

The
**Red
Cell**

Hard Rain and Galoshes

Civil Service Reform for the Post-
Brexit World

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Introduction

“A hard rain is coming.” Such was the warning, presumably deliberately leaked, from a briefing by Dominic Cummings to Special Advisers. Whitehall was set for a massive shake up.

The news should not have come as a surprise to anyone either listening in or reading about it in the papers afterwards. Those familiar with the Cummings blog will have read detailed critiques of intrinsic civil service flaws, arising from first hand experience and attempts at localised reform. The Vote Leave campaign itself underlined that Brexit provided opportunities that were to be seized, but also that the referendum result was not an end in itself and to reach its full potential it required fresh work.

Anyone who has followed the news over recent years will recall countless stories of Whitehall failure: IT scheme catastrophes; sensitive memory sticks and laptops going missing; illegal immigrants working inside the Home Office itself; procurement overruns; PFI outrages; DfID bankrolling costly gimmicks; expensive politically-correct job hires; and so on. More recently, there has been the disastrous mishandling of Brexit negotiations themselves, albeit with mandarins empowered to go rogue by the incompetence and dithering of senior ministers, in a situation only lately gripped.

Whitehall reform is clearly necessary and long overdue. It was even said to have been the regretted missing piece of the agenda that was to have been undertaken in the Thatcher decade. But what form now should it take? How far should it march? And what objectives does it need to secure?

In another paper, we have reviewed the system of law making in the EU, and how much of what was once considered “out of scope” can now be corrected.¹ There, we focused on the obscure and astonishingly little known facets of comitology, the inevitable red tape that accrues for the UK economy, and proposals for a streamlined system that takes back control of the drafting of legislation. Reform here unfortunately remains an area of seemingly limited political consideration.

In a wider context of strategic planning, we can also draw the reader’s attention to our recent paper on risk management, and attempting to apply the wizardry of superforecasting to policy (which, though now trendy at the top, risks misapplying some of the critical lessons involved).

This paper forms the corollary to that research, covering the people and systems doing the policy drafting.²

¹ http://www.theredcell.co.uk/uploads/9/6/4/0/96409902/brexit_red_tape_challenge.pdf

² [http://www.theredcell.co.uk/uploads/9/6/4/0/96409902/understanding_risk_micropaper .pdf](http://www.theredcell.co.uk/uploads/9/6/4/0/96409902/understanding_risk_micropaper.pdf)

It begins with a remarkable piece by Tony Lane, who held a senior post covering international trade negotiations. He tackles head on “What therapies will best help Whitehall make Brexit effective”, from its approach to handling international relationships through to training.

Sir Richard Packer was Permanent Secretary at MAFF. His book, *The Politics of BSE*, is certainly no light read but makes for rare (and alarming) insight on the role of personal relationships within and across ministries, for good but often for bad - particularly when blame-dodging and spin enter the equation. Here in this paper, Sir Richard inserts a salutary warning about breaking all the eggs to achieve the desirable objective.

Two former civil servants from Ireland supply the next contribution, which takes the form of a short dialogue. The commentators draw from their own wealth of experience to provide a mixture of useful prompts and parallels for reshaping our own civil service.

Finally, past Red Cell contributor Adrian Hill adds a number of observations and proposals based on his time in both the civil service but also the military, which have somewhat different ways of doing business and generate prospects for direct comparison.

Brexit demands major changes. Leaving the EU means stripping away levels of distant, obscure, complex and particularly undemocratic administrative hierarchy from British governance - the Brussels knotweed of our times. These changes are on top of the reforms needed to address increasingly familiar failings within Whitehall itself. Some are specific, with certain departments carrying worse reputations than others. Others are generic across the civil service. After a long drought, a hard rain is indeed overdue. But it must not become an all-devouring flash flood that takes away the good as well as the bad. That includes the levees that might protect us all from any maliciously radical - and literally revolutionary – Neo-Corbynite government in the future.

Brexit Means Change in Whitehall

Tony Lane

The Brexit debate has brought widespread criticism of the role of the Civil service. Some of this is justified. Brexit has brought to birth a new Britain with its independence reaffirmed. Many things will change, and reform will be needed in Whitehall accordingly.

To whom do civil servants owe their loyalty?

The 2016 referendum brought a result no-one had expected. We voted to leave. Did this mean that civil servants were duty-bound to work for what the voters had voted for? Was the role of civil service to throw itself heart and soul into implementing the referendum result? Was it to be criticised if it did not? Or did it, on the contrary, owe some higher duty to keep the country on track notwithstanding the referendum?

There is only one answer to questions of this kind. The duty of civil servants is always owed to Ministers of whatever government is currently in office. They have no other accountability. If they are criticised for failing in a supposed accountability to the referendum vote: or towards Parliament: or towards some other understanding of the public interest: the answer is the same: they are not meant to be accountable to anyone but Ministers. Ministers are accountable to Parliament: Parliament is accountable to the voting public.

This was for some time misunderstood in the Brexit context. Whitehall officials serving under Mrs May's government were responsible to Ministers of that government: they were criticised for not going hard enough to implement the referendum: but so far as they had responsibilities for implementing the referendum, they were responsible as directed by Ministers. It is wrong to imagine that the referendum created duties for the civil service independent of Ministers. As it was, it is common knowledge that, under Mrs May, the government's commitment to implement the referendum was ambivalent. The government was seeking what many saw as a partial Brexit (and perhaps ultimately even a reversible one). The government were under conflicting pressures from what was then a pro-remain Parliament, from the referendum that they were pledged to honour, and to demands from Brussels. It was an uneasy period when many political conventions were being challenged. Ministers were widely seen as facing two ways: civil servants perforce shared that ambivalence. But they were right to take their instructions from Ministers.

At the end of 2019 a new government took office and was soon confirmed in a General Election. The new government has shed its predecessor's ambivalence. There is now for the first time a government in office which is unambiguously committed to make Brexit real, and to make it work: this makes it for the first time the unambiguous duty of civil servants to do the same. It is a duty to which they are now turning their hands, hearts and minds, in many cases for the first time. It is their duty because it is now the clearly stated policy of the Ministers they serve.

But don't civil servants have attitudes of their own?

This is true: human nature being what it is, it takes time to re-set one's personal compass towards some great reversal of policy, and then to follow it with all one's heart. Britain's great European adventure of 1973-2020, or misadventure as many now regard it, was hard fought, deeply felt and in the end firmly decided. This took a long period of years. In any matter of that sort, Civil servants' attitudes are deeply embedded.

Their attitudes spring in large part from their duty to be politically neutral. Political neutrality will often tend to translate into a disdain of ideology; pragmatism is something Civil servants feel in their bones, and pragmatism can often take a malignant form, as a suspicion of new ideas. Any radically new departure of policy, if it is to survive the struggle for acceptance, has to win recognition as pragmatic and realistic. In practice, if officials are wholeheartedly to accept that some great reorientation of policy is here to stay, they will often be finally convinced only when it has been accepted by governments of both parties. It then becomes part of the conventional wisdom.

A parallel case occurred in the 1980s, when Whitehall found itself bound to accept a market-oriented re-direction of economic policy. This happened slowly and reluctantly at first. Initially these policies were mocked in Whitehall, which viewed them as ideological. But when, in the course of the 1980s, they began to succeed, and to capture the middle ground of politics, there was a turnabout in official attitudes. This turnabout was slow at first, but in due course it became more convinced. It wasn't a question of the intellectual arguments convincing sceptics and winning them over: the new approach had to achieve pragmatic and political success first, and only after that were the intellectual arguments able to gain a hearing.

Will this tale repeat itself over Europe?

When Britain took that new turn in the 1980s, the EU was moving in the opposite direction. There was soon conflict. That conflict grew, and in the 1980s it was a battle the new drift of British policy did not win. Britain knuckled under for the time being, and when it reluctantly accepted and signed the Single European Act (1987), and then the Maastricht Treaty (1993) Whitehall took this as confirmation that Europe was moving in a federal direction, and that this movement was unstoppable, and had to be embraced. Like it or not, it was part of the furniture, an unhappy necessity that one had to live with. The spirit was one of pragmatic and resigned submission, not necessarily of enthusiasm.

Whitehall stuck with that resigned submission for years, as Treaty followed Treaty. It meant that, when intellectual objections to deeper federal integration began to grow, and when it began to appear that the hoped-for economic benefits were not forthcoming, Whitehall shut its eyes. However the objections to the European commitment gained in intellectual strength, they once again failed the political and pragmatic test. For that reason questioning that European commitment was treated as not merely unwise but indecent. The objections were off the radar.

As Whitehall closed ranks in defence of the European commitment, it should not be imagined that its embrace of Europe was ever enthusiastic: it was never more than a reluctant submission. Reluctant, but all the same unchangeable. Europe had come to be regarded as a painfully-learned lesson, and that is what it remained. Brexit, when it came, was a demand to reverse that lesson and reopen old wounds. Whitehall's experience of 45 years was that the European commitment was here to stay and Brexit was a political non-starter. This meant that whatever intellectual arguments accumulated for it, they could never gain a hearing.

It is important, as a new generation sets itself to build a new, post-Brexit Britain, along with a new understanding of the meaning of national independence and a new understanding of the scope of democratic debate, to appreciate that Whitehall's submission to the EU was never a love affair. It was not a love-affair but a painful lesson, taught in painful stages from the 1960s onwards. That lesson had to be painfully learned, and part of that painful process was learning to ignore arguments in the other direction. Not to rebut them but to ignore them. That is why one so often finds in Whitehall an attitude that simply refuses to address the arguments for leaving the EU. Senior civil servants have arduously trained their reflexes not to listen. They have learned to stop their ears; and they have learned to do this for so long, they have ceased to be aware that they are doing it.

Can Whitehall learn to see Britain as an independent country?

Given the extent of the intellectual rupture that civil servants now find they are required to undergo, how can the management of the service help the official machine to adjust? What therapies will best help Whitehall make Brexit effective?

- A new promotion policy can work wonders for a Department wanting to re-orient its culture. Promotions of young officials with their careers ahead of them. Anyone newly promoted in Whitehall with a new mission can usually be relied on as an ambassador for that mission. Others will take note. Civil servants will come to identify Brexit with career success. Those carrying Brexit forward will be seen gaining promotion young, and then forging ahead. Marks of favour need to be seen coming their way.
- When officials are helping Ministers develop policy, much of their work is to appease and conciliate pressure groups. Sometimes the system gets into a rut: the wrong pressure groups are appeased. Producer pressure groups at the expense of consumers. Monopolistic pressure groups at the expense of competition and innovation. Incumbent pressure groups at the expense of new arrivals. Protectionist pressure groups at the expense of open trade. And all the time, European pressure groups at the expense of multilateral pressure groups, and so on. Too many of the wrong pressure groups have carved themselves cosy European niches (encouraged of course with seductive skill by the lavishly-funded European institutions themselves).
- Experience teaches officials they are expected to shield their Ministers from unwelcome lobbying, while smoothing the path for the influence exerted by the lobbies that are officially approved. Britain's long European misadventure has meant that officials have become habituated to being expected to pander to European pressure groups. They now need to re-educate themselves, cultivate fresh client relationships: identify the groups who will benefit

from Brexit, give them air-time, encourage them to lobby ambitiously, to dare to speak up and demand a hearing. When neglected groups are given access, they will speak up.

- And officials will show they are willing to listen, once they know their Ministers want to hear. Why has no-one heard so little of the consumer voice in the Brexit debates - it's not because consumers love the Common Agricultural Policy! Why has no-one heard business organisations (especially small business organisations) articulating an agenda of burdensome European Directives that they want replaced? The incumbents can make themselves a cosy armistice with the regulators, but the injured entrepreneurs cannot! Have the silent ones received proper encouragement to speak up? The right kind of official encouragement can help them find a voice, and officials will provide the right kind of encouragement if they know that's what their Ministers want. Officials will do that when they see promotion going to those officials who have developed that kind of pro-active skill.
- We have heard lately about Whitehall's need for people with wild and radical ideas. The need however is the skill of recognising good ideas in others, and in turning these ideas into practical policies. And moreover, the skill to recognise good ideas, however one shrinks from saying it, must include the skill of filtering out poor ones.

How should diplomacy adapt?

A main aim of British Foreign Policy will from now on be to repair and rebuild our relations with the Anglophone world. It is important that our attention to this world should not be too much dominated by the US, because we have no wish to be subservient to any single partner. But when we chose our misguided European misadventure, we turned our back on the Anglophone world, and much well-deserved resentment did we gain thereby. We need to repair these relationships with due humility, and with generous imagination. They need not always (perhaps indeed will not normally) be relationships consisting of legally binding commitments: but in contrast to the EU relationship, they will be able to rely on close cultural and historical bonds. This Anglophone rebuilding will involve all government Departments and much of the civil service. Aspects of it will be:

- The next head of the Diplomatic Service might be an individual whose career has especially embraced relations with Anglophone countries;
- The business of the Anglophone world should go beyond free trade agreements, and build within that Anglophone world the full range of relationships that we formerly had with the EU. They will be food suppliers, customers, collaborators in university research, and partners in many other ways. Our relations with them can involve issues such as competition policy, intellectual property, company law, telecommunications, data, research, educational exchanges, freedom of movement, transport links, development aid and so on. On all issues of this sort, the EU's Council of Ministers provided a regular forum of collaboration.
- Similar links must now be developed in the Anglophone world, with Ministers meeting occasionally and officials meeting often. Ministers and their Departments will meet regularly with their Anglophone opposite numbers. Commonwealth Finance Ministers already meet annually, and something similar will be needed among Ministers dealing with all the subjects listed above (transport, competition, education, intellectual property &c). In the EU, the Council of Ministers meets regularly to bring together Ministers dealing with each of these subjects.

British civil servants have learned to cultivate relations with their European opposite numbers. The British civil service wins high regard in Europe, and in spite of clashes of policy, relations have been good. That is the pattern that must now be replicated in the Anglophone world. British civil servants should learn that their own career success depends in important part on developing fruitful relationships with their Anglophone opposite numbers.

- Secondments of officials will play a part in this. For example Australian civil servants have much to teach their British opposite numbers in about how to follow a forceful independent path. A leavening of that sort could permeate the whole dough.

Post- Brexit regional policy

Regional policy is undergoing a fortuitous revival as a by-product of Brexit. When the subject was last fashionable in the 1960s and 70s, the emphasis at that time was on transferring manufacturing industries to the regions. Today the emphasis will be different. Germany provides an example of dispersion national institutions, where the Bundesbank, the Federal Cartel Office and the Constitutional Court were all set up from the outset dispersed in different cities throughout the Bund (federation), separate from the seat of federal government (then in Bonn). In Britain, there are already suggestions that the House of Lords could move to York. Other examples could follow. The BBC should be moved out of its metropolitan bubble, and northern cities should be allowed to bid to be its new home, to the BBC's advantage and their own. The Supreme Court might be another case, followed perhaps by other Courts.

Management of Whitehall

Finally a word about the **central management of the civil service**: -

- The Civil Service Commission was established in Victorian times to establish the civil service on a professional basis and to cleanse recruitment of nepotism. Originally it had a degree of independence from the service itself, but over the years, that independence atrophied, and the Civil Service Commission is now apt to be seen as a method of reproducing the service in its own image. Obviously this risks passing on not only its strengths but also its weaknesses.
- Today there is much to be said for re-establishing the Civil Service Commission on an independent statutory basis, setting standards and reporting to Parliament, not only on recruitment, but on every aspect of the service's performance. Its relationship with Parliament should be similar to that of the National Audit Office. The First Civil Service Commissioner should be appointed from outside the service, and his/her relationship to Parliament should be similar to that of the Controller and Auditor General to the Public Accounts Committee. The Commission should consist not mainly of serving civil servants, but of individuals in other walks of life, chosen as representatives of the "clients" which the service exists to serve: retired Cabinet Ministers, senior members of the armed forces, business, the professions, local government and so on.
- European experience has shown British civil servants much to admire in the French civil service. Not least the École National d'Administration (ENA). Perhaps the time has come to establish a

British equivalent. This should be the normal route of entry into the civil service Fast Stream and the diplomatic service. It might be set up within a leading business school.

Summary

The civil service has been criticised for failing to throw itself into the Brexit project with proper vigour after the referendum. But Mrs May's government also lacked vigour, and the civil service owes its loyalty to Ministers for the time being in office. The new government is unambiguously committed to Brexit, and civil servants now share that unambiguous loyalty.

Civil servants have a duty to be politically neutral, and this duty fosters pragmatism and disdain of ideology. At times this can decay into intellectual complacency. Once some great reorientation of policy has been accepted (such as EU membership), it will push competing notions off the political and bureaucratic radar. Joining the Common Market/EU was a monumental political struggle which monopolised official thinking, and once this was thought to be over, a submissive attitude developed when the evolution of the EU took a federal turn. Whitehall turned a deaf ear when the intellectual arguments for Brexit began to accumulate. Although Whitehall's embrace of Europe was never enthusiastic: it grew to regard any alternative as unthinkable.

The reality of Brexit presents senior civil servants with the need to re-train their reflexes. How are they to achieve this?

- A generation must be brought forward through accelerated new promotion;
- Different pressure groups will need to be appeased. Officials will need to re-educate themselves and cultivate fresh client relationships;
- Foreign policy should focus on re-building the Anglophone world;
- Different pecking orders must be established in the Diplomatic Service accordingly;
- Anglophone Ministerial networks world should be established similar to the EU's Council of Ministers, shadowed at official level and through staff secondments.
- Regional policy should focus not on relocation of manufacturing industries, but on prestigious public sector institutions whose relocation will bring private sector employment with them.
- The Civil Service Commission should be re-established on an independent statutory basis, setting standards on all aspects aspect of the service's performance.
- A National School of administration is needed along the lines of France's École National d'Administration (ENA).



Tony Lane served as Head of International Trade Policy in the Department of Trade and Industry between 1984 and 1987, servicing the UK input to the EU's external trade policy and managing the launch of the Uruguay Round. He later went on to head up the Department's Industrial Policy side. On retirement, he worked as a consultant on trade policy to many governments in Europe and around the world.

The Civil Service; What next?

Sir Richard Packer

This note is concerned with the civil service, not with the public sector as a whole. The latter includes, for example, most schools and the NHS, but teachers and NHS workers are not civil servants, though their equivalents in some other countries do have that status.

We need to start from the status quo remembering always the reality that for major changes ('reform' is of course a prejudicial description) the cost of the associated dislocation is almost certain to occur, while the anticipated benefits might or might not arise.

The civil service that emerged from WWII was basically that envisaged by the Northcote/Trevelyan Report of 1854, of which the essential characteristics were political neutrality and entrance by competitive examination. The civil service that resulted is generally accepted to have demonstrated virtues including a relative lack of corruption by international standards and a cadre of officials at the top of strong intellect and devotion to the public weal (as they conceive it).

However, it is not always appreciated that other arrangements are perfectly workable. In the USA, for example, political appointees occupy many senior posts below ministerial level which in the UK are occupied by civil servants.

In practice in the UK there have often been special arrangements, notably in 10 Downing Street where Prime ministers sometimes imported people with real influence but of indeterminate status, which did not fit easily into this pattern. But these were of limited extent and overall the system survived until Harold Wilson's government in the 1960s.

Disenchantment with the service then and later has had 3 principal themes. First, there was a feeling that it had not kept pace with economic and societal developments. It was noted that those in senior posts were rarely qualified in economic or scientific disciplines and that that deficiency had not been countered by relevant training. A major enquiry (Fulton) was commissioned and a string of recommendations made designed to move the service in a more modern direction some of which were implemented. There was another similar burst of 'reform' in the Blair years. Blair was unenthusiastic about the civil service and appeared to want major change. But in the event the overall impetus was lost and attention came to focus mainly on increasing the numbers of ethnic minority and female officials in senior posts on the apparent assumption that increases in the proportion of such persons in post would in itself constitute reform and automatically lead to increased efficiency.

Second, there was a feeling that the service lacked flexibility and organisational competence. It was observed that most top civil servants had a policy setting background and that dealing with organisational matters had a lower status. This was judged by some to be inappropriate. The most significant development designed to counter this was the development of agencies starting in the 1980s. Agencies are staffed by civil servants and report to ministers, but agencies are at a greater distance from them and in general the Chief Executive has more autonomy than most civil servants. A good example of an agency of the kind originally envisaged is the Vehicle Licensing Agency which

has a narrowly defined remit and has objectives the achievement of which can in principle be achieved significantly more efficiently by the introduction of modern management techniques. It was claimed that this distancing of agencies from the political fray should allow them to focus more easily, while also distancing ministers from responsibility for routine tasks. Whether agencies have brought about greater efficiency has not been proven, but it has been shown that in a political furor ministers cannot distance themselves from the eye of the storm whatever the organisational structures of the entities involved. Whether the policy concerned is within the remit of an agency makes no difference. Nevertheless there is no strong push to abolish agencies and their continued existence appears to have general acquiescence.

And third, some politically highly committed ministers, such as Richard Crossman in the Wilson government, claimed that their senior officials were opposed to their policies and continued their opposition beyond what they (ministers) considered reasonable, with the consequence that the government found it difficult to implement the policies which it had been elected to pursue. Similar complaints surfaced during the time of the Thatcher government.

These considerations, especially the third, led to the development of political advisers, now called special advisers (Spads), from the time of the second Wilson government in the 1970s. Spads' vital difference from civil servants is that they are openly politically committed to the government of the day, indeed they are often active members; they are required to resign when the government leaves office. There are similarities to the 'cabinet' system long operated by French ministers. Such appointees have accumulated power and status over the years and currently play a prominent role in most government departments especially in 10 Downing Street. Well-known examples include Jonathan Powell and Alistair Campbell in the Blair years, Nick Timothy and Fiona Hill under May and, most recently, Dominic Cummings with Johnson.

One might say that over the last half century or so the UK system has evolved in a piecemeal fashion typical of the UK. It still has recognisable aspects inherited from the Northcote/Trevelyan era, but the feel of the thing is different and the closer to ministers, especially senior ministers, one gets the more prominent political appointees become. On the other hand much of the civil service operates far from any contact with ministers and the developments of recent decades described above, other than the establishment of agencies, have had little effect on them.

What to do now if anything? I detect that most politicians, Conservative and Labour alike, are reasonably content with the present arrangements. Is there any pressing need for radical change in the public interest?

My conclusion is that there is no obvious, radical change that would stand a good chance of either gaining widespread agreement or of improving matters. If this is correct the last thing we need is some half-baked 'initiative', which some might say characterised the 'reforms' of the Blair era.

There is, however, a good case for extending compulsory training of the kind recommended long ago in the Fulton Report in the time of Wilson. For the elite – the fast steamers – this should involve more and better training in such disciplines as economics, statistics and data manipulation together with some of the agenda normally studied for the degree of MBA in a business school. For those lower down it would involve training relevant to the task in hand. Learning on the job is essential,

but there is much evidence performance is enhanced by formal training of which there is insufficient in the UK, including in the civil service.



***Sir Richard Packer** was the youngest ever Permanent Secretary at the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF), from 1993-2000. His earlier career centred on the agricultural and fishing policies of the European Union. He subsequently went on to become a Non-executive Director of Arla, the largest UK dairy company. He is the author of *The Politics of BSE*.*

A Dublin Conversation: Two Views from Ireland

The authors are retired civil servants in the Republic of Ireland

Contributor 1 – A Context of Opportunity

The debate that was begun here, during the Brexit referendum, exposed everyone under the age of 60 or so to the fact that the EU is not the greatest thing ever. It won't be possible to put the genie back in the bottle. I expect that the generation coming to the fore now will begin to address the issue. Frankly, they won't have any choice.

Brexit also though opens up other vistas to the perceptive observer.

British society has reached an important crossroads. The industrial decline that began before WW1 has now reached a critical point. Britain's days of living off debt and services (as opposed to manufacturing and services) are coming to an end.

The British economy has to be rebuilt, brick by brick. They can no longer rely on arms manufacturing as the principal element of their manufacturing industry. Not only is it immoral, but it is threatening the peace of the world. The same applies of course to the EU's attempts to break into the arms industry. The West generally has to get back to industrial development of the kind in which Britain led the world in the 18th century, i.e. making things other than armaments. Services and the City of London remain important of course, but the re-industrialization of Britain is paramount, and for that a competitive sterling exchange rate is crucial. British manufacturing needs to be advanced, not British high finance.

Re-building the British economy is of course just one element of the challenge ahead. Rebuilding British society, including the political system, the judicial system and the system of public administration, is also urgently required.

The political system of the 1950s and 60s would never have tolerated the kind of behaviour that Tony Blair and his spin doctor, Alastair Campbell, engaged in over Iraq. Parliament, particularly the Opposition, would not have behaved like poodles. (A recent edition of *Private Eye* has a picture of Johnson's Cabinet - all poodles.) The judicial system (as a judge recently told the Police) would not arrest a Cambridge lecturer for tweeting about some political controversy or other while real crimes are ignored. And the civil service would never have gone along with the Iraq War dodgy dossier.

The British educational system is also in need of significant reform. I don't want to describe it as a crisis, but it does not give the impression of being in rude health. Arguably, the common denominator behind many of Britain's problems is the decline of the educational system. However, the problems go deeper than that as they do in the West generally.

This is a time of great opportunity, but also of great challenge for Britain. They are lucky in that they are regaining their independence at a time they badly need it. The challenges they face are enormous.

To meet them, they will need to recreate the Rolls Royce civil service they once had. That will involve tackling the problems in the education system, but also the wider problems that led, for example, to the disastrous decision to go to war in Iraq.

The British civil service does not labour under the weight of our TLAC system, whereby Irish mandarins, in effect, rather than the Irish Cabinet decide who will join their ranks. But they have adopted (we copped it from them) the new system of civil service management that features business plans, role profiles, annual reviews with your manager and all the rest of it.

I always had a business plan before we had Business Plans. The difference between the former and the latter, however, is that a business plan is built around an objective - new legislation on industrial development, tackling child poverty, inadequate housing, whatever - whereas a Business Plan lists tasks to be completed in a calendar year.

Completing tasks is very different to achieving objectives. How a task is completed (well or badly) is irrelevant as long as it is completed.

Johnson's approach seems to be to be a combination of the worst of Thatcher and Blair - having poodles for Cabinet colleagues and trying to run everything from Downing Street. I do recognize, however, that Johnson knows that he is faced with a civil service (its mandarins certainly) who are probably still seething about Brexit, so he faces a big challenge as regards that.

The issue is way above my pay grade, but I can only repeat that this is both a time both of opportunity and a great challenge for Britain.

Contributor 2 - Comparison with Irish Civil Service reform

As far as I am concerned, the Irish civil service has deteriorated seriously over the years. There are a number of causes;

Growth of the private sector

In the past the Irish Civil service, especially some Departments which had graduate recruitment schemes, could attract some of the very best and brightest students, as the competition from the private sector was not too strong. In addition, the salaries in the Public Service were comparable to those in places like the finance industry, law, etc.

Today the starting salaries of young recruits in places like the Department of Finance, Foreign Affairs, etc., are only a fraction of what a first -class honours graduate can get from locally based international legal firms, finance houses, high tech employment etc. You cannot buy an apartment or in many cases even rent one in Dublin on Public Service starting salaries. Many young people simply cannot afford to take up a job in the civil service.

Whatever you do, don't make a mistake

The internal mechanisms of the civil service have changed as Heads of Department are more likely to be criticised if they do not have a good gender balance in senior management than for poor achievement of targets. There is a huge plethora of "social" requirements and unofficial quotas to be achieved, which take up an inordinate amount of time and effort.

Many of the aims of these exercises are laudable, but taken as a whole they destroy the ability of any Department to act decisively. People can rise through the ranks without ever having an opinion or achievement, as long as they keep their noses clean.

A person who has not made a mistake, has usually not made anything significant. Also the excessive caution means that many able people spend their day vetting the work of juniors, rather than in undertaking productive work themselves.

Recruitment and promotion

Recruitment and promotion have become dysfunctional. In an attempt to be fair and transparent, everybody is now graded on a competency basis, with candidates asked essentially the same questions.

Anybody running an operation knows that you need different types of individuals, with completely different skill sets, for a team to be successful. Yet the civil service is essentially trying to get very similar types in its initial recruitment. Also, in the past there was an effort made to recruit graduates from a wide range of disciplines, even science graduates like myself, people like marine engineers etc. This practice has been dropped and recent recruitment has been from a narrow range of subject areas, such as European Studies.

Not enough recognition of track records

At senior interviews past performance is sometimes not considered and hence there is a tendency to promote those who can "spoon" at interviews and are comfortable with the latest management/equality jargon.

The old method whereby senior management decided on promotions has essentially disappeared, something that I believe is a bad development. Also, if the person seeing promotion knows that their line manager does not really have a say in promotions, it lessens the incentive to do a good job such as to impress line managers.

Cooking the process to get preordained outcomes

In Foreign Affairs we had to drop some of the markings for general knowledge and being conversant with international affairs in the recruitment process because a disproportionate number of females fell on this test. We had to redesign our recruitment requirements with the Civil Service Commission. This was a mistake and led to a dropping of standards.

Not enough respect for real diversity

While the Civil Service pays huge attention to the need for diversity in areas such as gender, minorities, disability, etc., it pays no attention to diversity of opinion. There is little value placed on challenging the accepted narrative or conventional wisdom in many areas.

I have seen numerous instances where the best way to get on is to become an echo chamber for others. Hence creative people generally get bored and disillusioned unless they are lucky enough to become involved in what are the right areas for them.

Family matters

The civil service rightly makes huge allowances for things such as work-sharing and/or time-off for family matters etc. However, it has to be accepted that this does impact adversely on efficiency.

Contributor 1 – Those criticisms hit the mark

Growth of the private sector

On the growth of the private sector, I have been making the point to political scientists (who are not interested) that what is happening constitutes what I call problems of development (as opposed to problems of underdevelopment which economics students were taught about in the 1970s).

Fifty years ago, the people living on my road were (probably) civil servants, teachers, doctors, bank managers, etc. Nowadays, a location like mine, bought with an inheritance, is largely home to (wealthy) medical professionals, lawyers, accountants or very wealthy businessmen. Your typical middle-rank civil servant nowadays is living in former working class districts if he's lucky, while the guys they went to university with and who joined KPMG or Arthur Cox or did medicine or dentistry are living in posh places like Ailesbury Road or Dalkey or Killiney. Moreover, the APs and POs can only afford to send their kids to the Christian Brothers, not to Blackrock or Gonzaga. You can see where this is leading: too many doctors, lawyers, accountants and bankers (not all of them suited to their professions) and not enough smart people in teaching, the civil service, whatever.

But there's a catch: who will teach the next generation of doctors, lawyers, accountants and bankers? The break-up of the middle class - the backbone of any society - into two sub-classes (and remember the middle class is very class and status conscious): those who can afford to live in "good" areas/send their kids to "good" schools and those who can't is a very serious problem. As I say, academics just don't seem to be interested in looking at it. I have not seen anything about it anywhere but it is a growing problem.

Whatever you do, don't make a mistake

Even as an Assistant Principal, I estimated that I spent 40% of my time making sure that boxes were ticked. I always had a business plan, long before there were Business Plans.

A business plan set out real challenges and targets. A Business Plan merely requires that a piece of legislation be prepared or a report done or a Directive adopted in Brussels.

If the legislation is below par (as much modern legislation is), that is the next guy's problem. The box has been ticked.

The civil service has enough necessary box-ticking (much of the bureaucracy that drives people crazy is necessary), but the business plan culture that began in the 1980s has been a disaster. If it is bad here it is even worse in the UK where it has reached farcical proportions: targets for ambulance drivers who ignore heart attack calls (a longer journey perhaps) to make two shorter journeys to bring people with an in-grown toenail or a sprained ankle to hospital to meet their targets. I believe that is happening. The British police are arresting people on absurd grounds while ignoring serious crime. This type of thing is being written about in Britain.

I think we are seeing some of the ultra cautious culture of the civil service here in how we are dealing with Covid-19. I can't believe they have not called off the Dublin St Patrick's Day parade but I think I understand the reasoning. They are waiting until this thing breaks out into the community at large when they will muster the nerve to curb everyday events, ban travel, etc. If they had the courage to take that action now we would get ahead of this thing, but they don't. Wait for the tribunal of enquiry next year. It will all come out then but of course nobody will be blamed.

Recruitment and promotion

The British have not been saddled with TLAC, but if the situation there is as you describe it (and it is the case here) it is another problem. I saw people promoted at least one if not two grades above their ability. In the old days, a certain amount of that happened: sometimes people were promoted to get them out of harm's way, but in general an effort was made to promote people on the basis of their ability to move to the next grade.

The civil service unions bear some of the responsibility for this problem. It was a case of the lowest common denominator, which is what the unions demanded, rather than the highest common factor, on which management should have insisted. I don't know about the situation in the UK.

Not enough recognition of track records

It seemed to me, as my career went on, that having a good track record was a positive disadvantage. The consistory system that you refer to was abolished at the insistence of the civil service unions (in the Department of Industry and Commerce anyway.) A huge mistake. Why did

management give in to the unions? Because they were afraid they would be accused of being selective. Lack of backbone. They could have told the unions that all promotions involve being selective, but they didn't.

Cooking the process to get preordained outcomes

This is a case of the lowest common denominator again. The civil service was always anti-intellectual (outside the Department of Foreign Affairs), indeed positively hostile to ideas; but it had standards. Standards have slipped in many walks of life throughout our lives so why should the civil service be any different? It reflects society in general, like women in the army. I have never spoken to an army officer/retired officer (bar one friend) who privately, one on one, welcomed women in the army. For the moment, however, there is nothing that can be done, particularly in an environment where the collapse in standards in one area leads to a collapse in another - where, for example, the promotion system is less likely to lead to management that will argue for high standards. The sound of paper tearing

Not enough respect for diversity

Ours is a one-party state without gulags. The camps are not needed as people here are simply sent to purdah. The British civil service is less likely to suffer from this problem as they have had changes of government, which, until Blair destroyed Labour, usually meant changes of ideas when governments changed.

Johnson and Cummings may plan to build on the damage done to the British civil service by Thatcher and Blair. They would be well advised to look hard at the damage done by Thatcher and Blair and not repeat it or make it worse.

Family matters

Oh yes. The rules are full of days off for this and weeks off for that, but the work still had to be done, usually by unmarried males, on whom a lot of it falls. I made the point often (and might even have tried to make it officially in my Business Plan) that my Section's staff complement should be recalculated to take account of those on maternity leave, paternity leave, summer-off-by-married-women-with-kids-leave, etc., Good luck with that.

Some of the problems that have weakened the Irish civil service may be unique to Ireland (no diversity), but perhaps less so since Thatcher and Blair (the last thing they wanted was diversity). Some are common to the developed world (problems of development). Some are the result of the importation of ideas from the private sector about business planning (possibly from Britain).

In our case there are other problems also. The civil service is too small (it should perhaps be about 90,000 strong). It should be professional, not based on the generalist principle, which is no longer appropriate. The political culture in which it operates (which it influences but which also influences the civil service) is also important. British political culture is somewhat different to ours. It is based on changes of government with genuinely different approaches to public policy, a healthy situation.

Or it was until Blair came along. Before Blair, Thatcher did a lot of damage to Britain. Johnson and Cummings could do further damage to a civil service that was once (with the French civil service) a Rolls Royce organization but is very definitely not so today. I suspect that morale is low. Johnson and Cummings should start with that assumption.

On top of all that, the British education system has gone into serious decline and needs a drastic overhaul. I see the effects of it everywhere. I saw it in the work of the British civil servants I met in Brussels in later years; and in the hangdog look of much of Britain and British society today.

ECHR

One factor not so far raised is the impact of Strasbourg. A recent essay by the brilliant philosopher and political analyst John Gray is required reading. With a regular perch in the *New Statesman*, his case not just to scrap the Human Rights Act but to quit the ECHR is not easily dismissed by the usual suspects.³

It was inevitable that legal overreach would generate a strong reaction and, thank goodness, that is now happening. The crucial sentence in the article for me is "Protecting often divergent human interests, they [the courts] are the site of unending value-conflict". Politics was previously the centre of that conflict. Now the courts are. The British judiciary had the wit to stay out of the political arena until recently but my goodness they have fairly jumped in now.

What has happened (and it started here in the 1960s with middle class interests using the courts to get changes to the law to which a very conservative Dail would never agree) is that vested interests have realized that they are more likely to get what they want from the judiciary. The courts here declared that the public sector had to comply with the planning laws and that women could serve on juries.

Both of these (1960s) decisions (and there were others) were reasonable, but should have been made by the Dail. The fact that they were not was a consequence of 'We the People' continuing to elect a very conservative parliament. So, the political system and democracy were bypassed and the judiciary was complicit in that. If you are a smart lawyer you can probably find something in some human rights document somewhere to win your case. It is easy to understand how the slide down the slippery slope began, but it has now reached serious proportions. The political system has to fight back and restore the balance between the political and judicial systems. That won't happen here but it is happening in the UK. It will intensify following Brexit.

Needless to say, the bureaucracy that has built up around the human rights industry has also become powerful. The Irish Government sends officials to regular meetings of human rights committees abroad where the Government is criticized for not doing this or not doing that. Governments should be answerable to their electorate, not UN human rights committees in Geneva or wherever. The craven attitude of the State towards those committees is embarrassing and reflects very badly on Ireland.

³ <https://unherd.com/2020/03/lets-scrap-the-human-rights-act/>

Conclusion

One of the problems that Covid-19 is very likely going to expose is the deterioration in the British civil service due to the introduction of the business plan culture. I always had a business plan long before there were Business Plans but once the latter were introduced the quality of work often deteriorated. It was more a question of delivering the Plan than the plan. If it was delivered badly the next guy could clean it up but the Plan had to be delivered. The Business Plan "virus", dare I say it, has infected the Irish civil service too but not as badly as in Britain where, as far as I can make out, standards have plummeted fairly significantly. The decline in the British educational system in recent decades - fairly steep too as far as I can make out - might also be a factor.

The reported administrative delays in Covid testing might end up proving to be an example of that. It wouldn't surprise me if, when this is all over, the deficiencies in the business model imported by the British civil service from the US and clogged by our civil service, which doesn't suit either service, comes under scrutiny. I certainly hope so as the British seem to be struggling with Covid-19. We are up against it too but after a bad start (in not stopping flights from China on Day One and from Italy later - in common it has to be said with the rest of the EU and indeed, as far as I know, the UK too), the Irish public service is acting heroically to turn this thing back.

Carleton–Browne is Alive and Well

Adrian Hill

In spring 1959 the latest Boulting Brothers comedy hit the cinema screens of the British Isles and North America. Starring Terry Thomas, Peter Sellers, Luciana Palluzi, John Lemesurier and several others who were to enjoy fame, Carlton-Browne of the FO revealed everything the public suspected about their diplomats. The film is hilarious to this day, on You Tube, and remains a trailer for Yes Minister some years later.

*

Fortunately in real life there are some smart operators.

“I suppose the office told you that people sent here are specially selected,” John Margetson, Head of Chancery, British Embassy, Saigon, South Vietnam, June 1969, long legs propped on his desk.

“Yes, they did,” Adrian Hill, new Vice-Consul.

“Did you believe them?”

“Of course not.”

“I’m so glad. They’re scraping the barrel to find people to send here - but if it makes you feel any better, we are the scum.”

Carleton–Browne is alive and well

Jeremy Hunt (remember him?) ruffled a few swan feathers with his suggestion that some ambassadors might be chosen from the lower castes of commerce rather than HM Diplomatic Service. I’ve a vague idea what’s involved when moving from business to international politics after returning to a former diplomatic patrol zone following my third retirement. As I explained to Irish Ambassador here in Bern, “Now I know what the Resurrection will be like, Martin – I can report to Saint Peter that the parties are better than back in the ‘seventies.”

Less frivolously, with Brexit done and only six months left of *transition*, moreover the voters themselves quite capable of demanding a clean break rather than Brussels Favourite Fudge, high time HM Diplomatic Service and Department for International Trade started to think long term about staff development.

What is training?

I served in the Army before HM Diplomatic Service and then went into business and industry including a spell on the CBI Council. Skills learned in previous jobs always give one an advantage in

the next one. One objector to Jeremy Hunt claimed that diplomats are not born but result from years of training. Maybe it's changed. Otherwise, let's take a closer look at this fable.

When entering the Royal Engineers their curriculum was complex and took a year. As a soldier one had six weeks infantry training followed by another six weeks of engineering training. Add a further six weeks for pre-para fitness training and ten days of selection (known as P company) at the Airborne Forces Depot followed for those who passed by two weeks with the RAF at Number One Parachute Training School. To my knowledge there was no Number Two School. For officers we first spent two days on practical tests. The selection board were looking for leaders. Those picked went to the officer cadet school for six weeks of basic training by the Guards with weapons training from veterans of Korea, followed by several months of officer training, both theory and practise culminating in leading an infantry company attack. The final part of the course was three months learning field engineering at the Royal Engineers Officer Cadet Squadron in those days at Chatham. We had an extra month because our course built a heavy girder bridge as part of the Royal Engineers Annual Display. One learnt tactics from rifle section up to armoured brigade level and field engineering from building bridges, ferries and airfields, roads and railways, to all kinds of demolitions, laying or clearing mines. On top of this were the special courses for airborne forces and during my three years as a young officer I learnt other skills such as mountaineering and free-fall parachuting. Had I stayed in the sappers at some stage I would have been sent to Medway Tech or Cambridge to read Engineering! After which Staff College or Joint Services College or an overseas staff college, usually India, Canada or the USA. Later on, if destined for higher command, senior officers were selected for the old Imperial Defence College, nowadays known as the Royal College of Defence Studies.

This structured route formed my concept of what is meant by professional training.

In stark contrast

When investigating potential careers in the Civil Service the first thing I discovered was an institutional resentment towards the armed forces from those too young for the war but called up for National Service. I was one of the earliest volunteers for our professional Army. To my incredulity my military qualifications – paid for by the Treasury - counted for zilch and my military service worked against me. As I had no civilian degree I had to take the Civil Service Commissioners' examinations – first was a paper using numbers and logic, followed by papers in two subjects at First Class Honours level. I plumped for history and geography. To the horror of the selection panel, who presumed that would swiftly eliminate me - and indeed my shock – I passed all three. The Home Civil Service was represented by a senior lady on the interview panel who swiftly rejected me there and then as totally unsuitable. The men simply mumbled embarrassment. I managed to find a way to have another interview. I still hoped to find a place in the Ministry of Defence. Some weeks later a letter arrived telling me that I had been accepted for the Commonwealth Relations Office, then part of the Home Civil Service.

The Commonwealth Relations Office put half-dozen of us new entrants in the hands of the Chief Paper Keeper for a week. He taught us what all the various bits of paper were and how they went around Whitehall. He wisely made six bachelors sign on for their *widows'* pensions with name and

future date of marriage as yet unknown. Just before lunch on Friday he announced that we were *trained*, he would be available for consultation in the Red Lion, after which he was going to his bookie. And by the way, I was going to become the junior desk officer in the small Defence Department run by General George Price, a famous name in the Royal Engineers, who been General Ismay's assistant throughout the war and thus worked directly to Winston Churchill for five years.

I was very fortunate.

George Price had a tiny department and I shared an office with his Assistant Department head, John Champion, former original Desert Rat and more recently Colony Secretary of Uganda, the Governor's right hand man. George was the most intelligent person I ever worked for, brimming with common sense, sharp as a razor and quick as lightning at taking decisions which he never needed to alter, a familiar and distinguished figure sauntering along the corridors of power. His opinion was in demand all over the Commonwealth, not just Whitehall. Likewise, John; highly intelligent, practical, wonderful sense of humour and from the same breed of great public servants. Again, everyone knew him. One day he ripped up an envelope then found inside two halves of a top secret agenda for a meeting. He stuck them together with sticky tape only to spill tea over them. At the meeting that afternoon, he found himself next to Louis Mountbatten, who leaned over and loudly observed with a broad smile, "Aren't you taking this civil servant stuff a bit too seriously, John?"

I settled into the department very easily and found myself attending meetings at the MOD chaired by my old CO, by then a brigadier and head of MO 2. Later that summer we were merged with the Foreign Office but everyone knew we were being taken over so the FO could inflict its obsession with Europe on the whole Commonwealth. We had lost the power struggle by thinking that doing a good job was enough. I never forgot that lesson. That much the FO did teach me. The merger was planned to take three years. There were still skirmishes thirty years later when I retired. We fought and won another battle only four years ago. Dave Frost is fighting another battle as I type. **The lesson? Don't make *any* bi-lateral treaties with the EU.**

After a year I was posted to Lahore as the technical aid officer who sometimes *helped* with immigration. I spent a fortnight learning about our aid programme for West Pakistan and the West Punjab in particular. Last I spent a fascinating day at London Airport with the immigration and customs officers, just in case I needed to know. When I arrived in Lahore there was a line of eighty people from the North West Frontier outside my office door at 7.30 in the morning five days a week, sometimes more than a hundred - so much for the training. We had a hundred hours of language lessons and a very patient teacher! He taught me to read Persian script so I didn't try to translate everything into the Roman alphabet. This allowed me not only to converse with the customers but to drive from Lahore to Delhi, through the Khyber Pass to Afghanistan and to many other places from the Hindu Kush all along the Himalayas; I could read the signs and ask the way, moreover talk to everyone. Vital skills when Pakistan and India fought a full scale war in September 1965 and we had to evacuate a large number of women and children.

While on leave afterwards, the Army Parachute Centre telephoned, they had heard that I was going to Cyprus. They made an offer I couldn't refuse. Along with another civilian I was trained as an Army free-fall parachute instructor – a superb course focussed on *teaching techniques* and *safety* – with two weeks of teaching at all levels on the ground and in the air under the watchful eyes of the chief instructor (formerly PT Instructor of the SAS) and his staff. While I was in Pakistan Dare Wilson,

colonel of the SAS, had thoroughly re-organised free-fall parachuting in Britain, starting with the Army. The other instructor course members were young soldiers as were all the student parachutists. **The sport was valued; it encouraged self-reliance, thereby confidence though respect for danger, attention to detail, responsibility for others, taught three-dimensional thinking through how to calculate and master risk.** Plus it was also great fun. As I was on leave I was able to spend several weeks down at Netheravon Airfield and not only qualified but improved my own performance jumping with the SAS, Red Devils and 7 Para RHA on displays, the final one with the World Cup relayed over the aircraft radio from Wembley before we jumped in a park on the outskirts of Reading.

On arrival in Cyprus, apart from my job, I took over the Cyprus Combined Services Parachute Club from my original RAF instructor. Eventually I was voted chairman of the Cyprus Combined Services Parachute Club – it's an RAF island to this day - the only diplomat who has enjoyed that honour.

Cyprus and South Vietnam both involved civil wars and full scale wars and two more evacuations of civilians. **FCO training for both posts was short though practical, in large part how to do the paperwork and keep the books.** The languages were Greek, Turkish, French and Vietnamese. I stumbled across the best training programme run by the FCO – hard languages in the actual countries starting with Arabic in Beirut. Later on I came across fluent speakers of Vietnamese, Cantonese and Mandarin Chinese, Japanese and Korean. Unless it's changed, language students spend two years learning a language followed by two years in the local embassy.

To this day I remain amazed how a great office of state that can provide such a superb preparation for certain languages and cultures, hardly bothers to provide any other form of job preparation.

Learning Arabic is the fastest route to becoming an ambassador – there are lots of small embassies in the Arab world. Yet, as Mathew Sayed pointed out only recently in the Sunday Times, basic blunders were made during wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, such as not understanding the tribal nature of both countries, by these same Arabists. Moreover, the vital training for dealing with large numbers of sometimes frightened people, including some in authority - some indeed with authority over myself – and guiding them all through various emergencies, long before had been given me by the Army. More at *Diplomacy for Dummies* on www.theredcell.co.uk where life at the sharp end of diplomacy is described. On return to London from Vietnam I was referred to the Tropical Diseases Hospital. My blood was not quite right; after a UK/US consular lunch at a soup stall by the rail and road bridge across the river south of Quang Tri City, I had suspected parasites! No sooner was I admitted for tests than the FCO summoned me from the ward.

In those days Western European Department was the cream of the office – so I was told – and I was put in it to help with Northern Ireland. **Never mind the Irish, there was almost civil war between the FCO and the Ministry of Defence.** The Irish Prime Minister was known as Union Jack and the British Ambassador, John Peck, as Greenmantle. The head of our department, Kenneth James, had been the Counsellor and deputy ambassador in Saigon. His successor in Saigon thought I looked upon myself as part of the defence staff – this was not meant as a compliment – but Kenneth needed someone the Army felt they could talk to who was on their side. Again the training had been through wearing uniform, serving with George Price, and many other events to which I was about to add a few more. At least no parasites were found. My colleagues were superb and delightful people to work with on at times harrowing tasks. Some of my work was in Northern Ireland. Another life

with the Army meant that whenever over there I stayed with a family whom I knew –Peter and I had been on the parachute club committee together in Cyprus, before that he had led the Red Devils free fall team. Consequently I learnt all kinds of things about inter community relations that you could only learn on the spot. I became interested in standing for Parliament and tried my first attempt at founding a business with a parachute club. Unfortunately our old twin engine bi-plane's rev' counters failed one afternoon on take off, leaving the starboard engine running faster than the port one. We veered off the runway. The pilot normally flew an airliner. He managed to steer along the grass beside the runway though hit another aircraft. Nobody was hurt, but the bill was painful. I paid and retired from politics for the time-being.

One lunchtime, down in the office basement canteen, by chance I was joined by a friend running the Personnel Department as his new job. Our chat resulted a few months later in my leaving Downing Street only minutes ahead of Ted Heath's furniture van. The following morning I stepped off an overnight train from Victoria at Bern Bahnhof. **There followed my first *proper* management training course in the FCO - from John Wraight and Gillian Brown, the ambassador and the counsellor, on how to run an embassy.** "Bern is a very classical embassy," explained Gill on that first morning. When she went on holiday that summer I was able to step into her shoes. Gill was very thorough, slightly shy and yet with great charm, a natural leader and splendid networker. They taught me the map of every democracy in the world. Where to go for particular types of information and who one needed for particular decisions. Equally important, how to push or persuade politicians and officials in London to do what you thought wisest. Their network was impressive and they willingly shared it. One early friend was the great Paul Jolles who had just completed his 120 treaties with the Common Market. He was partly responsible for another treaty – he co-hosted the party where I met my future wife!

Gill and John Wraight trained me so well that I even found time to start writing for the RUSI Journal which led to writing books, one part of the official history of the Department of State. I believe I'm the only British diplomat with that *honor*. I still have one I wrote in Switzerland that nobody in the liberal world of publishing wants to see the light of day – an eyewitness story of the most crucial moment during the whole Vietnam War. **Anyone normal would think the FCO was delighted that one of their young diplomats could write articles for the RUSI on airborne and armoured tactics. Not a bit of it – all possible obstacles were put in my way until Jenny Shaw, Editor of the RUSI Journal, commissioned me. The FCO backed off.**

Four years later with my wife and son – yes, there was time for a bit of personal networking as well – we stepped off a plane in Canada. During leave I had attended the FCO commercial course. This was delivered by enthusiastic instructors but again was nuts and bolts, filling out forms, how to help exporters though carefully avoid hands on situations, no hint of any strategy. The High Commissioner, John Ford, had been the trade chief for the USA based in New York. I looked forward to learn about exporting from an established master.

All diplomatic posts are inspected every three or four years in a constant search for ways to save money, rarely are staff added. The inspectors arrived in Ottawa that winter. They soon realised there was almost no interface with the national media based next door on Parliament Hill - yet the High Commission was about to become involved in Canada's most important political debate for nearly fifty years. A new face was urgent. They also saw a way of saving money. Move the new second

secretary commercial to the Information Counsellor's job but at the former's pay and allowances! Could I think of a title? For the next three years I became the Director of the British Information Services. People congratulated me on promotion! At least I had a superb staff. Together we coped with the IRA hunger strikes, a Summit Conference, Canada's highly sensitive Constitution debate for more than a year – it was still an Act of Westminster in 1931 – followed by the South Atlantic War. I even went down to Washington to guard the shop there for a month. John Ford tried to get me promoted. Not a chance, the office wanted to save money. His successor, Lord Moran, son of Churchill's doctor, tried again and after a long battle, won. Both John Ford and Lord Moran, independently told me I should get out and find another job.

I had three years in London on Law of the Sea, the embryo Channel Tunnel to the treaty with France and COBRA committee for counter-terrorism. The young desk officer dealing with Canada asked me to write Mrs Thatcher's speech to both houses of the Canadian Parliament. A few weeks later a video arrived at our home in Sussex – from CBC and CTV's Parliamentary Bureaus, "We soon guessed who wrote Maggie's speech." Meanwhile I was trying to find a publisher for the two books, one factual the other fiction though both about real events. I also put myself on the list of two head hunters. Eventually I departed for Korea to run the Commercial Department, deal with the media, take care of our team and Royal Visitors as Olympic Attaché. By this stage, apart from language lessons, I relied on experience and gut instincts. South Korea had a government of generals in suits headed by a pompous, touchy scheming colonel that I had met at the Vietnamese Airborne Division Club fifteen years before and not particularly liked. During the next three years exports doubled, partly though significantly through helping the South Koreans win real democracy. I also looked after the Korean media and ours, Britain's Olympic Team and the Royal Family. **Diplomacy requires many skills.** We were very hands on with our exporters and close to the media which made some people in the embassy nervous. After which we had a wonderful two years in Jamaica while I negotiated early retirement. No sooner was it agreed and signed up than the personnel people started phoning to pressure me to change my mind. I suspected they had lined up someone else. I quickly took the money and left.

My apologies to the reader for inflicting on you all this life history but my reason is **to illustrate how random changes of direction, forced by the FCO's lack of depth, make carefully thought out training somewhat pointless.** The personnel people, of course, spend their days plugging gaps because they have less people to spread around the world. According to media reports the FCO has almost abandoned Africa to DIFID.

Round up

No officer in the Army would recognise the FCO approach as serious career development. An officer in the Armed Forces will attend signals courses, weapons courses, arms school courses – armour, infantry, artillery and so forth – staff college recently merged with joint services staff college, overseas staff colleges, The Royal College of Military Science, The Royal College of Defence Studies for those destined for higher command. The Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force have infinitely more demanding courses than the Army. What about allied diplomats? Take a sister diplomatic service, the US Department of State. American diplomats are sent back to school at

regular intervals. They regard career development and sabbaticals as normal. They will attend a university or service college for a Masters course, sometimes both, sometimes a secondment to Congress or to an industry as well. (My joining the course at the US Navy War College was thanks to the US Navy's hospitality as was time with the 82 Airborne Division.) **A career American ambassador has a year long course to get to know his own country.** I have American diplomat pals who have been driving cattle in Wyoming one week and on patrol at night with the Chicago Police the next.

At least when I left occasionally people were loaned to industry. Tony Blair's government brought in management consultants and changed the postings system. The grid which tried to match horses for courses was dropped for individuals bidding for jobs – in reality a way of advancing the politically correct and EU believers. Here in Switzerland, we see a shrinking staff working hard though with no representation any longer in Zurich or Europe's richest city, Basel. This concern sounds absurd in a small country? Then ask yourself why so many countries keep large offices in New York less than three hours by train from Washington? I've driven from DC to NYC and back for a day out shopping. The men had lunch in Little Italy while the ladies did the shopping! The reason is people – you have to live among the people who make things happen. Diplomacy is all about thousands of unique personal relationships. Switzerland is our fastest growing export market according to CNBC. Nearly 100,000 jobs in Britain are due to Swiss investments. Recently we had two very good British ambassadors in Switzerland at the same time, one for us and the other for the EU though on loan from the FCO. Both were excellent. The new one is as well and has a super deputy and staff. They have confounded my alarm about a shrinking staff – no less than three major agreements have been signed with the Swiss in good time before Brexit. Why don't the government support our ambassadors better? Britain's exporters and voters pay a price in lost opportunities because the FCO suffers the death of a thousand cuts. We're paying a very steep and unnecessary price because Home Office Olly first haggled with the EU instead of an experienced and street-wise ambassador. So,

- **Drastic surgery is needed followed by rehab.** The FCO is full of people obsessed with Europe. They will never have any interest in the Commonwealth. How many staff pulled from Africa were sent to Europe instead over the last five years?
- **Take away the C and revive the Commonwealth Office. Give this new office of state the aid programme to administer by merging the International Aid Department into it with its budget.** At a stroke the old office that I knew, with its sense of mission and clear purpose, is reborn. The Commonwealth is what makes its members different from the rest of the planet. Accompany this move with an emergency naval building programme. Send a global message – after forty years in a mental illness ward, we've escaped and we're back.
- **There is an argument for entrusting a new Commonwealth Office with our core alliance with the United States as well.** We need a replacement for NATO. Germany is towing the EU towards an unholy alliance with Russia for energy and China for a huge export market. It will end in tears. We are under no obligation to become dragged into Merkel's dreams for global power and end up on the opposite side to our Five Eyes allies. **Nor do we need the Chinese Army opening its own spying research centre and spy recruit school right in the middle of**

Cambridge. Remember Blunt, Burgess, MacClean, Philby and possibly John Cairncross as well? Do we really have to tell the County Council and Downing Street that the Secretary of State for the Environment can over-rule a local authority?

FCO mandarins live in a world of their own prolongation, where their decisions don't matter – Auntie Brussels and Mutti in Berlin carry the can. Like us in the old Commonwealth Office, American diplomats live in a world where the choices are for real. I can't wait until we're back in the firing line. The standard of decision making will rocket overnight.

Let's look at our neighbours. The Irish are supposed to be neutral, so are the Finns, Swedes and Austrians. All four might jump over the side of Merkel's U boat and head for truly neutral Switzerland. Unless Merkel wants to make the EU neutral? Either way NATO no longer makes sense for us or the North Americans. **A new global alliance should be built around our Five Eyes friends which some European countries may want to join.**

Let the FO concentrate on Europe as they like it so much and perhaps more important, rebuilding our relations with Latin America, expanding our links with Japan and Korea, reading China, Russia, strange lands with hard tongues and often violent or volatile politics. There's work for a century if not longer. The reason for the merger back in 1963 was, so say, that we had two foreign policies. That was nonsense. The FCO had one, Europe, and it consumed money, manpower and precious time. Imagine if the money paid to rich farmers in Europe through the CAP had gone to poor farmers in the Commonwealth. As a diplomat the EU was a pain in the ... which always demanded my sparse time for no useful purpose. How many Economic and Information Counsellors' meetings have I suffered in my life? Our relations with Europe are going to be much simpler after Brexit, and mostly about what's in our interest. Always remember that the EU is a racist cult with its origins in another one.

What about our trade with Europe I hear protests? We're just escaping from an attack by Kung Flu which brought trade with Europe to a grinding halt. We have a structural deficit with two blocs – the EU, mostly Germany, and China. In the case of the former the CBI, industry, commerce, banking will have been given four and a half years to get ready for Brexit. So has the government. Consequently,

- **Learn from the EU's never – ending haggling with the Swiss.** Pull out of the trade talks now and prepare for WTO terms when trading with Europe. Put government support behind companies seeking new markets throughout the Commonwealth, Latin America, Asia and the Far East. That's where the growth will take place and keep on growing. Move away from China. Every dollar spent in China ultimately keeps the Communist emperor in power and adding to his weapons for use against us and our friends.
- **Tell the City to wean itself from the European market.** That's not easy but much safer. Just add that when it all goes pear-shaped, they're on their own.

Meddling neighbours are part of our history. New Labour's socialist fairy tales replaced vast chunks of our history. Sort out the national curriculum – a lot of things happened before World War Two and New Labour imported voters on an industrial scale from Europe instead of the Commonwealth.

Waves of invasion from Europe started with the first humans who walked across the great river valley that is now the English Channel. Yes, the sea has risen when global warming melted the ice thousands of years ago. Next came Celtic tribes followed by Julius Caesar. Then the Jutes, Angles and Saxons followed by the Vikings. William the Conqueror was the last Viking invader – Norman means Northman and the people of Normandy have a lot of Danish Viking blood in them. Leave aside the Black Prince and Henry the Fifth, there was another war, one that lasted nearly two-hundred years and provides our chart and compass today.

Continental despots from the Civil War right through to the present time almost by habit play the other three kingdoms against the English. Catholic Ireland and much of Scotland have been exploited by France to support the House of Stuart, Louis Quatorze and the Kaiser supplied arms and money to stir up Irish and Scottish rebellions. Hitler invaded with aircraft and rockets, he used Ireland as a safe haven for his spies.

John Peck was our Ambassador in Dublin in the early 1970s. He'd been one of Churchill's wartime private secretaries. We used to enjoy debating the Irish Troubles. He thought that the problems would go away when we and the Irish were just provinces of a greater Europe. That was in 1971. My counter was the conclusion of an Irish friend, Liam O'Reardon, who reckoned that before 1918 Lloyd George made a mess of Ireland and ever after it was Eamon De Valera.

Today the EU led by Angela Merkel though I suspect steered by Martin Selmayr plays the same card – the threat of amputation of one or more of the other three kingdoms. Selmayr's Northern Ireland back stop is to bring about amputation. He knows that customs barriers between the islands of Great Britain and Ireland are absurd. My advice to Boris is play the same card. Let the Irish Republic know that if ever they fancy ditching the Euro to restore the punt, we would stand behind them financially. Indeed, we'd stand behind them if they ever wanted to escape the EU. How long are French and Germans going to speak English for the sake of one small country and their Eastern European colonies? Why on earth would ordinary Scots and Irish want to become German colonies? That's what's on offer, nothing else.

By all means look to Winston Churchill but in the present moment Clem Atlee has a lot more to teach us. He had a plan that included things like the NHS even though nationalising industry was not such a good idea. Atlee was a great patriot, his re-armament push during the Korean War was prudent and wise, moreover laid the foundations of the boom that gave my generation the Swinging Sixties. When Harold Macmillan told us, "We'd never had it so good," our thanks were also owed to Clem Atlee. He had been a brilliant staff officer in his youth, last but one off the beach at Gallipoli. Clem Atlee with Ernie Bevan stood up to Stalin with the Berlin airlift. We developed our own atom and hydrogen bombs and the V force to deliver them. We built new big ships, destroyers and nuclear submarines. Clem Atlee was well aware that allies can slink away when the enemy fleet comes over the horizon. He would not build aircraft super carriers then leave them with no EAW, surface and submarine defence screen and supply ships. **Today Clem Atlee would be doubling or tripling the size and strength of the Royal Navy and Royal Air Force, developing hypersonic conventional weapons for both. Winchester it seems beats Eton on foresight and common sense.** (Our boy went to Harrow!)

If we want to become a great nation again, we have to start thinking like one. Let me add one other thought based on sixty-three years as a soldier, diplomat, the last thirty with industry, owning

a tour business and as a writer. The world today is made up of three kinds of countries - those which believe in freedom of thought, word and deed including trade; those which believe in fortress walls and controlling everyone and everything within those walls; those that don't know which way to jump. We just rejoined the first group and claim we intend to become a leading member; Russia, China and the German led EU form a loose version of the Axis in the second group; any leading member of the first group should get busy persuading as many nations as possible the third group to jump into our group.

Skills learnt as a diplomat apply to many other trades. Whether working with unions or merging companies, creating a publisher or promoting a book, selling an idea or forming a team, the lessons apply extremely well. Don't believe me, ask the people at the GMB with whom I worked. We met often. The unions joined our training committees. We made sure we didn't spring surprises on each other. So long as there are bad bosses we will always need unions. Likewise, for me, there are plenty of skills learnt in business that equally would help diplomatic envoys. **The FCO has no idea of real people management. The Armed Forces have it coming out of their ears.** People in business tend to have their company's interest as their true north horizon. Union leaders are better at seeing the wider picture. I learnt a lot from my trade union friends. That's my experience. And people in business and industry create structures designed to make things happen, get jobs done, make a profit. No business would sign an Irish back-stop – it's a contract without a break clause, moreover cannot be terminated by either party alone. That's not just stupid, that's white coat stuff. The FCO is programmed to ignore what its political bosses want and do what the monastic order regards as closest to the true faith. And I thought only our spies are mostly Romans! I'm not sure how long a businessman could stand that approach. It drove me mad so I climbed over the monastery wall. *Carlton-Browne* ends with the credits flowing across workmen painting over a UN white line – itself painted to save money. Oh, by the way, it's true - diplomats are not trained, they really are just born.



Adrian Hill is a former soldier who then pursued a career with the diplomatic service for almost 30 years. Following retirement he became an author, then chief executive of a major industry association and member of the CBI council, before he retired again. He subsequently took the London tourist board examinations as a tour guide and later became a member of the Institute of Tourist Guiding.