

## PREFACE

*It is axiomatic that no member of the [Diplomatic] Service should show or even imply personal disagreement with any aspect of His Majesty's Government's foreign policy. It is not always so easy.....*

Marcus Cheke, 1949

There are, I think, few other walks of life in which being goosed by a President, Prime Minister or some other illustrious personage is an everyday hazard, as it is for Ambassadors' Wives or, indeed, Ambassadors (there are Ministers of all sexes with whom no Ambassador is safe). The progress of the principle guest through a distinguished throng can frequently be tracked via the startled yelps of the guests as he or she passes by. Time in office is short and fast work is needed to make the most of it.

But for diplomats themselves, the temptation to stray or at least experiment is a constant danger, as many Postings are both stressful and boring, and they go to a lot of parties. Senior diplomats enjoy great prestige, which goes down a treat with the opposite sex, opening delightful prospects. Some of the larger, more cosmopolitan posts go through phases of such rampant sexual intrigue that you wonder whether there is any time or energy left for more mundane matters such as policy, commerce or the anxieties of Distressed British Subjects.

Beneath the veneer of exquisite manners and immaculate dress and behaviour, all human life, much of it entirely reprehensible, is there. So guidance is necessary, as what diplomatic services really dislike is disorderly lives.

Until sixty years ago, diplomacy was largely the preserve of an international aristocratic class, and the rules of behaviour that it adopted were very much the rules of their own society. However, after the upheavals of two world wars, society became more fluid and the Foreign Office began to make conscious efforts to recruit more widely:

*My dear chap – these days it really does not matter which university you attended. Either is equally acceptable. Anon.*

The FO was nonetheless determined to maintain its own traditions. Manners simplify life by acting as rules of engagement for interaction between people who do not know each other and may come from different traditions, but they are also the basis for arcane rituals, which set castes apart, and the rules and regulations that governed Foreign Service life were no exception.

Between 1949 and 1974, the FO therefore produced a series of helpful little Guidances on How to Behave Abroad. Since in 1949 etiquette was still of paramount importance in diplomacy, the first Guidance was written by Sir Marcus Cheke, His Majesty's Vice Marshall of the Diplomatic Corps, the guardian of such important matters. It was addressed to a young diplomat, John Bull, who was about to join the staff of Sir Henry and Lady Sealingwax, in the fictional country of Mauretania, and to his loyal wife, Mrs. Bull. Later versions were written by senior members of the Service, Barbara Salt

and Stanley Tomlinson, drawing on their experience of life abroad. I have used quotes from these Guidances to highlight the transformation in attitudes over the twenty-five years during which they were produced, which in themselves carried the seeds of far greater upheavals to come.

Sir Marcus' Guidance is a hilariously idiosyncratic account, far removed from the dry tome that preceded and paralleled it, the Guide to Diplomatic Practice by Sir Ernest Satow, (1917 - updated several times by distinguished diplomats, notably Lord Gore-Booth), and the careful booklets that followed, and all the more entertaining as a result. It was, of course, a confidential document (de-classified, I hasten to add, in September 1993) for internal FO use only, but it is outspoken in a way that would be unthinkable in an official publication today:

*There are countries where ...it is the virtues which are emphasised in the Old rather than the New Testament which impress the most.... The late Mr. Chamberlain might have done well to remember this when he flew to Munich to negotiate with Hitler; had he been accompanied by a platoon of picked men from the Guards instead of a secretary or two carrying umbrellas, he might have produced a different effect on the Nazi mind.*

It is a shock to read the rules of etiquette that governed existence in Marcus Cheke's day, and to realise how different our lives are now. However, it should be borne in mind that although much of the advice put forward so confidently may reinforce outsiders' worst fears about the Foreign Service, it is as much a reflection of the diplomatic world as it was thirty to forty years earlier when Sir Marcus himself was a young

diplomat, as of the battered world of 1949. The old rigid forms of pre-war society were still apparently intact, but change was already working through the system, and there is a fascinating transition from Sir Marcus' sublime self-confidence, to the sensible, down-to-earth approach of Barbara Salt, sixteen years later, and the eminently reasonable, but definitely defensive tone of Stanley Tomlinson; conventions and rules of social behaviour may have relaxed by 1974, but the world had become more circumspect. All three booklets describe conventions which belong to another age, as remote from us as the Victorians, to whom they would be much more familiar, although things were getting fuzzy by 1974, when doubt had begun to set in. Much space is taken up with the rituals surrounding the leaving of cards, which nobody would understand any more, and there were equally clear rules which told you what to wear, and indeed what not to wear.

Diplomacy is above all a theatrical performance, a comedy of manners, and when the conventions of society change, so do those governing the conduct of foreign relations. It is based on internationally acceptable norms and standards where the pace of change is much slower than at home, and on the necessity of putting on a brave show, so there can seem to be a time lag between diplomatic and contemporary life. It makes diplomats seem stuffy and old-fashioned for, as Sir Marcus observes, other people are much keener on ceremony than the British are. There is the story, which has become apocryphal, of the French Ambassador's wife who sat next to a former British Foreign Secretary at a grand dinner at Lancaster House. As soon as dinner was over, she stormed into the ladies loo, complaining in voluble French that he had propositioned her. "But surely," her companion protested. "You expected this?"

“Naturally,” she retorted, eyes flashing. “But not before the soup!”

Much of the tension between diplomatic services and the governments and peoples that they represent springs from the public’s view that diplomats are stuck in a privileged time-warp, at vast cost to the taxpayer (in fact, the FCO budget is one of the smallest in Whitehall) and diplomats’ view that, as Chou En Lai said, diplomacy is war by other means and they need to be properly resourced to carry it out. And anyway, where’s the fun in commuting from Milton Keynes or flying the flag in some grotty flat in downtown Beijing?

Diplomats believe passionately that their work is terribly important. Their tragedy is that, while this is true, most people have only the faintest idea of what they actually do. It is the question that you are always asked at parties, but even as you draw breath to give a balanced and articulate answer, the eyes of the questioner glaze over and shift to the other side of the room where he or she has just spotted someone much more amusing or important. Most of diplomacy is, in any event, pretty intangible or aimed at forestalling trouble, and it is difficult to find anything interesting to say about a disaster that did not happen, even if it kept you up all night. From time to time, however, there is a lasting end result. When I first met my husband he was working as assistant to Sir William Luce, the Foreign Secretary’s Special Envoy to the Persian Gulf, who was encouraging the establishment of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in the aftermath of British withdrawal East of Suez. They were shuttling between London, Teheran and the Gulf States, patiently stitching together an agreement that all the (very difficult) parties could live with (or indeed survive; one unfortunate Ruler was assassinated during the course of the negotiations). Their success can still be seen on the map,

but this is rare. So the mystery remains, and indeed it is possible that people do not actually want to be told earnestly about negotiations over aid quotas, treaty sub-clauses or, heaven help us, prison visiting; reality is so tediously pedestrian. They want to be able to visualise diplomatic life as endlessly glamorous – and to hate diplomats for enjoying it. But there has to be more to it than that, so this is a book about what diplomats do and the conventions that govern their lives.

A Foreign Service exists to defend and promote its country's interests and maintain its place in a precarious world, and to give advice to its Government. As ever, the key thing in diplomacy is to pick your fights. Once the decision on a course of action or policy has been made (not necessarily in accordance with its advice), its job is to pursue it with tenacity and intelligence, without resorting to open warfare. There are a lot of Big Beasts out there, not to mention hordes of marauding little ones. All of them are hungry and the balance of power between them shifts constantly, so diplomats are kept pretty busy. If it all goes horribly wrong, and it frequently does, the Foreign Service sweeps up the bodies and engages on damage limitation. Foreign Services have evolved over the centuries, accumulating along the way a body of conventions and practices known as diplomatic etiquette, and they believed that they had the expertise to do the job.

But over recent years, an enormous cultural shift has taken place in the perception of what diplomats do and what they are for. Revolutions in travel and technology have altered the way they communicate and organise their work, but most significantly of all, diplomacy's primary role has changed from representational, deeply rooted in the conventions of the nineteenth century, to service, ruled by key objectives,

stakeholder surveys, indicators of success, capability audits and the familiar problems of finite resources (painfully more finite every year) and infinite demand. Outside management consultants have been brought in to produce blue-prints for change, and Special Advisers keep the line on policy.

A modern Foreign Ministry is expected to implement foreign policy as part of a government machine, but not to own it in the same way as it did in the past. It has lost its exclusive remit in Foreign Affairs and found itself in competition for the best-funded bits, such as anti-terrorism and aid, with other politically astute departments. It cannot even assume that bilateral diplomacy between two countries, carried out by a resident Ambassador and his or her staff, once its strongest suit and the very stuff of traditional diplomacy, will fit within the grid as a measurably effective activity. There is increasing emphasis on multi-lateral diplomacy through bodies such as the EU, the UN and NATO, which engage the interests of the whole government machine and call for close ministerial participation and control.

This has caused mighty diplomatic institutions, formerly symbols of self-confidence, to question their own existence and the validity of their calling as a profession, and as a consequence, Foreign Ministries have pretty much had to reinvent themselves. The major internal focus has shifted to the problems of devising and introducing corporate change fast enough to keep pace with dwindling resources, and it is more than a little strange to see organisations which prided themselves on clarity of thought and expression taking so readily to incomprehensible management-speak. The FCO's internal structure has been radically pruned, especially at the higher levels. It no longer sees it itself as an employer for the whole of a career, and all jobs in the senior grades and many

in the intermediate grades are open to the Civil Service as a whole. The concepts of a diplomatic service and of career diplomats are fast vanishing into the mists of time, and with them, for good and ill, the idea of a foreign service as a specialist caste. The Foreign Office thought that it was stronger than the Ministers who ruled it. It was wrong. The days are long gone of steely-eyed Ambassadors who would thunder at their supposed masters:

“You cannot seriously expect me to say anything so damned stupid to the Foreign Minister?”

And get away with it.

Where is the verve of former times? I miss it, but we must move on. The Foreign Office needs to open up to new people and new ideas, to find better ways of working and of serving its clients, and to embrace change for the good things that it brings, preferably without losing the best of the past. It is a difficult circle to square.

Why do I care? Because the Foreign Office has framed most of my adult life and it is difficult to kick such an old habit. On leaving university, I started as a desk officer in the United Nations department, and then joined the Private Office of the Minister responsible for negotiating Britain’s entry into the EU. I married a fellow diplomat and since at that time FCO rules demanded that a wife should resign when her husband was posted abroad, I spent the next twenty years as a diplomatic wife. After my husband died in 2002, the FCO, which had in the interim become an equal opportunities employer, took me back and I had another four years as a diplomat at the end of my career, to match the handful of years at the beginning.

This has enabled me to see that, besides the official rules that govern diplomacy and diplomatic life, which are enshrined in Guidances and dusty tomes on diplomatic practice, there are unofficial rules which really make the whole thing tick, and which govern the direction and pace of change. That is what this book is about - and the excuse to tell a few good stories (always irresistible to a diplomat). As Marcus Cheke observed:

*“The whole science of human relationships is involved in the consideration of these things.”*