

## Diplomacy, Ethics and the National Interest: What Are Diplomats For?

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### Summary

Drawing on the writer's experience as a former British diplomat who served in Cold War Poland and elsewhere, this article explores rival concepts of the diplomat's functions: the traditional UK Foreign Office emphasis on competitively and exclusively promoting the national interest; versus alternatively concentrating on the internationalist, ethical obligations that should govern diplomatic (and other) behaviour. Interference in the host country's internal affairs is formally prohibited, but the question of whether diplomats' contacts with, and implied moral support for, democratic dissident movements that are opposed to their undemocratic governments amount to unacceptable intervention raises difficult practical, political and ethical questions. An example of differing possible responses to a development aid proposal illustrates the dilemma. Differing views of diplomatic priorities and objectives, embedded in contrasting cultures at the UK Foreign Office and Department for International Development respectively, need to be sensitively resolved, mainly in the latter's favour.

### Keywords

Diplomats, ethics, national interest, obligations, Foreign Office, dissidents, interference

I certainly found that Britain's standing in the United Nations [after the US-UK invasion of Iraq] remained very high. It certainly was when I was in New York, from 2007 until just a couple of months ago. We were seen as a nation, perhaps more than any other of the big powers at the United Nations, as being committed to making the United Nations work. We weren't there advancing our national interests, we were there trying to advance and promote a global system which was in everybody's interest, and I think that's one of the abiding values that we have in our foreign policy.

Sir John Sawers<sup>1</sup>

### The Legitimacy of Values-Led Diplomacy?

Soon after arriving in Warsaw in 1986 as British ambassador, I found myself delivering a *démarche* to the Polish foreign minister in my capacity as representative of the UK presidency of what was then the European Economic Community

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<sup>1</sup> Sir John Sawers, 'Evidence to the Iraq Inquiry', 16 December 2009, available online at <http://www.iraquinquiry.org.uk/media/40929/091216pm-sheinwaldsawersbowen.pdf>.

(EEC). Britain's six-month stint in the presidency had begun soon after my arrival, so it fell to me to chair the regular meetings of EEC ambassadors in Warsaw during that period. The Polish communist government had committed a particularly flagrant act of persecution against a prominent Solidarity leader; the EEC ambassadors had jointly recommended to the presidency (in London) and to the other EEC capitals that our governments' displeasure, plus a warning about the malign effects of such behaviour on Poland's relations with our twelve Western governments, should be formally communicated to the Polish government. This was agreed in EEC capitals, and the Warsaw ambassadors were left to decide whether the message should be delivered by them all collectively, or by the 'troika' (the ambassadors of the preceding presidency country, the current presidency and the next in line), or by myself alone on behalf of the presidency. The latter course was chosen. I was authorized to speak off the cuff but to base my remarks on agreed 'speaking notes', which I would leave with the Polish minister. I took advantage of the latitude given to me in order to speak pretty robustly (to the consternation of some of my EEC colleagues when I reported back to them later). The Polish foreign minister was obviously startled. Had he heard me correctly? Could I confirm, he asked, that I was really speaking on behalf of *all* the EEC governments and not just on the instructions of Mrs Thatcher's government? It was a natural question: this was the first *démarche* that the Polish government had ever received from the EEC. I confirmed that I spoke on behalf of all twelve EEC member states, and that all twelve governments had agreed my instructions. 'You mean even *Greece* agreed?', asked the minister incredulously.

This was all routine diplomacy of no special significance. The Polish government responded, predictably, that the EEC *démarche* represented unacceptable interference in Poland's internal affairs. The *démarche* had no immediate tangible effect, but it should have affected the Polish regime's calculations of the costs and benefits for them of harassing Solidarity leaders thereafter. The action taken collectively by all twelve EEC governments obviously made a deeper impression than if the representations had been made solely by the United Kingdom, or by four or five Western governments separately. It was a good example of EEC joint action based on the twelve governments' agreement on the course to be followed.

However, as I rapidly discovered after chairing two or three EEC ambassadors' meetings in Warsaw — held at least monthly — there was a wide range of views among both the ambassadors and their capitals about the proper role of Western governments and their diplomats in relation to Solidarity, which was then an illegal trade union and *de facto* political party, and in our dealings with the communist regime to which we were accredited. Some of us felt under an obligation to give all the support that we properly could to a Polish organization that broadly represented our own democratic, liberal values and that enjoyed mass popular support against an unpopular government imposed by Moscow. Others

gave more weight to the undeniable obligation of all diplomats to obey the laws of the country in which they served, arguing that this limited the extent of permissible contacts with Solidarity and prohibited any encouragement of Solidarity to seek to undermine Poland's legitimate government (however reprehensible its behaviour in Western eyes). It could have been argued (although I do not recall that it ever was) that it is one thing for embassies to have contacts with opposition groups for purposes of political reporting to their capitals; it is quite another to encourage them. If intervention of that sort was thought to be acceptable, it arguably called into question the whole diplomatic system, which is why it is proscribed by the 1961 Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations.

### **Maintaining Open Communication**

In accordance with another important principle of diplomacy, the fact that our own governments' relations with the Polish regime were often troubled was an additional reason for keeping open our lines of communication with it, not a reason for putting them at unnecessary risk. The Polish government, however undemocratic, had a far greater capacity for damaging or supporting British and other Western national interests than Solidarity, however worthy the latter. It was sometimes argued that the long-term interests of the Polish people were better served if western governments engaged as far as possible with their government, using the carrot rather than the stick to maximize our influence and thus gently to nudge Poland in a more liberal and democratic direction. For this group, it was virtually an article of faith that we were there almost exclusively to advance the national interests of the individual countries that we represented and the collective interests of the EEC, and not to work for what we nowadays refer to as 'regime change' just because we disliked the country's system of government or ideology.

Others in our EEC ambassadors' group agreed that our duty as diplomats was to seek to promote our own countries' and the EEC's interests, while of course gathering information from the widest possible range of sources to enable us to report accurately to our governments on events in Poland; to analyse how these might or did impinge on our countries' interests; and to recommend to our capitals policies (or policy changes) that were best calculated to advance our interests in the light of our assessments of the local situation. But some of us at least went one somewhat controversial step further. We asserted that we had a duty to represent in Poland not only our governments' interests and policies, but also our own countries' values of freedom, civil rights and democracy. If this meant supporting, as far as was practicable and legitimate under the Vienna Convention, Poles who were working against their government — against its communist ideology and against its Soviet overlords — and even if this meant throwing

grit into the oiled wheels of our working relations with the Polish government, so be it. We sought to draw a line between material support for Solidarity on the one hand, which would have been indefensible according to the rules, and moral support through contacts and expressions of sympathy and concern on the other, which we implicitly regarded as legitimate (although the Polish authorities would naturally have disagreed). In our eyes there were more important causes than maintaining 'good relations' with a government whose ideology was fundamentally opposed to ours and whose behaviour towards its own citizens was in many respects insupportable, even if in practical terms it was necessary for the conduct of day-to-day business with our host government to maintain a minimum of civil, businesslike and, on the personal level, even reasonably amicable relations. A mutually civil relationship was anyway necessary if we were to be able to gain essential insights into the Polish government's and Communist Party's thinking and intentions, and to exercise a modicum of influence on Polish government policies and behaviour in matters where our own countries' interests were involved.

### **Redefining the Diplomat's Task**

How, though, could we justify this claim to a more exalted (perhaps more pre-tentious) role for diplomats than public relations officers for our ministers' policies and little better than handmaidens of our countries' businessmen? It could be argued that, for example, supporting Solidarity was in our countries' long-term interests, since a free and democratic Poland would be a more productive partner for us commercially and in international affairs: and we would be backing the probable eventual winner. Or it might all be seen in the context of Cold War simplicities: our enemy's enemy was by definition our friend, and by helping him we damaged our enemy. But in truth that was not really the reason for our sense of obligation towards Solidarity. We hoped that Solidarity's courageous and vulnerable leaders might gain a degree of protection against arbitrary harassment and persecution by the Polish security services from the knowledge that they were in touch with several western ambassadors and their embassies, who could be relied upon to make a public fuss whenever there was a new act of injustice or repression against them. We wanted to make it more difficult for the Polish government and Communist Party to maintain the myth that Solidarity was now irrelevant and that Lech Wałęsa was nothing but one more shipyard electrician. We wanted ordinary Poles to know that as representatives of the democratic West, our sympathies were with Solidarity and not with their oppressors. We did not really pretend that all this was solely intended to advance our own national or even Cold War interests: we were, or hoped and believed that we were, acting in the interests of the mass of ordinary Poles. Certainly we were

doing all this with the active and indispensable encouragement of our governments (of mine, anyway), but were our taxpayers really paying us moderately generous salaries to work for the benefit of the Poles? It was not a question to which there was an obvious or comfortable answer.

### **Balancing National Interests and Ethical Obligations**

Sir Christopher Meyer, British Ambassador to Washington DC in the run-up to Iraq, gave his recent book about diplomacy the suggestive title *Getting Our Way*, a pithy summary of Meyer's definition of the diplomat's task. The British diplomat, he seemed to say, is engaged in a perpetual struggle with foreign adversaries who are out to get us. His success consists in out-witting them, ensuring that our interests prevail over theirs, in getting our way. Another former three-times British ambassador, Oliver Miles, reviewing Meyer's book for *The Guardian*, pointed out that 'There is, of course, nothing original in the message that diplomacy is about national interest', noting approvingly Lord Palmerston's dictum, which was also quoted by Meyer, that 'We have no eternal allies and we have no perpetual enemies. Our interests are eternal and perpetual, and those interests it is our duty to follow.' But Miles went on to make a neat point about diplomats and national interests:

For my part I have become a heretic as I have thought about diplomacy since I retired from the service. My starting point was the discovery, when I was British ambassador in Greece, that the one person above all others who had the same agenda as I did was the Greek ambassador in London. Diplomacy, I conclude, is only occasionally about getting the best of the other fellow; it is usually about working with the other fellow to get the best for both of us.<sup>2</sup>

That is a useful insight, from the viewpoint of an ambassador serving in a basically friendly and like-minded country, as distinct from a country such as Cold War Poland, with whose government our relations were essentially adversarial. But what if the interests of 'the other fellow' cannot be reconciled with the interests of the country that our diplomat represents? Unless he has 'gone native', he automatically bends his best efforts to ensuring, if he can, that his own country's interests prevail, an idea that is adequately summarized, indeed, by 'getting our way'. Yet more parsing of 'national interests' is perhaps required.

Reading Miles's review, I am struck anew by the way that the old Foreign Office ethos — from before 1965 when the C (for Commonwealth) got into FCO with the partial mergers of the Colonial, Commonwealth and Foreign

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<sup>2</sup> Oliver Miles, 'Getting Our Way by Christopher Meyer: Oliver Miles Enjoys a Former Diplomat's Lively History of the Profession', book review in *The Guardian*, 14 November 2009, available online at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2009/nov/14/getting-our-way-meyer-review>.

Offices — took it for granted that diplomacy was solely about the national interest, with the Meyer school interpreting this as getting the better of Johnny Foreigner and not much else, and Miles coming around to a more sophisticated interpretation to do with finding interests in common rather than assuming that the national interests are a zero sum game.

I came to diplomacy, rather reluctantly, from seven years as a home civil servant in the old Colonial Office (not to be confused with the Colonial Service), where we were explicitly brought up to treat the colonial peoples' interests — not Britain's — as paramount, although obviously we tried wherever possible to reconcile the two. In other words, we sought to be guided by Britain's obligations before its interests. (Lord Palmerston, it may be noticed, spoke of 'duty' as well as 'interests', but implicitly regarded the two as indivisible.) When I transferred to the Diplomatic Service from the home civil service, my first diplomatic job was concerned with colonial affairs at the UK Mission to the United Nations in New York in the mid-1960s, at the height of decolonization, then a fiercely controversial issue. The combination of considerable idealism at that time about the UN vision and the sanctity of the UN Charter, with the job of explaining and justifying our policy of transferring power to our colonies as soon as they were ready (and willing) to accept it, focused us less on Britain's interests and more on our obligations, not only to the colonial peoples for whom we were responsible but also our obligations under the Charter. But I hope that I never forgot whose side I was on when taking part in the UN's often rampantly prejudiced Decolonization Committee of 24 and the Fourth Committee of the General Assembly, also dealing with decolonization.

Later in my new-found career I served in three communist countries, or anyway countries with communist governments, where in all three embassies it seemed an obviously important part of our jobs, with the encouragement of our political masters at home, to give what limited support we could, if not to movements or people opposed to communism (as in Poland), then at any rate to policies calculated to undermine or expose the regimes in power — again, semi-ethical obligations rather than the single-minded promotion of British interests, unless you adopt the view that any challenge to a regime ideologically opposed to Britain can be justified *only* as being 'in Britain's interests'.

Nigeria and Australia, where I also served, were of course different, in different ways. In Nigeria there was an obvious obligation to help promote economic development for the sake of the Nigerian poor and to do what little we could to combat the curse of corruption — arguably both in Britain's medium- and long-term interests, but not really seen as our obligation mainly for that reason. In Australia there was rarely any conflict between British and Australian interests and the obvious aim was to try to promote both to mutual advantage, much as envisaged by Oliver Miles. On the infrequent occasions when UK and Australian interests clashed, I had no problem with trying, usually with only qualified

success, to ensure that ours prevailed. The Australians are big boys and girls, well able to look after themselves, and they understand very well what diplomats from the other end of the world are up to, since their own (highly capable) diplomats are up to it too.

I hesitate to describe these varying perceptions of obligations, as distinct from simple interests, as the kind of thing that the late and widely lamented Robin Cook meant by 'an ethical dimension to foreign policy' (not, incidentally, 'an ethical foreign policy'), but perhaps that catches the flavour — although only a crook would argue for an *unethical* dimension to foreign policy. I confess that I sometimes found uncongenial, or worse, the traditional, slightly simplistic Foreign Office view that promoting British national interests was the only name of the game and that this was the only game in town. I disliked the tradition and culture that allowed you to argue against some patently immoral policy proposal only if you did so exclusively on the grounds that: (a) it would not work; and/or (b) we might be found out; but hardly ever that (c) it was simply wrong. (For a small example of an abortive attempt to wriggle out of this straitjacket by arguing (a), (b) *and* (c), I might cite the despatch that I sent to the FCO when I left my last African post, arguing both the practical *and* the moral imperatives for taking urgent action to arrest the predictable decline of most of Africa into an intolerable global slum. The despatch, hastily binned on its arrival at the FCO, can now be read on my website,<sup>3</sup> thanks to Freedom of Information.) There were, of course, other exceptions, but the prevailing culture was palpalable.

The relationship between the national interest and the diplomat's obligations is not simple. Often the real conflict is not so much between the ethical dimension on the one hand and the Foreign Office tradition of *realpolitik* on the other, but rather between the short-term and the longer-term views of what is in our national interest. It is almost always 'in the national interest' to behave decently and honestly in conducting our international relations, even if we sometimes pay a price for doing so in the short term. But what if the short-term price of behaving decently and honestly is steep, while the extent of the benefit to the national interest is so long-term and indefinable as to be almost imperceptible — arguably too far over the horizon to justify the immediate cost?

Take the example of a development aid project, such as a hydro-electric dam, which would create thousands of jobs for British workers and for which the African country concerned, for internal political reasons, wants UK development aid. The economists of the UK's Department for International Development (DfID), however, say that it is economically and socially unsound, a poor use of British taxpayers' money, especially as the size of the aid programme is finite — so it is a zero sum game: more African lives could be saved and improved by spending the money on, for example, health clinics and rural hospitals than on

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<sup>3</sup> See online at <http://www.barber.com/1772>.

the dam, but we cannot do both. The traditional FCO approach would probably be that agreeing to finance the dam, thus creating British jobs and boosting relations with the African government concerned, must be the option in Britain's best interests. DfID's instinct might well be to choose the option likeliest to save lives, alleviate poverty — by law the sole permissible purpose of development aid — and make economic and social sense: the clinics and hospitals. What collectively agreed recommendation should diplomats and officials make to ministers? The answer might depend more on the respective political clouts of the two departments in Whitehall than on the merits of the conflicting arguments.

Whatever the outcome, Meyer's implied rule of diplomacy — 'getting our way' — seems an inadequate guide when immediate national interest clashes either with longer-term interests or with the obligations imposed on Britain by its wealth and by its history. Diplomacy, a branch of politics, involves formulating and executing foreign policy, which is no more exempt from ethical imperatives than any other activity (apart perhaps from espionage). The golden rule for diplomats, as for others, must be to act in a way that brings the greatest good for the greatest number, *irrespective of the nationalities of those who are to benefit*, even if in real life a degree of priority is likely to be accorded to one's own fellow citizens. Whether ministers who live or (metaphorically) die by the domestic vote will generally obey such an elevated internationalist rule is another matter. But there seems to be no basis — *pace* that old-fashioned Foreign Office tradition — for excusing diplomats from it.

This, however, has obvious practical implications. If, as most major political parties have seemingly agreed (at any rate before the May 2010 UK election), overseas development spending is to be safeguarded in the coming Age of Austerity, the preservation of a separate government department headed by its own Cabinet minister, hitherto the practice only of Labour governments, seems essential. A real effort also needs to be made to harmonize the conflicting cultures of the FCO and DfID, and this can be achieved only by elected ministers who understand the issues, however rarely they are articulated. It will be obvious that despite a career spent mainly in the FCO and the diplomatic service, both my head and my heart belong in DfID's corner. Global poverty and gross global inequality are such towering and shameful issues that nothing (apart perhaps from combating climate change and the preservation of world peace) should be allowed to distract attention or resources from addressing them.

### **Practising Diplomacy: A Daily Balancing Trick**

Diplomacy is being practised all over the world in a thousand daily transactions between governments, most of them conducted — without specific instructions — by diplomats senior and junior, with few such exchanges ever coming to the



attention of ministers. Where instructions are sent, the majority are composed and transmitted by other diplomats in capitals. Diplomats practising their trade at the coal-face of embassies and high commissions, consulates and multilateral delegations, have to balance daily what they judge to be the ethical demands of the issues that they face against their pursuit of the national interest and the promotion of their governments' policies. In this they are little different from people in other sectors, public and private, whose decisions often pose ethical dilemmas as well as demanding judgements about practical interests, although diplomatic decisions more than most others may sometimes crucially affect many other people's lives, and are occasionally literally matters of life and death. A diplomat, perhaps serving far away, gets used to sensing the political and moral atmosphere at home, in his capital. If he seems to be getting the balance seriously wrong, he will soon be given a gentle steer, perhaps by a junior but perceptive desk officer or the relevant head of department in his foreign ministry, sometimes by members of his own staff or embassy colleagues; very occasionally, and less gently, by a minister. He will not, if he is any good, be purely reactive in striking that crucial balance: he will follow instinct and conscience and try to persuade his masters at home, if necessary, that he has got it right, seeking to influence policy as well as obeying its dictates. Success in this will earn him Brownie points, but an honourable failure may do so too. Often he is doing little more than playing games, in which 'getting his way' may be an adequate objective. Equally often, however, things are more complicated than that and there is no rulebook containing all the answers.

I should perhaps add as a footnote that I never had any personal compunction about a spot of modest hanky-panky at the expense of, for example, the Soviet dictatorship, the Polish Cold War apparatchiks or the South African apartheid brigade (from the safety if not comfort of the Southern African department in the Foreign Office) when opportunity offered. I regarded that, indeed relished it, as justified by its consistency with my and my country's ethical duty and long-term foreign policy goals. To be sure, this raises questions about ends justifying means. But diplomats, and even DfID officials, have to live in the real world and there is sometimes such a thing as an excess of ethical zeal.

**Sir Brian Barder KCMG** was British ambassador to Ethiopia, Poland and Bénin and High Commissioner to Nigeria and Australia, having previously served *inter alia* at the UK Mission to the UN and in Moscow. He retired in 1994. Before transferring to HM Diplomatic Service, he spent seven years as a home civil servant in the now defunct Colonial Office in London. Educated at Sherborne School and Cambridge University, he did National Service in a tank regiment in Hong Kong. In retirement he writes a blog (see online at <http://www.barder.com/ephemsl>) — mainly about politics, civil rights and international affairs — and has been a member of the Special Immigration Appeals Commission, the Board of Management of the Royal Hospital for Neuro-Disability, and the English-Speaking Union Committee for Speech and Debate. He contributes occasional articles to newspapers and periodicals, comments on current affairs on radio and television, and is a prolific author of letters to newspapers.

