

## **Music in the Security Council**

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*The cloistered, fetid world of United Nations negotiation over Iraq convinced Carne Ross of the need for more open, accountable global diplomacy.*

Negotiation is the heart of diplomacy. When I was sent to negotiate for my country at the United Nations in New York, I was over the moon. This is it, I thought, the real thing, the hard core. This was my fantasy of diplomacy, my dream career, come true. But the reality of negotiation, its everyday, minute-to-minute lived reality, is of course, like the reality of most fantasies: different.

The location of our negotiation was a small cramped room, the so-called NAM caucus room, near the main UN Security Council chambers. The table in the room was not big enough for all fifteen delegates of the council's member-states. So if you were late for the day's session, you had to sit against the wall, with your voluminous papers balanced uncomfortably upon your knees. Light filtered weakly through dusty blinds drawn upon the outside world. After a couple of hours, the air inside the room would be stale and fetid.

We were discussing the six-monthly "rollover" of the oil-for-food programme on Iraq. This sounds like it should be straightforward. But by 2001, when I had been working at the British mission for three years, nothing about Iraq at the UN was straightforward. The Security Council, and in particular the five permanent members, was deeply divided.

On the one hand, we (the United Kingdom and the United States) wanted to maintain the sanctions imposed on the Saddam Hussein regime after its invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 (and confirmed after its ejection in February 1991) - and therefore, so we thought, the pressure on Baghdad to disarm its weapons of mass destruction (WMD). On the other, the French, Russians and Chinese wanted to "encourage" greater cooperation from Iraq, and ameliorate what they claimed were the negative effects of sanctions.

Worse, in our little group of delegates, national divisions had become personal animosities. It wasn't just the air that was bad in that room: the atmosphere was horrible. When the American delegate spoke, the French would smirk and laugh. When the French spoke, the American would stare at the ceiling or shuffle his papers. It wasn't very pleasant being in that small, under-ventilated room.

Depressed by the prospect of weeks of this animosity, one day I had an idea. Before negotiations started that day, I asked my British colleague to bring in a CD of his

favourite song. He played *Wild Wood* by Paul Weller, formerly of the punk band, The Jam. The next day the Bangladeshi delegate played a haunting love song. The next, the Chinese played a song from medieval China. And it worked. Somehow, the venomous atmosphere calmed. We got down to work more quickly. The delegates began to listen to each other with more attention. I cannot claim the music brought consensus to the Security Council, but it did bring harmony to our little room.

Until one day the Iraqi ambassador got to hear of our music (the press had noticed the CD player). He complained that we were making light of his country's distress. Another Arab ambassador objected too - even though his delegate told me that he was looking forward to choosing his song. And though our music had to stop, it did not stop the story going round the world. In the west, it was reported (in the *New York Times* and others) as a quirky, almost humorous episode. In much of the middle east, it was another example of the inhumanity of western diplomats towards Iraq.

At the time, I thought this criticism unfair: we were simply trying to improve the atmosphere of our negotiations. But looking back, it was symptomatic of something much deeper - and justified. In that room, we were very distant from the reality of the Iraqi people whose lives we were arbitrating. Our arguments were much more about our desires and needs - whether Chinese or British - than they were about the Iraqis'. All of us in that room claimed to care about the condition of ordinary Iraqis. But in truth, we knew little of it. We extracted our information, according to our needs, from poorly-written UN reports. From this partial (in both senses) basis, we created narratives about what was "really" going on. All of us did this, whichever side we were on. Every example of civilian suffering, the French blamed on sanctions, we blamed on Saddam's failure to implement the humanitarian programme. In a complicated story, both had some truth. But neither had the whole truth.

This story is but a particular example of something wrong with the way that diplomacy, and international decision-making, is done today. No one outside our musty little chamber even knew where we were, let alone *who* we were. Sequestered in closed rooms far from prying eyes, decisions of enormous gravity were - and are - being made, in our name, by our diplomats. And though the diplomats are far removed from the places they are discussing, only rarely do the real people their decisions affect get a say in the diplomats' deliberations. This wasn't only true of Iraq; it is also true of Kosovo, or the Western Sahara, or Darfur.

More scrutiny, more accountability, more transparency - there are ways to introduce these necessities in structural form. Above all, the closed forums of diplomacy must allow those with most at stake in their decisions to speak. It's not only fairer, better decisions that will result. It's time to bring some air.