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Feb 16, 2018 by **Nicholas J. Cull**

Public Diplomacy in Action at Wilton Park ^[1]

Today was the final day of the third Wilton Park conference on public diplomacy in the UK. Those in attendance included a mix of practitioners and academics from large and small nations, including several people associated with the CPD blog – Ashraf Haidari (who spoke brilliantly for Afghanistan), Ali Fisher, Simon Anholt and myself. Countries represented included Romania, Mozambique, Vietnam, British Virgin Islands, Liechtenstein and Mexico. Nations with teams present included Canada, Denmark and the USA.

The conference—artfully managed by Julia Purcell—succeeded in palpably moving the PD ball forward, with much discussion of new technology and operationalizing best practice in public diplomacy. The breaks and meals provided essential scope for the attendees to get to know each other and knit together into a network. One especially memorable moment was a brief recital by the Julliard-trained violinist and cultural diplomacy scholar, Sabina Rakcheyeva, who comes originally from Azerbaijan. Her playing—which included a piece of her own composition fusing eastern and western musical themes—said more about the power of culture as a mechanism to engage than any number of extended academic lectures.

Prisoner of War camps are seldom out of the news, but I doubt that the institutions of the war on terror will be retained at their former inmates' requests to become the locus for peace building and real engagement.

My reason for this blog post is not merely to memorialize a single conference, but to point out what a remarkable institution Wilton Park is. It began as part of a World War II prisoner of war camp—a protected space in which Germans could discuss their political future and engage with ideas of democracy. It has developed into a post-war haven for broader discussions around Europe and its integration. For some years now it has been housed in the idyllic setting of a stately home in Sussex, which seems rather like something from an Agatha Christie novel. Many are the merry conference goers to have joked about Colonel Mustard in the library with the lead piping and so forth. Discussion is protected by a “Wilton Park Rule” and is quotable only without attribution. It is administered under the Foreign Office public diplomacy machinery. While the formal content of the program is a part of British exchange and facilitation work, the setting (and menu) can be counted as cultural diplomacy for Britain. Prisoner of War camps are seldom out of the news, but I doubt that the institutions of the war on terror will be retained at their former inmates' requests to become the locus for peace building and real engagement.

There was only one real note of disappointment. The conference was supposed to host Jim Murphy—until late last week the British Minister of State for Public Diplomacy and Europe Minister. He has been reshuffled to be Minister for Scotland while Caroline Flint has replaced him. Jim Murphy made a difference in British Public Diplomacy, especially the transatlantic relationship, and one hopes that he will have an opportunity to somehow remain in the conversation he did so much to encourage.

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