

Interview to Colin Archer (April 2017)

G.C.: As a peace activist, could you tell us your experience, and what has changed during these 40 and more years?

CA: The most important change from a political point of view is the end of the Cold War. We have moved from a bi-polar system to one with multiple big powers and a situation where most armed conflicts are within nations rather than between them. We have witnessed a tremendous expansion of the peace agenda, which can now be seen to encompass human rights and democracy, development and environment. Add to this the rise of globalisation and the internet revolution, and the result is a vast multiplicity of actors from the local to the global level. Probably as a reaction to these changes we are now seeing a revival of nationalism and authoritarian rule on all continents. But one thing that has not changed is the difficulty of achieving UN reform. And we still have not abolished nuclear weapons. Much work still to do!

G.C.: Why is the issue of military spending so important nowadays?

C.A.: Current events in Syria and NE Asia remind us of the dangerous tensions between large powers, and also their interactions with smaller states like N. Korea. We are still in a time where hard power is seen as the most important political currency. Global military spending has begun to rise again after a slight dip following the financial crisis of 2008. It has now reached a total of \$1,700 bn per annum- of which the USA spends almost half. Recent wars such as those in Iraq and Afghanistan, Yemen and Libya show quite clearly that militarism doesn't solve problems. And with leaders like Trump and Putin we face bigger risks than ever.

G.C.: Why is it so important to redirect money from military spending?

C.A.: This demand has two purposes: to reduce militarisation, and to support social and ecological development. IPB argues that there are 5 main directions in which the money saved from the military budget could be redirected: peace, development, environment, humanitarian efforts and public services like education and health. We don't have many examples of states who have followed this path but Costa Rica is one. By abolishing its army (following a civil war) it has been able to devote much larger amounts of public money to peaceful development.

G.C.: Which are the priorities? Which sector is the most important?

C.: All are important. But if we have to choose then reducing the threats to the whole planet must come first. Above all, these are the dangers of nuclear destruction and the rapid advance of climate change.

G.C.: Is there a possibility that in the future nations will have peace ministries? (In Italy for example, civil society is working to create a civil and nonviolent defence ministry) Do you think that this would be possible in more than one country?

C.A.: It is possible, but it will require a major shift in government thinking. For them, peace is a part of their relations with other countries, so it is handled via their Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

There could be elements of peace work in several other departments (education, youth, justice, social affairs...) but so far there is little appetite for a whole department devoted to peace. A few nations already have created such ministries:

- *Nepal has a Ministry of Peace and Reconstruction;*
- *New Zealand had a Ministry for Disarmament for some years but it has now been absorbed into the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade under the title International Security and Disarmament Division.*
- *Venezuela has a Ministry of Interior, Justice and Peace.*

The Global Alliance for Ministries and Infrastructures for Peace is a worldwide community of civil society campaigns, organisations, committed citizens, and elected and appointed government officials from over 44 countries. <http://gamip.org/mission-vision.html>

G.C.: I have a last question, it comes to my mind in these days in which the humanity of some people seems lost somewhere and many factors are contributing to create even more intolerance and division. Which advice would you give to young people who want to become (or want to continue as) campaigners and that often have to face obstacles that seem insuperable? How should we answer to people that believe and say that the violence (and even more violence) is the only way to solve conflicts?

C.A.: It is often dangerous to give advice! But what I would say is that the root of all efforts to improve society is a firm sense of fundamental values: equality, justice, harmony with the earth. You have to start with that. Then you need to find others who share your point of view and with whom you can develop some kind of project. The solidarity that you generate as you move forward will help keep you on track when difficulties crop up - as they are bound to! It is easy to feel that the system is just too powerful, and that our efforts are in vain. We all feel that sometimes. But we should remember the great victories of the past: achieving civil rights in the USA, the end of the Vietnam War, overcoming apartheid, banning landmines etc ...all these things were accomplished at least partly thanks to civil society! And it all takes time, so we need patience as much as need determination. But violence usually just generates counter-violence, and so on, in a spiral. What we need to find in each situation is the creative, humane, nonviolent solution
