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A UK perspective on public diplomacy and cultural relations in a  
time of conflict

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“Cultural diplomacy is the linchpin of public diplomacy; for it is in cultural activities that a nation’s idea of itself is best represented.”

That is not an original thought but is a direct quote from the Report of the Advisory Committee on Cultural Diplomacy for the State Department in 2005, and Professor Chris Merrill was one of its main contributors.

What I want to talk about today is how we – the US and the UK – should respond to the great global challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The list is long but includes: the rise of globalisation; the unequal share of wealth and access to resources across the world and the rise of new global players like India and China; mistrust between cultures; the rise of terrorism and the radicalisation of young people; climate change.

Our governments seek to address these difficult issues through the use of the full range of traditional foreign policy actions, which range from direct military interventions through sanctions and diplomacy to attempts to influence publics – which we normally describe as public diplomacy. And as we all know, these have had mixed success.

I will argue that we need a new approach which is distinct. An approach that recognises the changing global environment in which we are living but is flexible enough to be used alongside other aspects of foreign policy. One which recognises that the international context has changed and one which delivers influence through establishing understanding and trust between nations.

While I am certainly not suggesting it is a panacea, I would like to talk a little today about the approach the British Council and others have developed, which we term cultural relations. I firmly believe that cultural relations, which I would term a new public diplomacy, is an idea that's time has come.

Traditional Public Diplomacy seeks to promote the national interest of a country through informing, persuading and convincing foreign audiences of our point of view.

Cultural relations is part of a new public diplomacy. It is not uniquely an instrument of Government, but a pragmatic vehicle for systematically developing engagement, understanding and trust between peoples, communities and cultures – creating a platform of influence which, in our case, supports the UK's long term interests.

In the case of the UK, it is the British Council, which does this work. We operate in 110 countries and have nearly 8,000 staff – more than half of them locally recruited nationals. We engage with 85 million people each year around the world – with face-to-face participation by more than 16 million. We are active across the whole spectrum encompassed by the word “cultural” – including the arts, science, the environment, education, English language, sport, leadership, citizenship and the promotion of civil society. Obviously we offer different mixes for different parts of the world, and the mix changes over time.

There is another point to make about the British Council here – our independence. Although a third of our funding comes from government, we have an arm's length relationship which gives us a day-to-day operational independence on the ground. This makes a critical difference to what we can achieve, as I will explain in a moment.

I began by talking about the intense challenges our two countries face by saying that we have to recognise that the context has changed.

### **The narratives of liberal democracy no longer have the field to themselves**

Once, public diplomacy and cultural relations offered easy wins for what, during the Cold War, we called the West. Those countries we would now describe as the liberal democracies – with America and Britain among them.

Once, if we wanted to build international influence by reaching out, say, to the elites and future leaders of other nations, the ordinary narratives of our way of life seemed to give us a magically compelling advantage.

As Joseph Nye has pointed out, the Berlin Wall did not fall in 1989 to the tanks and battalions of the West but to the picks and hammers of ordinary East Berliners. And why? Because they were desperate to be part of the story they could hear being told across the concrete and beyond the barbed wire.

The narrative they were hearing told of freedom, equality, openness, tolerance and the rule of law; it was a story of universal values mediating between peoples of sometimes very different origins and beliefs, to enable them to live together in something approaching harmony: the values, in short, by which America and Britain strive to live.

When the Wall fell and the Cold War ended there was – or so it seemed – nothing that could possibly compete with this story. The world lay at its feet. History, it seemed, really *had* ended and all it would take was time before the narrative of liberal democracy completed its clean sweep of the global imagination.

But today, post 9/11 in New York, post the 7/7 bombings in London, post-Afghanistan, post-Iraq, that easy confidence seems less well-founded.

There are other narratives – powerful, persuasive and assertive – competing for the attention of today's rising generations round the globe.

In the recent years other narratives have appeared and gripped the imagination, particularly of young people. They vary from the protestors who demonstrate against world trade to those involved in the sometimes violent campaign against vivisection. In Russia, there is perhaps less interest in the liberal democracy narrative and more appetite for a strong, authoritarian approach which restores the country's position in the world.

But it is the narrative of Al Qaeda and similar groups that stands out for obvious reasons. At the risk of over simplifying, their narrative is a distorted form of Islam that justifies indiscriminate violence through a false religious identity. It seeks to place the West and Muslims in conflict by linking historic grievances with the difficult issues many Muslims face today. With the help of the internet and the mass movement of people, this narrative has quickly managed to appeal to many young people across the world.

As our two countries are discovering to our cost, this is a narrative of compelling force. Powerful enough to reach into the hearts and minds of young people in many parts of the globe and convince them that our values are a force for evil and oppression that must be rejected and resisted everywhere.

What has happened here? Have our narratives lost their verve? And as a result has our public diplomacy lost its sure-footedness?

Perhaps we rested too long on our Cold War laurels, assuming that history really had ended, and that all we needed to do was to place our wares in the showcases of the world and let them work their infallible magic all by themselves. By seeking to cut back the British Council's network, or in the case of America, absorbing the hugely respected United States Information Agency into the State Department.

Perhaps we were too slow to notice that the context in which our communications were launched had changed irrevocably with the democratisation of the media that followed the growth of new satellite TV channels, the birth of the internet and the effective abolition of the cost of entry – meaning that anyone could become a global media player? And that two-way, not one-way communication had become the only game in town?

I would argue that the context changed and we failed to keep up. These alternative narratives are sticky and have impact. As we all know, one young person who becomes radicalised and tragically ends up being a suicide bomber is enough to create many casualties.

In the light of this situation, it is critical that our approaches to public diplomacy adapt.

### **The old channels of influence are proving less effective**

I think everyone here would accept that a major problem for any democracy seeking to build international influence is that many of the old ways of doing so are becoming less effective.

I think, if we are honest, we would also accept that there is a reason why their effectiveness is diminishing; and it is because many of the old ways of building influence are essentially one-way channels.

This is obviously the case with the straightforwardly coercive elements of foreign policy – whether the gunboats of yesterday or the helicopter gunships of today.

But it is also true of many forms of diplomacy, which, gentler though they may be, still tend to begin with a particular national template and seek to impose it on others – whether they want it or not.

We hear a lot about “soft-power” these days. But even “soft-power” has a hard one-way trajectory – to make the rest of the world want what we want.

What links all these traditional forms of influence-building is that, in essence, they seek to directly persuade an audience rather than to truly connect with people – in other words they seek to capture, not engage.

In the past, they have often been very successful. But in today’s world, although they still have value, they can no longer be relied on as the sole channel.

### **The old channels are failing because one-way channels are no longer trusted**

Why is this?

One reason is that expectations have changed. In the world we are entering, the world of Web 2.0, of interactivity, of globally available instant communication, the expectation of any engagement between people is that it will be two-way: that you will be as interested in what I have got to say, as you expect me to be in what you have to say.

People are no longer prepared – If indeed they ever were – to sit passively, meekly absorbing the influences of others, politely receiving today’s message.

They don’t want a message, they want a conversation – and they want to make their contribution to that conversation, and to have the value of their contribution recognised by the other participants.

That’s what everyone here expects, isn’t it? Why should we expect that others will feel different just because they are other?

Facebook has replaced face-to-face. Of course personal contact is still vital but the media world has been transformed by the phenomena of social networking and user

generated content. Young people are growing up in a world where the connections they create through Facebook, Bebo and other sites make two-way communication the absolute norm for them.

In a different way, the web has democratised the media and enabled the full range of opinions, from the radical to the mainstream, to be presented with similar weight and profile online. Wikis, blogging and other ways of putting forward opinions are enabling debate and we have to be able to respond to this.

A public diplomacy built largely around the delivery of messages via traditional media channels will therefore be decreasingly effective.

To be fully effective, public diplomacy has to use the full range of tools of available – and that includes cultural relations.

### **The new world demands a different mindset – a willingness to let go complete control**

But to “do” cultural relations effectively, you have to accept that the instruction manual is different from that provided for the other public diplomacy tools. To use cultural relations well, your mindset has to change in some significant ways.

Most importantly, you have to be prepared to accept that you will never be able to control every aspect of the interaction.

That can be hard for governments to accept. But it is of the essence of effective cultural relations and it is why cultural relations can only operate effectively at arm's length from government.

Cultural Relations is not a soft option, it has to deliver public value for public funds. The British Council seeks to build an international platform of influence which delivers a long term benefit for the UK. Government objectives are naturally a significant

input to our strategic planning. There is frequent contact, formal and informal, between the British Council and the Foreign Office. Nevertheless, government recognises that we can be most effective if we work – and are seen to work – at arm's length from the UK's embassies and High Commissions. Our operational independence is built into our formal governance arrangements.

Let me give you an example of how that works in practice.

A few years ago we invited a group of young photographers to record aspects of Muslim life in the UK. They were free to choose any area of life they wanted. Some chose asylum centres, some makeshift mosques, others schoolchildren in the north of England. We made no attempt to guide or censor their images. This was an exercise in honesty and openness, not in propaganda.

The resulting exhibition, called Common Ground, opened in Indonesia and Malaysia, and has since toured to many parts of the Arabian Peninsula and Near and Middle East. In each country, we commissioned local artists to create work on the same theme as their British counterparts, thus giving them ownership of the project, and a feeling that it was as much about them as about Britain. It has created a real stir, prompting vigorous media debate.

Last year we showed the exhibition in Saudi Arabia. Not the easiest place to mount such a show, given that photography in public, particularly of women is still largely restricted. In fact, it was the first art exhibition we have ever put on in Saudi, and we staged it in Riyadh – the most religiously conservative Saudi city.

In the words of one press critic who saw the show in Riyadh: "Its impact on Arab viewers cannot be overestimated."

It opened many eyes. Many people in the Middle East had no idea that Britain even had a Muslim population – let alone one supporting hundreds of mosques and dozens of Muslim schools – or that Islam is the second most popular religion in the UK.

Part of the success of the exhibition was that the images were plainly authentic. The photographers had taken full advantage of the creative freedom we had offered them. The fact that some of the work painted a less than rosy picture of life in the UK today was appreciated by audiences in the Middle East. They felt that they were not being patronised; and it was the plurality of views that made them feel this. In any form of cultural exchange, it is surely the recognition that there is plurality on both sides that leads to meaningful dialogue.

The exhibition therefore helped to create a truer and more nuanced picture of life in the UK than the one projected by those whose narrative of Britain describes a place populated by little devils dancing attendance on the Great Satan.

The irony is that the greatest difficulties were not in Saudi but at home, amongst some British members of Parliament, who expressed horror that British taxpayers should be funding a portrait of the UK that did not suggest that everything was pristine and perfect.

Had the British Council not had operational independence, this might have caused us some real problems.

But in the event, we stuck to our guns and we were entirely right to do so. The exhibition would have lost its authenticity had we removed the offending images, and in doing so it would have lost its power to engage and would have been a complete waste of money.

By doing what we did – by portraying the rough as well as the smooth – we underlined that Britain is strong and confident enough to acknowledge its faults as well as its virtues, and by doing so we modelled the open behaviour that we as a nation seek from those with whom we interact.

Successful cultural relations are as much about how we behave as what we do. Behaving with integrity and openness is a great earner of trust.

Trying to control every aspect of our encounters, on the other hand, is a great creator of mistrust.

To take another example: we recently helped to bring the National Theatre of Scotland's award-winning production, *Black Watch*, to Los Angeles and New York.

The play is a powerful and unsettling piece of physical theatre based on interviews with soldiers from Scotland's renowned Black Watch regiment recently returned from fighting in Iraq.

Working with local partners, we used the performances to prompt a series of public debates on the issues raised, bringing together young leaders, people from the military, from the media, and from academic and cultural life.

*Black Watch* asks difficult questions about the war in Iraq and is anything but a piece of British government propaganda. The debates around these questions are the sort of thing that only an independent cultural relations organisation can create.

### **Attempting to control outcomes doesn't work – and may be counter-productive**

The traditional public diplomacy channels, which attempt deliver a message, are not only becoming less productive, they are in danger of becoming positively counter-productive: no longer building influence, but creating and reinforcing mistrust.

One reason for this is that people everywhere are becoming much more media-literate, and as they gain greater insight into the way modern communication works, they become much more sensitive about being manipulated, directly or indirectly.

They understand about 'spin' and about sub-text.

They recognise media interventions by foreign governments for what they are.

They can spot an incoming influence a mile off and they have their defences ready.

Up goes the shield of cynicism and off bounces your carefully-judged information campaign, lost before it even landed. And not only lost, but lying there, in tatters, to be used as another piece of evidence in a narrative of Western manipulation.

By contrast, cultural relations enables its practitioners to fly well below the usual radar of public diplomacy and establish relationships that plug into the groundswell of opinion in the street – whether Arab, Chinese, Burmese or whomsoever.

It can do this because it works not through persuasion but through connection, not through capture, but through engagement.

Because of this, we are able to open doors and keep them open even in areas of great political sensitivity.

I am incredibly proud that we continue to operate in places like Zimbabwe, Iran and Burma – our offices open to all – in Burma, drawing upon the legacy of trust that has been earned over generations, offering something that people value and want, and that will offer the UK a platform for engagement with that country in times to come.

This was the story of our engagement with South Africa in the apartheid years. In the face of considerable criticism we stayed in South Africa throughout the period of international sanctions which enabled us to work closely with groups excluded from power, particularly in the areas of education and governance.

In 1987, at the height of South Africa's state of emergency, we relocated our offices from the administrative capital, Pretoria, to Johannesburg so that we could be closer to the emerging civil society groups with which we partnered and engaged.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu has spoken of the value of the British Council in preparing South Africa for its post-liberation challenges; and recently one of South Africa's leading business voices, Lazarus Zim, President of South Africa's Chamber of Mines,

wrote that “When all other doors were closed to black South Africans, the British Council had an open door”.

All that work during the dying years of apartheid in the early 1990s developed into high level links between the new leaders of South Africa and the UK which remain strong to this day.

### **“Mutuality” is the key to our effectiveness in cultural relations**

A core concept, at the heart of the new public diplomacy, is the concept of mutuality. Sometimes cultural relations are described in terms of “winning hearts and minds”.

But I dislike this phrase. We don’t want to win either hearts or minds. We want to recognise that people have their own hearts and minds, and what we want is shared understanding, not a monolithic world view or even a polarised world, one where people have to sign up to one version of the truth against another.

I see our role as developing mutually beneficial relationships that deliver value to both sides – a strategy, that is, of engagement.

Mutuality means what it says: a return for both parties.

There is always something tangible for the other nation, and this can often be summed up in a single word – access:

- Access to world-class training to learn the global language of English
- Access to globally-recognised qualifications and through those, access to employment and trade in a globalised economy
- Access to leadership and citizenship-skills
- Access to the culture and arts of a developed liberal democracy – including access to the other great global language – sport.

In soccer, for example our Dreams and Teams programme uses sport to develop leadership skills.

We train local tutors – usually high school teachers – who in turn give Young Leader training to 14-19 year olds in their schools – who have as their graduation project setting up and running a sports festival in their local community.

Each overseas school is linked to a British sports college and together they embark on a mutually agreed project that supports their curriculum.

Last year more than 3,000 teachers in 400 schools in 45 countries were involved. 5,000 young leaders were directly engaged in projects, and these in turn involved another 150,000 young people. The cost? About \$2.5 million to us, with about the same raised from partners and sponsors. Not much for a project with such astonishing reach.

In Africa we run a very successful programme called InterAction offering leadership training and development to nineteen sub-Saharan nations.

The benefit for the participants is easy to quantify. But what about the benefit to the UK?

We don't run the InterAction programme or Dreams and Teams purely for altruistic reasons. We do it because we want to build networks and to develop influence for the UK.

And we don't attempt to hide that fact. If you go to the InterAction website, for example, there it is in black and white:

*Our objective is to build and maintain a network of opinion formers, change agents and future leaders in Africa that will increasingly see the UK's commitments to Africa in a positive light, as a country worth partnering for positive social change.*

Does it work? Well, demand is high and the feedback is terrific. We deliver the programme to existing leaders as well as potential leaders. We've run the programme for the Cabinets of Cameroon and Malawi and we are preparing to do the same for the Cabinet of Sierra Leone – at their request. Next year we will be rolling out the programme in countries in the Middle East, tailored to their cultural environments.

We know from past experience that many of those who benefit from British Council training and facilities do go on to leadership positions – sometimes the highest leadership positions in their countries.

In Africa, for example, John Kufour the president of Ghana and current chair of the African Union, has had a long and productive relationship with the UK over the course of his career, facilitated by the British Council and stretching back to when he was a student.

In South America, the president of Colombia, Alvaro Uribe was a Chevening scholar, part of the scheme we administer on behalf of the British Foreign & Commonwealth Office that has brought many thousands of talented overseas post-graduates and young professionals to study in the UK.

Now I don't pretend that every government led by British Council alumni is automatically going to factor in the interests of the UK when they make their decisions. Why should they?

What I do say is that the experience gained by these leaders gives them an instinctive understanding of where the UK is coming from in a given situation – and that makes access for our diplomats and the space for persuasion and influence greater than it would otherwise have been.

There are broader benefits too.

In Europe we have the example of what happened when the Berlin Wall came down. At the time it was widely predicted that the newly-liberated nations of Eastern Europe would look to Germany for aid and would make German their international language of choice.

But, because of timely initiatives such as the Know How Fund – the British government programme of technical assistance for the countries of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union – the result was not as predicted.

The British Council ran a wide range of initiatives linked to the Know How Fund. Some of these focussed on English language teaching programmes – including one to retrain teachers of other languages, such as Russian, to become teachers of English; another, in Poland, enabled Polish business to reach out to the West through an “English for Management” project; and a third, in Bulgaria, created a British Council-devised curriculum for the English departments of all the technical universities.

The result is clear, English is now the international language of the region and its links with the UK are strong.

### **The return on investment in cultural relations is not guaranteed**

The benefit for Britain from cultural relations is broadly speaking what we offer – access.

We offer access to skills, training, qualifications, culture and the English language. And in return we get access to young leaders and, increasingly, to wider populations too.

We get the chance to build connections, to earn trust, to make sure our narratives are heard in places where the competing narrative can sometimes play long and loud.

It's why we are exploring running English language classes at al-Azhar, the Islamic university in Cairo. It's why we do work with madrassas – Islamic religious schools – in Pakistan, Bangladesh and Indonesia. It's why we have funded the first ever Afghan film festival in the UK and brought over directors and musicians from Afghanistan to take part in it. It's why in Indonesia, the largest Islamic nation in the world, we have provided training for school leaders throughout the educational network of the biggest Islamic organisation in the country – so far reaching 200,000 people in 500 schools.

But there are no guarantees here.

Cultural relations do not offer certain returns, and it certainly does not offer quick returns. It is, by definition a slow-burn process that needs the timeframe of a generation – and sometimes more – to do its work.

But in a world of growing mistrust and misunderstanding, is there another option available that has a chance of working?

Some of you will know that Britain is going through a period of diplomatic tension with Sudan at the moment. At the centre of the latest manifestation is a British teacher who went out to Sudan to work with young children at a school in Khartoum. She was using a teddy bear as part of class project and she gave the bear the name Muhammad – the name of a boy in her class.

There were complaints that this was insulting to the Prophet. The teacher was arrested, charged with insulting religion, and jailed for fifteen days.

Pressure from outside Sudan led to her being released early. But it's a classic example of cultural misunderstanding – which, it seems clear, was exploited by radical groups for their own ends. The misunderstanding, in other words, created a space in which mischief could be made.

How much better if sufficient mutual understanding had existed so that the Sudanese authorities could have accepted that this was, at worst, a simple error of judgement and not a calculated attack on Islam.

### **The UK, like the US, prides itself on its openness**

Britain, like the USA, prides itself on being an open society, open to new investment, to new trade, to new people, to new cultures, to new ideas.

This openness has made the UK, like the USA, a strong and resilient nation, drawing strength from its diversity. Through the British Council, the UK is in the business of exporting that openness.

### **The UK, confident of its own values, is open to influence from others,**

The clear implication is that we are open to influence from others.

This is not about blurring our identity or disguising our agenda. Our agenda is to build influence for Britain. We don't attempt to hide that.

But we begin the process with the understanding that other nations want to influence us too, and that we should not recoil in horror at that, but accept it for what it is – a simple expression of difference, which, when made in a context of mutual respect, simply does not imply a threat.

It is a matter of respecting the values others bring to the table, while being clear and confident about your own contribution. You cannot engage in cultural relations if you are not prepared to be clear about the beliefs that inform your own society.

When we staged Common Ground, the photographic exhibition I mentioned earlier, in Riyadh, we commissioned a respected Saudi photographer to contribute her own studio portraits of Saudi women to the show.

Manal Al-Dowayan is no ordinary portrait photographer. Her exceptionally powerful black and white photographs explore some of the most sensitive areas of what it means to be a woman in Saudi Arabia today.

If you Google “British Council” and “Common Ground” you’ll find one of her images on our website. It consists simply of a striking head-and-shoulders shot of a veiled Saudi woman who looks directly out at the viewer.

In her hand (which bears an intricately henna’d traditional decorative design) she is holding a what at first sight appears to be some kind of geometrical device – a circle with spokes – that partly obscures her face.

It takes a moment to realise that it is the steering wheel of a car. In a nation where women are forbidden to drive this is a courageous public statement for any Saudi woman to make and we were proud to help Manal Al-Dowayan make it.

It provoked debate. It provoked disagreement. But honest engagement will sometimes mean honest disagreement, as well as honest agreement.

And honesty of itself earns trust, and even at times of strong disagreement, trust keeps doors – and minds – open. It engenders a view that Britain is a country worth doing business with – and that’s to the UK’s long-term advantage.

### **Openness to the views – including critical views – of others brings rewards**

Along with honesty goes openness – including openness to criticism from others.

A couple of years ago the British Council commissioned a British Palestinian academic to report on what Arabs in the Middle East thought about Britain and the British Council.

Some of what he had to say in his report, called *Recreating Trust in the Middle East*, made uncomfortable reading for us. But we accepted that these were honestly made points and we chewed them over and as a result made some significant changes to the way in which we work.

Rather like a report from your own Council for Foreign Relations published at about the same time, it prescribes listening and humility as the essential tools of our trade. Its author, Sultan Barakat, writes that:

*We need a clear rationale for our work that incorporates national objectives as set out by government, but explains the benefits that we can deliver in working at a distance from the official, policy-driven approach. Our own, distinct, approach needs to stress our much longer time-frame and our focus on long-term relationship building...: 'If the British Council simply parrots what the Embassy says about Britain we are not interested. But there's a Britain we'd like it to show us – the Britain of the million marchers against the war in February 2003'.*

Our willingness to show that Britain is a pluralistic society with political tensions rather than a single monolithic voice and that this is the nature of democracy – is a kind of openness that does bear fruit. I'm going to read you an extract from a letter that we received about the same time from the Minister of Islamic Affairs in a Middle Eastern country.

*The British Council is one of the few institutions that understood the role of the Ministry of Islamic Affairs and dealt with staff with great respect, encouraged their participation, and greatly valued their ideas. Unlike others, they listened... I have felt the effect of working with the British Council... some of us had hostile attitudes towards foreigners based on doubting and distrusting their objectives, but after working with the British Council this attitude changed, and they became more receptive to foreigners.*

That's what I mean by Cultural Relations.

## **Challenges ahead for the British Council**

As I have already said, the world we now inhabit poses very serious challenges, both to America and the UK. The changing context demands a new approach to public diplomacy. At the British Council we have ambitious plans to raise our game worldwide – not through bigger budgets from the taxpayer but through different ways of working, in particular by delivering programmes with partners as well as on our own.

This is not the moment to lay out our plans in detail, but let me just give you some examples of the challenges we are setting ourselves.

Here in America, for example, we're shifting our strategic priorities from encouraging US students to study in the UK, to building new connections and long term relationships between the next generation of leaders in North America, the UK and the rest of Europe. We'll also continue to be active in arts work, as well as science – focusing particularly on climate change.

We are developing a new programme for the US called Transatlantic Network 2020. We want to build greater understanding between young people on both sides on the Atlantic: in Europe, where we have seen a rise in anti-American sentiment; and here in the US, where it's clear that many young Americans see Europe as less relevant to their futures. This is a dangerous trend for both us and the US.

Looking more broadly at our strategy for the next five years we will launch additional programmes in the emerging economies – India and China, Brazil and South Africa – and step up our efforts in parts of the world where there are high levels of mistrust and misunderstanding. We are making changes in how we work including in our presence on the ground so we can move a third of our grant funding out of Europe to invest it in new programmes for the Middle East and North Africa and in Central and South Asia.

The new public diplomacy requires us to work at a far more ambitious scale than before. While in the past we focussed on the relationships with elites, we now need reach out to much wider populations. Working with schools in the UK and overseas is a powerful way of doing this.

It brings long-term educational benefits for both our overseas partners as well as building valuable international awareness among Britain's young people. Within three years the British Council will link 10,000 schools in the UK with a similar number of overseas – a major step towards our ultimate aim of linking every one of Britain's schools – there are something like 27,000 of them – with a partner school elsewhere in the world.

On climate security, the British Council will work with our partners to build coalitions for change, working particularly in high-emissions countries. To influence a younger generation internationally we will develop curriculum content on climate change for international use in education and English language teaching.

On English language teaching itself: we know there are something like two billion people worldwide learning English at the moment. The British Council's vision is that the UK will provide all two billion of them of them – learners and their teachers – with access to the skills, ideas and materials they need.

These are transformational projects.

And cultural relations are about transformation – about transforming suspicion and isolationism into mutually beneficial international relationships.

### **Mutuality holds the key to solving the great international issues of the day**

This may all sound like wishful thinking on a global scale, when we know that the world is a dangerous place and, in some respects becoming more dangerous.

Take some of the great insecurities haunting global progress: global terrorism; religious extremism; and the threat to stability arising from morally corrosive global inequalities of wealth. These are not issues that a single nation can hope to solve only in relation to itself. They can only be approached through some concept of mutuality. And that means cultural relations.

Any nation's interactions with its neighbours exist on a spectrum that goes from wielding power at one end to influence at the other.

At the power-end there is the military, foreign policy and the apparatus of official diplomacy. Somewhere in the middle of the spectrum lies traditional public diplomacy – broadcasting, advocacy and so on. A new approach to public diplomacy, using cultural relations, lies right at the long term influence end of the spectrum: a process built on openness, mutuality, independence, and the building of networks and relationships that stand the test of time.

I would argue that a nation needs all these elements in order to successfully manage its relations with the rest of world.

John F Kennedy famously said that: "Diplomacy and defence are not substitutes for one another. Either alone will fail." I would argue that a diplomacy that ignores cultural relations is risking failure by missing a critical piece of the diplomatic toolkit.

That's not, by the way, a wholly original metaphor. I lifted it from a report published by the State Department a couple of years ago – a report from the Advisory Committee on Cultural Diplomacy, chaired by Patricia de Stacy Harrison. As many of you here will know, the report was co-authored by Chris Merrill, who spoke earlier,

As I did when I open this talk I'd like again, if I may, to quote from the report. It's quite a lengthy quote, but an important one – and it reveals where I got that toolkit image from:

*Cultural diplomacy reveals the soul of a nation, which may explain its complicated history in American political life: when our nation is at war, every tool in the diplomatic kit bag is employed, including the promotion of cultural activities. But when peace returns, culture gets short shrift, because of our traditional lack of public support for the arts. Now that we are at war again, interest in cultural diplomacy is on the rise. Perhaps this time we can create enduring structures within which to practice effective cultural diplomacy and articulate a sustaining vision of the role that culture can play in enhancing the security of this country.*

This is an important debate and I look forward to hearing the views of everyone here in the question and answer session which follows shortly.

### **Cultural relations is not an easy policy option**

Of course, cultural relations is not an easy option for the governments that espouse it.

A policy that posits a return in a generation's time can be difficult to reconcile with the demands of the normal political cycle.

So, if it is to flourish, it needs confident sponsors.

It needs governments willing to countenance a philosophy of offering not imposing, of being prepared to accept influence as well as wield it, of being prepared to ease control, take risks and play it long.

### **But it is a policy whose time has come**

In conclusion, let me say this:

It all comes down to confidence.

In a world where we need to strike up a dialogue with wider publics, not just elites, are we confident that we know how to use the new channels that allow engagement not just one way communication?

Are we confident that our ideas, our values, our narratives, are strong enough to stand on their own two feet?

If we are, then why should we need to worry about letting them loose in those channels where the price of getting a fair hearing for those ideas may be that we are unable to control every aspect of the encounter?

In return, cultural relations can offer ways to prise open even the most stubbornly-closed doors, ways to begin and sustain dialogue, ways to build and extend networks of influence for mutual benefit.

It offers a powerful tool to engage with the great global issues; including radicalisation of young people, climate change, mistrust between cultures, and lack of access to educational opportunities.

Its potential is greatly magnified by the emergence of a world where technology is abolishing communications boundaries and making dialogue much more powerful than top-down messaging.

In a new global environment we need a new approach to public diplomacy and I believe cultural relations must be a central part of it.

Fostering honest international dialogue through engagement is the best insurance policy for a more stable world, and the best way of making sure our narratives are heard clearly around the world. I am proud to lead the British Council, which has cultural relations as its bedrock, in its work of building influence for the UK.

Thank you.

