The Trust Option: The Role of Education and Culture in International Relations

It's a great pleasure to be here at Chatham House this evening - a world leader for new ideas, and forward thinking in international relations. Powerful ideas are the start of powerful networks and that is why it is a particular pleasure to speak here this evening, to you, about what the British Council is and what it sets out to do – before I move on to talk more widely about cultural relations…. a powerful idea that exists among powerful networks.

The British Council builds engagement and trust for the UK by sharing knowledge and ideas between people worldwide. Our 7400 staff work in 110 countries worldwide including some of the most challenging political and security environments – including Iraq and Zimbabwe – and the major emerging economies China and India, for example. We teach English, broaden young people's international views and develop skills that will allow them to become global citizens. We provide opportunities for the next generation of political, social, educational, scientific and cultural leaders to come together in regions across the world.

Tonight I want to outline how our approach to cultural relations addresses some of the major global issues we all face – including bridging gaps of trust that exist between countries and societies and achieving a global consensus on tackling climate change.

In today’s world, states can choose from a range of foreign policy options to contribute to and shape the world including hard power, such as military action and coercion - and aid and development. Cultural relations is another of these options. What makes it unique is that it delivers long-term sustainable two-way engagement which leads to a platform of positive influence for the UK. In short, it delivers trust.
As we do it, Cultural relations builds access to international influence – particularly in developing countries. Through our global offer of skills-development in English-language, teacher training, curricula development, language and professional qualifications we provide access to networks that offer international experience to the participants.

These networks and this activity are important because many of the most pressing issues we face today require more than government-led solutions - they need action from individuals at both a local and international level.

Take Climate change as an example:

We know that it will affect all of us. An effective response needs both mitigation, that is limiting further climate change by reducing the production of greenhouse gases; and adaptation - preparing for the impacts of inevitable climate change. Most importantly it requires each of us to change our behaviours. This is where, I believe, cultural relations comes in.

Climate Change matters to us, because it matters to many of the people we work with. Repeatedly, young people around the world tell us that climate change is one of their most important issues – and that they are not convinced that governments alone can solve the problem. We feel that we have a unique role to play to bring those young people together with global decision makers to make their voices heard – and to build an international consensus on tackling climate change.

Similarly there is a unique role for cultural relations to tackle the growing gaps of trust between people.
We believe that extremism and violence can flourish where individuals feel their identities are under threat, their voices and views and skills aren’t important and their values compromised.

We have seen people – often young people - gripped by extremist narratives which exploit their desire for recognition and need to be treated as equal to their national and international peers. This exploitation is insidious - it leads to mistrust and hate – and, ultimately, can lead to fatal acts of terrorism.

But as we know, this danger is not confined to any particular country or region. The recent riots in the townships of South Africa and in the banlieues of Paris are graphic examples of how people can react when they feel they have no voice or, in a world of scarce resources, their livelihoods are threatened.

In addition the way people communicate is changing. New technologies enable global communities to take root and flourish regardless of international borders. These supranational networks connect people, ideas, and resources like never before. They also, for good or ill, hand a megaphone to the historically voiceless, enabling them to proselytize and make their presence felt on the world stage.

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Governments are playing catch up as they try to develop new policy responses to these issues.

These stretch from aid, development and technology transfer; traditional international diplomacy in the form of government to government treaty; and increasingly, responses that will influence foreign populations. All these are effective in their own way in responding to the issues I have outlined but none of these specifically aim to deliver trust between people.
These issues require people to work together openly and cooperatively - and in order for this to happen, you need trust.

Cultural relations offers a way for individuals to work together on shared problems. It provides individuals, in the UK and overseas, with opportunities to get insights into societies and cultures that our different from our own. It respects the individual and gives them skills and a platform to make their voice heard. In the 21st century diplomacy is no longer the preserve of governments alone and cultural relations provides a platform for other voices to be heard: a people-to-people diplomacy.

As it is a people-to-people activity, to be successful, the British Council’s cultural relations work must strive to represent a broad view of the UK.

Let me give an example of what I mean. It comes from the distinguished academic Sultan Barakat. Professor Barakat wrote a report for us analyzing the way Arabs in the Middle East view Britain and the British Council. This is what he had to say about the relationship between the British Council and the British government:

‘If the British Council simply parrots what the Embassy says about Britain we are not interested. But there is a Britain we’d like it to show us – the Britain of the million marchers against the war in 2003.’

The Foreign Office had the foresight to give the British Council operational independence from the day we were established. It recognised in 1934 that our work would be over the long-term – seeking sustainable change in attitudes and behaviours – and that we would be at our best when we acted – and were seen to act – in concert with, but not directed by government.

The UK wasn’t alone in this - most of the major European countries have similar organisations. Only last week I was at a meeting in Berlin with the heads of these
organisations discussing how as a group we can contribute to pan-European intercultural
dialogue and ensure that Europe remains connected to the rest of the World…and the rest of
the world remains connected to Europe.

Our work focuses on individuals and communities. We help them work together on issues
and in partnerships of equals. We use the power of the arts, education, the English
language, science, governance and sport to provide the framework for this constructive
engagement and greater understanding between people of different countries and cultures.

Without equal exchange there can be no effective engagement. It implies a willingness to
learn as well as to teach, and to listen as well as to speak. Without an equal exchange there
can be no building of genuine and lasting trust.

This increasing interest in people-to-people diplomacy is mirrored by the technology that has
led to an explosion of new channels for interactivity such as user generated content on the
web.

People are seizing upon new ways to communicate. I saw an astonishing statistic the other
day that we will send two trillion mobile-phone text messages this year, every one with the
potential to elicit a response, and start a conversation. This presents a tremendous
opportunity for cultural relations to reach millions more people but also poses a difficult
practical challenge. The British Council has already started to take advantage of these
communications channels by, for example, offering students a bite sized English lesson by
text message.

The work of the British Council, with its stress on engagement and trust, maps well against
this burgeoning demand by individuals to grow beyond their identity as passive user and
become active contributors; to have their voice heard as well as to receive others’ messages. They gain – and we gain too.

It doesn’t matter whether we achieve this through teaching Imams English at Al Azhar University - the seat of Sunni learning; taking the next generation of climate activists to the G8 Environment ministers summit at Kobe and through academics taking part in international exchanges. Through such activity the UK always gain too:

We gain an understanding of different viewpoints and come to see that mutual interest can exist alongside diversity.

We gain citizens who appreciate the new forces shaping our future and who understand how Britain can best contribute and benefit.

Anthony Parsons writing some time ago in International Affairs, describes some of the benefits of using culture as a diplomatic tool.

‘It is really dazzlingly obvious,’ he said. ‘If you are thoroughly familiar with someone else’s language and literature, if you know and love his country, its cities, its arts, its people, you will be instinctively disposed, all other things being equal, to buy goods from him rather than from a less well known source, to support him actively when you consider him right and to avoid punishing him too fiercely when you regard him as being wrong.’

But today our work goes further than this. For example, we are contributing to the long-term stability of Iraq and Afghanistan, partnering with government and civil society to build human capacity in the generations of Afghans and Iraqis lost to conflict. Every day our local staff risk their and their families’ lives to come to work. They do this because they believe cultural relations matters.
General Sir Richard Dannatt, the Army’s chief of the general staff, said recently that the UK was more likely to be involved in what he termed ‘liberal interventionism’ and urged the military to adapt to stay relevant. Commanders in Afghanistan now talk freely about the limits of military intervention. They see their hard and dangerous work as only the first part of the solution: creating the secure space for the next stage - development, good governance, civil society, education - to take hold.

Of course, creating trusted relationships through engagement takes time - and cultural relations can take years to have its full impact.

For example, it was because we continued to work in South Africa throughout the apartheid period that we now have high level links with its present government.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu paid generous tribute to the British Council for our work in preparing his country for its post-liberation challenges.

Archbishop Tutu was not alone. Lazarus Zim, President of South Africa’s Chamber of Mines, has written: ‘When all other doors were closed to black South Africans, the British Council had an open door.’

But success in one generation does not necessarily carry through to the next. The next generation of leaders in South Africa do not have the same level of connections with the UK as the current – many of whom lived and studied here during apartheid. That’s why we are developing a new leadership programme to connect South Africa’s next generation with people like you.

Cultural relations creates lasting and effective influence – trust can change attitudes and behaviours.
On Climate Change Cultural relations needs to work in concert with the traditional
government-to-government activity. We seek to influence policy makers – giving young
people a platform to speak to global decision makers.

Our International Climate Champions project brought 38 young people from 13 countries to
address the G8 Environment ministers on climate change, in Kobe. Ministers listened when
those young people told they needed to act now. Similarly when we took young people to the
World Economic Forum in Davos – they stole the show. World Leaders want to know what
the world’s young people think.

We are connecting scientists and energy practioners to provide joint solutions to mitigate the
effects of climate change - and we are seeking to change people’s behaviours, by finding
opportunities to influence global publics.

For example, in Thailand we are working with the Ministry of Education to challenge schools
across the country to measure their Carbon-Footprint and to create a local action plan to
reduce their impact on the environment. Through our global linking programme, schools
compare and contrast their responses with their counterparts in the UK. In doing so students
develop a more human understanding of a seemingly intractable global issue and they will
understand that their individual actions have a far-reaching effect.

In our work in brokering effective Intercultural Dialogue, we are also working with schools to
give young people an international perspective to their education.

In our Connecting Classrooms project we aim to increase knowledge and understanding
between societies through international cross-curriculum working. Its main area of focus has
been sub-Saharan Africa but last year the project expanded to Pakistan where it is helping to
bring diverse and isolated communities together with links to the UK. The project improves
the standards of teaching and learning. It connects teachers in those countries with their UK
counterparts to introduce child-centred learning to classrooms, and to jointly develop English
and information and communication technology. The project provides a platform for children and teachers to understand each other’s cultures and societies better. It prepares them more effectively for life and work in an inter-connected world.

In Egypt we are working with the Al Azhar university, the centre of Sunni learning to improve English language teaching and learning for 500 students of its top students every year. We do this because many of these students will become leaders in communities around the world and we want them to be able to communicate internationally.

Al Azhar recognised that its students needed to improve their language skills and that working with us would bring an opportunity to increase international connections.

We are building on this project and have brought professors from Sheffield University together with Al Azhar’s Women’s Medical College to develop curricula and learning materials.

Asking a UK institution to help develop educational curricula and materials is a risk for Al Azhar. There have been media attacks on its decision. When I met the Grand Imam he told me that he was sure he’d made the right decision and that only by working together on projects like this would we begin to breach the gaps between our countries.

Working in partnership allows us to bring cultural relations to people’s lives. In doing so we need to be clear about the values we bring to the partnership.

Values matter. Sometimes eyebrows are raised when we work in countries that do not hold the rights of the individual in the same regard as we do. But I am proud we were able to work with the people of South Africa during apartheid, and I am proud that we continue to work for the people of Zimbabwe, Iran, Burma and Russia when political relationships in those countries are tense.
But working in a country doesn’t meant that we comprise our values. I’m clear that we hold respect for the individual as paramount and that our work enriches the individual and in doing so local and global communities. It is hard to ensure that our support for fundamental freedoms is noticed, but we believe that action – and the programmes we deliver – create real and meaningful life-changing opportunities for individuals around the world.

But what should we do in Zimbabwe? Should we be there? I heard yet another analyst today say that Mugabe needs constructive engagement with Britain and that only by talking will we resolve this situation. I don’t know if that’s right. But I do know that the people of Zimbabwe need access to our programmes, that we stand ready to increase our work and support to them when the time is right and the international community feels ready to engage.

The people-to-people and cultural connections we have created in Zimbabwe will outlast this regime.

But, with 6 billion people and perhaps 8 billion by 2030 – the world is a big place and getting bigger. Can cultural relations meet the challenge of scale?

I think it can – but I don’t think the British Council can or should be its sole practitioners.

We use partners to deliver scale and individuals to deliver impact. Over the last year our Connecting Classrooms programme linked 1 million young people in 900 schools around the world. And in West Bengal – in partnership with the State Government – we have created an English teachers’ handbook for 200,000 teachers who will work with 2.3 million school children.

Through activities such as these we engage with more than 112 million people each year and have face-to-face contact with more than 16 million.
It is the scientists, artists and leaders of tomorrow who will play a crucial part in encouraging the changes needed to meet the challenges the world now faces.

We believe an international element needs to be central to the design and delivery of education. Education must be about more than picking up vocational skills or expanding personal development – vital as those are.

An International education experience has a unique capacity to be a continually open channel for the changing conversations of mankind – a way of building worldwide networks of trust between individuals that offer us potential solutions to the great global challenges that seem to be beyond the capacities of more traditional approaches to international relations.

The challenges we are seeking to address need individuals and communities to change their attitudes and behaviours. This is easier said than done and requires sustainable interventions which continually articulate the wider benefits of our collective endeavour and redefine our collective global citizenship.

In conclusion, let me say this.

National sovereignty and power have been at the core of the broad principle used by nations to guide their actions in the international arena. But the great new global challenges, combined with new communication technologies, demand new foreign policy responses now that the nature of the international relations environment has changed.

Public diplomacy cannot be immune from this need to develop fresh approaches. The old Cold War command-and-control model of public diplomacy is paying decreasing dividends because it does not map well against the growing desire of individuals to contribute to information flows, not just be passive consumers of information. And it does not map well
against the new world in which national borders are becoming less and less useful as a means of defining - and containing - threats to national security.

Nations now face threats that cannot be boxed neatly within defined borders and restricted by theories of the state, or notions of national security. The threats are dispersed, hidden and based on the power of beliefs that transcend borders. You cannot ring-fence an idea that has spread on the internet. You cannot shout it down or crush it by force alone.

I am not suggesting cultural relations is a panacea to all the conundrums of modern international relations. But its emphasis on engaging overseas publics in long-term shared agendas has real impact.

Cultural relations respects the individual. Through engagement it creates trust, and through trust, lasting influential networks are created that benefit the UK.

Cultural relations is not the soft option to hard power. It is a potent tool for more effective international relations - because to meet the global challenges we face... we need the best will of the world... as well as the best of our will.. to find a path to a stable and inclusive future.

Thank you.