Published on *USC Center on Public Diplomacy* (https://uscpublicdiplomacy.org)

Nov 04, 2016 by John Worne

# Why it’s Harder for Governments [1]

In today's 24/7 news environment, governments have it hard. In my experience, working at the centre of UK government in the Cabinet Office, I found that government has to know its position on everything and be able to articulate it in a sound bite. You have to be either 'for' or 'against' any proposition, policy proposal or idea. You cannot be equivocal; you cannot have a nuanced view. If it's a significant policy or issue, then you have to be crystal clear. When government isn't clear, the media pursue, challenge and provoke you in 24 hour news cycles until you are clear. If you can't offer clarification- on a number, a position or who's to blame - within two news cycles of about 36 hours, your job as a politician is on the line. That certainly focuses minds but can also narrow perspectives.

British Governments, like US Administrations, are also political constructs. They are generally Labour or Conservative like US Administrations are Democrat or Republican. This means governments have ideology. They probably have less ideology these days than in the past (although the global financial crisis might change that), but they have beliefs which are anchored somewhere on the spectrum of views in the society they represent. Ideology means it’s hard for governments to reflect the diversity of views of a whole society.

A central tenet for liberal democracies is to protect free speech and the freedom to hold different beliefs. Part of the problem for governments is that they are largely denied this ability. Governments can't have a range of views or a variety of beliefs - they have to know what they stand for, and be for or against absolutely everything.

This is what makes two-way public diplomacy hard for governments. Genuine two-way engagement - or cultural relations - works by putting people together. If you take British people and have them talk with Americans, they'll find a lot that’s positive about which to agree. Take Brits and put them with Afghans, Iranians, or Zimbabweans, and they'll have things in common too. Our Governments can find it harder to engage in such dialogue. At the British Council, we find that at a people-to-people level pretty much everyone has something they can agree on – as well as much they won't. The advantage of cultural relations through an independent body is that you can connect people, exchange views and find common ground in a way that's hard for a direct government agency. Of course, we have to be strategically aligned with our government, but we can do and say and listen to things which would be hard for a government department. We get to go places government can't.

When I was in government, I often found myself sympathising with the views of another; but, if the views were not in line with the government’s policy position, I couldn't easily admit it. I did so once, in passing, to a stakeholder at a health conference and immediately found myself quoted by them in the afternoon session. I strongly disagreed with government positions at times, especially when they were clearly untenable, but my job was to defend them and I did so faithfully as long as I was on the payroll.

I vividly remember talking to someone from the US Department of Homeland Security in 2006

about Hurricane Katrina at a conference on emergencies. I sympathised with how hard it must have been to cope with destruction on that scale - land area pretty much the size of my country was affected – and he was grateful for the supportive comment. I then said “Bad news then that you might have more Katrina's given climate change”. He stared blankly at me, said “there is no science to support climate change,” turned and walked away.

Right now, we are all facing the global economic crisis and fearing what it might mean for us, our homes, and our jobs. That fear has become politicised very quickly, leading some governments to make short term, expedient, even protectionist decisions. Stresses between states – already bubbling over energy, oil, and resources – have started to emerge around trade and exchange rates. The numbers and stakes for states are dizzying. These are anxious times.

With economic uncertainty rocking mature systems and threatening even the most self-confident states, we need cultural contact more than ever to maintain and build trust and engagement. We need to acknowledge our interdependence in ways that bind rather than fracture. It’s a unique quality of cultural relations that at the time when most demand is placed on finite government resources - times of international stress, conflict and economic uncertainty - cultural relations is most needed. Cultural relation delivers a strong return on investment in the long run by promoting international openness, prosperity and sustainability.

Cultural relations is hard when you can't entertain another point of view, tough when you have to stick to your line, and impossible when what you say can immediately be used as a stick to beat you. This is the lot of political administrations. It’s even tougher when the purse strings tighten, which is why cultural relations is hard for governments to do, but vital for them to invest in – to keep the world open to knowledge, ideas and trade.