

26 FEBRUARY 2007

Secrets, lies and diplomats

We know next to nothing of how our overseas embassy staff operate in our name. In an astonishing exp

BY CARNE ROSS

When you join the Foreign Office, and once you have been "positively vetted", you are required to sign the Official Secrets Act. This draconian document comprises your agreement never in your lifetime to reveal to outsiders, or to publicise in any way, the content of your work. With astonishing breadth, the act defines the information that you must protect to your grave as any official business, determined by the government itself. In other words, anything that you do in the course of your work is to be kept secret, forever. Any revelation about what that work entailed is, in theory, a criminal offence. When I was offered the document to sign, I did not hesitate. The glamour of secrecy lured me in, and I simply never believed that the day would come when its strictures might seem more a threat than an invitation.

The signing of the Official Secrets Act marks one initiation into the culture of secrecy that pervades government, and particularly those parts of it dealing with foreign policy. When you learn how to handle documents, for instance, you are taught that the originator of the document must classify it, using designations starting with "restricted" up to "top secret". You are taught that only those documents that would not perturb you if they were handed out to passers-by on the street can be designated "unclassified". Unsurprisingly, therefore, almost every document produced inside the Foreign Office is classified "restricted" or above.

This culture is constantly reinforced throughout one's career. Telegrams are transmitted only when highly encrypted. All computers are hardened against electronic eavesdropping. Telephones carry stickers warning against divulging state confidences. So many and so ubiquitous are these limitations, that it is soon clear that the only people with whom one can discuss candidly what "we" are doing are one's colleagues - other members of the club of "we". One should only talk to people with a "need to know". This excludes almost everyone, including those in whose name "we" are acting.

The creation of the identity of a British diplomat, the exponent of the state, can seem a process which is innocent, unloaded and necessary. It could be argued that such a process is requisite for the international system the world today enjoys. States interact in this system; therefore the system requires exponents of the state's wishes, steeped in the richest sense of what their nation stands for. But my experience suggests that intrinsic in this process of diplomatic identity-creation is something dangerous.

In spite of the almost complete absence of outside scrutiny, the British Foreign Office does not "do" self-criticism. From the day I stepped into the training department, to the day I left my last full job at the UK mission in New York, it was part of the air I breathed that what "we" were offering the world was good. The oldest parliamentary democracy on the globe, a successful economy, an ancient culture: we represented the acme of what the rest of the world should aspire to. We were, moreover, pragmatic and "sensible" (never idealist, that was too romantic and therefore silly). American diplomacy, though marked with different emphases (the infinitely variable notion of "freedom"), is little different. Even when our motives were transparently different, we were encouraged, subtly and through imitation, to claim that we were offering others versions of ourselves: our democracy, our laws, our "values".

Pervasive complacency

In Afghanistan in 2002, our policy was framed as the delivery of stability and democracy, even when our motive was solely (and not illegitimately) our own security. I believed this identity: it made me feel better (particularly when defending the effects of sanctions in Iraq) and it gave me purpose. I only stopped believing it when the contrary evidence became too compelling to ignore.

This self-regard breeds a pervasive complacency. If our motives are always pure, it follows that "we" cannot be wrong. When Britain failed to secure the infamous "second" resolution authorising an invasion of Iraq, officials were very quick to blame France (for threatening a veto), rather than acknowledging the reality of "our" failure to garner sufficient support. Examination of Britain's failure (with others) to stop the genocide in Bosnia was left to journalists and scholars: no comprehensive internal inquiry was instigated. These are but two of the more blatant examples of a culture that brooks no self-examination, while resisting, meanwhile, the rigour of external scrutiny.

British diplomats are not alone in maintaining a comfortable and flattering self-image. In my experience, diplomats of many other countries rest on similar conceits. An Egyptian might claim that his tradition is one of brokering the pan-Arab view, while offering a bridge between east and west (a role claimed, too, by Turkish diplomats); the Dutch are the hard-headed pragmatists of the European Union; the Singaporeans are the politically incorrect realists; and so on. No one is the bad guy. Everyone believes they are serving the Good. There is a degree of caricature here, but in that caricature lies an uncomfortable truth: that to a greater or lesser degree, diplomats are required to define themselves, to create an identity, in order to function.

But for the game to be played, you need a "them", too.

Diplomacy requires a system of ordering to function; thought requires such a system, too (or so some philosophers would argue). In diplomacy, it is not seen as a mistake to boil the world down to some simple essence; it is mandatory. The easiest way to pretend that you understand the world is to essentialise it. The Arabs (all of them) are this; the Israelis are that. The Thais are a little bit . . . the Malaysians far too. . . and the French, well, the French are always incredibly . . . You will see this kind of essentialism practised every day. You need only open your newspaper. There you will read how the US president describes the aspirations of the Iranian people for freedom and democracy (though, curiously, in 2006 he no longer does so when talking about the Iraqi people, whose behaviour since their "liberation" has suggested that more complicated ambitions may also be at play). Switch on your television and analysts talk about the needs of the "people of the

Middle East" or the approach "the Europeans" take to building democracy. And it is not only the west which indulges in such characterisations. In April 2006, Egypt's President Mubarak upset sensibilities across the Middle East by suggesting in an interview that Iraq's Shia, indeed all Shia in the Middle East, were more loyal to Iran than they were to their own countries.

Veiled self-interest

One curious manifestation of this way of thinking is what happens to language when national generalisations fail. Before the invasion of Iraq in 2003, British and American diplomats and politicians would routinely talk about the Iraqi people as a homogeneous whole, as in "sanctions are not intended to harm the Iraqi people", "we have no quarrel with the Iraqi people, just with the leadership", or, as the invasion approached, "the Iraqi people yearn for their liberation". After the invasion, and as sectarian and religious tensions emerged into violent confrontation, the language changed. Commentators and leaders began to talk about the "Shias", "the Ba'athists", "the Sunnis" and, just as they did formerly with the "Iraqi people", they ascribed collective characteristics to these groups, as in "the Sunnis feel threatened by Shia dominance", or "the Kurds want their own state".

I once attended a lecture by a former British diplomat who found himself, post-invasion, governor of an entire province of Iraq. To explain the complexities of his environment, he began to draw circles on a board, inscribing within them the names of Iraq's different ethnic groups and then drawing lines and arrows to indicate the relationship between them. He clearly needed such a delineated system to help him understand what was going on. But to realise the deficiencies of any such system, one need only apply it to one's own reality: Britain's "middle classes want economic growth and social stability", "America's blacks support the Democrats". We feel insulted when others do it to us. Anti-Americanism is built on simplistic caricatures which grossly misdescribe America's massive diversity. As a Briton living in America, my hackles rise whenever I hear a sentence beginning, "The Brits are . . .". It is crass to describe our own societies in such terms, but this is what diplomats and analysts routinely do to other societies, and it is always inaccurate.

In negotiations at the UN Security Council, I realised that part of the way in which we worked out what we - Britain - wanted was by distinguishing our wishes from those with whom we saw ourselves in natural competition (France or Russia). So subtle and insidious was this process that it is hard to offer convincing proof, except to say that more often than I would want to admit, we saw issues such as sanctions on Iraq not primarily in terms of the issue but as a means of getting what "we" wanted. And what "we" wanted was sometimes defined in terms of what they - our opponents - didn't want.

A paradoxical example of the boiling down of what we and they want is to be found in trade negotiations. International trade talks at the World Trade Organisation - the most recent being the so-called "Doha round" - often revolve around the trading of concessions between delegations or groups of delegations. Such concessions are offered in exchange for access to others' markets in the same or different products, in a highly complex bargaining process. The offering of such "concessions" is however bunkum, because the benefits of free trade flow more to the importer than the exporter: imports of cheaper or better goods give consumers more for their money and, through competition, raise domestic productivity. In other words, what is being offered is not a concession at all - the party offering the "concession" is proposing something that will benefit itself more. But so familiar have the discourse of trade talks and concession-based bargaining become that everyone pretends that what is not a concession is one, and vice versa.

It is far too disconcerting a prospect for governments, or the diplomats who represent them, to talk about the world as it really is, one shaped and affected by multitudinous and complex forces, of which governments are but one group of many involved. To preserve their own role, and the belief - comforting to us as well as to them - that governments are "in charge" of events, they must continually assert that they are on top of the pile of agents and must determine what is important and what is to be done, and make and enforce the rules. This may have been appropriate in 1648 or 1945. But today the world is growing more and more complicated. Its problems are ever less susceptible to the essentialising analysis traditional in diplomacy. Everyone, including the diplomats, accepts that many of our most troubling problems are transnational in nature - pollution, bird flu, terrorism - complex in their causes and thus solutions, and require transnational action. The division of the world into the pieces of a chess game makes less and less sense.

Simplistic world-view

Globalisation in some respects implies a greater simplicity, for instance the narrowing of the world into one market. But even those who believe this must also acknowledge the world's continuing, if not burgeoning, complexity. Was it conceivable 30 years ago that the fury of one young Egyptian over the war in Chechnya would lead him to fly an aircraft into the World Trade Center in New York, an act facilitated by an organisation born of Osama Bin Laden's anger against the US occupation of Saudi Arabia, and itself given a base by a fundamentalist regime in Afghanistan, whose assumption of control was a direct consequence of Soviet occupation and slow decline (and this itself is a simplified account of a complex series of causes and events)?

We grope for simplifying metaphors - the big idea - to explain what is going on. Academics and commentators duly oblige, offering up "the world is flat", "the clash of civilisations", or "the moment" (when America could save the world). Diplomats' attachment to simple models and grand overstatement may be related to their need - which I could once identify as my own - to attribute to themselves beneficent rather than malign personae. We need narratives to explain the world. And we are unlikely to choose negative ones for ourselves.

This is an edited extract from "Independent Diplomat: dispatches from an unaccountable elite" by Carne Ross, published by Hurst on 26 February

Ten reasons to get rid of diplomats

Diplomats should be as open to scrutiny as anyone else, yet in Britain a large amount of information is still concealed unnecessarily in the name of national security. The Foreign Affairs Committee is so under-resourced that it can manage to examine only a few issues a year (it therefore tends to choose issues of meaningless generality such as the "war on terrorism" or "globalisation"). Its funds, happily for its members, do stretch to vital "information-gathering" visits where the diplomats organising them are careful to book expensive hotels and leave plenty of time for "shopping" in the programmes.

Thus, international policy is treated as a special discourse with special rules, words and traditions. In order to validate an unjustifiable separation (and immunity from scrutiny), diplomats must constantly affirm their elite status. Here's a radical suggestion. We should consider abolishing the separate cadre of diplomats altogether. Here are ten good reasons why:

1 The existence of diplomats reaffirms the separated nature of diplomacy and international relations from other areas of policy, when, in fact, they are inextricably connected.

2 Diplomats tend to be generalists and unskilled in the complexities of the global issues, from trade to terrorism, which now dominate our world. Although I spent four and a half years reading intelligence on Iraq's weapons and arguing about them with other diplomats, my knowledge was inferior to lifelong experts. On issues such as global warming, both the science and the policy can be beyond the grasp of diplomats.

3 It is ridiculous to pretend that the needs of an entire country can be embodied in a single diplomat, or embassy, or ambassador. It is inappropriate for the era we now live in.

4 We need, instead, to promote multiple links at multiple levels between governments, avoiding the narrowing and outdated structures of traditional diplomacy. In some ways,

this is already happening. In Europe, domestic ministers deal directly with one another through the European Union, avoiding traditional embassies.

5 Diplomats have not proved skilful at monitoring local political trends. The British embassy in Tehran failed to notice the emerging revolution in Iran in 1979. Despite the lessons from that episode, the embassy again failed to predict the electoral victory of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005.

6 Diplomats have an existential interest in preserving secretive diplomacy, in order to maintain the mystique and status of their role. The more threatened by outside intrusion they become, the tighter they will close their doors. This tendency is already evident in the UN Security Council, where those who are resisting calls for more public meetings complain that publicity will drive "real diplomacy" out of these forums and into private places. This argument is true but insufficient. What states want to keep secret they will, and always have done.

7 The existence of diplomats tends to reaffirm the state-centric "realist" way of thinking about international relations by forcing the practitioners to define their positions in terms of nation-states. These ways of thinking are circular (the state provides security; there is no security without the state) and can exacerbate conflict (the concept of pre-emptive war stands as the pre-eminent example).

8 This state-centric "realist" way of thinking is inherently amoral, and forces its exponents, including diplomats like me, to abandon their personal moral sense. In long-serving diplomats, the morality of the state tends to subsume entirely any personal moral sensibility. This creates the possibility of bad, immoral, policies such as sanctions on Iraq, or the Security Council's treatment of the Western Sahara, which make perfect sense in the "realist" security-centred way of thinking, but very little moral sense in terms of minimising human suffering or resolving disputes.

9 The existence of diplomats at the top of the pile tends to squeeze out other actors. Governments like to think they are in charge of world events. Diplomats have a strong interest in affirming this. Their dispatches and telegrams are full of grandiose statements about how this or that world problem might be solved.

10 The self-serving elitism and fake omnipotence of the world's diplomats have created a comforting illusion: that they are in control, allowing the rest of us to get on with our lives. We are not entitled to this illusion. The pact of irresponsibility must end. We must all take responsibility for international affairs. Our votes and our behaviour have global consequences. Every act, whether buying fruit, employing a cleaner, or choosing where to go on holiday, is international, and is, in its way, a form of diplomacy. Everyone is a diplomat.