

**'Downton versus *Daring*: can cultural influence be a substitute for Britain's declining hard power?' Sir Martin Davidson speech to Global Strategy Forum, 11/2/14.**

**Introduction: retreat from Juba**

A few weeks ago, the British Council's Country Director in South Sudan, a man named Tony Calderbank, reluctantly took the decision to suspend our operation in the country. His first responsibility – as with any boss – is to his staff. With gunfire in the streets, and following advice from our own security people and the Foreign Office, he made the decision that it was too dangerous to carry on.

So Tony, his wife and the other UK based staff were evacuated by RAF C-130 from Juba airfield, and brought back home, leaving two cats and many of their possessions behind.

It was a sad day for Tony and his colleagues, and it continues to be a worrying time for the locally appointed staff they left in the country, and for the people who had begun to use our services and to see us as a valued friend.

A cynic might say, looking at what is happening in South Sudan: 'Well, what did you expect? The country was bound to go to the bad, it's barely a country at all, you should have kept well out of it. And to imagine that cultural relations could work in such a poor place – that's the worst kind of utopian thinking'.

I don't agree.

Rather than seeing the retreat from Juba as an ignominious failure, I think it can stand as a textbook example both of the value and the risks inherent in the use of soft power.

South Sudan has only been a country for a very short time. It's a nation born out of a long and bloody civil war.

It is a minnow among nations, and the best strategy for minnows, if they want to avoid becoming lunch for some larger fish, is to find some influential friends.

So having established its right to independent statehood in 2011, South Sudan sought to establish itself as a citizen of the wider world, by – among other things – applying to join the Commonwealth.

The British Council's work in South Sudan is another part of that connecting process.

We set up an office in Juba, the capital city, and after just a few months of operation were offering English language teaching, programmes to encourage active citizenship, and running collaborative arts projects. The latter culminated in the South Sudanese theatre company's production of *Cymbeline* at the Globe theatre in London: a fantastic boost to the new nation's self-esteem.

All of that – I hope you agree – is good for the people of South Sudan. But what do we get out of it? Why is the UK putting time, effort and hard cash into a tiny country that most people in this country would struggle to locate on a map?

I said that it was in South Sudan's interest to become a citizen of the world. But it is also in the *world's* interest, and therefore in the UK's interest.

A community in which people are connected – through local clubs and activities, ties of friendship and family – is a strong community. The same is true for communities of nations.

The more ties we have – whether of commerce or culture – the stronger the trust between us, and the less the chance that we will decide to resolve our differences violently.

My organization, the British Council, exists to tell the United Kingdom's story to the world.

We do that through the teaching the English language, through our work in education and civil society, and in the arts. In short, through bringing our nation's cultural assets to the world.

Of course 'culture' often gets a bad press, particularly when it is destined for an audience of foreigners.

It's an attitude that goes back a long way, to Lord Beaverbrook's deep antagonism towards the British Council. Thus the Daily Express of 4 August 1939 fulminated:

*'Which is the best propaganda for us – the roar of ... British bombers and fighters, or the melody of madrigals broadcast by the British Council? If we saved the money wasted by the Council, we could have three extra squadrons of fighters to join the display.'*

It seems unlikely that British Council spending on madrigals would have bought even a single Spitfire, but that is not the point. A population facing total war could easily be persuaded that 'culture' was a luxury it could not afford; and the Express was not in the business of giving nuanced explanations.

For Beaverbrook and his readers, in a period when the British Empire was still – just – a living entity, national character was properly expressed in a far more muscular manner.

Yet if the British people in 1939-45 were not fighting for culture, why were they at war? Above and beyond the realpolitik of mid-twentieth century power, it was surely to defend values and beliefs – in the right of individuals to live as they wished, as much as anything else – that the war was fought,

### **Syria debate**

We tell stories to let others know who we are, and also to define, for ourselves, 'our place in the world'.

'Britain's place in the world' is a phrase that's been around in the media a lot recently, notably in the wake of another debate – the House of Commons debate in August this year about whether to join the United States in military action on Syria.

It led Vice President John Kerry to make pointed reference to the 'oldest ally' of the United States: France. Rather different from the mood in March 2012, when President Obama affirmed to Prime Minister David Cameron what he described as "... one of the greatest alliances the world has ever known".

Language matters, and so whether the relationship with the USA is 'special' or 'essential' has a real bearing on how we feel about our place in the family of nations.

'Britain's place in the world' of course goes back to the rather cutting remark of Dean Acheson, US Secretary of State under President Truman, to the effect that Britain, having lost an empire, had 'not yet found a role'.

It's a dilemma we still seem to be obsessed about at home, although it does not necessarily seem so important to those observing us from overseas.

Unusually, perhaps uniquely among long established nations, we suffer from a historical lack of definition about what to call ourselves. Do we live in 'the UK' or 'Britain'; are our people 'British'; or 'English', 'Scottish', 'Welsh' and 'Northern Irish'. Are they Pakistani British, Bangladeshi Welsh, or Afro-Caribbean Londoners. Or all or none of the above?

The 'British' tag has recently been wrested back from the far-right, but is nevertheless one that makes many people in these islands, for many different reasons, feel uncomfortable. Yet when we're abroad, we're usually 'Brits' – or, more regrettable, all too often just 'English'.

It's so much easier to be French, with a national 'offer' that has been conveniently boiled down into three words: liberté, égalité, fraternité. That's even snappier than America's 'life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness'.

If you are selling your brand abroad, you need an easy-to-understand definition that engages with the widest possible number of people.

### **Power 'spectrum'**

Perhaps because the shadow of the British Empire does still hang over our public discourse, in the wake of the Syria vote the phrase 'Britain's place in the world' was generally understood in the media in a political and military sense.

The discussion was all about our seat as a permanent member of the Security Council of the United Nations, and our role as the United States' go-to military ally. Our place at the 'top table', in other words.

But our place in the world is dependent on far more than our military or economic muscle.

There are many tables at which we might gain influence, and cultural relations – or soft power – gives us access to one of the most potent.

I would argue that the apparently rigid distinction between 'hard' and 'soft' power is a simplification. The two forms of influence are – and always have been – non-exclusive and overlapping.

Cultural relations exists on what we might think of as a 'power spectrum'.

The spectrum is all the ways that a state has to exert influence in the world, and to engage with it.

It runs from military force at the 'hard' end, to aid at the 'soft' end.

Cultural relations, towards the attraction end of the scale, seeks to engage people's interest and build a relationship for mutual benefit.

And of course each element of the spectrum shades into the next, so that it's difficult to say where one begins and the other ends.

It is a long way from the 'hearts and minds' end of the spectrum to the bombs and battleships end, but like the US – and unlike most of our competitors – the UK has the capacity to project power in all its forms, around the world.

France and China are arguably the only other contenders, able to project military might around the world and also heavily engaged in promoting a clear and comprehensible version of their national culture.

Other nations, for historical or political reasons, are unwilling or unable to operate across the whole spectrum. At its most successful, the UK's foreign policy engages on all points of the spectrum simultaneously.

Sierra Leone is a good example of what can be achieved by co-ordinated engagement, with UK military power creating the environment in which development assistance, education reform, capacity building and reconciliation work could begin.

It is notable that even at the extreme hard power end of this sliding scale of influence – military intervention – the cultural aspect remains in play.

Personnel in the small British military force that remained in Sierra Leone after the fighting were instructed that the correct procedure when driving anywhere in the country was, 'Windows down and waving'.

British soldiers, in other words, were not to present themselves as a faceless armed presence, but as individual human beings making an effort to engage with the local population, learning a few words of the language, handing out bottles of water.

This is cultural relations in action, just as much as British Council language programmes or Brazilian festivals of football.

The famous essay on Tolstoy by Isaiah Berlin, 'The Hedgehog and the Fox', takes its title from the ancient Greek poet Archilochus, who wrote: 'The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing'.

We must be fox-like to survive in the modern world – quick on our feet and adaptable to circumstances. The age in which nations could get by with knowing just one big thing is probably over.

The power spectrum as visualised by the UK is not exhaustive. It does not show all forms of influence that a nation may employ to further its interests. Religion does not figure on it at all, for example, because we in the West feel deeply uncomfortable with religion. The days when we went abroad with a gun in one hand and a Bible in the other are long past. If today's cultural ambassadors have a book in their hand, it is more likely to be the latest Booker Prize winner.

Others, of course, do not feel the same way, and it may be that future researchers into soft power – those working at the new Centre for Cultural Relations at Edinburgh University, for instance, may wish to examine religion as a soft power phenomenon.

It might be a useful and interesting piece of research, for example, to look at the way Saudi Arabia has used its position as the keeper of Islam's most holy site to project itself as a world power.

If we are serious about understanding soft power, we should be prepared to open our eyes to the fact that other people's definition of the term will not always be the same as ours.

### **Post Cold-War cultural relations**

In 1959 Richard Nixon and Nikita Khrushchev spent some time looking at a kitchen.

The kitchen was the latest in labour-saving design, and was on display at the American National Exhibition in Moscow.

In front of a party of journalists, the Vice-President and the First Secretary argued about the merits of Soviet and American kitchens, and whether or not they were within reach of the average working man.

The cupboards and the aluminium saucepans swiftly became a cipher for the two leaders' national ideologies. 'Don't be afraid of ideas!' they exhorted one another.

The American National Exhibition was organised by the US Information Agency [USIA], a body dedicated to American 'public diplomacy'; and the 'Kitchen Debate' remains a high point of the form.

In the late 1950s, when the alternative means of getting your point across could well involve ballistic missiles, a proxy war of jazz, abstract expressionism and waste disposal units seemed like a good option.

The Kitchen Debate was a classic piece of Cold War cultural relations.

For as long as the world was held in balance by two opposing ideologies – two ideological blocs – the purpose of such cultural discourse was clear: to get across to as wide an audience as possible the superior nature of your cultural offer.

So what has happened in the two decades since the collapse of the Soviet Union?

The end of the Cold War might have been seen by the ‘victors’ of the West as a chance to engage fully with societies that had hitherto been difficult to reach. Societies, moreover, that might be expected to welcome such an approach with open arms. But change in Moscow was seen in many quarters – not least in the US – as a signal that state-sponsored cultural relations had had its day.

Professor Nicholas Cull of the University of Southern California’s Center on Public Diplomacy has a view on this. He argues that USIA’s *‘ideologically driven masters believed that increased US public diplomacy would be a short-term phase in Eastern Europe’s march to capitalism, rather than a long-term project to promote mutual understanding’*.

USIA was effectively abolished in 1999, the battle for ideas having been – it was presumed – overwhelmingly won.

The irony, as Cull observes, is that the presence of the USSR helped shore up the ideological underpinnings of its mirror image, the USA. In the Soviet Union’s absence, the work of explaining the American Way was perhaps *all the more important* at the very moment when the cultural and influencing agenda moved into ever higher gear.

If that had been suspected before 11 September 2001, it became blindingly obvious afterwards.

It was clear that other people in other parts of the world thought differently from us. History hadn’t ended, as we’d been promised it would. There had been a return to ideology; or rather we were forced to realise that it had never gone away.

The British and American military have been involved in two continuing conflicts in the years since then, and there is widespread agreement that ‘the terrorists’ are not going to give up any time soon.

Any ultimate solution is going to be political and cultural: *military action can only buy us a space in which political and cultural action can take place.*

Al-Quaeda itself could be seen as a good example of a networked organisation: working through ideas, in semi-autonomous cells, with no single, easily-identifiable command structure.

The world has become more networked. Power is no longer about immovable blocs, but about connections, webs, networks. And in fact that is how soft power has always worked.

### **What others are doing**

So cultural relations continues to matter. But the nations of the West are no longer the only significant players. Booming economies in the South and East, new national priorities, and new technologies have all had a role in bringing new players onto the scene – each playing by a different version of the rules.

Al Jazeera launched in 1996, and states its intention to present ‘The opinion and the other opinion’ – the station's motto.

Viewers in the Arabian Peninsula were shocked by an early broadcast in which Israelis were heard speaking Hebrew: a first for Arab TV. And the station’s coverage of the war in Afghanistan won plaudits around the world. Like other soft power institutions, Al Jazeera asserts its independence from its owners, in its case the Qatari royal family.

Other Arab countries have followed in Al Jazeera’s wake, including Saudi Arabia’s Al Arabiya, and Sky News Arabia, a joint venture between BSkyB and Abu Dhabi Media Investment Corporation.

Chinese soft power – *ruanshili* in Mandarin – is expressed in various ways, including the 300 Confucius Institutes that have sprung up around the world since 2004; and a recent interest in African media.

Over the last decade, China has invested large sums in building communications infrastructure across Africa, providing technical upgrades for state broadcasters, and training journalists.



It has also been gaining influence in the continent's media landscape. Xinhua, China's state-run news agency, now has more than 20 bureaux in Africa. In 2008 it launched the China African News Service, and also offers a mobile phone newspaper in Kenya.

Meanwhile a Beijing-funded scholarships programme takes 12,000 African students a year to study in Chinese universities.

Russia and India are also becoming self-conscious exporters of their own culture. India is expanding its network of cultural centres, while Russkiy Mir, founded in 2007, now has 82 offices around the world.

Cultural relations is becoming a conversation at a noisy table. We need to speak louder, or make the most interesting point, if we wish to be heard.

## **Fragmentation**

A second and perhaps even more significant way in which the conversation is changing is the levelling out of communication as a result of digital technology.

The cultural relations paradigm is no longer national broadcasting agencies speaking truth to vast audiences who tune in at fixed times of the day; but individuals speaking their own experience to other individuals or communities of individuals.

When we think about the UK's great cultural treasures, we tend to think – at least, people of my age tend to think – about institutions, and we have many. The BBC World Service, our great universities and museums, as well as cultural icons like the RSC, the British Museum, and the National Theatre of Scotland. And of course these remain tremendous glories, hugely attractive to visitors from abroad and a source of pride to those of us who live here.

But in soft power terms – in terms of reach and engagement – other aspects of our national life and culture may be far more influential.

For instance, Manchester United claims to have 108 million 'followers' in China. That's considerably more people than belong to the Communist Party of China, which has around 85 million members.

I don't know how you would go about measuring the relative significance in people's lives of those two organisations – perhaps that's another question for the Centre for Cultural Relations. What I do know is that

even if the definition of ‘fans’ is somewhat loose, there are still an awful lot of people in China who feel a visceral connection with a great British institution, and who therefore have an interest in, and an attraction towards, this country.

There are many other such connections: through gaming, our creative industries, and the impact of social media, for example.

And the UK’s greatest soft power triumph of recent years was of course the 2012 Olympics. The opening and closing ceremonies were a chance to tell the UK’s stories – very deliberately plural – in the most compelling ways, to the largest imaginable audience. The sporting events – the meat in the sandwich – were an opportunity to show that we could match the very best in terms of athletic competition, as well as organising the greatest show on earth.

All of these new connections and networks pose a challenge to traditional forms of cultural relations, at the same time as offering – and I’m sure you would expect me to say this – huge opportunities.

The title of this talk – *Downton versus Daring* – is rather tongue in cheek. But it does make a serious point.

For some things a gunship is the appropriate response, and no amount of brilliantly crafted period drama will fit the bill. But for the making of connections with huge numbers of people around the world a TV show may in the long run be a more effective tool.

While retaining our ability both to defend ourselves and take the fight to our enemies, we should be aware of the effectiveness – and the cost-effectiveness – of soft power channels.

### **British Council model of soft power**

It comes back to mutuality and the idea of building relationships.

I said at the beginning that cultural relations had in the past been treated with suspicion by people who felt it was an effete and unmanly way for a great country to tell its story.

On the other hand, critics have attacked cultural relations for being, more or less, propaganda.

The British Council – and more generally the UK – has always maintained a robust stance on this.

Propaganda is a megaphone, blaring messages at people whether they want to hear them or not. That is not the way we work; and indeed if we tried to work in that way, we would fatally undermine our aims.

We have to *receive* as well as transmit – otherwise the relationship-building which is at the heart of our mission cannot happen. There are no relationships where only one person does the talking; or at least, no happy ones.

For the same reason, the British Council has maintained since its foundation in 1934 an arm's length relationship with government. That's essential if we want to maintain our independence and continue to generate trust.

We are not the cultural wing of the British government, any more than the BBC is. It is our job to create the space in which culture and conversation can flourish – not to determine the content of the debate.

And indeed that toleration – more than toleration, that encouragement – of different voices and independent thought is one of the great lessons I believe this country has to teach. We are not a monoculture, nor do we wish to be. The UK is composed of different nations, of different peoples, and of different cultures.

The best way to tell that story and show that it is possible to be strong while containing all this diversity – that in fact the diversity contributes massively to the strength – is through cultural relations.

## **Conclusion**

There is something of a Great Game going on in soft power terms around the world. But the great powers of old are being joined by smart players – new and agile players who are making up their own rules.

Do we have what it takes to keep up? Undoubtedly. But we must make the best use of all our assets if we are to succeed. We should be joining up the various elements of our national power – hard and soft – to ensure they are used in the most effective way possible.

The world has never been entirely at peace with itself; but the argument for engagement is today stronger than ever before, particularly for a country whose military might – for all we could wish it otherwise – is seriously diminished from 50 or even 20 years ago.

Soft power has to be smart power. We have to use all our assets in the

most intelligent combination, for the best effect in any given circumstances.

What my opening story about South Sudan demonstrates is that there is no either/or here. If we want to retain our influence in the world – and I think we do – then we must maintain both our naval fleet and our cultural offering.

But we may find that if we deploy *Downton Abbey* a little more, we have to deploy *HMS Daring* a little less.

Thank you.

/ENDS