

**MMB Speech for the Inaugural Conference of the Cyprus Centre for Intercultural Studies: Intercultural Dialogue and Cultural Diplomacy in Practice, 3.50-4.10pm, 15 Jan 2012.**

**Cultural Diplomacy: Smoke Screen or Change Agent?**

I approach cultural diplomacy through the lens of the UN and the perennial question - can peoples rise above nations, and the walls the latter build between each other, and create the global peace and harmony hankered after for centuries? This aspiration is at the core of the values of both the United Nations and before it of the League of Nations. But it has repeatedly been disappointed as the UN remains an organisation of nation states. Of interests first and values only second. You, here in Cyprus approach cultural diplomacy through the hopes, but then the bruises and disappointments of Cypriot- Turkish Cypriot relations. Both are stories of epic disappointments. This lecture asks the question, Should we give up?

- I start by acknowledging the starting point that neither a veteran of the UN or Cyprus can deny: that contact between people cannot replace the harder diplomacy of national interest. When states are bent on disagreeing, all the concerts, arts fairs and poetry festivals in the world are not going to bathe away the conflict. But politicians are survivors above all else and if they sense the zeitgeist is shifting they can suddenly fall in line with the aspirations of the artists and the poets. So there is a circularity to the question about the importance of cultural diplomacy. Can it lead or must it follow? Can it initiate a sea change in attitudes between states or is it consigned to a role of modest reinforcement of change begun elsewhere.

### **What is Cultural Diplomacy?**

- And here is the exciting part for a new centre such as this: the answer may be changing. Cultural Diplomacy has to be seen within the context of international relations throughout history and the increasing ease of communication and reduced cost of transport.
- Whereas much of international relations up until the 20<sup>th</sup> Century was conducted by few-to-few, the elite to the elite, the coming of age of democracy (which made those elites more responsive to public opinion) together with mass media and better means of communication, produced a public diplomacy conducted by few-to-many.
- While diplomacy - 'the art and practice of conducting international relations as in negotiating alliances, treaties and agreements' - focuses on conversations between a small number of elites, public diplomacy aims to reach the masses.

- Communicating cultural ideas became the central plank of this public diplomacy because<sup>1</sup>, ‘while culture is what distinguishes us as nations, one from the other, it is also through culture that we can understand each other, as individuals.’ Culture is the primary channel for communicating our essential human values.
- More obviously culture has become a prominent channel for international relations, alongside economic and political relations, because as T.S. Elliot put it, culture is ‘that which makes life worth living’.
- Willy Brandt in 1966 called cultural diplomacy ‘the third pillar of foreign policy’, ‘third’ because it accompanied politics and trade. William Fulbright wrote with foresight in 1964 that, ‘Foreign policy cannot be based on military posture and diplomatic activities alone in today’s world. The shape of the world a generation from now will be influenced far more by how well we communicate the values of our society to others than by our military or diplomatic superiority’

### **From few-to-many to many-to-many: Cultural Exchange**

- Cultural diplomacy is now something much more than simply a broadcast of one country’s cultural values to another, such as the Voice of America or the BBC World Service.
- Quoting a former British Council man in Athens, Robert Taylor, ‘Cultural relations ideally proceed (through) the accumulation of experiences between two countries (and) through open and professional exchanges rather than self-selective projection: the latter being better described as propaganda.’ Cultural exchanges must portray an honest picture of each country rather than a beautified one.
- That is not to say that this kind of propaganda did not have its era. Probably one of the greatest achievements of cultural diplomacy was the United States relentless bombardment of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe with the 1960s and 1970s culture of the west. It was the raw attraction of bands like the Beatles, the ‘jeans and the music’, which articulated or showcased best the west’s values of freedom, openness and political progressiveness as an alternative to the oppressive totalitarian arrangements in the Soviet Bloc. [Paul McCartney anecdote]

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<sup>1</sup> Quoting Helena Kennedy

- But this sort of broadcasting and mass media approach has two problems. Firstly this soft power is simply not credible if the culture being sold is not the result of a genuinely pluralist process. Take Hu Jintao's expensive efforts over his leadership to increase China's soft power – Polls show a fairly lousy return on investment.
- Secondly, as Joseph Nye (the Harvard Professor of International Relations who coined the phrase 'soft power') puts it, the inability to influence how messages are perceived in different cultural settings is a weak point. The influence of American music associated with 'sex, drugs and rock'n'roll' in a fiercely conservative Muslim society is likely somewhat less than it was in 1980s Hungary or Poland.
- Joseph Nye argues that it is genuine cultural exchange that overcomes these issues.

*'Simply put, face-to-face relations have more cross-cultural credibility than do government broadcasts. But this type of decentralization and flexibility is difficult for governments to accept.'*

*'The greater flexibility of nongovernmental organizations in using networks has given rise to what some call "the new public diplomacy," which is about building relationships with civil-society actors in other countries and about facilitating networks between nongovernmental parties at home and abroad.'*

*In this approach to public diplomacy, government policy is aimed at promoting and participating in, rather than controlling, such networks across borders.*

*Indeed, too much government control, or even the appearance thereof, can undercut the credibility that such networks are designed to engender.'*

- That is, in the world of Youtube, Facebook and Twitter, attempts by government to interfere seem just as parochial on an international level as they do on a domestic one.
- How then can government promote such cultural exchange?

- One of the best and time tested ways is through scholarship and the funding of academic exchange. It is particularly embarrassing for that Britain, despite the pre-eminence of our schools and universities, is shutting the door on a generation of international students through tighter visa restrictions and shriveling bursary schemes. In doing so we reject hundreds of potential evangelizers of our culture and our values.
- Another is by pushing for a cheap and free internet, everywhere – many countries, particularly in Asia and Africa lag far behind the west not only in terms of an internet connection, but also, gallingly, in terms of electrification.
- A third is by encouraging a dynamic world beating domestic arts sector which sets out to conquer global markets. Hollywood remains the poster child but Britain, France, India, Brazil and others are not slouches.

### **Social Media – An Unfinished Revolution**

- Beyond cultural exchanges and scholarship the sheer volume of social media and indeed mass media communication is a revolution in its own right.
- From the establishment of an international postal service to the telegram, the phone, radio, television and Internet, the increasing volume of cross border exchange is as revolutionary a force as Moore's Law about the increasing power of computerisation.
- It is a revolution where the technology still leads and the social impact surely lags. The real revolution will bring change that laps at the very foundations of the nation state lies ahead: Facebook may have changed the way a new generation makes friends and dates and Twitter may be changing how they get their news but the old edifices of embassies, foreign ministries, chancelleries and parliaments have so far remained relatively immune to the assault. It remains a preserve of experts - for now. Even though for decades now embassy reporting of events has been largely supplanted by CNN, Al-Jazeera and the BBC. Diplomats, just like the rest of us, get their news from cable TV, not their cables.
- Yet just as Caxton invented the printing press, its revolutionary application had to wait for Luther's use of it. We now have the tools to break down state power in the way Luther's tract then broke a monopoly of power, the Catholic Church, - but we don't yet have our Luther.

## **Unapologetically Nineteenth Century**

- So when it comes to **outcomes** foreign policy remains unapologetically nineteenth century. Even then policy was not some abstract prism but rather ran on two rails: the Westphalian nation state system and the exigencies of domestic policies, even then expressed more often than not through the macho actions of powerful media owners.
- Nineteenth century Britain saw more than its fair share of gunboat diplomacy when a storm in the press and parliament required the Government of the day to commit its equivalent of the modern Libya or Iraq: put down a dictator who the tabloids and parliamentary backbenches had lost patience with.
- When allowed, Grand Strategy was a more relaxed affair but run around principles of a balance of power between states and an abhorrence of vacuums of power. The vision was an orderly world of nation states presiding over a system of compliant colonies. It was an elite world, and a man's world.

## **Cultural Diplomacy is Not a Panacea**

- And as I have said, much of this system remains. It has neither been swept away by the Internet or evolving global culture.
- In December 2008 a touring exhibition from London's Victoria and Albert (V&A) museum arrived in Damascus. It was the first time an international museum had shown it works in Syria. At the same time David Miliband visited Damascus, itself a reciprocal trip after Walid Muallem, Syria's then top diplomat visited London.
- A Financial Times article reporting on the exhibition asked whether art and music could help repair relations between unfriendly countries. As the organiser quoted in the article said, 'this is a cultural exchange between the east and the west but it is not about politics, it is about building bridges'.
- Is this enough? Maybe this is the 'smoke screen' referred to in the title of the speech. While cultural diplomacy must not be dismissed, it should also not be feted too highly.
- So while Arab Israeli youth orchestras or summer camps are important and are not to be dismissed they have done little or nothing to address the underlying causes of conflict. While I as a minister myself who thought we

could do a lot more with the Syrian relationship than we managed to do, the Syrian-U.K. exhibition of 2008 did not preclude Assad's regime's terrible massacre of its people.

- Rather in such circumstances we must rely on the 'hard' traditional diplomacy of conflict resolution – the U.N. Security Council, in some cases sanctions, and negotiated settlements for lasting solutions based on resolving conflicting national interest.

### **What cultural diplomacy does do**

- Cultural diplomacy must work in the background however and often takes many years to work. It is most effective when disputes are between people rather than governments. It has become a slightly hackneyed quote but I think apt - Wole Soyinka, the Nigerian Nobel-Prize winning novelist and playwright, observed that 'Politics tend to have as its first principle, the demonization of the other, whereas culture tends toward the humanization of the other'. Cultural exchange identifies the common elements that unite all human existence.
- Politicians react to national opinion, which is formed in complex and inscrutable ways – but undoubtedly influenced by cultural diplomacy. The national opinion of two countries, even with cultural exchanges, can stay poles apart. Sometimes it takes politicians to be brave enough to move ahead of national opinion and forge a lasting diplomatic solution, even if it is not a vote winner. Cultural diplomacy can be the vanguard of this sort of rapprochement as we hopefully are seeing in Turkey-Armenia, Cyprus, Israel/Palestine – but ultimately it is still up to diplomats and politicians to ferment lasting solutions through binding agreements.

### **Cheese Diplomacy**

- There was a strange little story in the New York Times last October about something called 'cheese diplomacy'. Cheese makers in the Armenian town of Gyumri and the Turkish town of Kars (less than 70km apart but separated by a border that has been closed for over two decades) together with the nearby Georgian town of Ninotsminda produce and market a 'Caucasian cheese' invented by an activist call Artrush Mkrtchyan in 2008 to foster cross-border cooperation.

- This cheese diplomacy actually preceded the football diplomacy, that saw Armenian and Turkish teams play each other, and framed a year when the two country's negotiated and signed protocols to re-establish diplomatic relations.
- These protocols have never been submitted to parliament for ratification in either country. Yet the bonds formed through these interactions, and other inter country interactions collectively form a basic new safety net of conflict prevention.
- Quote from Hasan Ozertem, of the International Strategic Research Organisation, 'When relations are bad between two countries, the damage deepens if there is no contact between societies'. Cultural exchange keeps the door open in difficult times. But would it have been more than a new cheese if broader change had not been underway?

### **Pyongyang and Orchestra Diplomacy**

- Cultural Exchange is also between diplomats. Quoting a Demos report on Cultural Diplomacy, 'There is a long tradition of culture providing a safe and convivial setting for building bilateral relations or making political statements. Cultural experiences allow individuals to engage intellectually and emotionally and can provide personal connections that can outlive or override immediate political disagreements'.
- This vein of cultural exchange is sometimes called, 'orchestra diplomacy'.
- The 2008 visit of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra to Pyongyang played to a number of the Pyongyang leadership – though the event was also nationally televised. I was particularly struck by this as several years earlier as head of UNDP I had had to combat a violent attempt by the US congress and its allies in the US Administration to close the UNDP office in N Korea, one of the few points of contact this closed regime had with the outside world. America's ideologues wanted to close out any sunlight for N Korea's ideologues. Both sides in their way were the modern equivalent of book burners.
- But let me not divert from acknowledging that Bach and Beethoven only get you so far it seems. History is not very kind to orchestral diplomacy. The Boston Symphony's visit to the Soviet Union in 1956 was soon followed by the crushing of the Hungarian uprising. Relations with Pyongyang have remained static since 2008. In the case of the Philadelphia Orchestra's trip to



Beijing in 1973, a year after Nixon's visit – this was at least the beginning of more meaningful cultural exchange. Many of the students that came to the UK and the US after this are probably the most important long-term result of that period of rapprochement – especially as many now form the core of the Chinese diplomatic service.

- Modern music has a better track record. The reason is not hard to find. It captures the emotions, tastes and aspirations of generation who have not yet inherited the national walls of their parent's cultural identity. I mentioned earlier the Beatles role in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe's revolutions. Are young North Koreans, bewildered, unaware of, or excited by the new music video rage emanating from Seoul. Will Psy and 'Gangnam Style' do what generations of generals, barbed wire, armament, men, alliances and famine could not do - undermine a hateful regime that has oppressed its people beyond endurance.

## Europe

- So Cultural Diplomacy's moment may be coming. A world of state to state diplomacy alone is staggering and over time will be consigned to history,
- Europe itself reflects this painful transition. The Europe of my generation is all about opaque ponderous institutions that represent a world of governments. A six month Cyprus Presidency must have shown you all examples of its difficulties. The EU's formal attempt to break out of this, the Parliament, came too soon for real legitimacy. It was more an afterthought than a people's chamber.
- And obviously with its critical role in a Cyprus financial package I do not want to speak ill of a vital set of institutions. But the real excitement is that for all of the turmoil in the 'hard' institutions of Brussels, the 'soft' Europe of a generation of young Europeans who define themselves by their shared European-ness seems in good fettle.
- Let me offer the EU encouragement from the experience of the international organisation that I know better. That the UN has eternally appealed to generations of youth at the same time as their parents have grown to despise it, shows how its cultural appeal remains strong. In America, for instance, young adults (18-29) give the United Nations a much more positive evaluation – in 2010 over half (51%) said the UN was doing a good job,

compared to only 30% of their seniors. Generation after generation of young people go to model UN conference and it remains and a UN career deeply sought after career. Their parents by contrast view the UN and its staff much less positively. It seems to personify disappointment with the world they have worked in.

- The message of peace not war, of development not poverty, of universal human rights - In the eloquent words of its founders that still hover over popular imagination - of swords into ploughshares - still hold a new generation in thrall as they did mine. Yet in some demographic pendulum almost as fixed as the law of gravity people move with the years to disenchantment: the UN is dismissed at best as naive and ineffectual and at worst corrupt and a threat to honest nations with its web of international laws and regulations. As Cypriots, you have your own particular experience of disappointment with the institution.
- Yet I would argue it continues to offer a contemporary example of the power and limits of cultural diplomacy which is represented in this split between generations. On the one hand, its Charter and its development, humanitarian and human rights institutions are rooted in the soaring words and vision of Franklin D Roosevelt for a world freed of its ancient scourges through enlightened co-operation. But it also reflects the state-based collective security vision of that same American President, a veteran of a war where the old balance of power principles of traditional statecraft had broken down. This was to be an old order where aspiration sat with realism: Where states were not discarded but became truer vehicles of popular vision, domestic and global.

And so back to Cyprus. A UNDP programmes that sought to build cultural understanding across the Island's divide is to be discontinued I read on my way down here. It seems a sad epitaph to this visit and this speech. After 15 years and \$130 million the US is pulling the plug on its brave funding of restoring religious and other historic buildings on both sides of the Green Line and of sponsoring media, economic, policy and cultural dialogue. Was the effort in vain? You would all be better judges than I.

What I do know is that without progress on the political side and without a willingness to move on beyond historic and painful wrongs the balm of culture is just that. It may ease the sting but it does not heal the wound. Cyprus will find its solution with the

encouragement of a younger generation in both communities that turns a page but it will be politicians and diplomats who then feel empowered to come to the table and make the deal that has eluded their predecessors. Even if geography can be denied for this long the social media, markets and a global culture cannot be bottled forever. Change will come.