Black and white . . . or shades of grey?

John Sturrock has been fascinated by the referendum debate and believes that the binary nature of the question – yes or no – has meant that the opportunity for much richer discussion may have been missed

September 18 is a decisive day in our country's history, an unprecedented moment in time. Do we change the course of our history? Such a critical choice merits discussion of the highest quality. Indeed, whatever its outcome, the referendum on independence has profound implications for our futures. And yet, there is something about this referendum that has seemed unsophisticated. Much of the conversation has often seemed frustratingly simplistic. In reality, things are often more complicated than we are prepared to admit or reveal. But we have been compelled by the limited, binary nature of the question, decided for political reasons (and contrary to what appeared to be the preferred option for many), to adopt polarised positions and exclude discussion of many rich options. The question has placed constraints on our national consideration of our future.

What if both "Yes" and "No" are *right*? Or *wrong*? Or both right and wrong? What if we are missing another way? For example, what about a federal British Isles? Are we limiting our solutions by creating and taking "sides"? We engage in *debate* when we need *dialogue*. We engage in confrontation when we need collaboration. Nelson Mandela's biographer[1] puts it like this:

"Shades of grey are not easy to articulate. Black-and-white is seductive because it is simple and absolute. It appears clear and decisive. Because of that, we will often gravitate toward yes or no answers when a 'both' or a 'maybe' is closer to the truth. Some people will choose a categorical yes or no simply because they think it appears strong. But if we cultivate the habit of considering both – or even several – sides of a question, as Mandela did, of holding both good and bad in our minds, we may see solutions that would not otherwise have occurred to us. This way of thinking is demanding. Even if we remain wedded to our point of view, it requires us to put ourselves in the shoes of those with whom we disagree. That takes an effort of will, and it requires empathy and imagination. But the reward, as we can see in the case of Mandela, is something that can fairly be described as wisdom."

These words reflect the way one of the greatest political leaders of any generation addressed the great question in his country. They have resonance for us in Scotland today as we address ours. Yet, that we describe the referendum discussions as a "debate" tells us much. "Debate" has its origins in the Anglo-French "debatre": "to beat down" or "resolve by beating down".[2]

In sharp contrast to the sophistication revealed in the Mandela text, classical debate can encourage us, literally, to debase those who disagree with our point of view and can lead, as we have seen in Scotland, to polarisation, antagonism, personal attacks and animosity (think of a few of those television moments, not to mention the twitter-sphere). This has implications for the state of things post-referendum and indeed for public confidence in politicians generally and in what they tell us.

This is nothing new of course. Westminster-style partisan politics which, notwithstanding aspirations to the contrary, seems to have influenced so much of what happens in the chamber in Holyrood, survives in the paradigm of government and opposition. It thrives and indeed is sustained by confrontation, partisanship, the finding of fault, personal attack, party discipline and a largely binary system. Careers are made and broken by this system. Whole structures exist to maintain it, and are dependent on it. It will be said (by some, with an interest to preserve?) that this system is necessary to hold those in power to account. However, all the anecdotal evidence and two recent excellent books on the failure of government[3] suggest that this is not so. Indeed, a common expression on the back cover of these books is "cock-up". What has been described as the dualistic, adversarial model produces simplistic analyses, poor scrutiny, defensiveness, a culture of right/wrong and unattractive politics. Parliamentary committee meetings can often appear to sanction verbal assaults on witnesses whose preparation is dominated by self-protection and risk aversion and whose defensiveness simply creates the very sterility which frustrates, and exhausts, us. Worse than that, this model leads to some pretty disastrous policies and decisions, and a culture of cover up and hubris. For examples, read the books ...

SEVERAL SIDES TO MOST STORIES

The idea that many of the world's problems are much more complex than dualist (yes/no) thinking permits is not new. In reality, many of the conflicts within and between nations, whether political, economic or social, are multi-dimensional, finely nuanced, multi-layered. Were it not so, they would have resolved before now. There are no easy, right or wrong, solutions. There are several sides to most stories, many different perspectives. The dirty filters of assumption, culture, (mis-)perception, bias, and all the other many cognitive illusions, abound. What is "good" to some is "bad" to others – and vice versa. That is the reality, and it is likely that none is as clearly "right" or "wrong" as we might first think.

"You never really understand things from another person's point of view ... until you climb into his skin and walk around in it," said Atticus Finch, in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. And yet, how rarely do our politicians – or any of us who seek to influence others – do just that, frankly acknowledging other points of view, recognising difference and showing appreciation of multiple perspectives? How hard that is, what "effort of will", "empathy" and "imagination" it requires ... and yet how valuable and transformative it can be to view matters from your protagonist's vantage point. Perish the thought, but it might even result in solutions that would "not otherwise have occurred".

What can we do? The influential conflict resolution writer and regular visitor to Scotland, Kenneth Cloke, discusses the

distinction between political *debate* and *dialogue* in his latest book, charmingly entitled *The Dance of Opposites*[4]. The attraction of *dialogue* is that it encourages fuller consideration of the real issues. "Dialogue is fundamentally a practice of examining thought together, leading to new ways of thinking."[5] Shades of Mandela. We can ask questions that really get under the surface: What really concerns us? What do we really aspire to – and need – as a people? How do we achieve it in a complex world? What are the options? What are the real needs and objectives underlying this policy? How can these be achieved realistically? What are the alternatives to such and such a course of action? How much will each cost? What other risks are there? How can we add value? What in the "opposition's" criticisms might be valid? How could we involve "them" in improving this policy? How do we achieve the desired outcome in a complex world? How can we build on our counterparts' suggestions and look for multiple options, where "both" – or many – ideas may be valid? By what criteria can multiple options be analysed? What common criteria can we find to assess our choices and make decisions rationally and imaginatively? More particularly, why are we not able to discuss a federal option?[6] How might that work? What are the pros and cons? What about the other "grey" possibilities? And how can we set boundaries and hold people in official positions properly accountable and, at the same time, acknowledge their humanity and imperfection? We all make mistakes, don't we? How do we minimise the risks and maximise the potential?

Apart from anything else, whatever the outcome on 18 September, the Scotland of the future needs to be a creative, collaborative, collegiate nation or we'll not achieve what we can – and desire – to achieve. And, of course, we will still need to work – and live – constructively with other parts of these islands, whatever the constitutional position. We will be living in the same geographic space as before. We will need to nurture and sustain the many relationships that will remain as relevant in the aftermath as now. However independent we may be, whatever notional boundaries we may erect, we will also still be interdependent. Better dialogue can be our saviour.

It is of course the case that many politicians and civil servants have an inclination to be, and an aptitude as, non-positional negotiators. Arguably, the so-called "Edinburgh Agreement" between the UK government at Westminster and the Scottish government at Holyrood, governing the conduct of the independence referendum, is a good example of Getting to Yes (or, for balance, The Power of a Positive No)[7] in practice. No doubt, much of what is done behind the scenes in politics does reflect good practice in collaborative problem-solving. But it is not the norm, nor it seems are most politicians and officials sufficiently skilled in the genre.

Collaborative Scotland (www.collaborativescotland.org) was established to help turn the rhetoric of collaboration and mutual interest into actual practice. If we can achieve that, we can transform this country, whatever the result of the referendum. Indeed, the anecdotal evidence is that millions of pounds could be saved by avoiding unnecessary, often futile, disputes and conflict about policy, allocation of funding and distribution of resources. In turn, millions could be generated in a sustainable, environmentally appropriate and creative way. A prize worth working towards? This is no longer a "nice to do" but essential to our future prosperity, nay our survival.

As an example of this, the great lateral thinker, Edward de Bono, captures well the idea of maximising gains in a mutually interested way in his principle of "co-opetition". Transcending both competition with its zero sum connotations and the kind of co-operation which results in compromise, de Bono challenges us to think differently by adding value in a way which literally expands the notional pie and addresses our real underlying needs, hopes and aspirations. This requires us to move away from simply building up our own arguments and, at the same time, knocking down those of others with whom we (apparently and perhaps only superficially) disagree. Familiar though this pattern is, that can no longer be the name of the game. We must move on from "right" and "wrong", "either/or" solutions.

ENGAGE WITH CONTRADICTIONS

Simple though we may wish life to be, we must also learn to live with paradox, to engage with the contradictions of life, within ourselves and in the world, and resist the temptation to make them mutually exclusive. For G.K. Chesterton, "a paradox is often a truth standing on its head to get our attention". We may need to turn upside down to see things as they are. Can we hold the truth (any truth?) in both (or many) positions without dismissing any of them? How well do we tolerate ambiguity, uncertainty, mystery?

Richard Rohr, the Franciscan priest, tells us that the contemporary mind has almost no training in how to think paradoxically, being stuck with dualist thought and locked into making seemingly clever distinctions, while devoid of wisdom. Hence, he says, our angry politics – and our angry religion. So, reflecting the reality of complexity, let's build on our "opponents'" suggestions and look for multiple options where "both" – or many – ideas may be valid. Let's find common criteria to assess our choices and make decisions together and imaginatively.[8] Imagine such an approach in Scotland's parliament ...

Collaborative Scotland contends that how we engage with each other in Scotland, and with those outside Scotland, may be just as important as any vote. We believe that it is in the interests of a flourishing Scotland that all of our discussions, before and after the referendum, continue to be conducted with civility and dignity, as an essential foundation for the kind of collaboration which this article argues for.

To that end, our *Commitment to Respectful Dialogue* contains seven elements for effective dialogue. They are almost trite. No great manifesto. And yet, to practise these would be to transform politics, industry, professional life, financial services, neighbourhoods, communities and families in Scotland. Look at them and ask yourself: what if these were actually adhered to?

- Show respect and courtesy towards all those who are engaged in these discussions, whatever views they hold;
- Acknowledge that there are many differing, deeply held and valid points of view;
- Use language carefully and avoid personal or other remarks which might cause unnecessary offence;

"In Scots, as with many others, shame lingers and anger lurks, ready to cause us grief when we need it least. We find it hard to be kind, to ourselves or towards others

- Listen carefully to all points of view and seek fully to understand what concerns and motivates those with differing views from our own;
- Ask questions for clarification or when we may not understand what others are saying or proposing;
- Express our own views clearly and honestly with transparency about our motives and our interests;
- Respond to questions asked of us with clarity and openness and, whenever we can, with credible information.

Easy to suggest? Of course. Indeed, many of you reading this now will be saying to yourselves: "We have heard all of this before", "This is the usual touchy feely stuff", "This is not for me", "Even if I did this, he/she/they would not", "It will never work here ...".

And, of course, these are all true if we allow them to be. Mandela faced similar choices. He decided – and had the character and willpower – to do and be something, someone, different. If we think that this small country can punch above its weight, it needs exceptional people doing and being something different. Paradoxically, while these seven elements are often described as examples of "soft" skills, it takes strength, fortitude and willpower to adhere to them, a resilience which transcends our human tendency to default under pressure to instinctive and aggressive behaviour. I am writing this in the aftermath of the first Salmond/Darling "debate" where so much of this default behaviour was in evidence. What if each politician committed in advance to adhere to the seven elements of Respectful Dialogue?

DIFFERENT WAYS OF MAKING DECISIONS

A breakthrough is that many of our behavioural traits are now understood in a structured way. For example, the success of Nobel-laureate Daniel Kahnemann's "Thinking, Fast and Slow" has brought to our living rooms many examples of what have become known as cognitive illusions or "traps". Confirmation bias, reactive devaluation, attribution error, risk aversion, willful blindness, the list goes on. And we now understand that, in straitened circumstances or when feeling threatened, we will tend to resort to "fight or flight", evasive behaviour, just as our predecessors would when they faced unpredictable predators. However, our brain has developed to give us the facility to pause, consider, distil, reframe and reflect, all before speaking or acting. Nelson Mandela talked about the need to be calm and measured, to take time, to value our adversaries, let them save face. But many of us struggle with this. In Scots, as with many others, shame lingers and anger lurks, ready to cause us grief when we need it least. We find it hard to be kind, to ourselves or towards others. This understanding helps us to appreciate why, in a tense, binary, political debate, proponents of different views ("yes"/"no") might behave in ways which seem unattractive and evasive. It should also help us work towards different ways of making decisions and discussing policy.

What happens after the referendum will be significantly conditioned by how we all behave, the tone we set, the language we use, the extent to which we really listen to others who have held differing views, the attitude we display towards those who have apparently disagreed with us and our willingness to engage in respectful dialogue. If we can behave with civility, and find constructive ways to handle differences of view and difficult questions, we will influence the aftermath positively. This surely remains a worthy ambition for us all.

Like it or not, we live in a non-dualist world. We need to wrestle with complexity and ambiguity, nuance and subtlety. Above all, we need to acknowledge and celebrate that it is just fine to think that both "Yes" and "No" can be *right* – or *wrong* – with all the implications that such a conclusion has for our futures. The question may be binary, with its apparently categorical answer. The questions and answers in the months ahead need not be. To go back to our starting point, it is our collective responsibility to discover what "can fairly be described as wisdom".

I finish with a story, the name of whose teller I do not recall, of the rabbi in old Eastern Europe who came across two disputants who asked for his help in settling their dispute. Having heard the claimant, he said to him "You're absolutely right". The other man complained that the rabbi hadn't heard his side of the story. The rabbi apologised and listened to the other man, then told him "You're absolutely right". A bystander said: "Rabbi, you've just told each of them they're absolutely right – but that can't be so. They can't both be absolutely right". The rabbi turned to the bystander and said "Yes, you're absolutely right".

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www.collaborativescotland.org

FOOTNOTES

1 Richard Stengel in *Mandela's Way: Lessons on Life.*
2 And see Oliver Oscobar's excellent publication: *Public Dialogue and Deliberation* (Edinburgh Beltane).
3 *The Blunders of our Governments*, by King and Crewe, and *Conundrum: Why Every Government Gets Things Wrong*, by Bacon and Hope.
4 Kenneth Cloke will be visiting Scotland in November – details from www.core-solutions.com
5 David Bohm, theoretical physicist, who developed what is known as the "Bohm Dialogue".
6 See David Melding's thought-provoking T*he Reformed Union: Britain as a Federation.*
7 The seminal *Getting to Yes* by Roger Fisher and William Ury (a speaker at the Day of Dialogue on 4 September) transformed our thinking about negotiation; among many follow up texts, Ury's *The Power of a Positive No* is a classic.
8 The same theme is picked up by leading Harvard mathematician and biologist, Martin Nowak. Survival is not of the fittest with their selfish genes, but of those who find ways to collaborate successfully. But, arguably, through its apparent inability to evolve in this way, politics runs the risk of extinction, or at least of wholesale indifference, in the minds of those to whom it should matter most, the voters. See: *Super Co-operators: The Mathematics of Evolution, Altruism and Human Behaviour (Or, Why We Need Each Other to Succeed).*