A Class of its Own?

Social Class and the Foreign Office, 1782-2020

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Author's Note

This publication and the views expressed therein represent those of the author and not of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. All interview participants have been anonymised.

Foreword

Menna Rawlings

Director-General Economic and Global Issues

“Class is as adaptable as it is powerful.” That’s just one of the memorable lines from this fascinating publication, which tells the story of social class at the Foreign Office over the last 240 years.

Each historical period brings its own unique challenges to bear on social diversity of recruitment to the British Diplomatic Service. From the early days of the ‘breedings or feelings of gentlemen’, through decades of ‘all round good chaps’ to the early 21st century, our understanding of the issue has shifted over time.

And yet this can be a difficult subject. It goes to the heart of our identity and personal matters around our family and ourselves. That means we have struggled to measure or discuss class in the way we do gender or LGBT rights, or to defend ourselves against persistent accusations that we are elitist and drawn from too narrow a range of social backgrounds.

So I am delighted that Dr James Southern has lifted a lid on this most sensitive but important diversity issue. As we increase our efforts to collect data on the socioeconomic background of our staff, his study reminds us of how far we’ve come, and why it matters.

The FCO and social class have a complex historical relationship: it is essential that we understand this past in order to move forward.

A Note on Diplomats

When we talk about ‘diplomats’, what exactly do we mean?

Britain’s overseas representation has taken various departmental forms over the centuries. When the **Foreign Office** was formed in 1782, it was a small administrative department based in London, and a separate institution to the **Diplomatic Service**.

In 1919, the **Diplomatic Service** amalgamated with the **Foreign Office** and staff serving at home and overseas became interchangeable. In 1943 these bodies merged with the **Consular Service** to create the **Foreign Service**. Then, in 1965, the Foreign Service merged with the **Commonwealth Service** to create **H.M Diplomatic Service**.

The Foreign Service was then merged with the **Commonwealth Office** (itself an amalgamation of the Commonwealth Relations Office and Colonial Office) in 1968, establishing the **Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO)**, which is the name by which the organization is known at the time of writing.

The FCO today employs 13,000 people in over 270 diplomatic offices across 178 countries, but roughly 8,000 of its staff are ‘Locally Engaged’, and some are Home Civil Servants. Today’s Diplomatic Service, therefore, is a minority within the FCO as a whole.

But the focus of this publication, social class, affects each of the above departments in comparable (if subtly different) ways. Although, since the latter part of the nineteenth century, the Foreign Office itself has been staffed by a genuinely diverse mix of social classes, it is those in the upper echelons of the Foreign Office, and those in the Diplomatic Service (i.e. those who do representational work overseas), who historically have been drawn disproportionately from middle- or upper-class backgrounds – higher socioeconomic backgrounds in today’s parlance.

Thus, while this study discusses different organisations at different points in history, its core question remains constant throughout: over the past 250 years, has the social class of an individual affected which people do which jobs in British foreign policy?

I.

Introduction: A Class of its Own

Imagine a meeting in one of the 'fine rooms' at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office main building on King Charles Street, central London. The architecture – purposeful and grand – permanently reminds its twenty-first century inhabitants of the histories and traditions of British diplomacy, of which they are but the latest in a long line of representatives. The meeting has been convened to discuss UK economic policy in Central America. Three people are present.

The first, Emily, was educated at a middle-ranking public school in Shropshire. She grew up in a modest house near Shrewsbury with just her mother, but her father, who lives in the United States, is a wealthy business owner who paid for his daughter's education. Emily took a gap year to travel in South America, returned home to study Spanish at the University of Sussex, and after a further year spent teaching English in Madrid, joined the FCO in 2003.

The second, Charles, grew up in Glasgow. His father was a bank clerk and his mother a part-time typist. He benefitted from the promise offered by the 1944 Education Act to provide free grammar school places to children who passed the 'Eleven Plus' examination, and achieved the necessary 'O' and 'A' Levels to win a place at the University of Durham. After a degree in History, he took and passed the FCO entrance examinations in 1978.

The third person at the meeting, David, grew up in social housing in Hackney, London. His parents moved to Britain from Ghana as children during the 1950s, and are both bus drivers. David attended one of the best comprehensive schools in the country, and thanks to a number of outreach projects run by Hackney Council and by local charities, had work experience in the Houses of Parliament and in the office of an MP. Exceptionally clever, David took part in a social mobility scheme run by his Local Authority designed to help disadvantaged teenagers apply to Oxbridge. He was successful, reading Economics at Balliol College, Oxford. He joined the FCO shortly thereafter, in 2015.

The dynamics at play in this imaginary room offer clues as to the degree of influence class holds in our lives. Who – Emily, Charles, or David – do you think commands the most authority at this meeting? Who is likely to be the most confident, and who the most insecure? And how did where they grew up, where they went to school, and what jobs their parents did become so crucially important to their own working lives?

Meetings like that between Emily, Charles and David have been taking place at the Foreign Office for nearly 250 years. Much has changed in that time: the bowler hats, inkwells and moustaches are long gone, replaced by video teleconferences, instant messaging and flexible working. But one thing has been consistently present since 1782: the accusation that the British Foreign Office is an elitist institution.

Even a cursory overview of writings about the Foreign Office illustrates the persistence of this accusation. In 1858, the Liberal MP John Bright famously described Victorian foreign policy-making as 'a gigantic system of outdoor relief for the aristocracy',[1] while in 1882 Walter Bagehot maintained, in his *English Constitution*, that the 'old-world diplomacy of Europe was largely carried on in drawing rooms, and, to a great extent, of necessity still is so'.[2] A 1929 Fabian Tract written by Robert Nightingale publicly castigated the Foreign Office for failing to broaden its recruitment beyond aristocratic sources.[3] In 1965 the Foreign Office was still being described by Anthony Sampson as a pseudo-aristocracy, 'bound together by their Oxbridge background; by the intimacy of Third Rooms; [and] by the perpetual round of embassy parties'.[4] By the 2010s, the criticisms levelled by the Social Mobility Commission were instead focussed on Oxbridge rather than aristocracy, but the fundamental charge of social bias persevered unaltered. Peter Hennessy, the former *Times* Whitehall correspondent, summed it up best when he described the Foreign Office as perpetually 'subject to streams of vilification from all parts of the political spectrum, with the added dimension ... of a dash of bad old English class warfare and resentment'.[5]

Repeatedly, the Foreign Office has tried to shrug off this accusation. Since the mid-nineteenth century, it has invariably been engaged in some scheme or other to try to challenge the allegedly upper-class profile of its recruits: introducing open competitive examinations in the 1870s; interviews in 1916; comprehensive salaries in 1919; commitments to hire 'from any social sphere' in 1943; and a seemingly infinite array of outreach schemes throughout the postwar period, designed to attract graduates from universities other than Oxford and Cambridge.

Moreover, since the 1980s, the Foreign Office has made good, if sometimes slow, progress on incorporating women, and people who identify as LGBT, or, to a lesser extent, disabled people and those from what is now termed BAME backgrounds. Class has not yet found its place within the broader diversity and inclusion agenda that has risen to prominence in the Civil Service in recent years.

It could be argued that, since it is excluded from the Equality Act 2010, socioeconomic background is less urgent an issue than the nine legally protected characteristics: age; disability; gender; marital status; pregnancy and maternity; race; religion or belief; sex; and sexual orientation. The Act does state that public sector authorities must aim 'to reduce the inequalities of outcome which result from socio-economic disadvantage', but does not explicitly include social class under this rubric. Put simply, there is no legal justification for improving socioeconomic diversity across the UK government, including at the FCO.

Neglecting socioeconomic diversity for this reason, however, would be to miss the point of the Equality Act: those nine characteristics are included because there is a clear moral and political argument for each, and in this sense class is no different. Its exclusion from the Act has more to do with the fact that it resists straightforward definition and quantification than any serious political opposition to improving social mobility or socioeconomic equality.

On this basis, the 2010s saw the Civil Service begin to incorporate socioeconomic background into its diversity and inclusion agenda, using the same justifications, such as fairness and business efficiency, it uses to push for other types of diversity. While evidence about the impact of socioeconomic diversity is still being gathered, there are nonetheless calls from inside and outside Whitehall to take socioeconomic background (SEB) more seriously. The Bridge Report, commissioned by the Cabinet Office in 2016, listed a litany of socioeconomic biases intrinsic to the Civil Service Fast Stream recruitment process.[6] A recent KPMG report argued that 'social mobility isn't just a "nice to have"', but rather an 'integral part' of staffing policy, while a McKinsey & Company report from 2018 cited socioeconomic background as one of the factors contributing to the efficiencies in productivity that organisations may attain through improving staff diversity.[7]

If socioeconomic background is to be a permanent fixture in the Civil Service diversity and inclusion agenda, it is important to be clear on what the FCO can and cannot do to help. Where does it fit with the cycles of socioeconomic inequality sustained by the UK education system? Does its historic reputation as an elitist institution affect the way it recruits and the environment in which its staff do their work? Indeed, is there something inherent in diplomatic work that makes it more difficult or uncomfortable for people from particular socioeconomic backgrounds?

This publication aims to uncover the myriad ways class has shaped the history of British diplomacy, to assess the legacy of that history for the organisation today, and – it is hoped – to provide some of the tools and information necessary to tackle the issue of social class in the twenty-first century Foreign and Commonwealth Office. It makes no claims to solve whatever problems exist in the relationship between the Foreign Office and social class. Instead, it tells the story of that relationship, getting to the root of a perennial national preoccupation with the social status of British diplomats. Beginning with the FCO's eighteenth-century origins, it follows the tumultuous tale of class and British diplomacy through the rise and fall of the British Empire, two world wars, the Cold War, and a long list of Prime Ministers, Foreign Secretaries, and governments. Throughout, it asks one simple question: does the Foreign Office have a 'class problem'?

To answer this question, though, we have to be clear about what we mean by a 'class problem', and indeed what we mean when we talk about 'class' at all. British diplomats have been variously celebrated, respected, lampooned, criticised, and caricatured on the basis of the elitist, narrow range of social backgrounds from which they allegedly traditionally hail. Indeed, so clichéd has the idea of the upper-class diplomat become that it is almost a cliché to try to write about it. But social class is too complex – and too important – to be reduced to mere cliché. If we are to tackle the issue in a serious way, we first have to understand what we mean when we talk about 'class'.

II.

Class: A User's Guide

If class is a problem at the FCO, then any solution must be devised with the unique institutional culture of the FCO in mind. But it is important to distinguish between what an organization such as the FCO can and cannot do when it comes to class.

Governments, for example, can approach the problem of social class on a society-wide scale: the Labour Party's revolutionary nationalisation programme in the 1940s, and the Conservative Party's vision of a 'property-owning democracy' in the 1980s are both examples of political attempts to make Britain a more equal society.

The FCO, though, is not responsible for class inequality at this level, despite the criticism often levelled at it as an alleged bastion of class privilege. It cannot be expected to mould the education system from which it recruits, nor the employment market in which it operates. Like every other employer, it interacts with wider society in its own, unique, way.

What we need, then, is a definition of social class that makes sense to Civil Service recruiters, to FCO Outreach campaigners, and to diplomats in London and around the world trying to make sense of the environments in which they work. In short, we need a definition of class that makes sense in our day-to-day working lives on an individual, personal level.

We know that sexuality, gender and race *feel* very personal. LGBT people describe the ordeal of having to 'come out' to every new person they meet – the assumption being that everyone is straight. Add to this the growing awareness of sexual harassment in the workplace, and the 'micro-aggressions' reportedly encountered by BAME people on a daily basis, and it is clear that our identities have implications in the minutiae of our working lives.

Can class fit with other types of 'identity politics' in this way? Can we talk about 'coming out' as working-class, or experiencing 'micro-aggressions' as a result of our educational background? Does the FCO really have a problem with class, or is its historical association with social elites no more than a pernicious myth?

* * *

The definitions and effects of social class are among the most challenging aspects of our identities, at once extremely powerful and at the same time too vague to describe. Race, gender and sexuality exist on continuums, and there are often complex and personally challenging difficulties in deciding whether one *feels* like a man or a woman, whether one identifies with a particular racial or ethnic group, or how and with whom one likes to have sex. But there are strong political traditions, and associated

legislative frameworks, which mean that plausible, politically-significant identification along these lines is possible.

Class, however, is a completely different proposition. Gone are the days of Marxist arguments claiming that everyone who earns a wage is by definition 'working class', and gone are the days in which one's class background could easily be identified by dress or accent. Yet widening inequality in Britain, and persistent statistics about the educational background of British diplomats, remind us that it is nonetheless an urgent issue: all our lives are somehow powerfully shaped by where, to whom, and in what circumstances we are born.

It is easy to assume that, in a capitalist society, class status is determined by money. Certainly, the sociological evidence is clear that better education, standard of living and familial financial support (colloquially called 'the bank of Mum and Dad') significantly increase the chances of getting a good job and earning a higher salary. But, as the history of class at the Foreign Office clearly demonstrates, the acquisition and maintenance of social status is about much more than money.

If economics is only part of the picture, what else should we be looking for? In 2019, the Foreign Office announced that it would, for the first time, try to measure and record the socioeconomic background of its staff. It used extensive research undertaken by the Cabinet Office, which included consultation with 43 employers, industry partners and experts, and produced a longlist of 26 measures, which were then piloted with the 4,200 members of the Senior Civil Service and pared down accordingly. The resulting questions were put to civil servants in the annual Staff Survey conducted in each department, including the FCO:

SEB Questions, FCO Staff Survey (2019)

1. **What type of school did you mainly attend between the ages of 11 and 16?**
2. **What is the highest level of qualification achieved by either of your parent(s) or guardian(s) by the time you were 18?**
3. **Thinking back to when you were aged about 14, which best describes the sort of work the main/highest income earner in your household did in their main job?***
4. **Thinking back to when you were aged about 14, did the main/highest income earner in your household work as an employee or self-employed?**
5. **If the highest income earner in your household was employed when you were aged 14, how many people worked for this employer? If they were self-employed and employed other people, how many people did they employ?***
6. **If the highest income earner in your household was employed when you were aged 14, did they supervise any other employees?**
7. **Compared to people in general, would you describe yourself as coming from a lower socio-economic background?**

***Responses to these questions were to be selected from a multiple-choice menu.**

These questions are, of course, designed to measure class background in a way that produces statistics that can, year-on-year, be used to track progress in a manner akin to the way the proportions of women, LGBT and BAME staff are monitored. While some questions ask about education and self-identification, the majority focus on parental occupation – a traditional indicator of social background.

Indeed, the questions about parental occupation are so designed as to fit with what is known as the National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (NS-SEC) system: the method used by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) to classify the UK population according to occupation. NS-SEC was developed in the 1970s by the sociologist John Goldthorpe; its careful distinctions between the self-employed and employed are hallmarks of older Marxist approaches to class analysis that focus on exploitation of labour and the position of an individual within a capitalist economy.

National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification		
NS-SEC Class		Example occupations
1	Large employers and higher managerial and professional occupations	Company directors; senior civil servants; medical doctors; university lecturers
2	Lower managerial and professional occupations	Journalists; musicians; nurses; school teachers
3	Intermediate occupations	Graphic designers; secretaries; estate agents; police officers
4	Small employers and own account workers	Farmers; hotel managers; taxi drivers
5	Lower supervisory and technical occupations	Electricians; plumbers; landscape gardeners; train drivers
6	Semi-routine occupations	Builders; traffic wardens; call centre workers
7	Routine occupations	Cleaners; waiting staff; labourers; factory workers
8	Never worked and long-term unemployed	
*	Full-time students; occupations not stated or inadequately described; not classifiable	
* “Not classified”		

Understandably, then, the Civil Service has anchored its survey questions in this nationally recognised NS-SEC system. Designed to illustrate the shape of the economy as a whole, NS-SEC categorisation provides the FCO with the means to compile quantitative data and compare itself with other organisations and with the country at large. These criteria make perfect sense, considering the priorities set out by Civil Service Social Mobility Champion Bernadette Kelly in 2018, which depend on gathering a 'baseline of data' by 2020.[8]

Yet data on parental occupation paint an incomplete picture. Knowing where people started in life, in economic terms, is a tangible way of measuring the parts of society from which the FCO draws its recruits, but it neglects many of the characteristics that help or hinder individuals in their lives and careers.

Consider, for example, the following two quotations from interviews conducted in 2019 for this study. The first is from a senior member of the office, responding to a question about whether class still matters in the FCO:

> Less so nowadays – though certainly during my first few years in the office and at lower grades people would often ask me to repeat things (because my accent was funny) and ask me 'how someone with my background' had managed to get into the FCO.

The second is a reflection on the class connotations of regional accents from a recent junior entrant to the Foreign Office:

> I was born in London and lived in the south until the age of 8. When our family moved 'up north' and I started school in Stockport, I was very surprised to learn that my fellow classmates thought that I was 'posh'. Gradually, I acquired a 'northern' accent and now naturally speak that way.
>
> When I moved down to Oxford to go to uni, I was 'the northerner' in my friendship group, which carried working-class connotations for many people I met. At interview, one girl (who, to put it mildly, was not enjoying the experience) confided in me that she 'couldn't stand all the private school wankers' that we were coming into contact with. I thought it best not to mention that my parents actually paid for my sixth-form attendance (given her rage) but I thought it was interesting that she had obviously deduced from my way of speaking that I wasn't 'one of them'.

Three things stand out from these responses. The first is that, clearly, accent is tacitly acknowledged by both as a marker of social difference, whether as a 'funny' character trait or as an indication of being 'one of us/them'.

The second is that informal ways of identifying class, like accent, might easily be misleading: in the former case, misleading about ability (would the respondent's colleagues have continued to question how the individual in questioned 'had managed to get into the FCO' had they known they were talking to a future Head of Mission?); in the latter case, misleading to the point of convincing a stranger that the respondent was from a significantly less privileged social background than in fact was the case.

But the third point is the most important: in both examples, it is the social context that defines the significance and meaning of class. It is 'less' of a problem for a now-senior diplomat in the FCO of 2019 than it once was and, for the junior officer, it was the institutional backdrop of the University of Oxford that relegated a privately educated individual to temporary working-class status.

What does all this reveal? That our class identities are never fixed, never stable, and never quite clear. Every time we walk into a room, our class identity changes: we might feel superior, inferior, or similar to people we meet, depending on how we assess their social status and how they assess ours. One conversation might make us feel further up or down the social ladder than the next.

Indeed, not only does the meaning of our class background change according to the social situations we encounter, it also changes over time as our lives and personalities develop. The environments in which we grow up tend to be the source of our class identities: the wealthy, successful 'working-class hero' is still thought of as working-class, while George Orwell famously concluded that no amount of financial hardship could eradicate his essentially middle-class status. But some aspects can and do change. Another diplomat described his class identity as follows:

> Working class. My father was a grocer, my mother a secretary. Going to university, joining the FCO and marrying a middle class woman have probably made me *de facto* middle class now.

Clearly, this interviewee felt at once *both* working class *and* middle class. His education, career and marriage were all symbols of his personal social mobility, but, beneath the surface, he is still, in some ways, the son of a grocer.

The fundamental truth underpinning all these statements is that class is as adaptable as it is powerful. Clearly, a child who grows up in poverty, in social housing, and with parents who lack education, is faced with rigid, tangible barriers to obtaining a good job and financial security as an adult. But give that child education, support, and social connections, and class nonetheless endures: often buried beneath lacquered-on symbols of middle-class status, occasionally surfacing through an accent, an insecurity, or a misplaced comment.

In the 1980s, the French philosopher Pierre Bourdieu pioneered a new concept to capture aspects of class, such as those in the examples above, which 'traditional' models based on economics can neglect. He called it 'cultural capital', and defined it as 'familiarity with the legitimate culture within a society' – in other words, the extent to which an individual is able to 'fit in' with the bits of a culture considered superior by a particular society.

Cultural capital, Bourdieu said, can be institutionalised, such as via qualifications and credentials, or it can be about taste and identity. So, crudely, having a degree from a Russell Group university, liking French literature, and having a clipped English accent is more likely to engender success than having a couple of A levels, liking Oasis, and speaking with a broad Geordie accent – independent of ability or work ethic.

Since Bourdieu, sociologists such as Mike Savage and Sam Friedman have developed the idea of 'cultural capital' and used it to interpret empirical evidence about class in the UK. The *Great British Class Survey*, a rolling online poll launched in 2013, has collected masses of data to substantiate Bourdieu's theories and provide a detailed picture of the class structure of twenty-first-century Britain. Savage and his colleagues identified seven different 'new classes' of people in Britain in the 2010s, which, while they are probably too precise and contemporary to be of much use to the FCO, emphasise a crucial general point: class is too fluid and too complex to be reduced to simple categories such as 'middle class' and 'working class', and people differ from each other in a multitude of ways not captured by traditional sociological theory.[9]

It is easy to see, looking at the results of the *Great British Class Survey*, why reliable definitions of class have eluded sociologists and politicians alike for decades. In a sense, we now know *too much* about class to tie it to any one definition. What we can do, however, is try to draw together some of the ways – old and new – that have been used to measure class, to try to put together a guide that, while open to interpretation, at least helps us know what to look for. Drawing on Bourdieu, and on insights from several other traditions of sociological analysis, a 'User's Guide' to class might look something like this:

CLASS: A USER'S GUIDE	Type of capital		
	ECONOMIC (what you have)	SOCIAL (who you know, and who you are)	CULTURAL (what you know)
IDENTIFIERS	Household income	Occupation	Education
	Savings and investments	Social networks and influence	Tastes (music, art, books, food, hobbies)
	Property	Postcode	Presentation (accent, dress, humour, body language)

By eschewing rigid definitions and instead mapping out different methods of class identification like this, we can pick and choose characteristics and attributes according to the data we have or the situation in which we find ourselves. One person, an artist, may have very high cultural capital but very low economic capital. Another, a successful entrepreneur, may have lots of money, but little formal education. One might accrue economic and social capital throughout a successful career, but still 'feel' working class in habits and tastes. Thinking back to the example laid out in the Introduction, we can see that Emily, David and Charles are each advantaged and disadvantaged, socioeconomically, in different ways.

What a 'User's Guide' provides, that a 'definition' cannot, is the freedom to select from a menu of manifestations of class to suit particular situations. As we move through the history of the Foreign Office in the following chapters, it will become clear that different types of 'capital' are more valuable in some historical periods than in others.

In the early nineteenth century, for example, before the advent of salaries, there was a requirement that British diplomats possessed significant economic capital, but also high levels of 'social capital' in order to penetrate the chanceries and palaces in which international diplomacy was conducted. By contrast, twenty-first century salaries and expenses have made 'economic capital' theoretically irrelevant, and more formal bilateral and multilateral diplomatic relationships have diminished the need for social networks among political elites. But in an era where 'soft power' is the UK's most powerful weapon, British diplomats' 'cultural capital' is arguably more important than ever.

III.

The Breeding or Feelings of Gentlemen
1782–1914

The Foreign Office was created in, and by, a world of social and political turmoil. In 1782, amid fears that the American Revolutionary War (1775–83) was a harbinger of further violent resistance to European power, it was decided that British foreign policy required more formal organisation and direction. The political movement known as 'radicalism', which was primarily a demand for democracy, was growing on both sides of the English Channel. In France, of course, the 1789 revolution attempted to engineer an historic change in the relationship between the ruling aristocracy and 'the people', but in Britain, too, elites were anxious that their compatriots might follow suit, and the slightest indication of sedition was ruthlessly suppressed.

All institutions are shaped by the societies into which they were born (think of the postwar National Health Service or the medieval University of Oxford). The Foreign Office was no different, weaving the cultural and social assumptions of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries into its institutional fabric.

This was the era evoked so well by the novels of Jane Austen and Anthony Trollope, when a small number of aristocratic families possessed the vast bulk of the wealth of the nation and all of its political power. But it was also an era in which the very idea of a 'social elite' was increasingly being questioned – an era in which new political movements like radicalism, Chartism, anarchism, socialism, communism and, eventually, Marxism were emerging as challenges to the political status quo. Put simply, the Foreign Office was forged in a world of strict social hierarchy, but one which was beginning to fall apart.

Britain, of course, did not have its class revolution. Instead, the politics of class manifested itself as a gradual erosion of aristocratic monopoly on the instruments of government. The 1832 Reform Act afforded the newly industrialised northern cities greater representation in Parliament, but limited the franchise to those owning a household worth £10 or more – giving approximately one in five men (but no women) the vote. Concessions were made to the businessmen and traders of the *middle* classes – the beneficiaries of the Industrial Revolution – but the working classes continued to be excluded.

For the Foreign Office, and the Civil Service more broadly, the idea that talent, rather than birth, ought to dictate recruitment to elite professions became increasingly important as the nineteenth century wore on. Just as they had gained parliamentary representation, the middle classes began to demand greater access to political power to match the economic power they had accrued. The response to these demands was the development of a strategy of managed inclusion, which was to serve as a guide to the gradual opening of Whitehall recruitment to people from an increasingly wide range of backgrounds throughout the twentieth century.

The first intimations of the managed inclusion of those without impeccable aristocratic credentials came in 1833, when Thomas Macaulay steered the India Bill through Parliament. Macaulay's bill argued that recruitment to the Indian Civil Service should be by open competitive examinations. As he told the House of Commons:

> It is proposed that for every vacancy in the civil service four candidates shall be named, and the best candidate elected by examination. We conceive that, under this system, the persons sent out will be young men above par—young men superior either in talents or in diligence to the mass …

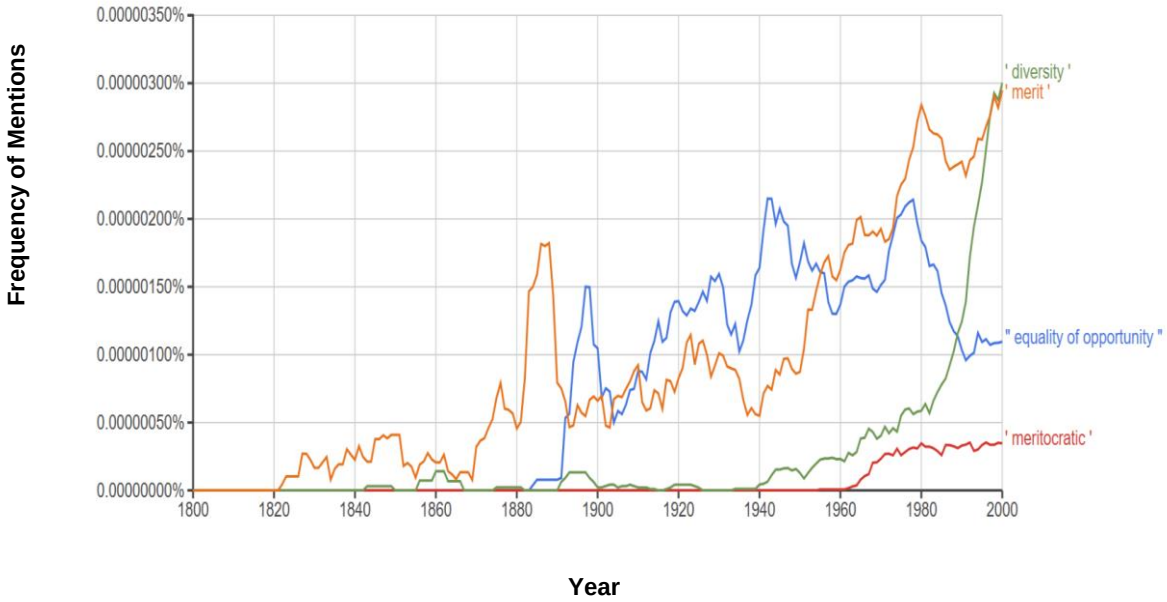
Macaulay's intervention took twenty years to take root in the UK, but when it did so, in the form of the Northcote-Trevelyan Report in 1856, the impact of his ideas was profound. Widely acknowledged as the founding document of the UK Civil Service, the Northcote-Trevelyan Report was the latest in a line of 12 official inquiries into the public service in Britain. It stated, in the boldest terms, that allocation of jobs in the Civil Service on the basis of aristocratic patronage, as opposed to ability, was detrimental to government work:

> Admission into the Civil Service is for the unambitious, and the indolent or incapable … Those whose abilities do not warrant an expectation that they will succeed in the open professions … and those whom indolence of temperament or physical infirmities [make] unfit for active exertions, are placed in the Civil Service.[10]

Northcote and Trevelyan went on to lament that the 'parents and friends of sickly youths' were able to influence recruitment to obtain sinecures for their incompetent offspring. As the Civil Service became steadily more professionalised, in line with other professions such as accountancy and the law, so the need to recruit more formally became increasingly urgent.

It would be a mistake, however, to think of the Northcote-Trevelyan report as an attempt to advance any kind of 'equal opportunities' agenda in the Civil Service. Indeed, as the graph below indicates (if only crudely: the data is not context-specific), the words and phrases used to describe and promote such ideas only really began to circulate towards the end of Queen Victoria's reign. Northcote and Trevelyan's diagnosis was that the country needed more than aristocrats alone to be governed effectively; their cure was an invitation for a select few middle-class men to bolster the professionalism of Whitehall.

Fig. 1: Usage of equality-related terms in English-language books published since 1800 (Google Ngram)



Not everyone was impressed. The then Prime Minister Lord John Russell opposed the recommendations, and Queen Victoria herself is alleged to have worried that abandonment of recruitment by patronage would 'fill the public offices with low people without the breeding or feelings of gentlemen'.[11] The reforms took until 1870 to implement, and did not receive official endorsement until the Playfair Commission of 1875.

The Foreign Office in particular managed to resist substantial reform of its recruitment processes, retaining rules about requirement of both private property and a personal nomination from a Private Secretary from those wishing to join. The political commentator Walter Bagehot observed in the 1860s that 'the new trade-class is in real merit equal to the aristocracy', but caveated:

> There is one kind of business in which our aristocracy have still, and are likely to retain long, a certain advantage. This is the business of diplomacy … The old-world diplomacy of Europe was largely carried on in drawing-rooms, and to a great extent, of necessity still is so … It is always the highest class which travels most, knows most of foreign nations, has the least of the territorial sectarianism, which calls itself patriotism, and is often thought to be so.[12]

In other words, the Foreign Office continued to claim that the unique nature of its work demanded a unique approach to recruitment: after all, how could the sons of bank clerks be expected to infiltrate the elite networks of European politics?

Referring back to the types of 'capital' – economic, social, and cultural – outlined in the first chapter, it is clear that at the nineteenth-century Foreign Office, diplomats required all three in abundance: economic capital, because they were not paid a salary (for a two-year probationary period at least); social capital, because they were required

to ingratiate themselves in the chanceries and palaces of Europe; and cultural capital, to understand one another's values and instincts. It is unsurprising, given this rigid set of requirements, that recruitment from a small circle of social elites was so efficiently sustained.

By the early 1910s, however, the diplomatic infrastructure that had been carefully constructed in the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars was disintegrating. As Britain, and Europe, teetered on the brink of war, the idea that aristocratic *noblesse oblige* could steer British diplomacy through the twentieth century as it had the nineteenth looked less credible than once it had. The Foreign Office was formed to help co-ordinate British foreign policy with greater efficiency, and thus far the tight-knit group of men recruited from a few families and even fewer schools had done the job. European diplomacy and British politics, however, were changing.

IV.

All-Round Good Chaps
1914–1945

By the early twentieth century, there were signs that structural changes in the Civil Service might force a reconsideration of the recruitment process. The Liberal governments of Henry Campbell-Bannerman and Herbert Asquith introduced a raft of legislation, which in effect created an incipient welfare state, and thus hugely increased the Whitehall workload. Staff numbers grew rapidly in the first half of the twentieth century, creating a demand – as in the nineteenth-century – that a recruitment pool consisting of a select few men increasingly could not meet.

Concurrently, the Education Acts of 1902 and 1918 (among others) helped to stimulate an increase in the number of secondary school places, and made a concomitant commitment to ensure all children stayed at school until at least the age of 14. The Civil Service had outgrown Britain's upper classes, and the education system was beginning to create a widening pool from which the excess jobs could be filled.

Of further significance for Civil Service recruitment was the fact that by the time the First World War had run its course, the politics of class in Britain had fundamentally altered. New political parties and intellectual movements committed to egalitarian redistribution of power and wealth were gathering momentum. The 'working-class century', as some historians have called it, was about to begin.[13]

The Labour Party, formed in 1900 as the Labour Representation Committee, could count on an electorate much more sympathetic to its policies after the Representation of the People Act (1918) abolished property qualifications for voting rights. Internationally, the Russian Revolution had established the world's first socialist state on the basis of Karl Marx's theory of class. Whereas the nineteenth century had been a story of middle-class demands for political representation, the twentieth century looked set to become a battleground for working-class demands for a greater share of the power and wealth of the nation.

In Whitehall, the response to emerging threats to the British class system was to organise a series of committees, commissions and reforms. A Royal Commission on the Civil Service appointed in 1914 identified some of the more anachronistic features of the Diplomatic Service, and set about removing them. In April 1919, the Diplomatic Service was officially merged with the Foreign Office, thus losing the separateness upon which its resistance to modernisation had hitherto depended. The Commission also, crucially, abandoned the 'property qualification' (a lower limit on private assets required for membership of the Diplomatic Service) and introduced formal wage grades. The pay remained poor, but in terms of widening access to British diplomacy as a profession, these reforms were harbingers of lasting change.

Economic barriers, however, have an extraordinary ability to survive – if the jobs they protect are sufficiently desirable. When entry to a desirable profession can be 'bought' in some way, even if only partially, then recruitment will always be dominated by individuals from wealthier families. The early twentieth-century Civil Service was no different: half a century after the Northcote-Trevelyan Report, middle-class parents were 'gaming' the examinations system with money in the same way Victorian upper-class families had been 'gaming' the patronage system with social connection.

The MacDonnell Commission sat from 1912 to 1914, and found that some parents were sending their sons to special colleges known as 'crammers' which, in exchange for a substantial fee, promised to coach their students to pass the Civil Service entry exams.[14] A year later, in 1916, the Leathes Committee suggested that incorporating an oral interview into the recruitment process would help to level the playing field; after all, nobody could 'learn' a personality or how to think on the spot. The Tomlin Commission in 1929, however, criticised the interview process, pointing out that wealthy students with privileged educational backgrounds were disproportionately successful. The Civil Service entered into a cycle in which each report it commissioned offered little more than an explanation as to why the previous report had failed; privilege, it seemed, was always one step ahead.

Routes into the Civil Service are one thing, but in the 1920s and 1930s Whitehall itself was evolving into an altogether different place to work. In 1919, with the ink still wet on the First World War peace treaties, Warren Fisher was appointed Head of the Civil Service – a maverick visionary who was, for better or worse, to define more than anyone else the way Whitehall recruited and promoted in the twentieth century.

Born the only son of an independently wealthy family in 1879, Fisher attended Winchester public school before spending four years at the University of Oxford. Despite the circumstances of his upbringing, his career looked decidedly unpropitious upon his graduation. Having failed to get into the Royal Navy on medical grounds, he botched the entry exam for the Indian Civil Service. Resolved that his future lay in the public service, he attended Wren's 'crammer' and scraped through the Civil Service examinations, eventually accepting a post with the Inland Revenue in 1903.

Stereotypical product of privilege and wealth he may have been, but Fisher was no conformist. He married in 1906, but continued to pursue casual extramarital sex, and by the time he and his wife Maysie formally separated in 1921 his reputation as a womaniser was common knowledge in Whitehall. This restlessness and temerity was evident in his professional life, too: he made no secret of his distaste for the Inland Revenue and within less than five years applied twice for transfer to the Treasury.

Fisher's rambunctious style won him admirers, and serendipitously the radical welfare forms enacted by David Lloyd George's government provided a bureaucratic platform for his talents in the form of the National Insurance Commission in 1912. A series of quick promotions through important roles ensued, and soon, a man who scraped through the Civil Service entry examinations and who had little economic

expertise to speak of, found himself appointed Permanent Secretary to Her Majesty's Treasury and the first Head of the Home Civil Service.[1]

From the moment he was appointed, Fisher's aim was to inculcate a distinct Civil Service identity. He envisaged a Whitehall populated by bureaucratic 'all-rounders', who could be parachuted into any department and any role at a moment's notice. To Fisher, it was of little importance whether or not civil servants had specific expertise – such as knowledge of agricultural policy or employment law – to do the jobs they were given. He cared more about building a common ethos and culture whereby civil servants, like soldiers or doctors, could be deployed into any given situation and their professional training and instincts would see them through.

With impressive efficiency, he embedded a cult of 'gifted amateurishness' (the 'super bureaucrats', as Richard Crossman would later describe them) in the Civil Service, but, crucially, could only do so by attaching his recruitment criteria to a web of assumptions and prejudices about social class in interwar Britain.[15] If expertise in a particular subject was not sought as a priority, other proxies for ability would be required in order to sift successful candidates from the field of selection.

As a man who had a poor track record in examinations, but who had traded on personable audacity to rise to the top of his profession, Fisher had strong views about 'talent' and the forms it took. He was suspicious of grammar-school boys – for him, they lacked a certain worthiness of character with which only the public schools could imbue young men. Imperviousness to corruption and bravery in the face of bureaucratic emergency were Fisher's watchwords; the proportional decrease in public school graduates entering the Civil Service since the early 1900s was, he thought, an existential threat to such values.

Giving evidence to a Royal Commission in 1931, Fisher explained his method for identifying the general personality traits and professional characteristics he deemed more important than specialised skills:

> The Service estimate of the capacities of individual officers for higher promotion is obtained and collated by informal discussions between the Permanent Secretary to the Treasury and his senior Service colleagues.[16]

He went on to outline why, in his view, this informality was so effective:

> The less formal it is the greater the likelihood, in my opinion, of the eventual judgement being correct. My colleagues in departments, whenever they may come into my room, in the course of discussion sooner or later get onto this question, and they are themselves looking out for people. Names are canvassed … in the most informal way a trend of opinion gradually forms itself as to the suitability of people … [17]

This type of recruitment is exactly what today's Civil Service Competency Framework and Success Profiles (of which more later) are designed to avoid. The informality that

[1] The Permanent Secretary to the Treasury had until Fisher's appointment been paid a higher salary than equivalent posts in other departments and was informally considered the Head of the Civil Service, but Fisher was the first officially to be given the title.

Fisher prized creates a space in which 'cultural capital' and 'social capital' flourish, and in which class prejudices and personal relationships therefore affect the recruitment process. The increasingly rigid parameters within which Foreign Office (and Civil Service) job interviews are conducted are an ongoing reaction against a culture of informality that went necessarily hand-in-hand with the 'cult of the all-rounder' that had dominated Whitehall for much of the twentieth century.

In this context, it is easy to understand why the various inquiries into the Civil Service in the interwar period encountered so many intractable problems with social bias in the recruitment process. From a Civil Service point of view, reforming recruitment procedure is a perfectly reasonable reaction to evidence of social bias in the system. But as this study shows, there has yet to be invented a recruitment method that cannot be 'gamed', at least to some extent. Throughout Civil Service history, parents with economic, social, or cultural capital have invariably (and understandably) found ways to bolster their children's chances of gaining employment in Whitehall.

This is not to say, though, that recruitment systems are inherently equally liable to perpetuate social bias; nor is it to say that reforming recruitment has no impact upon social diversity. After the Northcote-Trevelyan Report in the 1850s, the number of aristocrats in the Foreign Office and Diplomatic Service declined, despite strong resistance to the Report's recommendations. Moreover, the growth of the organisation required an administrative army of lower division clerks, who quickly outnumbered their aristocratic colleagues. The Foreign Office did evolve. But the gaps vacated by the nobility were filled by the sons of elite professionals like bankers, barristers and military officers. So when structural barriers like the property qualification were removed, there were in fact already clear routes into the Foreign Office and Diplomatic Service available to those whose economic capital proffered advantages comparable to elites from previous eras.

Zara Steiner, a leading expert on social elitism and foreign policy, described the effect of changes to the recruitment system in the early twentieth century:

> … the middle classes were already using the public schools as a means of entering the governing classes … The domination of Eton, admittedly a very large public school, seems to have increased rather than diminished in the early 20th century. Between 1908 and 1914, 9 out of 16 clerks and 16 out of 21 attachés came from this one school. However lazy or industrious such prospective recruits may have been, they, like their political heads, had gone through an educational system geared to moulding a particular kind of man.[18]

The existence of the property qualification kept out those without money, but the socially-biased recruitment it had cultivated meant that there was a particular template for how a diplomat looked, sounded and behaved. Although the formal constraints on class-based recruitment were gradually unravelling, there remained a stubborn conviction that the type of knowledge and conditioning required for diplomacy remained unchanged. As Steiner pointed out:

> The whole entrance procedure and the examination system was intended to recruit the kind of man who was fit for a diplomatic career. This meant men who could move in a certain social milieu … [19]

While *economic* status may not have been a formal prerequisite for diplomats after the introduction of salaries, there were still *cultural* minimum requirements for entry to the Foreign Office. This was to be Warren Fisher's Whitehall legacy: resetting recruitment criteria along cultural lines.

On the face of it, developments between 1918 and 1939 were an appropriate response to social change in the country at large. Sections of the population hitherto disconnected from government were steadily being incorporated into the political life of the nation: the 1918 Representation of the People Act gave men over the age of 21 (and women over 30) the right to vote, regardless of whether or not they owned property; political representation for society's poorest had been augmented by the simultaneous rise of Trade Unionism and the Labour Party, as exemplified by the election of the first Labour government in 1923, and the 1.7-million-strong General Strike in 1926. Moreover, the incremental growth of access to education had begun to erode erstwhile barriers to 'professions' requiring qualifications, such as accountancy and law, which had emerged in the nineteenth century. In restructuring their recruitment criteria, the Foreign Office and Whitehall were simply bringing themselves into line with the evolution of the British economy and employment market.

But it is worth pausing for a moment to think, in the light of all this interwar change, about the three types of 'capital' identified in the opening chapter. If the Victorian Foreign Office had been a place where economic, social *and* cultural capital were required in equal measure, which of these mattered now?

As elsewhere in this study, questions such as this are difficult to confront. Instead of straight answers, paradoxes prevail: educational attainment was increasingly available to all, but superior education could be bought; interviews tested personality, but also tested how well an individual 'fitted in' with existing diplomats; and while barriers to entry had theoretically been removed, nothing had been done to challenge the template for success – recruiters' idea of the 'ideal diplomat' remained loaded with cultural assumptions.

Undoubtedly, in the first part of the twentieth century, the rules of the recruitment game changed at the Foreign Office. But rule changes in and of themselves are never the issue. Rather, the crucial question is this: can those who possess high levels of economic, social, or cultural capital use that capital to increase unfairly their chances of gaining employment in the Foreign Office?

As far as interwar observers were concerned, there was no clear answer to this question. In 1929, the scholar Robert Nightingale wrote a Fabian Tract that rebuked in the boldest terms to date the class biases of the Diplomatic Service. Nightingale cast the struggle to democratise access to the Civil Service as comparable to nineteenth-century battles for suffrage and representation, and did not hold back in stating the urgency of the problem:

> The bureaucracy in foreign affairs has been one of the last strongholds in which the aristocratic principle has withstood the advance of democracy.[20]

Nightingale's intervention represented the first attempt to frame recruitment to the Foreign Office in terms of democracy and social justice, rather than in terms of efficiency.

But despite his grim foreboding, Nightingale was in fact relatively relaxed about the relationship between aristocracy and the Foreign Office. He found 'evidence of a well-defined movement towards democratisation in the Diplomatic Service', pointing out that the number of aristocrats recruited was now less than one in three and that almost half of recruits were 'men whose fathers earned their own livelihood'.[21] He did express concern that 'the proportion of aristocrats is distinctly higher in the more important … posts', but was generally optimistic about the direction of change.

What did concern Nightingale was the rate at which an elite education was replacing aristocratic credentials as a rite of passage for diplomatic hopefuls. Between 1851 and 1929, he pointed out, 255 people had been recruited; of these, '72 had been to Oxford, 36 to Cambridge, and 115 to no university at all'.[22] Even within the organisation, Nightingale thought the formula for success was clear: ' … not a single diplomatist of distinction who has entered the service since 1880 has been trained at any university other than the two premier ones'.[23]

In addition to this, the interwar economy was structured such that degrees were not necessary to obtain 'white-collar' jobs, and so other criteria were used to sift candidates. At the Foreign Office, Nightingale was in no doubt as to what these were, observing that 'no member of the Foreign Office has been traced who has attended any school in this country other than the public schools'.[24] In short, the educational route into the Foreign Office was monopolised by those with family wealth behind them.

If we think about Warren Fisher's introduction of the 'all-rounder' ideal, coupled with rapidly-evolving recruitment methods, we can say with confidence that institutional culture in Whitehall profoundly changed in the 1920s and 1930s. The size, scale and character of the Civil Service would have been, while recognisable, anathema to many of the principles on which early nineteenth-century officials had operated.

Yet at the same time, Fisher's vision and the evolution of recruitment appeared to have created new types of inequality of access to Civil Service jobs. In truth, aristocratic power and influence in Britain was declining *anyway* in the early twentieth century, and the practical need to expand the size of the Civil Service meant that new recruits would have to come from *somewhere* in society.

The Victorian culture of tight-knit upper-class patronage was no longer fit for purpose, but that did not mean that Whitehall was yet prepared to employ groups of men (and women) who had only just been given the right to vote. The aftermath of the Second Word War, however, brought a Labour government determined to expand the size of the state, to maintain an extensive diplomatic presence on the world stage, and, crucially, to bring the voters on whom the Labour Party relied into the political, economic and social life of the nation. Britain's so-called 'golden age of social mobility' was about to begin.

V.

A Question of Asparagus

1945–1980

To understand class at the Foreign Office in the middle part of the twentieth century, we need first to understand three documents: the 1943 Eden Report; the 1944 Education Act; and the 1963 Robbins Report.

The Eden Report set the tone for Foreign Office recruitment in a manner comparable to the Northcote-Trevelyan Report almost a century earlier. Eden, then in his third term as Foreign Secretary, was among the most distinguished European statesmen of his generation, and the report bearing his name called for 'equal opportunity for all' at the Foreign Office, promising to recruit 'from any social sphere'. There was no pro-active talk of engagement with those social spheres, but it was nonetheless an institutional revolution with a clear rallying call: the doors of the Foreign Office were now open to all.

Meanwhile, in less than three decades, the British educational landscape was dramatically reshaped by reforming postwar governments. The 1944 Education Act helped to create the Tripartite school system, whereby boys and girls took an examination at the age of eleven to determine the type of school they could attend: the cleverest were selected for places at grammar schools, which were effectively state scholarships to theoretically superior schools. Very suddenly, an educational ladder had materialised linking even the humblest of backgrounds with good qualifications and the prospect of careers in traditionally middle-class professions.

Then, in 1963, came the Robbins Report. An expert economist and life peer, Lionel Robbins produced a report on the state of Higher Education in the UK in which he argued that higher education should be universally available, regardless of means. Boldly, he called for 390,000 students to be in higher or further education within ten years and 560,000 by 1980. This would require the creation of 350,000 extra places, of which the majority were to be in universities.[25] His calls were heeded, and thus the system of mass-university education still in operation today was born. State-funded university places awarded on the basis of merit, on top of grammar school education, were now available to anyone, and, thanks to Eden's pledges, this educational pathway could theoretically lead all the way to the Foreign Office.

In this chapter, we will unpack these three documents and look in closer detail at their impact upon the relationship between class and the Foreign Office. We will also meet, via interviews, some of the working-class men (female working-class interviewees are much harder to find: some women were hired, but they were still subject to a marriage bar until 1973) who were recruited by the Foreign Office after the Eden Report and the 1944 Education Act. Like the age of aristocracy and the age of the 'all-rounder' before it, the so-called 'golden age of social mobility' was temporary, but, as we shall see, much of its legacy still lives with us.

The Eden Report: 'Equal Opportunity for All'?

Considering the role that British diplomacy – from Winston Churchill right down to the most junior Foreign Office clerk – played in conceiving and maintaining the Allied partnership that won the Second World War, it is perhaps surprising that, during the conflict, the then Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden published a report which bemoaned the public perception of aloofness, elitism and incompetence in the Diplomatic corps he headed:

> [The public thinks] it is recruited from too small a circle ... it tends to represent the interests of certain sections of the nation rather than those of the country as a whole ... its members lead too sheltered a life, … they have insufficient understanding of economic and social questions ... the extent of their experience is too small to enable them properly to understand many of the problems with which they ought to deal ... the range of their contacts is too limited to allow them to acquire more than a relatively narrow acquaintance with the foreign peoples amongst whom they live.[26]

Signalling a decisive break with interwar practice, Eden took aim at the so-called 'crammers', arguing that recruitment had for too long been conducted on the basis of knowledge which could only 'with difficulty be acquired without special study such as to-day requires the assistance of private means'.

Eden's remedy for this recruitment malaise was to promise that more attention would 'be paid to the personality and character of the candidates while ensuring that they possess the intellectual capacity and knowledge of foreign countries' to do the job.[27] As we have already seen, he pledged to provide 'wider training and equality of opportunity for all', and to recruit 'from any social sphere'.

Note that Eden did not say '*every* social sphere', which would have entailed a commitment to guarantee at least some recruitment from working-class sources. In promising to recruit from *any* social sphere, he instead tapped into an older, Victorian, liberal tradition which prioritised equality of opportunity over equality of outcome.

In doing so, Eden expressed an important area of consensus between Conservative and Labour policymakers in the decades following the Second World War: the idea of 'meritocracy'. Governments' approaches to social class in this period often rested on the assumption that because ability and intelligence were evenly distributed throughout the population, institutions like the Foreign Office simply had to remove barriers to entry, and talented people from all backgrounds would naturally be recruited.

It is no coincidence, therefore, that the Foreign Office sent Reader Bullard to Tehran in 1943 and made him what is widely considered its first ever Head of Mission from a working-class background: the Foreign Office may not have been representative of society as a whole, but social background was no longer in itself a barrier to occupying even the most senior posts. Neither is it coincidence that Ernest Bevin, a working-

class Trade Unionist, became Foreign Secretary in 1945 and was arguably one of the most successful ever to occupy the role. There had been working-class Foreign Secretaries before: Ramsay Macdonald, Arthur Henderson, Rufus Isaacs and John Simon were all from humble backgrounds. But Bevin was the first of these to embrace his origins and to try to change the Foreign Office as an institution as a result.

Indeed, it was Bevin who first advocated many of the principles Eden's transformative White Paper was later to adopt. He did so via a memorandum issued in 1940, but by then was already making speeches laying out his arguments.[28] Speaking to the Trade Union Congress in Stockport in 1940, he demanded a more 'democratic' approach to British diplomacy:

> There must be an absolute broadening … of the right of entry into the Diplomatic Service. If the boys from the secondary schools can save us in the Spitfires, the same brains can be turned to produce a new world. Democracy does not seem to me a mere question of voting at elections. Democracy seems to me a complete broadening right down to the humblest home of every opportunity in a democratic state.[29]

Over the next few days, five national newspapers ran stories calling for reform at the Foreign Office. Between them, Eden and Bevin caught the public mood.

The responsibility of turning Eden's and Bevin's vision of a more representative Diplomatic Service into reality fell to a man named Sir Percival Waterfield, head of the Civil Service Commission. In 1945, Waterfield introduced a new recruitment technique, known as "Method II" ("Method I" was a more traditional examination- and qualification-based route), to facilitate the entry of men whose military service had hindered their academic careers. Waterfield's "Method II" eschewed formal qualifications in favour of psychological testing, innovative interview techniques and role-play exercises. He boasted to the Foreign Office of his 'truly democratic' recruitment scheme, which had been 'designed to reveal candidates in their true colours without prejudice of any kind owing to their up-bringing or social circumstances'.[30] "Method II", in theory, meant that any man (or woman from 1946), if he or she had the necessary talent, could walk through the doors of the Foreign Office and become a British diplomat – regardless of social or educational background.

Like the Northcote-Trevelyan Report a century earlier, Eden's and Waterfield's reforms were not uncontroversial. Originally, "Method II" involved a weekend stay in a country house in Stoke D'Abernon, Surrey, where applicants were subjected to rigorous testing. Quickly, the scheme acquired a mythical reputation: Rorschach Plates and strange role play exercises were reported, and the *Times* felt it necessary to quell rumours that participants were being watched at mealtimes to check they were eating their peas in an appropriate manner.[31]

Home News

QUALITIES FOR A CIVIL SERVANT

48-HOUR "HOUSE PARTY" ASSESSMENT

From Our Special Correspondent

STOKE D'ABERNON, MAY 22

The Civil Service Commissioners have quickly fulfilled the promise given on their behalf by Sir Percival Waterfield, the First Commissioner, to allow the public, through the medium of the Press, to obtain full information about the method of selection in the "Reconstruction Competition" for the home administrative and foreign services. To-day a group of correspondents left the Civil Service Selection Board (written CISSB and pronounced "Sisby") after having watched the latest "intake" of candidates endure its ordeal.

It has been an edifying and extremely interesting experience, even though it has been somewhat exhausting for those of us not accustomed to sitting down (and sitting still) for such long periods as Civil servants, prospective or otherwise. One's chief general impression that the tests are a fair way of assessing "personality, effectiveness, and judgment" was confirmed by the candidates themselves. Whether those who have failed will be able to pass on to, say, their younger brothers or sisters any useful idea about how to equip themselves for success is difficult to tell.

NO CRAMMING

It is a question which the examiners at C.I.S.S.B. were reluctant to separate from any suggestion that "cramming" was a possible answer, though of course it would be an impossible method. Sir Percival Waterfield, who very kindly found time to visit C.I.S.S.B. for this occasion, said, quite frankly, that the only way for young people to equip themselves is to take an interest in current affairs, to read their newspapers and listen to broadcast talks, and in general find out what is going on in the world around them.

It would be irrelevant to the immediate picture of life at C.I.S.S.B. to pursue this question further, except to quote from Sir Percival's now famous Oxford speech the statement that "the qualities required in the administrative class or the senior branch of the foreign service are brains, personality, effectiveness, judgment, and integrity, the whole blended into a sane and balanced individual by the process of education." The brains are, by and large, possessed by the candidate already, because he cannot arrive at C.I.S.S.B. at all unless he has shown himself up to second-class honours standard; integrity can be sufficiently gauged from a candidate's personal references.

The C.I.S.S.B. tests, exercises, and interviews are thus mainly concerned in the search for personality, effectiveness, and judgment. They last for 48 hours. Candidates are divided into three groups of seven, to each of which there is allotted from the directing staff a chairman, a psychologist, and an observer. The chairman, besides forming his own impression of the candidate, coordinates the views of his two colleagues; the psychologist investigates traits of character and personality and estimates their influence on the candidate's effectiveness in the public service; the observer is concerned with the candidate's quality of mind, the depth and range of his intellectual interests.

GROUP EXERCISES

The group exercises are of two kinds—impromptu discussions and committee work. The first of the discussions is on some current topic, and is held soon after arrival at C.I.S.S.B.; the second is on some subject in the realm of abstract thought, and is at a later stage with the candidates temporarily regrouped according to the ability they have so far shown and with all three observers present. The committee work is founded on a series of administrative problems relating to an imaginary island and gives each candidate an opportunity to act as chairman.

There is one written test, with the same island background, in which the candidate is given an hour and three-quarters for both reading a file of documents about the island and answering a question on one of its problems. The candidate has also to give a 10-minute talk on a subject chosen from the "intellectual interests" he has previously set down on a form; he nominates the type of audience he wishes to address, though actually it consists of the rest of his group with the chairman and observer. Each candidate is separately interviewed by the chairman, psychologist, and observer.

INTELLIGENCE TESTS

There remain the "cognitive" tests, more popularly known as intelligence tests, which are the special department of the psychologist. They are the newest element in all that is new about C.I.S.S.B., and are naturally the most suspected. But there is really nothing alarming about them. They aim at measuring the ability basic to such processes as learning and reasoning," and are not concerned with such other aspects of personality as the will or the emotions or imagination or originality, nor do they aim at assessing acquired knowledge. No candidate at C.I.S.S.B. is failed solely on his performance in the cognitive tests, and the main function of the psychologist is as one member of a team of three. As a distinguished retired Civil servant, who is now one of the Commissioners, remarked yesterday, "we keep these psychologist chaps and all their jargon in their proper place."

The final conference of the chairman, psychologist, and observer, in which they formulated their recommendations on each candidate in the group, was more enlightening than had been expected, even after 48 hours of close attention to the tests and exercises. It was necessary to revise, for instance, an idea that a candidate's sense of humour (or lack of it) did not come into the scheme of things at all. Above all, it was abundantly clear that the Final Selection Board at Burlington House, to whom the recommendations of C.I.S.S.B. go, will have a true and valuable assessment of each candidate's "personality, effectiveness, and judgment." It need hardly be added that the Manor House at Stoke D'Abernon, with its beautiful surroundings, is a most delightful place in which to carry out the arduous tasks imposed on C.I.S.S.B.

The Times report on Sir Percival Waterfield's 'Method II' recruitment scheme, 22 May 1948

There was some truth behind the mythmaking. One former diplomat interviewed for this study, who joined the Foreign Office in 1946, remembered his "Method II" experience:

> And, er, they asked me all kinds of strange questions ... I remember somebody said "Do you read the Bible?" To which I said "no". He then gave me a quote from the Bible and asked me to say what I thought it meant.

Another, recruited in 1955 remembered:

> I was asked what I thought was the best means of bridging the Channel. Literally bridging, or tunnelling. And I had to give off the cuff a whole series of cogent reasons why which version I thought was preferable.

Controversy aside, "Method II" was, in some senses, a success. The gaps in intake left by the war were filled, and such was its popularity that it eventually made "Method I" obsolete and from 1970 became the sole route into the upper echelons of the Foreign Office. The Civil Service became a paragon of cutting-edge recruitment: it outsourced its "Method II" techniques to the BBC, Anglo-Iranian Oil, and the John Lewis Partnership. Its innovative, multifaceted approach makes it the forerunner to today's Fast Stream Recruitment Centre.

There was one problem, though, that "Method II" failed to solve: biased recruitment. After the Second World War, a successful career in diplomacy still depended disproportionately on a private education and a degree from either Oxford or Cambridge. By 1950, the proportion of Administrative Class (roughly equivalent to today's 'Fast Stream') recruits to the Foreign Office who had been to Oxford or Cambridge was actually greater than in 1939 – though the two ancient universities had themselves diversified their intake to some extent – and in that year only two applicants from other British universities were hired.[32] The percentage of those appointed as heads of embassies and legations that had been to Oxford or Cambridge steadily rose in the post-war period, reaching 80 per cent by 1971.[33] The rate of new recruits who had been to independent schools was still consistently around two thirds in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and the proportion of privately-educated ambassadors actually increased to above 80 per cent after the war – a rate maintained throughout the 1960s and into the 1970s.[34] Even while "Method II" was lauded as blind to educational privilege, the Foreign Office continued to draw its recruits from a small social circle.

The 1944 Education Act: The Grammar-School Generation

Despite the relative failure of "Method II" to diversify recruitment, there were some working-class men (and a few women) who, thanks to the 1944 Education Act's promise of grammar-school places for those who passed the so-called 'Eleven-Plus' examination, turned up at the "Method II" assessment armed with a good education and an Oxbridge degree. While the odds were still stacked heavily against those with low cultural, social or economic capital, barriers had been removed and a few of the working-class products of the grammar-school revolution would eventually rise to Ambassadorial status.

The grammar schools themselves were not the cause of the increase in social mobility in Britain after the Second World War. The economic structure of the country had dramatically altered since the early twentieth century, meaning that by the 1940s there were fewer manual 'blue-collar' jobs, and more professional 'white collar' jobs. Children who would, only a few decades earlier, have been guaranteed careers in manual work now found that those jobs were disappearing and being replaced by intellectual, office work – in places like the Civil Service. The 'Eleven Plus' examination simply decided which children from working-class backgrounds would be the ones selected for a grammar-school education and a white-collar career to fill these gaps in the job market.

This is not to say those recruited were not capable, but simply that grammar schools cannot be given the credit for their personal social mobility. But if the shape of the economy was changing, and the educational and recruitment apparatus was in place to facilitate the rise of working-class diplomats, how did the Foreign Office fit with the social changes sweeping Britain?

As part of the research for this publication, several men from what today we would term lower socioeconomic backgrounds were interviewed. They offer an invaluable window onto the history of class at the Foreign Office, precisely because, thanks to the Eden Report and the 1944 Education Act, they were the first from such backgrounds to enter the Diplomatic Service in a systematic, formal way. They were pioneers, encountering an organisation peopled and shaped by men who belonged to a social class completely alien to their own.

Unsurprisingly, the most striking theme common to these men's recollections of the Foreign Office is a sense of alienation. The 1944 Education Act plucked them from the impoverished communities in which they grew up, and their destination was a government department which had for most of its existence actively sought to exclude people like them.

Harry, who grew up the son of a milkman in a deprived part of Hackney and joined the Foreign Office in 1955, told an anecdote that captures well the idea of 'cultural capital' and the problems a lack of it can cause:

> Okay, there are tricks of the trade, like the order to use your knives and forks, but these are technicalities. I mean the one time when … I really felt appallingly ill-equipped to be in the Diplomatic Service was a time once at dinner. This was in my first posting, so I was the junior member of staff. And, it was a dinner involving the Head of Mission and his wife, and asparagus was on the table. I had never seen asparagus, I didn't understand what it was and regarded it with suspicion. And so I ate the decent-looking bit and left the ghastly dark bit at the end on my plate. Which would have been alright if anyone had just taken it away, but the Head of Mission's wife leaned across the table at me and said, how scared of her I was … [AFFECTS STERN FEMALE VOICE] "Harry! Why are you leaving the best bit?" Her husband was more sensitive than her, and sort of turned the conversation to something else, but I apparently, I've been told I went bright red with embarrassment. But she didn't mean in a nasty way, it just hadn't occurred to her that somebody like myself hadn't the faintest idea what I was eating.[35]

Diplomatic life presented challenges for which no amount of grammar-school education could have prepared Harry. Similarly, Michael reported feeling culturally

excluded while at post. He explained that when he was in Africa, the British Council would show films for the entertainment of staff:

> I think it was Olivier's *Othello* they were showing. I like *Othello*, I had done it at school. And it was assumed in the Office that only staff down to Grade 9 would be interested in seeing the film. And I actually went along and said, "I'd like to see this as well" … they said, "Oh, oh, alright, but you must sit at the back though." We sat at the back behind the projector. Now … you can't imagine that today, but this was in 1965.[36]

Michael's recollections are revealing about the way 'cultural capital' (i.e. who *should* like Shakespeare plays) can shape the experiences of people working in an organisation.

Interestingly, however, Michael was excluded from the *Othello* screening on the presumption that his relatively junior grade was indicative of relatively low social class. Evidence of this form of discrimination runs throughout FCO, and Civil Service, history. Indeed, according to Staff Surveys, so-called 'gradism' is still, in the twenty-first century, rife: in 2019, more people reported discrimination on grounds of 'grade or responsibility level' than gender, sexual orientation and ethnic background combined. Closely associated to, but not directly interchangeable with, social class, the issue of 'gradism' adds a layer of complexity to an already mystifying debate.

The grammar school generation did struggle to 'fit in' at the Foreign Office in ways more blatantly related to social class, though. Victor, a working-class Londoner who joined in 1967, remembered that

> I was always on the coattails of some of these really intellectually clever middle class types … I just really felt like a square peg in a round hole. They were intellectually superior, no question of it.[37]

Despite this, the Foreign Office was clearly changing. Victor himself spoke of encountering an organisation in transition:

> I suppose I was the first of the baby boom generation joining the Foreign Office. Britain was beginning its sort of post-imperial, postwar transition, transformation … Because you got people with very different backgrounds, the colonial times were much more, how can I put it, normal, less middle class, less elitist.[38]

William, also a working-class Londoner, recruited in 1955, had a similar opinion:

> I mean when you look at the Diplomatic Service as it was, in 1945 … the whole of the upper echelons of the Service were of a particular background. And I daresay that they felt … more comfortable recruiting people like them than people of a different background. Right? So in my early days, I mean I joined the Service only ten years after the end of the war, and I think that sort of attitude was only beginning to break down at that time, possibly because of the effect of the war and the way it churned up British society, and enabled people from all kinds of backgrounds to come up to the top. So possibly that had an effect on recruitment in my day.[39]

Michael, meanwhile, was keen to point out that whatever vestiges of elitism still existed were, if not disappearing, then at least not so strong as to be insurmountable:

> [P]eople who had degrees were very intelligent and special and proper, and it wasn't 'til I'd been in the Service for a few years, I thought, "There are some right plonkers with degrees!" Intelligent but they had no common sense at all … it became obvious as I moved along.[40]

These working-class men may have arrived at the Foreign Office and felt out of place or occasionally excluded, but what they also encountered was an institution in flux. Echoes of bygone privilege remained – still influencing institutional culture, but no longer dictating it to the extent that only those who came from the "right" backgrounds could learn to fit in.

There is one more thing to note about the experiences of the grammar-school generation. Their recollections make familiar reading in some ways: other big organisations such as the BBC and ICI were also adapting to socioeconomically diverse recruitment on an unprecedented scale. What sets the Foreign Office apart, of course, is that its work entails travelling overseas to work in a wide variety of different national cultures and environments. This simple fact of diplomatic life is common to every historical period covered by this publication, and will continue to affect the Foreign Office as long as it exists. What did the grammar-school generation make of class in a foreign context?

For Graham, who grew up on a Dagenham council estate before joining the Foreign Office in 1953, working overseas was fundamental to the 'escape' from the constraints of working-class life he so desired:

> I wanted to escape Britain, but I didn't want to lose contact with Britain … I wanted to join the Foreign Office because it took me abroad, but it kept my links back to my country, which was the ideal situation. I didn't want to live and work in Britain all the time. [41]

His determination to break free from what he saw as a specifically British class dilemma even manifested in his personal life:

> I was already beginning to move you see and I quite early on realised that I needed – I wanted – to marry a non-British girl … I realised that, with English middle-class – I was heading towards the middle, I could sort of understand I was heading in a middle-class direction – but I wasn't comfortable with the parents of middle-class girls in Britain.[42]

Graham went on to deride Britain's 'class-ridden society' in the 1950s, remembering painfully being 'labelled' as working-class by the colour of his free dinner ticket at school, but at the same time, despite a British education that took him from a prestigious local grammar school to the University of Cambridge, felt his class disadvantage only in a British context. While working for the Foreign Office, this feeling remained:

> But so much of what you're doing is not among your colleagues, it's among foreigners, isn't it? … And I had postings which suited me. Copenhagen suited me really down to the ground, I was more or less co-opted to be one of the Danes. I

> was one of the few foreigners who spoke absolutely fluent Danish, and I stood out and could get on with them. That was easy – it was always London … [43]

Graham was not the only interviewee to draw distinctions between class in London and class overseas. William spoke of life at post as a social leveller, especially when it came to finding entertainment in a small embassy:

> Another thing I will mention – amateur dramatics. This used to be the mainstay actually of social life, and my first year in Bahrain, one of the diplomats' wives had been trained at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts, RADA-trained, very professional. And she put on Turgenev, *A Month in the Country*: with my Russian background I went along to help them with the pronunciation of the names, and was immediately enrolled in the play. I played the leading male. And it was fantastic. And I was playing opposite the wife of my Head of Mission. On, dare I say, intimate terms which would have been impossible otherwise![44]

Such dynamics are still surely important in today's FCO: diplomatic life frequently throws together groups of people from a range of social backgrounds and requires them to work together for years at a time in foreign, and often remote, settings.

The pertinent points, then, are these: first, institutions, such as schools or government departments, may not directly cause social change, but they do shape the lives of people who experience that social change; and second, the 1944 Education Act demonstrates that political developments can happen quickly, and organisations like the Foreign Office must be prepared to adapt, so as to welcome, recruit and get the very best from people from every background conceivable.

The Robbins Report: The Birth of FCO 'Outreach'

If the 1944 Education Act created a minor headache for Foreign Office recruiters, the 1963 Robbins Report created a full-blown migraine. Appointed by the government to review the state of higher education in Britain, Lord Lionel Robbins produced a report which spoke of 'large reservoirs of untapped ability in the population', and 'special problems due to competition for places in institutions of outstanding eminence' which could 'only be solved by the improvement of other institutions'.

His solution was to establish 'as an axiom that courses of higher education should be available for all those who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue them and who wish to do so' – in other words, if you were capable of studying at degree-level, the state should guarantee your place at a university regardless of personal circumstance.[45] The Robbins Report is the reason why in the 2020s university is a normalised part of the lives of young Britons, and why 'graduate schemes' are by far the most common way to begin 'white collar' careers. From 1963, mass higher education became the new normal.

The problem from the Foreign Office point of view was that the Robbins Report coincided with the policy of full employment pursued by Harold Wilson's Labour government in the 1960s. Not only was the Foreign Office no longer able to rely on a

production line of prospective diplomats from Oxford and Cambridge, but also it now had to compete with other big institutions and businesses in a seller's market to attract the generation of graduates that Robbins was unleashing.

As a result, the 1960s witnessed the Foreign Office, for the first time in its history, selling itself as an employer to prospective applicants. In the early twenty-first century, this type of activity – known in institutional jargon as 'Outreach' – became an indispensable stage of the FCO's recruitment cycle, but in the pre-Robbins era, such self-advertisement would have been anathema: the glamorous allure of diplomatic work was assumed to be all the enticement any potential applicant would need. Now, the Foreign Office would have to offer its careers to an unprecedentedly competitive job market, packed with graduates from a wide range of social backgrounds who could choose from a multitude of potential career paths.

It was Michael Stewart, the then Labour Foreign Secretary, who in 1966 sent a circular to the Foreign Office to confront this growing recruitment dilemma. In reply, diplomats circulated a letter which admitted that the image of Britain's diplomats had become a

> national problem … "anti-establishment" attitudes are also more prevalent at civic universities ... and the Diplomatic Service is generally equated with the "establishment".

Although university visits had been part of recruitment efforts since the 1950s, they were still relatively informal and still based on the assumption that any young person would jump at the chance to join such a prestigious organisation. As Michael Stewart and his colleagues were realising, this approach could no longer work in 1960s Britain.

Diplomats were right to be concerned. The public reputation of the Foreign Office was at a lower ebb in the 1960s than it had been at any point in its 200-year history. 1959 witnessed the release of *Carlton-Browne of the F.O.*, a comic film about the Diplomatic Service starring Terry-Thomas and Peter Sellers. In 1961 a novel, *Sauve Qui Peut*, by Lawrence Durrell (the son of a Colonial Officer) unleashed the most scurrilous parody of diplomatic life to date. In the same year, a new club was founded at 18 Greek Street in Soho called 'The Establishment', where proprietors Nicholas Luard and Peter Cook (another son of a Colonial Officer) regularly sent up hapless mandarins in their sketches.[46] Even politicians were getting in on the act: in his diaries, Tony Benn described 'the final end of the public school man, now that the Empire has gone – to finish up in British Embassies around the world, representing all that is least dynamic about British society'.[47] Diplomats had always had a mixed reputation in the eyes of the public, but by the 1960s it was becoming fashionable and natural to view the Foreign Office through a lens of hostility and ridicule.

So, in December 1966 the Foreign Office appointed a diplomat named John Campbell to a newly established role, the 'Diplomatic Service Liaison Officer'. His task was simple: to identify why British diplomats had sunk to a reputational nadir, and how to improve their image and persuade talented young university graduates that the Foreign Office was an exciting and appealing place to work.

Over the next six months, Campbell produced and circulated draft versions of a report entitled 'The Diplomatic Service Image' around the Foreign Office, Commonwealth Office and intelligence agencies. Drafts were seen and commented upon by over 40 officials in London, including those in the most senior positions, and one version was sent to every post in the British overseas network. He read newspaper reports, watched films, met journalists, and even spoke to the then controller of BBC Two (a man named David Attenborough, who had already begun to make the natural history programmes for which he would later be famous) about writing and commissioning a drama series to show diplomatic life in a favourable light.

From the opening paragraph of his report, Campbell laid bare the scale of the task he and his colleagues faced:

> The mass of the British public envisage the middle and upper echelons of their Civil Service as being a race apart ... They regard the Diplomatic Service ... as being peopled by the same "ethnic group", but an even more exclusive tribe; perhaps a bit cleverer, certainly more "toffee-nosed" and out-of-touch than their Home Civil Service cousins ...

Campbell believed that the public quite literally viewed the diplomats who represented them as a separate race; it would surely take more than a few school and university visits to bridge such a vast cultural chasm. The report went on to suggest, somewhat bizarrely, that diplomats would be best served by 'seeking to present ourselves to the general public as ordinary human beings'.

Concomitant with the sense of ostracism conveyed in Campbell's paper was an acute sensitivity to mockery. He complained that diplomats were too often described as an 'exclusively patrician people', that they were viewed as 'James Bonds' who lived in a 'social whirl', adding that the

> little that is publicly said or written about us is both critical and uncomplimentary ... if the fragments of such comment were pieced together they would produce a composite and pretty unattractive "image".

There was, Campbell said, a

> "stage" presentation of a pompous idiot which provides innocent amusement for millions ... Ironically when this prototype image first became widely known, he was not in any sense a figure of fun. All the attributes which today make him anachronistic and thus inevitably in an age when satire and debunking flourishes a butt, would I am sure have been acclaimed as most befitting to a man whose job was considered to be that of making the Queen's wishes known in no uncertain terms to a bunch of "music hall foreigners" …

The message in this passage is clear: Britain had changed, but the Diplomatic Service had not.

If the Foreign Office was to compete in a job market in which, owing to the postwar economic boom and the pursuit of full employment as a matter of government policy, unemployment hovered around the three per cent mark, it would have to align itself much more closely with the attitudes and values of modern Britons – in particular the masses of new graduates created by the Robbins Report.

The problem Campbell encountered was that, when he circulated his report in British Embassies, Consulates and High Commissions around the world, his colleagues felt that there was an incompatibility between the type of 'image' that might attract new graduates from working-class backgrounds, and the 'image' that diplomats necessarily had to convey to governments and influential figures overseas. Comments from Fred Mason, then Ambassador to Santiago, were typical. He said that

> we should do our utmost to promote the idea of the Diplomatic Service as an elite service, intellectually demanding and difficult to enter … there is a danger of exaggerating the "common touch" to the point where we might loose [sic.] our glamour altogether and become just another bunch of Civil Servants.

Clearly, Mason was concerned that to shed the illustrious style in which it traditionally operated would be to lose the elite reputation that enabled the Diplomatic Service to do its job efficiently. William Paterson, Consul-General to São Paulo, was similarly perturbed, writing that although 'the impression of being a supercilious monied society' must be avoided, nonetheless the Service should

> be able to keep up good external standards if we are to earn respect. This affects the sort of houses we live in, the cars we drive, our clothes and our wives' standard of dress ... We are not going to get in among the ruling few unless we have means and background …

Most revealing of all, however, were comments from Paul Wright, a senior Foreign Office official in the United States and future Ambassador to Lebanon. Wright agreed with Mason and Paterson about the need to project an image of material privilege, listing among his essentials for the modern diplomat 'enough money to prevent inhibitions about the use of the telephone' and 'good modern British paintings on loan' to decorate the homes and offices of overseas diplomats. He also, however, said that

> I am not suggesting that we should go so far as the small powers, who try to make up for their lack of influence with an extravagant external display; but I do believe that it is no longer enough to assume that British presence can speak for itself.

In other words, according to Wright, the requirement that British diplomats *appear* to belong to an international social elite was now *more* vital than it had ever been, in the light of Britain's relative economic and military decline.

This attitude demonstrates two problems that the Foreign Office will always face when it comes to its image. First, that diplomats face pressures not just from the society they represent, but also from the societies in which they must ingratiate themselves as part of their jobs: sometimes, playing up to British diplomatic stereotypes may be useful. Second, that any kind of 'outreach' work necessarily involves bridging a generation gap, because older diplomats recruited at a different point in history – perhaps decades ago – have to portray an image that tallies with the tastes and values of a younger generation of would-be diplomats. Just as they did in the 1960s, these two problems continue to present unique challenges for the Foreign Office in its attempts to broaden its recruitment demographic to underrepresented parts of society.

Many of Campbell's initiatives ended in failure. Most spectacularly, his idea for a gritty drama about a down-to-earth diplomat was shelved – until the 1980s, that is, when the writers with whom he had worked revived the project and turned it into a sitcom poking fun at diplomatic ineptitude, starring Angela Thorne and entitled *Farringdon of the F.O.*

But his 'Diplomatic Service Image Report' remains a milestone in FCO recruitment history. It marks the first time diplomats thought about recruitment not in terms of structural barriers, such as property or educational requirements, but rather about their relationship with the culture, values and attitudes of the people they represented.

* * *

The 1943 Eden Report, the 1944 Education Act, and the 1963 Robbins Report did not solve the problems identified by Anthony Eden and Ernest Bevin in their respective critiques of diplomatic recruitment. Official inquiries into Britain's overseas representation in this period, such as the Plowden Report (1964) and the Duncan Report (1969), raised concerns about social bias in both recruitment and institutional culture. The Berrill Review (1977), meanwhile, had this to say:

> As regards the social background of recruits … we believe that most recruits to the administrative stream of the Diplomatic Service come from a relatively narrow range towards the top of the social tree (even in the clerical grade, 22% were educated in the private sector) … We think that recruitment has an important part to play in overcoming these problems.

Indeed, a decade after John Campbell's report, Berrill was unambiguous about the 'image' of the service:

> The FCO is regarded by much of the public as rather an exclusive and perhaps elite institution. Much of the press comment on our Review, for instance, has reflected this. We believe that this image discourages people from a wide range of social backgrounds from applying.

As the 1970s drew to a close, and with them the age of ‘meritocracy’ and of grammar-school educated diplomatic hopefuls (the Tripartite system was formally abolished in England and Wales in 1976), the FCO was still, it seemed, an institution at which people from privileged backgrounds were better-equipped to get in and get on.

The history retold in this chapter has demonstrated the effort, thought and good intentions on the part of many inside and outside the Foreign Office that went into broadening access to diplomatic careers for those from underrepresented backgrounds in postwar Britain – with less than satisfactory results. The legacy of the decades between the Second World War and the 1980s was not a Foreign Office in which equality of opportunity flourished; but it would be misleading to dismiss the efforts of Eden, Bevin, and others as a failure in this sense.

Instead, we can see this period in terms not of providing solutions, but rather of identifying problems. With all the *economic* barriers to entry removed, we see (as in Campbell’s report) underlying *cultural* and *social* issues begin to surface. There were now educational pathways through which theoretically any child could gain the qualifications necessary to become a diplomat, and, moreover, the Foreign Office now had test cases to consider – the working-class grammar-school boys and girls. The age of the ‘build it and they will come’ philosophy of equality of opportunity was over; the age of ‘outreach’ had begun.

VI.

Three Percent of This, Four Percent of That
1980–2020

At some point in the 1980s, a strange thing started to happen in Britain: people stopped talking about class. Once the stereotypical preoccupation of the nation, in the space of a decade class became a subject of which academics, journalists, artists, writers – even politicians – dared not speak. Sociologists and historians even began referring to the 'death of class debate'.[48] What happened?

It may have been political exhaustion: the trade unions, those bastions of working-class representation, were held responsible in the eyes of many for the economic strife of the 1970s, and the Labour Party suffered electoral catastrophe in 1983 on an explicitly class-conscious policy platform. Simultaneously, amid the death throes of sectors of the economy traditionally responsible for the provision of working-class employment, it was increasingly clear that the communities and cultures on which older forms of class identity were based could not survive into the twenty-first century. Perhaps, even, the explanation was more philosophically grandiose: the collapse of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s put an end to a 70-year experiment in building a state predicated on Karl Marx's theories of class. As far as class politics were concerned, 1989 was, in the famous maxim of political scientist Francis Fukuyama, 'the end of history'.

At the same time, class and social mobility were being replaced as the idiom through which recruitment to places like the Foreign Office were discussed in Britain. The age of 'diversity' was beginning. Originating in the United States as part of an attempt to make 'Affirmative Action' policies on race more palatable to white American business owners, 'diversity' was enthusiastically imported to Britain, especially to the private sector, where its arguments that social heterogeneity was good for business held much appeal.[49] Since the 1960s, legislation tackling gender parity, race discrimination, and homosexuality had created new criteria by which greater workplace equality could be measured. 'Diversity' appeared to offer a panacea capable of implementing social fairness simultaneously on multiple fronts.[50]

There was a problem, however, when it came to diversity and class. Most attempts to tackle social bias in recruitment thus far had, as we have seen, been founded on the basis of 'equality of opportunity' and 'meritocracy' – essentially on the idea that talent existed in raw form in everyone and that if recruiters were blind to social background then organisations would hire staff on a more representative basis. Attempts such as that of Eden and Bevin to diversify recruitment to the Foreign Office depended on the erasure of working-class identity, so that background simply did not matter. Diversity, conversely, depended on the celebration and foregrounding of particular aspects of identity, such as gender, in order to get the best out of different types of people.

Consequently, the 'grammar-school generation' interviewed for this study felt that the trend towards diversity ideology threatened the very mechanisms which had allowed them to pursue diplomatic careers from working-class origins. Huw's response to being asked his opinion about diveristy, for example, was typical:

> I'm deeply suspicious of it, to be perfectly honest. I'm very, very strongly of the view that we should stick with meritocracy, and not bend over backwards, to the point of breaking the back, to ensure that we have three percent of this, four per cent of that, and so on and so forth. I'm not impressed with the thought that just for the sake of ensuring that let's say a certain number of people from a certain part of the world, whose family come from a certain part of the world, I don't think we should … certainly not lower the standards. I really feel very strongly about that.[51]

Kenneth, meanwhile, was even more forthright:

> I think that's a load of old codswallop … it's a question of is a woman more able than a man or is a man more able than a woman or we've got a Muslim with… It's the ability. Do they have the ability? Do they? … I couldn't care less where they come from. I couldn't care less whether they are black, white, brown, Jewish, Muslim or what have you. I don't think any of these things matter if they have the ability … [52]

The argument that diversity work necessarily entails positive discrimination is a very familiar one, but one which is felt particularly strongly at an organisation whose recruitment, anchored in the principles of the Civil Service Commission, strives for blindness when it comes to characteristics like race, gender or class – attempting instead to identify 'pure' talent.

The problem for the FCO in 2020 is that, while sceptics like Huw and Kenneth may be long retired, there appear to be problems *inherent* in diversity ideology which render it incompatible with attempts to combat alleged class prejudices and biases. The 2019 Staff Survey was the first to make any attempt to collect data on socioeconomic background, and while statistics on the educational background of every Administrative Class (later Fast Stream) recruit were published every year until 1970, the practice has not been revived – despite the inclusion of data on gender and race in annual reports since the late 1980s. Indeed, the problem is endemic even at the very top of government: the 2010 Equality Act makes no provisions for social class as one of its 'protected characteristics'.

Further to the conversations with former diplomats referred to in the previous chapter, interviews were also conducted for this study with current FCO employees – 20 in total. Their opinions about the relationship between class and 'diversity' were less than enthusiastic. The most common criticism voiced was that the FCO's commendable efforts to improve ethnic minority and female representation were either ineffective, or even actively detrimental, to encouraging socioeconomic diversity:

> Too often we say we've improved on diversity or we're doing 'alright,' totally ignoring that all those women/BAME/LGBT staff are from the same social background.
>
> **Internships and apprenticeships are good at specifying they are open to BAME candidates, but are not open to white candidates from working class backgrounds, so it is possible for a socially advantaged BAME candidate to benefit from these schemes, but a socially disadvantaged white candidate to be excluded.**
>
> [N]ot enough is being done yet to promote social diversity, compared to, say, gender.
>
> **I think it is important to keep talking about class/ socio economic background as much as possible as this is not covered by the Equality Act 2010 … Talking about background is therefore optional which is why I think the issue has been shunned for longer than gender, sexuality and race etc. – but these characteristics also don't exist in a vacuum, they intersect with socio-economic background, this is why it is so important to be open and honest!**
>
> [The FCO] should treat class with [the] same seriousness it rightly address[es to] issues around race and discrimination.
>
> **[Regarding] the intern scheme, if you are from a poorer background and don't live in London, how can you realistically live off £19k a year? The scheme is set up so only people from wealthy backgrounds can participate or, if you live in London so you can live with your parents you would be able to do the internship.**

Tellingly, many interviewees suggested that the problem was one that might be solved by approaching class in the same way as other characteristics: making it measureable with tangible data:

> We need to develop better metrics/baseline data on the background of staff so we can see what kind of progress we're making on social mobility. I appreciate this stuff is difficult.
>
> **I think there's still an inherent bias towards those from more privileged backgrounds. But part of that is just a natural process of the recruitment process where we need to have some kind of robust methodology of selecting people – and people's educational attainment is clearly a key factor.**
>
> Lots of things – having better data … Staff and the board are now engaging openly on why this matters now, not least to improve our talent and diversity blend, but also to me an organisation that is much better representative of the country (countries) we are supposed to represent overseas.

In the light of these comments, the FCO's attempts in 2019 to collect data on socioeconomic background are – for those who want to see more working-class diplomats – encouraging. Having a baseline of data gives organisations critical staging posts by which to measure their progress in diversity terms.

The problem, as we have seen repeatedly in previous chapters, is that social class is much less tangible than other forms of identity. Take gender, or race, for instance. It may seem crude, but even the visual impact of having more women or black people in an organisation, especially in senior positions, sends out a powerful message on its own terms. Class, however, is 'invisible' – working-class people cannot set a visual example in this way. In a different, but related, vein, senior diplomats 'coming out' as lesbian, gay, or transgender makes an important statement about the FCO as an organisation, but, for many reasons, publicly identifying as 'working class' does not carry the same political power as publicly identifying as LGBT.

It is not that having diplomats talk about their class backgrounds is futile; it surely helps to encourage disadvantaged young people to apply to join the FCO if they see evidence that it is a place where men and women from every social background can succeed. Rather, it is that our class identities provide us with very awkward material with which to do diversity work.

Consider the following attempts by current diplomats to describe their own class identities. Some describe their class background in terms of a 'transition' from working-class to middle-class:

> Free school meals kid, first family member to go to university, neither parent has any formal qualifications and grandfather a lorry drivers mate! Never been abroad until 15, and no car or holidays at all till 7. Grew up with no books in the house. Attended comprehensive schools then Cambridge University. Now I would describe myself as middle class, but with strong working class roots.

> **I come from a working class background. I would say that my circumstances now are more representative of the middle class.**

> I come from a solid working class background. I was brought up on a council estate. Both my parents left school at 16 and worked in a variety of manual and service roles. I was the first person in my family to go to University. I graduated, joined the police and then subsequently the FCO, working my way up to a senior role. I … would describe my background now as middle class.

Others felt their working-class origins were indelibly permanent – that they would never possess the 'cultural capital' to enable them to think of themselves as 'middle class':

> I started my life as working class (although my parents would like to think that we were the higher end of working class). My first home was a council property and my current home is a local authority owned property (I'm a little ashamed of this) … I doubt that I'd ever be anything other than working class.
>
> **Working class through and through. Has changed a little since moving to London … but mainly because I am in a higher paid job and working in central Government. I wouldn't consider myself to be middle class, still have a working class mentality.**

Still more felt that their circumstances in relation to 'economic capital' were what ensured they still identified as working class:

> My class background is working class. I grew up in Dublin on a housing estate were everyone rented from the state … My class background has not changed … My current salary would hardly push me into the middle classes.
>
> **I am working class I guess. My parents don't own their own home and work mainly manual jobs. I still live with [my] parents so I am still working class.**

Most revealing of all, though, was the detail with which many of the interviewees were willing to describe their class status and background, often adding layers of qualification and explanation:

> Working Class (C2) – skilled working class .... I attended a state comprehensive and I was the first member of my family to attend University. Father - Gas Fitter, Mother seamstress. Although my father progressed within the Trade Union movement and my mother moved into Nursing.
>
> **Solidly middle class growing up (mum a midwife, dad a teacher) but ended up coming from a lower-income categorisation after my parents split. This meant bigger loans at uni and being told after joining the fast stream that I met the diversity criteria for being from a low-income family (the first time I really thought of myself as a white, middle-class, straight man as diverse).**
>
> I would describe myself as from a lower socio economic background. Although a civil servant and in a relatively 'good job' I would still describe myself as working class/ lower socio economic background. This is for two reasons: my parents both work in manual jobs. I was the first person in my family not to do so and the first person in my family to go to university. The second reason is that … the standard of living on the salary I have while living in London is comparable or less to my family's lifestyle living in the Midlands doing manual work … Also being working

> class is a strong part of my identity and I think no matter how far up the ladder I go here or elsewhere I will always identify as such.
>
> **My grandparents were working class. My parents entered the middle class through a 100% bursary education at a public school for my father. I have remained middle-class but no one in our family has been to university.**

The difficulty these statements pose for an organisation like the Foreign Office becomes apparent if we ask the following question: what method of 'measuring' class would capture the complexity of these interviewees' self-descriptions? There are those whose class status has changed; those who still 'feel' working-class despite a change in material circumstance; and those for whom Foreign Office work has entrenched their working-class status in more than one way.

Moreover, as though this conundrum were not complex enough, there is another, deeper, question at stake. The challenge for an institution like the Foreign Office is not merely to find a way measuring social class, but also to identify which aspects of class act as barriers to potential diplomats from what may be considered underprivileged backgrounds. It must also choose which aspects of class by which it judges its success: to what extent would more 'northerners', more state-educated pupils, or more recipients of Free School Meals make the FCO a more socioeconomically diverse place?

Since the relative disappearance of class from academic and public debate, criticisms of FCO recruitment have tended to focus on educational background as a marker of social bias. The Social Mobility Commission's 'Elitist Britain' reports in 2014 and 2019 both criticised UK diplomacy (alongside many other industries) on the basis of disproportionate recruitment from independent schools and Oxford or Cambridge universities; indeed, the 2019 report is subtitled 'the educational backgrounds of Britain's leading people'.[53] Yet since the 1960s, Oxford and Cambridge undergraduates have themselves become more socioeconomically diverse, and both universities endeavour to attract more applications from state schools. XXX

In other words, the relationship between social privilege and Oxbridge degrees, which since the early twentieth century has regularly been presumed to be axiomatic, does not necessarily hold, and therefore the assumption that a reduced proportion of diplomats with Oxbridge degrees signifies fairer recruitment, and vice-versa, may be a distraction from getting to the root of SEB as an issue. It may, of course, also be highly relevant and centrally important.

The point here is that FCO recruiters only begin to play a central role in individuals' lives at a time when many of the structural constraints (what former Foreign Secretary Tony Crosland called the 'cutting factors') that help create unequal life outcomes, such as place of birth, parental situation, and education, have impacted their cultural, social, and economic capital in relation to their peers. Consider the following statistics from

the Sutton Trust and the Social Mobility Commission (SMC) 2019 'State of the Nation' report:

- 43 per cent of children eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) do not reach adequate intellectual development by the age of five, compared with 25 per cent of the rest;
- By age 11, less than half of FSM pupils reach expected standards for numeracy and literacy, as opposed to over two-thirds of their peers;
- Just 16 per cent of FSM pupils get two A Levels, compared with 39 per cent of the rest;
- Privately-educated pupils are 55 times more likely to go to Oxford or Cambridge than FSM pupils;
- In the period 2016-2018, eight schools filled more Oxford and Cambridge places than 2,900 other schools combined;
- Half as many children from 'working class backgrounds' enter Higher Education as do those from more privileged backgrounds, and just five per cent of working-class children end up in the most selective Higher Education institutions;
- Half of the poorest adults have received no training or education since leaving school, compared with just one in five of their peers.

Combine these statistics with the fact that a report by the Institute for Government found that less than ten per cent of applicants to the Civil Service Fast Stream met its criteria for 'working class', and that fewer applicants came from working-class backgrounds than had degrees from Oxford or Cambridge.[54] Combine this with the most recent *Elitist Britain* report, produced by the SMC, which claimed that 52 per cent of diplomats went to Oxford or Cambridge and 51 per cent to independent schools. To put it simply, the FCO is part of a cycle of inequality that starts in early life and continues into adulthood, and which is beyond its control.

* * *

If so much is beyond its control – if children are born into socioeconomic situations that hinder them throughout their adult lives – what difference *can* the FCO make? Certainly, the area in which the FCO has more agency than any other is in its

institutional culture; it can work towards creating a working environment in which social background is of as little importance as possible.

Institutional culture is a hard thing to measure, precisely because culture is by definition that which is unquantifiable in an organisation or society. Indeed, there is a danger that, as our definitions of 'class' become more sophisticated, they evolve at a faster rate than our understanding of its effects. The FCO is implicated in the critiques of Civil Service recruitment laid out in the Bridge Report and by the Social Mobility Commission, and yet, at the same time, many of its current employees feel as though social class matters far less in the FCO today than once it did:

> I think [class] matters far less than it used to – people tend not to ask about class or educational (often seen as a proxy of class) background anymore. I think it was far more important in decades gone [by]. I think looking at the (visual) diversity of new joiners demonstrates this even more.

> **To be fair, I don't really feel my class background makes a difference to the way I am treated by the FCO or colleagues. I do feel quite welcomed by colleagues who I know are wealthier than myself and from a higher social class. Some of the people I work with are consultants who are definitely brought up in a wealthier setting than I was but I feel it is more about your productivity and likeability that gets you treated one way or another by colleagues.**

> I don't think [class] really matters and [I think] that the organisation is much more meritocratic [than when I joined]. My own story reflects that if you work hard, are capable and conscientious you can progress.

A clear conviction running through many of the interviews conducted for this study was that the FCO was moving in a direction towards greater 'meritocracy', and that class mattered less than it had at a (significantly) unspecified point in the past. These attitudes are evidence, it seems, that the *perception* that class is decreasingly relevant in British life is well-established. Academic research suggests that public perceptions of social mobility tend to be influenced by the visible minority of successful cases: uncovering who among its employees thinks of the FCO as a meritocracy, and why they think it so, is key to understanding the influence, if any, of social class upon Foreign Office culture.[55]

The difficulty, though, in interpreting these comments lies in the fact that the narratives they relate are intensely personal, subjective, and based on a narrow frame of reference. Sociologists addressing the lack of attention paid to social class in their own discipline – the so-called 'death of class debate' – have argued that since the 1990s class in Britain has become an individualised phenomenon: people talk in terms of their personal 'class stories', moving fluidly between different types of class identity as their lives develop.[56] This is to some extent a consequence of diversity ideology, because part of the challenge in, for example, improving BAME or LGBT diversity, lies in uncovering the personal experiences of those minority groups and incorporating

their voices into institutional practices and policies. But class politics are not built around the protection of minorities, in part because everyone has a personal 'class story' that contains varying degrees of privileges and obstacles.

Consequently, it becomes difficult to describe the institutional culture at the FCO where class is concerned, even if, at the same time, it is clear that SEB diversity is a problem. Many interviewees felt that there were certain things – which they often struggled to define, using terms like 'judged', 'stigma', and 'on the same wavelength' – that had made life difficult for them at the FCO:

> It's quite obvious that the majority of people that work in the FCO are middle to upper middle class. [Class has been a problem for me] quite a few times. Mainly when discussing my background and people looking down at me when describing it (I grew up in an overcrowded house- 3 bedrooms for 7 people; domestic violence, alcoholics and bailiffs at the door more than once; not going to university, being on benefits). It's upsetting – not everyone has had the perfect background and we should embrace diversity …
>
> **I'm not open about my background as I don't always feel comfortable in the FCO to be.**
>
> I do think people are very aware of social class in the FCO, and to a certain extent this goes both ways – there is a reaction against people perceived to be overly 'posh' (though I don't think it impacts their career success) whereas there seems to be lots of anecdotal evidence of people feeling looked down on or judged because of their working class background …
>
> **I still feel there's quite a stigma in the office around social/class background. It's not the sort of thing that people voluntarily self-declare …**
>
> I do agree, that socially, there can be prejudices, and colleagues are often drawn to those who they believe are on the same wave lengths, in doing this, there have been opportunities where I believe I [or] others have been overlooked, [and considered] to not have experience, or knowledge of interest in an area, due to our perceived social class.

These interviewees were reluctant to discuss social class, but, crucially, were unable to say why. This tells us two things: first, that class is far from irrelevant for these people – *something* must be at the root of their uneasiness; and second, that, for some at least, the FCO is not a working environment in which all staff feel comfortable revealing and discussing their socioeconomic backgrounds. This, of course, has implications for the way social class fits with the diversity and inclusion work which is a core corporate objective for the twenty-first century Foreign Office.

It is surely desirable that people feel at liberty to discuss their social backgrounds at work. But there is another dimension to this problem, which has implications for the core task of the Foreign Office: representing, and implementing the policies of, the British government overseas. Diversity and Inclusion are now cornerstones of the FCO's corporate objectives, described in the 2019 Annual Report as 'essential if we are to deliver excellent foreign policy and diplomacy in a diverse and changing world'.[57]

Again, then, we must ask: how does SEB fit with the relationship, as described by the FCO, between diversity and diplomacy? Representation is a self-evidently important aspect of diplomatic work, and it is clear that greater diversity in gender, sexuality or race not only makes the Diplomatic Service more representative of the country it serves, but might also serve to be symbolic of the liberal, tolerant values championed by ministers and diplomats alike, as exemplified in policy initiatives such as girls' education and LGBT rights in the Commonwealth. Can social class be incorporated into this agenda?

The association between 'Britishness' and certain types of class background is a ubiquitous trope in film, literature and other types of creative media, but interviews with serving diplomats suggest that there is some substance to the notion that subtle indicators of high social or cultural capital are still expected of British diplomats by their foreign counterparts:

> I think some of our interlocutors overseas expect a certain type of Brit and don't know how to react to other types.

> **I'd love to be a diplomat. However, I just don't think it's possible for me to get there. I don't have the finesse or gloss that I associate with diplomats and therefore see this as a barrier.**

> Yes, as the conduct and communication style of those from a perceived higher social class are often perceived as more desirable diplomacy styles. This is not necessarily the case, and the concept of how a diplomat should conduct themselves should be an adaptable concept.

Here we come to the crux of the issue. Usually, achieving greater equality between social groups (such as men and women), should that be desired, requires some kind of introspective investigation into what it 'means' to embody a particular characteristic. LGBT and gender equality in particular have, historically, entailed a process of creating and constructing LGBT and female identities, championing the diversity that these identities bring to organisations and societies and challenging traditional stereotypes.

As we have seen, though, the history of social class is unique in that defining the boundaries between, say, 'working class' and 'middle class' is a far more difficult process than defining (for example) gender roles. Put simply, measuring the levels of representation and experiences of women in organisations is easier and clearer than doing the equivalent for those from lower SEBs. The comments about 'a certain type of Brit' and 'finesse or gloss' above illustrate this point well: we know that class affects

our lives, but lack the vocabulary and terminology to say how or why. While we are able to talk about class neither openly nor, crucially, accurately, it will remain an elusive concept that is difficult to measure, monitor and address.

Indeed, starting an introspective conversation about class may be the most powerful action the FCO can take to begin to address SEB in its organisation. After all, each year, the Civil Service Commission provides just a handful of diplomatic hopefuls from which the FCO must choose its Fast Stream inductees. Improving SEB diversity among new recruits involves 'sucking' people from deprived backgrounds through the education system, through the Civil Service Commission, all the way to the offices of King Charles Street. With so little scope to set up the field from which it recruits, it is surely counterproductive to hold the FCO responsible for socioeconomic inequality that is beyond its remit and beyond its control. What it *can* do, however, is welcome those recruits to an institution at which SEB is acknowledged and understood as an issue that affects everyone.

How might this 'introspective conversation' work in practice? Here, history offers some useful signposts. Firstly, as we have seen, 'class' *per se* has never been explicitly discussed at the Foreign Office; rather, educational background has been the metric employed by critics and recruiters alike. We now know that educational background is only partly illustrative of class background, and that more sophisticated and comprehensive ways of measuring class are required. Encouraging diplomats to discuss how their SEB affects their lives and careers offers a potentially fruitful way of constructing genuinely meaningful definitions of class.

Secondly, we must take advantage of the fact that we are at present in the 'age of diversity'. Never before has diversity of representation been so closely tied to the core corporate objectives of the Foreign Office, and, just as recruitment practices were reformed or modified as a result of the 1944 Education Act or the 1963 Robbins Report, so, too, could today's FCO take advantage of the growing consensus that diversity is good for organisations to boost its efforts around SEB. Incorporating social class into the HR Diversity and Inclusion agenda, despite the difficulties it presents, must surely be a priority.

Finally, as former diplomat Tom Fletcher explained in his 2016 book *Naked Diplomacy: Power and Statecraft in the Digital Age*, social media and technological advances in the workplace mean that diplomats are better connected than ever with each other and with the outside world.[58] Diplomacy is more open and more public than in any historical period discussed in this study, and information travels across the FCO's global network in ever greater volumes at ever increasing speed. The upshots of this evolution, many of which Fletcher explored in his book, are myriad, but surely among them is that it is easier than ever to have an open conversation about a subject like class that incorporates and engages the whole organisation. Class, and indeed diversity in general, is fundamentally about relationships between people (and groups of people): changes in the nature of those relationships in the digital age may present new opportunities to establish shared definitions and understandings of social class.

VII.

Conclusion

In *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, a dystopian novel published in 1958 and set in 2034, readers are told of a Britain in which researchers have discovered the scientific formula for "merit" (understood in the book as "Intelligence + Effort = Merit"). Armed with this knowledge, politicians have rearranged the old 'class system' into a new apartheid based on IQ scores. The dream of a 'just' society free from class biases becomes a nightmare: everyone at the bottom of the system 'deserves' to be there, because they are, objectively, less meritorious than those at the top. The novel closes as the untalented underclass are preparing to overthrow violently their meritocratic overlords.[59]

Written by social entrepreneur Michael Young (who, among many other things, founded the Open University and *Which* consumer service), *The Rise of the Meritocracy* has often been misinterpreted as an attack on the idea of allocating jobs according to talent as opposed to social background. This was never Young's intention. Rather, he wants us to ask a deep and pertinent question about our relationship with social class: what do we want social equality to look like?

It is a question worth reformulating for the FCO in the twenty-first century. What do we mean when we call for a more representative Diplomatic Service, and what would it actually look like? We have seen that the aims of recruitment have changed with each historical period: in the nineteenth century, camaraderie and social connection were the aim; in the early twentieth century, it was confidence and adaptability; in the postwar period, the target was to build a Diplomatic Service in which anyone, no matter their background, had the *opportunity* to work. Working out that the Foreign Office must not only provide opportunities, but also encourage people to take those opportunities – and get the best out of those who do – is surely the most important challenge it faces in the twenty-first century.

There are signs that the way the FCO engages with the issue of social class is changing. A new staff network, 'Foreground', committed to engaging the FCO and wider society on social mobility and diversity, was created in 2016, following similar initiatives like FCO Women, Enable (disability) and the BAME Network. Foreground quickly grew to become the biggest network of its kind in the Civil Service, and a large proportion of the outreach work and internship schemes with which the FCO is engaged are targeted, directly or indirectly, at those from disadvantaged class backgrounds. The FCO is also now accountable to the Cabinet Secretary on this matter – partly through the Staff Survey questions pioneered in 2019.

Let us return to the scenario laid out in the introduction to this publication: the fictional meeting between Charles, Emily and David. Their backgrounds were designed to illustrate a plausible dynamic in which each participant possessed economic, social and cultural capital in different amounts. While the question 'which person would you rather be?' was deliberately devised to be unanswerable, it is surely

worth understanding the layers of history and culture that affect the way Charles, Emily and David behave and work.

Perhaps, though, we can go beyond understanding our history – important though that is. There is a good reason why the first chapter of this study is entitled ‘Class: A User’s Guide’: the common thread linking the subsequent chapters is the sense that social class, and its relationship to British diplomacy, has served a *purpose* for the Foreign Office in each historical period under investigation. In the nineteenth century, social class was the basis for membership of the Diplomatic Service, and in the middle of the twentieth century, it was variously a means to improve the image of the Foreign Office and a device through which diplomatic recruitment could adapt to changes in the structure of the UK economy. It has also, to varying degrees, been a way of measuring the fairness and openness of that recruitment.

The socioeconomic landscape in which today’s FCO operates is distinct from that in each historical period outlined in the chapters above. It is vital, therefore, that any ‘lessons from history’ are not gleaned directly: criteria for measuring social class are not constant, and to say that – to take an extreme example – there are no landed gentry on today’s FCO board is not to say anything meaningful about class in the Diplomatic Service. To borrow a quote attributed to Mark Twain, ‘history never repeats, but it rhymes’, and it is in understanding what it different and unique about class in the twenty-first century, over and above what is constant, that any attempt to tackle SEB at the FCO must prioritise.

There are some things, though, as the Twain quote suggests, that the history of class at the FCO can teach us. One must surely be that the inherent difficulties in quantifying social class make it imperative to encourage open dialogue and focus on individual experiences rather than mere statistics and data. This is not to say that data is not crucial: it is an important basis for measuring progress. But any initiative must be people-focussed and think deeply about institutional culture. Finally, adaptability is key. The FCO operates in a domestic and international environment in which social class plays an ever-changing role. The FCO has never been, and will never be, able to influence the class structure of UK society; but it can be ready for the challenges that UK society will surely present in the coming century.

Afterword

Paul Johnston

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Growing up in what used to be called a lower middle class family in a small Scottish market town, the idea of entering the “Whitehall” civil service, let alone the Diplomatic Service, never entered my mind.

Three things changed that:

- getting interested in, and studying Politics;
- adoring “Yes, Minister” and “Yes, Prime Minister”; and
- a BBC documentary in the late 1980s on applying to the Civil Service, which I saw by chance at the start (I think) of my final year at University.

The documentary showed a group of white/grey middle aged men debating the merits of various candidates. The main criterion seemed to be less ability than “suitability”, how well would they fit into the world of Whitehall.

Years late I read the “Strangers and Brothers” novels of C P Snow, charting the rise of a lower middle class man from a small market town to the Bar, Cambridge University, Whitehall and Westminster. In one of them, “Homecomings” a group of senior civil servants debate whether to offer a permanent place to a solicitors’ clerk, a man of unusual brain power but also (to the mandarins, at least) an unusual personality. In the end they decide against him on the basis that he wouldn’t “fit in”.

Almost the same phrase was used in the BBC film about an obviously bright and articulate young man with strong views who had dared to challenge the interviewers. This was juxtaposed with a less impressive (or so I thought) upper middle class interviewee, who was given a place essentially on the grounds that they would “fit in”

Inexperienced though I was, I suspected this must be a caricature of the actual process, But it “inspired” me to take a punt.

I found, in the application process and in my subsequent 30 year career to date, nothing so obviously or structurally biased.

But it is undeniable, that in the FCO, as in other walks of life, and as James Southern’s excellent publication observes, in-built social and economic advantages inevitably give a head start in life, and at work, to people from certain backgrounds.

What to do about it? To my mind, three things, which is what Foreground, the FCO Staff Association for social diversity, is trying to do:

- explain;

- encourage;

- empower.

Explain to people from across the country that the Civil Service and the Diplomatic Services are open to, and want to welcome, people from all types of backgrounds, provided they have the talents and skills required.

Encourage people from a range of backgrounds to apply, through active outreach, advocacy and mentoring.

Empower such colleagues, and indeed all colleagues, once they're part of the FCO, to help break down barriers to progress where we can and navigate those we can't.

In my view it's important that this doesn't become a "prolier than thou" exercise, where, like Monty Python's quartet of Yorkshiremen, aspiring young diplomats compete to outdo each other in boasting of the humility of their backgrounds.

Rather it should be about celebrating an Office and a Service that, year by year, is trying to become more fully like the country it's trying to represent.

As we embark on life outside the EU, with big questions about the future of the UK, its relationship with Europe and its place in the world, there's never been a more important time to be a diplomat. And diverse diplomacy has never been more important.

James Southern's study tells a fascinating story.

It's up to all of us to help write the next chapter.

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[3] Robert Nightingale, *Fabian Tract No. 232: The Personnel of the British Foreign Office and Diplomatic Service, 1851-1929* (1929)
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[5] Peter Hennessy, *Whitehall* (London, 2001), 400.
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[8] Internal Cabinet Office document.
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[21] Ibid., 11.
[22] Ibid., 8.
[23] Ibid., 11.
[24] Ibid., 9.
[25] Robbins Report, 277.
[26] *Proposals for the Reform of the Foreign Service*, Cmd. 6420 (London, 1943), p. 2.
[27] Ibid., 6.
[28] Kevin Theakston, 'New Labour and the Foreign Office' in *New Labour's Foreign Policy: A New Moral Crusade*, ed. by Richard Little and Mark Wickham-Jones (Manchester, 2000), 120.
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[30] Percival Waterfield to David Scott, 30 July 1945, NA/FO/366/1504.
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[34] See *Report of Her Majesty's Civil Service Commissioners* (London, 1950-1970); Boyd, *Elites*, p. 81.
[35] Harry, interview with James Southern,
[36] Michael, interview with James Southern,
[37] Victor, interview with James Southern.
[38] Victor, interview with James Southern.
[39] William, interview with James Southern.
[40] Michael, interview with James Southern.
[41] Graham, interview with James Southern.
[42] Graham, interview with James Southern.
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