

INSIDE OUT



The magazine of the FCDO Association

Issue 73 • Spring 2026

Things fall apart

Diplomacy in a dystopian age

Ramping up Relations

China and the Global South

FCDO 2030 Programme

Connecting with Alumni

The Pimpernel Supplement

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Spring 2026 Issue 73

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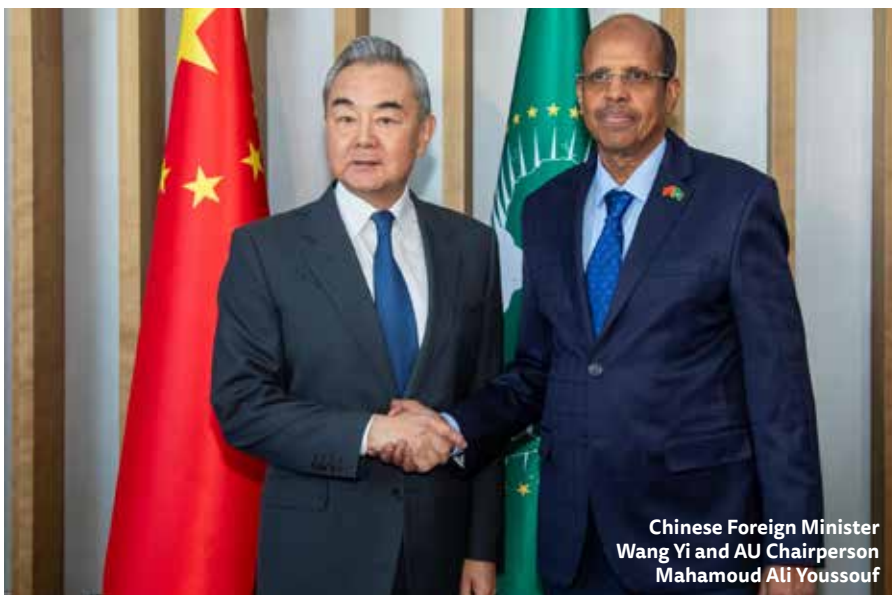
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COVER: CHARACTER DESIGN

From the Editor

The editorial team is pleased to bring to you the Spring 2026 edition of *Inside Out*.

In this edition, there are two principal themes: career related *I Was There* recollections; and life after departure from King Charles Street.

The first features **Croatia** from Jeremy Varcoe and **Ethiopia** from Tim Willasey-Wilsey; while the latter – in the continuing *You May Like To Know* series – comprises articles from Catherine Rashid, Peter Holland, John Dew (interviewed by John Freeman) and Mark Forrester. I encourage other members, particularly those who have recently left the FCDO, to write to us about their new careers/activities – because what you may be doing now could be of possible interest to the FCDO as it seeks to draw on our alumni's skills and experience in the context of its *2030 Programme*.

As for other content, Janet Rogan, deputy editor, writes about **China and the Global South**; Gillian Dare summarises the recent **Transatlantic Panel Discussion** with our US and Canadian counterparts about the future of diplomacy; and there is an update about the progress of the *2030 Programme*, plus dodging the proverbial verbal bullet.

As for books, John Freeman reviews Nicholas Hopton's book *Maremma Mia*; James Dauris examines the new history of Wilton Park published last year; and there is advance notice of our President's new book about the Foreign Office during the Second World War.

Pat Ashworth's *Pensions Speedbrief* and useful information in the *Pimpernel Pages* supplement conclude this edition.

The Power to Move

This was the title of the lead feature in the 2025 winter edition.

Written by Simon Bax with long and wide experience, it explored the dualism of filmmaking in a dystopian world and its power to inspire action – for good or ill. He argued that cinema has always been more than entertainment – it was a medium capable of inspiring action, instilling fear, galvanising societies, and reshaping the moral imagination of an age. Against that backdrop, “film provides a unique opportunity to alert the general public to these dangers and to inform them as to how to identify what might be true and what might be false, and to encourage a healthy scepticism in a world of hyper realistic fake content”.

He added that an antidote was to champion films that informed, inspired, and united. Independent filmmakers were often best placed to challenge dominant narratives, experiment with form and bring underrepresented perspectives to the screen. To that end, Simon proposed the sponsorship of a new award to recognise the British film that most powerfully raised awareness of a pressing issue or influenced public opinion in a positive direction.

Given the significant role the British film industry plays in UK soft power, the FCDOA shared the award proposal with the FCDO's Soft Power Hub and DCMS's Culture & Creative Industries Directorate. Simon is now developing a more detailed proposal for further discussion in April.

This is an example of how the FCDOA can forge links between our network and government to support new ideas and initiatives.

Last but not least, the 2026 AGM

This important event will take place online on **Friday 12 June** at 11.00 am. The agenda and voting form are issuing today. Please cast your vote. After all, it's your FCDOA.



Edward Glover,
FCDOA Chairman



“A lifestore of skills, activities, interests and opinions”


THE RELATIONSHIP WITH
THE FOREIGN OFFICE
SHOULD NOT TERMINATE
WHEN FORMAL SERVICE
ENDS. THE FCDO STILL
VALUES THE INSIGHT AND
EXPERTISE OF ITS ALUMNI

King Charles Street – The Approach to 2030

Edward Glover provides an update on the
FCDO's plans to stay connected to its alumni

The Chief People Officer, Mark Power, hosted a well-attended reception on 25 March in the Locarno Suite to reconnect with former staff. I represented the FCDOA, together with our President, Lord Ricketts. Board members Janet Rogan and Sara Everett were also present. Many of those in the Suite were already Association members.

Mark Power said the purpose of the event was threefold:

Connection: to maintain and stimulate the strong relationships that defined the FCDO through supporting and expanding links with alumni – those staff who had left King Charles Street previously and those leaving under voluntary exit schemes

Recognition: to acknowledge the commitment, professionalism and service that each had contributed over many years and

Community: to strengthen the partnership between those who had left and those who remained, ensuring their insight and experience of the former continued to shape the FCDO.

Overall, the event formed part of HR Directorate's commitment to sustained alumni engagement and to supporting those leaving under voluntary exit schemes through transition and beyond.

Speakers

There were five speakers, The PUS, **Sir Oliver Robbins** spoke first. He was delighted to see so many present. Their attendance demonstrated the strength of the Foreign Office community.

Times were rapidly changing. The Foreign Office was operating in a world that was faster, more complex and more contested. While it was essential to modernise in order to stay ahead, the FCDO was not losing its ethos – instead it was strengthening it. The core principles remained: professionalism, commitment, trust and a global, human approach.

He had been keen to hold the event, to bring those present back to King Charles Street, because the relationship with the Foreign Office should not terminate when formal service ended. The FCDO still valued alumni insight and expertise. Accordingly, he wanted to secure a more deliberate, supportive and mutually beneficial connection. The 25th of March was the beginning.

In conclusion, he thanked everyone for their contribution and the spirit with which they had served. The FCDO was at its best when building relationships, sharing insights and strengthening the community that bound us.

Three alumni then spoke briefly about their Foreign Office careers, the invaluable experience they had gained, and how they had applied it in what they were doing now. They were:

Reza Afshar OBE, currently executive director of **Independent Diplomat** following a diplomatic career focused on international security and diplomatic policy

Andrew Pike OBE, now leading his advisory consultancy after serving as GCHQ's first director of communications and previously leading national security communications at No 10

Vikki Dean, currently CEO of IFPI after senior roles at Portland, Google and nearly two decades in the Foreign Office.

All welcomed the event, spoke of their careers and gave their support to what the Foreign Office was seeking to do against the backdrop of a profoundly challenging world.

I spoke last about what the FCDOA does and how it could contribute to what was planned.

Founded in 1999 with the encouragement and support of Ministers and based in KCS ever since, it provided the following to its membership:

First, it connected past and present members of staff – an essential keeping in touch service.

Second, by means of our three platforms (website, magazine and newsletters) it kept FCDOA members abreast of the continuing evolution in the conduct of British foreign policy, enabling them to be better informed and in turn better advocates in their own external contacts..

THE ASSOCIATION IS ABLE
TO OFFER THE FCDO
ACCESS TO A WIDE RANGE
OF AVAILABLE SKILLS AND
EXPERIENCE

Third, members used its platforms to share diplomatic recollections and to say what they were doing now – the pursuit of new careers, new interests. The pensions adviser had helped significantly recently with the pensions crisis and the FCDOA worked closely with **The Pimpernel Trust**, for example on social care issues.

Fourth, through its expanding membership base – now over 1850, of which roughly 20% were current FCDO staff – the Association was able to offer the FCDO access to a wide range of available skills and experience. For example, last year we had co-arranged with the Diplomatic Academy the highly successful live **Diplomacy Masterclass** series for newer members of staff. The series had reached over 3000 staff live on the FCDO's global network. It had been warmly received.

Fifth, the FCDOA offered online talks by senior experts across a broad range of subjects. As well as talks on a wide range of topics, we were providing a 3-part job opportunities seminar for those contemplating departure from the FCDO. And we were revamping our external job vacancies webpage.

Lastly, we arranged annual lectures in KCS given by eminent figures, such as historians, former heads of the security agencies and occasionally by former heads of state.

So we had form, scope and a good record. And since our membership comprised former and indeed current diplomats we knew well how the Foreign Office system worked and we were moreover informal and discreet in our conduct. We saw one of our functions as assisting the FCDO in the promotion of diplomatic excellence, the art of diplomacy, building contacts, networking.

In short, we were contact makers as diplomats should be. If the FCDO wished to stay in touch with alumni, we could provide a vital link, provided of course alumni became FCDOA members. If they didn't, contact was lost.

In conclusion, the Association stood to work with the Foreign Office and others to help it achieve the ambitious 2030 objectives it had set itself. We did so on the basis of a proven track record, being close at hand and keepers of an expanding and diverse membership database. ■

Connection to the Foreign
Office should not end
when you exit the gates
of King Charles Street for
the last time



PHOTO: CREATIVE COMMONS



The mural at the UN Headquarters in New York depicts diplomacy remaking a shattered world

Future of Diplomacy in a Dystopian World

More than 350 foreign service association members tuned in to the sixth Trans-Atlantic Panel, hosted by the FCDOA's Canadian counterpart, AmbCanada, to discuss the role of diplomacy in an unpredictable and fragmenting geopolitical world. **Gillian Dare** reports

The post-World War Two international order – imperfect, yet anchored in rules, institutions, and a shared belief in collective security and prosperity – is steadily eroding, with profound consequences for the practice of diplomacy as we have known it.

The discussion about the future of diplomacy took place against the backdrop of the works of Canadian author Margaret Atwood, whose dystopian fiction served as a call to action in the face of increasing authoritarianism, environmental degradation, economic inequality, technological disruption, geopolitical fragmentation, and the deepened social divisions amplified by social media.

The discussions were led by three distinguished and experienced diplomats who drew on their extensive diplomatic experience to reflect on today's political, economic, and social challenges, and to offer insights and lessons for a new generation of diplomats navigating the role of diplomacy in an increasingly dystopian world.

The discussion

The moderator began by asking each panel member to address the following question:

Do you agree with the premise that we are entering a dystopian era? Drawing from your experience as a diplomat, what are the three major changes in the international context impacting on the practice of diplomacy as you knew it?

Ambassador Rae said we were now in a profoundly different and difficult world, not dissimilar from the novel *Animal Farm*. There had been a major shift in the tectonic plates in the geopolitical world. He highlighted the following three changes:

- As alliances and positions constantly shifted and the dynamic between bilateral and multilateral altered, it was no longer easy to determine on which countries we could rely as allies.
- The lack of trust by the public in those who governed was another factor. The new politics were increasingly defined by populism and the impact of social media, often biased and inaccurate in content.

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FOR INDIVIDUAL STATES
TO SOLVE ALONE

THE PANEL



The Honourable Bob Rae, who recently served as Canada's Ambassador to the United Nations (2020–2025), where he chaired the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and was a leading international voice on humanitarian, refugee, and human rights issues. He is the Visitor at Massey College, University of Toronto.



Dame Menna Rawlings was appointed the UK ambassador to France in 2021, a post she occupied until July last year. Her appointment marked a historic milestone, forming a first-ever all-female cohort of heads of mission to G7 missions. Before Paris, Dame Menna was British High Commissioner to Australia, later serving as the FCDO's Director-General for Economic and Global Issues from 2019-20. She is now President of Queen's College, Cambridge.



Ambassador Ronald Neumann is currently President of the American Academy of Diplomacy. Formerly a Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, he served three times as ambassador: to Algeria, Bahrain, and then Afghanistan. A career member of the Senior Foreign Service, he also served as Embassy Baghdad's liaison with the Multinational Command.



The **Hon Alexandra Bugailiskis** moderated the Dialogue following a 39-year diplomatic career in Canada's foreign service, which included four Ambassadorial appointments (Italy, Poland, Cuba, and Syria) and senior executive roles in Ottawa, including as Chief Negotiator of the Canada–EU Strategic Partnership Agreement. She currently chairs the International Advisory Committee of the United Nations University Institute for Water, Environment and Health.

- Given the increasing direct, spontaneous high-level communication at head of government level, foreign ministries were finding it ever more difficult to make durable and permanent arrangements in the pursuit of secure and lasting solutions.

The key issue to consider was whether this was a long-term even a permanent change or might there be a reversion to more normal international relations.

Dame Menna endorsed these points, especially the speed of events and the public suspicion of politicians and public officials, adding that diplomats were now having to deal with situations which had seemed inconceivable previously, especially the changing attitude towards democracy and a liberal world order.

But it was important not to be blinded by short-term difficulties in the pursuit of solutions to longer-term issues and their consequences. For that reason, she was not sure about the onset of a dystopian world. Yes, there were acute and challenging difficulties but the position was not hopeless – it was necessary to take a longer view of history. Personally, she therefore remained optimistic despite the unpredictable world confronting us. In diplomacy, it was important not to be blinded by the short-term.

Against that backdrop she referred to three elements – speed, spillover and suspicion.

- **Speed:** world events and issues were piling up at an ever-faster rate. Accordingly, diplomats were under ever increasing pressure;
- **Spillover:** many events and issues, such as migration and displacement were coming together at the same time – ‘flooding the diplomatic zone’; and
- **Suspicion:** lack of trust and good faith in the conduct of governments.

Despite these factors, the supreme challenge was to seek and build long-term relations and trust. Without them, negotiations would fail. While the current situation risked undermining stability, she still considered human agency had the power to change things and be successful.

Ambassador Neumann observed an underlying resistance to change. Pushback was now a major global fact. This meant we were going through an increasingly difficult period but he wouldn't say the position was dystopian. What concerned him in particular was the disjuncture in national and international structures to deal with global challenges most of which were too large for individual states to manage.

While most power was state-based, the breakdown of multilateral institutions was resulting

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in the erosion of crucial global mechanisms and abilities to deal with problems too big for individual states to solve alone. This had contributed to change in the role of a few big powers and especially the US. But increasing uncertainty and incoherence in US foreign policy was making it impossible for other states to pursue coherent and consistent policies. It was incumbent on the big powers to understand the needs, aspirations and impacts on other countries when designing their policies. He saw little sign of this.

The moderator then invited the panel to consider a further question:

Was it possible for some of the classic diplomatic skills to be adapted to the new international context? For example, was the ability to find common ground and achieve solutions still a valued and relevant skill? And in a world of digital saturation and information/disinformation overload, could a diplomat still provide added value as a trusted interlocutor with their host country or indeed their own headquarters?

Dame Menna said it was essential not to lose sight of the value of the traditional diplomatic approach or the importance of taking the long view. Despite the unpredictability of US policy, the speed of events and the disappearance of private space and changes in technology, there still remained a need for strategic flexibility.

Diplomats retained a duty to create the space for developing considered long-term approaches. Real and effective influence came from building relationships, listening to what others had to say, from being in the same room as the key players and policy makers – the application of traditional diplomacy.

But it was equally important to understand who now formed the diplomatic world. The number and range of players had broadened. There was an increasing need for diplomats to get out more and listen to more people of diverse backgrounds, their political views and cultures and to learn how to discern who were the most authentic in a world of competing voices; in short, to understand better how people are thinking in the countries in which we operate, not just those who hold power. This required greater fluidity, flexibility and mental agility than before.

Ambassador Neumann was concerned people no longer understood the crucial value of building relationships, plus the importance of trust in finding common ground in order to negotiate settlements and agreements and secure compliance. Fewer members of the public recognised the dangers of relying on partial, unverified reports in both social media and the traditional media funded by doubtful or hostile sources to manipulate facts and interpretations for their own gain. Many people, especially amongst the public, took for granted that what they heard or read was the truth; that there was only one version of truth.

Coalition of the Willing:
sticking together in
unpredictable times



PHOTO: SIMON DAWSON/NO 10 DOWNING STREET



PHOTO: NATO

**A sombre family photo:
America's allies in
NATO worry about its
commitment to the
post-WWII Alliance**

Another vital element in traditional diplomacy was that conflicts and misunderstandings did not just end with negotiating or signing an agreement. From the outset there had to be an agreed implementation plan, with effective monitoring. This took leadership to deliver, plus an understanding of the issues and a judgment based on a combination of experience, effective institutions, and mechanisms for delivery.

Ambassador Rae noted that most people, including journalists and NGOs or businesses working in the international sphere, did not have access to the depth and breadth of knowledge and information which being part of the diplomatic network provided. They were therefore operating and making decisions based on partial and imperfect knowledge. This discordance underlined the critical importance of the role of accredited diplomats gathering and analysing what was really happening and assessing the knowledge to shape policy and actions.

Since his retirement, he had realised how much he had lost. Looking back, he emphasised the importance of real in-depth critical listening to a wide range of people; the willingness to admit that one's country's positions and policies could be misjudged; and a readiness to seek their adjustment in the light of changing knowledge. All three factors endorsed the value of diplomacy. It was necessary to continue to work hard to create space for more thinking, more questioning and greater assessment of the consequences of policies and actions – those of both allies and hostile governments. That was the crucial role of the diplomat, speaking truth to power, telling one's own government the truth even when they did not want to hear it. The diplomat's duty was to assess and explain the consequences of policies and actions and the impact they were likely to have on the people around them and in other countries.

Like the other panellists, he emphasised the overriding importance of implementation of plans and ensuring that all critical factors were considered when planning the implementation.

The moderator, the **Hon Alexandra Bugailiskis**, thanked the panellists for sharing their insights which had provided the basis for a rich and fruitful dialogue. She opened the session for questions and comments.

Development aid dilemmas

Several participants asked the panel what they thought were the implications of the current trend in reducing soft power and aid in relations between countries. How would this affect diplomacy?

The panellists agreed this was a short-sighted policy. It hindered the development of long-term relationships and diminished understanding between not only politicians and officials in countries but among their citizens.

Educational programmes and scholarships brought greater openness to different ideas between cultures, bringing about increased understanding and trust. The sharing of scientific knowledge, developments in medicine and technologies facilitated all countries – enabling

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NO COUNTRY CAN AFFORD ANY LONGER TO RELY ON A SMALL NETWORK OF LIKEMINDED COUNTRIES. ONE OF THE KEY ROLES OF DIPLOMATS IS TO IDENTIFY COMMON INTERESTS WITH THE COUNTRIES TO WHICH THEY ARE ACCREDITED... TO CREATE AND NURTURE NEW PARTNERSHIPS

them to become better able to manage the challenges they faced, not least from climate change, and to strengthen their economies. Soft power was one of the most effective instruments in development, economic empowerment and influence.

There were questions relating to the US's changing international role and what that might mean especially for her traditional allies. Is the US indispensable to us? What did we need to do to make ourselves less reliant on the US?

All panellists agreed the US played a critical role in global politics; that relationship mattered. While the US was not indispensable, it was perilous to ignore her international role. At present, the challenge for all of America's traditional allies was that no-one knew the direction US foreign policy, given its current unpredictability.

Against this current backdrop, it was therefore critical and urgent that we cemented our alliances with each other and moreover with other countries where we might not previously have considered political alliances – in order to strengthen new spheres of influence and perhaps revive old alliances. No country could afford any longer to rely on a small network of likeminded countries.

One of the key roles of diplomats was to identify common interests with the countries to which they were accredited and to help strengthen relationships where this was possible and practical – to strengthen capabilities independently from the US, to create and nurture new partnerships. The Ukraine war had demonstrated how effectively Europe was doing this. The UK and its European allies were already becoming the key players in maintaining security in Europe.

Can the centre hold?

Some participants were concerned about the impact of increasing right-wing populism and the view that the centre had lost credibility in the hearts and minds of its citizens and was seen to have failed to delivered security, growth, stability, and progress.

The panellists agreed that this could be a dangerous trend undermining the very fabric and basis of liberal democracy. This shift in thinking was dangerous to NATO, the Trans-Atlantic Alliance and to our collective response to the challenge of Russia and thus to the security not only of Europe but to the free world.

Ambassador Rae reminded participants that public opinion was constantly changing and might well shift yet further. Nonetheless, it was incumbent upon us to assess the consequences, especially for Ukraine, and prepare how best to manage policies and strategies. The Russian campaign of disinformation had already negatively impacted Europe, undermining European solidarity. Its long-term implications were troubling. We had yet to work out how to take on the Far Right and respond effectively to its challenge.

The panellists were asked for some final thoughts on the question posed at the start of the Dialogue. Had the world order really become dystopian? Were we moving to a new world order abandoning rule of law, accountability and ethically based policies? Or were we witnessing contested control for the existing world order?

Ambassador Rae considered we could not abandon multilateralism. Too many of the challenges facing the world were too big for single countries to handle. But he thought that with the weakening of the UN, new and different forms of cooperation were emerging with potential sufficient agency to deal with global and regional challenges.

Dame Menna believed it was still too early and difficult to predict where things were going. They might revert to re-vitalised existing world order or a new approach could emerge. It was important to remain optimistic.

Ambassador Neumann believed the changing role of the US had created uncertainty and incoherence. This could be a temporary change; however, it may have a longer-term impact on how states behaved and related to events, which would in turn affect how we undertook diplomacy.

Within all states, there were people with different perspectives and priorities of what they considered important. Judgment, understanding of the underlying issues and trust were essential ingredients in responding to situations. Policy making had to be based on understanding garnered from experience. Diplomats therefore had a continuing vital and unique contribution to make to achieving this much-preferred outcome. ■

Editor's Note

Three days after the Trans-Atlantic Panel Discussion – on 28 February – Israel and the United States began joint air attacks on Iran. In response, Iran launched missile and drone strikes against Israel and US bases and allies in the region. The challenge for diplomacy has become even greater.

IN DIPLOMACY, FAILURE
CAN COST AN ALLY OR A
LIFE. THAT LEVEL OF
RESPONSIBILITY CARRIES
A HEAVY PSYCHOLOGICAL
AND PHYSICAL BURDEN,
ONE THAT DOESN'T SIMPLY
VANISH UPON
RETIREMENT



Protecting the Protectors

Jonathan Freeman MBE DL, CEO of Charity for Civil Servants, explains the vital role of this organisation for Britain's silent sentinels

For those who spent their years pacing the corridors of King Charles Street or upholding the Crown's interests in a dusty chancery half a world away, today's news can feel like a dispatch from a different planet. To open a Sunday broadsheet or click on an online link is all too often to find the Civil Service unhelpfully caricatured as a "blob".

But for the retired diplomat, the reality was never a caricature. It was nuanced, difficult, and infinitely more consequential than a headline. The widespread misunderstanding of the Civil Service isn't just a communications failure; it's a failure to recognise how Britain holds its place in a fractured world. While the public takes its cues from Le Carré, the former Head of Mission knows the truth: when the state works well, it is silent.

How the Charity Supports the Retired Community

Some of the ways in which the Charity can help include:

- **Financial Resilience:** Providing emergency grants and long-term advice for those facing unexpected financial shifts.
- **Wellbeing and Carer Support:** Tailored assistance for those balancing their own health needs with the responsibilities of caring for loved ones.
- **Mental Health Services:** A confidential space to address the lingering stresses of a high-pressure career.
- **Dignity in Retirement:** Ensuring that those who gave their lives to the state are not forgotten by the state.

FOR MANY RETIRED OFFICIALS, THE TRANSITION FROM THE 'BIG HOUSE' TO PRIVATE LIFE CAN BE JARRING... THE CHARITY SERVES AS A VITAL LIFELINE FOR THOSE WHO SERVED US. IT UNDERSTANDS THE UNIQUE DNA OF THE CIVIL SERVANT

The Human Cost of Service

This silence, however, comes at a price. We often forget that behind the 'invisible architecture' of British interests are people – individuals who navigated Byzantine trade regulations, managed high-stakes consular crises, and built the quiet alliances that prevent small frictions from becoming global catastrophes. It is these individuals that the Charity for Civil Servants has been here to support for the last 140 years.

The stakes were never solely commercial; they were existential. In the private sector, a 'bold' failure costs a margin. In diplomacy, failure can cost an ally or a life. That level of responsibility carries a heavy psychological and physical burden, one that doesn't simply vanish upon retirement.

A Safety Net for Our Own

This is where the Charity for Civil Servants steps in. For many retired officials, the transition from the 'Big House' to private life can be jarring. The very qualities that made for a successful career – discretion, stoicism, a commitment to duty – often become barriers to asking for help when life takes an unexpected turn.

The Charity serves as a vital lifeline for those who served us. Whether it is navigating the complexities of later-life care, managing financial hardship in an era of rising costs, or seeking mental health support after a career spent in hardship posts, the Charity understands the unique DNA of the civil servant. Last year, the Charity helped a civil servant in need of help every 15 minutes.

The Moral Imperative to Give Back

The 'unaccountable bureaucrat' is a myth; in reality, the diplomat was answerable to a dizzying array of masters: Ministers, Parliament, and a media that relishes a pop at the establishment. This environment leaves the Civil Service unable to defend itself. It does not spend its time on self-promotion, which makes it an easy target. As a society, and as a network of former colleagues, we have a duty to bridge that gap.

The Charity stands to support civil servants throughout their lives, free of charge. Supporting the Charity for Civil Servants is not merely an act of charity – it is an act of solidarity. It is a recognition that those who maintained the framework of a civilised world deserve to live with security and dignity once their watch has ended. ■



Why I support the Charity for Civil Servants

"Throughout my career in the FCO, then FCDO and in the Diplomatic Service, I have seen the support that the Charity for Civil Servants has provided to individual colleagues and families and the difference it has made, helping them through difficult and trying periods in their lives. I'd like to thank those who work and who have worked in the Charity for their compassion and support."

Dame Karen Pierce

Protect the protectors

Stay connected to Your Charity for Life.

Sign up to the Charity for Civil Servants email newsletter:

cfcs.org.uk/hello



For whatever happens



Crossing the River by Feeling the Stones

Janet Rogan investigates the evolving relationship between China and the Global South

‘Crossing the river by feeling the stones’ has long been a core precept of China’s experimental development approach. Physically, like wading into a murky stream in just your bare feet, feeling for stones to reach the other side. But what if the river is the global economy, and the stones are Yuan bonds and cultural festivals?

While superpower tectonic noise fills the ether, China is calmly experimenting in the Global South. No showy Shen Yun leaps, just incremental steps, piloting financial innovations and cultural bridges and learning from them before scaling them up.

As of Spring 2026, this approach feels particularly coordinated: China’s 15th Five-Year Plan is ramping up, emphasising high-quality development amid external headwinds, while initiatives like zero-tariff access for 53 African nations (from 1 May) signal Beijing’s confidence in establishing mutual gains.



CREDIT: AU

The Foreign Minister of China Wang Yi at the AU Headquarters to launch the China-Africa Year of People-to-People Exchanges

'Panda Development': 21st Century Panda Diplomacy

Since the 1940s, gifts or loans of giant pandas have been precious diplomatic symbols for China. In 2026, panda diplomacy has evolved. The new pandas are Chinese currency experiments like yuan-denominated 'panda bonds' and a slew of innovative financial pilots. These experiments are in friendly, mutually respectful waters, with key partners in Africa and Latin America.

In October 2025 Zambia, Africa's copper powerhouse, became the continent's first country to accept mining taxes and royalties in yuan. China buys most of Zambia's copper. By early 2026, Chinese mining companies were making about 15% of their payments in yuan (roughly US\$ 300m out of a projected US\$2bn in annual mining tax revenue). For Zambia, this mechanism eases US dollar shortages and recycles funds for debt repayment or imports from China. For China, it's a low-risk experiment: if it smooths operations without provoking volatility, it could be extended to others, say the DRC or Angola, also significant partners for China.

'Panda Bonds' are also creating new financial facts on the ground. The first was Egypt's three-year Sustainable Panda Bond (yuan 3.5bn, US\$ 468.9m) in 2023. Afreximbank's 2025 debut Panda Bond (yuan 2.2bn/US\$ 300m) tapped into China's lower rates (1.8% versus 4% in the US) to fund African infrastructure. The Africa Finance Corporation is planning its own issue in 2026. These bond issues aren't massive yet. But they are building yuan ecosystems and establishing payment links to China's Cross-border Interbank Payment System (CIPS).

Another important innovation is debt conversions: in late 2025, Kenya shifted US\$ 3.5bn of Chinese loans to yuan, saving over US\$ 200m annually in interest payments. This gives Kenya more financial headroom and provides some insulation to dollar exchange rate volatility.

Latin America offers a parallel lab: since 2023 Brazil has been settling 30–41% of its China trade via a renewable yuan 190 bn/R\$ 157bn (US\$ 27.69bn) currency swap agreement. Also in 2023, Argentina expanded its 2009 currency swap agreement, again supporting trade. So far, there are no royalty pilots like Zambia's in Latin America but the pattern holds: experiment in trade-heavy spots, refine, expand.

This 'panda development' isn't aggressive. It's stones underfoot, fostering yuan use without overtaking the US dollar. For partners, cheaper capital; for China, deeper ties in the multipolar scramble.

THE NEW PANDA DIPLOMACY INVOLVES CHINESE CURRENCY EXPERIMENTS LIKE YUAN-DENOMINATED 'PANDA BONDS' AND INNOVATIVE FINANCIAL PILOTS IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi shakes hands with AU Chairperson Mahamoud Ali Youssouf at the launch of the China-Africa Year of People-to-People Exchanges



CREDIT: AU

People-to-People Links: Enduring Soft Power in Action

China's soft power has always hummed along in the background via people-to-people links. Even across the Taiwan Strait, people-to-people exchanges have been leveraged through the most tense moments. In 2026, soft power is in the spotlight with the 'China-Africa Year of People-to-People Exchanges' launched this January, celebrating 70 years of diplomatic ties between the People's Republic and countries in Africa (Egypt was the first in 1956).

Nearly 600 activities are planned, with 58 flagships unveiled at the launch. Under the banner 'Consolidate All-Weather Friendship, Pursue Shared Dream of Modernisation,' it's a mix of youth festivals, cultural Silk Road months, innovation contests, AI hackathons and 'Friendship Cup' sports events, backed by streamlined visas and scholarships. This use of soft power is not new. But in 2026, it counters narratives of neo-colonialist extraction, fostering generational bonds in a volatile world.

Hard Power in Uncertain Times

If soft power is the gentle nudge, hard power is the shield and in 2026's stormy global arena, everyone feels the need to forge one. African and Latin American nations, already navigating homegrown instabilities, now face a world where big players flex unpredictably, leaving multilateral bodies like the UN looking more like relics than rescuers.

The UN is largely absent from peacemaking tables in Russia-Ukraine, Israel-Palestine, and a slew of African flashpoints from Sudan to the Sahel. At the 39th African Union Summit this February, UNSG António Guterres slammed the lack of permanent African seats on the Security Council, saying "this is 2026, not 1946," implying out of sight, out of mind for global security priorities. African leaders have criticised the abandonment of collective security efforts, even clarifying that calls for "African solutions to African problems" were never meant to be invitations for the rest of the world to check out.

China, a P5 member itself, is not trying to revamp the UN but is simply carving parallel paths. Its 15th Five-Year Plan's blueprint, unveiled last October, elevates national security to a 'fundamental principle' amid 'severe external pressures'. To its partners, China offers 'Global Security Initiative' frameworks, as ever emphasising non-interference and joint stability.

In Africa, this translates to modest but growing hard security ties, often to safeguard massive

THIS IS NOT ABOUT ONE BLOC DOMINATING OR ABOUT CHINA TURNING INTO A GLOBALIST, HEGEMONIST POWER. CHINA WANTS TO SECURE ITS OWN SPACE AND ITS OWN TRADING INTERESTS, AND SO DO OTHER COUNTRIES IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) investments and trade routes. It has ramped up train and equip support (arms sales, officer training, joint exercises), although a controversial 2025 South Africa-China deal worth US\$ 22m to upgrade a military base has yet to get off the ground.

It has developed a network of state-linked 'private security companies' across 14 African countries to protect an estimated US\$ 700bn of BRI investments. China has only one naval base on the continent (Djibouti, since 2017), but there are strong signs of Chinese intent to establish another on the Atlantic coast covering the Gulf of Guinea.

First 'stones' have been supply of patrol vessels and surveillance, conferences on joint security, and joint naval exercises. China is offering a hand to cross turbulent waters together. It is not dominating the security scene, but in a world where old institutions falter, these experiments could redefine 'hard power' as protective partnerships rather than power plays.

Writing the Agenda in a Multipolar World

As old institutions creak, the Global South isn't waiting for permission but growing power on its terms: BRICS+ expands, AfCFTA integrates markets, and fora like the G20 (with AU's seat) amplify influence. China is cheering this on, positioning itself as a partner via its policy of Global Initiatives.

In Africa, zero tariffs boost exports, Yuan pilots hedge the US dollar, and people-to-people activities sync with Africa's Agenda 2063 goals. African countries are exploiting multipolarity for better deals, asserting sovereignty by starting to shift to value addition in-country and away from raw commodity exports.

People used to say the 21st century would be China's century. It's not, at least not in the way they meant. I thought Africa's time might have come; it hasn't exactly. But it's starting.

With the Global North distracted by its own challenges, and the 20th century multilateral umbrella leaking, elsewhere there is a determined assertion of new, or renewed, nation state priorities, with agency to define national interest and follow through with relevant policies, and relevant partners.

This space is driving innovative financial options between nations which can also strengthen African countries' ability to trade with each other on the continent. Intra-Africa trade is still the lowest of any region in the world – Africans trade least with their neighbours – in part because of ossified administrative boundaries inherited from different colonial governance systems.

This is not about one bloc dominating or about China turning into a globalist, hegemonist power. China wants to secure its own space and its own trading interests, and so do other countries in the Global South. Self-interest (and self-determination) is at play, not empire-building. This new architecture will build around the existing architecture, in some cases supporting it, in others challenging the US (and the US dollar) and the Global North. It is a joint mosaic of stones, felt collectively, crossing the turbulent river together.

2026 is the Year of the Fire Horse and two particular Chinese sayings are trending online: 马到成功 (madao chengong) "may success arrive the instant the horse does", and 万马奔腾 (wanma benteng) "ten thousand horses thundering forward". In a world where the 20th century powers are preoccupied with their own problems, perhaps 2026 is when another story starts to run elsewhere: not one rider leading the pack, but a herd of determined horses, China, Africa, Latin America, the Global South starting to find a collective stride together, hooves pounding over stones once felt in cautious steps, setting their own pace. Do we have the bandwidth for that? ■

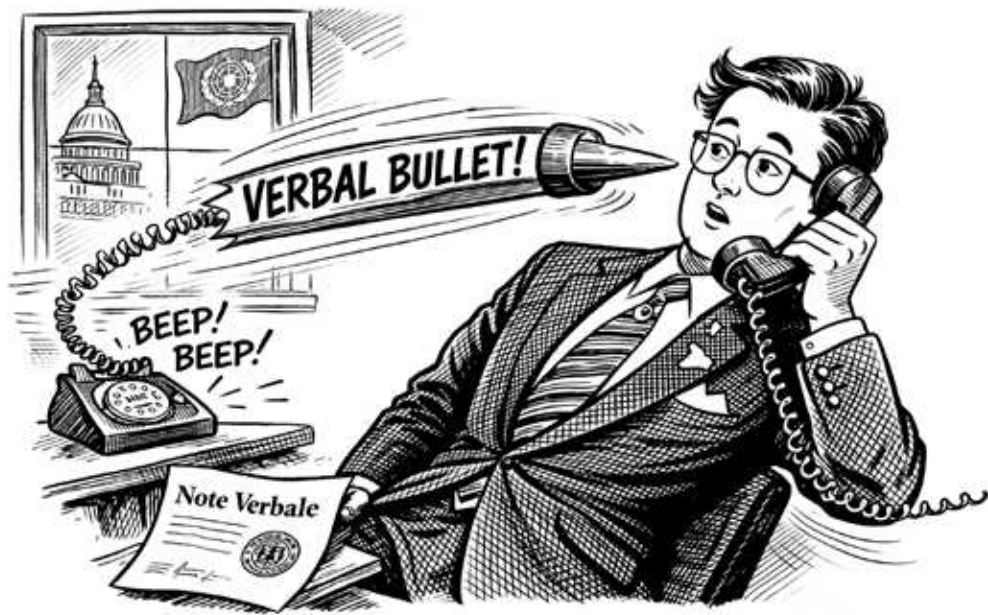
UN Secretary General António Guterres slams the lack of permanent African seats on the UNSC in his address to the AU Assembly this year



Dodging a verbal bullet

We've all been in that awkward situation – in the office, at home or on the phone – cornered in what you know instinctively is going to be a difficult conversation.

Edward Glover offers some useful disarming techniques



That uncomfortable moment

It's that ghastly moment when, caught off guard, you wish you were somewhere else rather than face what may be a difficult exchange. And where your response is on the proverbial line, there is a risk of tactlessly saying the wrong thing, thus making the confrontation potentially worse rather than achieving a balanced outcome.

The late-night phone call

Sometimes the deadliest verbal bullet is fired from the telephone. Everyone in diplomacy dreads the late evening phone call out of the blue from someone you don't know.

As head of mission, I received such a call shortly before the scheduled arrival of the then Prince of Wales on an official visit. No prior warning, the individual not known to me or on the lists of names I had received. I listened politely to what he had to say, tempted to give him a polite brushoff, given so many had contacted me with good reasons why they should meet the heir to the throne. When he'd finished, I was sorely tempted to say no and end the conversation.

Yet I hesitated – something about the caller made me think twice. So I didn't say no to what he asked. It was yes instead. Subsequent events proved my instinct had been right. I had dodged a verbal bullet that would surely have come my way – all the way from London. Instead, it went in another direction...

What you're likely to face

The lesson? In any difficult conversation of this nature, you are likely to face challenging approaches from your interlocutor(s). In response – that moment when it's essential have to have your wits about you – it's desirable to keep one's cool, to perceive sincerely despite the difficult circumstances the other person's point of view; to read their mind if you can and so seek and grasp an opportunity to respond in a non-competitive, non-conflictual direction.

If someone has a complaint about what you've done or failed to do, it's best in the first



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instance to let them ventilate their displeasure. That gives you invaluable time to marshal your response or simply to take the criticism on the chin.

Ways forward

I recall reading some expressions one could use if facing a verbal bullet. They were designed to encourage your verbal opponent, who may be unbelievably cross, upset or aggressive, to elaborate more calmly what's on their mind, thus creating an opportunity to turn the exchange towards potentially a more constructive outcome. The expressions were designed to show your interlocutor you're listening carefully to the complaint – including listening with your eyes or tone of voice.

What we can learn from diplomacy

Listening and observing are a crucial diplomatic skill – a point Dame Menna Rawlings emphasised in the recent transatlantic discussion. It's essential, she said, diplomats listened carefully to what their interlocutors had to say before intervening. To do so gave them a better insight how best to respond.

As the late Colin Powell said:

Diplomacy is listening to what the other guy needs. Preserving your own position, but listening to the other guy. You have to develop relationships with other people so when the tough times come, you can work together.

Some suggestions for those difficult office or domestic situations

I can't find the full list of expressions to dodge a verbal bullet but here are some original notes I made at the time.

1. The opening gambit

- Tell me what makes you feel this way/say that?
- Is what you've just said a question or your judgement?
- So what would you like me to do?
- Is there anything else you would like to add/tell me?
- How much time do you have to talk about this matter so we can try to understand each other better?
- What do you suggest we do about what you've just said?
- Is your evident anger/cynicism really the best way to find the way forward?
- How long have you been feeling this way?

2. A tentative forward move

If you sense the froideur/anger is easing, try one or two of the following expressions:

- I hear clearly what you're saying
- Thank you for clarifying how you see things.
- I understand that what's happened has left you feeling less than pleased.
- I can see why you would say that/think that.
- I know exactly what you mean.
- I'm trying sincerely to understand what you mean.

3. A further positive step

If the conversation begins to move into calmer water, there are the following approaches:

- So if I've understood you correctly, you....
- Am I right in saying that you think/feel...?
- It's important for you to know that I well understand your opinion.

4. A measure of conciliation

Then as you move closer to a possible outcome, there are the following directional steps:

- I see clearly where you're coming from and what the answer/solution might be.
- There has to be a better way to find an outcome. Let's try.
- Please tell me what you've heard me say in response to how our conversation began.
- Are there any other points you wish to make?
- I hope you agree we've made some progress in this matter
- Let's continue our conversation over coffee.

Conclusion

It's my observation we live in a world where there is an increasing inclination to listen less and instead proclaim personal opinions regardless of what others might think or say. The consequence is there are more verbal bullets and deaf ears.

Perhaps we should take some advice from Shakespeare:

Give every man thine ear, but few your voice; Take each man's censure, but reserve thy judgement. ■



First UN Secretary General Trygve Lie and Gladwyn Jebb holding the drafting pen

CREDIT: UN PHOTOS

Peace Makers

In his latest book **Peter Ricketts** sheds light on the unheralded men and women of the Foreign Office in WWII whose work – under fire and in the backrooms – shaped the modern world

The Foreign Office is the Cinderella in Britain's national story of the Second World War, dominated by Churchill, the epic battles and the clandestine world of the spies. *Peace Makers* celebrates the largely unknown story of the men and women who served in the Foreign Office in London and in Embassies around the world.

In London, the policymakers and their support staff laboured through blitz and blackout, advising ministers on issues of national survival while spending their nights on the roofs watching for incendiary bombs or patrolling the corridors with fixed bayonets on home guard duty. From early in the war, a group led by Gladwyn Jebb were thinking ahead to the future peace, drawing up blueprints for what became the UN and NATO and ensuring in the process a leading role for Britain in the post-war international order. William Strang convened US and Soviet representatives to plan for the occupation of a defeated Germany. Antony Eden and the PUS Alec Cadogan acted as shock absorber between Churchill and de Gaulle, picking up the pieces after their titanic rows and ensuring that de Gaulle was able to play his historic role in stabilising France after the Liberation.

British Embassies organized the evacuation of British citizens as the Panzer divisions swept across Europe. The luckless Ambassador to Belgium, Laurence Oliphant, left it too late to get away and fell into German hands while hiding in the sand dunes on the French coast. The entire staff of the Embassy in Tokyo, and the rest of the British community, were interned on the compound for eight months. The daily bulletins they produced have survived and paint a vivid picture of a community keeping their spirits up with a busy programme of sports, social events and improving talks.

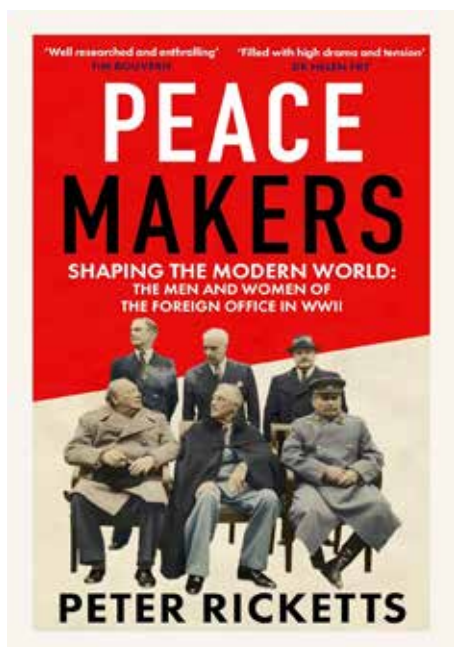
The record for wartime isolation goes to the Ambassador in the Holy See Francis d'Arcy Osborne, who spent four years in the gilded cage of the Vatican, together with his butler, secretary and dog Jeremy. He picked up valuable political intelligence from Catholic networks in occupied Europe and managed to organise a clandestine escape line for allied prisoners of war.



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Elizabeth Wiskemann, intelligence officer during WWII

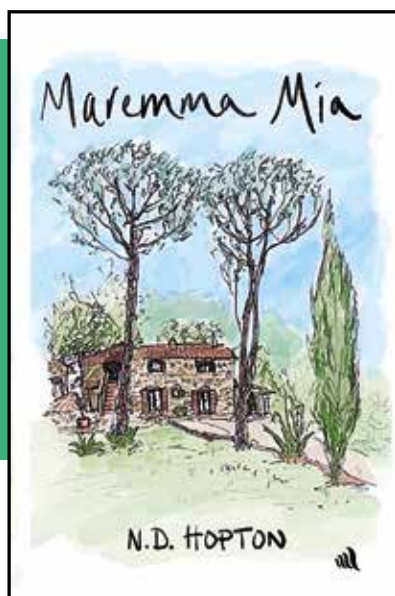


The War also changed the Foreign Office. Several intrepid women proved to be highly effective at promoting British interests in difficult and sometimes dangerous conditions abroad. Nancy Lambton spent the entire war as Press Attaché in Persia. Freya Stark built support for Britain in Yemen, Iraq and Egypt, turning her access to the harems of senior men into a powerful diplomatic tool. Elizabeth Wiskemann in Switzerland picked up valuable political intelligence in the shadowy corners where refugees, journalists and spies rubbed shoulders.

Their achievements helped sweep away the barriers which had kept women out of the senior ranks of the Foreign Office, and which were jettisoned in 1945. The book includes for the first time the recollections of some of the many young women who joined the Foreign Office in support roles and were crucial in keeping the wheels of Britain's diplomacy turning as cypher clerks, registry staff and secretaries. I had the great privilege of interviewing one lady in her 100th year who had been a secretary in Eden's Private Office and travelled with him to Yalta and San Francisco in 1945.

The men and women of the Foreign Office adapted to the upheaval of war and found the bandwidth to think and plan ahead for the world beyond the crisis. As we face a new world of disorder, the example of what they achieved is still acutely relevant. ■

Peace Makers Shaping The Modern World: The Men and Women of the Foreign Office in WWII, by Peter Ricketts (Aurum, RRP £22, Hardcover), available from Amazon and good bookstores from 7 May 2026



Meanderings in Maremma

Nick Hopton's new book about his family's escape to a dilapidated Tuscan farmhouse is an enticing read, writes **John Freeman**

Nick Hopton's new book is a delight. Though essentially about buying and doing up a rather isolated house much in need of repair and renovation, it broadens into something richer than that. Hopton isn't trying to do for the Maremma what Peter Mayle did for Provence. His is a much more ample book and many of its pleasures are to be found in its digressions.

The title, *Maremma Mia*, is surely a kind of riff on the musical *Mamma Mia*. But apart from the southern European setting, this book is quite a different offering. Though mostly light in tone it never descends into the strained comedy of so many tales of escape to Mediterranean wine and sun.

Uncharted territory

Indeed the first question this reader had was what and where is the Maremma? Though not an Italian region that readily springs to mind (or not at least to mine) neither is it exactly off the beaten track. It is the deeply southern end of Tuscany bordering Lazio. Its landscape is wild in parts, sometimes low level and marshy otherwise undulating and often hilly. Its towns and villages along the low-lying coast north from Rome are popular with Italian families. Inland however the region is more varied with small historic hilltop towns dotted about. It was close by one such, Suvereto, that the Hopton family found their Italian refuge a decade or so ago.

The name of the house was – and remains still – *I Cipressi* and its scrubby and untended hectares helped secure a comparatively inexpensive purchase. Even so Hopton's father was not convinced that it was a good deal and told him so.

More importantly his wife, Alexandria, also had her doubts and set a key condition – a swimming pool had to be put in place if the Hoptons' five young children were going to be sufficiently diverted over the summer months. Though always cost-conscious, Alexandria was also intent on getting some tables and chairs and a sofa or two, and, once the summer heat of their first few months had passed, supplies of wood to provide some heating.



ITALIAN CULTURE
INSINUATES ITSELF INTO
ALMOST EVERY CHAPTER.
DANTE'S DIVINE COMEDY
PROVIDES AN OPENING
EPIGRAM AND ITS FIRST
LINE RESONATES
THROUGHOUT THE BOOK:
"IN THE MIDWAY OF THIS OUR
MORTAL LIFE ..."

Divine Comedy

One of the strengths of *Maremma Mia* is the engaging cast of characters rustled up on its pages from the start. Not the least of them is the author himself. His backstory provides context and anchor to his account. Nick Hopton read Italian at Cambridge and time spent in Italy before, during and after his student days, inflects and informs his narrative.

A family connection sees Giovanni from Florence heading to Hopton's parents in York and thereafter Nick spending time with Giovanni's family in Florence. Nor is that the last of the Florentine connection as it is Giovanni who on a much later visit to London suggests more offbeat areas to buy a house in Italy.

Italian culture insinuates itself into almost every chapter. Dante's *Divine Comedy* provides an opening epigram and its first line resonates throughout the book: "*In the midway of this our mortal life ...*" Gobbets of Italian history illuminate parts of most chapters. The Venerable English College in Rome provides an echo from an earlier life whilst posted at the Embassy in Rome; and an admiration for the paintings of Caravaggio leads the reader into speculation about his mysterious death in the local region.

Of course Tuscan food features strongly in Nick's recollection as well as in the family's daily life in Maremma. Ample helpings of Tuscan sausage and bean stews satisfy the younger Hoptons' demanding appetites. And Nick brings to the page an absolutely riveting memory of a perfectly cooked steak fiorentina eaten in one of the finest restaurants in Florence courtesy of his friend Giovanni.

Family, friends and finances

Nick and his wife, Alexandria – affectionately named by him "*La Stupenda*" – and their children approached life in a rundown property with mixed feelings. The first summer was incredibly hot in a house with only a few electric fans and limited water supplies. *La Stupenda's* insistence on the need for a swimming pool became an expensive priority and a complex building project. Indeed many things cost more than expected and the family budget strained to respond and requiring a loan from parents.

Through it all a new family life takes shape and acquaintances turn into friends. The characters in the story multiply from vendors (Donato the butcher among them), to workmen (including the splendidly named truck-driver, Michelangelo) to neighbours on landholdings nearby dispensing olive oils and vegetables as welcoming gifts.

For every season

As the first year turns (and the book is arranged in sections according to season) the challenges form and re-form. Land needs clearing; pipes need replacing; furniture must be purchased (and IKEA doesn't come out well!); wood has to be collected for fires and stoves; and the seemingly endless difficulties involved in landscaping and installing the swimming pool become an abiding pre-occupation.

So it certainly isn't all plain sailing by any means and ten years on from their first footfall in Maremma, change is apparent as shops close and the need to engage with the rather ugly





holiday resorts along the coast threatens indirectly to intrude on the Hoptons' country fastness.

Maremma Mia is a rather joyous read (with many charming illustrations by Angelica Hopton and the author takes us along for the ride as he and his family face difficulties (bureaucratic ones all too apparent but quietly borne) as well as delights. It is an enticing read and at the end this reader felt enchantment.

The book is rarely sentimental, employing more irony and understatement than saccharine descriptions. If an Italian holiday is in prospect the book will whet the appetite; and if you are thinking of buying a little place in the Italian countryside, heed this book's gentle warnings as well as all it promises. ■

***Maremma Mia* by Nick Hopton, Chiselbury Publishing
(2025, RRP £11.99, Paperback), ISBN 9781917837156**

WRITERS' CORNER – AN UPDATE



Office Writers for Office Readers

Writers' Corner on the FCDOA website is a resource valued by Association members, both writers and readers. I want to keep it that way but it needs updating and streamlining.

Members of the FCDO past and present will continue to have among their number writers wanting their books to be known and read. *Writers' Corner* is however in sore need of a refresh. The text is therefore being tidied up to remove some of the comments and write-ins that have accumulated over the years since it was first established.

In future the website will:

- Retain and continue to add to the directory of FCDOA writers' publications;
- Feature each month one publication from the existing directory entries and highlight any new publications by members which have been notified to us in advance; and
- Continue to list details of writing courses made known to us and available to members.

As has been happening over the past year, the link between *Inside Out* and *Writers' Corner* will continue to be strengthened and book reviews and interviews (especially in the new *You May Like to Know* column) will continue to appear in the magazine.

This is also a useful peg on which to hang the FCDOA Board's decision to streamline aspects of the website as a whole. Nothing startling but a necessary updating.

John Freeman

Board Member and Editor of *Writers' Corner*

If you would like to inform the FCDOA membership of a book you have recently written or would like to review a book that may be of interest to FCDOA members, we would like to hear from you. Please contact the editor by emailing edward.glover@fcdo.gov.uk



PHOTO: WILTON PARK

Wilton Park CEO
Tom Cargill at the
first Wilton Park
Ambassadors Summit

Meetings of minds

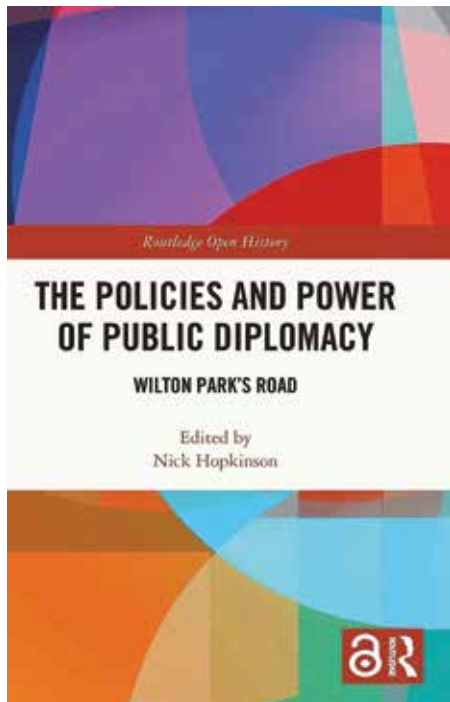
Nick Hopkinson's volume charting 80 years of Wilton Park's enduring power to facilitate dialogue is required reading for those with an interest in international affairs, writes **James Dauris**

Many of us who have taken part in conferences at Wilton Park will think of it as a place with a certain magic. Routledge Open History's new book *Wilton Park – The Policies and Power of Public Diplomacy* considers how that magic has helped to shape international policy debates over the past 80 years, and the differences this has made.

The book is an appropriately solid looking tome for one that addresses so many serious issues. But you shouldn't let that put you off. Thoughtfully organised chapters of easily digestible length guide the reader through the big issues and pressing challenges that have been central not only to Wilton Park conferences since it was set up in 1945, but to many of the most difficult geopolitical dilemmas that successive British governments have had to navigate over the intervening 80 years.

Nick Hopkinson's meticulous editing (many will have met Nick during his 23 years at Wilton Park, as acting chief executive, director and programme director) ensures that each chapter is usefully precise as well as concise. Much of the commentary is based on Wilton Park's 1,200 reports on its conferences over eight decades.

THE BIG THING THAT CAN
BE LEARNED FROM
WILTON PARK'S HISTORY IS
THAT YOU SHOULDN'T
UNDERESTIMATE THE
POWER OF IDEAS AND THE
POWER OF A GROUP OF
INDIVIDUALS WHO ARE
MOTIVATED BY THAT IDEA
TO COME TOGETHER AND
MAKE A DIFFERENCE
TOM CARGILL, CEO OF WILTON PARK



This is a book you can read from beginning to end or as easily dip into, choosing a chapter that piques your interest. Perhaps the WWII origins of Wilton Park in November 1945, as a creation of the Foreign Office's Prisoner of War Division; the Cold War, the consolidation of NATO, Russia and global security; the UK's changing relationship with the EC, EEC and EU; the role of the UN, human rights and international justice; democratic and transnational challenges, including climate, health, trade and the digital revolution; or a particular region of the world. It is a book that will help give desk officers and directors alike a sense of the place and history of issues that are central to their work today.

I was struck by how many contemporary concerns are ones that Wilton Park conferences were considering decades ago. Fifty years ago, FCO PUS Sir Denis Greenhill was arguing at Wilton Park that *"The defence of the West, far from being yesterday's problem, is actually today's"*. Uncertainty about continuing US commitment to European security and concern at the heavy US share of the alliance's budget has been a regular theme since the 1950s, as have considerations of the dangers posed by an isolated, militarily strong while economically weak Soviet Union, and more recently Russian Federation. Since the 1960s conferences have been weighing the rise of a radical Right in the US and tensions in Europe arising from competing ambitions for inter-governmental and supranational organisations.

Writing on these broad-ranging themes, the authors show how Wilton Park's ability to convene influential attendees and to facilitate dialogue around key international issues of the day has contributed to the development of global best practice. Wiston House's quiet sophistication and what Helmut Schmidt described as *"the rural seclusion of the South Downs"* have provided countless opportunities for contact making, network building and quiet conversations on the side.

It was at Wilton Park that the principles of post-war West Germany were refined, that the idea of the Human Rights Council was floated, that Universal Periodic Reviews were first discussed. The book considers how these conversations in turn showcased UK commitment to and skill at playing a proactive international role. All this, as Helmut Schmidt also noted, at less *"annual cost to the taxpayer than one single modern tank"*.

Wilton Park's key asset – its power to convene and to facilitate dialogue – has rested on the suitability of the space it offers for people to engage with each other, as much in the margins as in the main conference events, to discuss their differences in a protected environment and to *"disagree without being disagreeable"*.

A recurring theme is the importance of networks, conversations and trust. The book makes a strong case that the place of inter-disciplinary dialogue of the sort that Wilton Park has facilitated to help build a more democratic, peaceful, prosperous and sustainable world continues to be as important today as ever.

Tom Cargill, Wilton Park's Chief Executive since 2021, commented recently: *"The big thing that can be learned from Wilton Park's history is that you shouldn't underestimate the power of ideas and the power of a group of individuals who are motivated by that idea to come together and make a difference."*

With digital diplomacy, AI and fake news wanting to play ever greater roles in shaping thinking and attitudes, this book persuasively shows why Wilton Park and the Wilton Park approach will continue to matter. ■

***The Policies and Power of Public Diplomacy: Wilton Park's Road* edited by Nick Hopkinson, Routledge Open History (RRP£108.75, Hardback, 500 pages), first published 2025**

I Was There...

The FCDOA membership is rich in recollections and anecdotes. *I Was There* tells the story of world events through the eyes of colleagues who witnessed them first-hand

A reunion in 2022 of the three bereaved British families affected by the Ethiopian tragedies of April 1972



The cruellest month: April 1972 in Ethiopia

Tim Willasey-Wilsey recalls a month of tragedies in 1972 affecting the British expatriate community in Ethiopia

April 1972 was the month of my mother's camel accident in the dusty northern Ethiopian town of Mekele. Later we were able to laugh about the exotic nature of her accident but it was genuinely frightening at the time. As it turned out our family crisis, on Wednesday 12 April, turned out to be by far the least serious of three events to affect the British community that month.

My father retired from the Royal Marines in 1970 aged 50 and took a job as the Bursar of the General Wingate School in Addis Ababa which was run by the British Council. I was 18 and took a gap year both to retake my French A level and to recover from a surgical procedure. I was recruited as a support teacher at the English School on the other side of the city.

Ethiopia in those days was almost mediaeval with its absolute monarchy, its aristocracy and Coptic Church. There was extensive poverty. There was not much street-lighting and few roads were metalled. Out on the Ambo road, where we lived, hyaenas skulked after dark and whooped eerily. Airmail copies of British newspapers took two weeks to arrive and reception of BBC World Service radio was tenuous at best. The arrival of mobile phones, satellite TV and the internet has ended that sense of remoteness, which had its attractions as well as its disadvantages.

Easter Sunday of 1972 was on 2 April in UK but Orthodox Easter was a week later. We decided to take a trip to the Red Sea coast at Massawa via Asmara, the capital of Eritrea (then still part of Ethiopia), returning via the capital of Tigray, Mekele. Most of the flights were on elderly

THE NEW TERM AT
ETHIOPIAN SCHOOLS
STARTED ON MONDAY 17
APRIL AND THE
FOLLOWING DAY I WAS
TAKING A SPORTS LESSON
ON THE PLAYING FIELDS AT
THE ENGLISH SCHOOL
WHEN A PLUME OF BLACK
SMOKE APPEARED IN THE
DIRECTION OF THE
AIRPORT

but reliable Dakotas (DC-3) of Ethiopian Airlines which completed an almost daily 'milk run' around the country.

A royal invitation goes wrong

At Mekele we had been invited to ride the royal camels at the Governor's castle. The Governor, Ras Mangasha Seyoum, himself was away but his wife, Princess Aida was in residence. When the highly-bred camels went beserk (for no apparent reason) my mother and I were thrown off and fell heavily on the gravel drive.

My mother had extensive injuries including badly broken wrists as well as a large wound on her forehead. After some basic treatment by a Bulgarian doctor at Mekele we took her on a stretcher back to Addis Ababa the following day. Shortly thereafter our Greek doctor recommended that she be treated in the Seventh Day Adventist hospital in the centre of town.

The new term at Ethiopian schools started on Monday 17 April and the following day I was taking a sports lesson on the playing fields at the English School when a plume of black smoke appeared in the direction of the airport.

Airplane disaster

Within an hour the news arrived that a plane had crashed on take-off. A VC-10 belonging to East African Airways had ploughed down a steep bank at the end of the runway and burst into flames. Amongst many other passengers there were several British children going back to boarding school after the Easter holidays with their parents in Kenya and Ethiopia.

News came through that the Seventh Day Adventist hospital was being cleared of all patients and prepared for the arrival of badly burned passengers. We rushed to discharge my mother who was recovering from her wounds. Hours later we discovered that Elspeth Milne, the 12-year-old daughter of one of my parents' friends had been aboard and was critically ill. She later died of her extensive burns.

The sheer horror of these events was recently told by Harriet Ware-Austin in a BBC radio programme *Life Changing* which I heard live on 21 April 2021. Harriet had lost two of her sisters in the crash. Following that broadcast Harriet received emails from numerous people who had been affected by the trauma of that day. An article on the BBC website in October 2021 explains how the people affected had only recently begun to talk about their recollections and the subsequent effects.

A nagging question

For nearly 50 years I have had a nagging question about April 1972 which the Ware Austin programme finally prompted me to ask. Curiously my diary makes no mention of this event even though it has tugged at the back of my mind for years.

The fateful moment
Tim's mother mounted
the royal camel



SUCH WAS THE INTENSITY OF THIS TRAGEDY THAT THERE IS NO MENTION IN THE CORRESPONDENCE OF THE HORRIFIC AIR CRASH IN ADDIS ABABA WHICH TOOK PLACE EXACTLY TWO WEEKS LATER

CREDIT: MILNE FAMILY PHOTO



Elspeth Milne with Strawberry



Elspeth's grave in Aberdeenshire, with an Ethiopian cross

At the start of our Red Sea holiday my parents had travelled a couple of days before me. I flew alone to Asmara on Thursday 6 April. In Asmara I stayed in a cheap hotel 'Pensione Rialto' and either had supper there or at the better-known 'Albergo Italia'. As a former colonial city Asmara was famous for its Italian influence.

At the bar before dinner I ordered a bottle of Melotti beer and introduced myself to a young man, probably in his mid 20s, who was sitting on the bar-stool to my left. What brought him to Asmara? I asked. He stared at his drink and said that his girlfriend had just been killed when their Land Rover rolled down the precipice at Maychew, south of Asmara. I knew that stretch of road, a remarkable piece of Italian engineering as it zig-zags thousands of feet up an escarpment.

I cannot recall what I said but I do know it was wholly inadequate for the occasion. When a waiter told me my table was ready I fled from the bar with indecent haste. I suppose the feeling of guilt is what has kept the memory alive.

Red Sea retreat

The next day I took the bus down the incredibly steep winding road to Massawa. At one point it was searched by soldiers looking for ELF (Eritrean Liberation Front) guerrillas and a couple of young men were taken off.

In Massawa one evening we visited the Naval Base and dined with a Captain Stuart, a British officer who worked for Emperor Haile Selassie's grandson, Iskinder Desta. Desta was Head of the Ethiopian Navy and the brother of Princess Aida.

We also spent time with Reg and Catherine Hamlin, an antipodean couple who ran their own hospital in Addis treating fistula patients. They had been in Ethiopia since 1959.

Trespassing on a tragedy

Following Harriet Ware-Austin's radio programme I started googling for car crashes in Ethiopia in April 1972 with no luck at all. Then I had the idea of trying the British Newspapers Archive online. There I found one tiny reference on page 16 of the *Birmingham Post* of Tuesday 11 April 1972.

"Addis Ababa. Miss Frances Cram aged 23 of near Melton Mowbray, Leicestershire who died in a car accident in Northern Ethiopia last Thursday was buried in the British cemetery in Asmara – Reuter."

"Last Thursday" was indeed 6 April, the day of my conversation at the bar in Asmara. So who was the man I had spoken to? Further googling revealed that the Cram family papers had been deposited in the Lincolnshire Archives.

Covid prevented a visit to the archives until November 2021. Feeling a little uncertain as to why I was trespassing on someone else's tragedy I spent a whole day with the Cram Papers (as they are known) in Lincoln and discovered the whole story.

Frances Cram was known as Frannie to her parents and Frankie to others including her boyfriend, John. She travelled out to Ethiopia in January 1972 to teach at a school at Asella, 80 miles south of Addis Ababa in the Oromo region. The school was part of a much larger Swedish rural development project known as Chilalo Agricultural Development Unit (CADU).

John, who already knew the Cram family was working at Asella for a Dane, Gunnar Poulsen, an expert in forestry. In the months before her arrival John spent some time getting Frankie's

CREDIT: CRAM FAMILY PHOTO



Above right: Christopher Swabey's grave (foreground) in Asmara. Inset: A newspaper clipping from *The Birmingham Post* reporting on the death of Frances Cram (pictured above in 1965)

ADDIS ABABA: Miss Frances Cram, aged 23, of near Melton Mowbray, Leicestershire, who died in a car accident in Northern Ethiopia last Thursday, was buried in the British Cemetery in Asmara.—Reuter.
Birmingham Daily Post - Tuesday 11 April 1973

accommodation in order and writing reassuring letters about Ethiopia to the Cram family.

Frankie made quite an impression in her few months in Ethiopia. Now engaged to John, she got to know Geoffrey Last and his wife Margaret who were well-known figures in Addis. Geoffrey was Headmaster at the Medhane Alem School where many of the Ethiopian elite were educated. Geoffrey had known Sylvia Pankhurst (the famous anti-imperialist who is buried in Addis) and had also written a history of Ethiopia. Margaret, also a teacher and author, wrote that Frankie had played their old piano. She and John had *"fitted well into our disorganised household"* and enjoyed many of the same things *"like Brecht and Kurt Weill's Threepenny Opera"*.

During the Easter holidays Frankie and John decided to see more of Ethiopia travelling with an older couple, Christopher and Gabrielle (Gay) Swabey. Christopher Swabey was a 66-year-old expert in tropical forestry who had spent many years in the former British colonies and was the British funded forestry advisor to the Ethiopian government based in the Ministry of Agriculture. He and Gay were from Oxford and had been in Addis since February 1971, possibly on their last posting before retirement to UK where they had a daughter.

An adventure turns to calamity

The trip up north by Land Rover had taken them to the rock churches of Lalibela before making a very adventurous drive on dirt tracks across the mountains to the principal road from Dessie to Asmara.

On reaching the main road on Tuesday 4 April Christopher took over the driving from John and towards dusk began heading up the endless zig-zag of bends at Maychew. At this point they came across a large Fiat truck with trailer travelling in the same direction but on the wrong side of the road as it negotiated one of the tight right-hand turns. As it did so it was indicating to the right. Christopher seems to have understood this to be an invitation to overtake but the lorry then swung over into its correct lane almost forcing the Land Rover off the road. At this moment the Land Rover hit a pothole and the edge of the road gave way, sending the vehicle rolling down the steep slope.

Frankie, Gay and Christopher were all thrown out of the vehicle. Frankie died instantly and Christopher had serious chest injuries. John and Gay were less seriously hurt.

The survivors had to stay overnight in the nearest village and only the next day were able to contact the British Embassy in Addis Ababa which arranged for an Ethiopian army helicopter to fly all four of them to the American Military Hospital in Asmara where Frankie was declared dead on arrival and, a few days later, after consultation with her parents, buried in the local cemetery after a funeral service taken by a British missionary. Christopher Swabey was treated at the American hospital but also died of his injuries.

The files in the Lincoln Archives bear witness to the grief of the Cram and Swabey families and of John, who stayed on at Asella until August before returning to the UK.

Frankie's father, Frederick, had been a Methodist minister who served in central China in the 1930s and 40s including *"during the war years there"*. Her mother, Mary, was a surgeon, and she wrote that Frances was *"beautiful, talented, of warm and radiant personality, and our only daughter. She loved Ethiopia."*

Such was the intensity of this tragedy that there is no mention in the correspondence of the horrific air crash in Addis Ababa which took place exactly two weeks later.



**AFTER A REMARKABLE
EFFORT BY HARRIET
WARE-AUSTIN TO TRACK
DOWN RELATIVES OF THE
SURVIVORS, THE BRITISH
AMBASSADOR TO
ETHIOPIA AGREED THAT A
MEMORIAL STONE
COMMEMORATING ALL
THOSE WHO DIED IN THE
ADDIS ABABA AIR
DISASTER OF APRIL 1972
SHOULD BE PLACED IN
THE GROUNDS OF THE
BRITISH EMBASSY**

**The memorial stone
commemorating those
who died in the Addis
Ababa air disaster
of April 1972 at the
British Embassy**

Epilogue

The Haile Selassie regime was overthrown by a revolutionary movement of army officers, known as the Derg, in 1974.

Vice Admiral Iskinder Desta was shot dead in the mass executions at Akaki prison on 23 November 1974.

Princess Aida was imprisoned for 15 years in Akaki jail. My mother was one of many British friends who provided support via Catherine Hamlin during those years to alleviate her ordeal. After her release she joined her family in the United States where she died in 2013.

Her husband Ras Mangasha Seyoum escaped the revolution and formed the opposition Ethiopian Democratic Union (EDU). He is now in his late-90s.

The American base in Asmara, known as Kagnaw, was an important Cold War listening station and closed in 1977 when the Americans were expelled at the urging of the Soviet Union.

Frankie had three brothers. Leslie, became an archaeologist, and died in February 2021. Her eldest brother, John, died in 2008, leaving David, who is an expert in linguistics at Oxford University. He kindly provided the photo of Frankie (p31).

My mother's wrists had to be re-broken and reset in UK in 1973 and she eventually returned to playing the piano for another 31 years.

Mekele was the scene of much fighting and destruction during the recent war in Ethiopia.

In mid-June 2022, 50 years after these events, a group of relatives from all three events met for lunch in Somerset, many meeting for the very first time. It was a remarkably moving event.

The following month the British Ambassador to Eritrea sent us a photo of the grave of Christopher Swabey and the last resting place of Frankie Cram who is also remembered on her parents' grave in Leicestershire.

After a remarkable effort by Harriet Ware-Austin to track down relatives of the survivors, the British Ambassador to Ethiopia agreed that a memorial stone commemorating all those who died in the Addis Ababa air disaster of April 1972 should be placed in the grounds of the British Embassy. ■





PHOTO: UN PHOTO/STEVE WHITEHOUSE

Life Along the Green Line

From dodging shells while downing shots to escorting VIPs in heavily mined no man's land, **Jeremy Varcoe** recalls an eventful UN monitoring mission in Croatia in 1991

Ambulances of the British contingent of a UN monitoring group move through the deserted streets of Vukovar, Croatia

An unexpected invitation

Having been granted early retirement, I was jobless in 1991. I was happy to work out some of my notice when offered a three-month posting as the senior UK member of a new UN Peace Monitor group in the former Yugoslavia, where the Serbs sought to annex Croatia by force.

I knew little about the Balkans, and my FCO briefing on this historically unstable region was sketchy. I'd learned more from my Yugoslav colleague in Mogadishu. He correctly predicted that following the death of Tito, who had been the glue of a nation cobbled together by the Allies at the end of the First World War, his country –divided as it was on ethnic, religious and territorial grounds – would collapse. The Serbs would then take the opportunity to grab territory, by force if necessary, from the other constituent territories.

Old cricket flannels to the fore

We needed a white uniform, which, with blue UN armbands, distinguished the Monitors. While Italians and others had white tropical service uniforms, we were advised to buy white anoraks and wear old, even discoloured, cricket flannels! Dishevelled maybe, but Monitors from the UK were well regarded.

On the job

Once in Croatia, we were housed in a soulless hotel near Zagreb. The Chief Monitor, an impressive Dutch Ambassador, briefed me and introduced my team: a Canadian Artillery Major, a suave young French diplomat who spoke some Serbo-Croat, and a kind Serbo-Croat interpreter who was a professor. Our role was to mediate local peace agreements and ensure compliance with conflict rules. Not much hope – in this civil conflict bitterness and brutality ran deep. While both sides cheated, the Serbs were more ruthless.

Locals enjoy brief respite from shelling on 'Market Day' in Osijek



PHOTO: UN PHOTO/ERIC KANAL STEIN

When we dined in central Zagreb, the atmosphere was oddly festive, despite the audible boom of guns from the front. I was shocked that so many young Croats seemed oblivious to the nearby conflict and the fate of their nation, content to leave it to others to fight.

We were supported by a Serb territorial army regiment, more concerned for our safety than their own. Twice, when Serb shelling came close, we were bundled into basements with bottles of Slivovitz, the local firewater.

At the front

Our first mission was to scan a front-line area dominated by artillery exchanges. After a Croat complaint that Serbs were targeting a clearly marked hospital, I managed to contact both sides and broker a ceasefire: if Croats withdrew snipers from around the hospital, Serb shelling would stop. It held for about an hour before the Serbs resumed bombardment. Further attempts to stop them were ignored.

Next, our team visited a hamlet abandoned after fierce fighting. I was asked to escort Bernard Kouchner, founder of *Médécins Sans Frontières* and later a French Minister, who wanted to see first-hand where their medical team had been working. Arriving late afternoon, we examined ruins and found body parts.

Then a *Guardian* journalist's clapped-out hire car suffered a puncture. Knowing Serb shelling often resumed at nightfall, I grew anxious. The journalist struggled with the tyre, so Kouchner took over, showing the efficiency and courage he was known for. I admired him, though he later gained a reputation as a self-publicist. On this occasion, there was no TV crew.

A few days later, we arrived in Osijek, a large northern town under Serb attack. At the Mayor's office, we were warmly welcomed and shown extensive damage. Shelling continued for months, killing around 600 civilians. Since Serbs had been forewarned of our presence, I decided we should be highly visible, allowing residents to leave their cellars and stock up on essentials.

We drove around, reassuring those we met that it was safe to visit the shops and use the market, which the Mayor had opened for the first time in weeks. We left at dusk, as shelling resumed. If nothing else, we provided a brief respite.

Last tasks

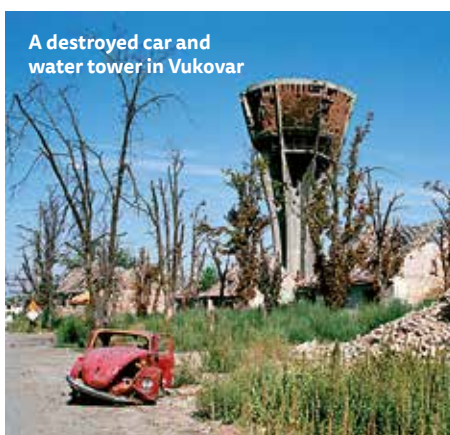
Our final mission was unusual. Under an agreement between Serbs and Croats, armaments from the disbanded Yugoslav National Army (JNA) were to be returned to their 'country' of origin but not recycled into the conflict. We sailed on a former ferry carrying armoured vehicles and shells from Rijeka, Croatia's main port, to Bar, a small Montenegrin port near the Serbian border.

As the only passengers, we had the lounge to ourselves. Upon arrival, we were barred from landing – local officials said we had no mandate to operate without the agreement of the government of newly proclaimed Montenegro, separate from neighbouring Serbia. Despite my vigorous protests at the breach of diplomatic privilege, we were told we were under house arrest. We never learned what happened to the weapons, though I suspect they were quickly recycled.

We were installed in a comfortable hotel, and that evening the self-styled Montenegrin Foreign Minister, a former sea captain who loved London, hosted an excellent dinner enabling him to practise his English. It was convivial. The next day, we were driven up the scenic road to Podgorica (formerly Titograd).

At the obviously brand-new Ministry of Foreign Affairs one of the few officials there delivered a perfunctory apology and assurance of our early return to Croatia. He more or less admitted that we were victims of Montenegro's diplomatic drive to achieve full statehood.

Back in Bar, we boarded a larger ferry, again empty save for a skeleton crew. Its Jordanian captain, clearly high on drugs, showed me the bridge – I was worried when I realised it had been stripped of all navigation equipment except a compass. Despite a circuitous route, we returned safely to Rijeka. Shortly afterwards, I read the vessel had sunk after mysteriously catching fire



A destroyed car and water tower in Vukovar

RECOLLECTIONS

PHOTO: UN PHOTO/ERIC KANALSTEIN



The heavily damaged train station in Vukovar

off Croatia – almost certainly an insurance job. I suspect that only our presence on board had delayed its destruction.

Escorting VIPs

For a brief final solo mission, I escorted Cyrus Vance, UN Special Representative and former US Secretary of State, across no man's land. There was extensive radio chatter as I briefed him before our Land Rover set off. Issued flak jackets, I chose to sit on mine, knowing roads and the vicinity along the Green Line were mined.

BBC war correspondent Kate Adie interviewed me. Asked why I wasn't wearing my jacket, I said I was more concerned about protecting my "crown jewels." She roared with laughter and suggested dinner in London on my return – an invitation I wish I'd accepted. I delivered Vance safely to the Serbian side. It took months of further negotiation to achieve a ceasefire.

Conclusions

Before leaving Zagreb, I helped draft a short paper warning Western governments that the Serbs would likely move next to annex or destabilise Bosnia-Herzegovina. I returned to London full of zeal, urging the Foreign Office to adopt a tougher stance on Serbian aggression. London wasn't interested and I was, frankly, fobbed off – though later, we supported NATO's bombing of Belgrade. Earlier action could have saved many lives and much further destruction.

My Balkan foray later helped me to better understand this troubled region when, as an Immigration Judge, I had to decide the fate of many appellants from Kosovo and the wider region. ■

REQUIEM

Mr Christopher Edge OBE, on 1 March 2025

Mr Ian Ronald Cormack, on 13 July 2025

Mr John Noss, on 3 August 2025

Sir David Ratford KCMG CVO, aged 91, on 2 October 2025

Ms Mignon Goldsmith, on 24 October 2025

Mr David Brighty, 28 October 2025

Mr Paul Ritchie CMG, in October 2025

Mr Peter Fowler CMG, formerly High Commissioner in Bangladesh and Minister/DHC in Delhi, on 3 December 2025

Miss Judith Callow, on 7 December 2025

Mr Maurice Dalton LVO OBE, on 22nd December 2025

Mr Julian Curtis OBE, in December 2025

Mr Roy Doherty, in December 2025

Miss Ann Bernadette Thiel, on 2nd January 2026

Dr Marian Malet, on 4 January 2026

Mr Graham Archer CMG, a former High Commissioner to Malta (95/99), on 12 January 2026

Mr Peter Unwin CMG, on 24 January 2026

Mr Patrick (Paddy) Morgan, on 10 February 2026

Miss Rodney Richards MBE, on 1st March 2026, aged 77

Mr Norman Morris

Inside Out Summer 2026 Deadline

If you would like to contribute to the Summer 2026 edition of *Inside Out* kindly send submissions by Friday 29 May to Character Publishing, 9 Chartwell Court, 151 Brook Road, NW2 7DW

Alternatively email

editor@characterpublishing.co.uk or edward.glover@fcdo.gov.uk

Kindly limit contributions to 800 words and please note that submissions may be shortened due to space constraints.

You May Like to Know...

Our regular series where FCDOA members share experiences of life beyond the arches of King Charles Street



John Dew in his studio

Portrait of an artist as a diplomat

John Freeman in conversation
with **John Dew** on his art of diplomacy

There is life after the Office, after the FCDO. Of course its shape and character varies enormously. For some it is a welcome escape from years of public service, from the grind of office life. For others a nervous step into uncertainty after years of managed transition from country to country.

Nor is retirement the only reason for bidding farewell to King Charles Street; many others opt mid-career for different challenges in the private sector or elsewhere. There are many different after-the-Office lives and each tells a story. John Dew's story may resonate with many readers of this column.

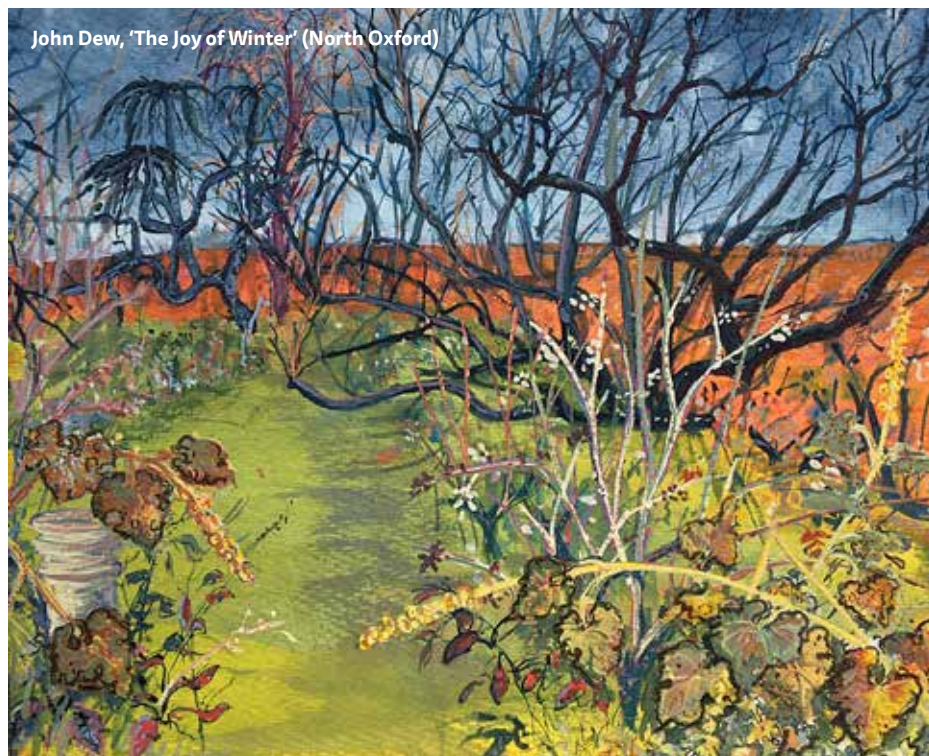
John served in the Diplomatic Service from 1973-2013. His career followed the customary alternating sequence of jobs in London and overseas and notwithstanding time in Paris and Dublin a Spanish-speaking pattern soon established itself leading eventually via Madrid to Ambassadorships in Cuba and finally in Colombia. For John after-the-Office offered the chance to concentrate on painting and graphic art. He had always painted and his travels gave opportunities aplenty to see the wider world and capture it on canvas or in other art works.

Though our paths had crossed in the Office I recently came upon John's name again whilst reading Philippe Sands' best-selling study of Pinochet's Chile, *38 Londres Street* where John makes an appearance drawn from his time in Madrid. I subsequently wrote to him and he kindly agreed to be interviewed for this column.

Have you always been a painter and graphic artist?

Yes. I probably spent more time in the Ruskin School of Art in my last year at Oxford than I did preparing for finals. They encouraged me to join a printmaking course that had just started and

John Dew, 'The Joy of Winter' (North Oxford)



AFTER I LEFT CUBA, I WAS TOLD THAT THE POLICE IN OLD HAVANA HAD BEEN GIVEN STANDING INSTRUCTIONS TO LOOK OUT FOR ME DISCREETLY, AND ENSURE I WAS NOT MUGGED WHEN I WAS SKETCHING IN THE STREETS

THE WORKSHOP HAD
BEEN FOUNDED BY CHE
GUEVARA IN THE EARLY
1960S AND EVERYTHING
WAS IMPROVISED WITH
GREAT SPIRIT AND
ENTHUSIASM

I became enthusiastic about etching. After graduating I had a tricky choice whether to go on to a full-time art school or join the Diplomatic Service. Art had to take second place for the next 40 odd years, but it was always a close second. My arrival in Cuba in 2004 with its intense visual excitement all around stimulated me to find the skills I had neglected for too long.

Which artists most influenced the evolution of your own style and preoccupations?

Ronald Searle, Edward Burra and Osbert Lancaster were heroes from my early teens. They convinced me that drawing and painting were worthwhile, and could explain the world more directly than words alone – in ways that could be entertaining, at times disturbing, even revelatory (certainly to a slightly naïve adolescent). Searle and Lancaster were much more serious and penetrating than their widespread reputation as popular cartoonists might suggest. With Burra, they combine topographical atmosphere and detail with a sharp eye for human character, often in some depth.

The same could be said of Herge's *Tintin* books. Their picture of the world and its politics, from the Balkans to Belgium to Africa, the USA, South America and even the moon fascinated me from as soon as I could read and may even have unconsciously pointed me in the eventual direction of the Diplomatic Service.

How do you choose subjects to paint? Many of your paintings and graphics reflect your time in the Office, notably your time in Latin America and Spain. Has that remained a focus?

When I was living in such stimulating and unusual countries as Cuba and Colombia, I simply tried to interpret what I saw. In Cuba so much of the character of the place was expressed in the once grand but now dilapidated buildings. Nearly all of Havana was built in half a century of great affluence between 1900 and 1959 and has been decaying ever since, exposed by the wonderful Caribbean light.

In Colombia the landscapes vary wildly from chilly mountains and high plateaux to Amazonian jungles and vast plains but everywhere is spectacular. So much of the character is in people's faces, especially those, of whom there are many, who have to struggle with life. North Oxford has its own somewhat tamer idiosyncrasies.

Printmaking, especially etching and lithography, cannot be done alone at home. You need a studio or workshop with heavy presses, hotplates and acids. This means working with others.

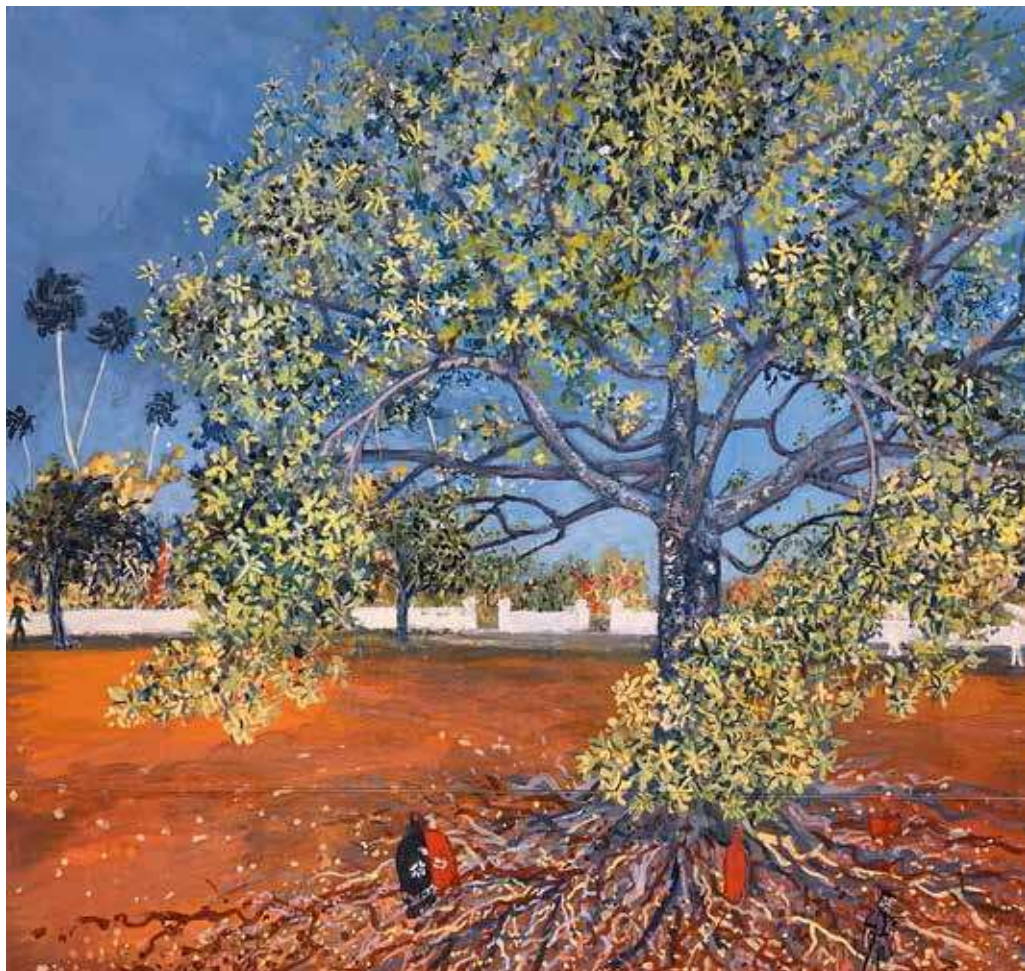
I was lucky to have been accepted in some of the best outfits in Havana and Bogota and to exhibit with them. This helped me get further under the surface of both societies that I might



John Dew, 'Bogota Roofscape' (Colombia)

LIFE AFTER DIPLOMACY

John Dew, 'Havana
Sacred Ceiba Tree' (Cuba)



otherwise have done. Fortunately, there is an excellent workshop in Oxford.

It was not all straightforward. In Havana there was a severe shortage of even the most basic materials, so I was introduced to lithography because they had hundred-year-old lithographic stones originally used for printing cigar labels. Later I brought in copper etching plates from the UK. The workshop had been founded by Che Guevara in the early 1960s and everything was improvised with great spirit and enthusiasm.

There were occasional difficulties. I was strongly urged to take part in a large exhibition. Something did not seem quite right to me when I took my work along a few days beforehand. But the organisers were enthusiastic, until the next day when they begged me to take my pictures away before the opening and to stay away during and after it.

Someone (I never found out who) in the Party had detected a lack of political correctness in my work and put their foot down. Yet after I left Cuba, I was told that the police in Old Havana had been given standing instructions to look out for me discreetly, and ensure I was not mugged when I was sketching in the streets.

But once a painting or an etching is under way the content becomes secondary to more abstract considerations, like the balance of forms or colour and the contrast between black and white. In the end every image stands or falls on such abstract issues.

Fortunately etching not only allows but demands constant alteration and variety of technique, printing a proof at every stage, before one is satisfied. Copper plates can be scraped and burnished almost indefinitely. The secret is to make what may in fact be the work of weeks or months look fresh and immediate. The tough and demanding school of drafting and redrafting that was routine in the FCO in the seventies and eighties was a useful preparation.

Whom do you most admire among contemporary artists still at work today?

Probably David Hockney; superb draughtsmanship, a unique vision of beauty and eight decades of utter dedication, for much of that time holding the fort for figurative painting against the prevailing fashion. ■



John Dew, 'Los Paisas' (Colombia)



John Dew, 'Calle San Lazaro, La Habana' (Cuba)

More of John's paintings, prints and lithographs, many of them reflections of his travels, can be viewed (and purchased) on his website: www.johndew.uk

Since having cataract surgery
Stephanie Kaloto in Tanzania
has a new lease on life



CREDIT: CURE BLINDNESS PROJECT

Visionary work

Since leaving the Foreign Office, **Peter Holland** has dedicated his time to achieving universal access to eye health

Losing sight

More than a billion people around the world live with sight loss because they don't have access to the care they need. For the vast majority, this is as simple as a pair of glasses or a cataract operation. The impact is profound. Without the glasses and services that we take for granted, children struggle at school because they can't see to read, adults can't hold on to their jobs and older people can find it impossible to participate in daily life.

A new beginning after KCS

I left the FCO 15 years ago. I loved my time in the Office. The work was challenging and exciting. I made many deep and lasting friendships and learnt an enormous amount.

For the past eight years I've been trying to apply what I learned at IAPB, the *International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness*. IAPB is the alliance for the global eye care sector. We bring together nearly 300 member organisations in more than 100 countries, from NGOs to universities, eye hospitals, and corporations, united by a shared vision: a world where no one experiences avoidable sight loss. Through policy development, advocacy, campaigning, research and collaboration we are working to elevate eye health as a global development priority.

CREDIT: JOY SAHA/VISIONSPRING



Businesses which ensure their workforce has access to screening and eye care can boost their productivity by 20-30%

A growing global problem

Eye care is inaccessible and unaffordable for far too many people. Unless something changes, by 2050 almost two billion people will have avoidable sight loss. By 2050, the number of people over 65 is predicted to double. Sight loss becomes more common with every decade of life. And by then it is estimated that half the world's population will have myopia – short sight – as children spend more time indoors on screens and less time outdoors, leading to an explosive growth.

But it's not intractable

But unlike many of the problems the world faces, solving the eye health crisis is possible. In most instances, the solutions and treatments, such as basic screening, distributing reading glasses and improving cataract surgery, are cheap and effective. These simple, cost-effective interventions have a much wider impact, increasing access to education and work, improving general health outcomes and improving productivity and economic growth.

Just one example: businesses which ensure their workforce have access to screening and eye care can boost their productivity by 20-30%. Addressing the eye health crisis could unlock nearly US\$450 billion every year for the global economy. For every \$1 invested in eye health, there is a US\$28 return.

Its treatment in the health priority queue

Eye health is not a politically controversial issue. But it is often taken for granted or ignored. As a health issue, no one denies its importance. But it's easy to point to higher priorities like malaria, HIV/AIDS or COVID. Building momentum and support for eye health as a development and economic priority has taken time and patience. We've had to gather the evidence, make the argument and build relationships, alliances and political will.

For the past five years, we have been making the case that vision and eye care are not just health issues, but critical drivers of education, equality and economic opportunity and development. Through patient diplomacy and alliance building, we have made progress in getting eye health on the agenda.

Working with a group of committed UN ambassadors in New York, in 2021, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the resolution *Vision for Everyone: Accelerating Action to Achieve the Sustainable Development Goals* – the first time vision had ever been mentioned at the UN.

It began in 2018 with roundtables with groups of UN ambassadors and senior diplomats discussing their experiences of eye health. Everyone has, or knows someone, with an eye issue. Asking ambassadors whether they could do their job without the glasses most of them wear brought home the seriousness and simplicity of the problem.

We followed that up with an eye screening in the UN staff lobby on World Sight Day 2019 (the annual Day, coordinated by IAPB under our *Love Your Eyes* campaign, which is a global rallying point for action on blindness and vision impairment). We expected 50 people to show up. 500 did, many queuing for over two hours to get their eyes checked. It's now an almost annual institution.

An estimated 150,000 new cataract cases get added every year in Bangladesh



CREDIT: ABIR ABDULLAH/ IAPB WORLD SIGHT DAY PHOTO COMPETITION

VISION IS THE ART OF
SEEING WHAT IS INVISIBLE
TO OTHERS
JONATHAN SWIFT

Life changing – following cataract surgery patient Losena wants to start a business to support her family



CREDIT: SAMUEL MURRAY

In September last year, I found myself at a table in the United Nations in New York during the General Assembly, alongside Prime Ministers, Ministers, corporate leaders and colleagues discussing how to turn those commitments into action. It was a moment that underscored just how far the eye health sector has come.

Making progress

There is progress. Despite the cuts to international aid, eye health is attracting funding. Last year *Bloomberg Philanthropies* committed US\$75 million to the sector, the biggest ever single contribution. Trachoma, an extremely painful infectious disease which causes blindness, is close to elimination. Affordable glasses are becoming more accessible, but far too slowly. One of the deepest frustrations is that, although you and I can buy cheap, good quality glasses in the high street, they're simply not available in the poorest communities in many countries.

At last September's event at UNGA, Prime Minister Gaston Browne announced that the first ever Global Summit for Eye Health will be held in Antigua and Barbuda in November this year, alongside the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting. In the run-up to the Summit, we will continue working with partners and governments to ensure eye health is integrated into national health, education, and development systems. We hope the Summit will be a platform to galvanise and accelerate global and national efforts to solve what is one of the biggest but most solvable health care issues facing the world.

The human dimension

Because, of course, behind the huge numbers are human stories: a child in Bangladesh who can finally read the blackboard or a grandmother in Kenya who reopens her market stall after cataract surgery. In Tanzania, 65-year-old Stephanie Kaloto speaks of her cataract surgery as if rediscovering the world for the first time. Once unable to see her family or the crops she had tended her whole life, Stephanie regained her sight through a community outreach programme. "I may be older now," she said, "but every moment is a gift I embrace with newfound appreciation. I feel like a child again."

Conclusion

Stephanie's story is part of IAPB's *Every Story Counts* campaign, which shines a light on the human impact behind the data, reminding the world that restoring sight changes far more than vision. It changes lives. ■

Peter Holland is the Chief Executive, International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness. He worked at the FCO from 1999-2011 with postings in India and Afghanistan on counter-narcotics. To find out more about the work of the IAPB visit www.iapb.org



PHOTO: IAPB



Prime Minister of Antigua and Barbuda Gaston Browne (left) announced the first ever Global Summit for Eye Health at this year's CHOGM in St John's, Antigua

PHOTO: PETER CROSBY



UN staff queue for vision tests at the UN on World Sight Day



Negotiating Love

Cat Rashid describes her move
from diplomacy to couple psychotherapy

I recently changed careers, from diplomat to therapist. I'm a qualified psychodynamic psychotherapist, helping couples and individuals with relationship difficulties. I have a private practice. I am also a visiting clinician at Tavistock Relationships in London.

I wanted to write an article about my journey, and some of the links between the world of diplomacy and the world of couple therapy.

A time of uncertainty

My career change was not spectacular. It was slow, frustrating, and for much of it I wanted to turn back. Joining the FCO was an experience in being driven away at breakneck speed, not entirely sure where I was going. Retraining as a psychotherapist felt like I was an old car, without power steering, trundling down a pot-holed road. There was too much time, and silence, and a pervasive feeling of irrelevance.

However, over the course of four years, I excavated parts of myself that I had lost touch with as a diplomat. This became the bigger experience.

I joined the FCO in 2013 when William Hague was Foreign Secretary. I had just completed a PhD at Cambridge in postcolonial literature. After one year in the Western Balkans and EU Enlargement Department, I became an ardent Arabic student, and I was posted to Bahrain and Jordan. I returned to London in 2020 and led the Yemen Team for almost a year.

I enjoyed FCO work and the people around me. I could deliver at pace, write submissions and diptels, grip process, get contacts on *Whatsapp*, and charm with my Arabic. My 'people skills' had lain dormant during the PhD; they were now in full bloom. I enjoyed big process, and I enjoyed the details of particular relationships.

But there were moments where I wasn't managing well. The postings brought unexpected stress in family dynamics. I sometimes felt very isolated abroad, and too ashamed to seek support. I made myself busy, always networking with local contacts, partly to avoid dealing with it.

In 2018, I was in Amman working on regional affairs, particularly Southern Syria. I dropped by at a DFID workshop in the Embassy. A counsellor, who had been working with an NGO in the Syrian refugee camps, was giving an impassioned talk about the atrocities of the Assad regime. She had counselled Syrian men who had fled Syria and had felt too ashamed to tell anyone what had happened to them. I suddenly saw an image of what I would like to do.

I called her the next month. She was wise, and blunt. She told me if I really wanted to do psychotherapy, I needed to retrain seriously in the UK before trying to offer it in the Middle East.

A new road

In 2022 I started studying one evening a week at Tavistock Relationships. For almost four years I had my own twice-weekly psychoanalytic therapy, as well as attending weekly seminars, clinical supervision, and seeing clients.

Psychoanalytic (or psychodynamic) therapy seems quite old fashioned nowadays. Particularly when you can reach for immediate advice on *ChatGPT*. But, of course, this kind of therapy is not advice. It is an experience in human connection. Psychodynamic therapy is a protected space where you can be listened to, deeply, by someone who won't bring their agenda, or desire for omniscience, into the room. Psychodynamic therapists sit in emotional depths; and simultaneously hold a sense of thoughtfulness and reality for the client.

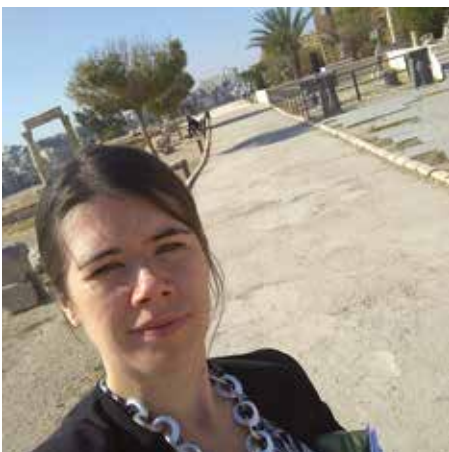
A key idea in psychoanalysis is that we don't know ourselves as well as we think we do. So much of how we think, and behave, has been imprinted from a young age, and consigned to a kind of unconscious. Another idea is that self-knowledge arrives in the context of a holding, healing relationship. We often need someone to really see us.

Tavistock Relationships is the only place in the UK where you can specialise in psychodynamic couple therapy. In the therapy room I am interested in how each partner encounters, and stirs up, the inner world of the other. I explore what each partner brings of their past to the relationship. This includes childhood experiences of being loved, included or excluded, intruded upon or isolated, excited or overwhelmed. Exploring these dynamics, in the presence of your partner, can be very exposing, but ultimately relieving. It is often a profound and moving experience.

Reflections on a past career

As I was retraining, I thought a lot about my former life as a diplomat. The art of diplomacy can teach us how to relate well. In the FCDO you instinctively know that you need to build

Recce of Theresa May's visit as
Prime Minister to Jordan in 2017.
Amman Citadel.



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a structure and drumbeat around a relationship, in order to sustain it. Diplomats know the value of intentional travel to the 'host state', which I like to think is a metaphor for curiosity. Diplomats also mark boundaries, including what can and cannot be shared between parties. Boundaries are important for everyday relationships too: we need to understand where we end, and the other person begins.

A lot of diplomatic work is also focused on symbolism. In other words, what does the relationship look like? How do we represent it? At the state level this is through memorandums and treaties. At the couple level you can symbolise your relationship through anniversaries, marriage, the couple home.

However, I've learnt that diplomats are not therapists, and therapy is not diplomacy. As I was training, I had to unlearn a lot of my FCDO competencies:

- Thinking intellectually
- Thinking quickly
- Having bold visions
- Being strategic
- Mitigating problems
- Influencing how people saw me
- Gaining mastery through eloquence
- Seeking agreement
- Performing well.

These skills are important in the FCDO. They were my prized possessions, as I was generally quite good at them. But, as I painfully discovered over several years, clients don't need them in therapy. Instead, clients need their therapist to be ordinary, and unsure, and in the trenches with them, and kind, and disagreeable.

So I have been on a long journey to become an ordinary therapist.

I recently gave a talk to FCDO Families on how to nurture your relationship if you are posted abroad. I'm also happy to speak on an individual basis (www.catrashid.co.uk) ■



Cat Rashid joined the FCDO in 2013. She worked in the Western Balkans Department and served in Jordan and Bahrain. She resigned in 2024 to retrain as a therapist and now runs a private practice www.catrashid.co.uk

Charity begins at home

Voluntary work has been the cornerstone of **Mark Forrester's** retirement which now focuses on fundraising for his granddaughter suffering from a devastating genetic condition



Mark with
granddaughter Leni

left the office in December 2017, three months short of the 40th anniversary of joining as an 18-year-old. The offer of working on Brexit was not for me. I was born in Portugal and cut my teeth in the office in European Integration Department.

My original plans for retirement had included establishing a bespoke tour operation aimed at the US market which would showcase Sussex, its history, castles, ghost walks, quirky pubs and guesthouses. But that fell by the wayside, which is just as well as Covid would have killed it.

The beginning

Our first few months were taken up with completing our house extension and providing childcare cover as grandparents.

Then we started travelling and catching up with friends, making two trips to the Commonwealth War Graves sites in France with Canadian and Kiwi military friends.



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Rotary

I joined Rotary International to give my time to something constructive in the community. This involved helping children read or improve mathematical skills at the local Secondary school. We ran monthly car boot sales and organised various music, art and photographic competitions for School students. The month of December was spent walking alongside Santa's sleigh throughout Seaford raising funds.

I then took on a school Governor role at one of the local Primary schools. I also accepted a request to serve as Trustee treasurer for a local charity called *SeaFriends* which provides one-to-one befriending and social activities to connect those in Seaford feeling isolated and lonely. Seaford has almost twice the average population of retirees.

Then along came Covid

A friend then suggested we might undertake school exam invigilation, and we were soon taken on and trained by Bedes school as invigilators. With the advent of lockdown in 2020, we were asked to become Covid testers for the students at the school which remained open.

The Personal Protection equipment (PPE) meant a change of gloves and plastic apron for each child tested, with each test result being individually marked up, checked and recorded before the child was permitted to go in to the school.

Exam invigilation took on a new turn as we conducted long distance exam invigilation with students as far away as Hong Kong by using two screens and special software, one to view the child and the other to see that the child was typing and had not found a way to cheat by pasting in work from the internet.

Covid also brought a request from a local foodbank to help with deliveries of food once a week to persons unable to get out to the foodbank in Seaford. I volunteered and was soon loading up my car with bags of food to deliver within a five-mile radius. As we came out of lockdown, the need for delivery reduced which was just as well, as I had by then also had two partial knee replacements, and the heavy bags took their toll if carried up many flights of stairs.

In my spare time I used to keep busy in the garden or riding and restoring old Japanese and British motorcycles. All the bikes have now gone sadly – and Debbie is happy about that.

I have switched my focus to a 1969 MGB Roadster. She tells me that MGB stands for Money Guzzling Beast. I don't know about that, but it is another way to meet interesting people!

A new focus

I have now stepped back from Rotary, the Trustee roles and exam invigilation to focus on writing – partly about our experiences but I am also looking at publishing some children's stories – set locally in Sussex. I wrote them for my daughter Amy's sons, but I am keen to see if I can use sales from them to help my son Angus's two-year-old daughter Leni Bea.

Leni has recently been diagnosed with a rare and very severe rapidly degenerative genetic condition called Sanfilippo syndrome Type B (MPSIIIB) – also known as Childhood Dementia. Sanfilippo Syndrome is unimaginably cruel. Children develop relatively normally until they are around two years old, then over a short amount of time they lose all the skills they have learned, experience severe behavioural challenges, hyperactivity, insomnia that can last for days, seizures, a total loss of cognitive and motor function and a premature death in their early to mid-teens.

We hope to enable Leni and other children with Sanfilippo syndrome to access life-saving treatment this year. A GoFundMe page for Leni quickly hit its initial target. Funds continue to be raised by friends, family and those touched by her story which will set up a trust to help Leni and others with the syndrome.

For Leni every day matters and it has brought a new focus to our retirement. ■

If you are interested in learning more about Leni's condition, or even wish to help, more information can be found at the address below. www.gofundme.com/lenis-lifesaving-treatment

We want to hear from you

If you are no longer in the diplomatic service and have gone on to pursue a new career, inspiring voluntary or part-time work or have taken up an interesting hobby and would like to share your experiences with FCDOA members, we would like to hear from you.

Please get in touch by emailing the editor on edward.glover@fcdo.gov.uk

THE PIMPERNEL PAGES

Support and information for serving and retired members of the FCDO and their elderly relatives. Edited by **Rachel Dawes**



A Library in a disused red telephone box in Cornwall

Little libraries

From a volunteer:

I imagine that quite a number of us will share the problem of running out of space to store all the books we have acquired over the years. It is certainly the case in this household. I cannot resist a bookshop and despite my best intentions, buy far too many. But help with my addiction is at hand as I have discovered two Little Libraries nearby, one in the waiting room at our local railway station and another in a glass fronted box on the garden wall of a house in a street round the corner. So every time I pass by I have a look to see what is on offer to borrow - the turnover is rapid (I have very literate neighbours!) and you never know what gem you might find. Whenever I remember I take a few of my old books to deposit and have even managed to create a little bit of space in my bookshelves....

The Little Library scheme is originally an American idea but has been taken up worldwide in the last few years. They come in all shapes and sizes, from re-purposed red telephone and blue police boxes, to plain cabinets and book cases via some very fanciful purpose made miniature houses.

If you look up Little Libraries on the internet there are endless photographs of the cute and the not so cute and even interactive maps to show you where your local little libraries might be found. Well worth investigating. And the books are free!

Try the website www.littlefreelibrary.org Although this is an American site, if you use the interactive map you can search in your locality and hopefully find a library that is close to you

Feedback

Experience of Receiving a Grant

Here is a letter we received recently:

Applying for a grant towards removing my bath and replacing it with a walk-in shower was a very simple and painless process, with the need to obtain an estimate the much-needed incentive to set the ball rolling.

Responses from The Pimpernel Trust were speedy and courteous, with only a simple A4 form to complete. The hardest question to answer was how much grant I was asking for! It's a relief to have had this work done and I'm very appreciative of generous support from the Trust.

If you have benefitted from a Pimpernel Grant, and would like to share your experience please do contact us. You can do so anonymously

Travel updates

New Entry/Exit procedure

In October last year the EU introduced its new Entry/Exit System (EES) as part of a wider effort to strengthen border security. The plan was for a progressive introduction of the new system, with full implementation by 10 April 2026, but there have been teething problems. The consequence is that UK nationals entering the Schengen Zone this summer may still go through manual passport stamping.

At entry points where EES is operational, travellers from the UK and other non-EU countries must register biometric data (fingerprints and facial recognition) at dedicated kiosks. Once registered, passengers should not need to do so again, and things should run more quickly.

But many self-service kiosks for EES still do not work reliably, and it can take up to 70% longer to go through the entry process. Only Sweden, so far, has allowed the use of an app to allow travellers to pre-register details. There is now concern about summer travel chaos.

EU Member States have been given flexibility to suspend the introduction of EES with the possibility of extension until September.

In the UK, Eurotunnel has begun the phased rollout of EES for coach passengers and lorry drivers, but has not yet started registering tourist vehicles. Eurostar at St Pancras has yet to switch on their new kiosks. It said that EES checks were being completed manually by border officers, and it would introduce kiosk-based processing once dates had been set by the French interior ministry.

The moral is that if you are planning to travel to Europe this summer you should check the state of play before you set out in case of delays.



EES kiosks at Zurich airport

Travel Insurance

We are all very aware of the need to take out travel insurance just as soon as we book tickets but have you looked closely at what level of insurance you have bought? Sometimes it's tempting to go for the basic cover but in fact this can be a dangerous practice.

If your trip abroad represents a considerable outlay in money do check that the cancellation limit is not too low. Basic cover won't be adequate if your journey costs you quite a lot. Often you're offered different tiers of insurance so go for the tier that will really cover the cost of your holiday. If it's too late then you can buy separate top-up cancellation cover (try www.pjhayman.com for specialist cover).

Another related travel insurance issue: have you thought about taking out disruption insurance? There are many ways in which your holiday can be wrecked before you even get onto the plane. Airport fires, natural disasters, really bad weather, computer meltdowns at the terminal: there are many ways that your journey can be disrupted and all your carefully worked out travel plans come unstuck. It will cover expenses not covered by your normal policy such as alternative accommodation if you are stranded somewhere, reimbursing you for unused flights and extra expenses (food and transport costs) for example. Disruption cover doesn't come as standard with most policies so if you want peace of mind then it may be worth getting disruption insurance.

And finally...

It is astonishing, in retrospect, that wheeled luggage wasn't common until the 1970s, and the upright two-wheeled suitcase only became ubiquitous in the 1990s. Are motorised suitcases the next frontier? AirWheel UK has picked up on a trend in Asia and the US. Its SE3S is a 9.4kg three-wheeled case with two handles: one for pulling it along as usual, and the other to be used as an accelerator, brake and steering wheel for what becomes a motorised tricycle.

The case, which meets airline overhead locker size limits, has a top speed of 8mph, a range of up to five miles on a two-hour charge, and offers 20 litres of packing space as well as phone charging point and a remote control, so that you can walk beside it if you don't want to ride it. Or you can use it to tow other luggage. In Japan, such cases qualify as motorised vehicles, requiring crash helmet and driving license. That is not yet a problem in Europe, though the rules are said to be under review.



Are motorised suitcases the next big thing?

Wellbeing

Reflection on Life

One of our volunteers writes: *Reaching the age of 79 has affected my physical, emotional and mental capacity. This was illustrated by my three-year-old grandson who, when he asked me to hide with him under the sofa which I had to decline because I am not quite as flexible as a three-year-old, comforted me by saying I should not worry as once I had reached his age, I would be able to perform the task!*

This incident, combined with fatigue, stress and headaches by trying to overachieve, made me decide that things had to change. I took the month of August to adjust to a new rhythm which consists of setting myself three tasks per day and resist the temptation of adding more. I now do one useful thing, for example gardening, housework, helping neighbours etc; one exercise; and one enjoyable cultural or social outing per day.

The benefit is enormous. Gone are the stress symptoms, and the relaxation is enabling me to think more calmly, notice my environment with great pleasure and wake up smiling. Who knows, in time I might even be able to hide under the sofa!

Gardening ticks all the boxes – an activity that is useful, enjoyable and good exercise



Pimpernel grants

The Pimpernel Trust is able to offer grants of up to £2,500 to serving and retired members of the FCDO, FCO and DfID and their elderly relatives for respite care or equipment to make life easier.

The grant could be applied to help in several different ways, for example:

- Respite Care – Average cost around £1,500 per week
- Mobility Scooter – Cost around £1,500 for a mid-range scooter that does 4 mph
- Electric Wheelchair – For indoor use £1,500 - £2,000
- Riser Recliner Chair – £1,000 - £2,000
- Adjustable bed – From £800 depending on size
- Stairlift – £3,000 - £5,000 (a grant of £2,000 from Pimpernel would perhaps make this an option for you)
- Wet Room – Help towards the cost of converting a bathroom to a wet room

If you think such a grant could be of help to you or your elderly dependants please email us at Pimpernel.Trust@fcdowebmail.fcdo.gov.uk outlining your situation or call to discuss the application with someone in the office on 020 7008 1040.

Do leave a message on the answerphone if there is no one on duty when you call and we will ring you back.

Unfortunately, grants cannot be used for ongoing expenses such as help with the cost of home care or care/nursing home fees.

Applying for a Grant:

We always appreciate hearing back from grant recipients about their experiences. It's really encouraging to know that grants can make a big difference to people's lives.



Cabinet Office Minister Satvir Kaur taking questions in Parliament about the problems with the Civil Service Pension Scheme



The Great Capita Disaster

Pat Ashworth reports on the fiasco following the change of pensions administrators for the Civil Service Pension Scheme

There's really only one pensions story in town at the moment. But for those who may not have been keeping up with Capita's performance after taking over the administration of our pensions from December last year, I thought I'd pull together the events of the past few months.

In December, the administration of the Civil Service Pension Scheme (CSPS) was transferred from *MyCSP* to *Capita* in what ministers described as an ambitious modernisation of the system. However, since the transfer, the scheme's members – especially recent retirees – have been subject to widespread delays, errors and service failures.

Almost immediately after the handover, thousands of pensioners reported missed or delayed payments, incomplete records and technical glitches on the new online portal *Capita* launched to replace the old system. Users struggled to log in, encountered broken links and were unable to retrieve basic account information such as years of service or beneficiary details. These have worsened a growing backlog of unresolved cases, which the Cabinet Office now estimates has grown to over 120,000, including pensions owed to retirees and critical cases such as ill-health retirements and widow(er) payments. Many of our own members living abroad had particular difficulties as the system would not accept non-British mobile telephones as a way to receive a login code.

Capita has acknowledged these issues and said it inherited “a significant backlog” from the previous administrator while also facing much higher volumes of contact from scheme members than anticipated. The company has said it increased staffing to over 500 full-time employees – around 50 % more than under *MyCSP* – and is working to deliver the required services.

Real world impact and political scrutiny

The consequences for some pensioners have been distressing. Stories shared in Parliament during a Westminster Hall debate described retirees struggling to pay bills, rent or mortgages because their guaranteed income had not arrived on time. Some have faced bank penalties, borrowed money or relied on family support; others have waited months for bereavement payments after a spouse's death. Questions have been raised not just about administrative failings but about the human cost of outsourcing such a vital service.

MPs from across the political spectrum have pressed the Cabinet Office for answers. Written questions in the House of Commons elicited pledges from ministers that the

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THE CABINET OFFICE HAS INSISTED IT IS TAKING THE CRISIS SERIOUSLY. MINISTERS HAVE OUTLINED A PHASED PLAN TO RESTORE MOST ELEMENTS OF THE SCHEME TO AGREED SERVICE LEVELS BY JUNE 2026, WITH PRIORITY GIVEN TO CRITICAL AREAS SUCH AS DEATH-IN-SERVICE AND ILL-HEALTH RETIREMENT CASES



government was “working urgently with *Capita* to resolve these issues” and had set up a cross-departmental recovery team to hold the contractor to account and improve processing times.

Cabinet Office Response

The Cabinet Office has insisted it is taking the crisis seriously. Ministers have outlined a phased plan to restore most elements of the scheme to agreed service levels by June 2026, with priority given to critical areas such as death-in-service and ill-health retirement cases.

As part of efforts to address financial hardship caused by the delays, the government and *Capita* have announced transitional support measures, including interest on overdue payments at Bank of England base rate plus 1% and an emergency loan scheme of up to £10,000 for those facing urgent bills.

What most of us find difficult to understand is that *Capita* had two years to prepare for this. It was awarded a £239 million contract to take this over in November 2023. But we also know that during 2025 *Capita* had missed various milestones leading the Cabinet Office to withhold nearly £9.6 million in transition payments due to delivery failures in the design, development and user readiness phases. Nor does any of this explain the difficulties of registering with the portal. But let us hope that the target of getting the system running efficiently by June is met. ■

Survivor Pensions

The arrangements about the procedure following the death of a pensioner and how to claim a survivor pension have now changed. The most important steps are:

Inform *Capita* as soon as possible of the death of a pensioner. This will ensure the deceased's pension is halted so that overpayments will not be made. At this stage, the best method seems to be to go to:

www.civilservicepensionscheme.org.uk/memberhub/contactus-member/

At the bottom of the page choose “Tell us a member has died” and follow the instructions.

This can also be done by telephone on 0300 123 6666. But of course, there are well known issues getting through by telephone.

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