

Bridges, not echo chambers

Thought for the Day

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Sadly there's no shortage of worrying and depressing news – the unthinkable nuclear brinkmanship of North Korea, the unprecedented flooding in Texas, the horrifying riot in Charlottesville – yet one of the things I found most unnerving last week was the comment by an MP that she has such a “visceral” dislike of the other side that she regards them as “the enemy”.

For me, this mindset that “either you're with me or you're against me”, either we agree about everything or we agree about nothing, is worse than “the enemy of my enemy is my friend” – it's “the friend of my enemy is my enemy”. This is the mindset of name-calling and shouted slogans, not rational debate. Surely it's possible to disagree about one issue, but agree about others? Can't we challenge one another respectfully, trying to make sense of the other's view? And if we do succeed in understanding, isn't it possible we'd agree that the truth might lie somewhere in between our initial prejudices!

You can see these opposing attitudes in the recent debates about historical monuments, whether in the American South, Oxford colleges, or now in Glasgow's George Square. We're offered a stark – and fake – choice between adulation and demolition, when surely their function is to remind us about the past so we can learn from it – not just to imitate it, but to avoid its mistakes.

In its early days, the internet was hailed as a vast ocean of information that would expand our horizons and open our minds; now we worry that it's degenerated into a mass of disconnected ‘echo chambers’, where our prejudices are only reinforced, never challenged. The Talmud teaches that wisdom comes from learning from everyone – not just those we agree with, but perhaps even more from those we argue with.

Surely today, as we celebrate another world-beating structure at Queensferry, it's worth reflecting on how much more beneficial bridges are than disunity and conflict.