

Travails of a foreign policy



Sir Henry Wotton

by Ralph Berry

'An ambassador is an honest gentleman sent to lie abroad for the good of his country.' Sir Henry Wotton, on a mission to Augsburg in 1604, coined that splendid defence of his trade. He asserts his own moral, and indeed, social integrity while admitting that his profession requires him to say things that are not, strictly speaking, true.

I do not rule out straightforward, old-fashioned lying as part of a diplomat's armoury. This is indispensable. But today we see a tendency that belongs to the realm of advertising. It has no base in the real world, just an inflated claim designed to sell a product. It can no more be questioned than the claims in the press for more comfortable ladies' underwear. Worse than that, the wordage in itself becomes the point.

Take James Cleverly, the Foreign Secretary, on the Ukraine war:

'Peace could be achieved today if Russia would withdraw its troops from Ukraine.' Very true, and we now have to explain to a primary school class, the target audience, why this consummation however devoutly to be wished is not on. The press is obliged to activate hordes of useless words whose flow cannot be stopped. When NATO is referred to as 'the cockpit of peace', no one is found to say that peace is not usually present in a cockpit. The commentariat finds unity in the cliché du jour—the current upheavals, says Cleverly, reveal 'cracks are appearing in Russian support for war'. Thank heavens for cracks, they paper over, well, cracks. Of course, much of this can be put down to George Orwell's litany of linguistic follies, 'Politics and the English language', a list both revered and ignored—by the same people. Without clichés public communication is impossible.

As it happens, the future of the Foreign Office will not be in the hands of James Cleverly for much longer. The word-flow will have even less meaning than before. Cleverly has just announced that he is considering standing down from Parliament at the next election. He has loved his job as Foreign Secretary and dreads working in opposition, where 'the best job he could get' would be party leader.

That fate would be hard for a proud man to bear after the golden years in Carlton House, where his work desk was Palmerston's.

Nor is the job itself what it was. Cleverly had hoped to be high in the counsels of NATO, just as his cabinet colleague Greg Wallace, the Defence Secretary, hoped to be the next Secretary-General of NATO.

But Wallace has now acknowledged that he will not be SG. The reason is contained in this terse headline: EU IS 'TRYING TO EDGE OUT BRITAIN' FROM LEADING NATO.

Those eternal culprits France, with Germany, have decided that

NATO is too important to be left in the hands of the British. I cannot say I blame them; when the last time Britain seized control of European politics it was Boris Johnson's unilateral declaration of support for Ukraine. Since the impetuous Boris and others like Talleyrand may murmur 'pas de zeze'. Too late, for the high price of zeal in the cause of righteousness is now coded into the bill. 'L'addition, s'il vous plait.'

The system is responding in time-honoured manner. Britain needs more troops and to increase defence spending. General Sir Patrick Sanders, Chief of the General Staff, says that Britain should 'never again be unprepared as our forebears were in the 1930s,' and suggested that the instability in Ukraine and Russia could be compared to the rise of Adolf Hitler. 'Suggested'? The defence people have long been proclaiming this unlikely thesis as their intellectual lodestar. The indispensable Hitler comes unfailingly to their assistance. It is as though A.J.P. Taylor never lived.

For today however I offer a cautionary tale. It is of 2016 and thus beyond the folk memory of all save the oldest member of the Foreign Office, if even him. An army coup against the Turkish leader Erdogan was mounted, and for several hours looked like succeeding. But the plotters lost their way—it was said, they should have taken their chance to kill Erdogan—and by the morning it was clear that the coup had failed. Erdogan then embarked on a prolonged purge of the Army, which left it incapable of any future coup. He is now in unchallenged power, and is on excellent terms with Vladimir Putin.