

## **DIPLOMACY BEYOND 2000 : “ARE DIPLOMATS REALLY NECESSARY?”**

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**Lecture by Sir Leslie Fielding KCMG "MULTILATERALISATION"**

Diplomacy is an ancient and honourable calling. It has always required professionalism and expertise. The promotion of the national interest is a constant cause for the sovereign States. Nevertheless, while diplomats are as necessary as they always have been, and the fundamental nature of their craft remains unchanged, diplomacy these days comes in different shapes and sizes from those which we think traditional; and diplomatic practitioners must be ready to learn new tricks in an old game. This necessity stands stark and clear in the context of what the jargon calls “multilateralisation”.

In what follows, I shall speak as a practitioner rather than a theorist; and as one who has operated, as it were, on both sides of the fence – in both traditional and new-style diplomatic work. Excluding periods in the army, as a University Vice-Chancellor and as a business consultant, I have served thirty years as a professional diplomat. Some of these years were spent perched cerebrally on the fence, whether on various training courses, or in polypragmatic policy planning in the F.O. think-tank. But most of my time was split equally between bilateral activity (in Iran, Cambodia, France and Japan) and multilateral duties (in London, and in the European Commission in Brussels).

What stands out a mile, to readers of Ernest Satow, Harold Nicolson and the memoirs of an earlier age, is the extent and complexity of the change which diplomacy has undergone in the second half of the present century.

Embassies have proliferated in number, as newly independent countries have established their overseas representation, and international and regional organisations have burgeoned. The work of an Embassy has extended from the political and consular to the cultural and commercial. New issues, such as protection of the environment and post-Cold War peacekeeping, have been added to the diplomatic agenda. Improvements in communication and facility of contact have brought greatly increased ministerial travel and instant and constant consultation between Ministry and Embassy. The diplomat's past quasi-monopoly of knowledge about previously arcane foreign places and peoples has been challenged by the growing expertise of mediemen, academics and the staffs of Chambers of Commerce and of Non-Governmental Organisations.

Multilateral diplomacy, in particular, has become a mega-phenomenon, demanding new knowledge and often novel techniques. This is, of course, attributable to the development of the United Nations, and of other international bodies such as the GATT/WTO, the OECD, and the ever-more comprehensive structures of the G7 (witness their meeting of Employment Ministers in Lille this week). But it has also been carried forward both by the rise to international pre-eminence of the European Union (which not only has a raft of ministerial councils and important official committees in Brussels, but now also supports well over a hundred EU diplomatic missions of its own around the globe), and by the growth of regional structures elsewhere, such as NAFTA, LAFTA, ASEAN, APEC, ASEM, OPEC, GCC and the rest, each with their internal co-ordinating mechanisms and external patterns of international contact.

In consequence, diplomacy has become more challenging. Certainly, the multilateral diplomat must be an eclectic, a polymath, a team-worker. He must be not only intellectually resilient but also even physically vigorous (see below). Above all, he must be open to new concepts, eager to acquire new knowledge and adept at facing new players

both in government and in the private sector.

My own views on multilateral matters are much coloured by my ten years in Brussels, handling the EU's Common Commercial Policy. This required familiarity, internally, both with the bureaucratic jungle paths of the European Commission, and with the layout and habits of the EU Member States' various tribal Indabas (the 113 Committee, the Coreper, the Council of Ministers, the external relations side of the European Parliament, etc.). Externally, it demanded knowledge not only of the EU's principal trading partners individually, but also of the collective working of UNCTAD, the GATT CG18, the Executive Committee in Special Session of the OECD and the "Sherpa" structures supporting the regular G7 Economic Summits.

Multilateral economic diplomacy of this kind is more focused and more specialised than bilateral political diplomacy. It is politics in the shape of economics – and the politics is as much in the narrow detail as in the broad proposition. It demands more actual negotiation, and probably also a greater bargaining and deal-brokering skill, than is normally expected of a quiet bilateral Chancery. Oratory and polemic, of the kind once associated with the UN General Assembly, solve no problems and offer no escape. Indeed, other than in marginal institutions such as UNESCO and the calmer reaches of the Council of Europe, there is really nowhere to hide. The individual has to be psychologically and intellectually strong enough to know and be known in depth. The number of peer players is restricted; they are captives of each other; today's opponent is tomorrow's accomplice; networking is of the essence, in both attack and defence.

In terms of human beings, the diplomatic requirement is for men and women with a high IQ. Fluency in the main international languages is a "must", often of a higher order than that demanded in bilateral posts, in which quite a lot of one's time is spent within the national Embassy. (I thought I spoke French well, after four years in the British Embassy in Paris. But in the Brussels Commission, I had to use the language, not for three or four hours each day, but for twelve plus. After spells of leave in the UK, I always suffered "French face-ache" during the first few days back in the Berlaymont – my Anglo-Saxon cheek and chin muscles tended initially to go on strike). Also indispensable – at any rate in internationally integrated bureaucracies such as the UN Secretariat and the EU institutions – is the ability to operate in a state of semi-perpetual "culture shock", in close daily working relationships with colleagues from many different backgrounds, driven by different priorities and animated by different assumptions.

There is a place in multilateralisation for diplomatic generalists, provided they are ready to devote themselves initially night and day to the acquisition of specialist knowledge. It helps to have an inter-disciplinary approach and collectivist instincts – diplomats work best in these environments in small teams which share their expertise and insights. Notwithstanding the obvious constraints in handling what are apparently technical matters, imagination and lateral thinking often prove priceless. So does the creativity required to manipulate a shifting pattern of complicities and alliances. Even physical stamina can be important. We can guess the strain upon the EU officials who have been negotiating around the clock this week, to deal with the beef crisis. At the launching of the Uruguay Round in Punta del Este as the EU trade negotiator, I worked all through the final night until the following afternoon; at a difficult UNCTAD ministerial meeting in Belgrade, my EU negotiating team and I worked for three days and two nights with no more than a total of four hours sleep. This requires good health, strict short-term abstinence from rich food and alcohol, and an iron will; without them, the strongest negotiating position and the most cogent argument can cease to be unassailable.

I will not conceal that, of my experience of diplomacy, I found bilateralism the more agreeable, but multilateralism the more demanding. But one should not exalt the multilateral, nor exult in its elitist astringency. The multilateralism can become addicted, and give way to the temptation of a busy but bogus self-importance. In reality, the true dimension of much multilateral diplomacy is

more that of the goldfish bowl than of the globe. Its practitioners can become remote from outside realities and out of touch with the public which they are in theory supposed to serve. The EU, for example, has to some extent become the victim of “regulatory capture” by a restricted circle of assorted Euro-Mafiosi (politicians, diplomats and administrators). How else should the famous “Maastricht Treaty” have become such a by-word for professional opacity and public unease? There is still scope for old-fashioned political diplomacy and much demand for cultivation of soundly based bilateral understandings between independent sovereign States.

Looking to the future, I would expect diplomacy beyond 2000 to be marked by:

- The further growth of IT, including the widespread application of videoconferencing and other forms of instant communication and data processing. (This should be seen as potentially an enhancement, not a hobbling, of the diplomat’s scope for action in the field. He may be more closely over-seen from his capital, but he has greater opportunity to influence headquarters – just as more frequent ministerial travel means that the Ambassador gets more of a chance to noble his master, the Politician, at close quarters);
- A further blurring of the distinction between bureaucrats and diplomats or between “Home Civil Servants” and “Foreign Service Officers”. (In an interdependent world, in conditions of “globalisation”, water-tight compartments make less and less sense, whether within a national bureaucracy or between nation states or within international frameworks);
- The intensification of inter-State co-operation, at least in political and economic affairs and in defence (if not in the commercial field, where individual countries are still as much competitors as collaborators);
- A moderate further growth of multilateral at the expense of bilateral diplomacy, (although multilateral Parkinsonism and personnel proliferation will eventually germinate the seed of its own destruction – diplomats are already sufficiently misunderstood and mis-trusted by democratic tax payers!);
- The continuation, nevertheless, of bilateral diplomacy as the basic professional instrument, in the way that the infantry remains the military *sine qua non*, whatever the sophistication of armour, artillery, air power and the rest. Multilateral diplomats in a serious national Foreign Service will not be fully effective if they are not able and willing to work hand in glove with national colleagues in bilateral posts, who can offer the multilaterals a depository of expertise on a given country, a source of analysis of that country’s intentions, and a means of discreet bilateral lobbying in favour of multilateral objectives;
- Training and retraining, in new skills and subject matters, as the constant future requirement to be laid upon the diplomatic profession, (as it already is for most other professions, from banking to marketing and manufacture even in some respects the Law; the UK Diplomatic Service, in particular, has long been outstandingly good at this);
- The crucial importance of quality in the selection of diplomats, if they are to be cost – effective in working conditions of increasing exigency. This is above all true for small countries, whose interests are so often overlooked or trampled under foot; but which can grasp more for themselves at the margin than the big countries can, if their diplomatic Apparatus, though small in number, is qualitatively a strong one. This applies particularly in multilateral foray, where smaller countries already have an in-built relative advantage, which can be exploited to great effect by skilled and determined diplomatic operators who have a keen sense of priorities. The classical illustration is that of the Grand Duchy, whose influence within the EU is greatly in excess of what it would be if Luxembourg stood alone.

Finally, a word of caution. Diplomats need to be both sceptical and self-critical.

As to the first, while diplomacy these days has many new partners, let us be clear that it has no single substitute.

Mediamen have their value, but they offer only episodic, not continuous, coverage of people, places and events. They are also highly derivative and dependent on others. I was once mildly amused, but also somewhat outraged, by a journalist who spent long hours being briefed by me in a foreign country with which he was unfamiliar, only to offer the opinion, having returned home and published his articles to wide acclaim, that newsmen had made Embassies redundant. Business expertise and acumen deserves respect; but multi-millionaires and tycoons are usually opinionated and sometimes mistaken. As a resident Head of Mission in Tokyo with some years of experience of the post, I recall listening, en route from the airport to his hotel, to a lengthy but flawed exposition of what made Japan tick, delivered by a major continental “Box Wallah” on his first ever visit. Then there are the academics, of which I am still in a sense one. A serious scholar usually likes to listen to a competent and knowledgeable diplomatist; and I have always encouraged the latter to do the same to the former. But there is a real difference between the two, the diplomatic operator being “positive” where the academic analyst tends to be more “normative”. International relations theory, in particular, where it can be understood at all by the non-specialist, has sadly proved of little or no application in the real world. (Hence the lament of Professor Fred Halliday of the LSE, in a distinguished article last year on “international relations and its discontents”, in which he wrote that “for most of those who make foreign policy, the theoretical world of IR is an alien and irrelevant field, if not indeed one of those existence they are unaware. After more than a decade teaching in a university department, I have come to the sorry conclusion that virtually everyone meets in the world beyond .... Believes that the academic study of international relations is a sub-field of news commentary”.)

But I also mentioned self-criticism. Diplomats may be necessary, but they are not sufficient, to keep the world turning. They are more prone than most to narcissism, complacency, and at times even arrogance. In 1956, I reported for duty at the British Foreign Office, from University. Having scraped a First and somehow come nearly top of the list in the competitive entry examination, I was naively expecting to be received by the Foreign Secretary himself, with this thanks that I had agreed to adorn his Foreign Service. Instead, I was directed to a subordinate apparatchik in a seedy office in Carlton House Terrace. After a brief chat, the man had my measure. As I was leaving, he said that what had always struck him was that, however exacting and rigorous the selection process for the post-war British Foreign Service had been made, nevertheless the percentage of idiots in each intake had tended to remain constant!

So I recommend to all diplomats, but especially to the multilateralists, a prudent measure of modesty. But I hope I have made it plain that, if they did not exist, diplomats would have to be invented. As long as they move with the times, continue to be diligent, and are wary of what they cost the public purse, the world will always need them.