Fortunately, perhaps, this does at least limit the scope of western powers for supplying weapons to one side or another and so exacerbating the situation, and disrupts the theatre of antagonism between, say, the US and Iran.

Faced with this turmoil it is difficult to see what could be done, and this simple fact may encourage a rare bout of modesty and humility, since for once we don't even think we know how to fix the problem. Perhaps we might begin to realise that there is one objective we could pursue, even if we do not yet see a way of doing so, and that is de-escalation. This, I suggest, is the proper role for the West in general and particularly for Britain.

How, I do not know, but clearly we should be talking to people, including those we do not like (we can look at legal remedies and sanctions once the killing has stopped) and creating forums where people can talk to one another. This 'behind the scenes' work has a long and valuable tradition, and has been carried out by Quakers (to my knowledge, and there are no doubt others) bringing together opposing sides during the conflicts in Ireland and elsewhere. However for this sort of activity to be most effective it needs on occasions to be able to speak with the authority of a government.

We can also set an example, by not taking sides, by offering humanitarian assistance wherever possible, and by resettling refugees in a spirit of generous welcome rather than grudging duty. What we certainly should not be doing is sabre-rattling,

Critical Issues

The question is, what is stopping us from having a more peaceful world? The issues are both cultural and economic. Looking at cultural issues first, it seems to me although people generally feel that peace is rather a good idea, many of our social norms and assumptions have been formed in a world where violent conflict was taken for granted. Let's look at a few of these.

Cultural Issues

First there is the 'balance of power' theory. This holds that peace is best maintained by ensuring that opposing groups are balanced in their ability to inflict damage on the each other. This doctrine (and it was actually called a 'doctrine') reached the height of absurdity in the 'cold war' era, in the form of mutually assured destruction (MAD). But any equilibrium that can be achieved through balance of power is inherently unstable. In reality it is doubtful whether the proponents of the theory actually believed it themselves, since the collapse of the Soviet Union was greeted with unanimous delight by the Western powers precisely because it disrupted the power balance – in their favour.

Behind the balance of power theory lies a seriously outdated assumption: that the only thing that prevents one country from attacking another is fear of counter-attack. Hence the 'defence' narrative, often expressed in the argument that we cannot afford to 'drop our guard' in this 'increasingly dangerous' world. In fact much of the danger comes from our maintaining 'defensive' measures (like Trident) that have the capacity to wipe out large swathes humanity at the press of a button, and which, to an outsider, are indistinguishable from a seriously 'aggressive posture'.

Coming down from the global to the social level we can see the pervasiveness of the culture of hostility reflected in many aspects of our daily lives. It's in the air we breathe. Take the veneration of competition for example. Or the media's obsession with conflict. Of course, competition and conflict are natural and probably essential aspects of social existence, but they have in many ways all but crowded out the softer and more positive virtues of cooperation and coexistence.

Economic Issues

Economics both underpins and is underpinned by culture. Cultural antagonism is supported by economic antagonism, as people often judge their economic success relative to their peers. Money has become the metric of success, and since we all, with very few exceptions, want to be successful, doing well has come to mean doing better than others.

One of the most direct ways in which this striving for economic success leads to increasingly sophisticated forms of violence is through the arms trade. War makes money for the rich, and in the process destroys the meagre lives of the poor. It is competition taken to its logical conclusion, untempered by compassion.

And conflict sells. One only has to look at the covers of the magazines at any supermarket checkout to see how harnessing the public fascination with conflict (real, or in many cases probably invented), makes money for the media. Perhaps this is relatively harmless, but I can't help thinking it helps to maintain a sort of 'ambience of violence' that inures people to the banal everyday violence of war, poverty, prejudice and social exclusion.

Then there's the question of inequality. This has to be one of the main causes of conflict, and drivers of crime. It provides the means and the motivation, both for those who acquire wealth 'legitimately' and for those who seek to obtain it by force or guile.

What can we do?

It would be hubris on a major scale to think we could make much of a dent in these colossal forces. I have great sympathy with those who decide simply to live their lives as well as they can and let the rest of the world do what the rest of the world wants to do. On the other hand times change and, wittingly or not, we are all part of that change – we are not alone. All over the world there are peace movements, people looking for a better way, people questioning.

The issues, as I have argued, are both cultural and economic, and we need to approach them, if we are going to approach them at all, on both of these fronts. Culturally, the challenge is to get people to think seriously about peace as a possibility, to get it, bit by bit, into the mainstream agenda. This will be a slow process to start with, at least, but you never know, sometimes change can be surprisingly rapid – like the fall of the Berlin Wall.

For all its many faults, our political system is essentially democratic, and based firmly on the rule of law. Clear and accessible mechanisms exist to put policies to the people so they can decide on their efficacy. Granted the mechanisms are flawed, but they are not so flawed that we cannot or should not use them. The important thing is to give people the opportunity to vote for peace – to 'give peace a chance'². By becoming the political voice of the peace movement the Peace Party aims to provide that opportunity, but to do so we will need your support.

The question of the economy is interesting. When Professor Francis Fukuyama³ pronounced 'the end of history' in 1992 he was promulgating a view that soon became widespread, that 'free market economics' was here to stay. Cracks have since appeared, with Fukuyama modifying his position somewhat, and more fundamental, if rather vaguer challenges being posed by the Occupy movement. Nevertheless the vast majority of people still see our economic system as a given, and assume that it couldn't be otherwise.

Alongside this passive acceptance of the status quo, however, a fundamental critique has evolved. This is not the time or place to go into it in detail but if you can find the time I strongly recommend

2 John Lennon (1969), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RkZC7sqImaM>

3 Prof. Francis Fukuyama (1992), *The End of History and the Last Man*, Free Press.

that you look up ‘Modern Monetary Theory’ and the work of Warren Mosler⁴, or Bill Mitchell⁵. Among other things it shows that the austerity agenda is not merely misguided but actually worsens the problems it is supposed to solve, and that if we wished to do so we could operate the economy for the public good.

This is fundamentally relevant to peace. It could allow us to eliminate extreme poverty, to reduce inequality and to maintain public services (like the NHS, transport, protection of the vulnerable and care of the elderly) at a high level. The ‘knock-on effect’ of changes like these would be huge. We could start to answer the age-old question, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” in the affirmative. Is it too much to hope that this would begin to engender a more generous spirit, so we could start to look on the world as somewhere that we could do some good, rather than simply a Pandora’s box of terrorism and other horrors?

Who knows? I don’t, but it’s worth a try!

Response to Jihadism

Jihadism is frequently presented as a new phenomenon. This is misleading. It may be useful to try to put the conflicts in the Arab world into some sort of context. I think we can see six distinct factors, only one of which is new. I hope you will forgive me for sketching these out extremely briefly – it would take several books to do the topic justice!

First, there are major geo-political rivalries. In common with the former Soviet Union countries arbitrary lines had been drawn around political entities that made sense to the colonial powers but had little or no inherent political integrity. Since the external controls were removed there has been an inevitable jockeying for power that will no doubt take several generations to resolve.

Second, there is an irresistible temptation for outside powers to try to influence the outcomes of these rivalries to their own advantage, so that internal struggles escalate into proxy wars. What *is* new in this process is the countries that are behind the proxies. Instead of the US, Britain, France, the USSR, China, these wars are becoming proxies for Arab states such as Saudi Arabia and Iran.

There’s also a strong strand of zealotry, which is exploited by the main actors to enhance the global perception of their power – a sort of hyper-cynical public relations exercise without a shred of humanity. But this isn’t new either. There is, and has been for as long as we have reliable records, a proportion of society that, for whatever reason, finds violence appealing. Couple this with a belief in martyrdom and you have a literally lethal concoction. But don’t we too honour those who are ‘willing to die for what they believe in’? What is the difference in principle between Laurie Lee, George Orwell and Ernest Hemingway going to fight in the Spanish Civil War, and young Muslims going to fight for what they see as a noble cause? We may not like the parallel, but we should at least look at it and see what it says to us. As Diana Francis says, “... this will mean changing both minds and hearts (our own included)”.

A fourth factor is (to use that unpleasant but apt neologism) ‘weaponization’. Most of the arms used anywhere in the world are made and sold by the US, Britain, Russia and France – in that order⁶. We supplied the tools people are using to slaughter each other on an industrial scale. This is not new either, but the weapons are progressively more destructive.

A fifth factor is the normalisation of violence. Whether it has been France, Britain, the US, or even ancient Rome that ruled the world, the ruler’s hegemony is always enforced by violence. So, inevitably, resistance is violent. When your daily life is spent in constant fear of a drone attack you are unlikely to feel charitably disposed towards the people who launch the drones.

4 <http://ineteconomics.org/new-economic-thinking/warren-mosler-what-modern-monetary-theory-tells-us-about-economic-policy>

5 <http://bilbo.economicoutlook.net/blog/?p=332>

6 <http://www.sipri.org/research/armaments/production/recent-trends-in-arms-industry>

And lastly a factor which we barely notice, and when we do we it is generally suffused with a romantic glow: social media and the internet, which have suddenly exposed traditional and conservative societies to all the excesses of Western culture. Unlike the other factors this one *is* new, and when considering its effects it behoves us to remember what our own society was like less than a century ago. Hardly exemplars of racial or sexual tolerance, and with an attitude to domestic violence that was similar to that practised in some of the conservative societies of which we now so self-righteously disapprove.

So much for analysis, but where does it get us? Well, to me it suggests two things. The first is that though ideology changes, the underlying causes of violence are not very different from what they always were. From which it seems to follow that the failed remedies of the past, if re-applied, will become the failed remedies of the future.

The second is the urgency of de-escalation. It's time, it seems to me, to stop trying to fix things by force because, to put it at its simplest, it never works. It never has worked, and it never will. Instead we should realise that even if, like disease, war is a natural part of the human condition, then like a disease it will eventually wipe us out unless we can halt its progress.

I have already talked about how we might go about this. But we should proceed with care, humility, modesty, and respect for those we are trying to influence. We do not need a rhetorical equivalent of gunboat diplomacy, and we shouldn't pander to our egos with talk of speaking softly while carrying a big stick. No one, these days, can risk carrying a stick big enough. So no more taking sides, no more playing to win. If we want peace, peace must be both our objective and our means of achieving it.

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