

Review - Inside the Foreign Office

Written by Oliver Daddow

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OLIVER DADDOW, JAN 8 2019

Inside the Foreign Office
Michael Waldman
BBC Studios, 2018

The BBC documentary *Inside the Foreign Office* was put together by Michael Waldman after the June 2017 general election. It covers what turns out to have been the final year of Boris Johnson's tenure as Foreign Secretary, with just a fleeting glimpse of the transition to Jeremy Hunt. It unfolds over three one-hour episodes, providing fly-on-the-wall footage of UK politicians and civil servants in action. It is interspersed with senior and more junior characters in the drama of British foreign policy talking about their day-to-day work, life and the business of being a diplomat.

Episode 1: Keeping Power and Influence

This is the scene-setter. It begins with Johnson and FCO Permanent Under-Secretary Simon McDonald addressing staff (there are some 14,000 based in London and around the world) in the balconied main atrium of the grand mid-Victorian FCO building in King Charles Street, London. Johnson is trying to spell out what he means by 'Global Britain' (he defines it as 'solving problems and doing good by bringing our expertise to bear'), to evident consternation among the massed ranks of civil servants.

It goes on to explore Britain's role in the world, what diplomats *do* and how they respond to international dilemmas. It shows UK diplomats embedded and operating in multilateral institutions such as the United Nations (UN), particularly as one of the members of the privileged Permanent-5 countries in the UN Security Council, along with the other big-hitters at the end of the Second World War: the US, USSR, China and France. This episode is themed narratively around a series of set pieces showing the FCO at work in different settings. First, at the UN's annual General Assembly week in New York, where they deal with Russia, a Resolution prosecuting Daesh for War Crimes, responding to the Rohingya emergency in Burma ('pure racism' Johnson called it), and sorting protocol on place settings for a dinner hosted by Theresa May on ending modern slavery. Second, the Ukrainian Ambassador is shown on the ground investigating the cause of civilian and military deaths allegedly at the hands of the Russian government.

Little of what gets covered and talked about will resonate with seasoned FCO observers as well as those with a passing acquaintance with contemporary developments in British foreign policy. There is a lot of talk about Britain 'punching above its weight' and wry definitions of diplomacy from McDonald ('the art of letting other people have your way'). There is some edginess about Britain's evident declining status in global affairs from its supposed heyday at the outbreak of World War One in 1914 to, today, a second-rank power, 'not able to do very much' by itself. Brexit has clearly focused attention on maintaining Britain's place in the second tier.

Episode 2: Brave New World

This episode is around Brexit, which is shown to be putting pressure on policy-making and implementation throughout the global diplomatic network overseen by the FCO. It opens with footage of a January 2018 Senior

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Leadership Forum convened by McDonald for an “uninhibited discussion” around the stresses and clench points in the system arising from Brexit. This is one of those moments in the series when the presence of the camera really shows, because one wonders what an inhibited discussion would have been like, if this was an uninhibited one. McDonald gathers views on Brexit from the top British people stationed in embassies around the world. Opinions are fed in from China (critical), Pakistan (less fussed) and Brazil (“politics as weird and corrupt as the press make out”).

One gets the impression that the truth for many FCO civil servants is that they are performing their public service role by enacting Brexit against their better judgement, which cannot, however, be allowed to impinge on their work. “Most of what we want to do we’ll find more difficult” because the UK will no longer be in the room when its European partners take the big decisions on the economy and security. This echoes the view of many former diplomats who have bemoaned that Brexit will reduce British influence and lead to a diminished role in the world by engaging in ‘an unparalleled act of self-harm’. For those on the ground, in the work we see being done by the British embassies in Mongolia and Nigeria, for example, the reality of Global Britain is a constant push to improve Britain’s current and future economic outlook through business and soft diplomacy. It is to be hoped that the narrator’s description of Mongolia as an ‘apparent backwater’ now required to support Global Britain does not undermine the strategy when the documentary gets watched in Ulaanbaatar.

As for arch Brexiter and Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson, he is filmed making flying visits to Portugal and France in October 2017 to promote ‘Global Britain’, the shorthand for the government’s foreign policy strategy of making Britain ‘more outward-looking and more engaged with the world than ever before.’ Johnson is briefed by top aide, the long-suffering Caroline Wilson (Director, Europe), who leads the European network of posts and the relevant FCO team in London. Johnson is shown filming social media promotional material for each leg of the visit (referred to as “the tyranny of the Twitter feed”) and having various meetings with senior diplomats and business people in each country.

Some of the footage is as worrying as it is funny. In Lisbon, Johnson gives a speech mentioning the Treaty of Windsor between England and Portugal, which he clearly has not read. In France he addresses his audience wholly in French (“they love it when I talk French” he quips, presumably talking about his French counterparts), to Wilson’s evident consternation. Questioned about Brexit, he describes it as having ushered in “a slightly scratchy period” but claiming that it will be “fine when it’s done”. Nine months after his whistle-stop European tour to advocate for Global Britain and eulogise Brexit, Johnson resigned from his position, unable to toe the May line on Brexit agreed at the Chequers away day in July 2018. One is left with the impression of a Foreign Secretary who, at best, did not take the job seriously.

Episode 3: Brits in Trouble

We tend to associate the FCO with diplomacy and high political matters, including promoting prosperity and projecting British values, the themes circulating in the first two episodes. The third episode deals with another of its core functions: consular work and the protection of British nationals who travel and work abroad. Annually, the FCO deals with over 30,000 such cases of Brits in trouble abroad, including lost passports, hospitalisations, detentions, deaths and those involved in natural disasters and major crises such as acts of terrorism.

The third episode illuminates the nature of this work by following three stories. I will not provide a spoiler as to how they turn out, although the second one has been in the news. The first story unfolds in the aftermath of the devastation wreaked by Hurricane Irma on the British Virgin Islands on its way through the Caribbean in September 2017. It follows a member of the FCO’s Rapid Deployment Team, part of a crisis response team of 82 FCO staff plus military sent to help Brits affected, especially an elderly couple whose house was completely destroyed. This is the ‘human’ face of the FCO at work, reinforcing the heavy toll the work takes on staff, not least emotionally and in their personal lives.

The second story concerns the detention of several British citizens in Cambodia in January 2018, on ‘pornography charges’ arising from arrests at a pool party. The FCO’s case team work closely with Mark Field, Minister of State for Asia, gradually escalating the diplomatic pressure to move things towards a resolution. What comes through very strongly from this story (reinforcing the previous episodes) is that rich, context-heavy local knowledge about the

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country concerned, including a careful approach to tone as well as substance, is vital. This sounds easy but is far from it. It also makes liaising with the family members of those affected a delicate task, because not everything that could be said can be said when politics and local law are in play.

The third is the tensest story, centering on the Forced Marriage Unit (FMU), which deals with over 1000 cases a year of forced marriage, honour-based violence and victim protection. The FMU in this instance is working on the extraction of a 17-year old British Iraqi dual passport holder who has been kept in Iraq against her will and promised to her cousin when she turns 18. Her caseworker in London has to devise a plan for her to leave without her family guessing what is happening, all the while liaising with the Embassy in Baghdad to sort the immigration paperwork and affect the mechanics of her escape.

As this foray into the less media-friendly work of the FCO illustrates, *Inside the Foreign Office* has something for those new to the practice of British foreign policy as well as those already with an interest in the UK's international diplomacy. Informative and part promotion on behalf of an embattled, Brexit-era Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), the series gives a pretty comprehensive picture of what it is like to work in one of the great – or formerly great – offices of the British state, at a stressful and turbulent time in domestic and international politics. The addition of the human-interest stories in episode three provides a welcome richness that might, perhaps, help the FCO recruit more high quality staff to carry out its vitally important tactical and strategic tasks.

About the author:

Dr Oliver Daddow is Assistant Professor in British Politics and Security at the University of Nottingham. This review was written while he was an Affiliate Researcher at the Bennett Institute for Public Policy, University of Cambridge. His research, writing and teaching interests are in British foreign policy, Brexit and public policy evaluation. Amongst his publications he has authored *Britain and Europe since 1945*, *New Labour and the European Union: Blair and Brown's Logic of History* and a textbook on *International Relations Theory*, now in its third edition. He co-edits the textbook *Politics UK*. He edited *Harold Wilson and European Integration: Britain's Second Application to Join the EEC*, *Interpreting Global Security*; and *British Foreign Policy: The New Labour Years*. He has written articles in leading international peer review journals such as: *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, *International Affairs*, *International Relations*, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, *Journal of European Public Policy* and *Review of International Studies*.