

# Is Peace-Building Common Sense?

Richard Lappin

Peace, it is often claimed, is common sense. Whilst many of us feel a normative bond to this claim, the continuation of violence would suggest that the fostering of sustainable peace remains an elusive goal. Perhaps it is time to re-examine this most fundamental of claims if we are to accept the true complexities that are involved in peace building.

Common sense is one of those fantastically frustrating phrases that is used with significant frequency, yet is annoyingly difficult to comprehend. The *Collins English Dictionary* defines common sense as: ‘Plain ordinary good judgement; sound practical sense.’<sup>1</sup> In terms of semantic usage, I have no qualms with this definition. Indeed, most people often follow up their appeals to common sense by claiming ‘its obvious’ or ‘everybody would have done that’. However, this is where I begin to doubt exactly *what* knowledge is obvious or what is *common* to the majority. Interestingly, the bulk of research on common sense comes in the discipline of Artificial Intelligence which seeks to instil a range of basic information to help computers/robots function with a greater fluency and naturalness. The common sense they attribute includes basic facts such as ‘fire is hot’ and ‘people do not walk on their heads.’

Could the principles of peace building be added to this canon of common sense? Advocates would argue a resounding yes. They would state that you do not need any esoteric knowledge or a postgraduate degree in conflict resolution to understand that peace is a “good thing.” However, this claim is immediately rendered insensible by the continuation of violent conflict which clearly illustrates that some people profit from war, whilst others see it at the very least form of ‘common sense’ and the only way that they can maintain or change their world order.

Moreover, even if it was possible (I disagree) to claim the *aim* of peace building is common sense, the *means* used to achieve this aim are too complex and disputed to ever be considered common-sensical. This is highlighted perfectly in Gene Sharp’s seminal work, *The Politics of Non-Violent Action*, in which 198 methods of non-violent action are described. However, more tellingly, common sense would presumably dictate that such non-violent methods are peaceful and used solely for good causes, but in actual fact they can, and are, used for confrontational and negative aims. For example, one only has to look at the orders of Slobodan Milosevic to create ‘human

---

<sup>1</sup> “Common Sense”, *Collins Softback English Dictionary*, Third Edition, Harper Collins Publishers: Glasgow (1991), p.312.

shields' on infrastructure during the 1999 NATO bombardment of Serbia. Similarly, it is accepted that aid can sometimes prolong a conflict (by keeping factions fed and healthy to continue fighting), whilst premature elections can lead to a return to violence (by polarising societies on the very issues that led to violence).

More fundamentally, common sense can be argued to be the very enemy of peacebuilding. Common sense is often appealed to in political debate, particularly in the absence of sound argument, to detrimental effect. Civil rights for ethnic minorities, women's suffrage and homosexuality have all been attacked as being contrary to common sense. Indeed, common sense can be seen as a conservative notion which implies that a 'fact' is present and indisputable. It is my belief that if common sense prevailed, we would live in a static world, cloaked in ignorance and which shunned creativity. This is the very antithesis of peace building which seeks creative, win-win solutions to seemingly intractable conflicts. If common sense dictated we should surrender all thoughts of finding a solution to issues such as Kashmir or the Balkans because, as some would have us believe, these 'people will never see eye-to-eye.' However, we must remember that Western Europe was once the same, but the formation of the EU has proved how peace building can triumph over stagnant common sense beliefs.

This illustrates the first of three fundamental flaws with common sense. Firstly, it fluctuates *temporally*. To use an obvious example from outside peacebuilding, the contention that the world is flat was once common sense, yet common sense now tells us that the world is 'in fact' round. As Henry Ward Beecher famously posited: 'The philosophy of one century is common sense to the next.'<sup>2</sup>

Secondly, common sense fluctuates *spatially*. What is common sense to an American may often differ greatly from, for instance, an Iraqi. Many Americans are often puzzled by the seemingly irrationality of many Iraqis and wonder why they blindly follow propaganda and are so easily manipulated. Of course, the opposite is true and many ask the same about Americans. However, the point is that an exogenous peacebuilding effort based on common sense will often be paternalistic, patronising and ultimately rejected. As already noted, common sense suggests an indisputable answer and in peacebuilding there are no such easy answers or 'quick fixes'.

Finally, I would also contend that increasing *individuality* make any pretence to common sense ridiculous, even within small communities. In what can be viewed as an increasingly postmodern world, the destruction of meta-narratives and breaking down of rigid demarcations (for instance in class, gender and the nation state) illustrates that there is no universal knowledge. People

---

<sup>2</sup> Quote commonly attributed to Henry Ward Beecher (former US Congressman). Available at: "common sense." Quotations. Quotations Book, 2005. *Answers.com* 11 September 2007. <http://www.answers.com/topic/common-sense>

increasingly transgress traditional borders and 'pick and mix' the truths that are most suitable to them. This is evident in the increasing emphasis on transdisciplinarity within peace building which makes use of numerous disciplines to provide a creative (individual) solution for specific problems.

In conclusion, a persons 'common sense' may not necessarily be the 'common sense' of another person, and this is why the term has never gained any 'common sense' understanding. Moreover, experience often teaches us that our own common sense changes over time. Therefore, despite a seemingly obvious appeal, common sense has no place in peacebuilding.