

Diplomat at Large

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By Stephen Moss

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Came Ross must have been an unusual schoolboy. He didn't dream of being a footballer, a cricketer or even an engine driver. He dreamed of being a diplomat. "At quite a young age," he recalls, "I realised that I was fascinated by abroad. I decided quite early on that I was going to become a diplomat, and was very discouraged by everybody saying it was incredibly difficult and that only very clever people became diplomats."

At 22, fresh out of Exeter University, Ross proved the doubters wrong: he passed the necessary exams, joined the Foreign Office's graduate fast-track, worked at the UK embassy in Bonn and its mission to the UN, enjoyed a good salary, status, even a sniff of power, and was on course to an ambassadorship with obligatory knighthood. Then, last September, the dream turned to dust. He quit - part of the diplomatic fallout from the Iraq war - to be an "independent diplomat".

A contradiction in terms, according to some of his Foreign Office friends, but not according to the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, which last week chose Ross as one of its seven "visionaries for a just and peaceful world". For the next five years, the trust will pay him a stipend of almost £40,000 a year to attempt to prove his former colleagues wrong and turn his vision of what might be called committed diplomacy - putting right before might and morality before national interest - into reality.

Ross, a confident, crop-haired 38-year-old, spent 15 years in the Foreign Office. He loved the life but ultimately hated having to bend the truth on behalf of his country. The gradual process of disillusionment began in Germany in the mid-1990s when refugees from the war in Yugoslavia flooded into the country. "We of course supported the British policy that the war in Yugoslavia was a civil war and that an arms embargo was a fair way of treating all the parties," he says. "This was deeply mistaken and inhuman. In effect it enabled one group to genocidally pursue another. The war was born of a grasp for power by Milosevic and his henchmen on the back of an invented Serb nationalism."

It took Ross almost a decade to realise the full extent of the mistakes the Foreign Office made in the Balkans. His lack of faith in British policy in the Middle East manifested itself far more quickly. From 1995-98 he worked in London on the Middle East peace process and as speechwriter to foreign secretary Malcolm Rifkind, before joining the British delegation at the UN, where the issue of Iraq - he was the key British negotiator with the Iraqi government and the weapons inspectors - was soon to take over his life.

He says the New York posting, which occupied him for almost five years, was "dramatic", "exciting", "challenging". The hours were long but he enjoyed the drama -

trying to work out what the Iraqis were doing, negotiating resolutions in the security council, being pursued by film crews desperate to understand where the diplomatic dance was leading. But, in Ross's mind, one word obliterates all those others - "guilt".

"I think sanctions [against Iraq] were wrong and they harmed the wrong people," he says. "They did immeasurable damage to the Iraqi civilian population. We were conscious of that damage, but we did too little to address it. We said we were trying to address it, but frankly it wasn't enough and I'm not proud of my own role in that because I was a vigorous defender of British policy in the security council. We would not have treated a European or American people in that way."

Ross was in New York on September 11 2001 and his recollection of the attack on the World Trade Centre is vivid. "I saw the first plane go over and then went to a ludicrous EU meeting which dragged on as reports were coming in of the attacks," he recalls. "The meeting ended after both planes struck. The UN building was evacuated and we were sent home. My home was downtown, so I walked back against this flood of people coming the other way - people covered in ashes and weeping. I went to my apartment on the south side of Union Square which looks south over lower Manhattan. I watched all afternoon, watched this huge pall of smoke which didn't go away for weeks. You could smell it in the apartment and in the streets around for weeks afterwards."

The lesson he draws from 9/11 is of the compassion of New Yorkers and the way political leaders in the US and UK misjudged the mood. "There was no desire for vengeance among people on the streets," he says. "Union Square became a collecting point for people to light candles, pray, sing, grieve. I'd make my way through these crowds every day and it affected me very profoundly. Tragically, that compassion is something that the governments of both the US and Britain have seemed to ignore since."

In the wake of 9/11, Ross was given responsibility for UK policy on Afghanistan. He quickly realised that meant preparing for war. When the invasion came, he spent six weeks in Kabul negotiating with warlords. Again his account tempers the excitement of the moment with the disillusionment of having to come to terms with what could be achieved. The allies didn't understand Afghanistan, didn't have sufficient forces on the ground, were trapped in their fortified compounds, were naive about the willingness of the warlords to cede power, and were far too optimistic in their belief that opium production could be curtailed.

He returned to New York and, increasingly doubtful of the wisdom of British policy in the Middle East, decided to take a year-long sabbatical, joining the graduate international affairs programme at the New School in Greenwich Village, where he studied a subject of which Donald Rumsfeld might approve - the limits of knowledge in decision-making. "I was ultimately trying to grasp the claim in diplomacy, and in policy-making in general, to knowledge," explains Ross, "because I had doubts about the whole thing. What is it that we know, how do we know it and how can we make policy on the basis of that knowledge? Examining the theory helped crystallise a lot of my doubts."

While he was on sabbatical, Britain and the US invaded Iraq and Ross's doubts turned to anger. "I was very close to my former colleagues in the mission and was in touch with a lot of the diplomats at the Security Council," he says. "I was very conscious of what the British government was doing, and I was very sceptical of it. I contemplated resigning at the time and making a fuss, but felt that resigning would be standing up in front of a runaway train and I'd just be crushed.

"It was an agonised experience because I knew that the evidence they were presenting for WMD was totally implausible. I'd read the intelligence on WMD for four and a half years, and there's no way that it could sustain the case that the government was presenting. All of my colleagues knew that, too. We all believed the Iraqis had something, but that is very different from saying they had that much. The intelligence indicated that they'd failed to account for what they had in the past. They hadn't given us a complete account of the disposal of their past stocks, so we thought there was something, but there was no way that the claim of an imminent threat was sustainable. The 45-minute stuff was ridiculous."

He had lost faith in the Foreign Office but had no idea what to do with his life, so at the end of his sabbatical year he engineered a compromise - a secondment to the UN in Kosovo. In the summer of 2004, he supplied a secret, written testimony to the Butler inquiry on intelligence and weapons of mass destruction. The act of giving evidence finally brought his career as a British diplomat to an end.

"I told [the inquiry] what I knew in terms of the evidence on WMD and what the inspectors told me during the four and a half years that I dealt with it," he says. "I also wrote down my views on the available alternatives to war, which were fairly forthright. I felt that war should be the last alternative, and emphatically it was not in this case. There was a very good alternative to war that was never properly pursued, which was to close down Saddam's sources of illegal revenue. That testimony crystallised what I felt about the Iraq issue, and once I'd written it I felt there was no going back. I had to quit. I couldn't honestly work for this government with a smile on my face."

It was a bold, some would say foolhardy, step. Ross gave up everything - income, status, what he calls the "grandeur" of the Foreign Office. He wrote to the permanent undersecretary and to the political adviser to the secretary of state stating his reasons for resigning; neither replied. Some former colleagues were "indifferent to the point of rudeness"; he doesn't know whether they took his resignation as an implied criticism of their own actions or whether they thought him mad.

"I had a very good career under way and it was a huge sacrifice," he says. "I'd always wanted to be a diplomat, so it was a very painful decision. I still feel sad about it when I walk past the Foreign Office. But in the end I felt I had no choice. Although diplomacy and the Foreign Office was a deeply satisfying and enjoyable career, it wasn't answering to a deeper part of my soul."

His wife Carmen - a Croatian-born film-maker living in New York when they met - gave Ross the idea of offering his diplomatic skills on a freelance basis. Henceforth he would not be beholden to the British government but to his own conscience, and his policy advice would be steered not by national interest but by the alleviation of suffering. Independent Diplomat, the slogan of which is "A diplomatic service for those who need it most", was born.

Ross is currently advising the government of Kosovo and trying to raise awareness of the Saharawi people, displaced by Morocco's long-standing occupation of the western Sahara. He hopes the Rowntree money will enable him to start building a global network of diplomats and lawyers who can help emerging governments or "political groups struggling to make their case heard". Independent diplomats will not dissimulate, sit on the fence or hide behind national interests; their instincts will be to help the marginalised and oppressed; they will take sides.

"I often felt as a British diplomat that the things I really wanted to do were help the people who were less privileged than us," he says. "I don't believe in the received wisdom about what foreign policy is about. I don't believe in things like British interests and the calculus of security and trade and all the rest of it. I think it's mostly manufactured."

He holds up his present preoccupation, the refugees of the western Sahara, as a test case for his new approach. "If you look at these people suffering in a refugee camp in the middle of the desert, most British people would think that was wrong and that something should be done. Yet British policy is to do nothing because British interests dictate that fairly minuscule trade with Morocco is more important. At the UN I used to perform these calculations myself and send telegrams saying we had no interest in supporting the Saharawi cause. At the Foreign Office you are taught to think that trade and market share and security are the most important things, and that human suffering is not important if it's nothing to do with Britain. I disagree with that analysis. The best way to a safer and more peaceful world is through alleviating suffering. Simplicity is the only thing that works in a complex world."