

## ENCOUNTER WITH MELISSA CONLEY TYLER

Tackling conflict at a local level can stop small disputes turning deadly, says this international affairs specialist.

By DANIEL FLITTON

AS SECURITY measures go, it was certainly an unusual tactic — “absurd” is how Melissa Conley Tyler sees it in retrospect. Surely nobody would want to steal such a bright pink bike? But in the mid-1990s, that colourful little two-wheeler — carried her safely along the streets in some of South Africa's most dangerous townships.

“One of the worst things at that time were all the car-jackings. No self-respecting thief would want a bright pink bicycle, so they'd have to actually be after me. I think that reduced my risk somewhat.”

It was soon after the fall of the white minority regime and Conley Tyler was working in Johannesburg, practising her skills in the art of conflict resolution.

“I was mainly working with people who were trying to promote reconciliation. Some of it was trauma counselling for people who had been subject to apartheid-era abuses. One of my jobs was trying to help evaluate whether that was working — whether giving people trauma counselling was helping people see other groups in a more positive light.”

It is the kind of role that appeals to many an idealistic graduate, the chance to help in a country ravaged by years of misfortune and deprivation. Looking back now, at 38, Conley Tyler is a little more circumspect.

“It illustrates for me the invulnerability you think you have when you're young,” she says.

Conflict resolution is a tricky business. And in international politics, untangling the cause of wars, territorial disputes, ethnic violence or genocide can often prove a stubborn if not impossible task. Yet each conflict has local roots, a spark that if left unchecked can burn brighter and turn deadly. Dousing those flames, or even dimming their heat, usually involves patience and lots of talking, an effort that can at times take well-intentioned people to dangerous places — often, sadly, to become victims themselves.

Conley Tyler has built an unusual career in this difficult field, studying at the prestigious Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University in the US, working in the Bronx of New York, the slums of South Africa, and on Aboriginal reconciliation in Australia. Last month, she won a Fletcher School award as the most outstanding alumni under 40 — receiving her gong at a 650-person gala in the ornate surroundings of the Library of Congress in Washington DC.

“From my perspective, I just did interesting jobs that I thought would do good and teach me something,” she says. “If you keep doing that time after time it apparently turns into a career.”

She is self-effacing, but her contemporaries are more forthcoming with praise. “I would describe her as one of the emerging generation of new thinkers in international relations theory and practice in Australia,” says Greg Hunt, the federal member for Flinders and former parliamentary secretary for foreign affairs in the Howard government.

At Melbourne University in the early 1990s, the two were law school rivals in mock court debates. Hunt remembers her as “highly intelligent, highly focused, but always incredibly pleasant and good humoured”. They continue to bump into each other in the small pool of



PICTURE: PAUL ROVERE

## In pursuit of peace

foreign affairs specialists in Australia.

Conley Tyler approaches conflict resolution differently from those analysts who tend to focus exclusively on the tectonic clash between superpowers, armies and governments.

“It works at lots of different levels,” she says. “I'm sure when I was studying I would have loved to have been doing the country-to-country peace negotiations, but that's not something I'm probably going to be doing in my life.”

Her interests are more local, the daily conflicts between people or within small communities. From her time working in the Bronx — for a long time America's most notorious neighbourhood — she recalls an “appalling sameness” in the cases. Types of disputes that, unchecked, led to bigger problems.

“What they often came down to is people needed assistance to communicate with each other. There were almost always solutions to the problems . . . whether it's language, culture, anger, whatever it is that is getting in the way of you being able to resolve that dispute,” she says.

“Our knowledge has ballooned in the

last few decades. We've got a much better idea of the ‘technology’ for helping people resolve disputes, from the micro to the macro.”

She ticks off the various fields of study that have each helped increase this understanding — such as psychology, politics and law — and compares the process of resolving conflict to taking tools from a toolkit.

“Depending on the sort of dispute, you draw on different knowledge. If it's a fairly simple two-party commercial dispute, you don't need to go into the deep psychological underpinnings,” she says. “But if you're talking about a long-standing ethnic dispute, (when) communities are very divided, then you're going to have to bring in a lot of social understanding of what's going on.”

It is an intensive and often expensive approach but over the medium to longer term it may actually prove to be far cheaper, both in money and in lives.

Even so, putting these theoretical mechanisms into practice is difficult, especially when tackling some of the world's most intractable disputes. Conflict

can be resolved only when the parties genuinely seek compromise. Israel and Palestine are cases in point.

“There are some conflicts we actually do know how to solve or we've got some idea about how to go about it, but we haven't reached a point where people are happy to accept a solution.”

And what of Cyprus — the divided Mediterranean island, where since 1964 Australian police have assisted with international efforts to keep the peace? Conley Tyler talks of “frozen” conflicts, not presently violent, but in a type of suspended animation because there is no reason for anything to change. Georgia and Russia, who recently came to blows over the territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, might also be headed into a long frosty dispute, she adds.

Then there are China and Taiwan. “I think everyone wants Taiwan to stay frozen, because the alternatives to Taiwan not being frozen are too bad to contemplate.”

Speaking of countries armed to the teeth, glaring suspiciously at each another, what about Kashmir, the disputed province between India and Pakistan?

“I can imagine things changing,” she says, though after six decades, not soon. “Tibet? A lengthy pause. ‘Hard to know.’” She muses about the experience in East Timor, another long-lasting and thorny dispute after Indonesia's 1975 invasion. For nearly 25 years, officials and commentators exhorted the Timorese resistance to give up. Then, when circumstances suddenly changed, the Timorese were offered a surprise chance for independence in 1999, which they eagerly embraced.

“I guess sometimes it's hard to anticipate,” she says, avoiding the trap for many analysts and pundits of guessing at the

outcome for the sake of offering a view.

For the past few years Conley Tyler has been deeply engaged in a different type of conflict, though one decidedly non-violent. She has worked to rescue Australia's oldest public forum for discussions about global issues from the depths of obscurity — the Australian Institute of International Affairs, the local equivalent of Britain's famous Chatham House.

**‘I just did interesting jobs that I thought would do good and teach me something.’** MELISSA CONLEY TYLER

“She's turned the AIIA around from an organisation that was dying slowly and increasingly irrelevant,” says Professor Michael Wesley, who edits the institute's flagship publication, the *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, and played a key role in Kevin Rudd's 2020 Summit in April this year. “It is probably the country's oldest and most venerable think tank,” he says. “It really is something that shouldn't be allowed to die.”

Conley Tyler is the institute's national executive director, with broad oversight of the seven state branches, comprising 1600 members.

“The institute was set up 75 years ago with, I think, a very simple idea to promote public understanding of international affairs,” she explains. “The job is to get whatever part of the populace we can engage with to show what is happening in the world affects what is happening here.”

Each year, the institute hosts about 150 public events, with experts speaking on such big international issues of the day as the US presidential election, the turmoil in Zimbabwe, the global financial crisis or abolishing nuclear weapons. Funding is drawn mostly from members' fees, a small government grant, and publications sales.

Until recently, the crowd was mostly grey haired — retired diplomats and public servants — but Conley Tyler has helped spur programs to reach a younger audience, particularly students, for whom international politics is now a hugely popular subject.

“As the Americans say, she ‘walks the walk’, and young people who work with her catch on,” Di Bretherton says by email from Tianjin, China. Bretherton, a law professor who has worked for the United Nations, helped Conley Tyler set up a centre for the study of conflict resolution at Melbourne University in 2003.

“Melissa was particularly effective with the interns, who came from many different countries in the world, and wanted not only to learn about peace in an abstract way, but to experience what it means to work for peace,” Bretherton says.

“This was very effective in helping young people to see that you don't have to drop your career and rush off to be a peace protester to work for peace, but . . . work on the practice of peace every day, in the family, university, neighbourhood and workplace.”

THE market for think tanks is becoming ever more crowded in Australia. Reports sprout regularly from, for instance, the well-heeled Lowy Institute for International Policy in Sydney and the government set-up Australian Strategic Policy Institute in Canberra. In the midst of war in Afghanistan and a global economic crisis, international problems have a higher profile in Australian debates, but Conley Tyler does not see the new organisations as rivals.

“We ourselves never express an opinion on any issue in international affairs,” she says. “Our job is to be a forum for debate. From our perspective, having more academics, more independent think tanks, more people talking, thinking and writing about international affairs is fantastic. It increases the amount of debate. We draw on them for our events and our publications.”

One blatant fact is that this remains a male-dominated field, as a quick glance over the staff list at Australian foreign affairs think tanks readily shows. Conley Tyler hopes this imbalance will eventually subside, as more women build successful careers in the area.

Paired with this, a number of academic studies have looked at the role women play in resolving conflict. “I don't think there is something essential about every woman that says we behave in a particular way,” Conley Tyler says. “There are women who make very martial careers, and there are women who make very peaceful careers.”

“Having said that, I do think a number of women do move into conflict resolution because it really connects with their values in different ways. That may come from many women working in caring areas.”

For herself, she is happy to have found space for professional pursuits and a loving family. Her partner, Simon Evans, is a specialist in Australian constitutional law — one of the least transportable areas of expertise you can imagine, she jokes.

On her influence in helping to resolve conflicts, she is modest, but looks to the big picture. “I always feel there is this difficult balance between feeling the problems of the world are so big you can't do anything about them, or on the other hand getting too big an ego and thinking you're a large part of the solution.”

“I think you've got to find somewhere in the middle where you say, ‘Well, I can only do a little bit, but the little bit I do is valuable and is worth doing.’ Even though it doesn't solve all of the problems of the world, it's part of the jigsaw of all of the people that are trying.”

Daniel Flitton is diplomatic editor, and a member of the AIIA.

### MELISSA CONLEY TYLER

**AGE 38**  
**EDUCATION** Master of arts in law and diplomacy, Tufts University, Boston; bachelor of laws (honours), University of Melbourne.  
**CAREER**  
■ National executive director, Australian Institute of International Affairs.  
■ Senior fellow, Melbourne Law School.  
■ Member of United Nations Expert Working Group on Online Dispute Resolution.

**OTHER EXPERIENCE**  
■ Centre for the Study of Violence & Reconciliation in South Africa.  
■ International Peace Academy in New York.  
■ One of the 1000 Australians to take part in Kevin Rudd's 2020 Summit.  
**PERSONAL** Partner Simon Evans, children Jocelyn and Gwendolen.

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**Date:** Wednesday November 26  
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**Enquiries:** Kathy Calyopoulos, phone: (03) 9920 4576, email: [kathy.calyopoulos@deewr.gov.au](mailto:kathy.calyopoulos@deewr.gov.au) and Patricia Bentley, phone: (03) 9920 4653, email: [patricia.bentley@deewr.gov.au](mailto:patricia.bentley@deewr.gov.au)

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