

In Memoriam Max van der Stoel 1924 - 2011

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Max van der Stoel who passed away after a short illness on Saturday the 23rd of April in The Hague was known as the quiet diplomat. He operated behind the scenes to prevent conflict and discreetly solve problems. He was successful when nothing happened. As one observer put it, he kept the dogs from barking.

Following a distinguished career as a Dutch politician and diplomat, in the 1990s, when he was already in his 70s, Van der Stoel was High Commissioner on National Minorities for the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Through old-fashioned, confidential shuttle diplomacy, Van der Stoel managed to reduce inter-ethnic tensions across the post-Cold War countries of Central and Eastern Europe. By stressing the need to protect the rights of persons belonging to national minorities, Van der Stoel strengthened good governance and social cohesion in countries in post-communist transition, and helped prepare them for EU accession.

Van der Stoel was particularly active in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. In 1998, he made a number of recommendations which, if implemented, could perhaps have averted the violence that erupted between the Albanian and Slav communities in 2001. He was instrumental in hammering out the Ohrid Agreement of August 2001. Part of his legacy is the South East European University in Tetovo which Van der Stoel helped establish during the height of the conflict in 2001 in order to encourage Albanian and Macedonian students to learn together, and to ensure the opportunity of Albanian students to receive quality higher education in their mother tongue.

In an age of megaphone diplomacy, Van der Stoel preferred to speak softly. This made him both trusted, and an enigma. He was trusted by his interlocutors not to talk about sensitive issues in public – a characteristic that made him an effective diplomat, and a trusted advisor to Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands. Yet his tact made some people think he was boring. When asked once why he had such a seemingly dull image, he responded: ‘As a public personality you have to be careful, certainly when you are skating on thin ice. Throughout my career, I have often been skating on thin ice, with people on all sides who would not mind if I fell through the ice. So that explains perhaps why I give the impression of a sphinx, of a reserved maybe even cool personality’.

Max was certainly a private person, but one with a dry sense of humor and highly-tuned political instincts. He was able to identify, as he put it, ‘where the shoe pinches’, and to propose solutions that could enable the parties to come to a face-saving agreement. This was evident in 1968 when he was rapporteur for the Council of Europe during the Greek Colonels’ crisis, or subsequently when – as Foreign Minister of the Netherlands – he helped broker agreement on the Helsinki Final Act in 1975, as well as throughout the 1990s as OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities. As a result, he received high honours from numerous States and several international awards, being nominated several times for the Nobel Peace Prize.

Van der Stoel approached issues from the perspective of realpolitik, based on years in the consociational system of Dutch politics. But he was also motivated by a sense of justice, particularly respect for human rights. He was a persistent advocate for political refugees.

Growing up in the Netherlands during the Second World War, Van der Stoel was repulsed by fascism and became active in the socialist movement. In the 1940s, he developed contacts in the German and Czech Socialist parties that became instrumental when he was Foreign Minister in the mid 1970s. He was one of the first Western Statesmen to meet with representatives of Charta 77, like Jan Patocka and Vaclav Havel. He insisted on respect for human rights as a key component of rapprochement between Eastern and Western

Europe.


In 1991 he was appointed United Nations special rapporteur for human rights in Iraq. His reports were a damning indictment of grievous human rights abuses under Saddam Hussein's regime. Over the next twenty years, he continued his engagement with Iraq, including returning after 2003 in attempts to persuade the new leaders – former dissidents – to work together in the best interests of the country.

Van der Stoel believed that the best way to avert conflict was to take action at an early stage. For example, he bemoaned the lack of international interest in Kosovo – until it was too late. Yet he understood that politicians were so focused on the problems of the day that they did not have time to focus on a crisis that could happen tomorrow.

He was a strong advocate of keeping multi-ethnic communities together. When asked what he thought about the future of the Balkans, he said: 'you cannot go on splitting up States into smaller and smaller pieces in the quest for ethnic purity. The nation-State is a myth'.

At the same time, he was concerned about how social integration could be achieved in multi-cultural communities, like the Netherlands. This remains one of the greatest challenges of our time.

The quiet passing of this quiet diplomat reminds us that discretion, human rights and conflict prevention are not old-fashioned notions: they are more needed than ever.



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