



The Common Table

How to Disagree Without Becoming Enemies in an Age of Polarisation

Every polarised society has a table from which someone has walked away. It may stand in a family dining room after an election, in a cabinet after a coalition collapses, or in a community hall where neighbours no longer speak except through lawyers and social media. The setting changes, but the sequence is familiar: disagreement about a decision becomes suspicion about motives, then judgement of character. At last, someone says there is no point in talking-and a relationship that must continue loses its language.

Politics amplifies this pattern. Elections demand choices; campaigns sharpen differences; media reward conflict; citizens seek refuge in voices they trust. These forces are not inherently corrupt. They become dangerous when the habits of campaigning overrun civic life, turning every school, court, workplace, neighbourhood and family into another front in an endless political war.

Yet polarisation cannot be cured by simply asking people to be calmer. Anger often grows from genuine failures: unaffordable lives, weak services, corruption, insecurity, exclusion and the feeling that ordinary people have no meaningful voice. Harmony that ignores injustice is merely silence imposed by the powerful. But grievance, however real, does not make every accusation true or every tactic legitimate. Pain can be exploited; fear can be given a face to hate.

This book therefore begins with a demanding idea: harmony without uniformity. A free society will never contain one history, one interest or one vision of the good. Its task is not to eliminate disagreement, but to preserve the conditions under which disagreement can continue without destroying equal citizenship.

That task requires both institutional repair and civic discipline: fair rules, competent government and meaningful participation, joined to curiosity, honesty, restraint and respect. Some acts-political violence, dehumanisation, electoral corruption and collective punishment-must remain beyond the democratic boundary. Within it, argument may be fierce.

Harmony is not one note repeated. It is the difficult composition of difference. And it begins with an ordinary, radical act: seeing the person behind the position.

Author

Dr Stephanus Peters is a writer, business leader and thoughtful observer of human relationships, cultures and institutions. His extensive professional experience, cross-cultural engagement and lifelong study of philosophy, history and spiritual traditions have shaped his understanding of how people relate to one another, and of what enables societies to flourish.

Throughout his life, Stephanus has been drawn to the values that connect humanity across different beliefs, generations and ways of living. He writes with the conviction that enduring change begins in our everyday choices and extends into our communities, workplaces and institutions.

