

## Encouraging the iconoclasts

Weakened during the Blair era, the Foreign Office needs to clear its corridors of sycophants and secret cabals if it is to confront the challenges of the 21st century, says Carne Ross

There is an urgent crisis in British foreign policymaking. The obvious manifestation of this crisis can be seen in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere in the Middle East and Asia, where Gordon Brown's new team must hope that commentators and the public will forget the goals the government declared for British policy just a few years ago: democracy and stability in Iraq, a Taliban-free and stable Afghanistan (and Pakistan), a two-state solution for Israel and Palestine, Iran arrested in its nuclear course. All look far from reach.

The less obvious manifestation is the failure of Britain's institutions of foreign policy (i.e. Number 10 and the FCO) to predict the dramatic events of the last few years. The antediluvian terrorism of al Qaeda more or less took officialdom completely by surprise, as did the election of Ahmedinejad in Iran (just like the 1979 Iranian revolution). The end of communism, the impact of the neo-cons on US policy and the rise of Hamas were equally unforeseen.

Under Tony Blair, Number 10 had a lockdown on foreign policy. The foreign secretary appeared subordinate even to officials working over the road. This subordination was reflected in, dare I say it, weak foreign secretaries and even weaker junior ministers who made no discernible impact on policy whatsoever. Meanwhile, among FCO officials, morale hit rock-bottom.

The Blair years saw an insidious policy of promotion by loyalty, where those most willing to demonstrate their political trustworthiness were elevated. This process – essentially politicisation of the civil service – is not admitted, even though every official knew of it. 'Sofa government' and spin undermined the culture of painstaking, long-term strategy-making (I am no Tory, but they did it better). Policy is still far too driven by the incessant demands of 'process', and the production of endless briefings for the next multilateral meeting, than it is by strategy.

Lastly, there has been no proper accounting for or lessons learned from the mistakes of recent years. While public blame is directed towards the toe-curling adherence to an incompetent administration in Washington, the weakened institutions of foreign policymaking have played their hidden part too.

The new foreign secretary has a challenge on his hands. He has heavyweight backup in the form of Mark Malloch-Brown, a minister who – for once – has serious international experience. But what is required is not merely a new tone, such as the subtle repositioning towards the US suggested by Brown's recent Washington visit. Something much more fundamental is needed.

The traditional model of foreign policymaking – grey suits sitting in Whitehall making elegantly crafted judgments about what 'we' want in the rest of the world – doesn't work any more. The idea that officials can sift and select the correct truths from the cacophony of the world is, I fear, a myth; as inaccurate as the notion that they can know too what 'we' want. Life is more complicated than that. The world is no longer a chess board of countries and powers. It is a confusing *mélange* where commerce, culture, emotion and even the weather play at least as strong a part as the policy decisions of governments.

To avoid the disastrous mistakes of recent years, policymaking needs to get a lot more eclectic and accountable. Instead of being a closed shop of secretive policymakers, the FCO could become a clearing-house of ideas, encouraged and debated with outside experts and even the subjects of policy – Iraqis, Israelis, Darfuris – themselves. Imagination is needed. It lingers, like dying embers, among a few officials in the FCO. Fanning it back to life will require deliberate signalling from ministers that the sycophantic days of Blair are over and that eclecticism, even iconoclasm, is permitted.

It is no easy task to effect policy that works. The traditional methods – of ministerial statement or ambassadorial *demarché* – are less and less relevant. Addressing the multiple forces at work in Pakistan, terrorism or global warming requires recruiting the multiple actors involved to your cause. With leadership, the FCO could become the shepherd of coalitions of private companies, NGOs, individuals and other countries to get things done, from ending genocide in Darfur, to stabilising Afghanistan. This is a lot harder than the traditional stuff of drafting eloquent submissions on 'whither China' to the foreign secretary. But it might work.

This course could prove the salvation of the FCO, which is currently so battered and unsure of itself. It would produce more legitimate and more effective foreign policy. But if Brown chooses to follow the Blair closed-shop (if not closed-sofa) model of policymaking, expect more mistakes, even if not – one hopes – of the magnitude of recent failures.

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