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DIPLOMATIC BLUNTNESS

Ladies and Gentlemen

Many thanks for inviting me to speak here this evening at the University English essay competition.

As Nina mentioned, I have been posted in Germany since last November as Private Secretary to Her Majesty's Ambassador in Berlin – a pompous sounding title, which in reality means that I am a less expensive means of doing the boring bits of the Ambassador's job. I chose to come to Germany, as I learned some German at school and wanted to get to know modern Germany better and see whether the clichés were true.

Before this I was stationed at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office where I worked on Security Policy (i.e. wars and military deployments), studied some German and then took up a three month placement as an "Austauschbeamte beim Auswärtigen Amt" in their NATO department.

The term ”Private Secretary” translates into German as ”Persönlicher Referent”. It engenders different reactions in different cultures and speaks volumes about the way British English prefers understatement which is designed to confuse foreigners.

If I say to Germans that I am a “private secretary”, they are usually too polite to admit it, but they have in the back of their minds until I tell them otherwise, that I spend most of my day typing.

I then explain to them that if I were to have to do the Ambassador’s typing, it is true I would need to spend most of the day typing such is the snail’s pace of my typing skills!

When I explain to Americans what I do they gasp after a while and say, “So you are the Ambassador’s Chief of Staff!”. Content-wise, the truth lies somewhere between the two. But in language terms, the tendency to understate and simplify is a very British thing.

I chose the topic Diplomatic Bluntness when Nina Stedman asked me to touch on my professional life and my interaction with the English language. For many it represents an oxymoron – how can one be “diplomatic” in so far as we understand that to mean saying what we mean, and also not threatening a relationship of open communication at the same time as not diluting the message (often unwelcome) which we bring.

This is a balance we as diplomats try to strike daily as we try to keep on cordial terms with even the most dubious of characters. We call it, supping with the devil.

Before I try to share with you some of the linguistic trickery we try to deploy in the British Foreign Office, it might be illuminating for you to know my particularly unusual route for a British diplomat into diplomacy as a career.

Unusually I studied law at university and then became what the Americans call an attorney and what we call a barrister. For my German friends, I explain this as an “Anwalt mit Perücke.”

I say unusually for British Diplomats, because while it is true that the political and bureaucratic classes in continental Europe are littered with lawyers, this is not so in the United Kingdom. It is a good thing too. I often found in the Auswärtiges Amt that as a lawyer I was often a little too comfortable with the rights-based reasoning.

One virtue of the British education system is that I work alongside people who are chemists, classicists, historians and economists – our work only bears some relation to their former academic studies, but the different perspectives they bring to the Service are rich. This is one of the most enjoyable things about working in what is a generalist's career.

When training to become a barrister, one has to learn yet another language. English law is a minefield of obtuse and awkward language. In contrast to this, the courtroom is often in stark contrast to the language of English law a place for colloquialisms and idioms. It was not rare in a courtroom to hear English gaming idioms such as, “My Lord, that point was a bit below the belt..” and the like.

I tell you this, not to make a mockery of British officialdom, but to demonstrate that even the most formal of settings with a room of people wearing Georgian clerical wigs is the place for plain English.

In the Foreign Office and British diplomacy it is no different. In fact, the shorter the sentence and the less complicated the words used in Foreign Office drafting, the more senior the officer – that is the general rule.

On coming to the Foreign Office, I was surprised to see that sentences were on average about 6 words long and often started with the conjunction “but”. For example, “But if they don’t agree we will take action.” Simple but difficult to write – a bit like children's books.

The other surprising indicator of the master use of English in diplomacy is that they tend to use shorter and often the German derivative word rather than the Latin derivative words.

For example, “We talked about X” is preferred to “We discussed the question regarding X”. This can come as a surprise to continental colleagues, especially in Germany, where often using the Latin-based word demonstrates a higher level of education. My colleague at the Auswärtiges Amt in Berlin was somewhat surprised to see that I had suggested that he chance “We regard this solution to be desirable” to “This sounds right.”

Likewise in Britain. We have train conductors who are equally as guilty of opaque and over-formalised English used on purpose to obscure meaning. “We are experiencing operational disruption to the infrastructure at the present stage” means often, “We have stopped because of leaves on the line”. So you can see, simple, clear and often informal English is crisper.

That is not to say that the English language does not allow us to build in ambiguity. We in the foreign service have a few of our own special words which at first hearing sound simple enough but are used to mean different things to different people. “We had a frank and open talk” can mean that we had a fight or that we were close – although more normally the former. “I am sure that must be right” can be used to agree that someone else is right or just to recognise that someone has thought about something but gone totally the wrong way.

We are also guilty of using some opaque words. We use the verb “finesse”. In diplomatic speak, to finesse a problem is really to try to

bully the disagreeing parties into agreeing. Another such word is “sound”. If someone or something is “sound”, it means just that we like them.

Such terms do bemuse the foreigner, but I think more and more these days the work of dealing with foreign governments, life is about talking clearly about disagreement – diplomatic bluntness.

Nobody sitting in the chamber of the UN Security Council in the lead up to the deployment of coalition troops in Iraq could have come out thinking that diplomatic language is flowery or imprecise. Oral statements would often begin with, “We don’t see it your way….” And amendments are often drafted in bullet-points. That is the modern diplomatic English I use daily.

At this point I would like to say a few words about the role of diplomacy in the 21st century.

Let me say first that diplomacy has seldom been more visible than over the last year or so.

Before Iraq, we agreed Resolution 1441 in New York. After that came the inspections in Iraq; divisions over a second resolution; military action, liberation, and now renewed debate and renewed international efforts for reconstruction.

A couple of years ago, few except the professionals were familiar with the workings of the UN Security Council, the stage on which world diplomacy is played out.

There's the question of Europe's relationship with America; of America's role in the world; of divisions between „old" and „new" Europe; of a „clash of civilisations" between the Islamic world and the west.

And an important debate is beginning about how to meet the security challenges of the 21st century – WMD and terrorism. The question of the role and effectiveness of multilateral institutions – especially the UN – is at the heart of this.

I don't pretend that I can answer these great questions here this evening. Nor do I want to devote my speech to the questions which make the headlines, whether Iraq, Afghanistan or the Middle East.

I want rather to offer you a few reflections about diplomacy itself.

In a way, it should be easy for me to do this – after all, diplomacy is what I do.

But then again, it is hard to step back from something you do – or think you do – every day, and think about the way it is evolving over the long term.

Defining Diplomacy

It has been said that an Ambassador is a man sent to lie abroad for the good of his country.

Perhaps the best definition of what a diplomat does is in the Vienna Convention of 1961. It defines the tasks of a diplomat as:

- representing his country in the host country
- protecting the interests of his country and its citizens
- negotiating with the host government
- informing his government of events in the host country
- promoting friendly relations.

So a diplomat is essentially two things: a representative and an information-gatherer. Part salesman, part journalist; and sometimes both at the same time.

Diplomacy Today

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The context that diplomacy works in, and the tools it uses, have changed hugely over the last century, and indeed over the last decade.

Email and telephones allow everyone from heads of state down to communicate directly with their opposite numbers in other countries.

Leaders meet regularly at summits or on whistlestop visits.

CNN or the BBC have breaking news of international events well before Embassies.

The internet allows people in London, or for that matter in Peking or Los Angeles, to read articles in tomorrow's German newspapers as soon as they are written.

All this leads some people to ask – do we need diplomats at all any more? Couldn't world leaders or technical experts do everything by email or videoconference?

The question is most often posed about Europe. You can get between almost any two EU capitals in two hours in an aeroplane. Ministers and Heads of Government seem to meet every week.

I am sometimes asked why Britain still needs an Embassy in Berlin. It is a fair question.

The first thing to say is that there is nothing new about this.

When the British Foreign secretary, Lord Palmerston, received the first diplomatic telegram in 1840, he is said to have remarked: “My God, this is the end of diplomacy”.

The French ambassador in London in 1905, Paul Cambon, was interrupted at dinner by a telephone call from the foreign minister in Paris. Returning to the table he announced: “Je viens de recevoir des instructions par téléphone. Cette profession est finie”.

Another important point on the modern context is that far more people are involved in international affairs than ever before. And different kinds of people too.

The diplomatic career used to be reserved to the top ranks of society. Until only 20 years ago it was still overwhelmingly masculine: indeed until the 1970s, women in the British Foreign Office had to resign if they got married.

But diplomats now come from a much wider spectrum than they ever have before.

There are still more men than women in diplomatic services, but many in Europe and beyond are catching up fast. Measures to allow diplomats to combine family with career, and measures aimed at recruiting and retaining women, are springing up everywhere.

The British Foreign Office has set the target of being representative of the country as a whole: this means recruiting more women and more people from ethnic minorities, who make up 7% of the British population.

And by no means all diplomats work for foreign ministries. How often have you heard the expression that someone is “a great Ambassador for their country”, or for football, for German food or whatever?

Often celebrities from a wide range of fields become “Ambassadors” for a particular cause: think of Peter Ustinov or Roger Moore and their work for children at risk. Or Jürgen Klinsmann playing for British football teams in the 1980s and ‘90s: he was often called an Ambassador for German football in Britain.

This is not diplomacy in the traditional sense of the word. But the same vocabulary is used, and with good reason. In the sense that they communicate and persuade across national boundaries, such people are diplomats like me.

Diplomacy is wider than before

My point is that far from having become irrelevant, there is much more diplomacy going on today than ever before.

You can see this in the size of our Embassy in Berlin. Far from being not needed any more, it is bigger than it has ever been.

When Sir Neville Henderson left Berlin with the staff of the British Embassy in September 1939, he noted that the British Embassy staff consisted of thirty men, seven women and two dogs.

Today the Embassy counts some 140 staff, of which around 40 are expatriate and 100 are locally-employed. In Düsseldorf the British Consulate-General, which is the centre for our trade and investment and our consular operations in Germany, has 75 staff. We also have Consulates-General in Hamburg, Munich, Frankfurt and Stuttgart.

It is not as if the UK is alone in having so many; indeed the French foreign ministry counts over 400 staff on its payroll in Germany. If diplomacy in the information age and in the European Union is no longer necessary, what are all these staff doing?

The answer is that the field of diplomacy has grown hugely.

At the beginning of the last century, diplomats did foreign policy. Everything else was a domestic concern.

Now there is hardly any area of national policy where there is not some kind of international cooperation.

Today almost no one could say that their job is entirely confined to national boundaries. Within the EU we have to develop international responses to problems. Lobby groups and NGOs work internationally.

Our international relationships are so important today because the challenges we face are shared ones.

Take security – the first duty of a state to its citizens. Being strong yourself, or maintaining a balance of power so that your adversaries keep each other in check, is no longer sufficient.

Since the second world war, states in Europe and elsewhere have found common security in alliances such as NATO. More widely, they have found that the way to lasting peace and security lies in binding themselves to each other.

The great example of this is, of course, the European Union, which, as Tony Blair likes to remark, has brought peace and stability to Europe for fifty years.

Terrorism is one of the biggest threats to our security today. Again, it does not limit itself to national boundaries. So countries need to work together to combat it: in sharing intelligence, arresting and extraditing suspects and shutting off sources of terrorist financing, to name just a few areas.

No country can create on its own a clean environment: global warming is a global problem. As more and more people travel to and live and work in other countries, the demand for harmonised rules in a whole range of areas, from pension provision to the transport of pets, is growing.

As the economy becomes ever more globalised, markets for our goods are open all around the world, and our firms operate in a wide range of countries. This again creates pressure for common rules, for example on trade or on labour standards.

I could go on. The point is that it is hard to think of an area today which does not have an international dimension. So very few areas of national policy are outside the remit of today's diplomacy.

This is why very few of my colleagues in the Embassy in Berlin do classic political diplomacy as my predecessors from 50 years ago would have recognised it.

Many of them are not from the foreign ministry. Colleagues dealing with the environment, with the economy or with social affairs are specialists on secondment from their ministries in London. I have colleagues from the police force acting as liaison officers in the fight against drugs and fraud.

Especially in Europe, we often believe that we understand everything about another country's policies and points of view. Thanks to the Internet, we think we have all the information we need to understand the situation. This is what one German Ambassador has called an "illusion of intimacy". [Illusion der Vertrautheit]

But we know each other far less well than we think.

We need to understand each other better. Not because knowing about your competitors helps you in a negotiation. But because we need to find common solutions to problems, and to learn from each others' successes and failures.

To do so we need to understand not just that the German government has taken a specific decision or policy, but the reasons behind it, the factors motivating it, the context in which it will work.

This illusion of intimacy goes wider than government or official circles.

I was looking recently at a survey of attitudes of young people in Britain and Germany.

Germans see the UK as a good place to work and to study – second only to the US. They recognise that we have a creative, multicultural society.

But Germans see us as reluctant Europeans. They have the impression that we don't like them very much.

Young British people said they admired Germany's high-quality cars and its well-organised people. They thought Germans lacked a sense of humour and – astoundingly, since we always seem to lose to Germany – that they played bad football.

But seriously, young people in Britain still see Germany too much through the prism of World War II. Part of this image of Germany in the UK is due to the fact that, in my view, we still focus our history teaching too much on the period 1933-1945.

It is right that we should not forget the past. But the problem is that we risk creating stereotypes which have nothing to do with the modern reality.

Too often, when a foreign country is mentioned, stereotyped images are the first to spring to mind. If I say Britain, people think of the Queen, bad weather, or fish and chips.

This disguises the fact for example that it actually rains more in Paris than in London. Or that our national dish is no longer fish and chips but chicken tikka massala, an adaptation of an Indian recipe – which shows the kind of multicultural country Britain is today.

With a better understanding of what modern Germany has achieved we might for example better understand your attitude to Europe; and vice versa.

Conclusion

At this point, I should like to conclude. I am well aware that yet another form of blunt diplomacy is about to play out on the football pitch at 8.45 between your country and the Czech Republic and so time is at a premium.

Diplomacy is well and truly alive. It is not so much about being nice to foreigners for the sake of it, but it is about keeping channels open and yes, about being blunt at times.

For me this means explaining Britain to Germany, but also explaining Germany to Britain. It means being active in identifying where we can do more together, and in making sure these ideas get taken forward.

Sixty years ago, war was tearing the European continent apart. Today, war between our countries is unimaginable.

In Europe international relations used to be conducted by men in tanks. Now the men are sitting around tables drinking bottled water. It doesn't sound exciting. But this is modern diplomacy. And the benefits of bottled water over tanks are incontestable.

Thank you very much.