

# Political Therapy: An Encounter with Dr John Alderdice, Psychotherapist, Political Leader and Peer of the Realm<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper comprises an encounter by the author in 1992 with the distinguished Northern Ireland psychotherapist and political leader, The Lord Alderdice of Knock. Born in Northern Ireland in 1955, John Alderdice graduated in Medicine in 1978, and qualified as a member of the Royal College of Psychiatrists in 1983, followed by higher specialist training in Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy. Alderdice joined the Northern Ireland Alliance Party in 1978, and in 1987 was elected Party Leader. Raised to the peerage as Baron Alderdice in 1996, he was one of the key negotiators of the Good Friday Agreement signed in 1998. This 1997 paper includes the author's interview with Alderdice, together with his observations on Alderdice's two-handed psychoanalytic and political practice, his "political therapy". Drawing upon the author's roots as a Belfast-born Australian, the paper reflects on the possibilities of Alderdice's applied psychoanalysis – of politics "off the couch". Copyright © 2009 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.*

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The house was on the Knock road, right beside the headquarters of the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) and likely to be heavily guarded by police and soldiers. The RUC would not risk the IRA (Provisional Irish Republican Army) getting that close to home. I supposed there would be guns protecting Alderdice himself, as a leading politician. It was a narrow road and the December day was dark and the rain was starting to come down when I found it, a Victorian house behind a high hedge but the only security I could see was a policeman a hundred yards on, diverting traffic around some road works. Then, as I went into Alderdice's driveway, trying to look as little like a mad bomber as I could,

and keep the mud of my shoes, a soldier in camouflage and carrying a sub-machine gun appeared alongside me, as if he had been hidden in the hedge. "I have an appointment with Dr Alderdice", I said quickly. He was slightly built and looked very young under his green-brown helmet. "Go ahead", he said in an English accent. "Manchester", I thought, remembering how small the British soldiers looked alongside the ANZACS (Australian and New Zealand Army Corps) in the photos of Gallipoli.

I had put up at the Stormont Hotel near the former parliament building. In the lounge bar rain dashed against the plate glass windows as handsome, dumpy women of about fifty gathered for lunch, soon to be joined by husbands in suits and ties, their hair plastered down, who had been parking the car while trying not to get wet through. (A new Ford was blown up in the same car park a few months later.) I was not enjoying my visit at all and I thought, after I see Alderdice, I will be on the first plane back to London. I hated the armored cars, metal guarding their wheels that raced rat-like through the streets. In the railway station, my heart pumped when a file of soldiers came up behind me on the escalator, guns at the ready and the last man facing backwards. The woman at the newspaper stall said there had been an unattended bag in the toilet but it was nothing. From the forecourt of the station, later, I watched the soldiers trooping across the waste land that surrounds Central Station in Belfast till they disappeared, like the end of a piece of string pulled by an invisible hand, into the Divi's flats. It was 1992, between Christmas and New Year. The IRA ceasefire was still three years away.

## PATIENTS AND CONSTITUENTS

We sat with the lights on in a big front room that seemed empty. A Protestant room. Alderdice sat in a chair next to the fire-place (there was no fire) and I was across to his right, a surprisingly long way away, on the sofa. A small Christmas tree stood in a corner near a bay window spotted with rain. I left my tape-recorder on the arm of his chair and crossed back to where I was to sit. He is not yet forty. His hair is very black and he has well-marked eyebrows. His voice is strong and confident. I asked him about fear:

The reality is that people get out and about their work and their leisure and don't think too much what the dangers are. I took the children down into Belfast today. We went to a shop, then we started to go to another shop but the roads were taped off. Obviously a bomb, or a bomb scare. Now our reaction was neither to run and see nor to say, "Let's get away home, you never know what will happen." Our reaction was, "Goodness, I wanted to go to that shop! We'll have to go to the one across the road." You see we are used to it. This has been going on since 1980, more than half my life and all of my children's life. We don't remember anything different.

This shocked me, as if he was irresponsible to set aside the fear. In fact, I did not quite believe him and it was in my mind through the whole of our hour and a half of interview.

John Alderdice is a son of the manse in Ballymena, Ian Paisley's town. Born in 1955, he grew up through the 1960s to become, with one hand, as it were, a politician of the center: leader of the Alliance Party (since 1987), member of the Belfast City Council (since 1989), an anti-Unionist and anti-Nationalist spokesman for a non-sectarian future. With his free hand, he is a doctor, a psychiatrist and a Freudian-trained psychotherapist. In the morning he sees patients, in the afternoons, constituents. He jokes – or pretends to joke – that it is the patients who keep him sane:

Every morning I start off at eight o'clock seeing a patient. So, before I do anything else, I'm sitting down trying to listen to somebody, I'm trying to understand what's going on with somebody. I have a couple of hours of that and then, last thing at night, I have a couple more patients or I'm supervising a student. That clinical discipline – just sitting there and not moving, just the organs of your mind moving – that's very important.

Alderdice's two-handed career began with his discovery that conflict existed both within and without. He wanted to understand "a community in conflict with itself. When I was coming through grammar school in the late 1960s and early 1970s all the violence was bursting forth here and the question was why a community does such crazy things to itself." His father was, and still is, a Presbyterian minister but the home encouraged debate, from reacting to his father's sermon at the morning service – "whether I agreed or didn't agree" – to the politics of Unionism and Republicanism and the meaning of the growing civil rights movement. "He came from South Armagh, which is an area with a strong Republican tradition as well as an Orange tradition, and he would have had a considerable sympathy for Catholics and their views of things." Not that the older Alderdice was actively political or even particularly liberal in his theology: "He was a conservative evangelical, in fact." And the younger Alderdice, the oldest boy, was conventional enough through all these turbulent times not to neglect "the need to get a training, get a career", but bold enough at the same time to want a different sort of career, one that would bring him directly to the question of why a community tears itself apart.

"When I looked at politicians and at political theory they didn't seem to answer anything terribly much at all. That's why I moved – this was in my professional, medical mode – to a way of working with people which tried to understand individual, internal conflict." Freud, it seems, followed easily enough from Calvin. "I tried to work with people in ways that would empower them personally. This was congruent with a traditional radical Presbyterian view, which has a democratic church structure and emphasizes personal responsibility and freedom of thought and conscience." He was still, however, searching for a way to address collective conflict, and cultural disempowerment, as well though it may be only now, some years later, that he can say the two sides have at last "come together for me".

The first task of Alderdice's teenage politics was to break with the extremism and dogmatism of his own side without losing what was of value in it:

I remember the first political meeting I went to at university. It was being addressed by the leader of the Unionist Party, Harry West, and I didn't agree with whatever it was he was saying, so I started heckling him, as students are wont to do. And I was jumped on and dragged to the floor – and the people who did it to me were my two cousins!

At the same time, Catholics were people you did not know. “I wouldn't have met many Catholics at all till I went to university.”

Alderdice may have gone through a period of thinking that he would never find a place in politics.

There wasn't any political career for someone like me with cross-community, liberal, views. If you were a nationalist of the British sort there was an obvious place in Unionism. If you were a nationalist of an Irish sort there was an obvious place in the SDLP [Social Democratic and Labour Party]. And so on. Aside from that there was very little.

But as he approached the end of his training in medicine he began looking around again for a party he could join:

I wrote to all the constitutional parties [that's a distinctively Northern Ireland qualifier!] and asked them to send me information. The Unionists would send back lots of stuff with red white and blue flags. The Nationalists weren't terribly good about replying. But the Alliance Party sent someone around to see me and I had a good chat with them and immediately identified with their ideas about pluralism and tolerance in the community, and joined the Party.

He was in his mid-twenties and starting work as a house doctor and was soon involved in Alliance Party policy discussions, though “in a backstage sort of way because the professions, except perhaps Law, strongly discouraged anyone from getting involved in politics”.

Alderdice became leader of the Alliance Party in 1987. On my visit all the taxi drivers knew him and said he was different from the other politicians, an honest man, genuine, not like a politician at all. This was true of even the one driver I thought might have been a Catholic. (In Northern Ireland the nominal religion of driver and passenger is mysteriously matched.)

The Party has equal religious representation at every level. I mean my Deputy Leader and the Chief Whip are both Catholics. My two predecessors as leader were Catholic and their predecessor was a Protestant. It's Protestants and Catholics all the way through, voters, supporters, members, activists, elected representatives, leadership.

In a sense, this is the Alliance's basic policy, to show by example that Protestants and Catholics can get on.

On the central question of nationalism:

The stance would basically be that as far as pro-Union people go they have a right to remain in the United Kingdom if that is what they wish and it's in their best social and economic interest to do so. But they must recognize that a large minority of the

population don't look to London, they look to Dublin. Therefore there have got to be special arrangements for an involvement of people on a proportionate basis and a special relationship with the rest of the island. As far as the Nationalist people go, they have to see you cannot have a united Ireland because the majority of people in Northern Ireland don't want it. The wish for a united Ireland therefore has to go on the long finger – but the pay back is power-sharing, protection for minority rights, a special relationship with Dublin, and so on. That's the position the Alliance Party takes. Of course, Unionists say, "Oh, it's just a covert Republican Party", and Nationalists say, "Oh, another Unionist Party"!

The long finger. The obvious worry about parties like the Alliance Party – as it was with the Australian center party, the Democrats, until they found an effective niche in the Senate – is that they might be too clean-cut for politics, not really prepared for hardball politics, and if they were to become so would they still be as high-minded? (When the Australian Democrats' Janine Haines was leader, taxi drivers said *she* wasn't like a politician either.)

Alderdice himself insists that politics is not just applied psychology, or about right thinking and right feeling. "There's a danger psychoanalysts become so involved with fantasy and the inner world that they fail to see the real world their patients live in." In the past he worked with alcoholics and drug addicts:

I couldn't just sit there making interpretations about this guy's resistances. There was a *real* problem. People out there weren't going to give him a job, because he'd once been an addict, they weren't going to give him a flat or anything like that. Those were things he needed help with first if he was going to work through the more personal things.

Moreover, where the patient hangs on every word, voters are likely to be cynical about the pronouncements of politicians. A psychotherapist's patients seek him out and when he speaks they listen closely

because they have a problem and they think that you may be able to help them; they're even ready to engage in what might be a very painful process to receive that help. Politics is very different. First of all, the community doesn't come to you. You have to find ways to be heard, to be listened to, through the press and meetings and getting about. There's a lot more doing, getting people's drains emptied, getting their houses fixed, but above all getting elected. You have to put yourself forward where the psychoanalytic approach is pulling oneself back. In politics, the more public you are, the better.

And that's what I began doing seven or eight years ago, putting myself in the position where the community would regard me as somebody they wanted to listen to and developing modes of communicating so they can hear me. Getting credibility, getting a position for yourself.

Those years, the middle and late 1980s, were fateful years, though in Northern Ireland many if not most of its seventy-odd years have been fateful. "That was when there was no communication between politicians at all. After the Anglo-Irish agreement nobody talked to anybody. It was the death of communication. Everybody turning into their own autistic world, almost."

Long-since graduated from the backroom, now a practiced front-line politician, there must be considerable strain on Alderdice's two-handedness. In 1992, the Alliance Party's vote of about ten percent – eight percent in 1997 – was enough to put him on the Belfast Council, which, in the absence of a Northern Ireland government, has meant a heavy workload. (Seats in the House of Commons go to the Unionists.) At the time of our interview, he felt that he was only able to see the number of patients he saw, and supervise as many students as he did, because his political load was still comparatively light. There was no doubt that if Europe or a devolved Government or Westminster beckoned (and Westminster has now beckoned via the House of Lords) he would respond eagerly and this would probably mean his psychotherapy work would have to contract. [Dr Alderdice had been a Consultant Psychotherapist with the Eastern Health and Services Board in Northern Ireland since 1988, as well as being in private practice. Besides his political writings, he has published on eating disorders, the practice of psychotherapy and ethics in health care.]

The division between the real world and the inner world is not clear-cut, and wherever he goes in politics, Alderdice takes a psychoanalytic attitude with him. I asked him if there was any political equivalent of making an interpretation to a patient:

If a whole ding-dong starts you don't immediately get involved in the thing. You listen. Then you say, "What's going on here?" Here's the Unionists screaming at Sein Fein and Sein Fein screaming at the Unionists, they're obviously opposites. But the psychoanalytic stance pulls back and says, "These aren't opposites, they're replications of each other, in actual fact." If you see it in that way you can make an interpretation, which helps to pull them out of their rivalrous identification with each other.

He offered another example:

We were involved in the Inter-Party talks and the four parties and the two governments were moving forward into meetings with each other. The most frightening part of that was in London when the Unionist parties met with the Dublin government. Coming into that meeting it was absolutely clear to me that everybody was going to be quite frightened, because there was a lot of hype and a lot of reactionary Unionist talk about these guys selling the people out, and so on. And I had a sense that some of the Nationalists were very frightened – because although they kept *saying*, "We want you guys to meet us", you know, saying it over and over, in actual fact they never expected they would. They'd been asking the Unionists for something they'd never thought they'd get.

So I thought what can one usefully say in a situation like this? Of course, I had my own political views and was ready to put those forward. But I thought, well, if I was working with a patient and I sensed something was going to be very frightening for him, I would speak about it, I would say there was anxiety and what it was.

Now a politician can't go into a meeting and say, "I'm frightened!" But what I could say was, "We're all very frightened here today. Everybody's terrified because we're afraid we may be selling our people into the hands of their traditional enemies. This would be a terrible thing to do. It's a burden weighing on us, and there are people outside this

meeting who wish us harm. But remember there are many people outside here who are wishing us well.”

That was just part of my speech, about ten minutes. I had to speak first. They were all so frightened to speak they decided to go in alphabetical order and having me, Alliance, go first eased their anxieties!

I asked if the politicians were ever uncomfortable having a psychotherapist among them:

It makes them suspicious of me initially because they have huge fantasies that I can just sit there and know what's in their heads. There's also a degree of respect that comes from it. People see it as an interesting line on things.

Then you have some coming along to me with their own personal problems. Sometimes they are trying to trap me into not being able to attack them politically, because it would be taking advantage of the vulnerability they've shown me. But it's also looking for help from someone they trust. Part of the job description of every leader – the population doesn't realize this – is to help their colleagues.

(I am still wondering just how many political leaders would see this as part of their role, though it makes so much sense.)

I asked Alderdice whether politicians feel only another politician can understand them:

They might be half right! Because politicians tend to be seen either as dreadful hypocrites who have no real beliefs and as totally self-serving or, on the other hand, they are seen as powerful idealists, who embody all that's good in their supporters' view of life. Of course, that's not true. Most of the politicians I know have some sort of impulse to serve their community – now I know enough not to imbue that impulse with too much goodness, I don't idealize it. But it's still a good thing. On the other side, true, there's not a single politician who isn't weighed down by the strength of his own ego! But mainly they're like other people, not all good, not all bad.

I followed this up with whether politicians have support groups to help them cope with the stresses of the job. Alderdice's response shows, I think, not only how tough-minded he is about politics, but that one of the reasons he's tough is a certain realism learned in psychoanalysis:

It's a curious and ambivalent sort of business. Most politicians cannot really trust any other politician, including the ones in your own party. And the higher up you get the less you can trust anybody. And this isn't paranoia, it's just the case. Because the more leading you are the more people there are who want your position. So they can be rather understanding of each other and out to completely destroy each other.

Is this true of you?

Oh yes. I mean otherwise you would just disappear. I mean you just wouldn't survive as a politician for any length of time. One of the cardinal rules of working with patients, borderline patients especially, is that the therapist must survive. If the therapist doesn't survive you are not doing the patient any good at all. If the therapist does survive – as long as it's not at the expense of the patient – then there's hope for the patient, too. The same in politics. Survival is an important part of it.

## POLITICS ON THE COUCH

It crossed my mind that Alderdice's two jobs, as therapist, as politician, must overlap very close to home. On the couch, in fact. His patients are citizens, after all, participants in the strife in the Northern Ireland community. Surely all this would come into the therapy:

It's uncommon. There was one young chap, didn't know me publicly at all, started to have the idea I might be a Protestant and then he began to speak about his fantasies about what a Protestant might do to him, a West Belfast Catholic. I might be up to no good, perhaps I'm trying to find out things about him to pass on to the police. But you see that wasn't just politics. He was a quite paranoid man in his personality, and he developed what we call a transference psychosis, just for a few minutes at a time, when he'd jump up because he thought I was about to stab him, and so on. But it's an uncommon thing for people to bring those fears in. Maybe it's there and we don't pick it up properly.

I reminded Alderdice of the book *The Third Reich of Dreams* by Charlotte Beradt and Bruno Bettelheim, which, from dreams recollected years later, seemed to show that many people who did not "know" what had happened to the Jews had unconsciously known it all the time:

Well I have begun to wonder about this, just after the last three or four months really. Indeed just before Christmas I was doing some supervision with a couple of students and I thought from the material they were giving me this patient is wondering if his therapist is a Protestant or a Catholic. The students then began to remember things that had been said. Then they brought along other material. It turned out about half a dozen students had some experience pointing in this direction, relatively recently too.

I expressed amazement that this was only now being thought about:

I have a feeling we've been missing it because of the cultural norm there is in Northern Ireland just now – that you don't refer to politics or religion or the troubles if it's at all possible. In the Health Care setting, for example, we'd be afraid of bringing it into the work, bringing in the conflict and the division. That would be a terrible thing. So maybe we have been missing some of this.

Are some of your patients Catholics?

Oh yes. Oh yes.

And you would always know?

No, I wouldn't always know immediately. Although it would become apparent after a while, I would think.

But not when you start off?

No. No. Not necessarily.

## THINKING AND DOING

Psychoanalysis is often seen as expensive navel-gazing, a way of avoiding hard decisions and postponing action. And it is true it is meant to give us pause, at

least. The opposite defines politics: decisiveness, certainty, runs on the board. Alderdice, it might appear, has shaped his life rather neatly, dealing in words as a therapist and in deeds as a politician. And indeed he speaks of being impatient with community leaders who commission study after study of their respective histories, and endless reviews of their policies, and yet will not take the next step of actually having Catholics and Protestants working together, which the Alliance Party does:

That's what's often missing, Catholics and Protestants actually working together. We have twenty years of getting a deeper and deeper understanding of each other, and at the end of it people still say to us in Alliance, "But you can't have Protestants and Catholics in the same party"!

But it is too simple to see Alderdice as a half-day thinker and a half-day doer. His work in psychoanalytic therapy is about action as well – it is about clearing a path that has become overgrown, about cutting back the undergrowth of suspicion and doubt that ties up the will to act. Alderdice's Freud was no Buddha. And Alderdice's impatience with Unionist and Republican *talking* is based on knowing that "getting analyzed" – "the talking cure" – can indeed be a defense against doing what has to be done. Rather than two jobs, sharply contrasted, Alderdice has *one* job pursued on two fronts, the personal and the communal. Both are about finding the freedom to act, about finding the purpose and energy that follows the reduction, or at least naming, of fear.

Moreover in his criticism of those who merely talk, Alderdice is applying to politics a crucial finding from therapy: that ideas need to be felt before they have their effect. While he agrees that communities must reflect on their histories, as individuals in psychoanalysis do, they have to "remember that the history a patient works on in analysis is a *re-felt* history and it comes out of people working together". The emotional contact – with oneself, with others – is the thing, not the recitation of local histories. Political philosophy and public policy, if they are to lead anywhere, need to be "done" *interpersonally* and with feeling:

That's what I said in the Inter-Party talks. We had huge amounts of time spent on the SDLP saying what the Nationalist view was, then the Unionists saying what the Unionist view was. I said to them, "You know, for us in the Alliance Party, this is old hat. We've been doing this for twenty years and there's nothing you could tell me about your position, John Hume, or your position, Ian Paisley, that I don't know like the back of my hand. Because I have lived through it, with Catholics and with Protestants. That's what my whole political life has been about." That went all through the talks. What's needed is actually working together side by side.

But, I asked, Catholics and Protestants live in very different communities, don't they? I was hanging in, asking the question again in a slightly different way. In the back of my mind I was wondering whether the Alliance Party's achievements were transferable. Its membership is perhaps skewed to the better off and the better educated and whoever else can, somehow, afford to put fear aside and be

generous. And experimental. Its methods might not work closer to the hearts of the two communities. Alderdice can only repeat his message:

You see, it isn't just a question of being Protestant or Catholic. The difficulty is that so much else falls on the same line. It's religion but it's also cultural, sport, music. And geography, a division between the people of the north-east and the rest of the island. So of course there are differences and work goes on to understand that, like the Two Traditions group, the Community Relations Commission, a number of Church and other bodies. All these have been trying to say, "Look we must understand your differences and value our differences" – but with an analytic patient sometimes the very process of analysis can be used as a resistance and it can be the same in politics. And those who talk the most liberally are not necessarily the ones who are the most liberal in their actions.

### LORD IN-BETWEEN

You've got to ac-ent-tchu-ate the positive  
 E-lim-in-ate the negative  
 Latch on to the affirmative,  
 Don't mess with Mr In-Between  
 (Bing Crosby and the Andrews Sisters, 1930s)

The attitude of the song involves denial, fear and, above all, ignorance. Because in-between may be where the most important, human things happen. It is where thresholds are crossed, matters are complicated, new combinations are discovered or invented and solutions found. The great soldier-politician Sir William Slim remarked on how often important battles have been fought where two maps are joined.

However the man or woman who "messes" with the middle ground is always suspected of being indecisive, of being both shallow and short-winded. The UK's Tony Blair – known to some Labor critics, up till his election, at least, as Mr Blur (Abse, 1996) – is a classic case, claiming to be able to change Britain from "the radical centre", to combine opposites (capital and labor) and govern much of the time by consensus. When he came to the prime ministership in Australia, Labor's Bob Hawke offered the same promise in 1983, winning office partly because his Liberal party predecessor, Malcolm Fraser, over-emphasized confrontation. Britain's New Labor may be setting itself to perpetuate many of Thatcher's policies but it promises to combine this with post-Thatcherite attitudes. However, instead of weak, the man in the middle may be thought dangerous. Why is he not content with his own people and his own traditions? Loyalty is to political work surely what a stable currency is to an economy: so what kind of man gets himself elected to weaken or change loyalties, to re-write or re-combine them?

One thing is very clear about Alderdice. He is a man of conviction and resolute loyalty, however reforming he is as well. His "in-betweenism" is not that of

a professional mediator, with roots to nowhere, nor of a man who has lost faith in his past. It has two feet firmly planted in a proud sense of his past and involves a readiness to defend his version of Ireland. That he aims to include other pasts in the Northern Ireland community is no reason to divest himself of his own, nor is a new identity such a makeover that the old is discarded along with the loyalties it implied. I was frankly surprised at the depth of Alderdice's Protestantism, or "Ulsterism", and at his strong opposition to even psychoanalytic authorities who do not understand it. Freud's leading Celtic follower, and first biographer, the Welshman Ernest Jones wrote a famous paper in 1922 on the psychology of Ireland (Jones, 1922/1974):

It's on the "islandness" of Ireland. It's an interesting paper. But it falls totally into the trap of treating as reality the fantasy that the island is one. "It's an island, so it's obvious it should all be one." But why? We don't look at the Iberian Peninsula and say, "It's absurd. It should be all one country." On the contrary, if you have any serious liberal principles, you would look at Spain, or France, and say, "This place is far too big, people should be organizing themselves on a more regional basis."

I started making a list for myself of other examples (islands, not peninsulas) reaching just Cyprus before it hit me that Britain itself is an island and, as the Scots and the Welsh have indicated at the ballot boxes in recent years, its unity is a political one and may be coming to some sort of an end. The new nationalism is the order of the day, of course, and Alderdice, as a Liberal-Democrat and active European, is not merely scoring a debating point when he refers to regionalism in Europe. But, even for his time Jones's argument was weirdly deterministic. It was certainly not political, and it was not seriously psychological, either; perhaps topographical would have been the word for it. I found myself wondering, incongruously, whether, in reverse image, he would have expected New Zealand to reorganize itself into two countries, North Zealand and South Zealand! And how Australians would feel if Tasmania, suddenly noticing the sea all around it, decided to secede (though it is Northern Queensland and Western Australia, neither an island, that have always had real secessionists in their midst).

People look at Ireland and complain it's divided. Well, if you think the natural thing is *not* to be divided, perhaps there is an exceptionally strong reason why it is divided. It's obviously a mistake to try to wipe out real division just because you have a fantasy about the wholeness of everything.

Ultimately, Alderdice expects little help from his psychoanalytic colleagues on the Irish question:

Psychoanalysts, who are so concerned with their patients not to make moral judgments, not to pigeon-hole them, but try to understand them, these same people completely change their principles when they come to political situations. It seems to me you have to say, "There's been this insoluble problem in this island. What's the cause of it? What's

the dynamic that has maintained the conflict so long?" But most people of the psychoanalytical viewpoint tend to follow a more liberal line – and the liberal line has often been not very well-informed on Ireland. For example, a lot of what Gladstone said about Ireland would have been right if he had realized Ireland wasn't a homogenous identity.

The central point in Alderdice's history is that geographic and cultural division in Ireland predates the Partition Acts that set up Northern Ireland in the 1920s. That means it also predates modern Unionism. For Alderdice, the Battle of the Boyne in the seventeenth century is small beer beside the Battle of Moira in the fifth.

No matter how far you go back on this island you will find the people of the north-east having a separateness from the rest of the island. More than fifteen hundred and fifty years ago, the Battle of Moira was a very big battle. It went on for six or seven days and there were thousands of people killed and it was said to be the greatest battle that ever took place on the island of Ireland. So there you have a great battle before ever England got itself together as England, never mind Britain as Britain. And it was a battle between the people of the north-east and the people on the rest of the island. And the people from the north-east brought over their friends from Scotland to help them. Ireland's never been a single community, ever. The people in the north-east had a closer relationship with the people in Scotland than they ever had with the rest of the island. In those days, on a decent day, it was always easier to get to Scotland than to Wicklow or Donegal.

For Alderdice the real beginning of Northern Ireland is the early fraternity between the Irish people of the north-east and those Scots whose farms they could see from the coasts of Antrim and Down. Not the Elizabethan plantation of Scots farmers. British colonization only built on an existing regionalism in Ireland, exploiting a cultural difference already well-developed. "The first plantations were in Laois and Offaly but no one is suggesting that Laois and Offaly became Protestant counties. The graft took best in places like Antrim and Down because they were the places that had had something going on for hundreds, possibly thousands, of years."

Why are liberal psychoanalysts (the word is his) on the Republican side, not on his? I have no way of knowing whether Alderdice is right in this and I am not clear what aspects or types of psychoanalysis he has in mind. But clearly, with his remarkable track record in liberal politics and his bright future in British and European liberalism, there is still something else, something in the Protestant personality, that defines him and he has to defend:

I am still an Elder in the Presbyterian church. I'm very liberal in theology but religion is a very significant thing for me. I took the family to the States this year. We like Virginia. It's like here, only the weather's better. We went to Woodrow Wilson's birthplace and I immediately felt a tremendous affinity with his whole politics and his religious background. Wilson was the son of a Presbyterian manse too, and his family came from this part of the world. I felt a strong kinship with all this, and his liberalism, his contributions to peace, to democratic politics in the United States, and to Europe.

I reminded Alderdice that Freud hated both religion and Wilson:

Freud was one thing as a clinician but in his personal assessments of people he was sometimes terrible. To link up with Bullitt, who was anything but objective about Wilson! Freud admits right at the beginning of the book he's not an objective observer – and still he went ahead and wrote it! He doesn't look at the counter-transference, as he would with a patient, he doesn't look at why he might find a man like Woodrow Wilson so distasteful. There's this curious blind spot in Freud's assessment of people.

## PROTESTANT FREUD

In psychoanalysis, as in politics, Alderdice respects tradition while he promotes reform. Intellectually, he travels abroad, but emotionally he never leaves home. He could not live anywhere else, and indeed when he began his training as a therapist special arrangements were made so he could continue in Belfast:

Psychoanalysis is a very recent development in Northern Ireland, and in the island of Ireland in general. There are only two members of the Psychoanalytic Institute in London living here. One is a chap called Michael Fitzgerald, who is a child psychiatrist in Dublin. (His wife, interestingly, has just been elected to the Dublin parliament.) The other is Tom Freeman, vastly experienced, but retired now. He trained in a very classical way. His supervision was with Anna Freud. My own analysis, and part of my training, was with him. He was the only person in Northern Ireland.

You were a doctor and a psychiatrist: why did you decide to get analyzed and begin training as a psychotherapist?

When I was training in psychiatry the Professor, who was a neurologist of some note but a broad-minded man, wanted to encourage the psychoanalytic side of psychiatry. I went to work with Tom Freeman for a while. We set up a training whereby I could go to Dublin once a month, go to London once a month, have supervision each week by telephone, be in analysis here, and see my patients. This was over four or five years. Up till then, every time somebody'd gone out of Northern Ireland to train they hadn't come back.

Alderdice's first appointment was as a part-time consultant psychotherapist with the Health Service, which could not afford a full-time post. He also began voluntary work with the Alliance Party and his double task, therapy and politics, was quickly formalized. That was in 1988. In 1992, when we talked, he was in a position to set up training courses in psychotherapy himself. (A personal psychoanalysis was the centerpiece of Alderdice's training as a psychotherapist. It is interesting to speculate on how many "analyzed" practising politicians there have ever been. John Stachey, once on the left of the British Labor Party, later a Mosleyite, is one. Somebody said of him that psychoanalysis had at least improved his tennis serve!)

The therapist in him is pleased about the opportunities for personal treatment and training opening up in Ireland. The politician believes individual clinical work is not enough. Alderdice soon saw that the psychoanalytic approach was not carrying over into other parts of the health system. "It wasn't getting

rooted into the practice of psychiatry, in psychiatric social work, psychiatric nursing, general practice, and so on.” And this is one of the big changes he has made, trying to link therapy to wider concerns and have them embedded in general medical institutions. “The first of my trainees is through and operating at the consultant level. The second is part-way through, while another colleague has transferred in to work with me.”

Alderdice’s training was “very much from a classical point of view, a Freudian perspective, Anna Freudian – since then my ideas would have developed a bit.” But I am not sure how interested he is in the different schools of psychoanalysis, or even in theory. He seems to have other priorities. I asked him whether psychoanalysis could be in danger of becoming a religion itself, could it become ossified and dogmatic?

He said dogmatic positions can be attractive even to some psychoanalysts, but not to him:

Growing up in Northern Ireland I can smell fundamentalism a mile away. It doesn’t matter if it is Protestant or Catholic fundamentalism, or Hindu fundamentalism, or psychoanalytic fundamentalism, they’re all exactly the same – a particular form of thinking that says not only, “I am right”, but also, “You have to believe what I believe”. I can smell it a mile away. And I can smell it in some psychoanalytic circles.

He believes Freud was not at all like that. Where other people have seen quite a lot of dogmatism in Freud, Alderdice sees the founder of psychoanalysis as the sort of open-minded, reforming activist he himself is, principled but without a dogmatic bone in his body. And was the real Freud ever quite this engaged and passionate?

His whole way of working was never as clinically detached as all that. His office wasn’t a buff-painted room. There were thousands of artefacts of all kinds, and patients would come in and see little Anna running up and down the stairs, and so on. He was a very emotional man. He had strong feelings. And he got involved, he spoke out.

Alderdice is optimistic about the future of psychoanalysis. Clinically it is coming out of a difficult time “in terms of people being persuaded pills can solve all the problems. That’s peaked. There’s more questioning the uses of medication than in many a long year.” He sees a generational renewal going on, “grandchildren” looking back beyond their overly-clinical fathers and mothers to psychoanalytic “grandparents” who had strong public and cultural interests. The generation around Freud, he says, saw the relevance of psychoanalysis to politics and culture but the next generation, following the war, was too frightened and too exhausted for *political psychoanalysis* and went private: “They went back into clinical work almost as an escape from the horrifying reality of what they had gone through. It was enough to continue with clinical work, earn an honest crust and bring up their families.”

This lasted “a whole generation or two”. During that time, “if you had an interest in addressing the political world you might be criticized for not being

content with your clinical work". The idea was psychoanalysts should stick to their consulting rooms:

But now a new generation is saying, "No, no, no, that is not true. You can apply psychoanalytic understandings to what's happening in the world." And these are people more at the radical edge – in the British context, these are the ones who are opposed to what's happening to the National Health Service. These are people who can't just stay in their consulting room and hope to see patients, because their consulting rooms have been closed! So, obviously, they must be interested in the wider issues.

I had come to Belfast to ask Alderdice his views on psychoanalysis "off the couch" – what in more imperial times was called "applied psychoanalysis". We have heard his most important replies, both in regard to politics and, more sketchily, community health: what about other "applications"?

He says, yes, his head is bursting with ideas for applying psychoanalysis to the world, to culture, whatever, but first he must issue a warning: "One does have to be a little careful." He then went on to deliver a homily against "wild analysis", a warning that left his interviewer, a political psychologist who is not a trained clinician, feeling a little exposed:

Working with patients you can speculate till the cows come home and have half a dozen theories before tea time but finally you have to take the time with the patient, hear what the patient has to say and narrow down to a much smaller set of possibilities. Similarly with the broader psychoanalytical view. It's not at all difficult to have speculations. The thing is to be able to correct yourself when you are wrong.

Politics itself is not wild analysis. It provides a discipline similar to the discipline of clinical work. "Being in politics, I'm not just theorizing about it. I think you could very dangerously sit and write about psychoanalysis and politics."

I said, "That's just what I do!" Alderdice went on: "You have got to be there, you have got to take the ideas and use them, interpret, clarify, see whether they make an impact." Valid off the couch work is modeled on couch work, interactive and self-correcting. "In the end you've got to earth it in reality, otherwise it just becomes enjoyable fantasy. Fantasy that doesn't mean anything."

Looking back, this seems all of a piece with the rest of our interview. Alderdice is not a fanciful man. He does not owe his "in-betweenness", his reforming from the middle, to Winnicottian paradox and play; he does not see himself inhabiting the fabled "potential space". And there are no signs at all of Bion's creative mysteries. He is more black and white than that, his psychoanalysis more "scientific", more "Protestant", to put it that way, contrasting not only with Kleinian "Catholics" but with Middle Group "liberals". (In terms of the theoretical traditions of psychoanalysis he is a "conservative".) At any rate, Alderdice's version of reforming, peace-making politics is not accompanied by anything remotely like "oceanic feeling" and creative play, and I suspect that, as in the days when theology claimed to be the Queen of Science, his version of psychoanalysis sees speculation as a psychoanalytic sin.

In reply, some of us think that psychoanalysis and the Bible are more art than science and that their truths are got as much by imagination as by scientific method. It is important, too, that, talking method, Alderdice, for the only time in the interview, sounds moralistic: wild, speculative analysis is bad because it is too easy, it is too much fun; no Winnicottian fooling about here. Is all knowledge-getting, then, under the aegis of the super-ego? Is pleasure in thinking contra-indicative of good ideas? (I wonder, too, when people say speculation is terribly easy: are their heads *really* so full of wonderful ideas, would we be *bowled over* if we were told them?) But Alderdice is the man on the ground, as it were, or in the heat of the kitchen, and admittedly politics, in Weber's words, is a lot of "slow boring through hard boards". And he must have the last word:

I mean let me give you an example. I was watching the Australian film last night about the dingo baby, *Evil Angels*. I said to my wife, "You know you could make up a lovely psychoanalytic interpretation of that." I said, "Look here, you have Australia edging towards distancing itself from Mother England, the whole ambivalence that's developing. And you have not the Queen but Margaret Thatcher and you could make an interpretation that this woman was becoming the scapegoat for all the Australia people's ambivalences. But they don't address the problem with her. Everybody gets over-involved with a mother doing things to her baby. The baby is actually Australia, who is very angry with how its mother has looked after it and wants to be shot of her." Okay, you can make an interpretation of it, but so what? Is it based on anything other than two glasses of port and a good film?

## FEAR AND UNFEAR

I was born in Belfast in 1939. My family emigrated while I was still a child. I made my first visit back exactly thirty years later, the year the Troubles returned. Alderdice would have been still at school. For many years the sectarian violence in Northern Ireland was of no interest to me; the only Ireland I had any interest in was an internal one built from my first nine years when my family moved between marginally rural and provincial homes and eventually to England. I was fixed in an autobiographical Northern Ireland of the 1940s (see Little, 1995).

In 1992, after two days, I thought I would never go back again. I was miserable (the steady rain and the winter dark did not help) and afraid. Afraid not only of being shot or knee-capped, perhaps by mistake, but because I had the panicky idea I could get drawn back into it all. Ugly signs of the conflict were everywhere – bombed streets, burnt-out cars, boarded-up windows, court houses fenced in with barbed wire, and the guns and flak jackets and the suppressed rage of families forced to stop their cars for inspection. I said a silent prayer to my late father for getting us away, out to Australia. It made no difference that we were from the "dominant" group, the Protestants. (My father had never joined the Lodge.)

It was dark outside when we finished the interview and in the hallway where the family crest was hanging near the stairs, I asked Alderdice about his name.

It is from the east of Scotland. His family arrived in Northern Ireland, in his beloved north-east or Ulster, several centuries before. As I left I was thinking about fear. The fear I had come in with, that I had spent the day with looking around the town, seemed something to be ashamed of now, an irrelevance, given all that Alderdice was trying to do. I caught the interest in it and went out on the town that night as if Semtex had never been invented.

Alderdice said the people in Northern Ireland are not afraid. Like any of us, regarding our own death, they put fear, to use his phrase, on the long finger. Partly this is what is needed to focus on the critical tasks, worrying enough, that psychoanalysis or politics, or the two together, have a hope of dealing with. But it may be denial, too, leaving *fear* to lurk under the surface, distorting and debilitating the whole of Northern Ireland life. Alderdice's view is that of the psychoanalyst or therapist who is confident that the fear, and the denials of fear, are within the normal range and can be worked with:

We have taken a few steps forward and it has scared the living daylight out of everybody. So we are in a resistance, a massive community resistance at the moment. That's why nobody's talking. But in the bad periods of a good therapy, and of all places in Ireland where the bomb brings a fearful quiet, it is possible to hope that one day the talk will begin again.

## NOTE

- 1 The resumption of the IRA ceasefire, or a new ceasefire, depending on your point of view, was announced just before this paper was delivered at an international conference on Political Psychology at the Jagiellonian University in Krakow, Poland, 21–24 July 1997.

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