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Lebanon must face up to its past before it can face the future

Conflict resolution expert Johan Galtung tells *Gareth Smyth* that truth comes before reconciliation

The disarming thing about Johan Galtung is that all he has to offer is ideas. "I have no money, no force, no nothing," says the 67-year-old Norwegian, a professor of peace studies at universities in Austria, Japan, Norway and Spain. "But I have a lot of experience," he adds.

As a consultant on 'conflict resolution', professor Galtung has listened and advised in conflicts as far apart as Nicaragua, South Africa and the former Yugoslavia, and also studied successful multi-ethnic states like Switzerland.

On the eve of his departure from Lebanon after a five-day visit giving training workshops for the ministry of the displaced, he was sanguine about the country's prospects.

This was Galtung's fifth visit to Lebanon, but his first since the end of the war. "I was interested in the thesis of stability in Lebanon, and I was sceptical.

"I have met some very charming people, but this corresponds to a general thesis I have that the more charming the population the more rotten the country. The better the country works, the less charming the people: like Norway, they're not charming, and the Swiss aren't charming."

Galtung had not been in Lebanon since 1974. "The last time I came the signs [of what was to come] were there, mainly in the language. But they were also to do with the distribution of economic resources, and pressures from abroad and the temptation of certain groups to find allies abroad."

The terrain has shifted since the visit, but Galtung believes the roots of conflict, both socio-economic and confessional, remain.

"I would say it's a combination of external and internal sources, with the external sources utilising certain fault lines inside. There is a lack of deep democratic solutions."

At one of the workshops, a participant suggested that "a country based on confessionalism, even if there were only two confessions, is incompatible with such a centralised state. Lebanon needs more decentralisation to the municipal and district levels."

This argument, Galtung says, is very plausible. Rafik Hariri's suggestion of one single constituency is "okay for national parliament", he agrees, but only if supplemented by effective and responsive local government.

Conflict is "transformed", he says, when existing, destructive energies are diverted into constructive paths. Galtung stresses that if this is to happen, then the 'three Rs' - reconciliation, reconstruction and resolution - must go hand in hand.

If one or two run ahead of the other two or one, problems can arise. He cites South Africa.

"There is quite a vigorous protest there now, saying we have done enough reconciliation, how about solving the problem?"

"And the problem is that the whites have everything and the blacks have nothing. 'Having the vote is good, but we'd like to have housing, jobs and clean running water. I'm not saying that reconciliation should be stopped, but one has to catch up on the res-



Peace of the action: Norwegian Johan Galtung discussed conflict resolution in Lebanon this week - 23 years since his last visit. He believes the roots of conflict, both socio-economic and confessional, remain. 'There is a lack of deep democratic solutions'

olution end." But South Africa has provided a powerful example for other countries with its Truth Commission. The commission, led by former archbishop Desmond Tutu, has investigated crimes committed during the apartheid era with a view to both acknowledging the injustice and pardoning perpetrators who genuinely repent.

Facing up to the truth can benefit both perpetrator and victim, Galtung believes.

Many years ago, as a conscientious objector against the Cold War, he spent six months in prison in Norway locked up with murderers who were "suffering enormously from trauma".

Galtung drew a lesson, which he says, has been confirmed by his many years working in conflict transformation.

"When A commits an atrocity against B, two people are traumatised. B is the victim, that's clear, but A is traumatised by guilt to a greater or lesser extent. It depends on what kind of person A is, but there is almost always some kind of guilt."

If the truth is necessary for normalisation, and so a precondition to reconciliation, should an approach similar to the Truth Commission be applied to the 13,000 still 'missing' from the Lebanese civil war?

"This a very high number," says Galtung.

"Work has to continue. But, yes, I recommend that (a truth commission). How detailed you are is still a question, but the people who have lost their loved ones have a right to have their situation seriously reflected.

"And maybe the basic point about a court is not that the criminal is punished, but that the victim is taken seriously, and that they are not forgotten. A truth commission can do that."

In reconciliation, free expression of grievance has to be tempered with respect for others: "This is the delicate balance they have in El Salvador, Argentina, Chile: you have to say it, but not using too strong words."

And the most practical kind of reconciliation can come through reconstruction.

"Try to rebuild together, don't give it all to commercial firms."

"Some people symbolise that they can work together by reconstructing the village they did so much to destroy."

"And if they do that here, maybe the government could pay an extra subsidy, they should be rewarded. Maybe business could put some tools at their disposal and train them as skilled workers."

This is a practice which has had success in Nicaragua "where they killed each other for eight years, with intensity".

The idea came from an ordinary married

couple there, and many good ideas, Galtung insists can come from 'ordinary' people.

"It's a little like an artistic experience. You're sitting there with an enormous amount of conflict material in front of you, and suddenly you see something..."

A general rule is that young people and women have a particularly important role to play. "There is the element of the fresh, unused reservoir. There is the element of the people who are sick and tired of the games that all the main politicians are playing."

"There is in Lebanon and other places the element who were less immediate participants, though they may have been victims. That's important too."

But not everyone has the energy and imagination to want change.

Galtung is well used to people who dismiss his approach.

"The media likes to report conflict. Reconciliation is a far harder process to cover. At my press conference here, the journalists keep saying, 'Good idea, but it can't happen here'."

Galtung smiles. He has heard all this before: "One thing I've learnt is that the one common thing in every conflict around the world is that everyone insists their conflict is completely unique."

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