

For constructive political dialogue, we need to listen for the space in-between the extremes of perpetrators and victims.

Speaker

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European
Peace
Conference

Listen to the pendulum between stereotypes

Hans Faber on political dialogue in times of black and white thinking

*We are excited to announce **Hans Faber** as a speaker on stereotypes in politics at the European Peace Conference on Perpetrator-Victim Dynamics in Amsterdam, 2025.*

Hans Faber

Hans Faber is Chief Inspector Director at Inspectie Justitie en Veiligheid (2019–present). He leads the oversight of justice and security bodies. Previously he has been the Director International Affairs & Deputy Director-General, RDS, Ministry of Justice (2014–2019). Oscar, the founder of the Peace Conference came across Hans about 15 years ago when he facilitated a large group session for the Dutch Senior Civil Service (Algemene Bestuursdienst).

What do you mean with a ‘pendulum of stereotypes’?

“When thinking about the topic of the conference, I was thinking about a pendulum since we seem to think about the world in opposites. The world is black or white, cold or warm, light or dark. Similarly, we speak of perpetrators or victims. In their original form, these are very stereotypical. That is how we divide the world. Yet, we forget that these opposites are extremes. What appears a perpetrator, may also (partially) be a victim, and vice versa. Eventually, both sides need to come together. When seeking solutions for problems in society, I always imagine these conversations to be like clockworks. On the one hand, you can find small debates that tick-tock very fast. They are aggressive and whiny, in a hurry, much like a stopwatch. I think those exchanges are not very constructive as there is no time for reflection and nuance. Then there are dialogues that are like old grandma clockworks, with a long clapper. They move more slowly. You can listen to the clock’s ticking and actually see the pendulum moving. You are simultaneously aware of both sides, of the grey zone between the extreme black and white positions that are often taken in political discussions. The exchange is a dialogue that is thus way more nuanced. It goes beyond the perpetrator and victim labels we tend to frame people in.”

Can you give me an example of a pendulum discussion that ticks wildly?

“There are many examples I could give. One is on debates about migration. You have two opposite camps. Some are in favour and others are vehemently against it. Those who are against incoming migrants see them as perpetrators, as troublemakers and criminals, who put pressure on social services like housing and the like. Others see them as victims and refugees fleeing from war. Those against migrants, enlarge the perpetrator and problematic side of migrants. They exaggerate the number of young men whilst this is only a fraction of troublemakers when compared to the circa 75,000 people who are in Dutch asylum reception centres. Without making much distinction between troublemakers and those who deal with psychiatric or drugs issues. On the other hand, we must be mindful of the fact that in the larger cities, more than fifty percent of the population currently has a migrant background. Besides, violent incidents and other criminal behaviour in largest refugee shelter Ter Apel cannot be let go off without consequences, right? Yet, my point is that we are too quick to stereotype and confuse the larger group of migrants with these more ‘problematic’ cases. Lots of politicians make us scared that migrants take our houses, while at most 10% of social housing goes to them. By framing all migrants either as criminals or as pitiful people, we are creating a feeling of crisis, as if it cannot be solved, while the situation on the housing market is mostly the consequence of decades of specific Dutch policies. I am worried that we cannot discuss this topic with more nuance.”

We need a dialogue that goes beyond the perpetrator and victim labels we tend to frame each other in.

Do you think that the dialogue has become more complex in today's times?

“We tend to label politicians as populists (which is also something we should be mindful about too!) presenting problems in radical simple terms. ‘If only we would have fewer asylum seekers, punish criminals harsher, right?’ Yet, I also see how we can make it too complex. We think that topics are so complex that we cannot find a solution for them. Both extreme positions, too simple or too complex, are not true. In that regard, Paul Scheffer says: ‘We need to believe in that we can build a society.’ And I would like to add to it: Let’s stop thinking in oppositions and extremes, because by doing so we avoid difficult conversations, in which both parties need to compromise and to transform their viewpoints. No issue can be treated in isolation –and no one should be left behind.”

Where else do you see this disconnection within national political debates?

“Within the youth criminal system, you can also see two camps emerge. On the one hand, the pessimists call for ever higher punishments. They say, in name of claiming justice for the victims of the minors’ actions, ‘Lock them up’. With their focus on the perpetrator side of these youths, they treat them as if these children are incurable. Unintentionally, they may even aggravate the situation with their claims. One minor once told me: ‘Only when I was in prison, I learned to be a criminal.’ Sure, sometimes it does help to take the youth out of their criminal context. Yet, once they go back to home, without their social context changed in the meantime, even when the minors themselves have learned to behave well, the majority does reoffend. On the other hand, there are those – including me– who are a bit more optimistic. We believe that we should not only focus on the perpetrator side of offending minors. Of course, minors cannot offend without taking responsibility or held accountable, but can we at least also focus on preventing 13-14-15 year olds to go down the criminal path? As government officials, we should resist the framing in the political debate, which wrongly call the re-education institutes ‘youth prisons’. While minors have made mistakes, they are often also a victim. They often come from a difficult and unstable family and economic situation and may have a lower IQ as well. They are recruited by the ‘real criminals’. Perhaps, instead of framing and treating them as pure criminals, we should keep in mind the victim that they can be as well.”

We need to avoid both too simple and too complex solutions.

How can we, as a society, better acknowledge the victim side of criminals?

“We should see people as humans. Not only in terms of victims and perpetrators. Take for example sex offenders. Often, they have themselves a history of negligence and sexual abuse. They once were a victim and then became an offender of –let’s be clear about that– something horrible. However, once they paid their due and are no longer a danger to society due to their psychiatric psychological treatment, we must should adopt them back into society. Yet, we often refuse to meet them with our empathy. When we do not accept help ex-sex offenders to become part of society again, as we do not want them back in our neighbourhood or community, they do not get rid of their perpetrator label, and they thus become a victim, again. Similarly, with youths in gangs, they can get stuck in the judicial system as a perpetrator or get stuck in the healthcare system as a victim. You do not want to be either victim or perpetrator. You want to see them as accountable human beings yet with specific needs – like we all have our specific needs.”

Do we need to acknowledge the perpetrator and victim side of ourselves too?

“Definitely. We are both at the same time. Or can be perceived as such. For example, youth workers who have taken children out of their house, may be seen as perpetrators by parents and parts of society. In fact, by doing such a heavy intervention, youth workers indirectly and unwillingly turn the parents into the perception of perpetrators as well. Even though you rather let the child grow up with their parents and by far most youth workers want the best for children. Yet, not intervening can result into sometimes even more emotional harm of a child. A often heard complaint of parents and children is that they are not treated with equality and youth services do not really listen. The divide and contradictions become bigger. Both youth services and the parents and children feel misunderstood and now seem to stand opposed to each other. As a government, we should find ways to bridge this gap and move beyond our own pain of being misunderstood.”

What do you think is needed to counter today's black and white thinking?

“As a government, the art is to tie together different societal problems. If criminal gangs with minors is a problem, we should look at social cohesion and debts incurred with the vulnerable in our society. The local government who threaten to sue the central government for not living up to their obligation to provide more money for youth healthcare, should be a wake-up call for all of us. I think that government officials need to learn again to deeply listen to the whole –listen to both sides of the pendulum's clock, without stranding into the extremes of perpetrator and victim thinking.”

As much as you do not want to get stuck in the judicial system as a perpetrator, you also do not want to get stuck in the healthcare system as a victim.

Further reading

- Faber, H. [@hanscfaber]. (2019, December 14). *The silent downfall of the mestizo Indo culture in Indonesia—my family history scarred by war* [Article]. LinkedIn. <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/seventy-years-independence-indonesia-downfall-mestizo-hans-faber/>
- Faber, H. [@hanscfaber]. (2021, February 27). *Mijn eerste directe ervaring met oorlog: het bloedige Kosovo conflict* [Article]. LinkedIn. <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/de-kosovo-oorlog-hans-faber/>

Want to learn more? Join us in person or online.

European Peace Conference on Perpetrator-Victim Dynamics

"We are not at war, but not at peace either," said the new NATO Chief, Mark Rutte. "If you want peace, prepare for war." Is Europe at a crossroad towards more polarisation, identity politics, and war? Reflections on our human nature may help us find a sensible way forward.

At this year's peace conference, the first of its kind, an international group of scholars, experts and practitioners, will seek ways to explore how perpetrator-victim dynamics run through our lives, families, business and politics.

With guest lectures, workshops, personal and group reflections, we seek to embody the latest expertise from the research on war and peace.

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