

Review

Are Diplomats Necessary?

By **Brian Urquhart**

Independent Diplomat: Dispatches from an Unaccountable Elite

by Carne Ross

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1.

Diplomacy is one of the world's oldest professions, although diplomatic practice as we know it is a relatively recent development. Using ambassadors and envoys, often distinguished personalities of the time (Dante, Machiavelli, Peter Paul Rubens), was an accepted practice throughout recorded history. It was also regarded, in Europe at least, as "a kind of activity morally somewhat suspect and incapable of being brought under any system."^[1]

The establishment of the international rules of diplomacy, including the immunity of diplomats,^[2] began with the Congresses of Vienna (1815) and Aix-la-Chapelle (1818). The rules were a European creation gradually adopted in the rest of the world. Further international conventions update them from time to time. Diplomats have enjoyed a surprising degree of immunity from criticism for the often violent and disorderly state of international affairs.

The history of diplomacy abounds with double-edged *bons mots* on the nature of ambassadors and diplomacy: "honorable spy"; "*splendide mendax*"; "a process of haggling, conducted with an utter disregard of the ordinary standards of morality, but with the most exquisite politeness"; and the sixteenth-century Sir Henry Wotton's famous comment, allegedly in jest, that "an ambassador is an honest man sent to lie abroad for the good of his country." In *Independent Diplomat*, Carne Ross has little patience with the qualified admiration and curiosity with which ambassadors have traditionally been regarded. He tells the story of the disillusionment and rebirth—also in diplomacy—of a fifteen-year veteran of one of the most internationally respected diplomatic establishments, the British Foreign Service.

Many Englishmen, particularly of my generation, have an ingrained distrust, mixed with reluctant admiration, for the British Foreign Office, now the Foreign and Commonwealth

Office. We remember the disastrous 1930s, the failure to impose preventive sanctions on Mussolini's Italy when it invaded Abyssinia, or to oppose Hitler's occupation of the Rhineland, and the nonintervention policy in Spain. We recall the lack of response to members of the German General Staff who desperately sought British and French support in deposing Hitler while he was still relatively weak. My lifelong dislike of the word "unrealistic," often used to discredit bold ideas, dates from that time. Perhaps equally unfairly, we criticize the Foreign Office for failing to head off hopelessly misconceived plans like the 1956 Suez expedition or the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

Carne Ross's book has a firsthand quality that deserves attention. Many of his criticisms and suggestions are by no means new, but his growing disaffection with diplomacy and diplomats should stimulate serious critical thinking about the conduct of international affairs. On the other hand, his use of generalized stereotypes does not inspire confidence.

To take one small instance, describing a coldhearted, hierarchical desert of diplomats and Secretariat members at the UN headquarters in New York, he writes that "to meet...an Under-Secretary of the UN, you must yourself enjoy an equivalent rank in diplomacy or politics...." I strongly doubt this. During the time of my mentor and predecessor, Ralph Bunche, and in the fourteen years that I was a UN undersecretary-general, we actively encouraged outsiders and junior officials to visit us, not least because they were much more stimulating and informative than most ambassadors or ministers. I know of subsequent under-secretaries who have done the same.

In the same paragraph Ross writes, "Like Versailles' inner sanctum, the Secretary-General's suite lies in the most remote and inaccessible part of the Secretariat building." This is the purest flapdoodle. The UN headquarters building bears no resemblance whatsoever to Versailles. The secretary-general's office is on the thirty-eighth floor of a modern thirty-eight-story structure, and is accessible by no fewer than six elevators that also serve the rest of the building. It is true that the secretary-general's inhumanly busy program makes scheduling appointments very tight, but that is hardly a personal choice of the secretary-general.

Ross's account of the quirks, attitudes, conceits, and habits of British diplomats and the Foreign Office echoes a favorite minor theme of twentieth-century British novelists—the use of diplomatic language to soften disagreeable truths: the "us" and "them" view of the outside world; the pervasive complacency that comes from the sense of "the Office's" wisdom and superior judgment; the ritual significance attached to the drafting of telegrams; the carefully constructed barriers against confronting harsh realities; and the cherished illusion of a rational and essentially orderly world controlled by governments. Certainly diplomatic habit often blocks a forth-right approach to international crises. In

times of violence and acute human suffering, diplomatic niceties and hypocrisies in the UN Security Council can be enraging and can lead to inexcusable inaction or delay. But in a world organization still based on sovereign nations, what is a better alternative?

Ross's attempt to describe the stereotypical "ambassador" is the ironic climax of his indictment of his former profession:

His demeanour is friendly but grave. His expression says that he is a man to be taken seriously: he has much on his mind. He may frown but he will never grimace. He may raise his voice, but he will never shout. Measure is his mien. In all things, measure.

The quintessential quality of these paladins of their profession is, apparently, "balance," "not going too far," and not transgressing the borders of the state system and approved "facts." The ambassador must be a "realist," skeptical of moral enthusiasm or strong measures; he must also appear to be dedicated, in principle at least, to international law and human rights.

Ross describes his "slow descent from illusion to disillusionment." His final British posting was in 1997 to the British UN delegation in New York and at the end of it, in late 2003, he was lent to the UN team in Kosovo. During the run-up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq he earned, he writes, a "Rottweiler-like reputation...as the most effective and aggressive defender of British-American Iraq policy, sanctions and all."

The Security Council negotiations leading up to the US invasion of Iraq were the catalyst for Ross's final disillusionment. He recalls the intensive discussions about the draconian sanctions imposed on Iraq in early 1991. There was a basic inability to agree on the facts of the case. Britain and the United States held continued sanctions to be essential for international security; France and Russia maintained that sanctions were causing unnecessary suffering, particularly shortages of food and medical supplies, to the inhabitants of Iraq. UNICEF had calculated that 500,000 Iraqi children had died as a result of sanctions.

Ross was in the group of mid-level diplomats appointed by the Security Council to work on this problem. With no Iraqi representatives present and no accurate sense of what was going on in Iraq, the group was reduced, in Ross's words, to the "absurd spectacle of each side quoting supposedly impartial UN reports at one another." "There is," he writes, "something very wrong about sitting around a table in New York arguing about how many children are dying in Iraq and whose fault it was." He does not, however, suggest a better method of resolving the conflicting political and humanitarian problems involved in sanctions.

Ross is not reticent about the fact that he was good at his job. He mentions that most ministers did not understand the fiendish complications of sanctions. One British minister, who was trying to sell a British proposal to the Russian foreign secretary, asked Ross for a written brief; Ross responded with twenty pages. "He read it that night and the next day deployed it to devastating effect. [Russian Foreign Minister] Ivanov appeared completely stunned."

Ross increasingly felt that "all of us were failing in our responsibility under the UN charter to maximise security and minimise suffering." "It is," he writes,

far too disconcerting a prospect for governments or the diplomats who represent them to analyse or talk about the world as it really is, one shaped and affected by multitudinous and complex forces, among which governments are but one group of many involved.

Can the UN Security Council, still largely controlled by the original five permanent members, be relied on to deal justly and expeditiously with really critical problems? On Iraq, and on many other questions, mutual trust, especially among the permanent members, tends to evaporate quickly. France and Russia, although they based their case on humanitarian grounds, also had strong economic motives for lifting the Iraq sanctions, and both soon concluded that the Bush administration would never allow that to happen.

In 1998 the International Atomic Energy Agency reported that Iraq had fulfilled all its obligations relating to nuclear weapons except for two minor issues. The United States and Britain refused to agree to any public statement on this important development. According to Ross, the Americans told the British that, for domestic political reasons, the administration could not agree to any public suggestion that Saddam Hussein was doing what he was supposed to do.

The Russian ambassador, Sergei Lavrov, felt that he had been lied to. Richard Butler, then head of the UN inspectors in Iraq (UNSCOM), had stated in Moscow that Saddam Hussein was cooperating with the UN inspectors, but in New York he had issued a report saying exactly the opposite. In 1998 the US and Britain insisted on yet another Security Council resolution demanding Iraq's full cooperation with UNSCOM. Lavrov asked the British if they regarded the resolution as authorizing the use of force if Iraq did not cooperate. The British replied that they did not, but when the UK and the US, in December 1998, launched Operation Desert Fox, an intensive aerial bombardment of targets in Iraq, the British quoted the resolution in legal justification of the bombing. The Chinese, French, and Russians, not unnaturally, saw such obfuscations as evidence of bad faith.

Carne Ross left the Foreign Service in September 2004. His account of this event is surprisingly meager. David Kelly, a British biological warfare expert who had been advising the British mission in New York, had told a British journalist that there were professional misgivings about Prime Minister Tony Blair's intelligence dossier on Iraq's alleged WMDs—the so-called "dodgy dossier." Confronted with an official investigation, Kelly committed suicide.^[3] Ross was "appalled and enraged" by this tragedy. In June 2004, he submitted, from Kosovo, secret testimony to a British commission of inquiry into the use of intelligence on Iraq's WMD^[4] :

I wrote down all that I thought about the war.... Once I had written it, I realised at last, after years of agonising, that I could no longer continue to work for the government.

It is puzzling that someone who felt so strongly did not reach this conclusion in March 2003, when the UK enthusiastically joined the US in invading Iraq. Ross sent the transcript of his testimony to the foreign secretary and the head of the Foreign Office; neither replied, and that, it seems, was that.

While working at the UN, Ross had been appalled by the disparity between the diplomatic resources of the rich and powerful countries—with their experienced officials and advisers, information, intelligence, and secure communications—and the hopelessly overstretched and inadequate resources of the poorer ones, particularly those, like Kosovo, which are trying to establish their claims to legitimacy through the UN. He also notes that groups who are ignored, or discriminated against, or cannot get a hearing often resort to violence. (The early treatment of the PLO, and its consequences, is an example of this tendency.) After leaving the British Foreign Service Ross set up a nonprofit advisory group, Independent Diplomat, to remedy this imbalance—"a diplomatic service for those who need it most." The only qualifications for receiving this group's assistance are respect for international law and human rights, and a democratic philosophy.

Ross obtained nongovernmental support for Independent Diplomat, although he was surprised to discover that large foundations, for whom human rights are a guiding principle, are skeptical of diplomats and question whether, driven by realpolitik to take inherently amoral positions on important questions, they do any good at all. Independent Diplomat's initial clients are Somaliland, Kosovo, whose claim to national independence is currently blocked in the Security Council by Russia, and Polisario, the exiled independence movement of Morocco-occupied Western Sahara. Ross's organization provides a much-needed service.

2.

Ross's fundamental complaint about diplomacy and the United Nations, that they are not democratic, is, strictly speaking, true. At a time when democratization has proved far

more difficult and unpredictable than even its strongest promoters had foreseen, trying to introduce it at this stage at the international level is not a practical proposition, as Ross acknowledges. The European Parliament is made possible by common political, cultural, and social traditions, and common economic interests. The EU's members consist entirely of democracies. A universal world organization has none of these advantages.

Certainly international organizations, starting with the UN Security Council, should be more representative of the world they are serving. It is also important to keep alive the objective, however distant, of a democratic world organization in a democratic world. In 1945, Ernest Bevin, the postwar foreign secretary of the United Kingdom—a personality by no means starry-eyed or "unrealistic"—spoke of this in the debate on the UN Charter in the House of Commons. "We need," he said,

a new study for the purpose of creating a world assembly elected directly from the people of the world, as a whole, to whom the Governments who form the United Nations are responsible.... In the meantime, there must be no weakening of the institution which my right hon. Friends built in San Francisco.

A world people's assembly would not, Bevin continued, be a substitute for the UN, "but rather a completion or a development of it."^[5] Not surprisingly, as the world split into two mutually hostile, nuclear-armed power blocs, this suggestion was not followed up, although in the intervening years, NGOs and others have kept the idea alive by suggesting various ways in which the UN might become more democratic.

In 1994 the late Erskine Childers and I wrote a short book with the self-explanatory title *Renewing the United Nations System*.^[6] In a chapter entitled "Towards a More Democratic United Nations," we revisited Bevin's idea and sketched out how, eventually, a world people's assembly might be elected, be connected with the United Nations, and what it might do. Many of our other ideas were discussed, and some were even included in later UN reforms. About a democratically elected world assembly, however, the silence was total. Fifty years after World War II, governments seemed to be even less willing to consider the democratizing of international institutions than they were in 1945.

Although it begins with the words "We the peoples of the United Nations," there is no mention of democracy in the UN Charter. The UN is a strictly intergovernmental organization, and a place where national sovereignty—almost an anachronism in many other spheres of human activity—is rigidly protected. This unquestionably limits the scope and spontaneity of the organization. Sensitivity to any erosion of national sovereignty is a fundamental obstacle to reforms that would obviously improve the UN. A genuinely international, standing UN rapid deployment force, for instance, would vastly improve both the speed and the quality of the UN's response to crises, but the idea of this badly needed addition is now kept alive only by nongovernmental groups.^[7] It

seems likely that the aim of democratizing the UN, until it acquires determined and influential political advocates and worldwide popular support, will also have to survive through the efforts of nongovernmental organizations.

Carne Ross describes the lack of good faith and mutual confidence that often undermines negotiations within the Security Council. When the council works with a common purpose, its authority can be remarkably expeditious and effective, as it was, for example, in reacting to Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in 1990. Much of the time, however, national interests and differences easily outweigh a sense of international responsibility. In 1945 it seemed only logical that the five permanent members of the Security Council, the leaders of the alliance that had just won a long and desperate world war, would find it possible, even obligatory, to work together to secure the peace. In those early days many of us looked forward enthusiastically to the Security Council's first meetings, at which its five permanent members would rise above national differences and show the world a new model of international leadership and responsibility. The vitriolic public disputes that immediately erupted among the five in the Security Council were severely disillusioning. They persisted for over forty years.

Dag Hammarskjöld, who probably gave more thought than anyone to the future development of the United Nations, once spoke of "an opinion independent of partisan interests and dominated by the objectives indicated in the United Nations Charter."^[8] A sense of international solidarity has in fact emerged in the UN approach to humanitarian problems such as distributing food and other assistance in disasters and to threats such as global warming (but not, as yet, nuclear proliferation). In debates on controversial political matters, however, that sense of international responsibility is often absent. Pending a true democratization of the world organization, it would be a major step forward for the Security Council and the UN as a whole if more nations were willing to frame their foreign policies with regard to the larger international interest. There are already a number of countries—the Nordic and some European nations, Costa Rica, and Canada among them—that try to conduct foreign policy in this spirit.

Carne Ross complains that, despite the revolutionary changes of the past sixty years, diplomatic machinery and modes of thinking are much the same as they were in the early nineteenth century. The "new politics" needed for a globalizing world and its difficulties does not exist. Ross concludes that diplomacy must give up its elite status and be brought down to earth to participate in the world as it actually is. Diplomatic generalists should give way to experts in trade, WMDs, global warming, and other fields that are beyond the grasp of diplomats. (Governments now usually resolve this difficulty by assigning experts

to diplomatic missions when the situation demands, as the British government employed the scientist David Kelly to advise the UK delegation about WMDs in Iraq.)

Ross deplores the obsession of diplomats with secrecy, which, in his view, is mostly a way to preserve the mystique that gives them prestige and protects them from criticism. The argument that publicity will ruin "real diplomacy" is an old one. In the nineteenth century George Canning represented the "new diplomat" who sought public support for foreign policy through parliament and the press. The "old diplomat" Metternich described Canning as a "malevolent meteor hurled by divine providence upon Europe."^[9]

Ross also deplores the statecentric, "realist" state of mind of his former colleagues and the resulting amoral and misleading view of a world over which governments are, in fact, steadily losing control. He claims that this way of thinking emphasizes differences by forcing negotiations to be conducted "in terms of nation-states and anachronistic and invented identities," which actually exacerbate conflict. An example was the debate on sanctions on Iraq in which diplomats seemed to have no hope of agreeing. However, the "control list" of items prohibited for export to Iraq was so technically complex that experts had to be called in. To the diplomats' amazement, the experts agreed quite easily on the list of what was potentially risky to export to Iraq.

Powerful embassies and plenipotentiary ambassadors were essential in a time when communication with the home capital could take weeks or months; they are less relevant in our world of instant communications. Ross suggests rather ungraciously that embassies are still needed "to organise ministers' visits and look after distressed travelers who lose their passports." On the other hand, it is hard to imagine how the United Nations would tackle its very wide agenda without the diplomatic missions that, for all the failings that Carne Ross describes, make up a skilled, permanent working group in New York. It was also diplomats who recently achieved a vital agreement with North Korea and, earlier, with Libya's Muammar Qaddafi. Who else could have done it?

In his closing pages Ross's argument unravels in a series of increasingly windy and confused propositions:

...For the ordinary public, the self-serving élitism and fake-omnipotence of the world's diplomats has created a comforting illusion: that they are in control, allowing the rest of us to get on with our lives.... The pact of irresponsibility must end. We must correspondingly take more responsibility for our own international affairs.... Every action, whether buying fruit, employing a cleaner, or choosing where to take your holiday is international, and is, in its way, a form of diplomacy. Everyone is a diplomat.

International business and commerce, according to Ross, have learned "this lesson." ExxonMobil has a large political department, and on his recent visit to the US, Chinese President Hu Jintao spent more time with Microsoft than on Capitol Hill. Ross admits that business and technology can "be as ambiguous in their effects as anything else." Politics will always interfere, as when Google, Yahoo, and Microsoft were all accused by Amnesty International of abetting censorship and repression in China. Those companies responded that they must abide by Chinese law.

"The solution," Ross writes,

is therefore obvious. These [private] forces must be pointed in the right direction if they are to be for the good. Effective foreign policy, whether in promoting labour rights or environmental standards, now requires coalitions of actors—the private sector, civil society and government—acting in concert to be effective. If foreign ministries are to be effective, even relevant, in the future, as propagators of policy and change they must consider how to organise such coalitions, and how to encompass, direct and inform these many different strands and effectors of policy.

How such an "obvious" policy could be successfully carried out by Western countries in China he does not say. A little later he writes:

The practice and process of diplomacy, then, needs to change into something much more diverse and eclectic, such that we perhaps shouldn't give it a collective name—such as diplomacy—at all.

What, I wonder, is the Independent Diplomat organization teaching its clients?

Ross's final pages deal in whirlwind succession with UN reform, NGOs, universal norms of behavior, diplomatic legitimacy, international law, a new "global politics," and global political parties, "elected in some way," which

can claim the fullest legitimacy to speak for people.... Only a global politics can lift us above the zero-sum games of governments shortsightedly arbitrating their "interests" in international forums.

He adds that he is not advocating the immediate establishment of a world parliament, and suggests advisory bodies of elected representatives to advise the General Assembly or the Security Council. Quite how such bodies would be elected and by whom is not clear.

The villain of Ross's polemic reemerges:

the unwarranted and unscrutinized power of unelected officials who deal—often badly— with ever more of our collective business. The only long-term answer is for elected representatives to take their place.

Again, how? And elected by whom? And are these putative elections, which will inevitably become politicized, likely to produce more able and public-spirited diplomats and international officials than a rigorous selection process conducted by responsible, nonpolitical, appointed senior officials? I very much doubt it. The longstanding principle that civil servants, national and international, are not elected by political bodies has decisively proved its importance. In my experience, the best diplomats already have a strong sense of global priorities, although that is not necessarily what their governments pay them for. Members of the UN Secretariat *must* have such a view. The leadership and independence of the secretary-general and the competence, discipline, and integrity of the Secretariat are vital to the functioning of the UN.

Diplomacy has a long and important history. Recently there was a sigh of relief around the world when the United States, after disastrous experiments with military confrontation, gave some sign that it was willing to return to diplomacy as a main instrument of foreign policy. Diplomacy and diplomats have often aroused suspicion, even ridicule, but they still serve an essential purpose. There is, at present, no obvious alternative.

Notes

^[1] Walter Alison Phillips, of Merton and St. John's colleges, Oxford, in a lively contribution to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, eleventh edition (1910), Vol. 8, p. 294.

^[2] On the need for this most vital of diplomatic rights, Phillips mentions in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* "the habit of the Ottoman government of imprisoning in the Seven Towers the ambassador of a power with which it quarrelled," p. 299.

^[3] See my article "Hidden Truths," *The New York Review*, March 25, 2004.

^[4] Ross's testimony was published in December 2006 by *The Independent*, London.

^[5] *Parliamentary Debates (Hansard)*, Fifth Series, Vol. 416 (London: HMSO, 1946), p. 786.

^[6] Published by the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation with support from the Ford Foundation, 1994.

^[7] For example, *A United Nations Emergency Peace Service*, published in 2006 with the support of Global Action to Prevent War, the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation, and the World Federalist Movement.

^[8] Speech in Copenhagen, SG/812, May 2, 1959.

^[9] *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, eleventh edition, Vol. 8, p. 295.