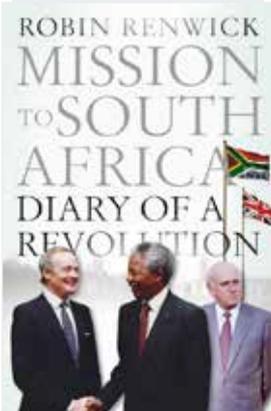


BOOK REVIEW

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Mission to South Africa by Robin Renwick

South Africa and indeed Britain have been fortunate in the quality and general performance of those who have served the Foreign and Commonwealth Office as High Commissioners or Ambassadors to the Pretoria government in the post war period. Among those who excelled in what was, after all, a difficult but important posting were, inter-alia, Sir Ewan Fergusson, Sir Patrick Moberly (with whom I worked closely at Chatham House in his role as Chairman of the Chatham House Study Group on Southern Africa), the late Sir Tony Reeve and Lord Renwick. The book under review gives a fascinating and detailed account of the latter's role in helping to promote the transition from Apartheid to democracy.

Before examining his analysis of that extraordinary phase in South Africa's history, it might be helpful to set his particular conduct of diplomacy in the context of the changes that have occurred in theory and practice since the agitation for a 'new diplomacy' requiring 'open covenants openly arrived at' so famously argued by President Woodrow Wilson of the United States in the closing years of World War I. During that conflict, the 'secret diplomacy' of the pre-1914 era had been bitterly criticised by opponents of the war as a prime cause of that conflict, while diplomacy in general came under attack in the inter-war period by those in the United States, for example, who disparagingly referred to its exponents as 'cookie pushers in striped pants'.

More sophisticated critics doubted the role of orthodox diplomacy and ambassadors in particular in a globalising world with new alternative sources of commentary on world affairs via 'real time' reporting. The increase in summit diplomacy and face to face engagement by presidents and prime ministers was also cited as making the orthodox diplomat increasingly redundant. Finally, in this truncated account of diplomacy's vicissitudes one might point to the much-derided 'quiet diplomacy' of Thabo Mbeki in his handling of the Zimbabwean crisis, and the WikiLeaks revelation of confidential discussions between governments. All these developments appear to undermine the legitimacy of diplomacy as a force for good in world politics. To sum up then, in the words of Sir Simon Jenkins, a trenchant critic of diplomacy: 'today's true diplomats are comers and goers, tourists, foreign correspondents, exchange students, visiting artists and celebrities....culture and lifestyle are the diplomacy of the 21st century. Old fashioned ambassadorship was long ago demoted by the telephone, the jet and the email...'¹.

And yet diplomacy has survived to good effect. According to Hedley Bull, diplomacy is 'the conduct of relations between states and other entities with standing in world

politics by official agents and by peaceful means². Underpinning this view of diplomatic practice are the twin notions of ‘intelligence and tact’³, both of which are central to the conduct of diplomacy at its best in the search for that ‘overlapping interest’ via negotiation between protagonists and without which satisfactory outcomes are impossible.⁴

Moreover, we must never forget the role that negotiation (not necessarily between professional diplomats) plays in making life possible and tolerable both within and between states. For example, the many agreements dealing with air traffic control across the globe and the work of functional organisations – such as the Universal Postal Union and the World Health Organisation – all continue to promote a degree of trust and efficient co-ordination both by states and individuals in their dealings with one another. This emphasis on rule-making and its general observance by virtue

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both of self interest and ethical concern entitles us to think of diplomacy as an institution helping – with others, such as international law – to bind the states of international society closer together and without which life would be in Hobbes’ words, ‘nasty, brutish and short’.

So much for diplomacy’s traditional role in regulating state interaction – whether the ‘high politics’ of conflict prevention and resolution or the ‘low politics’ of day to day refinement of the nuts and bolts of functional co-operation in a host of regional and global organisations. Renwick’s volume does much to restore one’s faith in traditional diplomacy confounding

critics who downgrade the role of ambassadors and see no virtue in old fashioned secret diplomacy the conduct of which, at its best, demands that the diplomat’s negotiating skill is underpinned by certain key values – restraint, patience, courtesy, empathy and good faith. But, above all, the crucial necessity of ‘tact and intelligence’ which Renwick in his stay in South Africa demonstrated with skill, firm conviction and enormous patience with the conflicting messages he received from both the agents of civil society and the major actors in South African politics.

Of course, Renwick had the advantage that he knew South Africa well. Appointed head of the Rhodesia Department in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in November 1978, he had played a vital role in the negotiations leading to the Lancaster House Agreement in December 1979 and to Zimbabwe’s independence in April 1980.

Renwick’s arrival as British Ambassador to South Africa in 1987 provided an opportunity to play a key role in assisting all the protagonists in the local political drama following Nelson Mandela’s release from prison on 11 February 1990. What Renwick did with such skill and determination during his tenure was, in effect, to engage in a subtle combination of time consuming ‘secret and quiet diplomacy’ demonstrating that both features of the enterprise are essential in promoting the work of conflict-resolution in a divided society. To this end he spent much of his time meeting the ‘main actors in this drama, P W Botha, F W de Klerk, Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu as well as many other less well known figures who had also played important parts in getting rid of a fundamentally abhorrent system sooner and with less bloodshed than most outsiders had dared to hope’⁵. As he himself explains his role: ‘in this deeply divided society it was possible to try to act as a

genuinely honest broker and to retain the confidence of the main participants ...the most that any embassy could do was to try to help act as a facilitator and then let South Africa get on with a process in which too much foreign involvement was positively undesirable⁶.

True, other diplomatic missions, notably those representing the United States and the European Union played a positive role. But what emerges from this particular account is that 'for a time the South African government, trying to change but still hard put to bring itself to do so, did feel that it needed one Western country it felt it could appeal to'⁷. After all, Anglo-South African relations have a long complex history; indeed one might argue that the two countries had for many decades enjoyed a 'special relationship' compounded of both conflict and co-operation. There was the added advantage that Renwick enjoyed the confidence of all the key players – Mandela, de Klerk, Buthelezi and a host of other major figures in South African politics: Helen Suzman, Pieter de Lange, head of the Broederbond, Johan Heyns, head of the Dutch Reform Church and Gerhard de Kock, Governor of the South African Reserve Bank. Nor can we ignore Renwick's role as 'Margaret Thatcher's appointment' giving him 'some leverage with the regime...[which]...could hardly afford the complete withdrawal of her support, although they had been doing precious little to deserve it'⁸. Thus, Renwick's diplomatic strategy combined both 'soft' and 'hard' power resulting in 'smart power' as modern diplomatic parlance would have it. Indeed, Britain's key role through the effective agency of Renwick's 'good offices' and Mrs Thatcher's determination to maintain the momentum of the negotiation process was fully acknowledged by Mandela as the 'principal supporter of the negotiating process'⁹.

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Renwick's great achievement, well documented with due modesty in this book, was to recognise the importance of persuading, by rational argument, all the conflicting parties that they had an 'overlapping interest' in ultimately securing agreement based on compromise and consensus. In effect, Renwick acted as a one man 'contact group' urging the key actors to keep talking to each other even when events conspired to threaten or cause a breakdown in negotiation.

What was critical in this context was the dawning recognition on both sides that they were locked in a 'mutually hurting stalemate' to quote the American scholar, W I Zartman. In his seminal work on Mediation (an important soft power diplomatic device acknowledged in Chapter 6 of the United Nations Charter) he discusses the significance of the critical moment when conflicts are 'ripe for resolution' and this was certainly the case in the late 1980s following the end of the Cold War, the removal of any conceivable threat to South Africa from the Soviet Union, the independence of Namibia and Zimbabwe and the slow erosion of the local economy as a variety of sanctions began to bite in earnest.

Renwick was well placed to seize the moment as both the Nationalist Government and the African National Congress recognised that the stalemate could not be broken. Indeed, Alfred Nzo admitted in January 1990 that 'we do not have the capacity within our country to intensify the armed struggle in any meaningful way' (p.92). Thus an ANC 'seizure of power' was not possible as Mandela himself had acknowledged in a secret memorandum to P W Botha stressing that negotiations with the Pretoria government had to take place.

As in all successful negotiations that end decades of conflict, those responsible have to be imaginative risk takers, willing if necessary, to defy their own supporters for the sake of long term advantage. They must be able to cope with the stresses and strains of what is, after all, a delicate and arduous process of crises management as old enemies are induced into confronting and ultimately acknowledging each other with due respect across the conference table.

The old adage 'cometh the hour cometh the man' has a special resonance in South Africa's case given the competence and, more important, the generosity of spirit displayed by Mandela and de Klerk, two leaders who saved South Africa from a slow decline into a wasteland of failed hope and aspirations both at home and abroad.

Robin Renwick made a massive contribution to promoting decent and productive change in the Republic's fortunes. He demonstrated that diplomacy of a traditional kind still has value and without which South Africa's transition would have been far more difficult. Future historians will find his analysis of events during the tumultuous years of the South African transition a profound guide, full of insight about the process of change and the role that individuals like the author played in helping to break the stalemate.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 The Guardian, 18 January, 2008
- 2 Bull, p.156
- 3 Satow, p.1
- 4 Bull, p.164
- 5 p.1
- 6 pp.171/2
- 7 p.172
- 8 p.29
- 9 p.147

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- Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society – A Study of Order in World Politics*, Palgrave Macmillan 1977.
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