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localist

papers

6. Direct Diplomacy



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Direct Democracy is a group of 38 Conservative MPs, MEPs, MSPs and activists dedicated to the principles of localism and the devolution of power. The Localist Papers are an examination of how these principles might apply to specific fields of policy. They are not manifestoes, and not all our supporters endorse them in full. Rather, they explore some possible ways in which power could be shifted from the bureaucracy of the central state to local communities and individual citizens.

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Tourist on Whitehall:

*“Which side is the Foreign Office on?”*

Policeman:

*“That’s a very good question, sir”.*

# The Localist Papers

## 6 Direct Diplomacy

### 1 Summary

British foreign policy is cocooned from the democratic process. It is conducted by highly qualified officials who, although often technically brilliant, have drifted away from the values of the rest of the country. There are few mechanisms to make the conduct of diplomatic relations subject to popular scrutiny; in consequence, the state machine is even less subject to democratic control in the field of international affairs than in domestic matters.

Left to their own devices, diplomatists have evolved an approach to international relations that is élitist, managerialist, supra-nationalist, technocratic and contemptuous of “populism”. Without democratic accountability, the foreign policy establishment has failed to recognise Britain’s true national interests. With no effective scrutiny acting to correct the institutional failings of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) establishment, Britain’s leaders have lacked a coherent vision of Britain’s place in the world.

This paper recommends a series of mechanisms to bring foreign policy back into line with public opinion. Specifically, it proposes:

- Scrapping Crown Prerogative powers, and making foreign policy subject to parliamentary control.
- Holding democratic hearings for senior diplomatic postings.
- Subjecting international treaties to annual re-ratification by the House of Commons.

## 2 The Localist Papers: **Direct Diplomacy**

### **2 Introduction**

It can be argued that diplomacy is different from other areas of policy. It is, after all, a highly specialised field, remote from the everyday concerns of most voters. Its practitioners have evolved particular skills, and a familiarity with their subject that few laymen can match. Yet precisely the same can be argued, *mutatis mutandis*, about policing, education or virtually any other field of government activity.

With little direct oversight, our diplomats have often pursued policies that are not only at odds with popular opinion, but calamitous in their own terms. Think, for example, of the backing that Britain has given to murderous tyrants such as Nicolae Ceausescu, Idi Amin and Robert Mugabe, in the belief that they would turn out to be our friends. Or of our repeated attempts to talk Teheran's ayatollahs out of their nuclear ambitions by being "constructive". Or of the failure of intelligence prior to Argentina's seizure of the Falkland Islands. Or of the alienation of once-friendly colonies (a special mention should be made here of Malta which, in 1956, voted by 74% in a referendum for complete integration with the UK; its application was rejected so high-handedly that, within eight years, Malta was completely independent and pursuing an anti-British foreign policy). Think of the mistakes that were made by John Major's Government in Yugoslavia. Think, above all, of the determination of the FCO to pursue closer European integration.

Many of these mistakes might have been avoided had foreign affairs more closely reflected the layman's views. You don't need a degree in Arabic and Persian studies to see that there is nothing to be gained by cosying up to the current Iranian regime. You don't need to have spent two years at the College of Europe in Bruges to understand why the EU is inimical to British traditions. On the contrary, an excessive specialisation in these fields can impair your vision of Britain's true interests.

All organisations make mistakes, of course, and it is easy to criticise with hindsight. But the conduct of British foreign policy shows certain institutional flaws. To the extent that these failures derive from the way it is structured, they ought to be remediable.

### **3 Why the Foreign Office gets it wrong**

Everyone involved with local or national politics is aware of the phenomenon of "officer control": the tendency of the permanent functionaries to run things according to their own convenience and priorities, with minimal input from the elected representatives who are notionally in charge, but who are in practice often too busy with their electoral activities to pay much attention to administration.

Certain features are common to almost all bureaucracies. They tend to be risk-averse and reactive. Those who rise to run them generally do so by never sticking their necks out, and by reflecting whatever is the prevailing wisdom of the moment. In consequence, they often cling to once-fashionable theories long after their utility has passed. At the same time, many officials feel bound to one another by the common nexus of their expertise. They dislike being told what to do by those who, as they see it, have no qualifications in the field. They are hyper-sensitive to press criticism. They resent what they call "populism" — which is often what the rest of us call "democracy".

All these features can be found, to some extent, in the FCO. A brief survey of the conduct of British foreign policy reveals three particular traits. Our diplomats are *hidebound*, acting according to strategic assumptions that are sometimes decades old. They are *elitist*, their disdain for public opinion at home being matched by a willingness to do business with despots abroad. And they are *supra-nationalist*, both in their fondness for establishing cross-border bureaucracies and in their dislike of secessionist or national movements.

**Bureaucratic stasis**

Generals, as the old chestnut has it, are always preparing to fight the last war. Rarely has this been truer than now. Seventeen years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Britain's deployment and procurement patterns remain trapped in the Cold War. We continue to maintain a garrison of 22,000 in West Germany; the single largest item of our defence spending has been the Eurofighter, an aircraft designed to dogfight Soviet MiGs; the naval budget is largely consumed by submarines, whose chief purpose is to keep open the North Atlantic sea lanes.

Meanwhile, we have invested far too little in the modern hardware suited to out-of-area campaigns: air- and sea-lift capacity, guided missile systems, advanced satellites and military computers, unmanned sea-vessels and aircraft drones.

These criticisms ought, of course, to be directed primarily at the Ministry of Defence (MoD). But the misallocation of our defence budget reflects a wider failure to have moved with the times. Our strategic thinking — and, indeed, our diplomatic alignment more generally — remains Euro-centric. It is true that, during the second half of the twentieth century, Britain's interests depended chiefly on the security of Western Europe. But, in the broad sweep of history, this was an extremely unusual period.

The end of the Cold War ought to have returned Britain to its traditional role as a global and maritime nation. Our enemies these days are distant and sparse: Iraqi insurgents, Afghan badmashes, West African teenagers. Yet we are fighting them with weapons, structures and alliances designed to defend West Germany against a massed assault by Russian T72s. Instead of determining our security needs and then furnishing ourselves with the *matériel* and institutions best suited to them, we took what we happened already to have — NATO — and tried to press it to a purpose for which it had never been designed.

This is how bureaucracies usually behave. No apparatus will ever volunteer to have its role reduced. Rather, it will cast around for a new task to justify itself. This is especially true at the top of the bureaucracy. Those who have risen the highest have generally been there for the longest. Their thinking has been schooled over many years in the institution and, when circumstances change in their later years, they can find it difficult to make the necessary mental adjustment. Just as the “East of Suez” brigade took decades to acclimatise themselves to Britain's reduced global role, so almost everyone over a certain age will insist that NATO must remain the centrepiece of our defence, without quite being able to explain why.

NATO does, of course, serve many useful purposes. Its members share common values, and it is an important guarantor of a continuing US presence outside the Western hemisphere. But, looked at from first principles, it surely cannot be as central to Britain's interests as it was during the Cold War. The UK ought to be developing ties with friendly governments on every continent. It should pick key strategic partners in each region where it has interests.

Europe is now just one continent among many. Yet our strategic thinking remains stuck in the 1980s. We are suffering unnecessary casualties in Afghanistan because we are short of helicopters. At the same time, we are spending almost unbelievable sums on Cold War weapons systems. The Eurofighter and the Trident replacement will cost around £20 billion each. Neither can be usefully deployed against the paramilitary enemies we now face.

The real problem is the absence of an overall strategic vision. In the days when the diplomatic service was small, and under direct ministerial control, such vision existed. At the peak of the British Empire, Lord Salisbury directed 52 permanent staff in London, and a handful of ambassadors overseas. Throughout the nineteenth century, Britain had clearly understood international interests: the need to maintain a naval presence in key

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theatres; the security of the sea-route to India; the spread of free trade; the balance of power in Europe; sympathy for national movements in Europe provided they did not threaten the balance of power; and, later, the two-power standard. These objectives were not a random check-list: they followed logically from an appreciation of Britain's position as a mercantile island nation.

Today, there is no such holistic analysis. The FCO's official statement of our strategic goals, *Active Diplomacy in a Changing World*, is comprised of nine unrelated objectives. In the absence of an overall strategic vision, our policy has become reactive, hand-to-mouth. We default automatically to whatever happens to be in place, rather than thinking about what we should ideally like.

This is partly the "sunk costs" phenomenon, which is by no means peculiar to British diplomacy. But it can lead to some terrible mistakes. We backed Idi Amin until well into the 1970s, and Robert Mugabe until well into the 1990s, because we felt we had invested so much in them. We supported the Shah of Iran for the same reason, with catastrophic consequences. We are now repeating the mistake in Saudi Arabia. At no stage have we defined, from first principles, what kind of world we want, and who our friends are in such a world, and then reassessed our priorities accordingly.

Our support for various authoritarian regimes is not just a symptom of inertia. Something more unlovely is also at work.

### "Our kind of people"

Look at the parts of the world where Washington's interests clash most directly with those of Brussels. These may be grouped under five broad headings: selling arms to China; engaging with Iran; destabilising Cuba; funding the Palestinian Authority; and co-operating with supra-national institutions, such as the UN, the Kyoto process and the International Criminal Court.

A common thread links these apparently unrelated disputes. In each of them, the US favours democracy over stability, the EU stability over democracy. Both unions are, in a sense, acting according to the DNA that was encoded at the time of their conception. The US was founded out of a popular rising against a distant and autocratic government, and so has a natural sympathy with freedom and self-government. The EU was founded following the horror of the Second World War, its patriarchs still haunted by the memory of the untrammelled plebiscitary democracy that had preceded it. Perhaps understandably, they believed that electoral majorities sometimes had to be tempered by the good sense and sobriety of professional administrators.

Historical experience has given European statesmen a very different *Weltanschauung* from that of their American counterparts. When an American politician looks at, for example, Israel, he sees a country like his own: a parliamentary democracy founded in adversity that elected its generals as its first leaders, and that maintained its commitment to representative government and the rule of law in difficult circumstances. Israel elicits his sympathy in the literal sense of fellow feeling. The European, however, sees the displacement of a traditional and settled Arab society by a state based on the one ideology he disdains above all, that of national self-determination. Israel, after all, is the supreme embodiment of the national principle: the vindication, after 2,000 years, of a people's desire to form their own state. The EU, by contrast, is based on the notion that national loyalties are transient, arbitrary and ultimately discreditable.

It is a similar story when it comes to Iran, or China or Cuba. The EU has never made a fetish out of democratic majorities, cheerfully disregarding referendums when they go the "wrong" way. So, naturally enough, it applies the same standard beyond its own borders, making allowances for autocratic regimes which seem at least to want to go in the right direction.

Ditto when it comes to supra-national bodies. Where Washington sees unelected



technocrats seeking to overrule elected national governments, most Europeans see a framework of rules designed to bind irresponsible politicians, even if they happen to have secured a transient popular majority.

The interesting point is to observe how British foreign policy is drifting out of the gravitational pull of Washington and entering into orbit around Brussels. Although the UK is, in this as in so much else, mid-Atlantic, there is a discernible Europeanisation of our policy in all the instances cited. British ministers have visited Cuba and encouraged commercial links with the Castro regime. Jack Straw was perhaps the most prominent of all EU politicians in seeking to cosy up to the ayatollahs in Teheran. Britain is an enthusiast, too, for the various international bodies that are so distrusted by Washington.

Much of this tendency has to do with the growing EU role in foreign policy, of which more later. But it also reflects the FCO's own guarded attitude to democracy. An exquisitely educated mandarin, who has learned over the years how to keep a series of unsophisticated ministers in check, might be excused for evincing a certain fellow feeling for an enlightened despot in another country, importuned on all sides to hold elections.

If this criticism sounds too harsh, consider the case of Craig Murray, once Her Majesty's Ambassador to Tashkent. Mr Murray had been posted to a vile tyranny: Uzbekistan is perhaps the last place on earth where the Soviet Union survives. The former Communist leaders who run the country treat it more or less as private property, systematically looting its wealth while denying basic ownership rights to their people. Islam Karimov's regime has closed down independent media, silenced dissidents and been implicated in the torture and murder of its critics. It is also widely suspected of controlling a drugs racket.

When Mr Murray arrived, he disliked what he found. He grasped that support for the Karimov dictatorship was doing Britain's

standing in the region no good and, within the bounds permitted by diplomatic protocol, tried to push the regime towards reform. He concentrated on economic freedom, judging that, if Uzbekistan recognised basic property rights, then the rule of law and, eventually, political freedom would follow. His interventions delighted local human rights activists, who believed that their association with a foreign embassy would afford them a degree of protection. But it horrified the Karimov government, which began to agitate for his removal.

The FCO found itself in a dilemma. It had decided to back Karimov in the belief that he was an ally in the war on terror. (As it happens, this has turned out to be a monstrous miscalculation. By creating the impression that Islamism is Karimov's chief enemy, we have in fact helped to create the very thing we fear: a revival of fundamentalism in a region that has never known it before.) Yet the FCO could hardly discipline an ambassador for supporting human rights. So, instead, it accused Mr Murray of personal misconduct, and urged him to leave quietly. He denied the charges, which were later dropped.

Mr Murray's case briefly became a *cause célèbre*, because he had supporters in Parliament and in the press. But the whole episode raises the disquieting question of how many other diplomats have been discreetly removed for challenging the FCO's steady-as-she-goes, Europhile, anti-democratic assumptions.

### Supra-nationalism

The past 40 years have seen an unprecedented growth in international law. Previously, international law was limited to the manner in which states dealt with each other. It covered maritime conventions, piracy, safe conduct agreements, the treatment of ambassadors and, later, conventions on the prosecution of war. These days, international law no longer stops at state frontiers. Treaties and conventions regulate everything from human rights to trade

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in endangered species, from the treatment of refugees to child labour. These accords are often treated by judges within the sigNATOrY states as part of their domestic jurisprudence. In other words, a country's adherence to an international legal code offers a way for its judiciary to bypass its legislature.

It may, of course, be argued that international law involves no real diminution of democracy. States are free to sign or withdraw from such treaties. In upholding them, judges are simply reflecting the wishes of their government in having acceded to them in the first place. The trouble with this argument is that international conventions are often interpreted expansively, to the point where they are used for purposes that the sigNATOrY could never have envisaged. Successive British governments have toyed with withdrawing both from the 1951 UN Convention on Refugees and from the European Convention on Human Rights on precisely these grounds.

Once again, we come to the basic tension between those who believe in the supremacy of the ballot box – *vox populi, vox dei* – and those who would rather ensure that some spheres are left to the experts. And those who are most prominent in this latter cause are, understandably, the experts themselves. The international conventions by which they set such store were drawn up by them, or by people very like them. These accords ensure that what they see as humane and enlightened values are guaranteed against crowd-pleasing politicians – who may, in any case, have only an ephemeral mandate.

The problem is remediable. Every foreign treaty that imposes domestic obligations on Britain should be concluded on a temporary basis. It should come before Parliament every year for reoption. If MPs believe that its provisions are being misinterpreted or wrongly applied, they will have the opportunity to demand its modification or, *in extremis*, its abrogation. This will prevent the constant accretion of international codes, each one with a standing bureaucracy dedicated to its constant expansion.

For international treaties are rarely limited to the paper on which they are signed. They also evolve secretariats, councils and commissions. Sometimes, these are limited in scope. The Commonwealth, for example, may issue advice to its members on domestic questions, but can impose no sanction other than exclusion from its ranks. The EU, on the other hand, has created a new legal order within the jurisdiction of its sigNATOrY, and given that legal order primacy over their domestic statutes.

In the eyes of the mandarin, such institutions formalise collaboration among states. They make impossible the smouldering grievances and secret diplomacy of the nineteenth century. Above all, they are a guarantee against that most dangerous of phenomena, nationalism.

What, though, do we mean by nationalism? The traditional definition is the desire of a people or language-group to form an independent and unitary state. Seen like that, is it so very different from what we mean by democracy?

To the democratic radicals of eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the two concepts were inseparable. To argue for government of, by and for the people instantly raised the question: what people? Within what unit should the electoral process be played out? The answer that the democrats came up with was the only possible answer. Democracy works best within a territory whose inhabitants feel that they have enough in common one with another to accept government from each other's hands – in other words, within a nation.

Those who are keenest on supra-national institutions are, as a rule, also suspicious of the claims of secessionist movements within recognised states. The international community's immediate response to the Slovenian independence referendum in 1991, which triggered the conflict in Yugoslavia, was to inform all the constituent Yugoslav republics that they would not be recognised outside the federation. This policy eventually became untenable, but the same principle was applied when it came to insisting on the unity of a

multi-ethnic Bosnia, and again when it came to holding Macedonia together. To this day, the UN and the EU refuse to countenance ethnographic frontiers in Kosovo or in Iraq.

There is a consistency in all this. Once again, the UN, the EU and the FCO value stability over democracy. For the truth is that supra-national states tend to work only to the extent that they deny democratic aspirations. The USSR and Yugoslavia worked as dictatorships, in the same way that the Habsburg and Ottoman empires had. The moment the subject peoples of these states were given the choice, they opted for self-government.

For Britain, the emphasis on preserving multi-national entities represents a complete reversal of what was once the basis of our foreign policy. Traditionally, Britain was a friend to national liberation movements. As Lord Randolph Churchill observed: “England has always made the cause of nations her own cause. She supported the national movements of Germany and the Low Countries against Bonaparte. Her sympathy was with Greece, Hungary and Italy, and with the South American Republics”.

Twice during the twentieth century, Britain would embark on ruinous wars because a friendly country’s sovereignty had been violated. Indeed, the notion that the Second World War was a battle on behalf of all nations would become a favourite refrain for Lord Randolph’s son.

What has changed? Why do we now elevate the multi-ethnic state as an end in itself? Why do we now try to push other regions of the world into forming regional associations in mimicry of the EU?

#### **4 Europe – your country**

The bureaucratic stasis, elitism and supra-nationalism that characterise the Foreign Office explain the FCO’s obsession with the policy of European integration. The EU is perhaps the supreme exemplar and beneficiary of the three characteristics identified above.

First, it is, in the narrow sense, a conservative project, trapped in the assumptions of the 1950s, slow to adapt to change. To this day, supporters of deeper union talk about peace on the continent after years of war, the reconciliation of France and Germany and the entrenchment of democracy: all rather *passé* in the twenty-first century. At the same time, Euro-integrationists remain wedded to a social and economic model which seemed cutting edge half a century ago, but which now appears ludicrously out-of-date.

Second, it is a technocratic, elitist project. Jean Monnet, Robert Schuman and the other fathers of Euro-federalism had a profound distrust of untrammelled democracy which, in their eyes, had led to fascism and war. That is why they deliberately vested supreme power in an unelected European Commission – a body intended to be immune to public opinion. Complaining that the EU is undemocratic is like complaining that a cow is bovine, or a butterfly flighty: it is designed that way.

Third, it is based on the idea that nationalism is the worst of all political ideals. The EU’s founding principle, repeated a hundred times a day even now, is that “nationalism causes war”. This is, in fact, a highly questionable proposition: the worst wars of the modern era have been caused, not my nationalism, but by trans-national ideologies: Fascism, Communism, Islamic fundamentalism. In each of these cases, national institutions and patriotic loyalties have tended to be a focus of resistance against tyranny. But no matter. To those who believe that voters are unduly excitable, and that the world is safer when run by a caste of international administrators, human rights lawyers and diplomats, the EU must seem a wonderful project.

Small wonder that, during the 1960s, the FCO began to agitate for British membership of the then EEC. More than this, a group of motivated diplomats were determined to keep the application on course, regardless of the stated wishes of their elected ministers.

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Their achievement is chronicled at length in *This Blessed Plot*, published in 1998 by the late *Guardian* journalist Hugo Young. Young was perhaps the most solidly Europhile writer of his day, and his book rehearses most of the usual arguments for the EU, notably that Britain is forever losing out by being stand-offish and joining too late. Yet he was also an exceptionally honest reporter, and was not too grand to roll up his sleeves and do some primary research. In particular, he tracked down many of the FCO officials who had mounted Britain's three applications for membership. Now retired (usually to the South of France) these men spoke frankly about how they had, on occasion, acted directly contrary to the stated wishes of the government in order to pursue what they regarded as the national interest. Young, of course, regards their attitude with approval, but the general reader is left gasping. This is how he summarised what took place during the 1960s:

“An elite regiment was taking shape [in the FCO]. Europe wasn't yet the path of choice for every ambitious diplomat, but it promised to be much more interesting than the Commonwealth, and offered a prospect of influence greater than anything else available to a second-order power. By 1963, a corps of diplomats was present in and around the Foreign Office who saw the future for both themselves and their country inside Europe. The interests of their country and their careers coincided. It was an appealing symbiosis.”

Of course diplomats approve of the EU: it was built by and for people like them. The Norwegian and Swiss diplomatic corps are as desperate to join now as the FCO was 40 years ago. What is staggering about Young's meticulously researched book is the insouciance with which these men – for reasons which, as he admits, were as much personal as ideological – were able to pursue their agenda independently of what the country had decided at the ballot box.

The EU is not just a consequence of the tendencies identified in the previous chapter;

it also encourages them within its constituent states. It does so partly by removing decision-making one tier further from the public, and thus providing a sense of insulation to national politicians. But it does so more immediately by directing the foreign policies of its members.

Many British politicians in both parties continue to talk quaintly about the need to resist a common European foreign policy. In fact, such a foreign policy is already operative. Go to any non-European capital and you will find that the EU mission dwarfs the national embassies. And why not? What used to be the chief business of national embassies has already been ceded to Brussels. 100% of trade policy, and 99% of development aid is controlled by the EU, leaving the national missions with little to do beyond promoting tourism and hosting visiting ministers from their home states.

Go back to the five areas which were identified as the main causes of friction between Brussels and Washington: the Chinese arms embargo, the Iranian nuclear programme, the future of Cuba, the treatment of Hamas and the status of supra-national institutions. In all these areas, a common European foreign policy applies. Member states may theoretically have the right to pursue different approaches in these areas; in practice, it would never occur to their foreign services to do so.

And what is the most important aim of European foreign policy? To foster integration on the EU model in other continents. It is little appreciated how much the various regional associations – the Central American Union, ASEAN, the African Union and the rest – owe to the EU. From the first, the EU has financed and promoted regional integration campaigns. It even makes its trade and aid deals conditional on a state's participation in such associations. And this, by default, also becomes the chief goal of the 27 member states. Ask, say, the British Ambassador to Montevideo to define the UK's key strategic goal in Uruguay, and he will talk about turning Mercosur into a proper political union. Our national interests are redefined to reflect, not just the ambitions of the European

Commission, but the prejudices of our diplomatic corps. As Hugo Young might say, it is an appealing symbiosis.

The EU has allowed many Whitehall departments, not just the FCO, to make policy with minimal political interference. In consequence, Britain is ceasing to think of itself as an independent power. It may have the world's fifth largest economy and fourth most powerful Armed Forces, but it has lost the habit of autonomous action.

## **5 Punching below our weight**

Britain has the potential to be a world power. Britain is the fifth largest economy in the world. Although recently overtaken by China, two decades of growing consistently faster than France, Germany and Japan mean that our relative economic standing in the world has grown. London is the world's financial capital. Militarily, Britain is one of the few nations capable of projecting military force worldwide. We have a nuclear capability and there are few armed forces in the world today with Britain's strength, versatility, experience and reach.

Diplomatically, we hold one of the five permanent seats at the United Nations Security Council, and we sit on the board of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. If we speak, we are heard.

We have the distinct advantage of being at the hub of the Anglosphere – that fast growing group of nations with which we have much in common and which appear to be benefiting most from the processes of globalisation.

At the same time, our geopolitical burdens are not unmanageable. We are not in the shadow of some larger, aggressive neighbour as we have been within living memory.

Unlike that other island democracy, Japan, on the other side of the Eurasian landmass, our near neighbours are not North Korea or China. Unlike Singapore, we do not have a giant like Indonesia to contend with.

We depend on the flow of trade, and need open sea lanes and open air routes. Our economy is fuelled by what we import. Having been a net exporter of fossil fuels, today we are an importer. Britain has a strong vested interest in the growth of global trade and in international stability underpinned by economic growth. So too do we have a vested interest in the spread of stable liberal democracies. Yet trade and democracy have spread further and faster in the past 30 years than at any previous time in history.

However, without a clear strategy, Britain is following the foreign policy of an international lightweight.

Back in the days of the Cold War, our strategy must have seemed straightforward. From the late 1940s to the late 1980s, Cold War considerations were paramount. Everything – more or less – fitted in around our Cold War strategy. Britain had a clear role, a purpose supporting the free world, via NATO and under US leadership, against the Soviets. With half a dozen notable exceptions, that, too, was the view from the Foreign Office.

Since the neatly bi-polar world crumbled with the Berlin Wall, many of the key elements behind our Cold War thinking have been retained. Yet there has been no fresh thinking. Foreign policy makers have not effectively considered major trends in world affairs, and what challenges and opportunities they offer Britain. Instead they have clung on to old assumptions and habits of mind.

A decade ago, the incoming Labour Government espoused something called an "ethical foreign policy". Precisely what this meant – other than not being Tory foreign policy – was never clear. Robin Cook showed an enthusiasm for supra-national institutions and a belief that supra-nationalism could uphold human rights and resolve international disputes. In contrast to such faith in supra-nationalism and multilateralism, however, Tony Blair has pursued a foreign policy based more on idealistic

interventionism. Long before Iraq, Blair was the driving force behind NATO intervention against the Serbs in Kosovo in 1999. In Chicago, in that same year, Blair advocated “a new doctrine of international community” based on interventions against countries when “we cannot turn our backs on conflict and the violation of human rights if we want still to be secure”.

In opposition for the past decade, the Conservatives have undertaken almost no deep-level thinking about foreign policy, and remain trapped in a Cold War mind frame. Ask almost any Conservative MP and they will tell you that NATO is “A Good Thing”. Ask them why, and the answer will be a little less certain. Ask a Tory front bench team about trade, and they will parrot the line about the importance of free trade. Tell them we now have neither free trade nor the ability to make our own trade policy, and they will eye you with suspicion. On defence, you will hear a sermon about how much the party believes in it. Ask them if this article of faith means we will continue to squander billions of tax pounds on the useless Euro fighter aircraft, and you will be viewed as a heretic. The old Cold War mantras are no substitute for real thinking. Our foreign policy is much the poorer for it.

## **6 Putting Parliament in charge**

Our Parliament is unusually weak in the field of foreign affairs. Through a quirk of history, the Prime Minister has inherited more or less intact the executive powers that once attached to the monarchy. Diplomatic appointments, the contracting of treaties and national defence are all controlled by Downing Street under Crown Prerogative powers.

The peculiar feebleness of our legislature, even relative to other EU states, is illustrated whenever a European treaty needs to be implemented. Whereas most of the other

members have constitutions that require parliamentary ratification or, in some cases, referendums, British MPs find that large chunks of the treaties can be approved without passing through the House of Commons. The signature of the Foreign Secretary, acting on behalf of the Sovereign, is all that is required.

For a long time, this state of affairs was regarded as indefensible in theory, but acceptable in practice. Perhaps because of their doubts about its fairness, successive prime ministers tended to exercise their Crown Prerogative powers with discretion. Criticism of the dispensation was more or less limited to Tony Benn.

The Crown Prerogative has today, however, become increasingly indefensible in practice as well as in theory. There has been a shift in power away from the legislature to the other branches of government. Under the aegis of the Prime Minister’s appointment powers, a network of agencies and quangoes has grown up, removing administration further from the elected chamber and, thus, from the people who vote for it.

In June 2005, in *Direct Democracy*, we proposed that the appointment powers exercised under Crown Prerogative be transferred to Parliament. Three months later, to Tony Benn’s surprise and delight, David Cameron committed a future Conservative Government to the policy.

Applied to the field of foreign affairs, this would have two consequences. First, it would give the House of Commons treaty-making powers, similar to those enjoyed by the US Senate and by several other parliamentary chambers around the world. On the principle that no parliament may bind its successor, such treaties would no longer be contracted indefinitely. Rather, they would be placed regularly before the Chamber – ideally on an annual basis – for reapproval. If they were not specifically endorsed, they would lapse.

The idea of time-limited Acts – “sunset clauses” – is not a new one. The Prevention of

Terrorism Act was voted on every year throughout most of the 1970s and 1980s. Nor should the principle be limited to foreign policy. A more widespread use of the sunset clauses would constrain the otherwise ever-growing corpus of legislation. But the application of the doctrine to the field of international relations would have one especially happy consequence: it would remind the agencies and secretariats established by international accords that they had a limited mandate and that expanding their powers beyond those envisaged by the sigNATOry states might lead to at least one of those states withdrawing from the accord.

It would also act as a check on one of the more curious of political phenomena, namely the way in which national ministers crave the approval of their foreign counterparts. Almost all national parliaments complain that their ministers “go native” when negotiating international deals, and exceed the mandate bestowed on them by their MPs. This would plainly be less likely to occur if ministers knew that whatever they agreed would have to be approved by Parliament, not just once, but in perpetuity.

The second major consequence of the abolition of Crown Prerogative would be an end to the appointment and promotion of diplomats without political scrutiny. The situation described by Hugo Young in *This Blessed Plot* would simply not arise; or, if it did, it could be instantly remedied.

When George Shultz was US Secretary of State in the 1980s, he had a routine for appointing American ambassadors. He would ask them to point to their country on a large map in his office. They would duly point to, say, Ecuador. “Nope”, he would tell them, tapping the US, “*this* is your country, and don’t forget it.”

It is perhaps no coincidence that the US, which has always had a degree of legislative control over both appointments and treaties, has such a clearly defined strategic vision and such a readiness to deploy force in defence of its

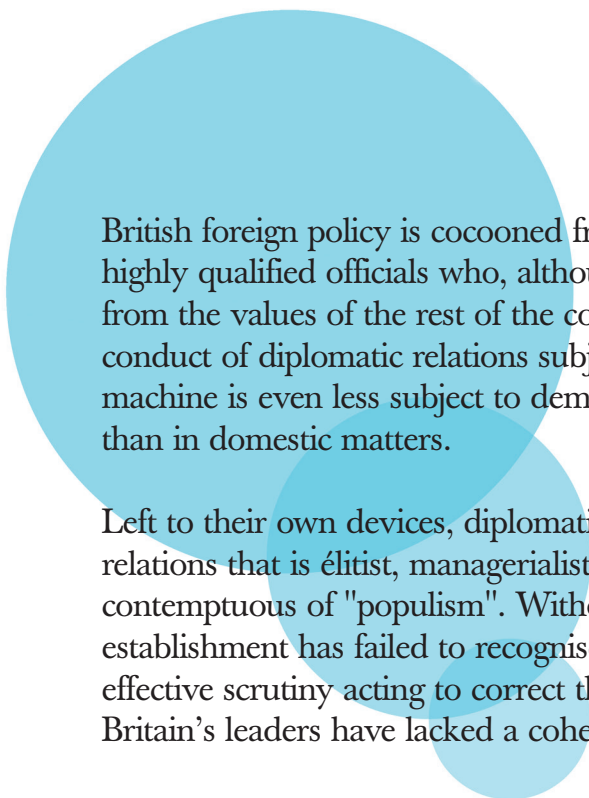
interests. Nor can it be entirely coincidental that, when Britain’s parliament was supreme, and its diplomatic service small, it too was willing to project its interests.

Some of the greatest of our foreign policy initiatives were undertaken as a direct result of popular pressure, expressed through parliamentary representation. The extirpation of the slave trade was led by public opinion. The support for liberal regimes abroad, too, was populist in origin. Foreign policy could, indeed, become the major electoral question of the day, as during Gladstone’s Midlothian campaign.

The democratisation of diplomacy ought to be especially attractive for Conservatives. In the rest of the world, and especially in other Anglosphere countries, parties of the centre-right derive a substantial measure of their electoral appeal from being the more trusted on foreign affairs. In Britain, by contrast, politicians have contracted out large chunks of international relations to the permanent functionaries in Whitehall and, especially, Brussels. In consequence, the issue has slipped from the electoral agenda.

We should rediscover our sympathy for national movements. We should prefer countries to be united by trade than by political structures. We should sponsor the spread of individual liberty and property rights, and thereby guarantee our own prosperity as a commercial nation. We should work with friends and allies around the world instead of narrowing our horizons to the EU. We should put our faith in elected national politicians rather than remote supra-national bureaucracies.

None of these things is possible, however, until foreign policy is wrenched back out of the grasp of EU officials and their British auxiliaries. We must make the question of how Britain relates to other nations a question for the British people, either through their elected representatives or, directly, through referendums. Grant this and much will follow.



British foreign policy is cocooned from the democratic process. It is conducted by highly qualified officials who, although often technically brilliant, have drifted away from the values of the rest of the country. There are few mechanisms to make the conduct of diplomatic relations subject to popular scrutiny; in consequence, the state machine is even less subject to democratic control in the field of international affairs than in domestic matters.

Left to their own devices, diplomatists have evolved an approach to international relations that is élitist, managerialist, supra-nationalist, technocratic and contemptuous of "populism". Without democratic accountability, the foreign policy establishment has failed to recognise Britain's true national interests. With no effective scrutiny acting to correct the institutional failings of the FCO establishment, Britain's leaders have lacked a coherent vision of Britain's place in the world.

This paper recommends a series of mechanisms to bring foreign policy back into line with public opinion. Specifically, it proposes:

- Scrapping Crown Prerogative powers, and making foreign policy subject to parliamentary control.
- Holding democratic hearings for senior diplomatic postings.
- Subjecting international treaties to annual re-ratification by the House of Commons.

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