

Interview – Tom Fletcher

Written by E-International Relations

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Tom Fletcher is Principal of Hertford College, Oxford University. Tom served as a Foreign Policy Advisor to Prime Ministers Blair, Brown and Cameron, before becoming British Ambassador to Lebanon (2011-15) and a Visiting Professor at NYU (2015-20). He is the author of the bestselling *Naked Diplomacy: Power & Statecraft in the Digital Age* (2016). His forthcoming books include *Ten Survival Skills for a World in Flux* (Harper Collins, February 2022) and *The Ambassador* (Canelo, August 2022). He led reviews of the modernisation of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (2016), the future of the United Nations (2017) and the future of learning (2019). He is a former chair of the international board of the UK's Creative Industries Federation, adviser to businesses, academics and NGOs, and a member of the Global Tech Panel. He writes for the New York Times, Prospect, Foreign Policy, The National and others, is a regular interviewee on BBC, Sky, CNN and has been profiled by the BBC, Arab News and more. His Foundation for Opportunity supports good people doing good things in public life.

Where do you see the most exciting research and debates happening in your field?

I think, at the moment, they are centred around artificial intelligence, technology, and its relationship to governments and citizens. In this field, there is a great debate to be had about liberty and security online, about the protection of citizens online and from weapons of the future, such as lethal autonomous weapons, cyber-attacks, and so on. I think this is a really important space, and one where there is not yet enough diplomacy. We've created the Global Tech Panel, and there are other systems up and running to try and have these conversations, but they are not moving fast enough.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

Two key things come to mind. First, my worldview is very much shaped by 1989 — the fall of the Berlin Wall; the beginning of the ends of apartheid; Tiananmen Square; the sense, in Francis Fukuyama's infamous words, that history was moving in one direction and was somehow ending. I think for many of the diplomats of my generation, 2016, particularly Trump's election, was a real correction to that world view. We've had to understand, at a more fundamental level, that events can go in other directions as well. Second, I was over-enthusiastic, and over-idealistic, in my thoughts on how quickly technology, particularly social media, would change politics. I used to go around saying that the most powerful weapon in the Middle East is a smartphone, and it isn't — yet. I think over time, we will see profound changes, but we haven't come about these changes as fast as I originally thought. Of course, this is also largely due to the fact that the Internet has also been weaponised by people for very negative reasons as well.

Following on from Brexit and the era of Trump, how has British foreign policy evolved, both in the sense of the transatlantic relationship and otherwise?

I think we are in an era now where we are trying to work out what our story is — what is our story that we tell the world, what is our soft power as well as our hard power, what are the alliances we require to sustain this story. I am a big fan of the Integrated Review, which was completed earlier this year. I think it is a strong document that balances out these different issues around our values and interests. We are in a period of flux and fluidity — we must ensure that we don't lose our reputation for competence as a country. It's all very well to jump up and down while waving the

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flag, and to give barnstorming speeches, but we also have to do things well, and we must not lose focus of that aim.

‘Negotiation’ and ‘compromise’ are two terms most commonly associated with the practice of diplomacy. In an age of increasing political polarisation, will a diplomat’s mandate become more difficult to enforce?

Yes, it will become more difficult to enforce, but diplomats have always needed to go where the arguments were. If this means going online and dealing with the polarisation and division, then that’s where diplomats belong. We can’t just stay behind the flags in this old ‘maps and chaps’ approach to geopolitics — we have to go where the most important arguments are, and look for negotiation space, look for compromise, and look for ways to crack problems together.

As Project Director of Towards Global Learning Goals, you place a lot of emphasis on developing and focussing on common global educational objectives. What have you learnt while working with the project, and what changes would you like to see in global education?

What we discovered with the Towards Global Learning Goals project is that most people are learning things the wrong way — and this includes people that are learning at elite institutions, as well as people that are out of education. So many jobs will be automated in the next thirty years, and yet, so much education is based on retaining knowledge and passing exams, rather than the head, hand, and heart — the knowledge, skills, and character you need to thrive in the digital age, and that is what I would like to see changed.

As a former ambassador to Lebanon, you have experience dealing with post-conflict state-building. What are some of your takeaways from Lebanon that have changed the way you approach state-building in the modern day and age?

First, you need to be humble. You need to remember the baggage that you come in with, and you need to understand the history of the country in which you are working. Second, you need to be patient and tenacious, and stick with it. It is the work of generations and generations, and as we’ve seen in Afghanistan, 20-30 years isn’t enough to do that — you need more patience. A third point is that we need more people to specialise in this sort of work. This isn’t space where you can just wander in as an amateur — you require people who understand, and have studied, state building.

In your book *The Naked Diplomat*, you discuss the need for diplomats and politicians to adapt to the digital age. How has technology improved our approach to solving global crises today, and what are some of the advantages and challenges of using technology in this manner?

I think there are massive advantages to using new technology. For example, I believe that artificial intelligence could help us achieve a climate change deal. I think that blockchain technologies can help us provide accreditation for people moving between countries. I think that social media has proved immensely helpful towards dealing with big crises and consular responses. Through sentiment mining and the proper study of data, I think we can now get a much better sense of longer-term national and historic trends than through the old approach of just going to a couple of cocktail parties. And so I am enormously enthusiastic about the potential for technology to reshape diplomacy, and it is this sentiment that is at the heart of *The Naked Diplomat*, and the reviews I did of the United Nations and the Foreign Office.

You recently claimed that we are about to experience an “extraordinary decade of diplomacy”. How has the pandemic changed the future of diplomacy, and is it definitely for the better?

Yes, I do think this is an extraordinary decade of diplomacy. I think we can look at what the Nobel Peace Prizes will be for in the next decade — they will be for climate change; they will be for peace processes around technology and big-tech in government; they will be around how we learn to live together within our own societies, and the relationship between migrant communities and host communities. All of these sorts of issues are incredibly important for diplomacy, but the pandemic has definitely set us back. It has been an era of social distancing, and national

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distancing, and we need to now start rebuilding the international architecture and some sort of global system of cooperation.

You have held a variety of posts in a range of career fields from the policy sector to academia. As a diplomat, what are some personal goals you set for yourself, and how did you go about achieving them? Is the life of a diplomat something you would ever return to?

I think a great exercise, and this is something I am writing about in my new book called *Ten Survival Skills for a World in Flux*, is to try and write the first paragraph of your obituary. Consider what people will write about you when you go, and it will help you define what matters most to you professionally. Also try writing the first paragraph of your eulogy. Consider what people will stand up and say at your funeral, and that will help you define the sort of person you are. The more that you can align those two things, your obituary and your eulogy, the more chance you have of living a life of purpose and value. That, for me, is a great way of setting those personal goals. As for whether I would ever go back to diplomacy, I never left! I still think of myself as a diplomat with a small 'd' — I'm not working in professional diplomacy and statecraft, but I am still involved in diplomacy in different ways, such as tech, climate, and education. For me, education is upstream diplomacy.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

Learn languages and learn about culture. Get out there, travel, listen, and develop emotional intelligence — develop antennae for understanding how different societies work. Be ready to learn, and most importantly, be kind, be curious, be brave. That is the advice I would give to young scholars of International Relations. I am aware this may sound odd coming from a Head of House at Oxford, but I think all of this is more important than learning what is in the textbooks on International Relations, even *The Naked Diplomat*!