

Nov 04, 2016 by *John Worne*

Deaf is Dumb – Why Listening is Powerful ^[1]

The British Council announced at the start of February, that we have had to suspend our operations in Iran. A sad day for the British Council, and also for tens of thousands of Iranians who have engaged with our cultural and education programmes in recent years. So far so uncontroversial. However, let's not forget the deeper loss – the loss to the people of the UK.

It's easy to think of public diplomacy as being one way – we give to (or often tell) them. The central premise of cultural relations, and I think the 'smarter' versions of public diplomacy is we listen to and engage as equals with them. Listening is the single most influential thing a person can do. It builds trust, engagement and the platform for discussion, negotiation and informed disagreement. It also enables people to begin to work together effectively and know what they share and what they don't. So who are the biggest losers from the British Council's exit from Iran? I believe not only the people of the UK, but also the wider global community and anyone who values open societies.

What are we losing? The potential to better understand one of the richest cultures and histories of central Asia (although, fortunately, another part of the UK's cultural sector is keeping some links alive). We have lost ground in educational ties which help to ensure the unbeatable diversity of school, further and higher education in the UK – and the huge economic benefits that it brings us and others. We have gone backwards on climate change, a world problem, which UK scientific and technical expertise was helping Iranian scientists, planners and municipal leaders to tackle.

But on a personal level, what I and many others have lost is our access to a better understanding of a great country which figures in most people's list of countries that matter in the world today. When I met our Iranian Country Director last year, he told me of a cosmopolitan nation, with a burgeoning middle class, which looks out at its region and the world with aspirations of modernity, growth and development. He told me of a country with a thriving parliamentary democracy, with genuinely plural institutions where citizens exert real influence over their representatives and leaders. He told me also of a country that loves its sport – especially weight lifting, wrestling and of course soccer (or football depending on where you live).

I have spoken to dozens of people about this conversation – these were not my preconceptions of Iran, a country I've not personally visited. Every person in the UK I have spoken to has been surprised by this description. Their assumptions are commonly that Iran is peopled by an extreme, sabre-rattling population led by an authoritarian religious dictatorship. Very wrong and fed by a news media which often wants to run stories that feed that perception.

In losing the chance to learn about a rich and vibrant culture and the chance to share the social and economic benefits of international education we also lose the chance to listen and learn about what really makes a people and a country tick. And, in the process, we have lost

some of our ability to judge our own response to Iran and properly calibrate what we support and what we sanction.

I read Heritage's take on our exit from Iran and views of the BBC's Persian Service. For them it's dumb to try to engage people to people and weak to try to listen to other voices than the voice of Government. They feel 'smart power' only works where it's not needed, in places and with people we already get on with. But I believe deafness - with people we don't know so well - leads to dumbness in both senses of the word. Dumb, because fewer people are going to listen to you and dumb because what you have say – even the tough bits – is more likely to miss the mark. Listening is powerful because the people you listen to and help through educational and cultural relations - are generally the smart people who can change countries as well as change your perceptions and prejudices.

The British Council really wants to work in Iran; we welcome the opportunity to listen to the people and government of Iran on what we can do to work towards that. We believe we can offer a lot to the people of Iran and they have much to offer us. We know that the people of the UK and the international community are poorer for our exit.
