

**Mark Allen**

# The future of UK foreign policy: Sir Mark Allen

## Report

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## ➤ Sir Mark Allen

**E**ntropy, though a term from the world of physics, seems an endemic feature of human affairs as well. To resist the inclination to disorder and degeneration, we feel the urge, from time to time, to put a new pulse of energy through our organisations and systems. Renewal, reform and realignment are the common slogans. Cynics often identify the campaign against entropy with the egotisms of new leading personalities who want to put their mark on organisations and, indeed, on history. And the cynics are often quite right. But it may also be that the newcomers are just sensitive to the entropy problem, even though they misjudge the language they use in addressing it.

Particularly at a time of financial constraint, there are related misjudgements which are just as dangerous. Wanting to embrace change, we can so easily misjudge the differences between the fundamental and the incidental purposes of an institution. We forget that real value mainly resides in the fundamental. In the field of foreign affairs, these problems are familiar and acceleratingly cyclical, almost leaving one to fear that a deeper entropy is at work of which these spasms of reform are but painful, clinical symptoms.

Today, impelled by the state of public finances, there is a shift away from the socialist belief that 'bigger government is better government'. Public departments are being cut back. And so, more than ever, it is important that we stay calm in recognising the differences between policy, strategy and operations, between fundamentals and incidentals. In these circumstances, the government's determination to harness our diplomatic effort to 'support for business' is troubling. On a reduced budget, what is to become of main diplomatic responsibilities? Are we watching strategy or spasm?

Whatever view we take of the state of our nation, the fundamental purposes of our overseas representatives remain remarkably unchanged: to negotiate with foreign governments, to understand the dynamics of power behind foreign governments' policies and to advise HMG on what British policies would best promote our own interests. These functions have value if we are to avoid 'megaphone diplomacy', policies steeped in ignorance or simple short-sightedness. It does not greatly matter whether we are in downturn or upswing. The job needs doing. And we kid ourselves, if we think that the media, official visits or new slogans will do the job instead. Only the ethos and values of public service can offer the government bespoke advice. Others may have important parts to play, clearly. But when others put their experience at the service of government, their motives can be variable and their reliability is qualified.

Of course, a small body of men and women able to discharge these diplomatic functions, is an enviable asset and many nations used to be jealous of our diplomatic service. Even the policeman questioned by an army officer, feeling his way down Whitehall in a war-time black out, 'Which side is the FO on?' answered, 'Ours, I hope.' But the asset can easily be taken for granted. In consequence, our diplomatic service has faced a proliferation of tasks and objectives which have had organisational repercussions, not least at the expense of the core political work. Locally employed staff at missions have been expected to fill gaps in political coverage and to do so without diplomatic immunity. Further afield, where we are less well understood or forgiven, this has caused suspicion. In Iran, this 'more for less' was followed by charges of spying. The rising damp of political correctness and left-marking catch-

phrases masquerading as policy has helped diminish the prestige of our diplomats. The prestige they once enjoyed gave them access, influence and credibility – advantages in any age.

Returning the FCO to a commitment to its fundamental tasks would be mind clearing. It would also make space for a more hard headed examination of what our interests really are. The gormless smugness of the recent National Security Strategy conjures up a world suggestible to the Strategy's recitative of assertions. The panglossian agenda does need challenging: for the purposes of the diplomatic service, where there is little connection with negotiation, good assessment and policy advice, tough interrogation should follow. It is possible that the FCO should operate on fewer resources; but the more important and prior question is 'What should it be doing?'

Our geography and traditions give us special advantage in dealing with foreign policy questions. Many other states face serious questions about their sustainability and importantly their sovereignty. The UK is not immune to these issues and has its own domestic questions about its union, but our identity as an independently minded trading nation is not yet threatened. Many contemporary problems lie like mist across the international scene, apparently not rooted in, or defined by, familiar state structures. Even, however, when we try to tackle so-called 'non-state actors', dealing with other governments is unavoidable. When we are abroad, we are usually on somebody else's turf, despite the elisions of globalisation.

The thematic imperative remains that we have to be good at dealing with others, with people overseas and especially their governments. And this is best done overseas where we may better understand the local drivers which are working for, or against, our own interest. This is work which requires experience and some specialisation.

Understanding what is going on in the world is a prerequisite for having an idea of what we should like to be in the world. Existential angst about our

permanent seat on the UN Security Council or our international military profile subtly proposes that these large questions are entirely for us to decide. In fact, debating society motions make bad options for foreign policy. A degree of predictability is important to being a reliable partner in international affairs, as it is to being a formidable opponent. Only time will tell whether the idea in the Strategic Defence and Security Review of An Adaptable Posture captures the necessary reassuring, or minatory, tone.

At deeper levels there is more than enough going on which should make us cautious about showy initiatives. Anybody who can remember the Cold War is struck by the irretrievability of that world which formed us. This is no cause for nostalgia, but a reminder of the difficulty we have now in reading the signs of the times, not least in the relationships between societies and their governments. The puzzling but radical changes in the make-up and behaviours of our own society are very present overseas as well. The empirical evidence of the paradox of political torpor and rapid social development suggests that there is a general problem of lack of vision ahead. Extremists are benefitting from the muddle and may well be enduring adversaries abroad, but the middle ground is silent. The lull in ideological conflict has left us curiously inarticulate.

Thus the future of the EU and of NATO remains opaque. The Middle East and Far East offer few indications of how their regimes will cope with demographic change. The so-called BRIC countries, favourites in some crude economic contest, do not tell us how their political systems will adapt to serve the development they want, or, if they do not, how their political systems will stay on top of the ferment. The United States is a new source of uncertainty, troubled by its riddles of isolationist, exceptionalist and interventionist moods. The underlying political ennui in the world was brought home to us in the early attempts to do something about climate change. Policy which is mainly optative or aspirational, sounds like a shepherd's boy whistling to keep himself company at night. Only the wolves benefit - they have ears to hear.

Seeing the change and uncertainty which characterise our world today suggests that a shrewd government will be cautious. Not all issues in the world are amenable to government statements or policy initiatives. Getting our diplomatic resources in good repair and clear about their primary responsibilities will better enable us to make sense of events, be they signalling single swallows or black swans.

The idea of a national security organisation offers a technique for bringing together the streams of knowledge and experience in government to take a critical overview of what is to be done. Gone are the days when national security questions were the preserve of a 'peaked capped' culture of military and security officials. Today, global health, migration, unemployment and religious convictions, energy and food security, financial regulation and many others touch directly on our competitiveness and welfare, on the home and overseas dimensions of our national security. Coherence is the salient requirement in defining our interests and the strategic choices open to us. To consider them, we need optics which can capture both context and focus.

So the new project of a National Security Council does deserve sustained support. It will not be easy – for them or for us. Patience is already tested by the Strategic Defence and Security Review and its muddle about the meanings of 'risk' and 'threat'. Bureaucratic interests and prejudices, the calibre of ministers and Treasury officials each conspire to preserve the defended and enclavist attitudes of departments. Work to support the NSC will face many unintended consequences, like those which followed the campaigns for 'joined up government'

in recent years. There will be a risk of duplication and of the NSC's interfering in what should properly be the responsibilities of individual ministers. The overlap between foreign policy and overseas aid will continue to cause tension. Enormous pressure will bear down on those sitting on the council. Diffident about wisdom, they may retreat into searches for more data, a proliferation of follow-up. The challenge of settling for the best they can do at the time, will demand courage.

No less a challenge will be submitting the elite self-confidence of top politicians and officials to the authority of parliament. A parliamentary committee, drawn from both houses, has to underpin the confidence we need to have, in the ultimate decisions the government takes. This should also both supply some restraint on ministerial enthusiasms and uphold the public interest in the face of an official tendency to fix. The committee should insist on an audit of the capabilities needed to support policy, strategy and operations.

Despite these problems, the NSC offers the chance to seek efficiency through greater conductivity at the most senior level. This sounds like dealing with entropy again - it is a fundamental problem. But it is heartening that the government seems ready to clean up the spaghetti wiring of Cabinet Office processes for dealing with national security problems. We must hope that the lessons of the last decade and our hopes for the new one will encourage officials to give the change a chance. A change of approach is needed. And if it promotes a hard re-engagement with fundamental issues, then hope may be justified. ■