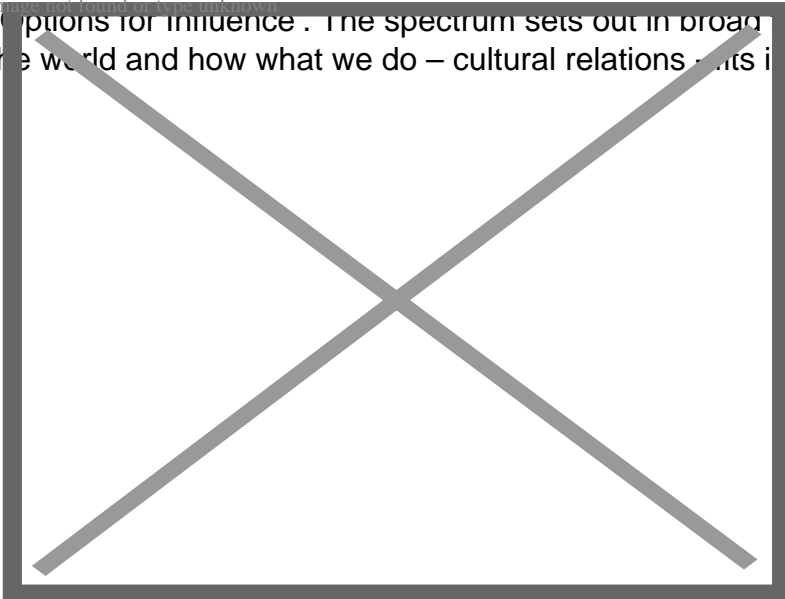


Nov 04, 2016 by **John Worne**

## **Schools, Hospitals or Cultural Relations?** <sup>[1]</sup>

At the British Council – the UK's international cultural and educational body – we've been thinking about what we call the International Relations Positioning Spectrum. It draws on work by Nick Cull and work done by Ali Fisher and Counterpoint, our cultural relations think tank on options for influence. The spectrum sets out in broad terms what we think a nation can do in the world and how what we do – cultural relations – fits into it.



People who have seen it so far have said - although there is a lot of information in this diagram - they find it helpful to see the spectrum and where we fit on it. Other people have said to me that they feel uneasy about seeing what we do on the same page as military action – this does not feel right to them.

My personal view – and it is a personal view – is that for the part of our funding which comes from my taxes, there are clear alternative uses for that money – particularly in a credit crunch and global recession. Public spending is finite and there are always tough choices, but I would like to have local schools that were better for my children to go to. I would like to see continued investment in my local health services which are generally good these days but struggle to keep pace with growing demand. Set against this do I really want significant funding raised through general taxation (including some of my money) spent on cultural relations instead of schools and hospitals?

I think to answer this challenge we have to be really confident that what we do is a key part of the UK's contribution to the world and is a real alternative to other foreign policy choices. I accept that the UK needs armed forces and that my taxes pay for them – not everyone does, but I do. I accept that we have a moral responsibility to respond to poverty and humanitarian disasters with food and other aid. Put simply I can understand and appreciate that in a crowded and at times dangerous world some of my money has to go on guns and food

parcels instead of local schools and hospitals. But why does it have to go to cultural relations?

I think the answer is that strong, effective cultural relations mean ultimately we will need less guns and fewer food parcels. Why? Because sharing knowledge and ideas between people worldwide is among the best antidotes to armed conflict and giving people access to skills, languages, jobs and opportunities can help map a path out of poverty. It also does far more beautiful things, like opening minds and opportunities for peoples' creativity and development.

The crude version of the International Relations Positioning Spectrum is 'giving, helping, sharing, boasting, shouting, fighting'. We do 'helping and sharing' and maybe a bit of 'boasting' from time to time - although when we showcase the UK I believe in the main we try to do it with sharing and mutual appreciation in mind.

Some of these words are better than others. 'Exchanging' is perhaps a more accurate term than 'sharing' as it is more actively mutual and more purposeful. 'Telling' is perhaps fairer than 'shouting' to encapsulate diplomacy and campaigning. In many cases the same activity could be 'telling, boasting or sharing'. The intent behind it and the way it is done make the difference.

I find it easier to forgo a better school for my son and daughter, when I remind myself that at its best, cultural relations means more 'helping and sharing', less 'shouting and fighting' and maybe one day a less urgent need to 'give'. It helps me to think that the engagement and trust we build through cultural relations reduces the costs of failing to engage or help improve the world – the cost of guns and food parcels – at the same time as enriching people's lives.

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