



“Power, politics and the emerging global order”¹

- Where are we going?

Ideas for leading a Conversation

For general guidance in running these sessions see
'Planning a Conversation' also available at www.agoraspace.org

Background

The unravelling of the Cold War has led to a situation where America is by far the most powerful nation in the world in terms of military might. Some American thinkers, notably the *Project for the New American Century*, have seen this as an opportunity to bring in a new reign of peace in the world as American values of democracy and freedom are exported throughout the globe. Others sense that the real need is to develop our international institutions so that we can work together to meet the challenges of globalisation. They are concerned that America still sees its own national interest as paramount and that it opposes a whole range of measures that may be essential building blocks for our global future.

How should we think about global politics? What would success look like in global terms? This conversation explores these questions from the perspective that all human groups have a tendency to develop similar features in terms of power and politics. What happens in our own back yard can give us insights into the global struggle.

Starter questions for small group discussion

- 1. Think of a group that you have been involved in. (This may be anything from a club, to a workplace, a faith community or football team) What is there in the life of this group that encourages the people to work together?**
- 2. Have you ever been caught up in something that felt like a sheer struggle for power? How did it feel? And how might it have been resolved better?**
- 3. We have been encouraged to make common cause in a global 'war on terror'. How do you feel about this? How do you think that terrorism might be minimised in the world today?**
- 4. Take one of the other major international issues like trade or immigration and consider 'What would success look like and how might we get there?'**

¹ These materials are produced by Project Agora, a company limited by guarantee, which is dedicated to creating new spaces in society for the highest possible quality of public conversation, the building of realistic trust and the seeking of vision. Contact Agora at www.agoraspace.org or email enquiries@agoraspace.org

One way through the conversation

Do not feel tied to this. The resource section offers several other approaches.

Begin the evening with question one: Think of a group that you have been involved in. (This may be anything from a club, to a workplace, a faith community or football team) What is there in the life of this group that makes the people want to work together?

This should produce a whole range of things.

So someone describing a workplace in these terms might think of each person receiving a wage, a sense of the common task, a desire to contribute their particular skill and so play their part, they may want to serve others or have a particular feeling of vocation. They might respect or fear their boss, be called to account through personal reviews or performance indicators, not want the sack etc. Or someone in a football team may simply want to win, enjoy the thrill of playing, the sense of being part of a team, a place where they belong. They might be concerned about playing badly, being dropped etc

List these things on a flip chart. Point out simply that they are very different types of motivation. There is everything from simple self interest expressed in “I want my pay”, through to visionary statements about the common task and their own part in it.

Go straight on to the second question: Have you ever been caught up in something that felt like a sheer struggle for power or survival? How did it feel? And how might it have been handled better?

Draw these feelings together. Notice how negative the experience of pure power is. Where groups are motivated simply by power and self-interest, then all the subtlety is lost. None of the positive factors listed in answer to question one are apparent. Such groups represent an impoverished culture. Introduce the idea that one of the key purposes of political development may be to move away from the fear and threat of the simple power hierarchy through to the rich, subtle and diverse, co-operative environment of the well-formed group. Another way of saying this is to note the general move from a group dominated by power through to one based on trust. Trust and power are actually present in different ways in every group, but in general terms there is a move toward trust in a healthy society.

How is such a transition achieved in politics?

There may be several key factors.

The Runnymede example (see resources) takes us back to a situation in the history of this country which was close to simple, competing self-interests, but a **balance of power** allowed a platform of mutual interest to be build, and a particular **person with vision** encouraged a settlement that had an eye to the common good.

The idea that these factors are important to political development is underlined in a recent Christian Aid report (see resources) about oil-rich countries, which noticed that despite massive incomes from oil, many of these countries fail to develop truly participative political structures and many of the people remain grindingly poor. Christian Aid argue that the reason is that the oil revenues prevent the leaders of the

country ever *needing* the resources of their people (as for example John needed the taxes of the Barons). This means that there is never an adequate balance of power, the people's voice is never properly heard and a sense of real working together is not achieved.

Brainstorm other factors that may make for healthy political development.

Defence has always been a powerful platform of mutual interest that can promote co-operation among people. Kings first raised taxes to fight wars and everyone knew the horrors of being invaded. Today, as national boundaries become less important to people on the move, so defensive strategies are changing.

We have been encouraged to make common cause in a global 'war on terror'. How do you feel about this? How do you think that terrorism might be minimised in the world today?

After the small group work, draw this out into a plenary discussion. Every society will have its discontents, but those who express that discontent violently will need to be stopped. International policing systems oriented around combating terrorism are likely to develop in the near future. But effective action must surely be coupled with international justice. America's opposition to the International Criminal Court and its use of Guantanamo Bay may be matters of real concern. The other side of the equation is how to build the trust of alienated communities. Some would argue that the very acts of violence involved in the 'war against terror' actually breed terrorism and that the key factor is how to build trust with those communities from which terrorists arise.

This question raises the need for structures of international co-operation to develop. It seems that the war in Iraq has seriously disempowered the UN at a time when we desperately need better and stronger international political institutions.

Go to Question Four Take one of the other major international issues like trade or immigration and consider 'What would success look like and how might we get there?'

This is a vision question. Ask each group to tell the others their version of what success might look like. Let others challenge it. Most ideas are likely to hinge around more effective international co-operation, a better developed World Trade Organisation etc. But these visions will also be charged with statements of principle. They will include the language of justice combined with effectiveness. They may point to the place of mercy and compassion. They may also overlap with faith positions and these may be made explicit. (see resources for further ideas about faith perspectives)

In a recent statement the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, called for a new commission of the UN that would deliberately look beyond competing national interests toward the common good. It struck me that this might be a modern political parallel of the time when Archbishop, Stephen Langton, pressed King John and the barons to look beyond their own competing interests. Is this a proper role for faith in the modern world?

Resources

There are many issues raised by this conversation. Our aim here has been to take a very big view and leave detail to another time. Here are some more ideas and information that are intended to resource the conversation and offer alternative entry points.

On the position of the United States

George Soros, one time international trader, now philanthropist, writes in his book *Open Society* that “The United States has become the greatest obstacle to establishing the rule of law in international affairs”. He cites their opposition to the international criminal court, the Law of the Sea Convention, the Convention on Biological Diversity and the Kyoto Protocol to illustrate his case. (*Open Society* Chap 12)

Robert Kagan, Director of the Project for the New American Century argues that America is only being realistic in its attitude to world politics. With regard to the threat posed by Iraq, he accuses Europe of being hopelessly idealistic. Hiding under the protective shadow of the US throughout the Cold War, Europe has been able to convince itself that it has no more need of brute force in politics. Everything can now be solved by negotiation and convention. The truth is that America now feels itself to be the ‘sheriff’ of the whole world community, a responsibility that it should not duck. (details *Paradise and Power*, R Kagan)
(More on the Project for the New American Century see <http://www.newamericancentury.org>)

The growth of democratic accountability

Christian Aid recently produced a report about oil-rich nations. It showed that the majority of people in these countries were actually much poorer than in other comparable nations. Why was this when there was so much oil money floating around? Christian Aid suggested that the root cause was that giving the country’s leaders access to this money meant that they did not have to listen to their people. Democratic accountabilities and a fruitful working together in a country may begin from the position where the ruler needs the people’s taxes and the people then have some power to negotiate. If the ruler never needs anything from the people, then the people may never be able to leverage any real participation in government. In England we can trace such accountability alongside the growth of democratic institutions beginning with Runnymede as King John has to negotiate with the Barons. (for the full Christian Aid report go to <http://www.christian-aid.org.uk/indepth/0305cawreport/cawreport03.pdf>)

An interesting parallel with this comes from the days of Charles II. After the Civil War the ‘Restoration’ as it was called was not a return to old-style monarchy. The King was now very definitely working with a Parliament and this is the era when true party politics began. In this uneasy embrace, Charles was encouraged by the French to assert his rights and become a ‘real’ king. They offered him a deal that would provide serious money in return for going to war with France against Holland and Charles converting to Catholicism. He accepted. His likely motive was that the money would set him free to do as he wanted as King without reference to Parliament. It functioned like the oil money today. We should be grateful that he and his successors did not find a way to continue such practices.

Runnymede

It is a Monday morning, June 1215, in Runnymede, a place, between Staines and Windsor, that would become famous for this moment. Around the room are the barons, several bishops, the emissary from the Pope, the Archbishop of Canterbury and King John himself. The meeting had come at the end of a long hard struggle. The Barons were aggrieved that the King would raise arbitrary taxes on them to fight out his family struggles in France – but they knew they needed a King. Years of civil unrest under Stephen and then Richard had proved the need for stable governance and a keeping of the peace. The King for his part needed the money and co-operation the Barons. It was the day for a deal.

Yet it would be more than a deal. More than just the Barons acting in their own interest. Behind them, as their leader, stood one Stephen Langton, Archbishop of Canterbury. He himself had fought a long struggle with the King Though appointed by the Pope, he was not King John's choice. There had been a bitter row in which the whole country had been excommunicated for six years. Now John was back in with the Pope and Stephen Langton had some influence with the Barons. It may have been Langton that prevented the descent into civil war. It certainly was Langton that drew up the 'Articles of the Barons' as they were known and encouraged the Barons to look beyond their own particular grievances and demand that the King agree to honour a whole package of customs and laws.

So it was that the articles were read out at Runnymede. The King acquiesced. The articles were the foundation of what became the Magna Carta. It has been dubbed the single most important document in British history. It was part of the means by which we created a balance of power between government and people, and out of which our democracy eventually grew. Source *This Sceptred Isle* - Christopher Lee

On the use of language

On the 20th Nov 2003, the HSBC and British consulate in Istanbul were attacked. 27 people were killed and over 400 injured. A Turkish extremist group with Al Qaeda claimed responsibility. Tony Blair responded to the tragedy at a press conference that day with these words

*This is a war
Its main battleground is Iraq
We have got to make sure that we defeat these terrorists,
the former Saddam people
And we must do that because
that is an essential part of defeating the fanaticism and extremism
that is killing innocent people
all over the world today*

Examine the use of language and logic here.

Is it right to call any of these things 'war'. It is certainly not a traditional definition of war. If it is war, then where is the end point? Who will surrender? What does 'war' language do to the process? Secondly think about the logic. The words make a link between the ongoing struggle in Iraq and the bombers of Istanbul. Is that fair?

Eleanor Johnson commented on speeches of Bush and Blair at this press conference 'Both seamlessly elided the war against Saddam in Iraq with the wider war against terrorists'

On brutalisation leading to terrorism

Dr Ayman Al-Zawahiri is said to be the 'mind of Osama bin Laden'. He is certainly Osama's second in command. Once he was simply a doctor from Egypt. A quiet, but radically minded man, who according to some became a violent fanatic as a result of a period of torture and imprisonment in Egypt's most feared Lazoghly Square gaol. Here people are burned, shocked, sexually mistreated, deprived of sleep and exposed to extreme cold on a regular basis. One inmate of the prison who shared a room with Al-Zawahiri wrote of how traumatic experiences during his three years in prison transformed this quiet doctor from a relative moderate in the Islamist underground into a violent extremist. (for the full story go to <http://www.guardian.co.uk/international/story/0,3604,881075,00.html>)

Consider how radical people from non-Western cultures might react to our bombing and other military action in prosecution of the 'war against terror'.

Making protest

Some see terrorism as the last resort of an oppressed people. Overwhelmed in military might, people have made their protest against government in Ireland, Israel and all over the world by acts of sudden, terrible violence that kill all sorts of people. By contrast, in response to British rule in India, Gandhi modelled methods of non-violent protest.

Watch a piece from the film Gandhi, eg the action at the salt mine. Discuss what conditions have to be in place for such non-violent protest to be effective? How might people such as

those involved in Al Qaeda, who are aggrieved at Western influence on the Arab peninsula today make a non-violent protest? (Gandhi (1982) is available from online sellers in VHS/DVD formats)

For more information about Al Qaeda, its thinking and its practice see *Holy War inc – inside the world of Osama bin Laden* by Peter L Bergen

Building international structures

The concern to build new international political structures is well expressed in the final chapter of *On the edge – living with global capitalism* by Anthony Giddens and Will Hutton. The chapter ends with this remark:

'The great national movements for democracy, liberty and social justice that took place in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries with nation-states now have to be reproduced globally. Nothing less will do.'

Faith perspectives

Jesus came into a world that longed for a Messiah to overthrow the Romans and establish the rule of God. Such hopes are found in many religious extremist movements around the world today. Yet Jesus did not do entirely what these people expected.

Consider the gospel accounts of Jesus as Messiah. They can be understood in several ways. On the more radical side, some have seen Jesus in Mark, for example, as a person with an almost revolutionary zeal, yet whose methods distinguished him from the terrorists of his day. So the Gadarene swine incident can be read as a veiled comment on the hope that God would come to push the Romans into the sea (Mark 5 as interpreted by such as Ched Myers *Binding the strong man*). Others have described his ministry as encouraging a radical 'love for the enemy,' an understanding of hated foreigners (eg the Good Samaritan) and a radical inclusiveness toward all that were alienated and unjustly treated by the society of that day.

(see John 2 the woman at the well, or the healing of lepers, or Luke 7 - the forgiveness of 'sinners', or Luke 15 - the inclusion of tax collectors). Were these the 'things that make for peace' that he spoke of?

In the light of these gospel accounts, invite people to answer this question: If you were talking to a radical in today's world, who had experienced terrible oppression, how would you advise them to act?

There are visions within the Judaeo-Christian scriptures of a world where people do genuinely work together, where conflicts are settled and there is peace.

From the Old Testament: Study Micah 4 v 1-5. This is set in a world view based around Israel and will therefore be read as implicitly 'Zionist' by some, yet it does suggest a vision of the world under God that is at peace. Consider the principles that lie behind this vision, in terms of just law, settlement of disputes etc and think about how they might be worked out in international structures today.

From the New Testament: Take some time with Colossians 1 v17-20. It is a vision of the world and everything in it reconciled to Christ and where there is peace. Think of the great international powers at work today. What would it mean for them to be reconciled to each other and to find peace. What practical role could the Christian faith play in that?

For historical reflection.

How do we deal with the history of the church at times when it has seemed to act in a way that is positively against the establishment of peace and justice?

Agora would be keen to incorporate Muslim and other faith perspectives into this conversation and positively invites people of other than Christian faith commitments to contribute ideas towards it.

Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi, in his seminal work, the *Dignity of Difference* notes that faiths tend to say that 'if only the world shared our faith and our texts then there would be peace.' Instead he argues that the key factor in world peace may be how we speak of those outside of our own faith position.