

## **The Council for Education in the Commonwealth The Gladwyn Lecture**

### **A manifesto for a New Public Diplomacy Lord Kinnock of Bedwelty, Wednesday 3<sup>rd</sup>. December 2008**

Gladwyn Jebb, in whose memory this Council for Education in the Commonwealth Lecture is given, earned his reputation as a “diplomat extraordinaire” by playing prominent roles in the 1940s in the formation of the United Nations and NATO, and in the UK’s first attempt to join the Common Market in the 1950s.

Throughout his career, and in his retirement as an active Liberal Party member of the House of Lords, he made clear his profound commitment to applying civilised and constructive purposes in order to achieve progress for humanity in a post-war World going through tectonic political, economic and technological change.

In tribute to that quality, I therefore begin this address on international cultural relations with one assessment, among many others, of the alterations swirling around our World, and everyone in it, in the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

Commentators in every generation since the Industrial Revolution have, justifiably, seen change as persistently accelerating. But there is – I think - something different about the microchip-driven roller-coaster that we now ride. Moore’s Law, for instance, tells us that the density of information storable on a computer chip doubles, and will continue to double, every 18 months. This is the metronome that beats the pace of change. Every mobile telephone here this evening is a computer that is more powerful computer than the rooms full of buzzing, card-fed machines of 40 years ago - but it is already a little dinosaur.

Young generations take such realities for granted, as they do the fact that ICT puts large parts of the human race in instant, and often continuous, touch with each other. They also take it for granted that

further leaps of innovation are already on the way. All that they don't know is the precise date and form and the probable consequences. I share that uncertainty. What I do know, however, is that innovation in ICT challenges the way we think about each other, about language and about many of the traditional categories into which we have classified people, ideas and relationships.

Add to this the accessibility and scale of mass travel, and the pressures that make migration worth risking, and it becomes evident that the relatively homogeneous societies that made up the World well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century are being replaced by very different communities of human associations that are much more ethnically, linguistically and religiously mixed than ever before.

Technology, in short, has liberated intercultural contact from geography - and that disconnection is growing every day.

Taken together with other trends such as demographic shifts and the massive consequences of the full entry of Brazil, China, India and Russia into the global economy, it means that the movement of people – on an unprecedented scale and with unprecedented diversity of origins and destinations - will continue. Atavists resent that reality and try to retreat from it into an unrepeatably past. Bigots seek to exploit the reality for hateful political ends. But the humane realists who make up the reasonable majority must strive to ensure that the realities of unprecedented mobility and mixture are positive developments and not negative tribulations for those who move, for their destination countries, and – a huge challenge – for their countries of origin.

All these changes are part of that great, perplexing, all-affecting phenomenon we now call *globalization* - the condition in which production, credit, consumption, capital, information, entertainment, people, employment now move around the World in ways that have mainly gone beyond the control capabilities of all but the most authoritarian governments.

The death of the nation-state is not in prospect, but the concept of the self-contained sovereign state that has prevailed since the mid 17<sup>th</sup> century is certainly running up against boundaries of credulity. We see those limitations in the inability of States to control multinational

investment and location; in the rapid internationalisation of economic crisis; in the trans-national leverage of a free media and the internet; in the planetary perils of crime, of diseases, of environmental degradation; in the destructive networks that support terrorism.

Fortunately, we also see creative responses to the evolving constraints on conventional sovereignty in the voluntary pooling of some national sovereignty in international bodies like the EU, the WTO, the UN and, with luck common and sense, in the co-operative intentions of the G20 articulated in Washington last month.

It is reasonable to describe all this as a New World. In coping with its challenges and opportunities it seems obvious that all who are not paralysed by prejudice, myopia or nostalgia must recognise that, since the way we relate to each other has changed and is changing organically and radically, we have to must embrace these alterations culturally, commercially, socially and politically at every level from the personal to the most official and formal.

As with much else, however, describing the need is much easier than accomplishing the deed...

In the immediate past – that is for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century - distant communication was difficult and extensive travel a rarity, controls on the movement of capital were customary, and the planet was broadly divided into two armed camps. Government-to-government relations were conducted through a communications monopoly that was only intermittently interrupted. Outside Europe, North America, Australasia and India vocal participatory democracy was the exception rather than the rule. In such a World, governments did most of our business of relationships for us.

But, plainly, that is not how a globalized World works. Amongst many other transformations which the communications revolutions promote we witness the fact that Governments' preferences are receding in significance - as the losing battles to restrict internet access in China, or satellite TV access in Iran, or to defend currencies under attack by speculators all demonstrate. In these, and in much more benign circumstances, Governments can and will do less of the relationships business for the people that they govern.

But, in this increasingly interdependent World, that business still has to be done. And if it is not to be confined to inchoate chatter at one end and formal diplomacy at the other, with a middle area of diaspora networks and company-to-company deals in between, some means of bridging, of providing coherent, dependable and accountable avenues between peoples and cultures must systematically be facilitated by institutions that are professionally dedicated to those purposes.

I will make bold and suggest that at least one workable – and adaptable – model for doing that exists. It is the approach to connecting human beings and their cultures evolved over almost 75 years by the organisation that I am honoured to Chair, the British Council.

Much of what we do – and, objectively, do superbly - is called Cultural Relations or “people-to-people diplomacy”. For several decades, we have handled large parts of the overseas relations of the United Kingdom in matters of education and culture and relationship building. Of course, the activities are not, of themselves, recent in origin: Monarchs and emperors have, obviously, always ‘done’ cultural relations with exchanges of holy relics, artistic mementos, presentation animals, scientific knick-knacks and much else. They’ve even donated sons and daughters for marriage – though less frequently in recent times. No-one ever thought of this as altruistic: It was all about flattery, cajolery or mild menace used to achieve influence.

Right through to modern times, Cultural Relations has been instrumental and manipulative and when, between the two World Wars, European states began to build institutions to conduct this sort of relationship, they sustained the same characteristics: The British Council was founded in 1934 to counter the propaganda of the Axis powers in the Mediterranean and - whilst the first Council employees undoubtedly had a broader vision - the succinct job description given by King George V certainly articulated the orthodox establishment view: The British Council was created, he said, “to show the world what it owes to Great Britain”.

In those days there wasn't much of a distinction between the activities of a government and those of its theoretically 'independent' but systemically dependent agencies like the British Council - and I'd hazard that this didn't matter very much. Most international contacts were channelled through official agencies. Most contacts were between cultural elites. Most were governed by formally agreed Mixed Commissions and Bilateral Cultural Agreements. Whatever the Council managed to do in the margins (and, even in those early days, the seasoning of practical idealism was supplied by the remarkable individuals who worked for the organization), its activities were subject to these inter-governmental agreements.

After 1945 the organisation began to reshape its work with a very British blend of pragmatism and altruism. Meanwhile, as the Cold War made the effectiveness of culture increasingly obvious as a medium of communication, it became formulated - in the USA - into a doctrine of 'Public Diplomacy' which was classically defined as "the relations of one government with the people of another country".

That was described by Prof Joseph Nye as "getting (foreigners) to want what the US wants them to want". It was a strategy for using people as levers to shift their governments. Naturally, it tended to be not entirely popular with those governments, particularly the ones that felt and resented the hot breath of Superpower consumerist-capitalist democracy on the back of their necks - and even among the intended target audiences it did not prevent resounding cries of "Yanqui Go Home".

The context has changed radically in the approach to, and coming of, this century. Intercultural intercourse is greater than at any time in human history - and governments can't shape it, or even monitor it, effectively. The billions of minute, discrete contacts are individually invisible, but they coalesce from time to time, and place to place. A symbol of this is the strange business of flash-mobbing, which brings together crowds of young people who don't know each other, summoned by SMS to a public place where they all suddenly and unexpectedly dance, or sing, or bounce on a department store's beds, or bring the fall of a corrupt government.

What is the role of a Cultural Relations institution in a world of flash-mobbing, where the anonymous internet forces the dismissal of CNN executives, summons the protesting multitudes in former Soviet Republics, co-ordinates the planning of terrorist attacks, and builds virtual Presidential campaigns in the US? One thing is certain, institutions like the British Council can no longer be portals through which cultural relations pass: we have to be – and are - a mixture of facilitators and navigators.

That is why we are developing new ways of thinking about, and of doing, our work. In outlining it, I shall suggest that, far from being the little sister of State-to-State relations, what we do and the way that we do it provides the most feasible vehicle for intercultural relationships in a present and future in which communication is easier than ever, but understanding often as fragile as it has ever been. I shall use the phrase Public Diplomacy to describe it, certainly not because I subscribe to any Cold War doctrine; but because it is more comprehensive than its component (but still essential) activity of cultural relations.

The fundamental question is what managed intercultural communication is actually *for*. It might be about national prestige of the ‘my-opera-company-is-bigger-than-yours’ sort. It might be about governmental policy-messaging. Or it might be about export promotion. But my view is that successful Public Diplomacy does not revolve primarily - let alone exclusively - around any of these. I believe that intercultural communication is a uniquely practical instrument for creating *trust* between peoples, communities and cultures – and trust which does not simply flourish in agreement but survives in disagreement.

International intercultural trust has never really been abundant and, certainly, the emergence countless millions of people empowered by globalization and the ICT revolution has undermined traditions of trust that were mainly limited to relations between élites.

Meanwhile, despite strenuous efforts to attract trust, governments are, regrettably but almost inevitably, often the lightning conductors of mistrust - a fact of which we are constantly reminded, both at home and abroad, by the bitter legacy of Iraq.

Of course governments can and do earn trust in some measure. But trust requires long-term consistency, a self-denying disinterestedness, a willingness to listen receptively to other points-of-view, to be self-aware and self critical, and to be – in a word to which I shall return in a moment – ‘mutual’. Those characteristics do not come naturally to governments as institutions. They must, perforce, exercise *raison d’etat*. And whilst their diplomatic representatives often, conscientiously and ably, seek to build understanding and trust, they must – as a professional duty – strive for politically driven and often short-term objectives, rationalise or obscure national shortcomings, and sometimes cool or suspend relationships.

Trust development must, therefore, be a core function of non-governmental cultural relations institutions, of which the British Council is a particular and individual example: Organisationally, relations with Government departments are close, constructive and transparent. Operationally, the Council has essential and clear independence. The Council’s identity and role is distinct from the day-to-day business of the government’s international relations but not antagonistic towards it. The public funding awarded to the Council is vital – but it makes up under a third of annual turnover, and falling. We therefore, fortunately, have to be businesslike.

Those attributes have special utility now: It is regrettably plain that trust in the UK is currently in doubt in several parts of the World. That intensifies the need to represent Britain and its culture holistically – certainly to manifest pride in accomplishments and values and to communicate both, but also to show proportionately that debate, disagreement, polemic and protest are healthy parts of our democratic culture and evidence of vitality and not decay.

Demonstrating that balanced reality is essential because our job, and the task of public diplomacy, is to generate sustained long-term, consistently managed, imaginatively maintained relationships. We work with governments and parliaments, with cultural organizations and educational institutions, with NGOs and private sector business partners, with the reporting media and sports. We assist with learning, with employment and with improvement of governance –

intangible products with very tangible effects. It is crucial to our success that we don't flit to and fro from one relationship to another – that we understand how much of our effectiveness relies on consistency over time, as far as possible without bending to short-term imperatives whether they are financial, political or fashionable.

This sort of relationship has an ethic of its own. To describe it we use the word 'mutuality' which for us, is shorthand for what makes a relationship 'trust-bearing'. It is beneficial to both parties, and rests on a clear understanding, by each, of the other's objectives. It requires candid speaking and active listening – taking seriously the arguments and positions, however uncomfortable they may be, of partners and interlocutors. It must, crucially, accommodate divergence as well as convergence.

Mutuality demands self-awareness and - particularly - an ability to put ourselves imaginatively in the place of others, in relation to ourselves. A mutual relationship is founded on a strong two-way sense of history and background, a clear recognition of the unequal distribution of power within intercultural relationships, and readiness to compensate for that imbalance without patronising.

It is no coincidence, of course, that mutuality has the characteristics of hard-nosed business as well as ethical conduct. We know that only two way communication is effective communication - and any business relations consultant or child psychologist would readily endorse that.

Such mutuality of communication plainly has to be the basic characteristic of Public Diplomacy. People listen when they feel respected and valued, and close their ears and minds when they don't. For the British Council this means establishing and nurturing relationships in which knowledge and confidence can grow authentically and not superficially because they are built on two strong foundations of reality and practise:

The first is that many people – most people – across the World want the kind of reciprocal respect that is inherent in a mutual relationship. They want evidence that they and their culture are taken seriously and are properly valued, even when not endorsed.

The second is that, in the Council, we make it our business to plant our relationships, and the projects and events that give them shape, in places where they are prominent and transparent. We project every educational activity, every encounter, exhibition and dialogue and we do so with confidence and transparency because we know there is substance and not merely sound. Naturally, we do it through the reporting and broadcasting media and the e-media – but, crucially, we also do it through the nature of many events which testify to Britain’s ability to see itself clearly and confidently, proudly but unsparingly.

To us, these are the raw materials of intercultural confidence in many spheres – whether in the EU, or the Commonwealth, or international associations more broadly, and from transnational civil society to shared understandings and observance of human rights.

All of this all produces cultural leverage – and when something over 128 million people in 109 countries around the World – including most Commonwealth states - now use or encounter what the British Council provides and facilitates it manifestly generates understanding, it fosters trust, it makes cultural relations meaningful, it works. It is public diplomacy in action, not theory.

Basic to that practical approach is recognition of the fact that nobody is convinced by being talked *at*, they must be listened *to*. That is an arduous reality which – fortunately – prevents public diplomacy from being a soft option. Acknowledgement of its potential appears to be spreading. In the course of her Senate confirmation hearing in January 2005, the current US Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice said: "We will increase our exchanges with the rest of the world... America should make a serious effort to understand other cultures... Our interaction with the rest of the world must be a conversation, not a monologue..." It was an interesting, if belated, recognition that even the greatest powers cannot live by Shock and Awe alone.

Since then, in probably the greatest single act of positive cultural relations ever seen, the people of the United States have elected a Kenyan-American to be the most powerful individual in the World.

Of course, that does not accomplish the Final Victory of public diplomacy, cultural relations, or – to use the favoured American term – “soft power.” As Paul Kennedy, the Professor of International Security Studies in Yale University has sensibly pointed out, whilst the “international attractiveness” of Barack Obama is strong and the Presidential election result has generated extraordinary goodwill, “great nations cannot survive on soft power alone...” As he said, “Economic reality and geopolitical reality” are self evidently rooted in what he called “the horrid World of hard power.” (Guardian article 18 Nov.)

Even when that implacable verity is recognised, however, it is equally valid to comprehend the fact that the imperial unilateralism, contemptuous disregard for cultural differences and dignities, neocon presumptuousness, and “Washington Agenda” of deregulation and privatisation that have been the components of “hard power” in the Bush years have been tried to the point of disintegration and found wanting.... Indeed, the recently published report of the Brookings Institution on “US Public Diplomacy for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century” begins from the premise that “America’s tarnished international reputation carries a price. Whether the United States seeks to draw more allied troops to Afghanistan, win votes in international organisations, or undermine support for terrorists, anti-American attitudes obstruct the achievement of national interests. Winning support is harder; our enemies missions are easier.”

It is a fairly muscular statement of the problem and it still sustains the misguided concept that public diplomacy should be a component of national defence and security policy. Interestingly, however, the Report then goes on to recommend improvements which include the establishment of a body called the “USA World Trust” that, frankly, on any assessment looks like a first cousin to...the British Council...

All of which leaves us with the mature, if rueful, understanding that neither “hard power” nor “soft power” can, by themselves, properly serve the interests of the modern World. Resolute, decisive and assertive policies are, obviously, essential in many spheres, but – at the same time - it is crucial that the worth of dialogue as a mentality as well as an activity is properly understood and sincerely employed.

That, in itself, prompts radical change from the conventions of international conduct: Palmerston's "hard power" 19<sup>th</sup> Century dictum that "nations do not have long term friends, they have long term interests" has prevailed for 150 years. It is time that it is adapted to modern reality. I'll suggest a formulation: "Now and in the infinite future, in order to sustain long term interests, especially in places and through times where trust is brittle, and distrust is malignant, nations and cultures must pursue long term friendships or risk long term enmities that cannot be overcome by military or economic force."

It isn't as acerbic or as sweeping as Palmerston's blunt maxim. But it does have the force of prosaic 21<sup>st</sup> Century truth.

We are in times of brittle trust and malignant distrust now. Every art and craft of authentic mutuality, of broadening cultural relations, of effective new Public Diplomacy, will be needed to get out of them. The alternatives of conventional power, traditional relationships, formulaic diplomacy that characterised the past will not work. The World is now too big – and too small - for that.