WHY SOFT POWER AND CULTURAL DIPLOMACY MATTER: WITWATERSRAND UNIVERSITY, JOHANNESBURG, S.A. (25/6/2015).

Presented by Sir Ciarán Devane, CEO, British Council

Introduction

It’s truly an honour to be here as a guest of Wits and the South African Institute for international affairs. Wits, as a great learning Institution with a global reach, is in its own right a major contributor to South Africa’s soft power in the world, widely known and praised for its commitment to transformation and change in this young democracy. And SAIIA [South African Institute of International Affairs] through its studies and public engagement has done an enormous amount to assist the better understanding of South Africa’s position in international affairs. I’m delighted that I have the chance to contribute to this thinking tonight, and to bring a view from the UK.

In central London there are two statues of Nelson Mandela.

The first is a large head of Madiba, next to the Royal Festival Hall on the south bank of the River Thames. It was commissioned by Ken Livingstone when he was leader of the Greater London Council, and unveiled by Oliver Tambo in 1985. It looks like the head of a person whose convictions will not be shifted, whatever happens. The text on the pedestal reads: *'The struggle is my life'*.

The second statue was unveiled in 2007 on Parliament Square. It shows a smiling Mandela, holding his arms wide.

There are very few people honoured by two statues in London, and it’s a credit to the city’s democratic instincts that Mandela is one of them. Interestingly, one of his neighbours in Parliament Square is Gandhi – someone whose character and politics were hugely influenced by time spent in South Africa. I think that says something very powerful about the ties that continue to bind nations, and their histories, together.

(Just for the record, King Charles 1st also has two statues in London – but I’m not so sure what that signifies.)

A statue is of course a symbol of power – often of *hard* power. The statue visible from the window of my office near Trafalgar Square is of the other Nelson – the Admiral – who was nothing if not an embodiment of military might at the height of British imperial power.

But the statues of Mandela are different, both in scale and intent. The Parliament Square statue is on a pedestal that is deliberately much lower than the other statues round the square – little more than a step, in fact. It is a convenient place to sit and eat your lunchtime sandwich. The effect is to humanise the statue. It says, this is a human being – a great one, and someone who achieved great things – but nevertheless someone with whom you might expect to have a real human connection. Not a man on a pillar.

In that sense it's a statue that says something about *soft* power: that it's personal; that it makes a direct connection; that it seeks to embrace (with open arms) rather than to terrify or impress with its size and bulk.

British Council – ways of working

The British Council is the United Kingdom's *soft power* organisation. That term wasn't in use when we were set up in 1934 – it's a much later coining of Professor Joseph Nye's – but the activities and approaches it describes are as old as human culture itself.

As are other forms of power, of course.

The various forms of power available to nation states are expressed on this 'spectrum', which runs all the way from military force to development aid. The work we do at the British Council – soft power or cultural relations – is towards the aid end of the chart; but it's inevitable that these neat subdivisions do not exist on the ground. In reality, one form of power does not operate in isolation from the others: they are usually all part of the mix.

In the six months since I've been at the British Council, I've carried with me a small book published during the Second World War. It has a sort of talismanic power. It's the British Council annual report for 1940, the year of our Royal Charter.

It's a fascinating read, not just for what it says, but for *when* it is saying it. At the height of the Blitz – the most perilous moment of the whole war as far as British sovereign independence went – public servants sat down and thought about winning the peace: about how best to project and protect Britain, once the hostilities were over.

I think it’s worth quoting from at some length:

‘The Council’s aim is to create in a country overseas a basis of friendly knowledge and understanding of the people of this country, of their philosophy and way of life, which will lead to a sympathetic appreciation of British foreign policy, whatever for the moment that policy may be and from whatever political conviction it may spring.

‘While in times of danger this friendly knowledge and understanding becomes vital to the successful prosecution of war (that is the Council’s place in the war effort), in times of peace it is not less valuable.

‘The annihilation of distance in the modern world, the other peaceful and war-like inventions of the age, have brought the different races and civilisations of the world rapidly and violently together’.

We’re talking about 1940: three-quarters of a century ago. But those words still offers an important expression of our purpose, and the reason for our existence.

After the Second World War, the Report’s *'friendly knowledge and understanding'* became a central tool in building the peace.

The title of this talk suggests I am going to tell you how soft power works – but of course I can only tell you how one organization does it, and that only from a perspective of a few months in. And the British Council is just one organization in one country …

But sometimes the perspective of a recent outsider is useful in understanding the big picture.

One of the most important principles of the British Council’s approach to soft power is the ‘arm’s length’ relationship we have with our sponsoring department, the Foreign & Commonwealth Office.

We have a responsibility to report to them on our activity. They in turn are answerable to Parliament for the way what we do fits in with the wider national interest.

But we receive less than 20 per cent of our funding directly from the Foreign Office. The rest is earned from our activities: our English teaching and examinations operations; our partnerships; the work we do on behalf of other bodies such as the Department for International Development.

As I said, our relationship with the Foreign Office is 'arm's length'. That means our activity is aligned with the UK's *broad national interest*; but it is *not* directed by the government of the day.

There are two main reasons for this. The first is that what we do is long-term – which is not something that governments elected on a five-year cycle always understand.

The second reason is that we do not want to be seen as the United Kingdom's propaganda department. Because in the long run propaganda doesn't work.

The point of soft power is that it works by attraction rather than coercion. It is about presenting something attractive to people - a different vision of the world - and allowing them to make up their own minds. It is not about *telling them what to think*.

I said that we receive around 20 per cent of our funding from government, and earn the rest. That creates an interesting – I think healthy – dynamic.

In this relatively new operating environment, and in order to ensure that we don’t stray from our original purposes (I told you I carry that 1940 report around with me), we have articulated three tests which need to be applied to any potential piece of work we might get involved with.

The three simple tests for our work worldwide are:

- Does it promote a ‘friendly knowledge and understanding’ between the people of the UK and people worldwide?

- Does it make a positive contribution to the countries we are working in?

- Does it make a lasting difference to the UK’s international standing, prosperity and security?

If a project or a piece of work doesn’t do all three of those things, then we probably shouldn’t be doing it.

Things that don’t tick all those boxes may be very worthwhile things to do – it’s just that as the UK’s premier soft power organization, the British Council probably shouldn’t be doing them.

Power spectrum

Cultural relations – what we do – forms the middle section of that 'power spectrum' I’ve already mentioned: the broad sweep of different factors by which a nation acts in the world. It runs from military force at one end, to development aid at the other.

The British Council's activity sits somewhere in the middle, where - very importantly - there is a benefit to both the giver and the receiver. Our activity works to mutual benefit.

What the world's recent experiences in Afghanistan and Iraq - for example - have taught us, is that one form of power alone is unlikely to be enough to solve any of the most difficult problems. We have to act on as many points of the spectrum as possible - on hearts and minds as well as bodies and bellies - in order to make progress.

So soft power is vital. And unlike other forms of power, it's not something that can be deployed for the short term. It's not a summer fighting season, or an airlift of food aid.

Soft power only works if there is real commitment for the long term. Because the work you are doing today may only pay off in ten, twenty, or thirty years' time. That's why at the British Council we are so proud of our 'sticking power' in some of the difficult places of the earth. Sticking around is the best way to gain trust - and trust is the real currency of soft power. It's what brings people to us to share our ideas.

So for example the British Council set up its first overseas representation in Cairo in 1938, and apart from a few periods when our activity was curtailed (during Suez, for instance), we have been there ever since.

That means that in Egypt today we are seen as a trusted friend. We can run projects like Young Arab Voices, which develops debating skills in young people in the region - and our motivations for doing so are trusted.

On the ground

Travelling round our network over the last six months has given me the chance to think hard about what we do, and why we do it.

We work in three main areas of activity: English language; Education & Society; and the Arts. The reasons for our being in those particular kinds of work are fairly straightforward.

Language is the best tool for engaging other people - for sharing ideas, finding out what others think and how they live, and what their hopes are for the future. If you share a language, you share - in a sense - a vision of the world.

And of course if you speak English – for historical reasons – you are plugged in to all kinds of opportunities that would otherwise be denied you. So there's a general – cultural – reason for learning English; and a slightly narrower, personal reason you might be interested, because it can be a giant boost to your career prospects and your chance of participating in a wider-than-local economy.

In South Africa we work with the Department of Basic Education to help establish English as a first and second additional language in all 28,000 government schools. By cascading teacher training, that means we are working with all 400,000 teachers [in South Africa] to improve the education outcomes for 12 million pupils.

That's the power of scale – a training technique used as what a military person might recognise as a force multiplier. In much the same way, English itself is a personal force multiplier.

Alongside major institutions like Wits, we're working with the Department of Higher Education to add an international dimension to the 'Staffing South Africa's Universities' strategy – connecting the next generation of South Africa's academics with their peers in the UK to create the kinds of life-long research partnerships that will see our institutions continue to thrive and drive economic renewal.

Our Society work seeks to spread best practice in governance, legal systems, and social enterprise.

In Education, we work both at the level of national education systems - helping reform and modernise them, with the benefit of our country's experts - and at classroom level.

The British Council's wind-up, solar powered MP3 player - the Life Player, is bringing English language learning materials, and materials in other South African languages, to village classrooms across the country.

According to HG Wells, civilisation as 'a race between education and catastrophe'.

Wells was prophetic in much of what he wrote, and I wonder if the time for that prophetic statement is now.

Looking at the demographics of Africa, it's obvious that a youthful population has to be provided for in terms of education and jobs. The statistics in South Africa are already stark in terms of youth unemployment – and events in the Mediterranean demonstrate what happens when education and jobs markets fail to provide what is necessary.

We're proud to say that one in ten of today's world leaders were educated in the UK, rising to one in seven of those who have studied at a UK university abroad. These include people like Aung San Suu Kyi in Burma (who we work closely with today) – as well as countless international business leaders, diplomats and leading figures in international culture and education.

All of that makes a difference – in the day-to-day decision making of those people, and in creating a general understanding and respect for the UK in international politics and diplomacy.

The British Council's work in the Arts uses creativity to do things that more formal, hard-wired relationships cannot do.

One small example: the statue of Yuri Gagarin that stood outside our office in London in 2012 probably did as much for UK-Russia relations as any number of diplomatic lunches or communiques.

In the UK we're currently enjoying a wave of world-class South African talent in our galleries, theatres, and clubs thanks to the South Africa-UK Seasons 2014 and 2015. We've had top names like Ladysmith Black Mambazo working with the Royal Ballet, Zulu dancers at the Edinburgh Military Tattoo, Hugh Masekela. Mic Casa and many more but just as importantly there's also been investment in the next generation of young emerging artists and creatives who represent the future of the cultural relationship between our countries. In South Africa our arts programme – called Connect ZA – is focused on the young, digitally native South African audience – and intentionally so, in order that we might reboot the relationship that the 'Born Free' generation has with the UK.

Other arts projects are harder to bring to fruition.

Last year the British photographer Nick Danziger visited North Korea with Andrea Rose, who was then the British Council's Director of Visual Arts, and the writer Rory MacLean.

The trip took – as you can imagine – a great deal of organising, and diplomacy, and persistence. But it was worth it.

The photographs captured glimpses of ordinary people living ordinary lives – people going to the hairdresser, working in the fields, waiting for a bus – while living in an extraordinary country.

North Korea is generally understood in the West through a series of clichés and caricatures. Our exhibition was an attempt to humanise that view and enrich our understanding. To break down barriers.

World problems and how to solve them …

So I would say that we have some pretty powerful soft power tools, which have proved their worth over the decades and won us a lot of friends.

Of course we're not the only people in the soft power game.

The world is changing. The old Chinese curse – 'May you live in interesting times' – is truly an affliction of the 21st Century.

You'd have to be living a very cloistered life not to realise that the world of 2015 is not like the world of 1995, or 1975. Strangely, it probably has more in common with 1915, in the sense that the social, technological and cultural changes now underway have the potential to radically alter the way we live our lives. New world orders are constantly being imagined and heralded.

The world is changing. Power is moving, in at least four major ways:

- from West to East;

- from countries to cities;
- from old technologies to new technologies;
- from governments to people.

The shift of economic muscle from Europe and the US towards the BRICS and other ‘emerging’ economies is very well documented, and it will probably take decades for us to work out all the implications. You in South Africa are already living that experience, so your insights will be far more valuable than mine on this subject.

The movement of populations from rural to urban settings is an even older phenomenon, but humans only recently became a predominantly urban species. The implications of this are in some ways even more profound, and pose great questions of our cities and the way they are organised.

The internet has changed all our lives, and – as South Africans know – mobile phone technology is revolutionising the way people get their information, do their banking, connect with others. M-Pesa brings one of the benefits of the modern city – the cashpoint – to remote villages in Africa. So in a sense, in addition to rural flight, new technology is urbanising the whole world.

And the *changes* in technology – not a clear-cut replacement of new lamps for old, but usually the existence of old and new together – is changing the relationship between people and their governments. If you can see what’s going on in other parts of the world, then you have the possibility of comparing and contrasting. You can make up your own mind about things – and in certain parts of the world that may in itself be revolutionary.

It’s all a reason to understand this thing we call cultural relations, or soft power, or telling your story – to do some thinking about how and why it works, and what we want it to do for us.

It may be that we need to refresh the old tools of soft power, as well as discovering new ones more appropriate to the age.

British Council in South Africa

But values and intentions are not subject to such radical change.

Whatever its forms of expression, the kind of work we do is about human connection – or it’s not about anything. There must be truthfulness at the heart of our ‘offer’ - and we should be open about our reasons for being in a particular country or doing a particular piece of work. People aren’t fooled – or not for long – and if we’re trying to develop relationships that will last over many years, it must be done on the basis of honesty.

And our aim should always be to break down barriers, whether those are physical or spatial or mental. Because that is the way to ensure peaceful and prosperous communities.

I mentioned breaking down barriers in the context of the two Koreas; but for me the concept of divided territories begins a bit closer to home.

The history of my native country, Ireland, is a divided one. Like South Africa, the island of Ireland is a place where the past is very present. The ‘Troubles’ began in the late 1960s and continued with varying degrees of ferociousness for the better part of three decades.

Your own present Deputy President was a frequent visitor to the border counties of Northern Ireland at the end of that sorry period. Cyril Ramaphosa helped oversee the ‘putting beyond use’ of the Irish Republican Army’s weapons.

Why this South African connection? Well, partly because our peace processes have tracked and influenced each other. The Irish understand, as you do, that coming to terms with the past is a painful matter; but less painful, and less damaging, than passing conflict down the generations.

And there is a large part for soft power to play here, in terms of language and symbolism. Something as simple as a public handshake – as happened between the Queen and former IRA commander Martin McGuinness, in 2012 – are hugely significant.

Poets phrase these things best, and the poet and President of Ireland, Michael D Higgins, in a speech to Her Majesty in April last year, spoke of the need to work hard to *‘present a better version of ourselves’*.

He has also spoken of the very important difference between a dishonest *amnesia*, and a reciprocal and honest *amnesty*.

There is a long way to go, but – for all the setbacks – it’s a journey that is well begun.

The British Council opened its first South African office in 1959, a year before Prime Minister Harold MacMillan’s famous ‘Wind of Change’ speech, which acknowledged the irresistible movement towards independence in former colonial territories in Africa.

Of course that was right in the middle of the Apartheid era, and there are arguments on both sides about the kind of cultural boycotts that were called for at that time.

We came down firmly on the side of engagement – which is what we also did in the countries of the Soviet bloc during the Cold War. If we’re all about connecting people, and opening doors, and keeping conversations going, it’s difficult to then turn round and say: In this case, we’re pulling out and withdrawing our services.

That’s not only true in the face of unsavoury political regimes: we do all we can to continue operating when things on the ground are physically difficult. That was the case recently in Afghanistan. As you may know, one of our people was killed recently in Kabul; and in 2011 the British Council office was targeted in an attack that killed twelve people.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I’d say that soft power allows us to take a step back from the symptoms that have to be tackled with warships and armies.

It allows us to address *causes*, and apply that great principle of wise old wives everywhere: prevention is better than cure.

A lot of our conversations about soft power in the UK centre on the concept of mutuality and mutual benefit: not doing things simply for your own benefit, but because it benefits others too.

There’s a very good African word for this – Ubuntu, which as I understand it means, ‘I am because you are’. It’s a great soft power principle, a great human principle, elegantly expressed in an African word.

It makes me wonder what else Africa might teach the world. The recent history of South Africa suggests we might learn a lot from you.

Whatever your politics, it’s clear that there are problems with the western way of using the planet – we urgently need to start looking in different places for the answers.

Along with all its challenges, any visitor to this country is struck by the feeling that ‘anything is possible’.

South Africa is rich in natural resources, and most especially in terms of its people’s energy and talents. There’s an entrepreneurial craving here, and a can-do attitude, that can be startling and invigorating to a person from a more staid and steady part of the world.

I’d like to finish by telling you about a video I saw recently – you may be familiar with it. It’s Toby Shapshak’s TED talk, and I really recommend it. He’s talking about African innovation.

He shows the famous image of the world at night from space, with some parts lit up with electric light – principally the northern hemisphere, of course.

Look, he says: it’s a map of innovation. All of those places with electricity – that’s where innovation ISN’T going on. Because everyone there is watching TV or updating their FaceBook status.

It’s where there are no lights that people are solving real problems.

Thank you.

/ENDS

Useful links:

https://www.ted.com/talks/toby_shapshak_you_don_t_need_an_app_for_that

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/M-Pesa