

WHAT I LEARNED IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

Lord Paddy Ashdown is High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), a position created to oversee implementation of the civilian aspects of the Dayton Peace Agreement of December 14, 1995. Born in New Delhi and raised in Ireland, Ashdown served as a Royal Marines Officer, a diplomat and an elected member of Britain's House of Commons, leading the opposition Liberal Democrats from 1988 to 1999. He was appointed High Representative in 2002, with a mission to ensure that BiH is a peaceful, viable state on course to European integration. Ten years after the signing of the Dayton agreement that ended the war in the region, *Canada World View* invited Ashdown to write about the lessons of Bosnia for the international community in post-conflict societies.



photo: CHR

In the 1960s, the charismatic Brazilian educationist Paulo Freire advanced the premise that “you can't teach until you are prepared to be taught.” Freire argued that pupils will always rebel against one-way communication—where the teacher dispenses knowledge and the class is required simply to soak it up. The fundamental disequilibrium of one-way communication leads to alienation and resentment.

Freire's ideas, once radical, are now orthodox—one reason that children no longer sit in rows in classrooms, but sit instead in little groups where they help one another.

The Freire paradigm can be applied (alas this is too seldom the case) to international intervention in failed states. If we are not prepared to ask what the people of Afghanistan, East Timor, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Iraq, Rwanda et al. are able to teach us, then our intervention will be met with a growing tide of resentment and alienation. This tide, in time, will overwhelm our best efforts to do good.

Yet there is a clear tendency for the international community to descend on failed states with answers.

This is fatal for nation-building. Yet, learning how to listen is easier said than done.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, we embarked on a steep learning curve as the result of an initiative that began by chance.

At the end of 2002, I called for a campaign to “bulldoze” pointless regulations, so as to clear the way for new investment and job creation.

Neither I nor any of my staff knew exactly which bits of the business environment needed to be fixed—so we couldn't preach. This was, as it happens, a huge advantage. We had to listen and we had to learn.

Listening and learning were the hallmarks of the “Bulldozer Initiative.”

For the international community the process was liberating, because we were not prescribing solutions to BiH problems. Our active participation in the process became increasingly redundant.

This model applies to politics just as much as it applies to business.

Bosnia and Herzegovina's recovery took on new momentum when the Euro-Atlantic integration process began to open up the real prospect of a prosperous and secure future. Moving into the Euro-integration path, BiH began to prepare itself for European Union and NATO membership, a process that has been experienced by other transition countries in Europe.

Notice the phrase: prepare itself. Progress depends entirely on the acceding country. They *know* what they have to do; they must strive to

Lord Paddy Ashdown: In Bosnia and Herzegovina the international community “learned a deeper lesson about our own struggle to find a basis for peace in the wider world.”

The conflict

In the wars that characterized the fall of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, the conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) was the most devastating. Between April 1992, when BiH declared independence, and December 1995, with the signing of the Dayton agreement, 250,000 people were killed and more than a million displaced from their homes in fighting among BiH's three main ethnic groups: Serbs, Croats and Bosnians. The conflict was characterized by ethnic cleansing, the targeting of civilians, the use of anti-personnel mines and ineffective efforts by the international community to quell the violence. The Dayton agreement created a loose federation overseen by the Office of the High Representative of the International Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina.