

A very unusual practice

Lord Alderdice talks to Liz Main about his combined career as a consultant psychotherapist and mediating politician in the Northern Ireland peace process

Who knows what would have happened to the Northern Ireland peace process if a young Dr John Alderdice had achieved his aim of becoming a missionary in Africa. It's a hypothetical question, since Lord Alderdice's youthful ambition was thwarted by a Malawi government less than keen to allow him and his wife, a consultant pathologist, into the country.

Instead John Alderdice took up a different mission – working for peace and stability in Northern Ireland, applying his psychoanalytic understanding to politics. In 1987, aged 32, he became leader of the Alliance Party in Northern Ireland. A year later, in 1988, he was appointed Ireland's first consultant psychotherapist. When he was 41 the then prime minister John Major appointed him Baron Alderdice of Knock and from 1998 to 2004 he served as the first speaker of the Northern Ireland Assembly. Now he is one of four members of the Independent Monitoring Commission overseeing the peace process and ensuring the decommissioning of weapons in Northern Ireland... and he doesn't turn 51 until next month.

Alderdice chose medicine, rather than follow in his father's footsteps as a Presbyterian minister, because he

wanted to be a missionary and he thought medical skills would be an asset. When it became clear that pursuing his missionary ambitions would be difficult, he started to consider the situation closer to home. 'I wanted to know why people harm themselves. Why, when we were doing okay in Northern Ireland compared to people in so many other parts of the world, we were breaking down into violence,' he says. But he remains a Presbyterian church elder. Faith, he says, 'is like the picture on an old television set, sometimes it shrinks down to that tiny dot you see when you turn it off. Other times it fills the whole screen.'

He qualified in psychiatry in 1983, and wanted to go on to specialise in psychoanalytic psychotherapy. As part of his registrar training he had worked with a psychoanalyst who had worked with Anna Freud. But there was no specialist training available in Northern Ireland. So he went into analysis five times a week, and persuaded the Royal College of Psychiatrists to let him train from a distance. 'For various reasons, we didn't want to move, so I stayed in Belfast and went to London once a month and received supervision on the phone every Sunday night,' he says.

Throughout his training, his political awareness was developing. 'I wrote to all the political parties to see what was of interest. I chose the Alliance Party because it was the one that accepted both Protestants and Catholics,' he says. The Alliance Party of Northern Ireland was formed in 1970 to provide a non-sectarian alternative. It believes Northern Ireland should remain part of the United Kingdom on socio-economic grounds, and numbers both Catholics and Protestants among its supporters. For Alderdice, the choice seems obvious: the party opposes violence, sectarianism and racism, and is committed to human rights and social justice – themes that he has pursued in the international political arena.

Still a senior registrar, Alderdice cut back his NHS hours and started to work as a volunteer for Alliance in 1978. He took on some private work to pay the bills while he pursued a political career. Yet opting for Alliance was a decision that was potentially to thwart his political ambitions: the party has never won a House of Commons seat (it gained one through defection). 'When I came into leadership of my party, the Belfast Telegraph said "Nice fellow, but who would want his job?"' he laughs. Still a registrar when he became party leader, he was nervous about how he would be perceived by his colleagues in psychiatry: particularly fellow psychoanalysts who might, he feared, 'say I was "acting out".' (In fact they were supportive, he says.) He stood for election to Westminster in the overwhelmingly unionist constituency of East Belfast in the 1987 elections, and predictably lost – albeit with 32% of the vote, the highest of any Alliance candidate. Instead he opted for local politics and was elected to Belfast City Council.



As leader of Alliance, the only non-nationalist party involved in peace talks, Alderdice was a key player in the 1998 Belfast Agreement, more commonly known as the Good Friday Agreement, which led the way to devolution and the setting up of Stormont Parliament. He was one of six Alliance candidates elected to the Northern Ireland Assembly, but immediately resigned the party leadership to take up the position of speaker.

While he says his job has been no more risky than for others in politics in Northern Ireland – at times less so because he has been ‘happy to engage, but not to agree’ with paramilitary groups and ‘therefore they have no reason to do harm to me’ – he admits he was apprehensive about working for peace. ‘I’m not sure I would have had the courage to come into this type of work without those years of psychoanalysis. I was very reticent. I had ideas already, I wanted to do it, but wondered, other than magic it better, what can you really do?’ Yet he decided to go ahead, and put his psychoanalytic skills into practice in the wider arena.

‘I started to apply my understanding of psychology in political life,’ he says. He would listen and observe in the same way as with a patient, but then interpret this in political terms and work towards solutions that would take place in the public domain. ‘I learned a lot about why people get involved in terrorism, why we get conflict.’

His focus now is on using that learning in international conflict resolution. He recently returned from Lebanon, where he held talks with both Hamas and Hezbollah, and has held extensive talks in South America in both Peru, where the conflict between the Shining Path guerrilla group, the military and other groups has led to more than 70,000 individuals ‘disappearing’, and in Chile. He holds an honorary chair in the faculty of medicine at the University of San Marcos, Lima, and in 1999 was awarded the Peruvian medal of congress, and also recognised there for his work on psychoanalysis and conflict resolution.

It is hard to find anyone in Belfast with a bad word to say about Alderdice. A patient sings his praises because he listens to her, makes time for her, and responds to her complaints about medication side effects. A taxi driver tells me that he’s a pleasure to have in the back of his cab (‘Mellow like, very calm. You don’t expect it from a man like him... Bloody big house though, huge like’). A town planner tells me how Alderdice willingly agreed to be patron of a charity to help poor people get financial help with planning applications.

He says he enjoys music, and took up choral singing to train his voice for public speaking. He likes sports cars too. He drives a ‘not very new’ Bentley, but has always enjoyed buying old bangers and doing them up to sell them on.

I ask him what he’s most proud of and he immediately says his family. He fell in love with his wife Joan when he was 16 and she 15, and they have three children. All, he says, have supported him in his work. He is thoughtful about which of his career achievements brings him most pride. ‘It’s very encouraging to be able to have some little bit more understanding of why terrible violence takes places in communities, and to be able to understand that it’s possible to do something about this, that it isn’t hopeless,’ he says

Continuous care

Some might have expected Alderdice to give up his psychiatric practice to concentrate on politics and his international human rights advocacy and conflict mediation, but as we speak his focus is setting up an NHS centre for psychotherapy based in the sprawling Knockbracken Healthcare Park in the suburbs of Belfast. The centre may not be glamorous – the sign on the front door comprises two sheets of A4 paper – but it is being done up, and he is delighted to have secured a home for psychotherapeutic services.

Alderdice started the psychotherapy service in the late 1988 when he was appointed Ireland’s first consultant psychotherapist. It now offers individual and group psychotherapy and cognitive therapy, taking referrals from throughout the NHS, from GPs, psychiatrists and CPNs. Waiting lists are currently around two months for an assessment and three to four months for treatment, although he concedes they may lengthen as the service becomes better known.

Alderdice insists that, contrary to usual practice, if patients are admitted to hospital the psychotherapist will visit and continue to see them there. ‘The patient needs to know that no matter how distressed they become you will stick with them,’ he says. He continues to oversee the inpatient treatment of his own clients when necessary. While he says many patients don’t need medication, ‘sometimes you can’t do the psychological work unless the patient is contained to do it’. And he stresses that individuals with psychosis are not excluded.

One of the major problems with hospital treatment, he says, is that a junior doctor will only see a patient for six months before being moved on, as part of their rotation: they ‘get no sense of illness or course of care’, he says. Sometimes it is only the psychotherapist who provides any continuity for a patient through the course of their illness.

He has no time for the Mental Health Bill, which he sees as a social control measure that impinges on human rights, and plans to vote against it should it get as far as the House of Lords. By contrast, in 2000 he put forward a Private Members Bill for the regulation of psychotherapy that would have required practitioners to qualify and register, and provided for a regulator. Without government support it came to nothing.