

'BYE, 'BYE BLIGHTY, I'M OFF TO 'BRASSHOLES!'
In Celebration of UK entry into Europe in 1973:
A Wormseye view from 'The First Wave' of Brits

by Leslie Fielding
 March 2013

Coming down from Cambridge in 1956, I joined the FO, and loved it from the start. Tehran (Persian-speaking Private Secretary to 'H.E. '); Singapore (on the staff of the C. in C., as Secretary of the JIC Far East); Phnom Penh (Head of Mission and peace negotiator); Paris (foreign policy liaison with the *Quai d'Orsay*) and two assignments in London (the first dealing with WEU and NATO and the second with 'blue sky' thinking). I was happy as Larry – and looked good in the uniform, too! By the time of UK accession to the European Communities, I was a Counsellor – and Deputy Head of the FCO's prestigious, all-seeing, all-knowing, 'Big Bonce' Policy Planning Staff. It was an orderly, appetising and oxygenated existence. Gosh!

But Arcadia is never forever; Olympus is not an abiding abode for mortal men. The Scots have a saying: 'There's aye a muckle slappy steen, at ilka body's door'.

On the First of April (natch!) 1973, I somehow found myself starting work on secondment as a Director (Under-Secretary, in Whitehall terminology) in the European Commission, in the first wave of civil servants to hit the Brussels beach. Ted Heath had called for volunteers, demanding that they made a good impression by working in French – he, of course, was a monoglot. My PUS, whom I had hitherto taken as a friend and ally, prodded me forward ('Go in and win, Leslie'). Vice President Christopher Soames, formerly my Ambassador in Paris and also my fine wine tutor, stuck his hook in, too (but with the alarming words: 'This has got to work!').

Initially, it all seemed a horrible mistake. I longed for the day when I could come in from the cold. 'Help! I'm a Celebrity!! Someone get me out of here!!!'

The workload was massive; the subject matter unfamiliar and often very technical; the working methods strange and occasionally even ludicrous. Most of the time I was condemned, as Sisyphus might well have been, to labour ceaselessly to avert trade wars with the United States, to appease a bruised and resentful Old Commonwealth, and to address intractable agricultural problems in the GATT. In addition – and as an act of malice towards the then only professional diplomat in that neck of the Commission's woods – I was assigned supervision of the Commission's protocol service, and of a new unit set up to sort out and professionalise the expanding but somewhat shambolic external diplomatic representation.

Language alone was a problem. To draft and to speak all day in French (which, as Ted had spotted, was *de rigueur* in those days!) demanded a level of effort greater than that which I had previously had to make during three years in Cambodia and four years in France. The French language demands facial exertions different from those required when one mutters away in English. Consequently, my throat, cheeks and lips

began to rebel after eight or nine hours *per diem*, non-stop; I suffered from total ‘French face-ache’ – for which the best relief was to swear copiously in German or Dutch (different muscles!) – for the first week or so back in Brussels, after the summer holidays. In those days, in Blighty, I had a modest spread on the fringes of Dartmoor, where, as Lay Reader and Landowner, I was the village ‘Squarson’. Frankly, I much preferred helping neighbours with a difficult calving, or denouncing local witchcraft from the pulpit, to getting my indecisive and slightly shifty German Vice-President, Willi Haferkamp, down to brass tacks and hard decisions. Or, for that matter, endeavouring to leave the presence of the well-disposed but super-bright French Secretary General, Emile Noël, without a sinking sensation of intellectual inferiority.

A greater difficulty (Euroceptics kindly take note) was the acute shortage of Brussels staff, compared with Whitehall’s ample availabilities. In consequence, and as already noted, the workload was consistently – sometimes absurdly – heavy. Yet another handicap was imposed by the bureaucratic tradition of the Commission. Old timers used to joke that it was an amalgam of the worst practices of each of the civil services of France, Germany, Italy and the Benelux – the six founding members of the European Community.

Certainly, staff discipline was more relaxed, obedience to instructions less certain, than in ‘The Office’. There seemed little or no career planning or staff training. The educational standards in the Brussels bureaucracy were high (officials often had degrees in both economics and law, as well as being competent in three languages); but, as civil servants, they seemed to me on average to fall slightly below the level habitual in Whitehall departments. I looked in vain for the kind of teamwork and the inter-departmental co-ordinating structures familiar to me both within the Foreign Office and between government departments in Whitehall. One had to watch out for banana skins from the ill-intentioned. Hierarchy did not seem to matter too much – the Luxembourger head of my protocol service (Grade A4) was junior in rank to his Italian Number Two (Grade 3 *à titre personnel*).

There were other novelties and horrors, like having to give press conferences on trade policy issues and to submit to being grilled by the External Relations Committee of the European Parliament. Worse, I was constantly required to rush off and actually *do* something, instead of composing elegant and judicious ‘Blue Minutes’ for ministers.

As for the EC overseas offices for which I had assumed responsibility, they were few, tiny, of recent creation and operating on an improvised, hand-to-mouth, basis. Confidentiality was less than what I had been accustomed to. One privileged external delegation was rumoured to possess an ancient cipher machine which no one knew how to use and which was therefore left locked up in the safe. There was no diplomatic bag service, or secure telephone link, to anywhere or anyone. On one occasion, I had to contact the Chef de Cabinet of my Commissioner in Brussels (my friend, former FO colleague and fellow Farsi speaker, David – now Lord – Hannay), from a dodgy situation in Latin America, by means of a telex sent from the local Post Office, couched in Persian. (Indeed, the Commission took pride in being a ‘House of Glass’. Asked by a Foreign Office friend how I was finding things, a few weeks after my first arrival in Brussels, I recall replying that, while in London you locked away official papers on leaving the office at night, in Brussels you left your files on your

desk, but locked up the telephone, so that office cleaners did not spend their evenings making long international calls to distant relatives). Internal organisation, too, could be – dare I say? – inspirational. Thus, I recall on one occasion the Washington Delegation reporting the same US government policy development twice to Brussels, in two far from identical separate telexes, drafted by two different officials who had not consulted each other or their boss. In the Tokyo Delegation, its Head – a senior German from Bonn’s generally weak, reconstructed post-war civil service – regularly assigned the same piece of work simultaneously to two separate officials, to see which one did a better job of it – a procedure proudly described by its practitioner as using a ‘two-headed eagle’.

The foregoing will rightly appear arrogant and condescending. I must have given the impression of a fussy and slightly narcissistic Guards officer, who had suddenly found himself an outcast, on transfer to an unfashionable Line Regiment stationed in a remote outpost of some insalubrious equatorial colony. And the plain fact is that, in everything that mattered, I was wrong, wrong, wrong!

After the first shock, I came to realise that I found myself in a set-up which had more in common with a successful City institution, or the upper layers of a dynamic Multinational Company, than with a long established imperial bureaucracy. There were not a few precocious prima donnas; a good working relationship with colleagues had to be earned, rather than expected as of right; knowledge was power – you did not share it too widely. People had more than one way of skinning a cat. But the senior continental officials in the External Relations Directorate-General in which I served were ‘Ace’ – people of marked ability and intelligence, who believed in what they were doing, and did it extremely well. These, and select colleagues from the agricultural and industrial policy departments, possessed international negotiating skills, developed over long years doing the same sort of job, that were unsurpassed – even unmatched – anywhere in the world. I came to admire them and I saw that I had much to learn. Although too polite to say so, they were less convinced that they had anything to learn from me.

On my first day in the then ‘Foreign Service’ in 1956, the elderly and experienced clerk in the Foreign Office Personnel Department, detecting a certain smugness (I had come in second on the list, in the Open Competition), took pains to assure me that, however tough and demanding they had made the selection process for the Fast Stream, “we still find that the percentage of idiots in the intake remains constant, Sir”. I was to remember what he said, twenty years later, renovating a *Maison de Maître* in Etterbeek. Clearly, one had to join them, if one could not beat them. There was no alternative but to go native. And, although it took time for my face to fit, in the end it was possible to rub noses and undergo tribal initiation.

To keep the opposition guessing, I began to switch constantly between fancy French, barrack room Flemish, Goon Show German, Intuitive Italian, D.I.Y. Danish, Survival Spanish and long forgotten school Greek (mostly ‘Water is Best’ and ‘Everything is in a state of flux’). I duly locked up my telephone; left my papers strewn across the desk, cast banana skins behind me; set aside hierarchy; instructed two juniors to do something which I then did better myself; dined as often as possible at the best restaurants and generally daubed my cheeks, and other accessible parts of my anatomy, with the comitological war paints of the relevant EC tribal Indabas.

But there was a price. It became difficult, when briefly out of the trees and back across the Channel, to speak good enough English to get past the front desk at The Travellers Club in native dress; utterly unthinkable, on eventual return to Blighty after 15 years of ‘Brassholes’, to consider any employment exciting enough, outside the University of Sussex. But I console myself. I am glad to say, on the first count at least, that I have happily since recovered full command of my native tongue. *One must-a be dankful for ze small Merçi, nicht?*

To be serious, from the close of my first year in Brussels, I never looked back. All of us Brits in the ‘First Wave’ from Whitehall had been given a ‘return ticket’. But I eventually told the dear old FO that I would not be returning to the fold. (Pity, about the uniform, though!).

After a bit, I moved to Tokyo, to head up the modestly staffed EC Delegation (other than me, only two senior Brussels-based staff). We defused a budding trade war and found ways of working with the Nips, for the common good. After four years of that, at the age of 50, I came back to Brussels to succeed Roy Denman as Director General for External Relations. D.G.1 – acting in the name of the largest and most powerful trade bloc in the world – was Europe’s international spokesman in all matters of community competence in the G7, OECD and UNCTAD, as well as in the GATT. Making good use of the growing network of operational external delegations, we succeeded in securing more rational bilateral relations across the board with Europe’s foreign partners; organised an improved aid programme for the ‘Non-Associate’ developing countries; seized the centre ground of the GATT to liberalise international trade – in the process, helping to lay the ground for the upcoming new European Single Market. And we did all this not arbitrarily or conspiratorially, behind the backs of the Community’s Member States, but in full and open consultation with them. The folk in Whitehall and Westminster were my colleagues and friends fully as much as their opposite numbers in the other European capitals.

In the end, essentially for family reasons, I took the difficult decision to return to the UK, to take up a University post. True, they had offered me the Washington Delegation, or the succession to Emile Noël! (No. Not). Even suggested I be the official EU candidate – it was our turn – to be the next Director General of the GATT (flattering, but *au dessus de ma gare*). Inevitably, at the end of the day, it was the Vice Chancellor’s impressive robes at Sussex that swung it!

As Director General, I had, for five years, written a private and very personal newsletter once a month to our external Heads of Delegation, to keep them in the policy picture at the centre of things. These letters, (which were always straightforward and said things “as they were”, to the point almost of unprofessional indiscretion), were naturally never copied to Commissioners or to other departments – although my four D.D.G.s and nine Directors were allowed a glimpse of them. I wanted to be free to say whatever I wanted. My final letter, dictated to my P.A., the late Susan Besford, in July 1987, as I was packing my bags, happened to conclude with the following paragraph. I had a lump in my throat (Susan took it in her stride, while raising both eyebrows), but nevertheless meant every word of it. I still do, today – and I can see each of them, still.

“When I vault lightly into the saddle of my battered family Volvo, and zoom up the rue de la Loi and out onto the Zeebrugge road at the end of this month, I shall wave a cheerful farewell to the formal minuets of the COREPER; and the rustic charms of the 113 Titulaires Committee; and the challenge of non-stop jet-setting round the world; and the adrenalin of rough and tumble, all-night negotiating sessions. [P.S. My record, Gentle Reader, was three days and nights without going to bed, as the senior EC negotiator at an UNCTAD Ministerial Meeting in Belgrade!] To say nothing of the obligatory gastronomic delights of ‘*Comme Chez Soi*’, ‘*Le Cygne*’ or the ‘*Villa Lorraine*’; and the tinsel crown of petty privilege and empty acclaim. Also, I admit I can do without working steadily round the clock, year in year out, without seeing very much of my wife and children, or being able to open a book or say my prayers properly. But I shall miss and remember the men and women of the Directorate-General whom I have been lucky enough to know and serve with, past and present, the living and the departed. My best wishes for your future careers. My blessing on you and your families. Goodbye – and thank you”.

Looking back today on the Brussels experience, one is bound to ask oneself whether subsequent events have not falsified at least some of the hopes we all cherished in 1973. In small part, maybe, yes. But the EU, with Britain in it, does have major and hugely compensating achievements to its credit. So, was it all worth it? Of course it was! Would I do it all over again? Absolutely!

LF
04.03.13