

Thought for the month November 2019

There is presently a sense that public debate has become increasingly fractious, aggressive even, laced with hurtful accusations and framed in poorly chosen words casting more confusion than enlightenment. We all know what the issue at the heart of this storm is. The question is, could we expect better from public discourse and if so how?

I believe we can and should expect better. When people use the language of confrontation it often masks a weakness in the case they're trying to make. When politicians talk about 'winning' negotiations they've may have forgotten that the property marking out the human species is that we're capable both of competition *and* co-operation. Successful negotiations are not those in which one side takes everything, impoverishing the other. Instead they're characterised by a mutual sense of a fair settlement: one which facilitates ongoing co-operation and the growth of trust between the parties.

Much is governed by the spaces in which debate occurs. We might have the capability to disagree well but if the argument is set in the context of a narrow, confrontational space, respect and decorum can be easily set aside in favour of tribal one-up-man-ship. This is echoed in the streets outside where one set of protesters bunch opposite another, trying to out-shout each other.

I'm taken by the idea of people's assemblies, where a random selection of the public explore an important question, listening to the wide spectrum of views in the room, taking in testimony from expert witnesses and discussing a range of options. The outcome is advisory but any parliament that chose to ignore it would be missing the opportunity to resolve a difficult question away from the cauldron of party politics.

There is another, still simpler way of managing difficult discussions. It starts with intent: the acceptance that all those involved have a valid point of view and a right to express it respectfully; and that although the outcome may not be exactly as one wishes, the process will result in a workable way forward, the widest possible range of issues having been examined. This intent also defines the manner in which the discussion is held. Those wishing to speak make their points calmly and succinctly, considering whether what they want to say has already been expressed. Sufficient space is left between contributions to give everyone the opportunity to absorb what has just been said, thus respecting both speaker and hearers. The issue is explored until there is a sense that the views and expertise in the room have been fully expressed and a way forward identified.

The name for this process? We call it the Quaker Business Method and it has served the Society of Friends well for nearly 400 years. It's not the only sociocratic process available but it is one which I believe has much to offer society at large, particularly in these challenging times.