



The Influence of Geneva

Eleven Genevan Ideas in the World Today

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Introduction

The first time I arrived in Geneva by plane in 1989 with my friend and colleague, John Mitchell, we had a rather unusual landing. We were towards the front of the plane and close to the stewardess who was sitting next to the door. It was a bumpy touch-down and half way down the runway there was a bang followed quickly by the rush of wind. The door had jolted open and with great calm the stewardess reached out to pull it back towards her, holding it tightly until we came to a stop.

Looking back on it, I feel sure this was a sign! Someone was telling me that I must get out at Geneva and was emphasising the point. When I did get out and saw around the city, I loved it immediately like so many before me. Over the years, I tried to come back as often as I could. Finally, two years ago I eventually found someone who would give me a job in Geneva and I moved here. We are now lucky enough to live in the heart of the *Vieille Ville* - opposite the house where Cavour's mother used to live and next to the one where Gallatin was born - who edited the American Constitution. Not far away in Grand Rue is the house where Rousseau was born. In the Hotel de Villes is the Alabama room where the Geneva Conventions were signed. Then, of course, there is St. Pierre and the *Auditoire de Calvin* where the great reformer used to preach so tirelessly.

My family are, of course, in a long line of English people who got out at Geneva and stayed. You are very kind to have us. As ever, this evening, you are showing characteristic tolerance by letting an Anglo-saxon address you in this day and age. I hope you will forgive me if I presume to talk about the great city of the ICRC and its various ideas for the next forty minutes - really knowing very little about either of them. In truth, I speak more in the spirit of an admirer than an expert.

I want to try to do two things tonight:

- First, I want to examine eleven particular ideas that have emerged strongly in Geneva's history and culture and look briefly at how they are getting on in the world of war and politics today. Six of these ideas involve profound political and humanitarian ideals. One represents a primal and constant fear. The last four involve a particular way of doing things which characterizes the ICRC approach.
- Secondly, because it is the 10th Anniversary of the SAR, I want to take the last ten minutes to reflect upon what particular characteristics employers can expect to get from hiring a former ICRC delegate.

These moral ideas, ways of doing things and personal qualities are not, of course, by any means unique to Geneva. As universal ideas or common characteristics, many of them have obviously emerged elsewhere around the world throughout history and in the present day. Indeed, to say that they are distinctly Genevan ideas would be to immediately undercut the logic of their universal claims. It would be easy to trace the origins and development of the same or very similar ideas in most other societies too, particularly neighbouring European ones. However, these eleven ideas have had particularly striking manifestations in Geneva and in Genevois culture and some are heavily identified with Geneva in the wider world.

Nor, of course, are these ideas without serious competition. There are always many other ideas which challenge and resist these Genevan ideals. Like the Savoyard hordes of old, there is always a mass of very different ideas about war and politics ready to burst upon and destroy Geneva's dearest principles. What follows, therefore, will be a mixed score card of success, failure and stalemate in the current struggle of these ideas to influence the world.

Six Big Political Ideas

The first Genevan ideal I want to look at is one on which early modern Geneva was founded - **freedom of movement**. Geneva changed dramatically - demographically and politically - when it welcomed Protestant refugees from France, Italy, England and Scotland in the first part of the 16th century. Like everything in life, there were mixed motives in the city's decision to become a place of asylum. Anti-Savoyard political ambitions and the chance to secure Church lands gave added incentive for many in Geneva's elite to put up with Farel, Calvin and their imported French elders. Protestantism offered more immediate advantages than the eternal salvation which obsessed its founders.

Geneva has continued to believe in freedom of movement and offered hospitality, asylum and employment opportunities for refugees and migrants throughout the centuries. Although, of course, it is no easy thing to become Swiss and many of us live on our Permits B or C for decades. And, why not? Geneva is home to so many different peoples now. Just as it is Genevan, so too it is in part a Latin city full of Spanish, Portuguese and Latin Americans. It is also an Arab city with many Algerians, Tunisians and Moroccans. All this can only help the impressive rise of Swiss football! The Gulf Arabs typically arrive and leave again with the swallows every summer to enjoy the cooler climate here, the women walking in *pardah* by the lake and their menfolk often gambling by night. Their numbers are diminishing but hopefully they will return. As more recent arrivals, Eastern Europeans and some Africans are also making a good home in Geneva but still struggling to find their place. This is also a city much loved by the Japanese.

Geneva's founding concern with the freedom of movement is now embodied in four important international organisations concerned with free and fair movement of people, goods and labour which are based in Geneva - UNHCR, IOM, WTO

and ILO. Theirs perhaps is one of the biggest challenges of this century in which human movement will be a critical economic, environmental and political issue.

Refugees were the hot political issue of free movement in the Cold War when left and right wing governments repressed opposition and persecuted particular individuals and groups. If they were lucky enough - people fled across borders into an international regime of safety to be protected as refugees. Today, and in the future, the politics of movement will be far more generalised and all-encompassing. Migration is fast becoming the great issue on this front and it may be driven primarily by economics and environment, rather than politics.

Where people are allowed to move and how they settle and mix when they arrive will be big political questions. It will be a global challenge, as it always has been. Something similar to the massive rural-urban flows of the industrial revolution is happening on a global scale now. And this migration will not just be poor-rich. It will be rich-rich too and will go in many directions. As China, India and other parts of Asia boom, Asians will move fast between countries and many Europeans and Americans will want to move east too. Within Europe people are moving dramatically. For example, hundreds of thousands of my own people, the British, are now buying houses and settling permanently or semi-permanently in Spain and France.

Migration will not just be economic. Much will also be environmental as people move to avoid flooding, desertification and even disease. Much movement will also happen within states and not between states. The number of IDP communities is much higher than that of refugees today because of war, environmental reasons and large development projects. In many conflicts like Darfur, governments seem content to use forced displacement to create new politically based demographics and land ownership patterns. In Asia, millions of people are displaced by massive dams and development projects. Governments in Africa and Asia in particular, must acknowledge these movements and work

hard not to allow the creation of a large group of second class and resentful citizens.

There will also continue to be a cynical migration based on greed and exploitation. Human trafficking for sex and domestic servitude is growing fast around the world. Such movement may be free but it is not fair.

It is not yet clear how states will respond to all this mass migration because they are not being explicitly strategic about it in their politics. Most politicians are just playing short term politics with the host community's fears and prejudice around this issue. Very few are being truly thoughtful and honest about what 21st economies, ageing societies and environmentally vulnerable areas will need from migration. Deep and realistic discussion of this subject is still taboo.

Geneva and the important international institutions within it can help to open up this subject responsibly. Movement is innate to human beings. It often makes good sense. But it is also often forced, exploited or obstructed. All of us have moved to get where we are in our lives. Movement must not be pathologized or demonized, Nor must it be unthinkingly championed. Freedom of movement is a founding idea in modern Geneva. A just and reasonable concern for it should be at the cutting edge of the city's global vision for this new century too.

Freedom of movement has often gone hand-in-hand with the second of Geneva's founding ideals - **freedom of thought**. Throughout history, many people have moved because they were persecuted for thinking freely in their homes. In an important sense, Calvin was all about freedom of thought. So too, of course, was Rousseau and the other famous enlightenment figures who made Geneva their homes in exile like Voltaire and, here in Coppet, Madame de Stael, although originally a Genevan by birth. However, while Geneva has produced and attracted free thinkers, it has also censored, exiled and even burned them as it did with Rousseau and Servitus.

Freedom of thought is typically under threat from two sources: repressive authorities which actively ban particular thoughts or consuming orthodoxies which impose epistemological paradigms which serve to reduce free thought and effectively brainwash whole societies. Both such threats are alive and well today. It remains as hard as ever to be a free thinker in the face of the censor on one hand and group-think on the other.

Particular regimes still censor with prison, fear and death. Old habits of thought repression persist in Russia, China, the Middle East, Burma and many African countries whose elected Presidents want to stay elected at all costs.

Pervasive mental orthodoxies are also rife today. The Western dominated media serves up a limited model of values and aspirations, giving an essentially partial view of human experience which is widely digested and accepted as the norm. Secular liberalism - the legacy of Voltaire and many others - is powerful and insistent on the rightness of its capitalist and democratic solutions. Its certainty is manifest in its determination to replicate them fast wherever it can. Extreme Islamist ideologues insist upon a dualistic vision of the faithful and the infidel. Feelings of humiliation are widespread in significant parts of the Muslim world, making such simplistic thinking attractive in hard places and hard times. Islamist extremism is matched by corresponding dualisms in some parts of American, Israeli and European society in particular. Elsewhere, societies trying to come to terms with rapid immigration or with minorities still slip easily into nationalist thinking or a victim consciousness which can quickly preclude a whole range of positive thoughts about "the other" group.

The freedom to think *differently* about things and to think *fully* about other people remains deeply under threat in many places. The physicist, Richard Feineman, believed that the best type of political society is one which, like a good scientific researcher, thinks sceptically - never assuming that it knows the answer or that

the answer it has now will always be the right one. Being absolutist and dogmatic is the opposite of this kind of sceptical thinking. However, under pressure, it is hard to remain sceptical and open. It is much easier to stereotype, to focus on difference instead of similarity, and to dismiss rather than to empathise and understand.

As always, the biggest challenge for free thinking remains on the middle ground in political and intellectual discussion - a position which says there is both something right and something wrong on any given subject and that pluralism is important. In other words, a way of thinking which does not automatically accept the terms of the argument as they are presented by any dominant groups. This is impartial thinking which does not yield to the pressure to take sides. It is objective and is based on facts rather than interests, intimidation or ideology.

In modern times, Geneva has cultivated a middle ground space for free discussion alongside its tradition of asylum and hospitality. Perhaps its biggest contribution to peace has been as a place where free talks can be held - talks on disarmament, talks on treaties, talks on peace agreements and talks on global issues. A great deal of this talking inevitably becomes bogged down and obfuscated in the deadening public discourse of diplomatic positioning-taking. But, on important occasions much of this thinking and talking has also been frank and free. A place for such free thinking and talking will continue to be needed.

A third big founding idea of modern Geneva is **political self-determination and independence**. Spiritual self-determination and its independence from Papal authority and church-mediated salvation is at the heart of Calvinist theology. Some even see Calvin's ideal of the heavenly city established in Geneva as the seed beneath the great tradition of American democracy and its mainly Protestant founders. Rousseau's social contract was more secular than theocratic and placed great emphasis on "the general will" of the people, albeit still preferring a small and unelected governing body. Nevertheless, he clearly

envisioned the people finding a firm grip as a counterweight to power which was then directly answerable to them. *L'Escalade* and *le marmite* are all about self-determination and independence.

This deep Genevan ideal of the right to determine one's own polity and to be independent of dominating powers is held and felt by many others in the world today. Despite most of us being mesmerised by the great conflict between terrorism and the war on terrorism, most civil wars - like those in Sudan, Uganda, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Thailand - are still about competing self-determination of some kind. The world's great protracted conflict - the Palestinian-Israeli conflict - is precisely about the self-determination of two peoples. Extreme Islamist ideology is also about self-determination - albeit of a kind that would leave little or no room for the self-determination of others.

The genius of the Genevan and Swiss model of self-determination and independence is that it supports communal and Cantonal power and diversity alongside federal unity and central power. It does this by valuing self-determination and independence at the most local level and recognizing that consensus and constant negotiation are the best means of protecting it. Like all geniuses, therefore, it is as frustrated as it is fulfilled!

This political method and its resulting institutions are unique but have a lot to offer other state polities emerging from the slow grind of decolonization and dealing with powerful cocktails of mixed minorities, rich commercial interests and powerful neighbours. But the perennial question remains: can the Swiss model can work without mountains?! Even if it cannot, Geneva can still be a place where people can discuss and explore creative models of statehood, self-determination and independence.

A fourth modern idea to emerge strongly in Geneva in the twentieth century is the idea of **world peace**. I do not feel that this deeply optimistic idea is essentially

Genevan. My limited experience to date suggests it is something of an impostor. Most Genevans are too realistic to buy world peace as a practical project. Although Geneva has become identified with an ideal of world peace, I think the idea is actually an import from eighteenth century Königsberg carried to Geneva by a twentieth century American. In other words, this is Immanuel Kant's idea of perpetual peace amongst nations installed in Geneva by US President Wilson in the form of the League of Nations, and then the United Nations.

But this is not to suggest that Geneva is against peace. On the contrary, it is for it and seeks to make it happen at every possible opportunity. However, it works more for little peaces. As in Swiss politics itself, the emphasis is on problem solving negotiations around particular conflicts and not some global schema of world peace. Nevertheless, this grand Kantian and Wilsonian idea of a reasonable and law-abiding world of states at perpetual peace does now exist in Geneva.

Looking around the world today it is hard to believe - despite the increasing paper of international treaties - that world peace is yet a realistic prospect. The intensifying competition for global trade and resources, the extreme levels of inequality, the deep perceptions of group or class-based marginalisation, the depth of ideological difference, the massive supply of weapons and the double-edged potential of global communications all tend more in the direction of perpetual conflict. The existence of a participatory, representative, consensual and efficient world government is also still far off. In the UN, WTO and increasingly powerful regional organisations, it may have an early skeleton. World government may be closer but it is fragile and always open to abuse.

A fifth modern ideal to emerge strongly from Geneva - in the writings of Rousseau and Piaget in particular - is that of **childhood**. Many claim Rousseau as the founder of the modern ideal of childhood which found strong resonance in the work of English Romantics like Blake and Wordsworth as they witnessed the

terrible roles played by children in newly industrial society. In *Emile's* idealized childhood, Rousseau set a particular tone to modern childhood. His ideas of natural goodness and the rightful freedom and individual personal development of children have since been elaborated into the modern world's interpretation of the entitlements of childhood. The mystery remains, of course, how Rousseau could be so barbaric to his own five children (and their mother) by sending them away to an orphanage immediately after their birth.

Although from Neuchatel, Piaget made Geneva his personal and professional home and developed this romantic and individualistic ideal of free and emerging childhood more scientifically by understanding how children learn and develop. Like Rousseau - but with the benefit of his own cognitive theory - Piaget emphasised that children are not just small things which need to be knocked into shape and made into adults. Rather, he showed how they are already individuals who are in the process of becoming themselves and that they learn better by discovery than adult imposed instruction. Not coincidentally perhaps, in 1921, Eglantyne Jebb, the English Founder of Save the Children Fund, is said to have penned the first draft of the Rights of the Child while sitting on the Salève - the beginning of the legal crowning of this modern ideal.

In the last 60 years, the whole modern movement around this particular vision of childhood has become epitomised and universalised in the ideology of UNICEF - an organisation which began life in Geneva and which still has a strong presence here. A certain kind of childhood which is free from work and war but complete with health, education, protection and political participation is now seen as a right and is deemed to last until eighteen. Like a successful corporate brand, this type of childhood has moved fast around the world championed by UNICEF, states and many NGOs.

Children's experience of disaster, war and poverty is now increasingly well understood. In many ways, it is particular and distinct from that of adults.

However, we may be seeing the beginning of some serious revisionism around the international children's agenda. There is some evidence - particularly in the new Human Security Report - that children do not always suffer as disproportionately to adults as UNICEF and others have claimed or implied. Men, women and children all suffer. Sometimes they suffer from the same things like displacement, disease, impoverishment and opportunity costs in health and education. Sometimes they suffer from different things which gender determines more than age like rape and extra economic burdens, male massacre, forced conscription and detention.

One aspect of children's experience of war which has received significant media attention precisely because it is so shocking to the modern ideal of childhood is the widespread practice of child soldiering as fighters and female camp followers. This manifestation of childhood is more Golding's *Lord of the Flies* than Rousseau's *Emile*. Not surprisingly, it has sent shudders through the childhood camp who talk of these and other suffering children's "stolen childhoods".

If we look around in wars, we find perhaps that not everybody believes in the same idea of childhood. This month in France, it was mainly people of sixteen and under who were burning cars. In Sri Lanka and Palestine, it is often people in their teens who are most political, determined and suicidal. In Liberia, Sierra Leone and DRC, it is often the youth who have been most violent. And, of course, most of this young violence and active extremism is male.

Youth and masculinity seems to be the two points at which the modern ideal of childhood as a peaceful sacred space becomes undone. Many stone-throwing and gun-carrying children seem to be demanding that we revise our ideas of childhood. Either it is not economically and practical possible for them, or it does not fit with their political priorities. Perhaps it simply infantilizes them for too long. Or, dare I say it, perhaps we humans - or we males at least - are not born good as Rousseau thought but instead are born an inevitable mixture of good and bad

- something from which a UNICEF childhood will not necessarily be able to save us when politics and choices are so hard.

A sixth idea to emerge from Geneva is the modern ideal of **the compassionate and reasonable conduct of war**. This is the one that concerns us most this evening. Legal and intellectual groundwork for this idea was laid by Rousseau and by Vattel (from Neufchatel) in the eighteenth century. However, the idea really took off in practice with Dunant's very practical revelation at Solferino and his founding of the ICRC and wider Red Cross movement with Moynier and others in the 1860s and thereafter.

In the second half of the twentieth century the vision and practice of compassionate and reasonable war was championed by Jean Pictet, Marcel Junod and others. To the outside world at least, Pictet epitomises the detailed and humane pragmatism of the ICRC lawyer and policy maker while Junod strikes the more dashing image of the delegate doing his best to apply "the spirit of the thing" with persistence, charm and a series of small triumphs in some of the worst corners of the world.

The Red Cross idea about war seems to be an idea made up of two parts. First, there is compassion - a profound sense that in war people remain people whoever they are and so should be considered and treated as humanely as possible in every situation. Secondly, there is reason - the idea that the best way to do this is by using a mutually agreed and binding law to prescribe and restrain the conduct of war. It is tempting but inaccurate perhaps to caricature the compassion as Dunant's and the legal reasonableness as Moynier's.

How is this idea of law-based compassion getting on in the world today? At one reading, it is proving to be extraordinarily successful. But from another angle, many people suggest that it is being stolen and misapplied on a grand scale. I will look at these two different interpretations by briefly examining two aspects of

contemporary humanitarian action: the law and its application, and current patterns in the use of humanitarian assistance.

- **Law and Application**

On paper at least, humanitarian law has been consolidated to an extraordinary degree in recent years. New laws around landmines, blinding and chemical weapons have been developed and ratified. A UN convention is also in place to protect humanitarian personnel. The Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement - a collection of rights and responsibilities derived from international law - are increasingly being used as standards by which to judge the treatment and conditions of IDPs.

The statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC) is in operation and the prosecutor is up and running, following on the heels of *ad hoc* courts addressing the conflicts from Former Yugoslavia, Rwanda and Sierra Leone. The document on UN reform which was agreed at the recent UN summit formally commits member states to concerning themselves actively with the protection of civilians in their own and other countries. Earlier this year, ICRC completed its massive study of customary international law to reveal a range of legal rights and responsibilities which can now be considered as customary whether or not a state is a signatory to the relevant convention. On paper, therefore, there has been much progress. Some of it is remarkable.

A great deal of this paper and the political discussion around it has focused on civilians in war. Tragically, of all humanitarian ideas, the principle of civilian protection was the last to enter firmly into ICRC practice - with no Convention on the subject until 1949. Today, however, the great majority of humanitarian discussion in the world takes place as a discourse about civilians. Civilian protection is now firmly fixed in the political lexicon and discussions of the UN Security Council and of most regional organisations. All NGOs see their humanitarian work as primarily about protecting and assisting civilians.

Politicians, the media, the ICRC, UN agencies, NGOs, faith-based movement, secular civil society organisations and civilians themselves all speak about the protection of civilians. This new humanitarian discourse of civilians has replaced old ideas of victims and beneficiaries. And so it should.

However, as any ex-ICRC delegate will know, talking civilian protection and writing legal paper on the subject does not necessarily help civilians. The idea that people in war are civilians and should be protected is still deeply contested in many wars. This is obvious in Darfur where government and *Janjaweed* forces clearly rejected the idea of civilian protection. For them, as for many others, the idea is simply wrong. People are not civilians, they are enemies - all of whom are equally worthy of attack and displacement. In most wars today, the civilian idea remains completely rejected by some ideologies, as it has been throughout history. Many people simply don't believe it. Some may believe it but feel the extremity of the times requires them to suspend this ethic to pursue a greater goal of survival or social transformation. Others may believe in it but feel that military necessity and real practical difficulties in distinguishing civilians from fighters will often mean they inevitably breach their own values.

So, in most wars today, civilian protection is deeply lacking as people are attacked, raped, kidnapped, summarily executed, displaced and impoverished - with most deaths still the result of destitution and disease. Many civilians are also detained - the particular concern of ICRC. Abuses of detention are widespread in wars and repressive regimes around the world but have received renewed public attention in the last few years because of the massive detention practices of US and coalition authorities in Iraq, Afghanistan and the wider war on terror. These abuses have been made public through the democratic and judicial processes in US and British societies themselves. Such transparency may not be available for the thousands of people detained in Addis Ababa and Kampala this month or the many other countries where long term detention is routine.

The recent Human Security Report (HSR) - published in Canada last month - takes an unusually optimistic view of war today. It claims that the number of wars are going down and so too are the number of people affected. It claims this is because of increasing international and civil society efforts and investments in conflict resolution. It brings good news but is still controversial as it has only analysed direct “battle deaths” and, as yet, has left out the much wider forms of civilian suffering with which humanitarians and the ICRC usually deal. The report is deeply contested and will be debated in Geneva next month. We humanitarians must not resist good news but we should scrutinize it. I know ICRC will be doing this and contributing its experience to the new view that “war has never been this good”!

- **Humanitarian Assistance**

If the news is really as good as the HSR suggests then Geneva’s humanitarian idea will really have been deeply influential in the last 15 years. There is certainly a mass of evidence to suggest that there is more humanitarian assistance than ever before.

The official and unofficial organisation of compassion in war is greater than ever before. Official humanitarian aid from OECD governments exceeded US\$ 7 billion in 2003 - by no means all of it skewed to Iraq and Afghanistan. Africa received a massive increase. The number of unofficial non-government organisations (NGOs) actively fundraising, assisting and advocating on all manner of humanitarian issues around war has also increased dramatically. The largest of these, World Vision and Care, are now bigger than most UN agencies. Most large NGOs now operate, like the Red Cross societies, as transnational affiliate organisations in confederations of various kinds.

In the last 15 years, all these NGOs have discovered formal ICRC style humanitarianism. It is not an exaggeration to say that they have remodelled

themselves along Red Cross lines. Their humanitarian policy makers have read Pictet and gone on IHL courses. Between them all, they have drawn up a Code of Conduct, a Humanitarian Charter and set a range of technical humanitarian standards by which to be judged. In their press releases and reports, they speak about humanitarian law and humanitarian principles more than ever before. In complicated and dangerous war zones, they talk loudly of their impartiality and independence. None of them, however, are truly happy with the word neutrality and will only use it as a term of last resort in an extremely difficult situation when no one else is listening.

If imitation is a high form of flattery, then Geneva must be blushing at the attention paid to its humanitarian style and ideals by the new generation of organisations now relishing this ICRC retro-chic!

If the unofficial sector is booming, so too is the government sector. When I first worked for Save the Children in 1983, the British Government's emergency aid section was run by one impressive woman and her assistant. Now the Department for International Development (DFID) employs hundreds of people and fields operational teams in rapid response and start-up situations. The same is true with most bilateral OECD donors and with European Commission's Humanitarian Office (ECHO) at the EC.

These days, of course, there is also a new side to the humanitarian activity of most governments. Their militaries are now big players and a critical part of their humanitarian policies when restraining the wars of others or waging their own. The expanded peacekeeping operations of the last 15 years have seen international military forces emerging as key players in opening up humanitarian space by creating secure environments for the assessment and delivery of aid by others. And, they have also assessed and delivered this aid themselves on occasions.

The peacekeeping role has typically seen international military forces following the lead of their colleagues in humanitarian and development departments. However, in more recent wars of their own, in Sierra Leone, Afghanistan and Iraq, the hierarchy has tended to be reversed and the humanitarian and development people follow the political and military lead. Not unnaturally, they see an additional value of humanitarian action and resources in what tends to be a counter-insurgency operation. A fundamental part of both Maoist and liberal counter-insurgency doctrine is to win the people. Improving their conditions is a good way to do this and humanitarian and development aid is typically applied with mixed motives by the west at war today.

If official western government departments have caught the humanitarian bug, so too has the western private sector in recent years. The privatisation of humanitarian aid is fast becoming big business. In hostile environments where western interests and symbols are targeted, logistics, construction, risk management, infrastructure security and staff protection are now being increasingly subcontracted to large international companies - many of them reliant on the services of ex-military people from the former Soviet, US, European and Asian armed forces.

Many of these companies tender directly for massive contracts in Iraq and Afghanistan which include transport, water supply and school building. One recent example is informative. This month, DFID once again put out to tender its whole humanitarian rapid response team for a five year contract. The short list included, The Crown Agents, the current holder and two powerful security firms: Control Risks and Armour Group. If one of them wins, a security company will now be managing the humanitarian response and assessment services of the British Government. To complete these bids, each company was chasing around recruiting ex-NGO people and quickly reading the latest humanitarian practice manuals to make their bid complete with the jargon and priorities of the day. I do not necessarily have a problem with such private subcontracting but many do.

If this is how “the West” is digesting and adapting humanitarian ideals today, what about “the Rest”. It is hard to criticise the West alone for mixed motives when it comes to the application of humanitarian action. In every war, the various parties see civilian populations and humanitarian resources as highly strategic. Seldom do they see them as either pure victims or pure aid. They should according to the law, but they do not.

Governments and armed groups in all conflicts regularly play with humanitarian aid to support their various policies of insurgency and counter-insurgency. Sometimes they will deliberately obstruct humanitarian action to ensure a scorched earth policy. Often they will channel aid to groups or individuals whose loyalty they seek to reward. Sometimes they will be content for humanitarian agencies to set up sophisticated IDP and refugee camps which serve their political purpose of transferring unwanted populations and institutionalising *ghettos*.

The idea that it is only western power that uses or “instrumentalizes” humanitarian action is as biased and misinformed. Nevertheless, some humanitarian and left wing commentators are so obsessed with the idea that most societies at war are somehow victims of a greater crime of western imperialism or neglect, that they fail to see the vicious imperialism and neglect at work within the societies themselves. If my country were being invaded I would prefer an invader who uses humanitarian aid actively to win my heart and mind than one who deliberately obstructs aid and displace me to ensure the success of his scorched earth policy against me and my people.

If the instrumentalization of humanitarian action remains routine, patterns of international assistance from “the Rest” may be changing in some quarters although tracking official aid from governments outside the OECD remains very difficult. At first glance, states beyond the OECD continue to perform as they

always have done. The Saudis give money for mosque building and, when pressed, send dates to Muslim refugees and IDPs. The most generous Saudi and Kuwaiti spending is usually reserved for infrastructure and income support to Palestinians. Other aid flows from rich Gulf states are hard to trace but do not show up in conventional humanitarian activities. Russia, China and India keep their heads down, seldom entering the humanitarian assistance debate although India and Pakistan remain essential pillars of UN peacekeeping. Brazil led briefly on the civilians agenda at the Security Council when - in Sergio Viera de Mello - it had a favourite son in the top humanitarian position in the UN.

At second glance, however, the Tsunami may have changed things and a new phrase - “emerging donors” or “non-DAC” donors - is now being used to describe a group of states who gave to Iraq and Afghanistan as dutiful members of the Coalition or produced significant donations to the Tsunami. Much of their aid is given as gifts in kind.¹

Some Asian donors like China, Malaysia and India look set to engage more long term as significant non-OECD donors in a region which is threatened most by natural disasters and now a potential pandemic. While this engagement may become focused on natural disasters, their increasing political power may also encourage them to engage in humanitarian support in war and in the wider political agendas around IHL, civilians, detention and the ICC. Like their western counterparts, the focus of their aid will remain linked to foreign policy and it is possible that - if they achieve critical mass as they grow richer - they could bring new values, direction and approaches to humanitarian programming. This may involve new aid channels outside the current UN, Red Cross and NGO networks or a major position of influence within them. Or both.

One Constant Fear

However, many are deeply worried by the state of all this humanitarian assistance and find themselves in the grip of a seventh idea that manifested itself in Geneva. This idea is an English fear about the tragic ambiguity of human creativity. This anxiety about the disastrous end of a noble idea is, of course, a main theme in **the story of Dr. Frankenstein**. Mary Shelley's terrible ghost story about the young Genevan scientist and his monstrous creation came to her the morning after she sat up late one night listening to Byron and Shelley telling ghost stories in a villa by the Lake in Geneva. It is now, of course, one of the most famous stories to be set in and around Geneva.

It is perhaps this idea, more than any other, that dominates many people's interpretation of humanitarian action today. Their story is also a frightening one and it goes something like this. They fear that, at the height of their power, western politicians in particular have taken important body parts from Geneva's great humanitarian idea and built them into something of a monster that now stalks the world. This monster talks humanitarian intervention when it means invasion and gives humanitarian aid to win communities to its side. It deploys armed soldiers as humanitarian workers and co-opts humanitarian agencies into its state-building programmes. It breaks humanitarian rules when it suits it to do so. It increases humanitarian aid budgets to gain the support of strategic countries in the war on terror and gives humanitarian contracts to its favourite private companies. As it rampages around, the monster will inevitably bring the whole humanitarian project into disrepute - a fact now clearly proven by the deliberate killing of aid workers associated with the monster.

Whether or not one sees today's humanitarian situation as a disaster of Frankensteinian proportions is essentially a matter of perception -

¹ The following paragraphs draw on the recent report from the Humanitarian Policy Group, entitled Diversity in Donorship: the changing landscape of official humanitarian aid, by Adele Harmer and Lin

preconditioned, I suggest, by the amount of anti-American or pro-American sentiment you bring to the subject. I do not share this perception of monstrous humanitarian malformation. I believe in the inevitability of mixed motive in any humanitarian action lead by politicians of any kind. But I do not read the current situation as an extreme form of capture or gross manipulation. To me, it in no way yet compares with the total co-option of Red Cross societies in the countries of fascist Europe in the 1930s, the transport of Zyklone B gas in the ambulances of the German Red Cross and Grawitz's perverted Nazi discourse of "humane killing".

In most places where it operates, the current western dominated system has by no means given up the principle of impartiality and is still focused on the needs of people rather than their identity. Impartiality is the most critical humanitarian principle and must be the acid test of any humanitarian action. Nor do I see in the US and Coalition conduct of hostilities the extreme attacks against civilians that were the norm in the Second World War, the Vietnam War and many of the US sponsored counter-insurgency wars of the Cold War.

Instead, I see a US-led coalition fighting particular counter-insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan, and operating a justifiable counter-terrorist operation around the world. The Coalition leaders of these conflicts are determined and, on occasion ruthless, but they also believe - to a significant degree - in humanitarian values and seek to abide by them in many ways. There are terrible black holes around detention and in the clumsy "fire first" and "fire most" culture of some US infantry in particular. There is also a typical confusion of interest between the application of humanitarian resources and deeper developmental resources which are a key part of re-making a society as an essentially liberal and functioning ally of the west. But this confusion is also intrinsic to the humanitarian project when operated by the UN and NGOs in any setting. There are also inevitable compromises in the provision of security in wars waged by the

Coalition. Humanitarian staff and resources do often require military protection by one side. But this problem is not unique to Coalition wars. Humanitarians are protected by the Ugandan military in northern Uganda and have enjoyed the close protection or effective area protection by armed groups, state forces or UN forces in most wars.

In other words, I see the risks and shadows of the humanitarian project's encounter with militarism and politics as essentially normal today - bigger in scale and interest perhaps - but typical rather than dangerously unusual. I imagine that every generation has had its Frankenstein fear about humanitarian action and will continue to do so. However, you may see things differently and sense a real Frankensteinian tipping point in the dominant application of humanitarian assistance today.

Four Ways of Doing Things

I want to turn now to four very Genevan ways of doing things which remain – and should continue to remain - at the heart of ICRC humanitarian approach.

The eighth idea is the very Genevan belief in **the power of the word**. In Book One of his Institutes, Calvin set out his core belief that God was revealed in two ways. Universally, God reveals Himself generally through the natural beauty of the world around us and “the many burning lamps which shine for us in the workmanship of the universe”. More specifically and directly, however, God also shows Himself to us through His particular revelation in the much brighter “light of his Word” in Holy Scripture. This is “a special gift” in which God “opens his own most hallowed lips”. Calvin was in no doubt that the revelation of the word is the most powerful and persuasive. This, of course, is why he preached

constantly in Geneva. He felt and knew that people could be deeply changed by hearing the Word and reflecting upon it.

ICRC believes the same thing and does the same thing. They believe that compassion and reasonable restraint in war is universal. Many moral “lamps” in many cultures bear witness to it. But ICRC also believes that in international humanitarian law (IHL), they have a special light which must be disseminated, taught and reflected upon by as many people as possible. In this way, people will either feel confirmed in their compassion or changed towards restraint. Just as Calvin ordered Bibles to be put in every tavern in Geneva, so too does ICRC try to put as much IHL material and training into the hands of armed forces of all kinds.

ICRC is right to do this. This is their especial role and they must always carry this torch and discuss real situations in the light it sheds. But, of course, it is the tragedy of our world that the word never changes us enough. We intrinsically break laws, even ones that we agree, admire or want to keep. As much as he believed in the saving power of the Word, Calvin was also convinced of the constant hypocrisy and deep failings of humanity. It is in this moral and ontological context that ICRC develops and promotes IHL. Many people will not believe in it. They will either reject it derisively or regretfully. Some will cherish it but not be able to hold firm to it when the threat against them seems so great or so unfair.

So, extremes of counter ideologies or perceived necessity will mean the word of IHL and its compassionate and reasonable view of war will always continue to meet a mixed reception. It will fall as the seed in Jesus’ famous parable of the sower. This is difficult and often disheartening work for delegates who sometimes wonder why they bother. But, the word from Geneva needs to remain strong and present in the world. Increasingly it is spoken by a movement that it

is much bigger than the ICRC. This needs to happen too. But ICRC must remain the guardian and protector of this special light.

The ninth idea is a particularly Genevan way of doing things which centres on the idea of **confidentiality, secrecy and real independence** in operating style. This way of doing things has emerged as deeply Genevan, most famously, of course, in its tradition of private banking and the particular Swiss brand of exceptionalism in international affairs distinguished by its neutrality.

ICRC holds dear this way of doing things. Again, it is right to do so. In the middle of an increasingly crowded, vocal, competitive and de-regulated humanitarian sector it is vital that one agency keeps relatively quiet and clearly independent. This approach has much value in itself as a way of getting things done but also, increasingly, it is a very important complementary counterpoint to the dominant NGO and UN way of doing things. NGO and UN orthodoxy now values high profile, loud advocacy and popular mobilisation. This is highly effective in many ways. Victims often benefit from it and so too does ICRC sometimes when this approach generates political action and opens up humanitarian space. But, another approach which is low profile, private and diplomatically focused is also extremely important. People suffering in war need both approaches and they need experts in each. In ICRC, they have the consummate expert of the confidential and truly independent method.

The tenth idea is another particularly Genevan and Swiss way of doing things that **focuses at the high value or *de luxe* end of a market**. This, ICRC does extremely well. It is still the Patek Philippe of the humanitarian world. Many of its people are excellent. Much of its infrastructure is superb. Its information gathering, networking and institutional memory is usually the best. It is the posh organisation, a cut above the rest - high cost but high value. Within the profession and within the international political community, ICRC is a brand apart. But, of course, depending on the market, it can be harder to stay at the

top than to get to the top. ICRC needs to keep building its quality with integrity and with a keen sense of what a modern ICRC needs to be in terms of method, staff and image.

Finally, of course, the eleventh idea is the very obvious Genevan and Swiss virtue of **pragmatism**. One reason why the Swiss civil war is the shortest on record is because its people are essentially pragmatic. Of course, General Dufour's efficiency and foresight also helped. In humanitarian terms, pragmatism is the application of the maxim given to Junod in his first briefing by Sydney Brown - that "it is the spirit of the thing" that counts and not perhaps every letter of the law. Interestingly, Brown was not a little English – another nation that is known for its pragmatism. He had an English grandfather and was educated by an English governess.

ICRC is more renowned for being dogmatic than pragmatic. This image does you no harm and I would not fight to change it for three reasons. First because you above all need to be seen to stand absolutely by the law. Secondly, because it does future negotiations and discussions no service to reveal your pragmatism in public and set out your more creative ways of working. Thirdly, because if a party thinks you drive a hard bargain they will tend be disproportionately pleased with any movement from your side.

I imagine that - at your best - most of you will have been more pragmatic than anything else in your ICRC careers. It is a difficult line to judge between being pragmatic, reckless, unethical, weak or inconsistent. But, in the many extreme, uncompromising and unsure situations of war, this line is often the zone in which decisions are actually made.

Sleep is usually a good indicator of how close to the right side of the line you were. I am sure you all sleep well. You certainly will after listening to me for so long!

Qualities of an ex-Delegate

To conclude, I promised to think about the tenth anniversary of *le Service Avenir* (SAR) and to identify some obvious strengths which a former ICRC delegate brings with him or her into a second career. For future employers, technical skills apart, these strengths are most useful if they are so-called “transferable skills”. I think ICRC delegates have many such skills and will simply offer you a list of what I imagine these to be. I am sure that you can think of many more.

I think one can expect most ex-ICRC delegates to be very good at being **single-minded and determined**, often in very difficult and unpromising situations. They will be well accustomed to working to a clear and obvious goal and to be able to set their hearts and minds upon it. As such, you can also expect them to be **committed** and to be people of **conviction**.

But, in my experience, most ICRC people are not blinkered ideologues as a result. Instead, the best of them are typically **supremely realistic** about problems, solutions and human behaviour in any situation. They have an idealistic mission but they are not simple dreamers. And they are also not easily thrown by failure.

The way ICRC operates and the terrain in which it works means that many ICRC delegates are used to playing a **vanguard role**. Many have strong experience of start-ups and of operating way out on a limb in the early or difficult stages of an operation. Many, therefore, can work at the cutting edge of any project to break and consolidate new ground.

But although many delegates have to be ready to work in a loner role on occasion, there is a strong *esprit de corps* in ICRC and a keen sense of loyalty to

each other and the organisation. Most ICRC people are, therefore, also **strong team players** and see the value of team work.

I am always particularly impressed how ICRC people **network** and how they **gather information** and share it with one another. On several occasions, after I have been lunched by someone at ICRC, another delegate will reveal that she or he knows something of the conversation from that lunch. In other words, ICRC people always seem well briefed. I have a sense that ICRC people have a good habit of talking to each other and keeping good files!

ICRC people are also **good analysts**. This skill is particularly valued in the Heads of Delegations but is often found in technical delegates too. They make a point of continuously understanding and updating their knowledge of people, place and problem.

Above all, I think one can expect an ex-ICRC person to be highly and acutely **focused on relationships and opportunities**. They know that it is by personal relationships that they learn things, implement things and change things. In their relationships and in their situation analysis they are always looking for new opportunities to reach that little bit further towards victims or to find more space and better ways to bring assistance and protection to them. An ICRC person is careful and considered but is also opportunistic in the best sense of the term.

Culturally, ICRC people are **more diplomat than activist**. This is the milieu of their mandate and it makes for discrete, engaging and focused operators who naturally gravitate towards power and authority as the place they seek to have most influence.

What is often perceived by others as ICRC caution is usually, in my experience, a responsible desire to **balance short-term gains against long-term costs**. Every delegate has a sense that the long term survival of ICRC and the respect

and credibility of IHL is something of enormous value. This is humanitarian capital. In all their actions, they calculate accordingly to preserve the long term capital of these things and not recklessly spend it or devalue its stock in the short term. This is wise.

And, finally, ICRC people are **practical**. They want to get things done.

This is obviously meant to be a positive list. I am sure there are weaknesses too and it is certainly unwise to generalise about all delegates. However, I hope these qualities and the ideas I have discussed are accurate and relevant. They are how I understand some of the influence of Geneva in today's world of war and politics. I hope they have been useful to reflect upon.

Hugo Slim

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