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'MY JOB'

A lecture delivered by Lord Carrington
at the Royal Institute of International Affairs
Chatham House, on 25 March 1982
at part of a special series of
four lectures celebrating the
200th Anniversary of the establishment
of the office of Foreign Secretary.

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'MY JOB'

1. I follow two distinguished speakers. Professor Howard applied his great historical insight to British foreign policy as it was; and Mr Watt his gift for prophecy and prescription to British foreign policy as it may become. The temptation is clear but the title of my talk this evening is 'My Job'; and, if you will allow me, I am going to take it literally and discuss not policy, but the practical questions, constraints and imperatives which any Foreign Secretary must contend with.

2. Before that, let me count my blessings. I am doing exactly what I want to do. I am particularly grateful to Lord Home, whose presence in the Chair this evening is a great honour for me, for having pushed me - intentionally or not - in this direction. I have watched and learned a great deal from him, and it was he, when he had half my present job, who sent me as High Commissioner to Australia. It is possible, I suppose, that this was not entirely designed to help me. But help me it did. That period in Australia gave me at first hand an insight into the problems of a Head of Mission and the workings of the Diplomatic Service. It also gave me a perspective about Britain and its position in the world which is much more difficult to achieve unless one lives for a period of time outside this country. Subsequently, when he was Prime Minister, Lord Home made me number two to Rab Butler in the Foreign Office. I know of no-one who made a more intelligent and civilised contribution to the political life in Britain and no-one who was better company than Rab.

3. I was looking the other day at the photographs of my predecessors hung on the walls of the Private Office. I have known fifteen of them. At first blush, and indeed at second blush, they seem a disparate lot. Bevin and Eden, Halifax and Morrison. What on earth have they and the others got in common? Quite a few of them do not seem to have been much interested in foreign affairs until they were made Foreign Secretary. After all, it is pot luck whether you become Foreign Secretary or not. The appointment may depend more on the political balance in the

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party or the clash of personalities in the Cabinet than on anything else. But, rum lot though they all may have been, I suspect that when they arrived in the Foreign Office and sat down and thought about what was to be done, they all approached it from much the same stand-point.

4. It is a truism, attributed to Palmerston, that a Foreign Minister's job is to further his nation's interests. It was the Duke of Wellington who proclaimed that 'interest never lies'. The proposition is one which has largely survived the growth of political ideologies which claim to replace national interest with an internationalist conception of the common good. I have never heard, and never expect to hear, a communist leader define the interests of the working people of the world in a way which does not precisely coincide with the immediate interests of his Government.

5. But to say that the job of Foreign Secretary is to further British interests merely begs the question of what those interests are. Here we come much closer to the essence of the task. The real role of a Foreign Secretary is to define this country's overseas interests, to choose between those that may conflict; to decide on the methods needed to further the major interests; and then to see that those decisions are carried out.

6. In the 19th century, my predecessors saw the basic British interest as to preserve the balance of power in a world where, as Palmerston put it, Britain had no eternal allies or perpetual enemies. Today, the aftermath of two world wars has left us with something much closer to permanent friends and with all too durable adversaries.

7. With hindsight, the balance of power emerges as a means rather than an end. The fundamental objectives of British foreign policy require a more general definition. My guess is that all my predecessors would have been happy to settle for something like peace, prosperity and human progress. But the impression of continuity is a little misleading: we are no longer quite so ready as our Victorian predecessors to accept that the objective of peace can be met simply by avoiding expensive foreign wars for Britain; or those of prosperity and human progress by ensuring the spread all over the world of parliamentary democracy on the Westminster model and of railway lines built by British engineers with British steel.

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8. In short, our interpretation of our objectives has changed gradually over the years; and the means at our disposal to bring them about have changed much more profoundly.

9. The British Foreign Service today employs about 5,000 people at home and abroad, scattered among some 200 posts in 126 countries. There have been many attempts - some more flattering than others - to describe what they do. The list of tasks in the 1963 Plowden Report is prosaic, but usefully conveys the range: giving advice on foreign policy; negotiating; cultivating friendly relations; promoting trade; explaining and seeking support for British policies; protecting British persons and interests; and administering aid and technical assistance. It is my job to give this mass of individual actions an overall direction and coherence - to see that they amount to a consistent foreign policy, and that it is the policy that the British Government wants. When a new Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary arrives or when a new Government takes over it may take a little time for both sides to adjust to what may be a different direction or a different bias, but I do not believe that any Foreign Secretary has found it difficult to steer the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in the direction he wanted. However diverse we all may have been, we have not usually been push-overs. And taking the necessary decisions is perhaps not quite as difficult as it might be. Some Departments of State are so huge, and their resources are committed so far in advance, that implementing a change of policy is as slow and cumbersome a task as altering the course of a supertanker. Foreign policy decisions have in general a much shorter lead time, and the Office will generally, if not always, answer to much lighter touches of the tiller.

10. My decisions, if they are to be sensible ones, need to be based on the right information and on expert advice. With this I am copiously supplied: indeed as I read the press and look through my post I often suspect that, with the possible exceptions of the Prime Minister and the Chairman of the England Cricket Selectors, I am the most advised man in the country.

11. There arrives each day a constant stream of telegrams from posts abroad. And there is a not inconsiderable flow also in the other direction. As you know, each of these telegrams,

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however mundane its subject, is addressed to me over the Ambassador's signature, or vice versa - a convention which can produce curious results if its logic is pursued to extremes. One Ambassador infuriated his staff with his excessive punctiliousness in this respect. They got their revenge when circumstances one day allowed them to send a telegram which read 'I regret to report that I have fallen down the lift shaft and am still unconscious'.

12. I read a very considerable number of these telegrams. I remember Lord Home reading them in Cabinet. But many more of them are absorbed into the written advice which reaches me in submissions from Departments. I ask for these to be brief and lucid, and they usually are - though my idea of brevity and lucidity does not always seem to coincide with that of the writers of the tidal wave of paper which threatens daily to engulf me.

13. Not everything can be done, or best done, on paper. Meetings - many of them with officials - give me a feel for an issue, for the way it is being handled and for the alternatives which may be worth pursuing. There is, in William Wallace's words, a continuing dialogue - I hope less one-sided than that so vividly portrayed in the 'Yes, Minister' series. If on occasion we disagree it is not surprising, for the issues are immensely difficult and are bound to give rise to different opinions. Policy decisions will not be well taken if these differences are ignored or suppressed.

14. Information and comment from the press, radio and television naturally contribute to the advice given me by officials. But the direct impact is the more important to me, and I read, listen and watch a lot. This gives me not only an alternative view of what is happening abroad, but - almost as important - an idea of how people in this country will see the events and the government's reactions to them.

15. Consultation, both at home and abroad, is also a vital element in decision-taking. At home, as Mr Watt has described, more and more issues which used to be considered domestic have acquired important international implications. More and more

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events abroad - the events following the Yom Kippur war of 1973 are an extreme example - have a profound effect on our domestic economy. This means that issues which can be classified as pure foreign policy, of no immediate interest to any other government department, are now the exception rather than the rule. On most important matters of policy, our decisions need to reflect the balance between international and domestic considerations. I do not think that there ever was a golden age when Foreign Secretaries were left to deal with abroad as they thought best - generations of Prime Ministers have seen to that. But there has been a qualitative and I would guess permanent change in the extent to which a Foreign Minister needs to talk to, and listen to, his colleagues in other government departments in order to do his job. Our membership of the European Community is not the only reason for this - I do not for a moment imagine that Mr Haig or Mr Gromyko lives a life free of the burdens of inter-departmental consultations - but it has contributed its share.

16. Consultation with colleagues abroad is equally important. This is self-evident in cases where, as in the European Community, the decisions to be taken are joint ones. But the point goes wider than that: even in areas where no-one questions the right of the British government to take decisions on its own, these decisions may have little of their desired effect if they are not supported by partners and allies, or if they provoke adverse reactions from other countries whose interests have been affected - as, in one way or another, they almost always will be.

17. The increasing reality of interdependence has been partly the result but mainly the cause of the significant growth of multilateral diplomacy since the last war. A great deal of international discussions and decision-making is now concentrated in permanent specialised fora of one kind or another. Cumbersome, and time consuming as it can be, multilateral diplomacy is here to stay. It has a particularly important role to play in relation to smaller states, who can otherwise feel that they are dragged along helpless in the wake of decisions taken by their larger and more powerful neighbours; but the need for consultatio:

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is there whatever the size of the country, and it can often best be achieved at or in the margins of an international meeting.

18. Increasingly, it is in this environment that decisions important to Britain are taken. It is rare that we can influence them on our own, and almost always true that by acting with our partners and allies we can greatly enhance our ability to get what we want. So I find myself frequently involved in co-ordination meetings with our friends before attending a meeting in a wider forum; and, when I get there, I very often find myself representing not just specifically British interests but those of some much larger group. Most often, this will be the Community or the Atlantic Alliance; but it can also be the Commonwealth or perhaps even the non-communist world.

19. It is of course the Community which takes up, if not the bulk, a very great proportion of my time. And this is as it should be, for I believe that our association with our European partners and the Western Alliance are the two important pillars of our present foreign policy. Without the latter, our security is in doubt. Without the former, we shall have little say in the economic and political development of the continent in which we live. We shall have correspondingly less influence in world affairs, and the consequences for our trading patterns and performance will be catastrophic.

20. The importance which the Government and I attach to Community policy, which is well understood in the Foreign Office, has a major impact on my job. I see my fellow Foreign Ministers very often - it seems at times more often than I see my own colleagues - and I know them much better than I otherwise would. While I have no need to remind you that we do not always find it easy to agree, our working methods are often closer to those of a national cabinet than to the classic model of international relations. I am enough of an optimist to regard this as a good sign.

21. An enormous amount of careful background work, briefing and diplomatic activity may have to go into every item on the agenda

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of a Foreign Affairs Council. The same is true of the frequent bilateral meetings which I, the Prime Minister or my other colleagues have with our European opposite numbers, where Community affairs will always be high on the agenda. This constant and enforced involvement in almost every aspect of the economic life of the member countries of the Community has probably done more than anything else to increase and to revolutionise the demands made on a modern Foreign Secretary. Professor Howard quoted Salisbury as saying 'we are part of the community of Europe and we must do our duty as such'. My distinguished predecessor can scarcely have dreamed that this duty would embroil the heirs of Castlereagh and Canning in the complexities of, for example, the Multi Fibre Agreement.

22. And then Foreign Secretaries attend - and should attend - the United Nations General Assembly, the twice-yearly Ministerial meetings of NATO, and the biennial meetings of Commonwealth Heads of Government. Each of these has its own flavour, and each serves to give life to an organisation which is important to the interests of Britain and of the free world - in the case of NATO, essential to our national survival. In addition they all provide opportunities for informal bilateral meetings with Ministerial colleagues, whether to do business or simply to keep in touch in the intervals between more formal encounters.

23. Both the consultation required for good decisions to be made and the communication needed to ensure their effective implementation involve contact with people. One naturally thinks of this aspect of a Foreign Secretary's life mainly in terms of contact with foreigners, and indeed anyone who does not enjoy dealing with foreign people and foreign countries is not likely to enjoy being Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary. It is very much part of the job to be able to share Herbert Morrison's joke that 'foreign policy would be OK except for the bloody foreigners'. But anyone who really believed that would have a pretty awful time at the Foreign Office.

24. Nevertheless contact with people here at home is just as important. I am glad to say that accountability to Parliament

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remains one of the basic facts of my job and I hope that the same will be true 200 years from now. The mechanics may change - witness the successful innovation of the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs, whose questioning is made the more pointed by the advice it gets from the preceding speaker in this series. But the fundamental requirements of democracy are constant. I need to explain to Parliament and to the British public what is being done in their name, and why, if they are to go on giving the support without which a foreign policy would be neither democratic nor ulitmately credible. And I need to listen to their views and concerns and take account of them.

25. I therefore spend a great deal of time talking to the press, making speeches, and meeting Members of Parliament, industrialists, trade unionists, churchmen and representatives of numerous interest groups. Of course there are areas of diplomatic activity which are and must remain secret. But in general the Foreign Secretary has everything to gain from the debate on foreign policy in the country at large being as well informed as possible. I naturally believe that the closer people come to having the same evidence before them as I have, the more likely they are to reach the same conclusions. I want people in this country not just to understand our foreign policy but to identify with it and to take a pride in it.

26. Travel has become an essential part of the job. 19th century Foreign Secretaries hardly travelled at all. Last year I spent a total of over three months abroad, much of it in short visits to attend multilateral meetings.

27. People sometimes seem to think that the telephone and the telegram have made Ministerial travel into a largely ritual exercise in high-class tourism - a myth fed by the fact that I look less uninteresting to a television team standing on the Great Wall or wearing a host country's national dress than I do disappearing into the local Ministries of Foreign Affairs or External Trade. But it is there, in the Committee rooms and corridors of international organisations, and at working lunches or dinners, that I spend most of my time when abroad. Not quite the holiday that some of my colleagues seem to imagine.

28. Good relations between countries have a personal flavour and are very vulnerable to neglect, of which the absence of personal

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contact at ministerial level is one of the first symptoms. It is surprising how quickly misunderstandings can spring up, even in capitals a few hundreds of miles from London, and how deeply they can take root. Personal relationships, built up steadily over a period of years, are both the best preventive and the surest antidote. Many of my foreign colleagues find themselves passing through London, for one reason or another, quite often; they rightly expect me to return the compliment by visiting them on their home ground; and a prolonged failure to do so can be deeply resented.

29. Often the first people to feel the consequences of change for the better or the worse in our relations with foreign countries are British exporters. I like to take groups of senior British businessmen with me on my longer overseas journeys. I benefit from their advice; and I think they benefit both from the opportunity to enter doors which might otherwise be harder of access, and from the favourable atmosphere which a successful visit can generate. Their presence is a salutary reminder to me of the importance of trade to Britain, and of the practical advantages to be gained from good relations between countries.

30. My Ministerial colleagues in the Office play their part in the travel programme; just as they do in calling on or receiving the many foreign visitors who come to Britain each year on official or informal visits, and in maintaining contact with those important resident visitors - the Ambassadors and High Commissioners accredited in London. I hope we do them rather better than Lord Harrowby, who was advised in 1804 to meet their enquiries with 'neutral unmeaning civilities'.

31. Having mentioned my Ministerial colleagues in the Office, I should add that it would be quite impossible for a Foreign Secretary nowadays to do his job without the effective support which they give me. It is not only that the same Minister cannot answer questions in both Houses of Parliament. The volume and the political importance of the work is such that

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one Minister could not possibly do it all himself, and my present team of five is certainly not too big. It must be admitted however that the most important people in the life of a Foreign Secretary are his Private Secretaries on whom he relies for so much of what he does. I have over these last three years been particularly fortunate in the quality of those in the Private Office who have been working with me.

32. This brings me on more generally to the question of resources. I have inherited from my predecessors a sophisticated machine that has evolved over the years to match Britain's changing needs against the men, technology and money available to meet them. The

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process of evolution has not stopped, and I need constantly to consider whether the British overseas effort - and here I include the independent British Council and BBC External Services with the Foreign Service - is distributed to the best effect.

33. Our resources are mainly people - and very competent people at that. There is no substitute for having the right or woman, speaking the right languages and in the right spot. But such people are not in unlimited supply and priorities have to be kept under constant review. The same is true of the priorities attached to different aspects of the job. Export promotion work, on which a third of the Diplomatic Service are engaged, has grown over the years and much of foreign affairs has an economic or trade bias; as more British tourists go abroad so we have to strengthen our consular and passport services; and immigration work is another special claim on resources. Our task is becoming more diverse, complex and often, thanks to better communications, more urgent. With fewer resources, we have had to improve our productivity, and we have done so to good effect.

34. The fact that the Foreign Secretary is also Minister of Overseas Development adds a major new dimension to the running of the Department. The ODA, with the aid budget running at a billion pounds a year, is a major spending department in a way which the Foreign Office has never been. There are qualitative as well as quantitative differences between the two. The much smaller budget of the traditional Foreign Office goes largely on staff and related costs, which require careful but not on the whole the same sort of management as does the ODA, which is funding major projects which may run into tens of millions of pounds. If we are to get the best value for our aid money, they need to be extremely well chosen and planned; and this, given the political pressures to do as much as possible in as many different countries as possible, makes for the most difficult choices before increasingly scarce resources are allocated. The ODA, in short, is very much a management job.

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35. All this makes for a busy life, but that is not new. At the beginning of the century, Grey moaned: ''For a Cabinet Minister who is head of a big department of State there is no real holiday, the work follows him like his shadow, presses upon him like a perennial stream''. I sympathise with him. The same despatch boxes that ate into his sleep follow me wherever I go. Even the most enthusiastic Foreign Secretary has on occasion been known to tire of them. There is a story that Ernie Bevin was once confronted with a pile of red boxes one Friday evening with a note from his Private Secretary reading: 'The Secretary of State may wish to look at these over the weekend'. He scrawled underneath: 'a kindly thought, but erroneous'.

36. Such features as despatch boxes and my great mausoleum of an office, little changed even in its decorations since Disraeli is recorded as giving an improbably large party in it over a century ago, lend a reassuring sense of continuity. But the job has changed a great deal since Lord Salisbury described it as 'floating down stream fending off obstacles with a boathook' - assuming thereby that the stream was flowing in the right direction and that nothing more than a boathook would be needed to save us from shipwreck.

37. But the changes, and their implications, have to be properly assessed. You sometimes hear people suggest that a Foreign Secretary's job or the FCO itself has become less important as Britain's relative power has diminished. From the point of view of a superior being watching world history through a telescope from another planet, this may perhaps be true, but from the point of view of British interests it is certainly not. For a powerful country, diplomacy can at times seem almost a luxury. She can act without consulting, and compel where she cannot persuade. Britain's power to impose her will beyond her own shores has diminished to the point where it can rarely if ever be a substitute for diplomacy.

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But our worldwide involvement remains. Britain exports about 30% of her Gross Domestic Product; it has enormous investments abroad, of which about 2/3 are outside Europe; and it has been estimated that over 3 million Britains may live abroad. It follows that every day foreign governments are taking decisions that intimately affect the jobs and the lives of ordinary British people.

38. And, if our direct responsibility for the maintenance of peace and the production of democratic governments around the world is not what it was, our interest in these objectives has if anything increased. No-one would be better pleased than we if the principles of the Charter and of the Helsinki Final Act were faithfully implemented by every country all of the time. As it is, we must accept that there will be lapses and do our best to contain them before their harmful effects begin to spread - or are encouraged to do so by those who have a very different idea of a satisfactory world order. We have, in short, to avoid the dangerous fallacies of believing either that any instability anywhere in the world is a threat to our interests, or that there are little countries far away to which we need never pay attention.

39. Picking the right path between the two remains the responsibility of the Foreign Secretary, and it is certainly no less important now. I cannot understand those who say that because we are not a super power, Foreign Policy and the FCO are no longer important. They are more important if we are to survive and prosper in a dangerous world. Nor can I bring myself to accept the rather curious criticism that the Foreign Office does things too well and should learn to do things less well with less good people.

40. If I have inherited from my predecessors more responsibilities than power to discharge them, I have also inherited some tangible assets. Perhaps most important of all is the huge fund of good will for Britain, for her culture, her democratic traditions, her sense of justice and her common sense, which exists abroad - and

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by no means only where you would most expect to find it. To dissipate this goodwill through neglect or misjudgement would be a form of madness, for the incipient signs of which a Foreign Secretary must always be on the alert. He is, in a sense, the trustee of this priceless national asset.

41. The inheritance includes also the knowledge of and affection for foreign countries throughout the world of the many Britons who have long connections with them. A highly professional and skilful Diplomatic Service which is the envy of our friends and allies. And thank God that in our system we do not change the senior people in the Foreign Office after a change of Government and Party. We are immeasurably lucky that when a new Government comes in there are those in the Office who have been working on problems over a number of years, who understand the background and who can give advice - to be accepted or rejected of course - on the basis of knowledge and experience. However good a new man may be, it must inevitably take time for him to catch up with the backlog of telegrams, secret or confidential information and day to day developments. In the meantime, the problem goes on and policy-making is that much more difficult.

42. In short, we have far more influence and opportunity to exercise influence than the bare statistics of military and economic strength would suggest. It would be as foolish to neglect these opportunities, and to abandon to others the task of shaping the world in which our future lies, as it would be to pretend to a super-power status which we do not have and to face the inevitable penalties of trying to do too much. The job of British Foreign Secretary is as exhilarating as ever. It remains one which can be done well or badly. The difference still shows, and it still matters. It is the job I have always wanted and, having got it, I do not feel that I need envy my predecessors anything that I lack. I only hope they enjoyed it all as much as I do.

Rt Hon. Lord Carrington. "My Job". RIIA/8/4270. Chatham House, London. March 25, 1982. *Chatham House Online Archive* 2018. ©The Royal Institute of International Affairs © Cengage Learning. 11 Jul 2018. SSWQHK436794884. http://go.galegroup.com/choa/i.do?&id=GALE%7CSSWQHK436794884&v=2.1&u=chatcomp&it=r&p=CHOA&sw=w&viewtype=Manuscript