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A Call for Dialogue

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By Steven P. Dinkin & Murray L. Galinson

The people have spoken. All over the world.

midnight, Aug. 28, 2011

It's been a striking thing to watch – citizens banding together to make their voices heard and create change in their respective countries.

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Each one has gone about it differently. Each one brings with it lessons from which we can all learn.

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And we must learn from them – especially now, in San Diego and across the country, as we brace for the year of debates, advertising and sensational media coverage that will inevitably lead up to the 2012 elections.

We are all the 'Department of Cures'

Many assume this fight will be ugly. We prepare for a year filled with not just opposing views, but name calling, personal attacks, nasty language and violent disputes.

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But it doesn't have to be that way.

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One just needs to look at the recent protests in London and Israel to see incredibly contrasting examples of public debate – and the end results for their citizens.

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London showed us its violent side. In response to the fatal shooting of Mark Duggan by police, a peaceful protest quickly erupted into a multiday riot that spread across London and into other areas of England. The riots were characterized by looting and arson attacks of unprecedented levels.

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Grief and destruction for English citizens. Several community members died, hundreds more were injured and 3,000 people were arrested. The country sustained millions of dollars in property damage. To this day, there is confusion as to what, exactly, the rioters were trying to communicate.

Israel's demographic obsession

Compare this to the peaceful protests that took place in Israel over several weeks in late July and early August. More than a quarter-million Israelis poured into the streets of Tel Aviv and other major cities to civilly demand action. The protests initially targeted soaring housing prices, but quickly morphed into a sweeping expression of concern about a wide array of economic issues, including the cost of food, gasoline, education and wages.

Imagine if a similar proportion of San Diego residents engaged in respectful dialogue. What kinds of social change could we affect? How could we give voice to the silent? Which issues could we advance?

In Israel, the demonstrators made a decision against violence. There was no looting, no arson, but their message was clear: they weren't going anywhere until their concerns were addressed. Citizens of all ages beat drums and waved flags, chanting phrases like "social justice for the

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people" and "revolution." In Jerusalem alone, more than 30,000 protesters gathered outside the home of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. The government was said to be "stunned" by the movement, which was clearly too big to be ignored.

The end result?

The government responded, setting up a new committee to address protester complaints. Netanyahu announced a series of reforms to bring down housing and consumer prices. A much greater sense of urgency has been brought to bear upon social justice.

These two examples of public debate illustrate very clearly that we, as citizens, have choices to make. We can scream and yell, cause damage and pain to get our points across. Or we can speak with a strong, calm voice and be heard just as clearly – indeed even more so.

They also show us that we have options – perhaps more than we thought we had. No longer do we need to feel trapped by the upcoming electoral cycle. No longer do we need to dread the inevitable nastiness and personal attacks we are sure it will carry in its wake.

Instead, we can embrace our differences. We can debate our sides with respectful, reasonable discourse. We can acknowledge that our fellow citizens will have different opinions, stemming from their own perspectives and histories. We can accept that we all have a right to feel what we feel.

We can also appreciate not just our differences, but the thing that makes us very much the same: that we have viewpoints to share, arguments to be heard, and the right to act on our own beliefs.

Yes, we will disagree. And yes, we might even feel angry. But it's how we allow our anger to influence our actions, and the behavior we accept from others, that will ultimately create the end results a little over one year from now. Depending on how we act, those results will fill us with shame, or pride.

In the end, the choice is ours.

Dinkin is president of the National Conflict Resolution Center. Galinson is a former NCRC Peacemaker of the Year and is immediate past board chair of the California State University System.

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