



## Taking a hard line can only lead to harder battles

### John Sturrock

**L**eadership is about many things. Often it is viewed through the prism of domination and force, where success is achieved by physical strength. In matters of sporting prowess, physical danger or traditional forms of battle, that may be a necessary and often successful approach. But, in the long run, it is deeply damaging to survival when the threats we face are social, cultural, political or economic.

Sadly perhaps, when faced with such threats today, our default setting is still to resort to force and violence, albeit linguistic, rhetorical and psychological. It is much harder to engage thought, intellect, compassion, reciprocity and fellow feeling, even if we understand intellectually that to do so will not only benefit the perceived "enemy" but also, paradoxically, ourselves - and those we seek to protect. In other words, if I help you, it is more likely that you will help me.

We have seen this played out in

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antagonism over Brexit and Scottish independence. Rather than analysing and assessing realistically and objectively what might be said and done, and showing dignity and respect to those with whom we disagree, the rhetoric, language and posturing has been reminiscent of warfare. We seek to destroy our foe, as well as his, her or their arguments.

Ironically, though, the result can be the opposite of what was desired, because our perceived enemy cannot be eliminated by force. There is no final whistle with a declaration of victory. Short-term gains may be hoped for as victories but this kind of winning is likely to be pyrrhic.

So, taking a hard line, asserting dominance, dismissing challenges, claiming superiority of knowledge, refusing to listen, failing to engage - all carry the risk of inflaming a situation and reinforcing resistance. The prospect of "losing" is increased. In contrast, seeking to find common ground, showing willingness to talk and to discuss authentically the underlying issues, making concessions, showing courtesy to all - particularly those on "the other side" - getting in their shoes, and seeking to understand their hopes, fears, concerns, aspirations, all of these will tend to breed "success".

Perhaps the outcome will not be what we imagined or hoped for at the start but it may be richer, more imaginative and enduring than any result that proceeds from trying to impose a harsh binary choice.

**John Sturrock is chief executive and senior mediator, Core Solutions Group**