

Jonathan Powell (international mediator)

“I don’t always find leaders worldwide of comparable courage as those in the Basque Country”

Interview made by Enekoitz Esnaola for the basque journal BERRIA (10th february 2019)

Since 2007, Jonathan Powell (Fulbeck, UK; 1956) has worked for 11 years as facilitator in the Basque Country peace process. He is “proud” of this resolution and remarks the efforts made by both Basque political and social parties.

Following graduation and working experience in the media sector, Powell moved to US being enrolled as UK diplomatic staff. In 1997, he moved back home serving as Chief of Staff during Tony Blair's UK Prime Minister mandate being one of the major negotiator of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. He has negotiated many political, military or diplomatic conflicts - the Colombian one being the last one - and founded the non-governmental organisation InterMediate.

He started working on the Basque conflict's resolution in 2007. He was sent to Geneva (Switzerland) by Blair to lead the last talks between ETA-Spanish government and Batasuna-PSOE. Despite those talks failed, Powell carried on following the debate around the change of strategy inside the basque Nationalist Left. In 2010, Brian Currin announced him to be one of the signatories of the Brussels Declaration. One year later, jointly with the Henri Dunant centre, he played an important role to cross messages between ETA and Madrid. His first public appearance within the frame of the Basque Country peace process was on October 2011 in Donostia for the Aiete International Conference. The Aiete

Declaration (17th October) was signed by six personalities whilst Powell was working behind the scene. Three days later the Aiete Declaration, ETA announced definite cessation of its armed activity. From 2011 to 2013, he covertly tried to get ETA and Spain talking in Norway. He also kept talking to the Basque agents; i.e. he arranged a meeting series in Bilbao in 2014. On 4th May 2018, he had another public appearance in Kanbo (Labourd) at the International Conference organised the day successive to the ETA disband.

Currently, he is dealing with fourteen conflicts worldwide, as he explained. He rarely appears in public and even fewer gives public speaking. He answered back to the question asked by the basque journal BERRIA through writing.

You have been involved more tha 10 years in the process of resolution of the Basque conflict. What situation did you find first time you get contact? May 2007, the talk process of Geneva was broken...

I was first approached by the NGO handling the talks in 2007 while I was still working in No 10 Downing Street. The process was stuck and in danger of collapsing. They asked me to bring out to Geneva members of Sinn Fein who had participated in the peace process in Northern Ireland. I did so and I had the impression they had a helpful impact on the Independentist delegation. I was also asked to go to Madrid to meet the Interior Minister to share the lessons which I had learned from the Northern Ireland process. I was present at the meeting in Geneva where the process finally collapsed and I was struck how some of the participants on the Independentist side were disappointed by the way the process unravelled and left determined to go back to their base and develop a political approach that would have more chance of success.

Nationalist Left began the internal debate to give up the political and armed dual strategy and to work only with a political way without violence. How do you value it this change step?

My impression was that the leaders of the Indepedentist Left changed their

approach after the collapse in Geneva. They started a debate in their base on the right way forward and developed a political strategy, very similar to the way in which Sinn Fein changed its strategy in the 1990s. They won this argument amongst their supporters and have never looked back since then in what has been a successful peace process. I think this change of strategy was fundamental to securing the end of the conflict.

Do you think that the international community helped Nationalist Left to change the strategy?

I think this new strategy was home grown. It required a deep and lengthy debate inside the Basque Country. The international community was able to support by sharing lessons from peace processes elsewhere and providing encouragement for both sides to take steps forward but this was very much a supporting role. The real drive came from inside.

On 17th October, 2011, Peace Conference in Aiete, Donostia – San Sebastian. You were one the signatories of the final statement. On 20th October 2011, ETA’s statement declaring the end of the armed campaign. How do you remember these days. What future did you expect when that happened?

The Aiete Conference in 2011 was an important moment and it represented a huge amount of work behind the scenes over many years by people who have never really received the credit they deserve. I remember coming out to San Sebastián for a meeting and press conference before the conference itself. I was asked who would be the winners and losers from this process. I answered that there should be no winners and no losers. If an agreement is going to stick it must not be a zero sum game, but rather everyone must feel they have benefitted from it. I thought what I had said was unarguable, but the next day I was severely criticised in the right wing Spanish press, who insisted the government must be the winners and the terrorists must be the losers. That didn’t seem to me a good basis for a lasting agreement.

I remember gathering together the international participants for the event. Many international figures were unwilling to come, knowing they would be attacked for participating. I am still struck by the courage of those who did attend to make a stand for peace, especially Kofi Annan, who sadly recently died, who was indeed criticised severely afterwards including by Spanish friends.

The day itself was a blur of drafting statements, marshalling everyone and getting the announcement made. But it was also a joyous day marking the end of the conflict when ETA made its statement shortly afterwards as expected.

I had anticipated the rest of the process would be relatively smooth. After all who could be against getting rid of weapons and resolving the consequences of the conflict? But the change of government from the PSOE to the PP ensured that subsequent steps were much longer and more painful than they needed to be.

After Aiete, the Norwegian table for the talks between the Spanish Government and ETA, concerning the consequences of the conflict, was not set up. That was a lost chance?

Yes the immediate next steps did not take place as envisaged. And that was a sign of the difficulties ahead.

After the Norwegian attempt failed, ETA gave priority to its disarmament, and carried out that process on 8th April 2017. ETA itself said it was an “extraordinary lesson”. What would you highlight about the disarmament process? Can we say that this process could be a new model in the world?

Taking the weapons out of the conflict took six more years; much more time than it should have done. Because it was effectively a unilateral process was more difficult to enact than normal bilateral processes when legal guarantees can be given and cooperation is possible with the forces of the state. It does show however that such a process can be undertaken even in the face of an obstructive political stance.

What is your opinion about the implication and the job carried out by the civil society of the North of the Basque Country in the disarmament of ETA? And your opinion about the behavior of the French Government?

The decision to involve civil society in the next steps when the government opted out proved to be an inspired idea. The political parties and the representatives of civil society were able to provide the backing and the debate necessary to make the final steps possible. The position the French government found itself in was difficult. They did not want to alienate a close neighbour and ally and they were constrained in what they could do.

Even ETA disbanded, do you think that Spain will continue with the strategy of victory and defeated? You have spoken publicly against this strategy. What is the problem or risk of this strategy?

Trying to 'win' a negotiation is always a mistake; it simply leaves grievances in place that will boil up again into further conflict. No one won. It was good for all parties. I think however the success of the Independentist Left political strategy in the Basque Country makes the position taken by the previous Spanish government largely irrelevant. Now it is possible for the political parties in the Basque Country to work together for a new future.

There was a Government change in Spain. The PSOE is now in Madrid, instead of PP. What kind of change can you expect from the new Government in the field of the consequences of the conflict? Do you think that the relationship with the socialist Government will be better than with the Popular Party Government? You have worked before with a Spanish socialist Government in President Jose Luis Rodríguez Zapatero's time. How was that work, that relationship?

The new government in Madrid does not have a majority and it will be difficult for them to take bold steps in Catalonia or in the Basque Country. On the other hand, the last Socialist government [2004-2011] does not in my view get enough credit

for the work it did to bring about peace.

Yet, there are almost 300 basque prisoners. According to the actual prison policy the last Basque prisoner will be released approximately in 2050. What kind of steps we should do in the field of prison policy to get a just and durable peace? It is just law or something more?

The issues of the prisoners and the 'on the runs' remains unresolved. This was very difficult for us in Northern Ireland too. We allowed all prisoners out after just two years whatever crime they had committed, and we were criticised for doing so. And the 'on the runs' issue is still a live and controversial political issue 20 years after the Good Friday Agreement. You can also see from the peace process in Colombia this is never an easy issue to deal with.

What other consequences of the conflict are still unresolved? In April (2018) ETA said that they were truly sorry about the pain caused to the victims of its activity, and asked for forgiveness to the not fighting victims. Do you think that this ETA's statement could be enough?

The most difficult issue in any peace process is to draw a line under the past. If you don't you find you are constantly dragged back into the past. In Northern Ireland we still have not managed to do this and as a result the politics of Northern Ireland is from time to time threatened by the reappearance of the evils of the past. The ETA statement of regret was clearly not enough for all of its victims. But I believe the work on the ground between those who suffered on both sides can gradually heal the pain caused by the conflict.

During these years, you have been in a relationship also with the Basque Government. What is your opinion about its job in the peace building process?

The Basque government too contributed to the peace process. They found themselves in a difficult position between the authority of Madrid and their desire to

help the peace process. They tried to help on issues like prisoners but could not always succeed.

After the dissolution of ETA, can we say that the international groups and people that have helped in the process have finished their job or they have more job to do? How important do you think has been this job made by international groups and people like you?

The role of internationals in making peace in the Basque Country should not be exaggerated. The heavy lifting was done by political leaders there. They were the ones who needed courage and had to take risks, and some paid a heavy price. I think the international community will of course be ready to support the implementation of the peace process and there are still unresolved issues that need to be taken care of.

In 2011, in the point number 4 of the statement of Aiete (Donostia – San Sebastian) you said: “We suggest that nonviolent actors and political representatives meet and discuss political and other related issues, in consultation with the citizenry, that could contribute to a new era without conflict”. Following the purpose of the resolution of the political conflict, do you think that the right to decide or the right for self determination of the Basque Country should be recognized?

The outcome of the peace process was an agreement to disagree. Many in the Basque Country still want to exercise the right of self determination and others do not. But what all sides have agreed is that they will pursue their aims by exclusively political and peaceful means. That has resulted in peace in the Basque Country and a much better future for all but it does not mean that all political differences will be miraculously resolved.

Are you satisfied with your experience in the Basque Country? What would you mention?

I am proud to have been associated in a small way with the Basque peace process and I pay tribute to the courageous leaders I met on all sides. It was they who made peace possible and they who should get the credit. I now work on 14 different conflicts around the world, often referring to the lessons I learned in the Basque Country, but I don't always find leaders of comparable courage who can end those conflicts in the same way as those leaders did in the Basque Country.