

# JUST RESOLUTIONS NEWSLETTER

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## Hope and Help for Collaborative Approaches to Divisive Issues

By Robert J. Fersh

In the 1932 movie *Horse Feathers*, Professor Quincy Adams Wagstaff (played by Groucho Marx) presciently predicted today's responses to political differences. Following his appointment as head of Huxley College and hearing that the college's trustees had suggestions for his administration, Wagstaff responded with the song "I'm Against It."

I don't know what they have to say. It makes no difference anyway.  
Whatever it is, I'm against it.  
No matter what it is or who commenced it. I'm against it.  
Your proposition may be good. But let's have one thing understood:  
Whatever it is, I'm against it.  
And even when you've changed it or condensed it. I'm against it.<sup>1</sup>

In these days of increasingly straight party-line votes on critical issues before Congress and sharp divisions of opinion in local communities on ideological or racial lines, it has become all too predictable how people will react to the ideas of others. If the ideas come from people or groups not on "their side," whatever that side is, they are against it. While this is certainly not true for all of us, the trend seems increasingly headed in this direction.

We are deluged with reports that the nation is "hopelessly divided"; we no longer just disagree with our political opponents, but we increasingly feel animosity toward them and question their legitimacy. Many media outlets fan the flames of conflict, reinforcing the perception of impenetrable polarization. While divisions do run deep, the drumbeat we hear may well overstate the reality and give too little credence to evidence that we really can do something about it.

Some people may be too ideological, too committed to hating others based on their identity, or too convinced that only they hold “the truth” to effectively engage with others. People and groups long at odds, however, actually can find significant common ground and build a sense of community in the process. Fortunately, a growing number of bridge-building groups now are working nationally and locally to fight the groundswell of division within the country. Especially pertinent to readers of *Just Resolutions*, a growing number of mediators, attorneys, and facilitators who want to apply their capabilities to greater social purpose can lend a hand to creating a more collaborative and functional society.

This is not an easy time for bridge building in the U.S. or globally. The job is more difficult if some people are not committed to being truthful. It is also more challenging if one group sells another short and assumes moral superiority without listening to the most reasonable advocates of views they find unacceptable. Intrepid bridge builders, active or inchoate, may take heart from entertaining the following propositions—even if they do not agree with all of them.

- Most Americans from across the political spectrum are decent and want to make the country better. They have shared goals – for economic opportunity, health care, a fair immigration system, and even-handed policing – but disagree on how to achieve them.
- The overwhelming majority of the country rejects violence against people or property to achieve political ends.
- Most people believe in telling the truth. We all shade facts to support our arguments, but most people believe in and practice honesty.
- We will get better answers if we engage people with divergent backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives. No individual, political party, or ideology holds all the best answers. The creative tension of differing points of view can push thinking to a new level, generating wiser, more creative, and more enduring answers.
- People of widely differing views and ideologies can agree on solutions without relinquishing core principles. People can find win-win solutions and acceptable compromises. Disagreement on some issues does not mean disagreement on all issues.
- Underneath it all, most people greatly prefer – and are relieved to be in – positive, affirming relationships with others than to be at odds with each other.

I write as someone with nearly two decades of experience in bringing polarized opposites to a shared table to find common ground on major, intractable issues confronting our country, primarily as the founder and former CEO at [Convergence Center for Policy Resolution](#). In many cases, people who participated had no relationship or could barely speak with others at the table. While deep disagreements often remained at the end, most participants were enthused about the important areas of common ground they achieved. Most also reported major shifts in understanding the motivations and positions taken by people on different sides, and in many cases, lasting friendships were formed. Here are examples of unlikely allies convened:

- Teachers' unions and their fierce critics from the school reform and charter school communities found shared goals and approaches to transform K-12 education.
- Big food companies and public health advocates, distrustful of each other and at odds on how to fight obesity and diabetes, found ways to create greater market demand for healthier foods, thus putting the profit motive to work for improving American diets.
- Major corporations and workers' rights groups/unions who long disagreed on how to provide quality jobs, a living wage, and economic opportunity for workers found a series of ideas they could pursue together to promote economic mobility.
- Prison administrators (public and private), tough on crime folks, and formerly incarcerated people found surprising levels of agreement on fundamental reforms in prisons and upon re-entry to help people transition successfully to normal life.
- Affordable Care Act advocates and those who sought to repeal and replace it found ideas in common on how to improve our healthcare system.

Our experience at Convergence conducting multi-stakeholder dialogues on challenging issues in the cauldron of national politics and policy may offer some helpful lessons, especially for those whose mediation experience may be limited to more narrow disputes with relatively few participants. Here are some [pointers from our work](#) (and that of others) to consider for successful, collaborative problem-solving:

**Relationships:** Beyond cutting deals, increase focus on the quality of relationships formed and the levels of trust engendered, especially when dealing with charged issues that may require long-term cooperation. Communicate continuously with participants throughout the process, not just in formal meetings of the group.

**A shared goal:** A fundamental building block to successful collaboration is to identify an overall shared goal among divergent stakeholders. It is crucial to frame the goal so that all parties can identify with it, and do not think solutions are pre-baked. If a group is not meeting necessarily to reach consensus on solutions, the goal simply can be to understand each other better.

**Research:** Interview potential participants to create a map of the issues at stake and the differing viewpoints and players optimal to include in any dialogue process. These interviews have the added benefit of building trust in the neutrality of those who convene the dialogue.

**Forming a dialogue table:** It's important to be as inclusive as possible of differing views and experience, yet also keep the table to a manageable number (usually 30 or less) who have the collective knowledge, experience, and influence to make a difference if they reach agreement on recommendations. Include those with "lived experience" in the issue at hand and have a strategy to deal with challenging individuals whose exclusion could make them spoilers.

**Facilitation and ground rules:** Employ a skilled facilitator (or team of facilitators) to convene diverse and divergent stakeholders with ground rules that protect confidentiality, promote respect for differences, and provide equality of opportunity to be heard. Early discussions should focus on interests, values, fears, and concerns rather than debating pre-existing positions.

**Shared principles:** Generate shared principles that can guide the formation of recommendations. Participants might agree on principles – for example, those who work full time should not live below the poverty line – but not on how to achieve them. Shared principles help reinforce the shared mission of the group and build trust among its members.

**Integrative solutions:** Help participants listen well to understand the needs of others and then collaborate to develop creative solutions that include the most important needs of everyone involved. These solutions may require compromise, but the gold standard is not split-the-difference answers but rather win-win solutions that don't compromise fundamental principles. These solutions will often be stronger, more durable, and more comprehensive.

**A plan of action:** Starting well before any final agreement or recommendation, identify the likely leverage points for impact (such as changes in public policy, business practices, public awareness, philanthropic priorities, or creating new public-private partnerships). Urge all parties to make commitments to move recommendations forward and finalize a plan of action. Continue to convene the stakeholders and new allies over time to help generate results.

We live in such charged times that suggestions we really can bridge divides, or that it makes sense to give our political opposites the benefit of the doubt, might understandably be met with skepticism. Nonetheless, attitudes and practices described here give aspiring bridge builders a fighting chance to solve problems and build a more tolerant and respectful society in the process.

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<sup>1</sup> Bert Kalmar & Harry Ruby, *I'm Against It, in Horse Feathers* (1932).