



“The Man on My Right”
15 February 2013, Iran International Conference Centre
Islamic Republic of Iran

Around 4PM in the afternoon on 15th February 2013 I was relaxing in the speaker’s room at the Iran International Conference Centre listening to the current speaker on the in-room flat panel television and chatting with the other speakers and organisers who were present at the time. I had completed my own speech earlier in the day and was enjoying some time to relax after a three month build-up before arriving and 3 intense and long days on the ground in Tehran.

In the international news the United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran were locked in a war of words caused by President Ahmadinejad’s repeated remarks that Israel should be wiped off the face of the earth and Iran’s present insistence on nuclear development (for peaceful means) which the West and Israel believe is for nuclear war.

In the cinemas the movie ARGO had become a worldwide bestseller and was giving everyone who could see it the ominous impression of Iranian leaders and certainly the Islamic Revolutionary Guards as despicable Islamic fundamentalists set on wiping out the influence of Western materialistic thought and influence in Iran. The movie depicts the heroic Canadian rescue of six US diplomats taken hostage in the US embassy by Iranian students following the 1979 overthrow of the Shah of Iran and the return to leadership of the new supreme leader, Islamic cleric Ayatollah Khomeini.

My family had all seen ARGO and were very nervous about my trip to Iran, more so than any other trip I had taken before. I had been to many hotspots in the world but when my son JP told me my wife Marie was very worried and when she stood and gave me a big hug saying she might never see me again I knew she was worried and hiding it (but not very well). My son LT, who normally doesn’t write while I am away, had sent me an email on the first day of my trip asking what Iran was like. My daughter Ni Si at McGill University in Montreal had also written soon after my arrival, again something she doesn’t often do.

The speakers’ room at the Conference Centre is luxuriously outfitted and catered and sits 12 people with 9 individual chairs around the outside of a long narrow room with a sofa for three at the end of the room. The speakers’ room also doubled as a VIP Suite and the conference sponsors, representing all the leading companies in Iran, were invited to bring their CEO’s into the room during coffee break to meet the speakers and chat with each other.

Break times for us speakers quickly became a hectic round of handshakes, official photographs and some questions. I estimate conservatively that I was photographed 5,000 times in two days. When the conference attendee breaks were over the sponsors departed to hear the next speakers and our room reverted to a combination of jokes between us speakers and listening and learning with great interest from whichever of our team of six was on stage.

It was an honour to be included in the group of great speakers. Our team included **Tim Bean** – fitness guru to the rich and famous in the UK, a Kiwi originally and a very nice guy. **Mark Englis** – the first double amputee to summit Mt Everest AND win the first New Zealand ParaOlympic Silver Medalist for cycling in the Sydney Para-Olympics. Mark was also from New

Zealand and with Tim kept all of us with our feet on the ground laughing and realising this is just another job. **Luis Huerte**, a brilliant professor of Marketing from Spain teaching at IESE and who has been invited to address audiences in over 60 countries. Luis and I joked because several people in the 1000 people audience has mistaken us on day one for each other and he was being asked questions about negotiation while I was being asked questions about customer service. **Chris Skinner**, an advisor to senior bankers in the City of London was also with us and his knowledge of the future of banking and the impact technology was having on the change in the world economy meant he was sought out for questions throughout the conference. **Joe Sherren** was our team leader and the most seasoned amongst us in Iran having come several times before and as one of the leading motivational speakers in the world, was loved and well known by the audience. Joe is Canadian and gave me a nice link to this rather unique group and culture and provided valuable advice on several levels.

By 4pm Friday the conference was moving into the final stretch. Joe was finishing up on stage and Mark, who had been selected to wrap things up for the team was making his final preparations in the speakers room. The other speakers were coming and going with the organisers as was I because we all needed to keep moving to overcome the mental and emotional stress (and subsequent exhaustion) which comes with the job of speaking to large audiences.

Over the last few weeks the international press had been full of news about Iran. Nuclear war was feared, the international embargo on Iran had sent their currency, the Rial, plummeting against the US Dollar. In just one year the Rial had lost 80% of its value. President Ahmadinejad was nearing the end of his term and was making strong comments in the news about his views on current conflicts in other parts of the world. The Arab Spring was continuing to create unrest in Egypt, Syria, Bahrain and Tunisia. As home to Shia Muslims worldwide, Iran played a role in all of these conflicts. The wars in Iran's neighbouring countries of Afghanistan and Iraq were still featuring regular flare-ups and the US troops were still years away from being taken home. Canada, as part of the international embargo of Iran and in support of Israel, had closed its embassy in Iran.

The speakers' room is long and rectangular with doors at either end exiting to the stage, bathrooms and press rooms. At one end is the TV screen and at the other is the sofa. I had sat in various chairs over the course of the two days depending on availability and whether I wanted to speak to the other people present or watch the current speaker on our large TV monitor. Having given my final speech and having faced the scrum of photographers with the other speakers after lunch I was finally relaxing and had opted to sit on the sofa at the end of the room for the first time and have some tea. On a chair to my right Mark was making his final preparations, on a chair to my left Luis was chatting with Panthia, assistant to conference organiser Sepehr, and who between them enjoyed the stress and excitement of organising events like this in an effort to develop their country. This was their 5th World Management Forum <http://www.worldforum.ir/en> .

In addition to management conferences I learned Sepehr also organises more specialised conferences on sales and marketing and that at an earlier conference one of the speakers had fallen afoul of the Ministry of Intelligence (i.e. Islamic leadership). As a result extra oversight was needed for this World Management Forum. I had learned earlier that they had checked out each of the speakers' backgrounds before accepting to grant us visas. We were after all "guests

of state". Our presentations were censored and could not include any references to religion, sex or politics and certainly we were not to make any reference to the current conflict between Iran and the US or Israel.

There was to be a break between Joe and Mark. I was not surprised therefore when about 15 senior gentlemen entered our room. I had not seen them before and simply thought they were VIP's invited by the sponsors coming to meet the speakers. Within a few minutes, after the traditional introductions, translations, shaking of hands and offering of seats, I found myself seated back on the sofa beside an Iranian gentleman on my right and no one on my left. The man on my right was introduced to me through our translator and my background as a specialist in negotiation and dialogue formed his opening. He asked me about my personal perspectives on the current situation in Iran. Protocol taught us not to speak about this in public but in private such questions were normal and answering them was acceptable, provided you said the right thing. Our conversation was intermittent as people came to meet the man on my right and this gave a chance for our interpreter, Panthia, to join me (at my repeated request) on the sofa on my left to help with my conversation with the man on my right whose identity was still at this point a mystery to me.

While the attention focused onto the man next to me I began to notice everyone else in the room was staring in our direction. All the photographers were taking pictures of the man on my right and no one was speaking while he spoke. In any part of the world this means he was the most important man in the room. I quickly began to feel like I was in a film sitting next to the lead actor.

Attendance in the speakers' room was evolving, Mark had exited to prepare alone for his final speech. Panthia had moved to Mark's seat to the right of the sofa to be closer to the man on my right and better interpret our conversation. It was then the man on my right asked what I thought about Iran's conflict with the US. Realising this was rapidly becoming one of my life's historic dialogues I signalled to Luis to join me on the sofa and he was introduced to the man on my right who then invited Luis and I to join him for tea. This was important I told Luis (remembering 3 Cups of Tea) and we sipped. The man on my right said "there is no trust between the US and Iran and that without trust we cannot negotiate". "Will the US attack Iran" he asked.

As I wondered how I might handle this question I realised at least some of the men who had entered the room with this leader were in fact his body guards. Tim who was at the door when the group of men had entered our room earlier and who retired from the New Zealand Police latter told me he had recognised at least two of the men had guns under their suit jackets including the one with dark circles around his eyes who was repeatedly walking forward to speak quietly in the ear of the man on my right.

Luis, a seasoned international executive, was beginning to recognise what was happening and jumped into the conversation, as professors do, with a diagram which on the bottom left quadrant referred to dialogue and on the top right quadrant referred to attack. The conflict was laid bare in Luis' diagram. "What should we do?" the man on my right asked Luis continued. "Israel is the problem. The remarks of your president some years ago are the cause of the mistrust". Luis had just escalated this conversation into an area of no return. "Are Israel and the Nuclear problem linked" the man on my right asked. "Yes" continued Luis "they are linked

but not the same". Luis was brilliant in his assessment and while there were many more issues these two were the tip of the sword threatening the West and Israel.

By this time I had opened my Samsung Note and with my tablet pen had written in large uppercase letters on the screen the word **TRUST** in red. I interjected but again our conversation was interrupted by another VIP coming to meet the man on my right. When the interruption was over Luis encouraged the conversation focus on what I had written on my the screen of my phone. I took my pen and said to the man on my right, "there is no trust". I crossed out the word with a big **X** and wrote underneath in black the word **Demonstrate**. I said "both parties must demonstrate you can be trusted". Panthia's interpretation allowed for a pause. I then wrote a second word **VERIFY** and said "not only must *you* demonstrate you can be trusted you must also verify *they* can be trusted". We were again invited by the man on my right to eat cake, drink tea. We obliged, Luis digging in while I resisted just nibbling the delicious almond biscuits we had been served. There was another interruption by the security man with the dark circles surrounding his eyes. Tim said when this man turned it was easy to see the gun bulging under his arm inside his coat. The security guard was facing me with the leader on my right, Luis to my left and Panthia attentively interpreting in the seat to the right of the sofa so his gun was invisible to all of us.

Knowing all senior leaders in Iran are highly educated and that many are alumni of the finest universities in the West, I leaned to the man on my right and asked him in English, "what do you think"? He responded by simply saying "we would like your ideas and should we want to help in any way please do so". I said again now with interpretation "the impending change of your president will give the new president the opportunity to distance himself from Ahmadinejad's remarks about Israel". This was translated and I received no response. Then our time was up and we were all invited back into the conference hall here Sepehr was to be honoured with an Honorary Doctorate degree for developing Iran and each of us were to receive certificates of appreciation from a very senior government leader, as it turned out, the man on my right. Luis and I thanked the man on my right for the conversation and as we stood to depart I turned to thank Panthia and shake her hand. She was witness to an incredible conversation. Panthia smartly reminded me in English that I cannot touch her and I retracted my hand clumsily hoping the entourage with the man on my right had not noticed.

After the presentations were completed the man on my right was invited to speak for 15 minutes. 45 minutes later he was still speaking, all in Farsi without translation for us few listening in English. I was told it was a strong reminder of the Koran and its teaching about organisations. Many of the audience had left or were checking their phone messages while he spoke. After two days of engaging speakers this man was falling flat in the worst way and I felt compassion for him as a speaker having lost his audience. Others later told me it is his own fault and that his message is no longer of interest to the people like it was 34 years ago at the start of the revolution. People today, like everywhere in the world, wanted progress not repression.

Once the senior government official completed his tirade Mark stood and gave a fantastic closing speech after which all speakers were invited on stage for photos with the senior government leader. As the senior government leader departed I gave him my conflict card, the graphic reminder that we must engage in dialogue and negotiate otherwise blame and arrogance will

eventually lead to destruction. Hundreds of photographs later we were finally done. I had never in my life seen so many flashing iPhones.

Latter that evening I was told the man on my right was the senior advisor to the Supreme Leader of Iran, Ayatollah Khamenei, who replaced Ayatollah Khomeini who led from the 1979 revolution until his death 3 June 1989. While the world was focused on Tiananmen Square June 4th 1989, the current Supreme Leader took office.

I believe our willingness to engage in dialogue, even on difficult issues, can make a difference. I don't know if there is any link but two days after talking with the man on my right Iran's Supreme Leader went public with a statement to the US and Israel that Nuclear war is immoral and that the country's development of nuclear power is only for peaceful purposes.

Important dialogue continues between Iran and the rest of the world on February 26th in Kazakstan. <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/06/world/middleeast/iran-nuclear-talks-to-resume-this-month.html?ref=nuclearprogram&r=0>

Peter Nixon, 23 February 2013

Resting in Phuket after 14 hour detention by Iranian police while transiting Tehran between Bahrain and Bangkok

The solution is in the dialogue©.

