Let’s Talk Politics:

An Analysis of Political Conflicts and a Guide to Designing, Organizing, and Conducting Dialogues on Difficult, Dangerous and Controversial Issues

by Kenneth Cloke

“We ask only that men think it over carefully and then decide whether they will add to the misery of the world to achieve vague and distant goals, and whether they will accept a world crowded with weapons where brother kills brother; or whether, on the contrary, they will avoid as much bloodshed as possible in order to give future generations -- who will be even better armed than ourselves -- a chance for survival... What we must fight is fear and silence, and with them the spiritual isolation they involve. What we must defend is dialogue and the universal communication of men. Slavery, injustice, and lies are the plagues that destroy this dialogue and forbid this communication, and that is why we must reject them.”

Albert Camus

As wars, genocides, and bitter political battles rage daily around the globe causing devastating human losses, inspiring enduring enmities and hatreds, undermining national and international relationships, compromising environmental sustainability, and generating chronic conflicts, conflict resolvers have largely remained silent.

Perhaps this is because we feel we lack the skills to tackle such deeply divisive issues, or do not possess the commitment and dedication needed to work through difficult political issues, or are afraid we will get drawn into polarizing political arguments ourselves and be consumed by them. Perhaps we are worried that we will be overwhelmed with
insatiable demands for help, or are waiting to be invited to offer assistance, or are not clear enough about what we would do even if we were invited.

We have all watched political conversations that were ostensibly oriented to issues, values, vision, and direction slowly degenerate into angry quarrels between deeply wounded, frightened, adversarial people; then deteriorate into brutal personal attacks and antagonistic power contests; only to sink into screaming matches, shaming and blaming, and personal viciousness, eventually descending into pushing and shoving, senseless violence, and appalling acts of brutality.

Successful political decision-making and conflict resolution require not silence or rage but dialogue, not aggression but collaboration, not accommodation but courageous, constructive, creative contention. Silence in the face of critical issues signifies not merely the absence of speech, but also of integrity, and therefore of self, of values, of citizenship, of community. As Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. presciently said, “Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.”

Whatever our reasons for remaining silent, our ability to avoid addressing the complex, all-consuming, immensely challenging issues that characterize modern political conflicts is rapidly diminishing. As our world shrinks, these conflicts impact us in increasingly significant ways, allowing distant social, economic, and political decisions, environmental choices, and technological innovations to directly and acutely affect our lives.

Indeed, it is arguable that in the absence of improved conflict resolution skills it will prove difficult, if not impossible, for us to survive as a species. Political conflicts have grown so costly, destructive and global that there is really no alternative, either as citizens
or as conflict resolution professionals, than to summon our courage, evaluate what we can contribute, and do what we can to ease the world’s suffering. Nor is it utopian or presumptuous to imagine that we can expand and evolve dialogue techniques in ways that will allow us to discuss and resolve contentious political issues without resorting to violence or coercion.

**Conflict and Political Speech**

If the goals of politics are, as Aristotle and Socrates believed, to maximize social justice, ethical self-improvement, and the common good, the role of political speech ought to be to achieve these outcomes by convincing others through honest dialogue and rational discourse, rather than by silencing those who disagree with verbal manipulation, coercion, personal intimidation and retribution.

In the first place, manipulation, coercion, intimidation and retribution merely polarize the opposition, driving it to more desperate measures in an effort to communicate its legitimate interests and points of view. In the second, as with all conflicts, it is easy to be seduced by false polarizations and come up with self-convincing rationalizations, sentimental platitudes and justifications for *anything*. None of these forms of speech, however, bring us any closer to social justice, ethical self-improvement and the common good.

The essayist Isaiah Berlin argued that political communications and ideas are “inherently un-philosophical,” in the sense that they are based on values over which people naturally disagree because they are based on dissimilar orientations and experiences. Political communications should therefore be regarded as unscientific, leading to different truths and representing unique experiences, *each* of which is regarded by others as valid.
This is the essence of interest-based approaches to conflict resolution. More interestingly, from a conflict resolution perspective, Berlin asked, “In what kind of world is political philosophy – the kind of discussion and argument in which it consists – in principle possible?” He answered, “Only in a world where ends collide.” Thus, political speech is conflict speech. For this reason, the answer to the question “What should be done?” is inherently undiscoverable as a complete and exclusive answer. Berlin writes:

Not because it is beyond our powers to find the answer, but because the question is not one of fact at all, the solution lies not in discovering something which is what it is, whether it is discovered or not — a proposition or formula, an objective good, a principle, a system of values objective or subjective, a relationship between a mind and something non-mental — but resides in action: something which cannot be found, only invented — an act of will or faith or creation obedient to no pre-existing rules or laws or facts.

From this fundamental circumstance, Berlin concludes that no political argument powerful enough to convince large numbers of people can be entirely wrong. Thus, every powerful political idea represents, and continues to represent, some important piece of political truth, based on a genuine social experience. In an insightful passage, he wrote:

The social contract is a model which to this day helps to explain something of what it is that men feel to be wrong when a politician pronounces an entire class of the population … to be outside the community – not entitled to the benefits conferred by the State or its laws. So too, Lenin’s image of the factory which needs no supervision by coercive policemen after the State has withered away; Maistre’s image of the executioner and his victims as the corner-stone of all
authority...; Locke’s analogy of government with trusteeship; ... all these illuminate some types of social experience.

Political philosophies are therefore not scientifically provable, but poetic, *metaphoric* truths about the human desire for freedom from tyranny, domination and oppression and alternative ideas about how to end it. What is important, therefore, in analyzing political argumentation, is that we probe beneath the formal, factual arguments people offer and elucidate the metaphors and analogies, syntax and grammar, interests and emotions, stories and experiences that gave rise to them.

To do so, as in all conflict resolution, it is necessary to surrender the idea that there is a single political truth, which is ours, and recognize instead that *every* political argument is an effort to establish the truth and validity, even the value and importance, of a particular personal and social experience. This implies that politics, despite its linguistic assumptions and orientation to power, need not be a zero-sum game in which one side is right and all others are wrong, but an effort to acknowledge, investigate and integrate multiple, diverse, contradictory interests and truths in the course of formulating a common policy and direction.

This is precisely what conflict resolution, at its core, represents: a way of resolving disputes based on diverse interests using consensus building, power-balancing and similar techniques, in which no single group is allowed to dominate. Thus, mediation possesses a hidden political dimension that is *inherently* democratic, egalitarian and collaborative because it allows a variety of interests and truths to contend and seek synergistic combination. It defeats prejudice and hatred not with opposing prejudices and hatreds, but by combining, averaging, undermining and canceling them, then searching
beneath their hostile veneer for the hidden, unsatisfied, heartfelt stories about experiences and interests that have been fueling them, and reframing them in ways that make them understandable to all.

**Conflict, Politics, and the State**

From the outset, politics and conflict seem intertwined and inseparable. Indeed, political conflicts have historically been used to strengthen and *define* the state, and to provide it with a sense of unifying meaning. As FDR’s Assistant Attorney General Thurman Arnold put it, “No nation, no social institution, ever acquired coherence without some sort of fight. Out of the fight come its myths and its heroes.”

These myths and heroes, however, generally take the form of adversarial stories about others that define political identity and meaning, but do so *negatively* and antagonistically. As a result, politics and the state are initially defined through opposition, competition, adversity, conflict and hostility toward others, producing a political culture that is grounded in aggression, suspicion, distrust of differences and power- or rights-based solutions to conflict. This history raises a critical question: Is it possible for nations to acquire coherence, identity, and meaning *positively* through collaboration, participation, and interest-based solutions without the destructive, dehumanizing consequences that flow from fighting? And if so, how?

**The State as Mediator**

Politics and the state are mechanisms not only for avoiding and suppressing conflicts, but also for managing and settling them, principally by means of military force, legal coercion, and bureaucratic regulation. These methods, however, fall far short of what is
now possible using mediation and dialogue, which can also lead to prevention, resolution, transformation and transcendence, and seek to end conflicts at their chronic, systemic source by enhancing learning, problem solving, collaboration, heartfelt communication, and openness to consensus-based systemic change.

What is worse, the state is itself a source of chronic, systemic conflict, and often unwilling or unable to reach deeper, systemic levels of resolution. These chronic conflicts stem historically from competition for status, wealth and power, and struggles for dominance between masters and slaves, lords and serfs, capitalists and workers, Whites and Blacks, men and women, rich and poor, citizens and foreigners, manufacturers and consumers, and countless others.

The state has not generally been neutral in these conflicts, but has more commonly sided with those who were already dominant against those with less status, wealth and power. The more equal the balance of status, wealth and power between competing groups, the more the state has been forced to defend itself by equivocating, retreating from open partisanship, adopting the language of neutrality, focusing on legal enforcement, obeying the logic of election returns, and transforming itself into a relatively pluralistic, bureaucratic and apolitical institution.

Thus, the economic transition from feudalism to capitalism was accompanied by a political transition from power-based hereditary monarchies to rights-based electoral democracies. For the early American colonies to gain independence from colonial domination and the constraints imposed by English commercial and monarchical power, it became essential to advance the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. These values implied, reinforced, and increasingly required political self-determination,
national independence, democratic government, popular elections and rights-based processes.

From the beginning, rights-based politics manifested themselves in contradictory, conflict generating ways. On one hand, the U.S. Bill of Rights and Constitution enormously expanded democratic rights over what had been available in England and Europe. On the other, slavery was supported and only White male property owners were allowed to vote. On one hand, everyone had an inalienable right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, implying self-determination. On the other, these rights were systematically denied to the native nations and tribes that already inhabited the country.

Nonetheless, the appeal of these democratic principles proved more powerful and lasting than efforts to constrain them within narrow bounds, and as they increased in popularity, the willingness of governments to openly oppose the rights of those who could vote them out of office has steadily declined. This process has expanded over the course of centuries in the direction of increased openness, collaboration and democracy, but always within a context of bureaucratic constraint.

More importantly, the evolution of power-based hereditary monarchies into rights-based electoral democracies required the emergence of new forms of politics, a new kind of state and a new set of political processes, including debate. This raises the follow-on question: what shifts in politics and the state would be likely to occur if we were to evolve further and adopt interest-based processes and relationships?

If power-based political institutions require hierarchy, operate by command, and result in obedience; and if rights-based institutions require bureaucracy, operate by control, and
result in compliance, what would interest-based institutions require? How would they operate? And what would they result in?

**Neutrality, Bureaucracy and the State**

Neutrality can therefore be seen as a *consequence* of inequality, domination and the inequitable distribution of status, wealth and power. The state *must* support the ideas and attitudes of the dominant groups that fund and operate it, yet it must also preserve its own legitimacy, authority and persuasiveness. The second of these goals cannot be achieved as effectively using power-based options such as dictatorship and military force, which are unfavorable in the long run for commerce and political stability, as it can through rights-based options which promise something to those who feel excluded.

This is because rights are systemic limitations on the exercise of power, and are based on *formal* neutrality, legal forms of coercion, bureaucratic regulation, abstractly worded legislation, impartial judges, due process of law, administrative agencies that are somewhat removed from the political process, and professional police who administer and enforce the laws. These measures generate chronic conflicts, but are more popularly acceptable, and therefore less likely to encourage hostility, rebellion, revolution, or civil war than power-based systems.

As a result, a self-reinforcing set of ostensibly neutral rights-based processes emerged over the course of several centuries that reduced the need to resort to power-based contests and curtailed its worst abuses, while simultaneously reinforcing inequality and generating less adversarial chronic conflicts. These conflicts could now be avoided, suppressed, managed and settled by being channeled through formally neutral legal and bureaucratic systems that would sidetrack and coopt collective acts of rebellion,
ameliorate political antagonisms and deflect proposals that might result in large-scale alterations of the system.

Paradoxically, as the state became more neutral it also grew less political and more capable of responding humanely, empathetically and flexibly. But as it became more bureaucratic, it grew less sensitive to the needs, feelings, desires and suffering of others. Its ability to recognize human differences and subjective variations became increasingly inconsistent with its formality and orientation to rules and technical details, thereby increasing its callousness, distance, hypocrisy and need to appear neutral.

As rights-based democratic republics altered their leadership and policies through popular elections, they became more vulnerable to shifts in public opinion and required the development of bureaucracies, which are more insulated, apolitical and stable. There may be a rough democracy practiced within the ranks of elected officials, but there is little or none in the civil service. Most bureaucracies aspire to be run like corporations, but lack corporate efficiency, entrepreneurship, leadership and incentives, while at the same time possessing all the lethargy, cynicism and disinterest that characterize the worst hierarchies and autocracies.

On the one hand, bureaucracies reflect the evolution of political states from power-based arbitrary exercises of absolutist dictatorial will, to rights-based, rational exercises of abstract logical decision-making. On the other, their rules are rational, orderly and equal, regardless of how irrational, disorderly and unequal human life is. Bureaucracy is thus both an enormous step away from tyranny and despotism, and an enormous distance still from authentic popular democracy.
Bureaucracies, as rights-based social institutions, are designed to placate irate citizens who have been denied fairness, channel dissent into isolated backwaters where it can boil ineffectively without contaminating the whole, grudgingly provide social services to those they secretly look down on, mitigate the effects of otherwise uncontrollable greed, monitor public spending, and enforce arcane, Kafkaesque rules and regulations. Novelist J. M. Coetzee writes,

… you must at every moment remind yourself of what it is like to come face to face with the state – the democratic state or any other – in the person of the state official. The ask yourself: Who serves whom? Who is the servant, who the master?”

Honoré de Balzac, in his novel The Bureaucrats, described it this way:

Made up entirely of petty minds, the bureaucracy has stood as an obstacle to the prosperity of the nation, has delayed for seven years by its machinery a canal project that would have stimulated the production of a province, is afraid of everything, prolongs procrastination, and perpetuates the abuses which in turn perpetuate and consolidate its very existence. The bureaucracy holds everything in its control: even the minister is in its web; finally, it stifles men of talent who are bold enough to be independent of it or to expose its follies … Bureaucracy, a gigantic power set in motion by dwarfs, is thus born.

The consummate chronicler of bureaucracy, however, was novelist Franz Kafka, whose descriptions, especially in The Trial and The Castle, of politeness combined with cruelty, proximity with distance, rationality with insanity, dedication with irresponsibility, and
efficiency with waste, reveal its twisted sensibility and the inherent limitations of trying to fit round human objects into square, bureaucratically engineered holes.

We can trace the sources of rights-based ideas and language to the essential characteristics of bureaucracy, described in detail by German sociologist Max Weber. Today, these can be altered and amended to include a number of traits that disrupt political discourse, including these:

- precise, formal separations that make communications problematic
- distinct jurisdictional areas defined by regulation that interrupt the natural flow of work
- over-centralization of functions, leading to inflexibility, waste, and reduced innovation and motivation
- impersonal hierarchies of titles, offices, powers, and privileges that reinforce relationships based on superior and inferior status
- fixed rules and consequences that reduce creativity, authenticity, and individuality
- recruitment and promotion based on technical skills, degrees, and formal, objective qualifications, masking informal, subjective bias and favoritism
- government positions as the private property of officials
- goals, processes, rules, and policies that are determined by others, disempowering those who do the work
- separation of official from unofficial truth, resulting in rumors and gossip to fill in the blanks
division of what is personal and private from what is official and public, while simultaneously confusing them

- loyalty to regulations and positions, rather than ideas or people
- systems, structures, and rules are regarded as superior to values, processes, and relationships
- facts, reality, details, and evidence are given great respect, while emotions, art, abstract thinking, and intuition are discounted
- stability, tradition, conformity, and experience are valued over change, innovation, criticism, and insight
- personalized blame and impersonalized responsibility
- secrecy and “need to know” are used to withhold information and augment personal status and power
- avoidance, aggression, and accommodation take precedence over listening, dialogue, and collaboration

The values of bureaucracy are those of control, conformity, formality, diffused responsibility, discouragement of initiative and impersonal compliance. For these reasons, German sociologist Robert Michels argued that bureaucracy is inextricably linked with “the iron law of oligarchy,” since increasing complexity and bureaucratization cause power to be concentrated in the hands of elites that are then able to make decisions autocratically, even within political states and parties that profess to value democracy and the rule of law.

Bureaucracy concentrates access to communication hierarchically at the top, reinforcing isolation and apathy below. This concentration forces those in the middle to manipulate
information, control formal communication networks, and consolidate their power. It also encourages them to use their positions to acquire unique, secret knowledge and skills that make them difficult to replace, ossifying leadership and alienating the public.

These dynamics led French political philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty to begin his analysis of political conflicts in the 1920s with the assertion that bureaucratic language and abstract politics are a kind of crime against individuality:

Before the [First World] war, politics seemed to us unthinkable because it is a statistical treatment of men ... [I]t makes no sense, we thought, to treat these singular beings ... as if they were a collection of substitutable objects.

The experience of World War I completely altered Merleau-Ponty’s view of the necessity of politics and convinced him that there was little or no connection between the ordinary language of everyday life and the power-infected language of bureaucracy and politics. Several decades later, the English critic John Berger reached a similar conclusion:

Between the experience of living a normal life at this moment on the planet and the public narratives being offered to give a sense to that life, the empty space, the gap, is enormous.

For Merleau-Ponty and others of his generation, the most elementary forces influencing political life were those of social inequality, economic inequity and political autocracy. These suggested the necessity, even the inevitability, of adversarial conflicts, bureaucratic relationships and the inhuman use of violence and coercion against others. Merleau-Ponty wrote, “Political problems come from the fact that we are all subjects and yet look upon other people and treat them as objects.” He considered this double standard
in how we regard ourselves versus how we treat others as a “fundamental condition of politics” that is distorted because it “unfold[s] in the realm of appearance.” While employing coercion and violence as tools, democratic politics nonetheless requires the tacit consent of the governed. Consent is therefore manufactured by creating an appearance of legitimacy, neutrality, necessity, civilization, and even morality, so as to justify actions such as executions that might otherwise seem illegitimate, unnecessary, uncivilized and immoral.

In a similar way, the apparently innocent clichés of “civilizing morality” and the “white man’s burden” under colonialism translated directly into the violent, brutalizing oppression of dark-skinned peoples, overturning ordinary precepts of private, interpersonal morality and causing politics to violate Kant’s categorical imperative that we should act only in ways that we would accept if they were to become universal law.

Indeed, the mere existence of prejudice, exploitation, domination and oppression fundamentally distort political discourse, either by implicitly justifying what is unjustifiable in principle, suppressing the voices of those who seek to end it, or encouraging people to remain silent, knowing of its presence. These acts cause politics to violate a second principle of Kantian morality, that one should “So act as to treat humanity, whether in your own person or in another, always as an end, and never as only a means.”

In these respects, moral violations and reversals are subtly reflected in nearly all varieties of official, bureaucratic, power- and rights-based political speech. We can spot them in the ways disingenuous politicians abstract general principles from individual cases to create an appearance of breadth and statesmanship while avoiding troublesome details,
and in the ways they personalize abstract principles by referring to specific individual instances so as to avoid ethical difficulties while creating an appearance or “image” of morality and integrity.

Thus, in power- and rights-based political language we experience repeated references in noble, stentorian tones, to “our country,” or “the people;” crass manipulations of maudlin sentimentality, particularly regarding children, struggling families, religious figures, and recently departed political leaders; facades of personal outrage and affront; loud protestations and harsh denunciations of moral transgressions by others; and simplistic claims of uncompromising toughness or unyielding principles regarding complex, multilayered problems. Each of these undermines political discourse and makes dialogue more difficult.

These twists of political language become more common during elections and wars. As journalist H. L. Mencken wrote, “The whole aim of practical politics is to keep the populace in a continual state of alarm (and hence clamorous to be led to safety) by menacing them with an endless series of hobgoblins, all of them imaginary.” Every so often, the imaginary nature of these hobgoblins becomes known and the magnificence of the patriotic illusion disappears, exposing a reality of social snobbery, economic greed, and political self-aggrandizement.

In these ways, political language can be turned into a weapon of domination, intimidation and coercion, as when it is used to indict internal opponents as traitors who offer aid and comfort to enemies, or when it adopts a syntax of demagogic exhortation through calls for immediate uncompromising action and does nothing, or when it claims victory or responsibility for changes it did little to bring about. Political speech can also be a perfect
cover for naked greed, prompting Mencken to comment acidly, "When you hear a man speak of his love for his country, it is a sign that he expects to be paid for it."

The language, syntax, metaphors and narrative assumptions common to power- and rights-based political speech make it difficult to avoid or de-escalate violence, transform debates into dialogues, or come to grips with the difficult, often painful issues that inform our most important political choices. Thus, it is common in politics, as in personal conflicts, to construct false absolutes regarding our opponents in order to justify our own unconscionable behaviors. Is it possible, then, to bring a more nuanced, meditative sensibility to conflicts triggered by political speech and turn hostile denunciations and debates into appreciative disagreements and dialogues?

According to neutral, bureaucratic, rights-based thinking, no matter how disastrously people have been treated, laws and public policies must be the same for everyone, subjecting victims and perpetrators to identical rules. Yet as the poet William Blake wrote, “The same law for the lion and the ox is oppression.” While rights are clearly a step forward from the openly subjective power of monarchies and dictatorships, they fall short of accepting human strengths and weaknesses, responding uniquely to individual needs, acknowledging emotions and heartfelt subjectivity, and satisfying diverse human interests in diverse ways.

While neutrality, bureaucracy, and rights have moderated the impact of persistent political conflicts, they have made it nearly impossible to address the deeper dissensions and antagonisms generated by inequality, inequity, and autocracy. Rights distort and to some extent camouflage the nature of these conflicts by resorting to abstract rule-making, remaining formally neutral in the presence of prejudice, channeling disagreements
through bureaucratic agencies and coercive legal institutions that are required to support the status quo, and confining results to win/lose outcomes.

The Win/Lose Nature of Political Power

The principal human goal of politics is to create a public space within which every group can satisfy its unique interests, establish its way of life, and orient its institutions to meet its members’ needs. Democracy and its underlying demands for equality, equity, and freedom are thus symbols, whose deeper meaning is the ability to live personally and socially as oneself, rather than in the shadow, image, and self-interests of others.

Power-based politics is a means of living as oneself, but exclusively and anti-socially, exercising domination over others and preventing them from doing the same. Rights, on the other hand, permit everyone to live formally as themselves, but thwart them in doing so by requiring them to exercise their rights in competitive, adversarial, bureaucratic ways. Rights are small slices of freedom from tyranny for those who otherwise lack status, wealth and power. They are provisional concessions, small chunks of freedom, and piecemeal guarantees, for anyone with the will and strength to enforce them.

Consequently, power- and rights-based politics are fundamentally competitive, win/lose, adversarial processes, suggesting that any gains in equality, equity or freedom by one group require its withdrawal from others. For this reason, power-based political conflicts turn into fierce power contests and efforts to seize complete control over state institutions from insiders, while rights-based conflicts turn into legal battles and efforts to share power by regulating it, or subdividing it with outsiders.
Yet once a group of outsiders gains access to power, they commonly use it to satisfy their exclusive interests over and against those of others, and thereby become the new insiders. They then find it necessary to defend their power and rights by force and coercion, giving rise to a new group of dissidents who demand rights and access to power.

Interest-based approaches, on the other hand, do not require these win/lose outcomes, and are able to increase social equality, economic equity, and political democracy for multiple constituencies simultaneously. They dismantle domination in both large and small ways, aiming at its source, and for that reason, are methods by which it becomes possible for us to redesign political dialogue, including its language, processes and relationships.

When people shift from exercising power or recognizing rights to satisfying interests, even on a small scale, equality is no longer seen as a threat to the social status of existing elites, but as a source of immense richness, creative problem solving, and collaborative relationships. Economic equity ceases to be regarded as stripping wealth from the rich, but as a way of reducing insecurity, implementing social justice, and improving everyone’s quality of life. Political democracy is no longer perceived as mob rule, anarchy, or electoral charade, but as the best way of collaboratively discussing, analyzing and solving common global problems.

**Civil Society Versus the State**

How then do we overcome chronic political conflicts? To those on the political right, the state is often seen as a source of military strength and a protector of private wealth, while to those on the left it is regarded as a provider of social services and a re-distributor of economic wealth. The goal of many “right-wing” social movements is therefore to use the state to defend the nation against others, promote national businesses against those of
other countries, guarantee property rights against the poor, prevent interference with individual economic gain, and increase the share of economic wealth going to the richest members of society. The goal of many “left-wing” social movements, on the other hand, is to use the state to build partnerships with other countries, promote social justice, guarantee minority rights, prevent interference with individual political freedoms, and increase the share of economic wealth going to the poorest members of society.

Political logic and arguments of considerable force can be garnered in support of each of these aims, yet it is generally assumed by both sides that they are mutually exclusive. In reality, they share a number of common features. For example, while right and left may disagree over the purposes of government, they often agree that the state is a proper instrument by which to achieve these goals. And while they may disagree over whose economic advancement governments should support and how, they usually agree that government should be an agent of wellbeing for someone.

By alternating between left and right justifications, the state has steadily increased in size and strength, as a combined military, social, economic and political force. By means of competing ideologies of expansion, the state has become a vast, centralized, hierarchical, bureaucratic, autocratic institution. It is thus distinct from smaller, decentralized, egalitarian, interpersonal, democratic political communities, which are commonly described as “civil society.”

Civil society simply means informal, self-organized, social community. It is the spontaneous, unofficial, social, economic and political activity of people who interact informally alongside the state, yet are largely independent of it. Whereas the state is essentially a formality and an abstraction that has no concrete existence, civil society is
composed of actual people acting informally in concert. While the state relies on a separate class of bureaucratic experts, managers and professionals, civil society relies on volunteers. While the state is stable, ongoing and universal, civil society is evolving, *ad hoc* and responsive to individual needs.

The state is oriented to rules and structures, whereas civil society is oriented to values and relationships, and is “naturally” structured, unselfconsciously reflecting its inner nature. While the state is objective and rational, civil society is subjective and emotional. This does not mean it is irrational, but human. While both make mistakes, civil society is more ready to acknowledge its errors and more accepting of chaos, subjectivity and human limitations. While the state is the ego of civil society, civil society is the soul of the state.

Harvard political science professor Robert David Putnam described civil society as creating two kinds of social capital: bonding capital and bridging capital. Bonding capital is created when people socialize with others like themselves, while bridging capital is created when people socialize with those who are not like themselves. These interact over time, strengthening or weakening each other. Mediation and other interest-based processes are filled with techniques for increasing both bonding and bridging capital, which power- and rights-based states regularly reduce through chronic conflicts.

While force and coercion are the principal methods used by the state and the law, collaboration, consensus and conflict resolution are the principal methods used by civil society. For this reason, while civil society can perform many of the functions of states, states are rarely able to perform the functions of civil society. For example, states do not ordinarily encourage accused criminal offenders to pronounce judgment on themselves, ask their victims for compassion, invite forgiveness and reconciliation, permit
communities to impose sentences, or support personal transformation and transcendence, yet civil society can do all of these through victim-offender mediation and restorative justice.

Thus, while civil societies may legislate, enforce rules, or sit in judgment, states find it difficult to design rules based on subjective criteria (i.e., uniquely for particular individuals) without being accused of bias and losing their aura of neutrality. Civil society routinely enforces rules non-bureaucratically, but only when they are just and there is a clear need to do so. States enforce rules uniformly, without regard to justice, even when there is no need to do so.

**Civil Society and Democratic Change**

Because nation-states exercise considerable power over important social, economic and political decisions, they are heavily influenced by gigantic global corporations, which are nearly uncontrollable, even at a national level. Yet the principal source of countervailing power against these corporations has been precisely the nation-state, which, for this reason, is strategically constricted in its capacity for democratic decision-making and systemic change, in part by requiring candidates to rely on campaign contributions from wealthy donors.

Only by separating politics by means of democracy from wealthy interests (i.e., by eliminating the power of money over political elections) will it be possible to make social, economic, political and environmental decisions in the interest of people rather than in the interest of corporate and private wealth. For example, merely expanding the environmental role of the state without simultaneously increasing democracy and the
influence of civil society will not prevent the state from acting hierarchically, bureaucratically or autocratically, and may even assist it in acting more so.

Hence, increasing democracy can be regarded as introducing elements of civil society into the state. We can therefore consider civil society and popular political participation as the limit of democracy, as that term is used in calculus, and as the principal means of redesigning and transforming the state. Yet the state is commonly seen as superior to civil society, partly because it is viewed as neutral, unbiased, without subjective prejudice, unswayed by emotions, capable of dispassionate judgment, and superior to “mob rule.”

In recent years, however, sociological research has supported the idea that large groups of people are capable of acting emotionally and rationally at the same time, as in the aftermath of crises such as September 11 or Hurricane Katrina. Moreover, the U.S. government’s primarily military response to these events suggest that the state is as capable of irrational violence as civil society, and perhaps more so, as amply demonstrated by the genocides and mass slaughters of the 20th century, which continue today. In addition, research on “swarm intelligence” has shown that the average of a large number of solutions to a problem will be routinely more accurate than individual guesswork, and research on problem solving has proven that diverse teams are better problem solvers than uniform ones, reinforcing civil society over the state.

The neutral state has been a useful and effective instrument for minimizing tyranny, feudal absolutism, monarchy, dictatorship and totalitarian political systems. In states based on unlimited power, inequality and the exercise of personal political will can easily overwhelm rationality. However, these are not arguments against a more advanced level
of democracy in which interests not only restrict arbitrary power but transcend it by rejecting the very idea of exercising power over and against others.

In other words, political history can be seen as a progression from the use of power, to rights, to interests, and thus, as successive stages in the resolution of social, economic and political conflicts, leading to higher, more cooperative, democratic and human forms of political organization. When the state is organized around the satisfaction of interests, it is increasingly influenced by, transformed into, and made identical with civil society, thereby transforming the character of its communications, processes and relationships.

**Mediating Political Speech**

The fundamental orientation of politics to power and rights, as opposed to interests, automatically reinforces the assumption that there is a single truth or correct outcome, and more bizarrely, that it is morally acceptable to lie in pursuit of it. This leads directly to verbal chicanery, character assassination, prejudicial statements, demagoguery, and pursuit of victory at any price.

During the last few decades, interest-based methods, processes, and techniques have developed that allow us to transform not only ordinary adversarial interpersonal speech, but unnecessarily divisive political rhetoric as well, and to do so in ways that reveal human interests, deepen empathy and invite a collaborative search for higher, intersecting, synergistic outcomes.

It is possible, for example, even with hardened political adversaries, to identify ground rules, forms of communication, and process agreements that allow them to constructively address their problems. It is possible to separate highly adversarial groups and ask them
to identify what kind of relationship they would like to have with their opponents, and then list the obstacles preventing them from achieving it, or the behaviors their side engaged in during previous negotiations that made trust more difficult. They can then present these lists to their opponents and discover how accurate they were, thereby shifting their communications in a new direction.

In addition, large meetings and assemblies can be divided into small, randomly selected, politically diverse teams, allowing structured, facilitated conversations to take place face-to-face. Each team can then be asked to list, analyze, and prioritize the problems they are experiencing and brainstorm possible solutions, without necessarily agreeing on them. It is also possible to ask each person some profound internalizing question that stimulates reflection, such as these, which are sometimes used in mediation:

- Why did you decide to join this group? What attracted you to it?
- Why do you care what happens here? What about it touches your passion?
- What have you done that has contributed to this conflict? How have you, by action or inaction, fueled or allowed it to continue?
- What has this conflict cost you? What price have you paid for it? How much longer are you prepared to continue paying that price?
- Do you believe your communication has been effective in creating understanding in the other side? What might you do to improve it?
- What is one thing you would be willing to do to improve communication with the other side?
- What request would you most like to make to the other side? What promise are you willing to make in response?
• What most needs improving in your relationship?
• What is one thing the other side could do to restore your trust?
• What is one thing you have learned from, or appreciate about the other side?
• With 20/20 hindsight, is there anything you wish you had done differently? What are you willing to do differently in the future?
• Is there anything for which you would like to apologize? Are you willing to do so now?
• If you had one wish for what we might achieve in this session, what would it be?
• What changes would need to take place for you to act differently in the future? What support would you need from others? How could they encourage or support you?
• What might either side do that would undermine or sabotage the progress you’ve made?
• What is likely to happen if nothing changes and the conflict continues? Is that what you want? If not, why not?

Conflict resolution has demonstrated in countless instances that people are able to stop accusing and start listening to each other, not as a result of political argumentation, which is nearly always experienced as confrontational and disrespectful, but through authentic interpersonal dialogue. This may take the form of stories, empathetic questions, open-minded discussions, emotionally vulnerable admissions, acknowledgements, apologies, confessions, informal problem-solving conversations, collaborative negotiations, personal
requests, sincere promises, honest disagreements, heartfelt declarations, or discussions of mutually important issues.

The unspoken assumption behind most political communication is that there is a single truth and only one correct outcome. This illusion is partly a consequence of the natural orientation of political speech to decision-making and a need to select one out of many diverging paths, competing options and alternative views of the future. Yet intelligent political decisions emerge more easily, naturally and successfully from an appreciation of the complexity and multiplicity of truths, rather than an assumption that other truths are inferior or do not exist. The shift from single to multiple truths happens automatically when we alter the form of political discourse by transforming debates into dialogues, and ask questions that do not produce a single correct answer. Even simple algebraic equations can produce more than one correct answer, so that the square root of 16, for example, is both 4 and -4.

**Transforming Debates into Dialogues**

Once populations reach a certain size, political participation and direct democracy become more complex, vulnerable to conflict, and time consuming, allowing representative democracy and bureaucratic political institutions to rise and take their place. Yet these less direct forms of political representation encourage a variety of adversarial, rights-based forms of communication, including debate.

Clearly, population density and urban sprawl reduce the likelihood that people will behave toward one another as if they were members of the same family, tribe, or species. Yet large groups can be reorganized into smaller groups and teams or small groups that
work collaboratively or in parallel to make political decisions more democratically without significant reductions in efficiency or effectiveness.

If we define democracy as “government of, by, and for the people,” what would government “of, by and for” all the people actually look like? How might it be done? Democracy, of course, has two distinct and entirely different meanings. First, it can be thought of as a form of state or system of government in which leaders are elected and decisions are made by majority rule. Alternatively, it can be thought of as a problem solving process that is free, equal, open and participatory, in which power is shared and decisions are made collaboratively. These two definitions sometimes conflict, since elected governments and majority rule do not always entail equality, openness and participation.

Democratic processes include group facilitation, public dialogue, informal problem-solving, strategic planning, public policy mediation, even large group computer conferencing. These methods make it possible for large numbers of people to discuss difficult issues and reach consensus on common approaches, in spite of significant differences in beliefs, size and diversity. They make it possible to bridge the gap between ordinary language and political discourse by shifting communication from debates over who is right to dialogues over what is possible, using stories and life experiences to explain why they care about these issues.

Conversations about difficult, dangerous and controversial issues are minefields, full of hidden traps and camouflaged dangers. As a result, most people assume it is better not to talk about them at all, rather than enter conversations that could blow up. Yet silence in the face of difficult problems simply guarantees their continuation. Is it possible for us to
design processes that take account of these difficulties and avoid, reduce or overcome them? Can we design dialogues in which people talk about difficult, even dangerous topics in ways that are safe and effective, yet directly address the issues and allow people to discover solutions? If so, how do we begin?

**Dialogue vs. Monologue**

First, it is useful to distinguish dialogue from other forms of communication and identify the principal elements that make it effective. Dialogue is different from monologue, which can happen even when more than one person is speaking. Here are some important distinctions between them:

- Monologue is one way. Dialogue is two ways.
- Monologue is an assertion. Dialogue is a responsive conversation.
- Monologue is talking *at* each other. Dialogue is talking *with* each other.
- Monologue assumes there is a single truth. Dialogue assumes there are multiple truths.
- Monologue is announcing “The Answer.” Dialogue is asking respectful questions and exploring diverse answers.
- Monologue is preaching to the choir. Dialogue is talking with people who are different about their similarities and differences.
- Monologue is about me. Dialogue is about us.
- Monologue is about power. Dialogue is about interests, which are the reasons why people want to accumulate power.
- Monologue moves toward opposition. Dialogue moves toward relationship.
Monologues tend to advance narrow, self-centered truths that divide us from one another because they are too small, inflexible and simplistic; because they cannot encompass the greatness and complexity of all the possibilities that reside in the problem. Dialogues, on the other hand, are broader, collaborative searches for synergistic truths that unite us, that are large, flexible and complex enough to include everyone, yet not make problems simpler than they actually are. Dialogues allow us to cross the divide of our differences and discover what we have in common. They encourage us to communicate and thereby overcome the isolation of individual experience and learn from other points of view.

**Dialogue vs. Debate**

We can also distinguish dialogues from debates, which are simply two successive monologues pretending to be a dialogue. Debate defines issues and solutions adversarially, in ways that make them automatically unacceptable to the other side. Dialogue, on the other hand, as defined by Physicist David Bohm, is “a stream of meaning flowing among, through and between us.” Dialogue defines issues and solutions collaboratively and searches for ways of making them acceptable to all parties.

Debate is a circular process, in which opponents argue and disagree with each other and are more interested in demonstrating that they are right than they are in discovering the truth. In dialogue, truths emerge not from one side winning and the other losing, but from both sides explaining their different perspectives, identifying the meaning of their disagreements and searching for solutions that satisfy their underlying interests. Bohm explained how dialogue achieves these results:

> In … a dialogue, when one person says something, the other person does not, in general, respond with exactly the same meaning as that seen by the first person.
Rather, the meanings are only similar and not identical. Thus, when the 2nd person replies, the 1st person sees a difference between what he meant to say and what the other person understood. On considering this difference, he may then be able to see something new, which is relevant both to his own views and to those of the other person. And so it can go back and forth, with the continual emergence of a new content that is common to both participants. Thus, in a dialogue, each person does not attempt to make common certain ideas or items of information that are already known to him. Rather, it may be said that two people are making something in common, i.e., creating something new together.

Here are some distinctions between debate and dialogue, developed largely by Bohm and the Dialogue Group for the Boston Chapter of Educators for Social Responsibility:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DEBATE</th>
<th>DIALOGUE</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Debate is oppositional: two sides are opposed and attempt to prove each other wrong.</td>
<td>1. Dialogue is collaborative: two or more sides work together to develop a common understanding.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. In debate, the goal is to be the only one to win.</td>
<td>2. In dialogue, the goal is to find common ground and to find better solutions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. In debate, one listens in order to find flaws and refute arguments.</td>
<td>3. In dialogue, one listens in order to learn and find commonalities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Debate affirms each side’s own point of view.</td>
<td>4. Dialogue enlarges and transforms both side’s points of view.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Debate rarely questions assumptions but defends them against criticism.</td>
<td>5. Dialogue questions assumptions and discusses and re-evaluates them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Debate rarely results in open apology or introspection.</td>
<td>6. Dialogue encourages apology and introspection, and openly shares them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Debate defends one’s own position as the best solution and excludes the other side’s positions and solutions.</td>
<td>7. Dialogue elicits interests rather than positions, and reaches better solutions by creatively combining them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Debate produces closed minds and hearts, a determination to be right, and resistance to change.</td>
<td>8. Dialogue produces open minds and hearts, a willingness to be proven wrong, and participation in change.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Debate results in the solidification and entrenchment of beliefs.</td>
<td>9. Dialogue results in the modification and re-examination of beliefs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In debate, one searches for disagreements, mistakes, difficulties.</td>
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<td>---</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>In debate, one searches for flaws and weaknesses in other’s positions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>Debate involves opposing the other side without recognizing feelings or relationships, and belittling or deprecating the other person.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>Debate assumes there is a single truth or correct answer, only one side has possession of it, and that combining them only weakens them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>Debate implies an end or conclusion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td>Debate assumes that conflict is only resolvable when one side wins.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In his book *On Dialogue*, Bohm explains why we need to pay attention to the process of dialogue and design ways of making it more effective:

Dialogue is really aimed at going into the whole thought process and changing the way the thought process occurs collectively. We haven't really paid much attention to thought as a process. We have engaged in thoughts, but we have only paid attention to the content, not to the process. Why does thought require attention? Everything requires attention, really. If we ran machines without paying attention to them, they would break down. Our thought, too, is a process, and it requires attention, otherwise it's going to go wrong.

Another way of thinking of dialogue is to regard it as a learning process in which participants with diverse ideas, backgrounds and experiences try to understand not only what the other thinks that is different, but more importantly why they think that way, and what events and experiences led them to do so. Part of the power of dialogue is its
encouragement of personal stories, life experiences, and the lessons people draw from them. These induce empathy in the listener and invite deeper levels of listening.

For this reason, it is often useful to open a dialogue by asking people to say something about who they are in relation to the issue. For example, in a recent dialogue conducted by Mediators Beyond Borders in Los Angeles about conflicts in the Middle East that was attended by over a hundred people on both sides of the issue, small groups began conversations with a facilitator asking each participant to briefly introduce themselves and say what personal experiences or connections they have with the Middle East. People were invited to tell stories about their experiences and encouraged to express empathy with them.

**Some Forms and Stages of Dialogue**

It is possible to conduct dialogues between two people, dozens, hundreds, or entire communities and nations, as occurred informally in the days following September 11, 2001. The main difficulty with two-person dialogues is that no one is present to facilitate the conversation if it starts to go off-track. The main difficulty with larger dialogues is that people tend to “grand-stand,” give speeches, and become so distant from one another that they fail to listen empathetically to what is being said, especially by dissenters, opponents, outsiders and critics.

For this reason, the most effective dialogues, in my experience, are those that take place in small, diverse groups of about 5 or 20 people, led either by a trained facilitator or a volunteer from the group, with a recorder to capture everyone’s ideas and discourage repetition, and in difficult cases, with a “process observer” or mediator who can step in to
reflect on what went wrong in the conversation and offer ideas on how to get it back on track.

William Isaacs, CEO of Dialogos and author of Dialogue, distinguishes four unique stages of dialogue based on Bohm’s ideas. He describes, for example:

1. "Shared Monologues", in which group members get used to talking to each other
2. "Skillful Discussion", in which people learn the skills of dialogue
3. "Reflective Dialogue", in which people engage in genuine dialogue
4. "Generative Dialogue", in which "creative" dialogue is used to generate new ideas

As Isaacs sees it, participants in dialogue pass through a number of stages in their ability to listen, process and interact with each other. Dialogue is therefore an evolutionary process in which people adapt their ideas and beliefs based on what they are able to learn from each other. This suggests that what is useful and important at one stage may not work when people move to a different stage, which requires considerable presence, awareness, sensitivity and understanding on the part of the facilitator.

**How to Organize a Dialogue**

To organize a dialogue regarding divisive political issues in a community or organization, it is helpful to break the process down into 15 core steps or elements, and examine each separately:

1. Designing the process
2. Training facilitators
3. Convening participants
4. Setting the stage
5. Agreeing on ground rules
6. Introducing participants
7. Asking questions to encourage dialogue
8. Listening in a committed way
9. Summarizing important and useful points
10. Intervening to encourage listening and resolve conflicts when necessary
11. Breaking into small groups
12. Listening to small group reports
13. Inviting feedback
14. Reaching closure
15. Evaluating the process

Here are a few suggestions on how to go about designing a dialogue using these 15 steps:

1. **Designing the Process**

Every dialogue will attract a different mix of participants and cultures, occur in different locations and times, and therefore require different designs to be effective. The steps in organizing a dialogue will vary, depending on the nature and size of the group, the needs of the parties, the character of the issues, the timing of the process, cultural expectations, and other considerations. While fine-tuning the process is important, in my experience, the principal elements in the dialogue remain the same, and can be said to consist of these steps, unless more difficult exchanges occur, in which case mediation may be necessary.
The design process should take account of the beliefs, culture and experience of all the people who are expected to participate, their personal backgrounds, anticipated moods and attitudes, degrees of expressed open hostility, recent events, willingness to talk to the other side, and similar factors. It is equally important to be flexible and ready to modify the design if it is not working.

2. **Training Facilitators**

It is important to prepare facilitators in advance, including those who will be guiding small group sessions, and make sure they have read and understand the training materials and feel ready to lead the process. It is often useful to have one or two mediators who can “float,” listen in to small group sessions, watch for warning signs like raised voices, and be prepared to intervene and help out as needed.

3. **Convening Participants**

The first step is to identify the principal parties who will participate in the dialogue, who should include:

- The primary parties to the dispute
- Affected groups in industry, labor, government, and community
- Recognized experts and scholars
- Leaders of local community organizations
- Concerned individuals, such as students, teachers and officials
- Anyone who can contribute to the success of the dialogue or undermine it

Next, interview key participants in person in advance of the session to discover their issues and interests, build trust in the process, uncover hidden obstacles to moving
forward, gather information to assist small-group facilitators, fine-tune a design for the process and communicate these to encourage openness and buy-in.

4. **Setting the Stage**

Arrange the setting in a friendly, open location and manner. If possible, have chairs arranged in small circles so people can talk to each other. Have flip charts, marking pens, masking tape for hanging them on the wall, paper and pens for note taking, tissues and refreshments available if possible.

In addition, it is useful to meet in advance with small group facilitators to prepare them for what they are about to do. Here are some sample instructions that can be used to assist small group facilitators:

**Suggestions for Dialogue Facilitators**

Facilitators perform the following functions, or ask group members to do so:

- Moderate the discussion, if necessary, to keep it on topic.
- Record key points, preferably on flip chart paper.
- Keep track of time.
- Observe and give feedback on the process.

Facilitators should also:

- Ideally arrange chairs in a circle or semi-circle so that each person has eye-contact with you and with each other. This seating arrangement encourages interaction and sharing so no one is left out.
- Use each person’s name. Name tags or tents are useful to help you remember and make them feel welcome.
• Do not discount, dismiss or minimize participants’ ideas or feelings. Stop the process or reframe comments if others do so.

• Be aware of everyone’s differences and encourage them to do so as well. Each of us comes with a different family system, culture, religion, political beliefs and experience which affects our views.

• Respect requests for confidentiality.

• Show respect, friendliness, and interest. Use humor (especially about yourself) whenever appropriate.

• Be fair when you present information or respond to comments or remarks.

• Be less concerned about securing agreement over content and more concerned with reaching agreements over process.

• Focus on positive qualities, and reframe negative ones.

• Discourage individuals from monopolizing the conversation. This helps those who withdraw or refrain from participating who may need encouragement.

• Be a good listener. It is helpful to paraphrase or summarize comments to show that you are listening. It also gives you an opportunity to clarify what was said.

• Be flexible. Go with what is happening.

• Observe how the participants interact and where they seat themselves.

• Listen for words of welcome or hostility, watch for eye contact, observe body language, especially notice withdrawal and hostility.
• Note the effect on participants of words or actions by others, both positive and negative and consider giving feedback on these at the end.

• Take written notes of statements to come back to, group interactions, specific suggestions for follow-up, and suggestions for improvement of the process.

• Phrase suggestions for improvement positively, so as to encourage continued improvement.

• Ask participants questions like:
  o “How did it make you feel when s/he said that?”
  o “Why did you want to come here today?”
  o “Where are you heading with that question?”
  o “What are you feeling right now?”
  o “How could this dialogue be improved?”
  o “What are some other questions you might ask?”

• The facilitator should allow the group time to perform exercises before intervening and not try to manipulate or control the group process.

• If a particular group is not working well, try switching groups so a different person is facilitator, or stop and ask why the conversation is not working.

• If a group is getting sidetracked, ask a question about the original topic.

• Take some time at the end of the session to ask each person what they thought of the discussion, or what they learned from it, or what they will
do differently. Encourage participants to report on their experiences and suggestions on how to improve the process.

- Compliment participants on their work.
- Thank everyone for sharing their feelings, experiences, and information with the group.

5. Agreeing on Ground Rules

Invite participants to discuss and agree on ground rules for the dialogue. Here are some common ground rules that can encourage constructive attitudes and help create a trusting environment in which dialogue over difficult issues can be useful:

**Some Common Ground Rules**

- We agree to be present voluntarily and that no one will be coerced into attending or speaking.
- We agree that everything we say to each other will be confidential and will not repeated to others, unless we expressly agree otherwise. [Or: We agree that all statements made during the dialogue are not for individual attribution, unless we decide otherwise.]
- We agree that the process will be completely transparent and open.
- We agree that no group decisions will be made until we have finished discussing the issues.
- We agree to participate in a spirit of learning and open communication.
- We agree to be honest and not withhold our differences or disagreements.
- We agree to communicate respectfully and not engage in personal insults.
• We agree to act with courtesy and not engage in violent or disruptive behavior.

• We agree that we will jointly investigate factual discrepancies.

• We agree that we will not retaliate for anything anyone says or does during the dialogue.

• We agree to publicly support the group’s consensus, if there is one.

• We agree that all public announcements, press releases, global e-mails, bulletins and disclosures issued during these dialogue sessions will be presented in a spirit of collaboration and improving relationships.

• We agree to mediate any disputes we can’t resolve ourselves.

6. **Introducing Participants**

As they convene, welcome the participants and invite them to be present in a spirit of inquiry, learning and discovery. Tell them you will review the ground rules, give an overview of the design for the process, and present a list of issues to be discussed that has been drawn from the interviews.

You may want to invite people to introduce themselves, either in the large group, or if there are too many, in the small groups they will belong to, as the first item on their agenda. If you use self-introductions, ask each participant to state their name, perhaps where they are from, and answer a question that will introduce the dialogue, such as:

• One reason why you decided to be present

• One reason you want to see this issue discussed or resolved

• One thing that, in your life, has led you to feel strongly about this issue
7. Asking Questions to Encourage Dialogue

Thousands of dialogue sessions have been facilitated or mediated over the last three decades between conflicted parties, including communities, political organizations, governments and national minorities. The Public Conversations Project, Dialogos, Common Ground, Mediators Beyond Borders and similar organizations have developed a rich array of methods for opening lines of communication. Here are a few questions that can be used to begin a political dialogue:

- What life experiences have you had that have led you to feel so deeply and passionately about this issue?
- What is at the heart of this issue, for you as an individual?
- Why were you willing to participate in this dialogue?
- Why do you care so much about this issue? What does it mean to you?
- Do you see any gray areas in the issue we are discussing, or ideas you find it difficult to define?
• Do you have any mixed feelings, uncertainties, or discomforts regarding this issue that you would be willing to share?

• Is there any part of this issue that you are not 100% certain of, or would be willing to discuss and talk about?

• Even though you hold widely differing views, are there any concerns or ideas you think you may have in common?

• What underlying values or ethical beliefs have led you to your current political beliefs? What values or ethical beliefs do you have in common?

• Do the differences between your positions reveal any riddles, paradoxes, contradictions, or enigmas regarding this issue?

• Is it possible to view your differences as two sides of the same coin? If so, what unites them? What is the coin?

• What is beneath that idea for you? Why does it matter?

• Can you separate the issues from the people you disagree with? What will happen if you can’t?

• Is there anything positive or acknowledging you would be willing to say about the people on the other side of this issue?

• What processes or ground rules would help you disagree more constructively?

• Instead of focusing on the past, what would you like to see happen in the future? Why?

• Are you disagreeing about fundamental values, or about how to achieve them?
• Is there a way that both of you might be right? How?
• What criteria could you use to decide what works best?
• Would it be possible to test your ideas in practice and see which work best? How might you do that?
• Would you be willing to jointly investigate your conflicting factual assertions?
• What could be done to improve each side’s ideas?
• Could any of the other side's ideas be incorporated into yours? How?
• Is there any aspect of this issue that either of you have left out? Are there any other perspectives you haven’t described?
• Are there any other ways you can think of to say that?
• Do you think it would be useful to continue this conversation, in order to learn more about each other and what you each believe to be true?
• How could you make your dialogue more ongoing or effective?
• What could you do to improve the ways you disagreeing with each other in the future? For encouraging future dialogue?
• Would you be willing to do that together?


The purpose of these questions is not to eliminate or discourage disagreements, but to place them in a context of common humanity and allow genuine disagreements to surface and be discussed openly and in depth. These questions reveal that political conversations need not be pointlessly adversarial, but can be transformed into authentic engagements by
allowing opposing sides to come to grips with difficult, complex, divisive issues without being hostile or abusive.

These questions also demonstrate that it is possible, even in small ways, to strengthen dialogue, encourage learning and change, and return to the original purposes of politics. The mere possibility that we might do so is sufficient to encourage us to consider how we might redesign political processes and activities so as to draw people together – not over and against others, but with and for them, so as to maximize political clarity, ethical self-improvement, and the common good. As Supreme Court Justice Robert Jackson wrote, "It is not the function of government to keep the citizen from falling into error; it is the function of the citizen to keep the government from falling into error." Only an active, collaborative, democratic citizenry can make this happen.

8. *Listening in a Committed Way*

It is important to begin the dialogue process by listening. Here is what Brenda Ueland says about the importance of listening:

> I want to write about the great and powerful thing that listening is. And how we forget it. And how we don’t listen to our children, or those we love. And least of all—which is so important too—to those we do not love. But we should. Because listening is a magnetic and strange thing, a creative force. . . . This is the reason: When we are listened to, it creates us, makes us unfold and expand. Ideas actually begin to grow within us and come to life. . . . Who are the people, for example, to whom you go for advice? Not to the hard, practical ones who can tell you exactly what to do, but to the listeners; that is, the kindest, least censorious, least bossy people you know. It is because by pouring out your problem to them you then
know what to do about it yourself. . . . So try listening. Listen to your wife, your children, your friends; to those who love you and those who don’t; to those who bore you; to your enemies. It will work a small miracle—and perhaps a great one.

So listen to those you disagree with, even to those you find abhorrent. We are human beings first, before we are left or right, African-American or Caucasian, or however you define yourself. By listening in a committed way to each other we create pathways and connections that hold us together and do not allow us to imagine we are so completely different from one another that we could harm each other without feeling guilty or ashamed. The Chilean journalist Ariel Dorfman, who was tortured by the military junta under General Pinochet, wrote, “How easy it is to kill someone you don’t have to mourn because you never dared to imagine him alive.”

Committed listening is listening as though your life could change as a result of what you are about to hear. We get there by discussing things that matter in small conversations, by having facilitators to keep us on track and recorders to make sure our voices are heard, by agreeing to take turns, by coming to grips with the difficult things people want to say, by searching for practical things we can say to make a difference.

9. **Summarizing Important and Useful Points**

It is useful for facilitators to summarize people’s points – not everything that is said, but the most important and useful points, as a way of making people feel heard and reducing repetition. This can be done on a flip chart, by a recorder or orally. It can also be done by asking each side to see if they can summarize the other sides’ views. Summarization should not be simply verbatim repetition, but capturing its essence and repeating it using different words.
10. *Intervening to Encourage Listening and Resolve Conflicts when Necessary*

Sometimes, the dialogue process goes off track. What do we do then? To begin, try these interventions:

- Draw participants into responsive dialogue, defuse tensions, summarize agreements and record “points of consensus and disagreement” on flip charts.

- Ask each side to present its position, offer back-up information, detailed explanations, and provide ample opportunity for questions and dialogue from all points of view.

- Shift the focus from positions to interests, past to future, personalities to issues, and prescriptions to options. Ask *why* people want what they want and probe for underlying concerns.

- Caucus periodically with each side to encourage them to trust and speak freely with you, and to bring their interests and hidden issues to the table.

- Ask representatives of opposing positions to meet in "side-bar" negotiations to come to consensus on recommendations to the larger group. Select the strongest advocates so others will not question their recommendations.

- Transition into small group problem solving and collaborative negotiation, identify areas of agreement, disagreement, mutual interest, and consensus. Re-focus attention on relationships and qualities the parties have in common.
• Summarize points of agreement regularly, to build confidence in the process and limit the range of disagreement.

• As the parties reach full and final agreements, review each point of agreement to ensure consensus.

• If they have not reached full and final agreement, confirm interim agreements, agree to limit the use of destructive methods between meetings and encourage continued dialogue.

• List outstanding disagreements to work on at the next session. Elicit recommendations and agendas for following sessions.

• Hold repeated sessions, picking up where you left off and distribute summaries of the last session before the next one.

• Draw each separate session to a close, not a conclusion. Thank participants, assign homework and encourage continued dialogue over open issues.

• Confirm agreements to meet until the conflict is resolved and to forge a genuine resolution.

• Reach for closure, acknowledge participants and celebrate successes. Make the process transparent throughout, explaining what you are doing and why, while you are doing it, so everyone can learn skills to resolve conflicts in the future.

David Bohm wrote that the main problem people offer in refusing or rejecting dialogue is that the other side is prejudiced and unwilling to listen.

After all, it is easy for each one of us to see that other people are 'blocked' about certain questions, so that without being aware of it, they are avoiding the confrontation of contradictions in certain ideas that may be extremely dear to them. The very nature of such a 'block' is, however, that it is a kind of insensitivity or 'anesthesia' about one's own contradictions. Evidently then, what is crucial is to be aware of the nature of one's own 'blocks'. If one is alert and attentive, he can see for example that whenever certain questions arise, there are fleeting sensations of fear, which push him away from consideration of those questions, and of pleasure, which attract his thoughts and cause them to be occupied with other questions. So, one is able to keep away from whatever it is that he thinks may disturb him. And as a result, he can be subtle at defending his own ideas, when he supposes that he is really listening to what other people have to say. When we come together to talk, or otherwise to act in common, can each one of us be aware of the subtle fear and pleasure sensations that 'block' the ability to listen freely?

Here are some process interventions that can be used by facilitators to help each side become aware of the ways they are blocking listening, keep the conversation on track and encourage respectful communication:

- **Transparency**: “What just happened in the conversation we were having?”

- **Inquiring**: “What do you think should be done? Why do you think so?”
• **Supporting:** “I appreciate your willingness to speak up and express your opinions. Here is an example that supports your point.”

• **Acknowledging:** “You took a risk in making that apology/concession.”

• **Refereeing:** “What ground rules do we need so everyone can feel we are behaving fairly?”

• **Concretizing:** “Can you give a specific example?”

• **Exploring:** “Can you say more about why you feel so strongly about this issue?”

• **Summarizing:** “Is this what you are trying to say ... ?”

• **Challenging:** “Is that consistent with the ground rules/what the group has already decided?”

• **Coaching:** “Is there a way you could respond less defensively?”

• **Connecting:** “That point connects directly with what was said earlier … .”

• **Re-orienting:** “I think we're lost. Can we get back on track? Are we talking about the real issue?”

• **Problem Solving:** “What do you see as some possible solutions?”

• **Uniting:** “What can we agree on here?

• **Contextualizing:** “Why have we come together to discuss this issue?”

If these do not work, consider taking a break and ask those involved to meet separately with a mediator to see if they can resolve their issues.

11. **Breaking into Small Groups**

It is always useful to break large groups into smaller ones to give everyone a chance to participate and reduce the tendency to grandstand and use adversarial styles of speech
that trigger conflicts in large groups. Each small group should have a facilitator, and if possible, a recorder to take notes, a process observer to reflect back to the group how they did and intervene with process suggestions if the conversation becomes too heated, and a time keeper to stay on track.

12. **Listening to Small Group Reports**

Ask each small group to select someone who will present the results of their conversation, elicit comments from the large group, draw people into dialogue about possible disagreements, and applaud each small group for its work.

13. **Inviting Feedback**

At the end, ask if anyone would like to offer oral feedback on how the process went for them, and whether they have any suggestions on how it could be improved next time. Thank them for their comments, make sure someone records them and draw the meeting to a close. Instead, or together with oral comments, it is possible to hand out an evaluation form, as suggested below.

14. **Reaching Closure**

At the end, ask people to reflect on their experience in the dialogue, what they learned or will do differently as a result, or how they felt about the process. Try to end on a positive note that looks toward common action and continued dialogue.

15. **Evaluating the Process**

Sometimes it will be best to ask the participants to complete a written evaluation. More people will participate and the confidentiality of their comments will produce different feedback. Here is a sample dialogue evaluation form you can modify or ask people to fill.
in at the end. The most important element is that you take every suggestion seriously and consider what can be done next time to make the process work better.

**Sample Dialogue Evaluation Form**

*Please add your comments for the benefit of the facilitators and future participants.*

1. On a scale of 1 to 5, 5 being highest, how would you evaluate the usefulness of your dialogue? 1 2 3 4 5
2. What was the most useful and enjoyable part of the dialogue for you?
3. What was the least useful or enjoyable?
4. What could be done to improve future dialogues?
5. What is the most important thing you learned this evening? Is there anything you intend to do differently as a result?
6. Is there anything you are willing to do to help?
7. Other suggestions and comments:

**Confronting Prejudice, Bias and Stereotyping**

Prejudice is complex and operates on many levels. It can be found not only in insults and judgments, caricatures and stereotypes, but refusals to listen and communicate, stories of demonization and victimization, inability to experience empathy with others, and infinitesimal denials of humanity. It is reflected in personal selfishness and hostile relationships, bullying and aggressive behaviors, and ego compensations based on poor self-esteem. It is expressed through contempt, disregard, and domination, as well as through low status, inequitable pay, and autocratic power. It is endemic to power- and rights-based politics, and a barrier to dialogue.

Prejudice commonly operates by stereotyping. People form stereotypes, in my
experience, in eight easy steps:

1. Pick a characteristic
2. Blow it out of proportion
3. Collapse the person into the characteristic
4. Ignore individual differences and variations
5. Disregard subtleties and complexities
6. Overlook commonalities
7. Match it to your own worst fears
8. Make it cruel

If these steps routinely produce prejudice, it is possible to undo them, for example, by making people more complex than their stereotype permits, distinguishing unique individuals within a group, or recognizing commonalities between people. It helps, in doing so, to acknowledge that everyone is equal, unique and interesting; that everyone forms prejudices; that everyone can learn to overcome them through awareness, empathy and communication; and that everyone can become more skillful in communicating across stereotypes and lines of separation created by fear.

It is common for people, when accused of prejudice, to respond defensively, yet confront other people’s prejudices aggressively, leveling accusations and instilling shame. These responses may initially succeed in suppressing the expression of prejudicial attitudes and undermining social permission for hate speech and the cultures of discrimination that allow it to continue. But to root out the deep-seated biases that keep prejudice alive, it is necessary to dismantle it at a much deeper level, in people’s hearts and minds.

Our principal goals in responding to prejudice are therefore not to castigate, blame, or
point fingers at those who exhibit prejudicial attitudes, as shaming and blaming merely trigger defensiveness and counterattack. Instead, they are to defuse prejudice by assisting those in its grip (including ourselves) to:

- develop a knowledgeable, confident self-identity, and appreciate who they are without needing to feel superior to others
- experience comfortable, empathetic interactions with diverse people and ideas
- be curious and unafraid of learning about differences and commonalities
- feel comfortable collaboratively solving problems and negotiating differences
- be aware of biases, stereotypes, and discrimination when they occur
- stand up for themselves and others in the face of prejudice, without becoming biased in turn
- experience diverse affectionate relationships that grow stronger as a result of differences

There are many ways of confronting prejudice, bias and discrimination that allow us to alter not simply the overt prejudicial statements and behaviors that express it, but the covert places in people’s hearts and minds where it lies buried. To begin with, we can each acknowledge and speak openly about our own prejudices, how we have struggled to overcome them, and how it feels when others act prejudicially toward us. When confronting other people’s prejudicial statements, we can:

- bring awareness to our emotional responses and calm ourselves before speaking
• assume their good intentions
• try to understand where their prejudice came from
• discuss their statement one-on-one, privately, in a non-threatening way
• request permission to offer feedback
• be low-key and non-aggressive
• don’t shame, blame, attack, or accuse
• be friendly and accepting, yet assertive and clear
• be hard on the problem and soft on the person
• ask if the effect they created was the one they intended
• ask if they ever felt discriminated against or harassed for any reason, and get details
• indicate what it feels like to experience prejudice, using “I” statements
• tell a story about prejudice to help them listen and learn
• try to assess the cost of prejudice, offering examples from personal experience
• suggest alternative phraseology, approaches, or perspectives
• state your disagreements openly and honestly
• bring in a third party to mediate differences
• ask for feedback on our feedback

All nations, political groups, minorities, cultures, classes, races, and individuals seek to satisfy their own self-interests, yet rarely recognize that satisfying the interests of others, including those of their opponents, is essential to satisfying their own. Modern forms of warfare, ecological concerns, revolutions in communication and transportation, and
economic globalization no longer permit isolated, short-term understandings of self-interest. The long-term interests of each are now increasingly and directly the interests of all, and vice versa. As the Dalai Lama recently declared, “‘We’ and ‘they’ no longer exist. This planet is just us. The destruction of one area is the destruction of yourself. That is the new reality.”

In this regard, discrimination can be defined simply as acting in one’s own short-term self-interest and ignoring the self-interests of others. In a larger sense, all governments discriminate, simply by representing the interests of dominant groups, whether defined by politics, nationality, religion, culture, class, race, or gender; or by status, wealth or power.

Indeed, the self-similarity of discrimination on all scales extends even to attitudes toward nature, permitting human beings to regard themselves as superior to all other species and entitled to dominate those it considers different or antithetical to themselves, without regard for the fragility and mutuality of their interdependent ecological relationship.

In this sense, chauvinism is a general attitude of superiority and discrimination toward others, for the principal purpose of rationalizing acting selfishly and denying or opposing the satisfaction of other “inferior” interests. Chauvinism can also be triggered by the translation of one’s personal prejudices, or anger and humiliation at having been discriminated against by others, into a proactive form that seeks to dominate and ignore the needs of others.

The brilliant Tunisian novelist and sociologist Albert Memmi wrote in *The Colonizer and the Colonized* and *Dominated Man* about the paradoxical experience of living as a Jew among Muslims, an Arab among Europeans, a ghetto dweller among the colonial bourgeoisie, and an intellectual among tradition-bound family and friends. Memmi
described in detail how colonialism as a *psychological system* drives colonizer and
colonized apart. The inability of each to communicate with the other renders them
incapable of uniting effectively to oppose colonialism, contributing to their entrapment,
and confining them to culturally accepted roles, albeit ones favorable to the colonizer.

The Algerian psychologist Frantz Fanon reached similar conclusions regarding the
psychological pathology induced in individuals by the collective experience of racism
and colonial domination. The pathological impact of being a subject or object of
discrimination leads either to increased empathy and resistance to oppression, or to a
cycle of victimization, self-hatred and hostility toward others -- including, as Anna Freud
realized, identification with the oppressor. Each of these responses is expressed in
contradictory forms of nationalism.

Drawing on conflict resolution principles and experience over several decades in cross-
cultural mediation and diversity or prejudice reduction work, it is possible to shift the
self-replicating, conflict-generating nature of adversarial nationalism in a collaborative,
empathetic, transformational direction in at least the following seven ways, by:

1. Using inclusion, storytelling, and empathy-enhancing processes to encourage
   identification, understanding, and collaboration between diverse victims of
discrimination

2. Increasing awareness of the internal and external impact of bias and prejudice,
even when directed against one’s opponents

3. Focusing opposition on the system of discrimination while working in a
   collaborative, constructive, heartfelt way to end its personal and interpersonal
   manifestations
4. Persuading people of the need for overall unity, and inviting dissenters, lukewarm supporters, and defectors from the “enemy camp” into the change process

5. Bringing awareness, transparency, feedback, and continuous learning to communications, interactions, processes, and relationships

6. Promoting voluntary coalitions, teamwork, power sharing, and a “human right” to independence and self-determination

7. Using interest-based processes such as dialogue, collaborative negotiation, consensus-based decision-making, and mediation to resolve differences, both with allies and opponents

These techniques hint at a deeper symbiotic relationship between politics, self-determination, and interest-based processes such as dialogue. As there is no natural limit to self-determination short of full recognition of the equal rights of others, its practice, whether by nations, national minorities, or individuals, requires a democratic framework, which in turn requires interest-based processes.

Interest-based processes naturally promote collaborative and democratic ends, whereas power- and rights-based processes naturally promote adversarial, hierarchical, bureaucratic and autocratic ones. Satisfying interests is predicated on independence and implies self-determination, whereas power- and right-based processes are predicated on domination and imply imposition of an alien will. Power and rights thus necessitate the use of force, violence, or coercion to sustain domination, thereby generating chronic conflicts that interests seek to prevent and transcend.

For this reason, it is impossible to thoroughly abolish prejudice and discrimination, whether based on gender, race, nationality, or other categories, without also eliminating
social inequality, economic inequity and political autocracy, as these are sources of domination and therefore of discriminatory treatment, adversarial relationships and chronic conflicts. Hence, interest-based goals cannot be achieved using the same tools, methods and processes that were developed to maintain power- and rights-based relationships.

**Tips on Dialogue**

Engaging people in dialogue is simple, but it is not easy. It means that people have to actually listen to one another. They have to accept as authentic and valid for that person whatever that person says, even if it contradicts the listeners’ perceptions and deeply held beliefs. Here are some suggestions that may help facilitate political dialogues:

- Consider yourself an ally of other participants. If you set out to learn to engage in dialogue together and broaden your knowledge of others’ life experiences you can’t fail.
- Assume others are sincere in what they say.
- Listen not only for facts and opinions, but the reasons behind them. How and why did the speaker arrive at his or her conclusions?
- Don't take things too literally. Listen for meanings, not just words.
- Be patient. A question that may be easy for you, e.g. "What is your racial and ethnic identity?" may be hard for others. Give them time to work their way through their resistance and find the words.
- Accept silences as part of the process. Don't rush to fill the space.
• Seek clarification. If something is not clear, or if you want to learn more, ask questions. It helps to restate what you think was said, so that the speaker can feel heard, correct wrong impressions and expand on ideas.

• Ask "why" questions, but not in ways that sound judgmental.

• Avoid questions that can be answered with a simple "yes" or "no." A single-word answer may discourage further conversation.

• Be alert to generalizations, both yours and others. A statement may be true of "some," or maybe "most," but surely not "all."

• Use the identifying terms for people that they use for themselves. There's usually a reason behind their choice of group names.

• Say how an experience or statement affected or is affecting you. Reframe "you" or "they" statements as "I messages."

• Use real-life examples as reference points. Tell stories.

• Be honest, but don't release your own pent-up anger, anxiety or guilt at the expense of others.

• Try not to be defensive. Few of us are smooth talkers. We inadvertently step on toes. Keep the big picture and goal clearly in mind.

• Watch your body language. Be sure it doesn't say, "I'm bored," "I'm superior," "I don't believe you."

• Do not doubt the authenticity of what you hear. Each person is the highest authority on what she or he feels.

• Support others when they try to say something. They may repeat themselves, stammer or pause a while as they try to get it out.
- Understand that you're getting only a tiny glimpse into peoples’ lives. Dialogue happens at a fast pace, and not many are adept at organizing their thoughts on the spot.

- Refuse to give up on anyone, no matter how unpleasant, opinionated or difficult they are to deal with.

- Accept that you and others may hold opposing views. Resist the temptation to find quick solutions, correct, argue or counter.

- Be willing to have your biases challenged.

- Don't be impatient to talk about broader issues and problems. If and when the group moves on to analysis and action planning, things will go easier if they know and trust one another.

- Don’t dominate the conversation.

- Try to open and close on a note of heartfelt appreciation and unity.

(Based partly on materials from the Los Angeles Commission on Human Relations)

**Final Advice**

The most important advice I can give about dialogue is to simply try it. The process works, and even when it seems impossible to reach people, or when the pain and rage begin to emerge, someone will say something that turns the entire conversation in a positive, constructive direction. If you continue to hold the thought that it is possible and are clear in your collaborative intention and transparent in your process, people will understand and walk away having learned something important.