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Nov 11, 2019 by *Yadira Ixchel Martínez Pantoja*

Laura Clarke and the Exercise of British Public Diplomacy ^[1]

An important feature of diplomacy in times of digital communication is to build strong relationships that last longer. The importance of a diplomat in a host country is still relevant nowadays in order to make history. The British High Commissioner Laura Clarke has done unprecedented work in New Zealand regarding the expression of regret presented to three Iwis for the deaths of Maori people by the *Endeavour's* crew led by James Cook in their first visits to Aotearoa. Certainly, she has made history acknowledging an act that was previously ignored by the British Crown. In order not to set a precedent, this acknowledgement had not been promoted by any other diplomat in other countries colonized by Britain.

This is a remarkable achievement for a diplomat seeking to recognize the importance of the original peoples of New Zealand. This act not only shows the importance of a diplomat building long-term relationships with the government and key local stakeholders in a host country, but also builds a more harmonic New Zealand-United Kingdom relationship with a

deeper understanding.

Furthermore, Clarke has not only advanced foreign policy goals with this acknowledgement; she has won the hearts and minds of many Maori people and New Zealanders. Clarke's diplomatic activities seem to be effective in engaging publics and building relationships with relevant stakeholders in New Zealand. Hiring a Maori engagement advisor in February of this year has been a clever instrument of the diplomatic toolbox in order to connect and build lasting relationships with the Iwis, who are key stakeholders in Aotearoa. What Clarke is performing to persuade publics, build a positive reputation and engage diverse stakeholders in New Zealand is public diplomacy.

Clarke's public diplomacy is accompanied by traditional diplomatic functions. These include promoting Britain's national interests, providing consular services, meeting other official representatives, and attending to protocolary events including a security discussion with Fiji's Navy as well as defense arrangements with Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia and Singapore. She also has attended to Anzac Day commemorations and discussed trade opportunities with the leader of the opposition, MP Simon Bridges, and other members of parliament, including MP Todd McClay, who are members of the Committee of Foreign Affairs, Defense and Trade.

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In addition to these activities, Clarke has smoothly employed different instruments of public diplomacy such as cultural promotion activities including the mini British Film Festival, the premiere of the Downton Abbey film, the London Pacific Fashion Week, and the Royal Overseas League (ROSL) photography competition. This also includes educational programs such as the British High Commission scholarships for Maori students to study Museum and Heritage studies at Victoria University of Wellington and Museum studies at Massey University, and the Chevening scholarships for Kiwi and Samoan graduates.

Other public diplomacy activities to appealing publics include promoting the Rugby World Cup and the Cricket World Cup on her Twitter account and creating mental health awareness by having a SPCA visit to the High Commission staff for mental health and walking in the Wellington's botanical gardens for wellbeing. She visits local businesses and schools including the famous Pic's Peanut Butter Factory in Nelson and the Mount Roskill Grammar School with MP Michael Wood. She knows the relevance of local traditions, media venues and celebrities. She celebrated Matariki (Maori New Year), discussed Brexit and the issue of e-passports on national TV shows such as NZ Q+A, met with the famous actor Sam Neil, and created a new competition for International Women's Day in which a Kiwi woman is the British High Commissioner for the day. Moreover, she attended the T? te Whaihangā exhibition which consisted of returning Maori artifacts that were held in British museums for 250 years, as a part of the *Endeavour* celebrations. These are engaging activities that show how she is culturally connected with the local people and heritage.

In order to build relationships, Clarke has participated in the Whaariki business forum in Auckland, spoken to Maori business leaders at the FOMA 32 Conference, visited the Cawthron Institute

in Nelson, and addressed the Royal Commonwealth Society & the British New Zealand Business Association (BNZBA) to create a Commonwealth trading group. Additionally, she has opened “Homewood,” which is the British High Commissioner’s official residence, as a venue for hosting British Chef Jack Cashmore, for other events such as a farewell dinner for the outgoing Defense Advisor, and for Christmas parties. She also spoke at the New Zealand Institute for International Affairs Auckland branch regarding the Pacific’s partnerships and shared values, promoted the UK’s agricultural technology in the Fieldays convention, attended the launch of the BNZBA new branch in Christchurch, co-hosted the World Press Freedom seminar, and had a meeting with Fonterra’s CEO Miles Hurrel. All this mix of public events, talks, seminars and visits have been used to promote the UK’s potential trade, agriculture, scientific cooperation and businesses opportunities that can be implemented between New Zealand and the United Kingdom.

This use of public diplomacy is certainly to promote Britain and advance possible trade opportunities after Brexit is completed. But Clarke has also opened a new chapter of a closer New Zealand-United Kingdom relationship. She has not only made history by addressing letters of regret to Maori people, but also exercised British public diplomacy through personal contact aided by social media, taking advantage of the “last three feet” of diplomacy. It shows the relevance of the presence of a diplomat in a host country in order to build relationships. More importantly, these public diplomacy activities are intended to create a positive British image and continue gaining the hearts and minds of more New Zealanders.

Note from the CPD Blog Manager: Read Martínez Pantoja’s previous CPD Blog post, “How Do Non-State Actors Enhance PD?,” [here](#).

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