

The British Foreign Office

John Dickie, *The New Mandarins: The Making of British Foreign Policy*,

(IB Tauris, London, 2004)

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As an author on reform of the Indian Ministry of External Affairs (450-page *Inside Diplomacy* (2000), articles in this journal and elsewhere), I was captivated by this book. It reveals for the first time the genesis and mode of the transformation that the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) has carried out over the past five years. It is relevant for diplomacy networks around the world, and for those interested in international affairs, in today's paradigm of volatile, unpredictable world affairs.

In writing this 'authorized' account, experienced journalist Dickie, author of another splendid work, *Inside the Foreign Office* (1993), was given unique access. He lifts the curtain on the change that began in 1999 when Foreign Secretary Robin Cook decided on a novel approach. He empowered the 'young turks' of the diplomatic establishment, led by his speechwriter Martin Gould, to produce their own agenda for change. In the space of barely six months, exploiting IT-enabled networks to the full, a coalition of over 100 'contact groups' emerged, comprising some 1000 British diplomats, and produced a 103-page report, *Foresight 2010*, calling for the most thoroughgoing transformation that this establishment had confronted. (Alas, this document remains unpublished). It was left to Cook's successor, present Foreign Secretary Jack Straw, to implement this, a process underway for the past couple of years.

Such bottom-up foreign ministry reform is unprecedented. The hazard of good ideas spinning out of control, and worse, losing credibility with the high levels that must exercise command, was avoided by designating senior mandarins as coordinators for each major theme addressed by the contact groups. Two successive permanent under-secretaries, as heads of the diplomatic service, persisted in support for this process, while staying away from details of the recommendations as they evolved. As it turned out, such an inclusive, two-step method guaranteed institutional acceptance.

The book's first two chapters narrate the method's chronology and operation. The rest details the ensuing changes, probably of greater interest to those concerned with foreign ministry structures and human resources than the general reader. But

there is more than enough to hold interest for anyone interested in public affairs management.

A few of the new British methods are worth summarizing. All senior assignments, some 450 at London and abroad, are covered by a point system under the rubric 'Job Evaluation, Senior Posts', bearing points, from 28 for the permanent under-secretary at the apex, to 8 for the envoy at Port Moresby (8 to 12 for heads of department and 20 to 22 for the top six directors general at the FCO, 22-23 for the envoys to Delhi, Moscow, Berlin and Paris, 24 for the ambassador at Washington DC, 25 for the envoy at Brussels). The grading takes into account the people management responsibility, the accountability and judgment needed in the larger sense; at each change of incumbent, the rating is reviewed. All the posts are up for bidding, with a single page application, to be considered by the 'No. 1 Board', with final approval by the Foreign Secretary (i.e. the cabinet minister).

The Policy Planning Division was abolished, replaced by a 'Directorate of Strategy and Innovation', required to produce 'fresh strategic thinking on current, long-term and cross-cutting issues'. For the first time in its history, the FCO organized a conference of all its ambassadors in January 2003, producing inter alia a public paper on foreign policy strategy, again a first. The primacy now given to innovation is comparable to the Canadian foreign ministry listing it as one of its four major goals.

One should mention the Research Analysis Department, dating to 1943, which not only studies past events (like MEA's Historical Division), but also has the very contemporary task of filtering every 'submission' (i.e. proposal) addressed to the Foreign Secretary, placing issues in their context, guarding against short-termism. This ensures utilization of the institution's imbedded memory, a critical task in any foreign ministry.

Dickie narrates the methods that are relevant to reform management. One is the 'quick wins' formula, ensuring immediate results to win support for the change agenda among the doubters. Another is the surveys carried out after implementing some reforms, to review utility and impact. He mentions a few innovations that did not work, like recruiting corporate executives for a few high profile jobs (e.g. the consul general in New York, advertised in *The Economist*); the very best found the emoluments and career prospects unattractive, and it made no sense to get businessmen who had not made it to the top. But one business-related change that has worked is the inclusion of two top private industry CEOs in the 14-member 'Board of Management' that serves as the top decision-making body of the FCO.

It is fascinating that at just about the same time, the German Foreign Office carried out its own navel-gazing, an examination of the role of its EU embassies, confronting the charge that they had been reduced to the role of inn-keepers and bag-carriers in the EU integration process and its 'Common Foreign and Security

Policy' (CFSP). The German paper, presenting a robust case for the embassies (the work of has diminished in some areas and expanded much more in others) is narrated in the Paschke Report of September 2000, available at several websites in English translation.

Overall, this book shows how renewal in foreign ministries has become continual. The best change is internalized, incremental; that has also been the experience of the Chinese Foreign Ministry, which has virtually reinvented itself since 1993. No less vital are the methods in what the Germans call 'success management', including pragmatism, constant reality checks, objective follow-up and rejection of the unworkable. This applies equally to all the sectors of public affairs management.

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