

# MULTILATERALISM: THE NEW DIPLOMACY<sup>1</sup>

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My theme today is diplomacy, the way it has changed over the years and the impact on the way diplomats operate.

To simplify matters, let's say that diplomacy has developed in three stages:

- bilateral contact by representatives of Sovereign States, often the personal representatives of the monarch
- multilateral organisations in which states negotiated, set common standards and in some cases adopted laws
- to a new development, which might be called "multi-stakeholder diplomacy" where non-State actors play a significant role in international affairs.

## What is diplomacy?

Perhaps I should also start by defining diplomacy. There are many definitions of a diplomat: a person sent abroad to lie for his country or to spy for his country. I sometimes think we are condemned to eat and drink for our country. Perhaps a more cynical approach is to say that when it comes to give and take, the good diplomat gives one and takes ten. More seriously, the art of diplomacy is in getting under the skin of a country, getting to know its people, its language, its politics, its economy and its culture. Our aim has to be clear: perhaps facetiously deemed as letting other people achieve your ends; but it means working to pursue your country's interests through a range of contacts in the country where you are accredited.

It is a job requiring certain skills: not a great intellectual background or deep technical knowledge but the ability to get on with people, communicate, adapt to new challenges and make an impact.

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How do you measure success? Doing well does not only mean that relations are good. You have to seek added value. Underlying the diplomat's role is the main objective of promoting stability, security and prosperity in the world. There have been notable failures where the inability to resolve disputes led to conflict. Clausewitz's famous line 'war is merely a continuation of politics by other means'. Furthermore, a famous British politician, Tony Benn, said that all war represents the failure of diplomacy.

### History

I joined the Diplomatic Service having read too many romantic novels about Colonial Civil Servants writing finely crafted letters back to London and drinking too many gin and tonics while they waited for the reply.

Diplomacy started a long time ago. Indeed, it is said to be the second oldest profession. It originated when envoys were sent from one state to another. At that time the shifting rivalries of Europe put a high priority on kings and princes forming alliances often by arranging royal marriages.

That bilateral role began to shift over 100 years ago with the development of multilateral diplomacy and multilateral organisations. Perhaps the biggest failure of diplomacy was World War I. When the Grand-Duke was murdered in Sarajevo there was no international machinery to prevent the situation from developing into a major conflict in which millions of people lost their lives.

That tragedy could have been tackled by the sort of international bodies and contacts that operate now. The immediate reaction was to create the League of Nations. After the Second World War the international community created the United Nations. Throughout the world the United Nations and its agencies play a vital role in assisting disadvantaged and needy people by alleviating poverty and starvation, supporting refugees or ensuring respect for human rights.

One of the most important roles of the UN is to prevent and resolve conflict and keep the peace. We could not do without it. The organisation of the United Nations and its Special Representatives and Advisers should be

respected and defended in their actions. We should all back and express confidence in the United Nations because they are working towards a common goal: a peaceful, just and prosperous world.

Other organisations have also brought us peace and prosperity. In Europe we have seen the important role played by NATO during the Cold War when the main focus of international diplomacy was the rivalry between East and West. The collective security of Europe and the fact that there have been no major conflicts for 60 years could not have been achieved without this multilateral forum for political and military collaboration. That collaboration has now been extended to NATO activities outside Europe, eg in Afghanistan.

And of course the European Union has also played a tremendous role in promoting reconciliation between countries and peoples that fought wars during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in promoting prosperity within Europe and in conveying a sense of political and economic strength in the world. We hope that when the Lisbon Treaty is ratified that role will grow and deepen the collaboration between European nations.

#### Indicators of change

Underpinning the international organisations is the important development of international law. The United Nations Charter, the Geneva Conventions, the European Convention on Human Rights have established clear benchmarks against which nations have to measure their international conduct. In many multilateral organisations peer pressure can be enough to make countries change their views and positions. But the sanction of international law, including ultimately international war crimes trials, can help to ensure respect for essential values and rights.

The new challenge and opportunity comes from the concept of "multi-stakeholder" diplomacy. International relations are no longer the exclusive right of bilateral embassies or national representatives. Non-governmental actors such as NGOs, pressure groups, companies, even actors and pop stars can influence the way politicians and governments operate.

The ICRC and League of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies have supported people in zones of conflict and hardship. The role of Amnesty International has put popular pressure on governments who commit human rights abuses. This effort has arguably been more effective than the international organisations themselves. Greenpeace and other environmental bodies have raised environmental issues to the very top of the international agenda. And the NGO Global Witness pressing for arms control which led to the ban on landmines. And popular artists like Bono and Bob Geldof have raised the profile of poverty and starvation, mobilised ordinary people and gathered donations.

Another new development is the way diplomacy has become multi-dimensional. Diplomats are not only pursuing external relations. They have to deal with their own domestic policies in an international framework. In Brussels, diplomats are negotiating laws and helping Ministers negotiate the best deals that will then have to be enacted in domestic law.

Modern diplomacy covers major issues such as trade relations, migration, climate change and security. These are all issues which matter to people at home who want their representatives abroad to make them safer and more prosperous. Some of the most important issues in the European Union relate to justice and home affairs, the environment and industrial development. Indeed, much of the EU's agenda is devoted to negotiations on laws where nations have shared their sovereignty for the greater benefit of the Union as a whole.

This mix of legislation through diplomacy has led to a further major development in the proliferation of summits. The speed of transport and communications means that Foreign Ministers and Heads of Government can meet more frequently. EU Heads of Government meet four times a year in the European Council. The meetings at G8, G20 and Ministerial week in New York are all important opportunities where Heads of Government not only meet but negotiate and take decisions.

Diplomacy was always political but it has perhaps become more politicised as diplomats have to prepare the negotiations for their political leaders to find the final compromises. It is this emphasis on compromise and the political balance between internal and external pressures which has made diplomacy much more complicated and professionally challenging.

The trick is for political leaders to cope with the pressure from their international partners while also satisfying domestic opinion. When those agendas conflict, it takes the skill of a politician to strike the balance between what is achievable in the international negotiation and meeting expectations at home. The danger for the politician is that painting himself into a corner by setting too ambitious objectives can be counter-productive when the trend in that organisation goes against him.

#### Implications for diplomats

What does this mean for the profession? Should a diplomat in future be simply a man who always remembers a woman's birthday but never remembers her age? Or should a diplomat be someone who has such refined skills that he can tell a person to go to hell in a way which makes them look forward to the journey?

The role has indeed changed. But it has not been diminished. The fact that much EU business is done in Brussels has not reduced the importance of bilateral embassies in EU countries explaining and interpreting his host country's views. The fact that Heads of Government negotiate in summits has made it even more important for diplomats to be involved in the preparation. A diplomat is no longer a message carrier or a gatherer of information. He or she is a purveyor of outcomes, a negotiator who needs to be able to influence his host country and make an impact on that country's public opinion.

The Ambassador also has to be a manager, not just a political representative. In my first Embassy in Quito in Ecuador I rarely saw the Ambassador unless he summoned me. All communications were addressed Your Excellency. In my

High Commission my staff use my first name and I take a close interest in all aspects of the operation, the budgets and human resources policy, the issuing of visas and passports and the promotion of export opportunities. Many of these things would have been regarded with horror by my predecessors.

But as international diplomacy has become more specialised, that has also had implications for the training and expertise we need. A diplomat should have a general knowledge of many aspects of international relations but also a deeper knowledge of certain specialist areas, whether it is the EU, political military issues or human rights. Being a one-issue expert doesn't work anymore. But neither can we be gifted amateurs as in the past.

### Conclusion

Multilateralism might be the new diplomacy. But traditional diplomacy still flourishes. A diplomat has to understand the politics of his host country as well as the politics of his home country. We have to be adaptable, turning our hand from negotiations on the big issues of the day such as climate change to managing the morale of our staff and the complexities of our budgets.

I am glad that the old days have gone. The Foreign Office I joined 35 years ago has changed beyond recognition. And I can assure you that the days when diplomats acted like colonial governors are long gone. The contrast with modern diplomacy could not be more stark. For example, we are now flooded by emails and required to respond on the spot to the latest images broadcast by CNN or the BBC. And indeed required to appear on TV in crises. We are service providers issuing visas, passports and commercial services. And our role in politics is one of analysis and communications, not interference or conspiracy.