

Interview - Ciarán Devane

Written by E-International Relations

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Ciarán Devane is the Chief Executive Officer of the British Council, a position he has held since January 2015. He holds a degree in biochemical engineering from University College in Dublin and a master's degree in international policy and practice from George Washington University. Before becoming head of the British Council Ciarán was the chief executive of Macmillan Cancer Support. In 2015 he was knighted for his efforts in service of cancer patients.

In this interview we discuss the work of the British Council, and its role in British foreign policy, primarily in the field of promoting the UK's soft power.

Could you briefly explain the work the British Council does, and how this fits into the position of the United Kingdom in the world?

The British Council was set up to use the cultural resources of the UK to create what in our early days was described as 'a basis of friendly knowledge and understanding' between the people of the UK and the people of other nations. The idea is to make a lasting difference to the people, institutions and governments of the countries we work with. This in turn contributes to the long term security, prosperity and influence of the UK.

We believe that through these connections – through the interchange of knowledge and ideas – good things will happen and ultimately the world will be a better, safer, more prosperous place.

We operate in four areas – Through the promotion of the English language to connect people across the world; creating opportunities for UK artists to connect with others abroad and bringing foreign artists to the UK; through supporting education – everything from reform of national education systems to our Connecting Classrooms programme for primary and secondary schools and finally through our society work – projects to improve people's lives by sharing civil society skills and values, for example using the UK's expertise in social enterprise, judicial reform and sports.

We act in the expectation that these cultural goods are attractive in and of themselves – but that they will also create a debate on ideas and values, implicitly – and that they have a lasting impact, for the UK and for the people we are working with.

What force does soft power and cultural diplomacy have compared to more conventional foreign policy tools? What for example is its use in a volatile region such as the Middle East?

Of course cultural relations can't stop violent conflict once it's underway. The kind of effects we have in the world are long term and incremental, and the results may not be visible for years or even generations. We can't expect to operate like a firefighting service.

What we are is one part of the suite of powers and influences available to nations. Prime Minister David Cameron recently spoke of a 'full spectrum' response to events in Syria. I take this to mean that we must use military force where military force is necessary and appropriate, and make diplomatic efforts where diplomacy is called for; but that in addition nations should deploy a full range of other foreign policy approaches, including cultural and educational

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programmes, which can help to achieve the national interest.

So our work is unlikely to take place while the guns are firing (though this happens); but it might be nearby, in a displaced persons camp for example, teaching language or skills, or helping keep cultural traditions alive.

Or it may be in places where there is a risk of future conflict – operating as a form of ‘forward engagement’, anticipating likely points of tension and helping to bridge divides with the power of culture and education.

Soft power is something that should always be in the mix, in other words, and in the minds of people trying to find solutions to the world’s big, shared problems.

One example is that we have offices in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories and in countries across the region. Our English language radio programme is broadcast on 12 local radio stations across the West Bank and Gaza, reaching more than 400,000 young Palestinians. In Israel, BIRAX is a £10 million initiative of the British Council and the British Embassy in Israel investing in world-leading research jointly undertaken by scientists in Britain, Israel and shortly the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

Another example is that we aim to be at the forefront of building trust and understanding in North Africa with our Hammamet Conference and the Young Arab Voices programme, which teaches democratic debating skills to the Arab Spring generation.

And in 40 countries around the world the Active Citizens programme is providing positive pathways for young people. Active Citizens has already trained 130,000 people in social leadership, promoting intercultural dialogue and community-led social development. It connects thousands of like-minded people around the world who collectively want to make a fairer and more inclusive society.

We are expanding our response to the Syrian crisis by running a three year project with the EU for displaced Syrians, providing language and academic skills, and online learning for 3,100 young Syrians living in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey.

By acting early enough we hope to contribute significantly to creating more stable societies and so reduce the possibility of conflict – both in the country itself and with the UK. And by responding to the *effects* of conflict (for example working with displaced populations) we not only help mitigate their worst consequences, but also make a contribution to putting nations on a more stable and peaceful footing (in partnership with others) once conflict is over.

To use an analogy from the health sector, where I worked for many years: cultural relations is best thought of as a kind of long term public health tool – deployed for the long term, and doing its work, often invisibly – rather than a type of surgery.

Former Foreign Secretary William Hague called the UK a “cultural superpower”, do you agree with this phrasing? And if yes, what makes the UK such as superpower?

‘Superpower’ is a rather loaded term, but we are certainly one of the big hitters – due to the English language, our writers, scientists, musicians and artists. And it’s also due to our wider culture and values that people around the world are exposed to through our education systems and civil society.

English is one of the world’s great languages, which for historical and linguistic reasons has become the lingua franca of international business. It’s an exceptional medium for connecting people and ideas.

The English language, and our historical trading ties, have given many millions of people around the world a cultural familiarity with us.

But the UK’s impact is also due to some truly world-class institutions that have stood the test of time, including the

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BBC World Service, our great universities, our scientific, cultural and sporting institutions, and the British Council. Each has been part of people's lives for generations, through radio broadcasts, libraries, English teaching, and sharing the best of our culture and thought.

In an ever-more connected world, it is essential that the United Kingdom continues to create and nourish those cultural connections, and continue contributing to the big global conversations of the future.

We can do that through the medium of our arts, education and values, but in order to do it successfully we will need to use the best of our history as well as optimising the potential of modern technology.

How do you relate to your soft power competitors? Particularly China and its Confucius Institutes?

The future of cultural influence, like wider international influence, is likely to be multi-polar. The landscape will not be dominated by one or two 'superpowers', but by a number of well-established players – among them certainly China, the United States, India, and the UK – and a host of other countries, each with its own unique cultural offering.

Each nation's soft power 'providers' will naturally work in different ways, and with different aims in view. The UK favours a 'hands-off' approach: we believe that culture and cultural organisations flourish best, and work most creatively, under a light touch. Many other European nations operate on more or less the same principle, while – for instance – the Chinese approach is more directly linked to national foreign policy.

The second point I would make is that because the British Council believes in a collaborative approach, and works in partnership to achieve shared aims, we have close relationships with many national cultural organisations.

The business of influence and attraction is not in any case a zero-sum game. If we are better connected to others because we understand them better, that is good for all of us – and to some extent it is irrelevant whether the impetus comes from the British Council or the Goethe Institut, Russkiy Mir or Hanban.

What does culture have to contribute to international development? How can it help countries or regions grow?

Culture is at the heart of what it means to be human. It's what the British author Richard Mabey calls – in a slightly different context – our species' 'semi-permeable membrane'.

It follows that any attempt to change the conditions of life for people and societies must take account of their cultural context. Successful and sustainable change can only grow out of a pre-existing culture.

The British Council is working on a global Culture and Development programme that directly contributes to the building of creative, inclusive, open and prosperous societies. The aim is to support and encourage innovative creative responses to development challenges and targeted social engagement through artistic interventions.

The creative industries also have a vital role to play in development, both in terms of employment and wealth creation, and as flagship businesses for their culture or nation. The creative economy is huge and growing, boosted by the new possibilities of digital technology. Art – in the widest sense – travels; and it speaks loudly.

Creative enterprises can help define a nation in the minds of those abroad – think of Bollywood, or the Malian music scene. And for the UK you only have to think of Shakespeare and the impact he has had globally. This year with Shakespeare Lives we are working with a range of partners including GREAT, the BBC and the Royal Shakespeare Company in a year-long celebration of the 400th anniversary of the playwright's death, and organising a series of events and celebrations in over 100 countries.

Last year the UK government voted to ratify the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict.

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In the context of the conflict in Syria and across the region, we are increasing our work in the field of cultural protection, recognising that in conflict situations people carry with them – along with the necessities of physical survival – cultural practices and values that are vital to their psychological and community health. Any development that ignores that foundation is bound to fail.

What place do universities have in all this? The UK's top universities are often cited as a significant source of soft power, why do you think this is?

Universities are probably the oldest global intellectual network. Long before the internet or cheap air travel, academics corresponded across continents and shared discoveries and expertise.

So it's not surprising that the UK, with its world-class higher education institutions, gets a soft power boost from its universities.

There are two elements to this. The first is the benefit we gain from hosting institutions that carry out ground-breaking research. The soft power effect of – for instance – Professor Stephen Hawking's work, or the creation of Dolly the Sheep, can hardly be calculated. (There is also a huge economic gain from such work, of course.)

Then there is the direct experience of overseas students studying at UK universities, or studying nearer to home at British branch campuses. The double effect of a UK education and immersion in a British educational environment is life-long, boosting professional capacity and building trust. A remarkable one in ten world leaders (at 2015) had at least part of their education in a UK institution.

Overseas alumni of UK universities form a sometimes hidden stratum, with members in the professions, in politics and at the top of business – all of them with a personal and often deeply held connection to the United Kingdom. That is the essence of soft power, and something we should be doing all we can to publicise and promote.

The British Council published research a few years ago (*Trust Pays*) which found that participation in UK cultural relations activities is associated with increased levels of trust in the country (up to a maximum of +26 per cent in Pakistan). And that this in turn led to a significantly increased interest in pursuing trade or business opportunities with us.

How does the British Council relate to the British government? How independent does it want to be from the state whose culture, and position, it is essentially promoting?

We see ourselves as a key partner of the UK government, aligning our work to the long term priorities of UK foreign policy and overseas development, but maintaining our unique long-term mission to represent the whole of UK society – its people, institutions and achievements rather than just the shorter-term imperatives of the politics of the day.

Our role is to look at the long term, to work out the big trends, and make our interventions accordingly. That's what our institutional arrangements – including most importantly our relationship with the Foreign & Commonwealth Office – are designed to accomplish. We have an independent Board of Trustees, operate under charity law, and have a Royal Charter which defines our mission. So we are happy to be aligned and to partner but not to be instrumental – so at times we do things which would not be the approach of a government department.

How do you relate to the extensive academic literature on soft power? Do they get things wrong?

The academic literature is extensive and very helpful. We need a grounding in theory and how soft power works in other parts of the world. But what I'm most interested in is evidence about our impact, about the people we're reaching (and not reaching), and how we can use it to inform our planning and strategy for the future. Are we really making a contribution to the people, organisations and countries we work with and does that really reflect back to improved prosperity, security and influence for all of us? So I think the literature is stronger on theory than in evidence.

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Of course conceptions of soft power will vary from place to place, and nations' and institutions' objectives will also vary. There really is no one-size-fits-all theory on soft power. The one thing we can all agree on is that it is becoming increasingly important as part of an overall solution to some of the biggest challenges we face globally – a growing element of the suite of powers that are available to any state.

One more thing I would say about the literature is that we want to work with others to achieve more meaningful and stable relationships for the UK. That is very different from some of the soft power literature – and especially from some of the more muscular discussions of 'smart power'. The approach is oblique. It is not about pursuing a foreign policy goal, more about creating a tone which promotes the basis of knowledge and understanding. Out of that other things may come.

Is the British Council still in the business of providing “cultural propaganda”, the reason it was originally created in 1934? What has changed and what has remained the same for the British Council since its creation?

We certainly don't use the 'p' word. On the other hand, it's true that we were set up in the context of offering an alternative world-view to the Fascist propaganda of the 1930s. But our approach, the creation of 'friendly knowledge and understanding', has always been diametrically opposed to anything we might understand as 'propaganda' or extreme ideology. In other words, it relies on attracting people to take part in a cultural conversation in which they have an equal role. It's mutual, and mutually respectful and mutually beneficial.

Much of the British Council's activity today is similar to what we were doing ten and twenty, and in some cases fifty years ago. We still teach English, we share our cultural resources, we convene debate and – I hope – help to stimulate interesting conversations.

But of course some of the means by which we do those things have changed hugely. We are very keen that as much of our activity as possible is digital and shareable – whether that is online content, or MOOCs (Massive Online Open Courses), or maximising audio-visual for multiple audiences. At the same time we mustn't lose sight of the fact that what makes us special and valued is our personal connection with people, and our global, on-the-ground network. So it's about using digital assets and platforms to enhance the personal experience.

One thing that hasn't changed, unfortunately, is that the world remains (as it was 80 years ago) a dangerous place. The rise of ISIS/Daesh is as much of a challenge to the institutions of democracy and basic humanity as the dictatorships of the 1930s. It may seem that Daesh can only be tackled by military means. I would argue the opposite – this is exactly the kind of situation in which David Cameron's 'full spectrum' response is appropriate and a forum for the kind of activities organisations like the British Council are expert in.

Daesh exists in a cultural context and is definitely an ideology to oppose so the response to it must be – at least in part – a cultural one, one of sharing ideas and knowledge. As an organisation, it depends on attracting recruits from many different places, including the UK. An important part of our work over the coming months and years will certainly be to show young people that there are alternative pathways for them – via education and skills – to make a better future.

What advice would you give to scholars of international politics? What areas of international society are still too often left unexplored?

The first thing to say is that international politics and relations between peoples and countries is a perennially fascinating subject – because it satisfies a certain curiosity about the world; and perhaps just as importantly because we live in an increasingly (apologies for the cliché) connected world.

The future will belong to those who understand how to make and maintain connections and networks, through personal, digital and other means.

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As far as areas that are unexplored, we might think of the new dynamics being created by the rise of megacities that in some case have more political and economic power than nation-states. And the relationship between the individual and the state, and state institutions is undergoing tremendous reshaping as a result of the internet revolution. It is – as I expect it always was – a changing world. Much is written about realism in international relations, about institutionalism, about constructivism. Now is the time for research which shows how they interact, and being the British Council, it will not surprise you that we think the role of institutionalism and constructivism is under played.

There is so much to learn and to think about in our ever changing world. That is what makes this such a fascinating field to be in.

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This interview was conducted by Tom Cassauwers. Tom is an Associate Features Editor of E-IR.