

ARE DIPLOMATS IMMORAL?

**Lecture to the Ludlow Civic Society
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by Sir Leslie Fielding**

It is not merely a great pleasure, but also very much an honour, to be invited to give a public lecture in Ludlow under the auspices of this distinguished Civic Society. The pleasure part is not unalloyed with anxiety. Speakers such as Sir Keith Thomas and Mr Anthony Howard, to name but two, are a hard act to follow; and this evening's audience is, I have been forewarned, both alert and discriminating. So, my upper lip may be stiff; but the lower lip trembles. Nevertheless I shall do my best.

I come to the Assembly Rooms this evening a former career diplomat. I have served in the Foreign Office in London: on the NATO desk, in the "think tank", and as the "Resident Clerk". I have also spent long years in the field – in Western Europe, the Middle East, South East Asia and the Far East. I was even for 10 years a Eurocrat in Brussels and survived to tell the tale. I have flown in and out of most (but not all) places; and continue to travel extensively. If I no longer negotiate and tell Johnny Foreigner where to get off, I still occasionally harangue the natives – last year, for example, in Budapest and Upper Egypt; this year, I hope, in Uzbekistan and even perhaps Leominster (if I can get an entry visa for Herefordshire, that is).

Ethics and diplomacy, morality and foreign policy; are *diplomats* immoral? Such is the appointed theme this evening. "Of course they are!", I hear you cry. "A bunch of creeps and crooks – almost as bad as politicians", is perhaps the popular prejudice.

For is not a diplomat an honest man (in the famous quip of the Elizabethan Provost of Eton and sometime overseas Envoy, Sir Henry Wootton) an honest man, I say, sent abroad to lie for the good of his country? Is it not so that, under the doctrine of *raison d'état*, the diplomat cannot be bound in public affairs by the same morality he will respect in private life? As the 19th Century Italian statesman, Count Cavour, once said: "If we did for ourselves

what we do for our country, what rogues we should be”. Then there is that famous dictum of Karl von Clausewitz: “War is the continuation of politics by other means”. Should it not therefore be understood that diplomacy is the continuation of war by other means? Beneath their smooth exteriors and behind their often bland public utterances, is not the true game of diplomats one of unprincipled ruthlessness?

To be sure, the world has never been a cosy place, a Victorian Sunday School, an illustration of the Queensberry Rules at work. Thomas Hobbes, in that masterpiece of English political philosophy, ‘Leviathan’, spoke of the life of man, when it lacked central government, as “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short”. He also said the same of international society, as he then experienced it. Hobbes wrote that:

“Kings and persons of sovereign authority, because of their independence, are in continual jealousies and in the state and posture of Gladiators; having their weapons pointing and their eyes fixed on one another; that is their forts, garrisons and guns, upon the frontiers of their kingdoms; and continual spies upon their neighbours, which is a posture of war”.

And indeed it is to some extent true, even today, that while the primitive condition of fear and insecurity for the individual has long been remedied by the institution of state government, at least in the Western democracies, nevertheless, where international affairs are concerned, a suggestion – perhaps more than a suggestion – of that primitive condition, that fear and insecurity, can still subsist. Sovereign states tend to collude and contend, seeking to maximise their power, promote their national interest and strive contentiously to uphold their national security.

Something of this kind has certainly been the human predicament for as far back as we can see.

Egypt in the third millennium BC, under the 5th to 10th Pharaonic Dynasties, struggled, unsuccessfully, to realise peace and order from chaos and plundering, through a series of external invasions and internal power crises.

The Greek States of the Classical Period, though wonderfully enlightened in many respects, nevertheless in their relations with each other pursued

policies of almost undiluted self-interest. Thucydides recorded their intrigues and conflicts, in his History of the Peloponnesian War (464-431 BC) – caused, he wrote, by the growth of Athenian power and the fear that this aroused in Sparta. He recorded an Athenian orator as reminding his listeners that they lived in a world where the strong did what they had the power to do, and the weak accepted what they had to accept. In the end, the Periclean Age self-destructed. Philip II of Macedon and Alexander the Great did for the City State democracies; inaugurating military dictatorships at home, and offering the excitements and distractions of imperialism overseas.

Things were not so very different in other parts of the world. In China, in the Warring States period of the 5th to the 3rd Centuries BC, before a single Dynasty (the Qin) forcibly united the country, the individual mini-kingdoms jostled and fought, allied and betrayed, in the most brutal and cynical fashion. And the doctrine of Realpolitik has been stunningly exemplified in the Western Europe of the so-called “Enlightenment” – for example in the 17th Century machinations of Cardinal Richelieu, the stratagems of Frederick the Great and Bismarck in the 18th and 19th Centuries, the brutish force of the 20th Century nationalist and ideological dictators, Mussolini, Hitler and Stalin. Each of these cynical practitioners of Realpolitik, and all of their advisers, having studied Machiavelli, it would seem, at their mother’s knee.

But Diplomacy is not, as so often assumed, a moral desert. It is about charm, not coercion; persuasion, not deception; about building where possible on trust and on common interests, rather than on mendacity and egotism. Foreign Policy, like DNA, has the structure of a double helix. People readily discern in it an ever-resilient strand of self-interest, even ruthlessness. But intertwined with it is an idealist second strand of ancient derivation – and it may be, these days, of growing strength. There is an instinctive sense of the primacy of justice; the belief that there is some over-arching standard beyond the national interest, by which diplomacy can and should be judged.

This instinct has a long history, rooted in religion and in ancient notions of natural law.

In the case of the Ancient Greeks, despite their sometimes appalling behaviour in practice, there was also in theory the aspiration to common

political institutions, the Amphictyonic Council and the Olympic Games. An ancient example often quoted is the rejection of Themistocles' advice, following the Persian retreat, that the Athenians should set fire to the fleet of their Greek allies, then conveniently in harbour close at hand, and so ensure lasting Athenian ascendancy. The suggestion was rejected as being, I quote, "Exceedingly advantageous and exceedingly dishonourable".

In post-classical times, in medieval Christendom, before the emergence of the nation state, certain moral and religious restraints bound civilisation together. In the medieval world, feudal oaths and allegiances were taken seriously ; careful thought was given to what constituted a "Just War" ; the temporalities of a Europe of Dynasties were overseen by a Church that supported, where it could, a stable European political order.

When that medieval European order passed away and growing nationalism and state power took the centre stage, modern diplomacy came into being, not only to push that power to the hilt ; but also, where necessary, to soften the crunch and seek the solutions - ending e.g. the Thirty Years War, in 1648.

There are more modern instances : in the 19th century, the suppression of the slave trade ; after 1945, British decolonisation. They were both morally driven. British support, today, for the enlargement of the EU to Central and Eastern Europe also has a component of altruism. In American foreign policy, US diplomacy has rarely been free from a strong moral coating, amounting, at times, to something like a moral crusade. Presidents Woodrow Wilson and Jimmy Carter are the obvious examples. (The Nixon-Kissinger period was perhaps an uncharacteristic interlude, in which realism and power play were naked and less ashamed). The present British Government's aspiration to an ethical foreign policy, on which I shall say more later, is yet another instance.

A word here about individual freedom of conscience. The modern British diplomat is a civil servant – albeit of a superior kind, at least in his own estimation. If he has a sympathy for one British political party rather than another (as he is entitled to, in a free society), he keeps it to himself and loyally serves the elected Government of the day. He is also bound by the Official Secrets Act. But he is not obliged to help carry through a major foreign policy with which he profoundly disagrees on moral grounds. He

can advise against it. If overruled, he may request to be assigned to other duties. In an extreme scenario, he can resign, in which case the only basic requirement is that he should do so discreetly. If he wants to kick up a fuss, he must first go into politics. While still a member of the Diplomatic Service, and always in a situation of crisis, he must not betray the trust vested in him, or in effect blackmail the government of the day, by public disclosure of dissent or by the overnight withdrawal of expertise and manpower. Diplomacy, as conducted by professionals, is not a “Kiss-and-Tell” calling.

I confess that I myself occasionally had doubts about certain British policies of the day, including two or three with which I was directly involved ; but these were doubts as to the judgments made and the outcomes to be expected - in a word, doubts about credibility and effectiveness - not reservations of a primarily moral character.

The Suez crisis might have been different. The failure of the enterprise is too well known to need description here. But we do need to remember that the men who made this dramatic mistake were averagely upright and honourable men and they made it on the basis, amongst other things, of their judgment of the ethics of the case. As they saw it, a dictator in Cairo was seeking to destroy legitimate Western interests and to dominate by ideology, propaganda, terrorism and if need be military force, an entire region of vital concern to the West. They were motivated by an understandable but mistaken reading of the lessons of history. In the 1930s, as they saw it, correctly enough, the two main democracies of Europe, Britain and France, had not taken timely action to curb Hitler, while it was still possible ; and this had led directly to the horrors of World War II. A similar failure over Nasser could, they believed, lead to comparable horrors in the Middle East. Therefore, he had to be stopped ; and force was thought to be the only way.

Nevertheless, to those working behind the scenes, the Suez adventure must have seemed a muddled, ill-prepared, perilous and at times duplicitous undertaking, conducted incompetently by a sick Prime Minister who brushed aside awkward but honest diplomatic, financial and even military advice, and went behind the backs of some of the political colleagues and professional advisors who disagreed with him. If I had been in the Foreign Office with direct responsibility for Suez, I might well have considered resigning my Commission, once the immediate business in hand was over.

But probably resignation as much on the grounds of the damage done to British national interests throughout the Middle East, as over the associated loss of life, and the apparent breach of international law. As it was, no direct crisis of moral conscience ever came my way, nor (as far as I know) that of any of my immediate contemporaries.

If anything, the boot was on the other foot. It was the moral conscience of my employers that should have been activated. I was the victim of a false prospectus. Thus, I had been under the clear impression, on joining the Diplomatic Service, that I was signing up for a civilised career of elegance and ease, waltzing under the chandeliers with beautiful Contessas, and consorting with Monarchs, Presidents, Prime Ministers and the like, in the Chancelleries of the Great Powers. In the event, there was indeed a little of that. But no one told me that I should also have stones thrown at me by religious fanatics in the Middle East, be menaced by street mobs in South East Asia, or find myself chased by the French riot police through the narrower streets of the Second Arrondissement in Paris, during the “Events of 68”. What’s more, no danger money was forthcoming from the F.O. Clearly, I was robbed. Most immoral, I call it!

But I digress. To return to my central theme, I maintain that conscience does constrain the exercise of power ; realism is sometimes tempered by idealism ; morality can set limits to the reach of *raison d'état*.

I grant that, in *tomorrow's* world, we could all recidivate. Let us not be Utopian. Few thinking people doubt that there can be massive world changes – even upheavals – before the new Century is out. It may even be, as I have argued recently in other fora, that the 21st Century will hold some nasty surprises. The past 50 years could be seen, in retrospect, as an Antonine era for Britain, of peace and prosperity. Scientific accidents, nuclear and biological terrorism, religious fanaticism, water wars, population explosions, disorder generated by global warming, even social damage caused by the more malign forces of IT and economic globalisation – any combination of these could upset the apple cart, and sweep us back, if not to outright barbarism, then to Realpolitik with a vengeance.

But, as things are now, we are on a comfortable diplomatic roll, and we might as well enjoy the thrill.

There are particular reasons why this is so, in *today's* world.

We have, first, the development of treaties, conventions and practices which set limits to anarchy and help the growth of international norms. I think of the United Nations Security Council, the International Court of Justice, the Declaration of Human Rights. The United Nations has two temporary war crimes tribunals : the one to deal with those implicated in the genocide in Rwanda and the other to handle suspects involved with atrocities in the Bosnia-Herzegovina civil war. A permanent International Criminal Court is indeed now in prospect.

Regional institutions have been developed, such as the British Commonwealth, the European Union, the Council of Europe, each with its corpus of rules, orientations and ideals. International relations generally are increasingly rule-based ; our memberships of NATO or the OECD or the WTO carry obligations, as well as conferring privileges and rights. In such bodies, the participating countries hold each other, as it were, morally hostage ; and a new multilateral diplomacy is called for, which might have seemed odd to Metternich, but which has stood the test of effectiveness in the modern world.

The EU is of particular significance in this context. The original European Community was not driven, as is sometimes claimed, by fear of Communism and by Cold War considerations. It had different well-springs - the determination that Europe had to be so re-constructed as to eliminate permanently the national rivalries which had culminated in the two World Wars. In that sense, it was an ethical enterprise, in which national sovereignty and national interest would be tempered, reconciled and even fused, to the common economic advantage. Whichever side you take in the present argument, as to whether the Union should be more Inter-Governmental or more Federal, with a greater or lesser role for the central institutions of Europe's Commission, Parliament, and Court of Justice, the EU represents a huge success story of a moral nature, through a new style of international discourse quite unknown at the Congress of Vienna in 1814/15, or even anticipated by the Versailles Conference in 1919.

The naked abuse of national sovereign power in international diplomacy is also constrained these days, not only by alliances and treaties, but by public opinion.

Up to and even beyond the Napoleonic Wars, very few Europeans concerned themselves directly with foreign affairs ; it was the preserve of Princes and a small aristocratic body of Ministers, Envoys and Diplomats who probably had more in common with their foreign counterparts than with their own ill-informed and impassive co-nationals back home. The English public, as a rule, were notably indifferent. To be sure, young gentlemen of good family, accompanied by their Chaplains and Tutors, Dragomans and Domestic, embarked on the Grand Tour. The Duchess of Richmond even gave a Ball in Brussels (and was gravely inconvenienced by it falling, unforgivably, on the eve of the battle of Waterloo – but what else could one expect of that vulgar little Corsican, Mr. Bonaparte?). Jane Austen’s novels, and Parson Woodford’s diaries, record an English social scene which appears largely indifferent to the clash of continental armies and oblivious to the knavish tricks of foreigners.

Today, however, we live in a global political village as well as in a global economy. A purely amoral, Machiavellian, diplomacy would not be practicable, even if there were Ministers and Ambassadors sufficiently irresponsible as to try to apply it. In the contemporary West, everyone has views on foreign policy ; far from being a closed preserve, it has become, like our views on education and our notions of the shortcomings of the young, a public park where anyone is free to kick a ball about. In this country, not only learned institutions like the RIIA and the IISS, but also party-political and private “think tanks” abound, pontificating and generally second guessing the professionals in the Foreign Office.

The media, too! I personally deplore the over-simplified world of the sound-bite, and the short attention span of the TV screen ; the know-all assurance of the teenage scribblers on the broadsheets and the bar-stool arrogance of interviewers on the Today programme. But these guys have their role to play – as, famously, US television cameramen, press commentators and news agency reporters did (to my direct experience and awed admiration) in the Vietnam War. The latter, to my mind, stationed, as I was, on or near the spot, was misconceived, ill-directed and above all unwinnable. So mediemen have their value.

But, if they are necessary, they are not sufficient. They offer only episodic, not continuous, coverage of people, places and events. They are also highly

derivative and dependent on others. I was once highly amused, but also mild outraged, by an American journalist who spent long hours being briefed by me in a foreign country with which he was unfamiliar, and from which US diplomatic representation had been temporarily withdrawn ; only for him to offer the opinion, having returned home and published his articles to wide acclaim, that newsmen had made Embassies redundant.

I mentioned sound-bites and simplifications. It goes almost without saying that such trivial chirpiness and such dumbing-down trivial chirpiness cut little mustard, when applied to the sheer complexity of many world issues. The global waters are often opaque, even muddy. There is the old diplomatic joke : to every entangled and obscure international issue, there is always one answer which is simple, lucid and logical - but it is always wrong. In a world of conflict and contradiction, a diplomatic danger to be avoided is that of double-talk, and, worse, double-think. As Henry Kissinger points out, in his massive book on “Diplomacy”, foreign policy has long been, and will continue to remain, a complex blend of the idealistic and the hard-nosed. I would add to this that mistakes do get made (often only evident with hindsight) ; and that a degree of inconsistency is probably inevitable.

Let me give some illustrations.

A basic principle of the UN Charter is non-interference within the domestic jurisdiction of sovereign states (Article 2.7), but without prejudice to enforcement measures dealing with threats to the peace and acts of aggression (Chapter VII). In the Suez crisis and in Vietnam, the UK and the US respectively are now judged to have acted immorally ; in Iraq and Yugoslavia, morally. In Persia, we and the Americans intervened to secure the overthrow of Mossadeq and to assist the late Shah back onto the Peacock Throne in the 1950's ; but stood to one side, in the 1970's, in the commotion at the end of the Shah's reign – in both instances, probably wisely and any way of necessity.

It was in the name of self-determination that Hitler roused the Sudetens and achieved the dismantling of Czechoslovakia. The so-called right of national self-determination was also seized upon as a slogan of peoples seeking to cast off the chains of colonialism. Yet in 1945, the Western borders of Poland were settled not by self-determination but by ethnic cleansing. (The

US, the UK and France accepted this injustice in order to avoid a conflict with Stalin's Soviet Union). Perspectives can change ; possibilities do not remain the same ; principles can not always be put into practice.

Thus the Kurds and Armenians were once thought worthy of self-determination, when Russia, Turkey and Persia were weak ; unworthy, later, when Western strategic interests had shifted, - all of which may have been inevitable, but was (and is) certainly sad. The Armenians of Eastern Anatolia were massacred or forcibly deported by the Ottoman Government in 1915 ; perhaps as many as 2 million died and only 1 million survived. While Turkey was our enemy in the First World War, there was nothing we could do about it. In the Treaty of Sèvres in 1920, however, the victorious allies recognised a United Armenia as a sovereign republic. Yet in practice they subsequently allowed the country to be partitioned between Turkey and the Soviet Union. Self-determination was not worth another war. In 1920, in the Treaty of Sèvres, the Kurds, too, were given undertakings, as a nation, by the allies ; undertakings which had to be withdrawn three years later, in the Treaty of Lausanne. It was not that the allied powers had suddenly become cynical. Between the two Treaties, the Turks had reformed and reasserted themselves under Ataturk and thereby changed the balance of power. There was no appetite in Britain or anywhere else to confront a new Turkey on behalf of distant Kurds. The need to prioritise peace over justice seemed inescapable.

Something similar happened at the end of the Second World War. Churchill had indignantly and honourably refused, at the Tehran Conference in 1943, Joseph Stalin's request that 50,000 German officers should be executed at the end of the War. But in order to avert a conflict with the USSR, the Western allies later felt obliged, at the Yalta Conference in 1945, to go along with the repatriation of 70,000 Cossack, Serb and Croat prisoners who were ideologically opposed to Communism, or who were without any great political motivation but had ended the war wearing the wrong uniform. As it unhappily turned out, they were put to death.

Today, our own and other Western Governments react to Human Rights abuses in one way in a small country like Sierra Leone, and in another way towards the giant power and the immense potential export market that is China. This is probably realistic. We do our best to act responsibly over arms sales, to ensure that the British made weapons will be deployed for

self-defence and deterrence, rather than internal coercion or external aggression ; but, as the second largest arms exporter after the US, we also have to look to jobs and industries at home - perhaps 130,000 jobs, and anyway over a third of our defence industry. This is probably realistic. It is not, however, consistent, let alone watertight. The equipment with which we supplied Indonesia may have been used, some of it, against the vast majority voting for independence in Indonesian-occupied East Timor, with whom we are in sympathy.

Where there are conflicting objectives and ill-defined lines of moral demarcation, the fact is that British diplomacy, and that of other well-meaning democracies, has to deal with the world as it is, pragmatically, and with as much moral decency, but as much realism, as we can muster. The logic, such as it is, will often be “fuzzy”.

Does this mean that an ethical foreign policy is a contradiction in terms, a doomed conjunction of opposites, a mere figure of speech or oxymoron? Opinions differ. The jury is still out ; it may never return to give a single verdict.

Probably the aim in future should be to give a higher priority in diplomacy to what is right, *tout court*, rather than simply to do what is perceived as right in the immediate narrow national or party political interest. If this what is intended by “an Ethical Dimension to Foreign Policy”, that is fine by me. But if it is simply a convenient piece of “spin” or a political gimmick, it will in due course boomerang on its authors.

Claims to introduce an out-and-out ethical foreign policy not only oversimplify and distort the complex mix of realist and moral elements in any British diplomatic decision. They also play into the hands of the single-issue specialists and obsessives. And they make too much of motives : whereas the only worthwhile foreign policy criterion is results. The Grand Duchy of Luxembourg, aware of its insignificance, can, if it chooses, as it usually does, merely confine itself to posture. Italian Foreign Policy, when vacuous and vacillating, has sometimes been dismissed as a “Diplomazia di Presenza” : a mere by-stander’s diplomacy. That will not do for Britain.

Certainly, Great Britain carries, alas, a significantly reduced relative international clout into the 21st Century. We vie with France for the fourth

largest GNP in the world. But any “Bar Chart” will show how far we fall behind the US, Japan and Germany ; and, how close at our heels follow the other aspirants and ‘uppers-and-comers’. Our admirable but under-recruited Armed Forces are now small. Our productivity gap with the French and Germans remains substantial and our income per head is the lowest of the advanced industrialised countries. There can be no place in our Diplomacy for illusion, nostalgia, or comforting visions of our own superiority and the weakness of foreigners

Despite these handicaps, we are nevertheless a serious medium sized power, with serious views on world issues, and a modest but effective potential to project serious influence. Rightly, in my view, we still aspire to be taken seriously. But it is not enough to look beautiful in the changing room mirror, before the match : the aim is to go out and get the ball into the net, against often determined opposition. Size may not matter (as with Israel) ; competence and success do (as currently, and less characteristically, with Israel). So the effectiveness of British diplomacy, also its morality, is up to us : to the resolve of our political leaders and the skill our professionals.

Let me conclude as follows. War is the failure of diplomacy. The basic role of a diplomat in international affairs is to implement foreign policy by peaceful means. He should, to carry conviction, be frank and straightforward ; where he is obliged to be ‘economical with the truth’, he must at least avoid downright lies. He needs to strike a balance between a healthy respect for Power and an appropriate acknowledgement of Principle ; he has to be both a realist and a moralist, weaving those two distinct traditions in international relations together. Ethics are important. But what is crucial is realism and “*savoir faire*”. Perhaps also, oddly enough, modesty and self-criticism - on which my last word this evening will be uttered.

To use a metaphor borrowed from CAMRA (the Campaign for Real Ale), beneath the froth of party politics in this country, the basic brew is a good one. If we think of British ministers, we may charitably assume that, of whatever political colour, they and their advisers are men of moderate virtue, who pursue British interests but also seek a better world. They want peace rather than war, stability rather than instability, democracy rather than tyranny, international prosperity rather than poverty, free trade rather than protectionism. They want these things, not necessarily because they are

virtuous men, but because anything else would be contrary to Britain's national interests as a small, densely populated island crucially dependent on free international commerce. In other words, they seek a broadly moral foreign policy for the most enduring of reasons, enlightened self-interest.

Are diplomats immoral? Many people take them to be so ; but this is unjust. In their private lives, diplomats may be. In their professional careers, never – or, hardly ever.

But, as I just implied, it is important that diplomats should be intellectually modest and self-critical men and women, as well as moral ones. My own experience is that things go wrong more often through all-too- human error, than through failed diabolical conspiracies ; through idiocy, more often than through immorality.

I joined the Foreign Office from Cambridge in 1956. On reporting for duty, one late September morning, I was naturally expecting to be warmly welcomed in person by the Foreign Secretary, Mr. Selwyn Lloyd, (although not, I hoped, thereafter the Prime Minister too, as I had an early lunch appointment at the Traveller's Club). Instead I was directed to some seedy office in Carlton House Terrace, where I met the clerk to the head of the personnel department. A dour and disillusioned Scot, he said something like this (and I'll spare you the regional accent), as I was leaving his cluttered desk : “No matter how searching and selective we make the entry examinations, we always find, in each annual intake to the Foreign Office, that the percentage of duffers remains constant. Good day, Mr. Fielding”.

Perhaps that says it all.