NEGOTIATING WITH
THE PAST AND THE
FUTURE
by Clem McCartney

Often we are having to decide who
should be involved in negotiations. One formula, which is often used, is
that the negotiations must involve
any party that can exercise a veto
or can wreck the agreement. It is a
pragmatic answer, consistent with
the "ideology of management," criti-
cized by Frank Dukes in the last
edition of Conflict Resolution Notes.
More ethical approaches, such as
Duke's "transformation practice,"
would allow in those who have an
interest in the outcome even if they
have no power. Alternatively one
would at least recognize that their
voice needs to be heard.

This approach acknowledges the
legitimate concerns of the powerless.
It opens up the boundaries of nego-
tiations. Frank Dukes suggests that
the parties may not only be living
people, who can be consulted if we
have the will, but also our whole
environment and people who are not
yet alive. William Atherton, in his
letter in this issue of CRNotes advo-
cates we should also include past
generations.

My colleagues and I live and work in
Ireland with a protracted dispute
about issues such as identity, recog-
nition and status. We are very
aware of the presence or influence of
past and future generations at the
conference table. They are there
whether we acknowledge them or not.
It is easy to assume that thinking of
past and future generations will give
a wider perspective which will help
discussion. This is not necessarily
the case. Therefore, I want to
explore the nature of our sense of
the future and the past and their
impact on negotiations.

Impact of the Past
In Ireland, if one goes back far
enough, we come to the Celtic period
from which are descended most of
the peoples of Ireland today: the
Irish and the Scots-Irish. It might
seem that we could reclaim a common
heritage and forget about the subse-
quent divergences. Heritage should
give us an approach to conflict
resolution, because the Celtic legal
system, the Brehon law, was based on
the principle of arbitration.

But this is not the history that we
want to remember. As in many
protracted ethnic disputes, we identi-
fy with our ancestors who struggled
"on our behalf," and this helps to
define us and our opponents. On
both sides we feel that we have a
duty not to throw away their sacri-
fice for us. We have to continue to
struggle for their goals. In that
sense our ancestors are a brake on
creative thinking about the future.
Entrapment is a common feature in
conflict. It happens when we have
invested so much of ourselves in our
present position that it is verydiffi-
cult to change. If entrapment is a
powerful force in a short-lived con-
flict, it will be very powerful over
the generations.

Commitment to the Future
In an ethnic dispute, our commitment
to our descendants can equally be a
constraint on our ability to be open
with our opponents. Because the
dispute is about identity and exist-
ence, we may be afraid that our
group will be absorbed by our
opponents. It may not happen in our
lifetime, but there is all the more
concern that we will be imposing a
culture and lifestyle we reject our-
selves on our great grandchildren.
At the height of the Cold War, people
in the West were asked, "How would
you like your children to grow up
under communism?"

Our fears will be greater if the
identity of our group is weak, or if
there are no obvious signs of our
differentness such as skin colour.
There is even more fear if the dis-
pute has a religious dimension. We
are not only concerned with the
welfare of future generations in this
life, but for eternity. The Northern
Ireland conflict is not normally
considered a religious dispute as no
one is trying to convert anyone to a
different faith. That is true, but
some people feel that their beliefs
are the only way to ensure their
eternal future. Further, for those
people there is the worry that their
descendants may not have access to
those teachings and so will be eter-
nally damned. Those people feel an
even greater sense of responsibility
to the future.

Therefore we have to be cautious
about the role the past and future
play in our deliberations. Rather, we
have to be cautious about the role we make them play. We accept that the past has formed us. It is equally true that our understanding of the past and the future is based on our understanding of the present. This is the nature of myths: cultural landmarks that help to orient us. In Ireland we have seen that aspects of our ancestors recur in our thought processes and behaviour. For example they affect the way we identify opponents and the way we behave towards them. Also we have seen that we pick out the things about our ancestors that reinforce our current preoccupations and help to explain and justify them. The same process happens in relation to future generations. We understand their needs in relation to our current environment, assuming it will not change.

In dealing with conflicts, our obligation to the past and our concern for the future can be genuine worries that make it difficult to consider alternative ways out of the present conflict. They also can be convenient arguments or negotiation ploys behind which we can hide. It is hard to negotiate with people who are not present.

Role of Past and Future
This is not to say that the past and future must be kept out of negotiations. They are there whether we like it or not. They can have a positive influence, but only in certain circumstances. Our position can be freed up if we can appreciate that our conception of the past and the present may not be recognisable to our ancestors and descendants. It is then possible to try to understand how our situation might seem to them and to understand their concerns and aspirations. Richard Kearney, a Dublin philosopher, says we need to "distinguish between myths' unauthentic role of ideological explanation (which justifies the status quo in a dogmatic or irrational manner) and their authentic role of utopian 'exploration' (which challenges the status quo by projecting alternative ways of understanding our world.)"

In Ireland we can look at nationalism and understand that it developed as a means to liberate people. However, it has also created a narrow tribalism. Protestantism had its roots in civil and religious liberty, but has also been used as a justification for intolerance. Were our ancestors committed to the enabling or the defensive forms of these beliefs? Would they recognise how we interpret their beliefs now? It can be a creative process to explore our cultural tradition, and there is growing activity in this area. However, this may need to be done separately within each tradition. We need to explore our differences with our ancestors and descendants before we can enter negotiations with people from other traditions. It is a frustrating process to try to communicate across the table with the dead hand of the present and the past. But if all of us around the table have first understood ourselves better by meeting our future and past, we will have had a transforming encounter, and we can help make the negotiation process a transforming experience.

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**MORE CALENDAR**

October 8-11, 1992, SPIDR Annual Conference, Pittsburgh PA. Contact: SPIDR, 1100 Connecticut Ave NW, Ste 700, Washington DC 20036, Phone: (202) 833-2188, fax 293-3054

November 6 - 7, 1992, Southeastern Mediation Conference, Greenville NC. Contact Bileen Growblewski, Mediation Center of Pitt Co., PO Box 4428, Greenville NC 27836-4428.

November 6 - 8, 1992 National Association for Mediation in Education, Advanced Issues in Mediation workshop. NAMR 139 Whitmore, UMass/Amherst, Amherst MA 01003.


November 25 - 28 1992: 5th National Conference on Negotiation and Mediation in Community and Political Conflict, Port Elizabeth, South Africa. Contact: Mrs H Buchanan, Institute for Study & Resolution of Conflict, University of Port Elizabeth, PO Box 1600, 6000 Port Elizabeth, SOUTH AFRICA. Tel: [including country and city codes] 27 41 504 2376, fax 504 2374.