

FOCUS

Why world may be ready for a new Edinburgh Conversation

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IN THE early 1980s, Edinburgh was the discreet venue for a series of meetings that arguably played a significant role in the ending of the Cold War. Known as the Edinburgh Conversations, the meetings were chaired by Sir John Burnett, the then principal of Edinburgh University, and were the brainchild of Professor John Erickson, the head of the university's Centre for Defence Studies. Erickson was a leading world authority on the Soviet military, admired and welcomed in the Kremlin and the Pentagon.

Each year, military, political and academic figures from the Soviet Union, the United States and Britain would meet to discuss the difficult issues in East-West relations and would seek to find "new thinking" to help to ease tension and reduce the fear of a nuclear catastrophe. Meetings were held alternately in Edinburgh and Moscow.

On one occasion, in September 1983, the participants gathered in Edinburgh in the immediate aftermath of the shooting down by Soviet interceptor aircraft of the Korean airliner, Flight KAL 007, just off Sakhalin island. The atmosphere was unimaginably tense but, somehow, the talks were preserved. That they continued at all was a tribute to the integrity and standing of Erickson and the university, and to the Edinburgh setting, so ably managed behind the scenes by Michael Westcott, the secretary of the Conversations, to whom I had the privilege in that year's Conversations of acting as assistant.

Twenty four years later, what is the relevance of this story? Well, the Edinburgh Conversations showed that Scotland, and perhaps Edinburgh in particular, could play a unique role as a setting for discussions about the most important matters affecting international relations at the time. The reputation of the Scots as trusted, intelligent, resourceful hosts, who were able to extend thoughtful hospitality and discreet facilitation, was valued then. That reputation is of no less value now. Indeed, it can be argued that political and constitutional change has the potential to reinforce Scotland's role as a place where sensitive and serious conversations can be had without the concern that other interests, selfish or otherwise, might conflict. While it has been suggested that Britain might find a new purpose as a constructive and positive midwife to a new global order, such a concept may be difficult to promote, owing to the baggage that comes with close associations with particular power blocs. For Scotland, however, perceptions may well be different.

There are many initiatives taking place around the globe to find new ways of addressing some of the world's most enduring problems. Many of these are happening quietly behind closed doors. Recently, however, the International Coalition of Concerned Mediators issued a public statement urging "that citizens of our nations insist that their elected and appointed government officials immediately engage in honest, direct and unconditional negotiations with all authorities and powers who can

resolve the crises and threats to security in ways that are equitable and practical for all concerned". They further urged that proven conflict-resolution processes be employed.

The quest to find common interests and goals, to understand the hopes and fears of peoples and nations, to discover creative ways of moving from violence and self-interest to a mutually acceptable, sustainable future, is not new. But there seems to be a new sense of urgency in the desire to find novel ways to tackle the causes and symptoms of what we know as climate change, international terrorism, wide-scale poverty and breaches of human rights.

The real global tension may now lie between the traditional hierarchical, power-based, positional approaches to problem-solving and the emerging counter-themes of co-operation, mutual interest and respectful collaboration.

Could Scotland play a role? Why not? Other small countries, without pretensions of being major players themselves, have done so. Our aspirations may not start too high. But I have no doubt that there will be a political leader somewhere who would welcome an invitation to visit this beautiful part of the world and have an opportunity to hold confidential, off-the-record talks with a rival; or a diplomat who needs to find a way to reach a crucial decision-maker in a political grouping with whom discourse is officially off-limits. We in Scotland could assist.

A Centre for Conversation and Dialogue - or, more prosaically, an International Centre for Conflict Management - based in Edinburgh, or otherwise easily accessible in the Central Belt, could help Scotland to rise above some of its more parochial concerns and extend outwards in a wholly appropriate way. The project would need pump-priming from one or more of our emerging philanthropists and it would need to guard jealously its own independence from outside interference. But philanthropy and non-alignment are two respectable themes of the age. The timing is good.

An added benefit might well be that such an initiative would encourage the development of a resource that would assist in conversations about important issues in and about this country and its future governance - and the big questions about public policy, allocation of resources and changing needs and objectives. Looking outward can often shed new light on ways to address difficult issues nearer to home.

Perhaps it is time for the New Edinburgh Conversations.