

It is an honour to speak today at the Institute for Government.

Which has done so much to improve not just the theory...

...but the *practice* of government.

If I have the privilege to serve as Britain's next Foreign Secretary...

...I will have had more time to prepare than any of my predecessors since Robin Cook.

I have spent over two years shadowing the role, made more than 40 foreign visits...

...learning and exchanging with foreign ministers, leaders, diplomats and thinkers.

From the truth-telling of Poland's foreign minister Radek Sikorski.

To the WhatsApp diplomacy of Emmanuel Macron.

And the dynamism of my friend, Barbados' Prime Minister, Mia Mottley.

I want to draw on the lessons I have learned.

But first I want to dwell briefly on what becoming Foreign Secretary would mean to me personally.

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I believe modern Britain is a story of *progress*.

The great story of the 20th century is a one of people without rights...

...women, people of colour, LGBT+...

...winning them through activism, representation and argument.

A Foreign Secretary can play a profound role in advancing and protecting those rights...

...at home and abroad

Almost exactly two hundred years ago...

...there was a debate in the House of Commons...

...on the "Slave Population of the West Indies."

The Foreign Secretary, the legendary George Canning, rose first to discuss abolition.

He spoke of a determination to look that "evil in the face."

William Wilberforce then took the floor to denounce the flogging and the branding of the enslaved.

But before other members began to raise the horrors of the plantations...

...a Tory called Sir James Blair took to the floor.

"I deny that the negroes there are in any respect harshly used," he said.

"On the contrary, I maintain, that they are as mildly and as humanely managed."

He described the slaves as 'property' to which owners 'are by law entitled'.

My own ancestors were those possessions.

Slaves outside of Georgetown in Guyana.

Let me tell you, if Labour wins the next election...

And if Keir Starmer gives me the privilege of becoming Foreign Secretary...

...two hundred years after James Blair's horrific words...

I will take the responsibility of being the first Foreign Secretary descended from the slave trade incredibly seriously.

However, I will focus, *not* on the culture war....

...but on learning lessons from the past...

...that enable us to work in partnership with the Commonwealth and the Global South...

...with respect and diplomacy...

...to address the problems of *today*.

An era of conflict.

The climate emergency.

Escalating humanitarian crises on every continent

That great task of extending and defending *progress*

And against a darkening geopolitical horizon...

...we shall deliver this not through symbolic gestures.

But through hard, painstaking diplomacy.

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Of course, diplomacy depends above all on people.

FCDO staff, many of whom I have had the pleasure of meeting over the past two years, are the essential ingredient of British diplomacy

and they are looked upon enviously by other countries.

Travelling overseas – from Brazil to Kenya, from the Occupied Palestinian Territories to Ukraine

I have been hugely impressed by your knowledge, professionalism and bravery, often in difficult circumstances.

I have seen how effective we can be when our key tools - diplomacy, development, defence - work together in unison.

So whether you focus on development or diplomacy, security or prosperity, consular or crisis response.

Whether you work in King Charles Street or in one of our 281 missions overseas.

Whether you are country-based or posted overseas

I know that this is a profession – for many of you, a *vocation* – unlike almost any other.

The demands can be extraordinary. The public scrutiny intense. The personal costs significant, to you and your families.

Thank you for your service.

Because at its best this institution can achieve so much.

It *has* achieved so much.

George Mitchell, the great American peacemaker, said diplomacy was 700 days of failure and one of success.

The nature of the business is that gains are often invisible or forgotten.

But there are many moments even in the quarter century that I have spent in politics which continue to shape our world.

From Tony Blair and Robin Cook's heroic work around the war in Kosovo and the sustained effort across the Balkans since.

The restoration of democracy in Sierra Leone, against all the odds.

Setting up the first Forced Marriage Unit in the UK, to help British victims abroad.

The London Summit in 2009 when Gordon Brown gathered together world leaders and pulled the global financial system back from the brink.

The Olympic Games in 2012 - a diplomatic success shared across the whole of Whitehall, but with its origins in the work of my friend Tessa Jowell.

And over the last two years everything you have done in Ukraine, to defend a democracy...

... from Vladimir Putin's new form of fascism.

Politicians may sometimes get the credit.

But I know full well that it is the work of civil servants toiling behind the scenes that makes these successes happen.

I know also that the last five years have been marked by disruption after disruption.

The painfully botched merger between two departments.

An endless carousel of Conservative foreign secretaries

Each with their own priorities and peccadillos

Each of whom have failed to deliver for the UK.

So, I would like to reassure you that I have no interest whatsoever in change for change's sake.

If I have the honour to become Foreign Secretary, my focus will be on delivering concrete gains for the British people.

And my objective for the FCDO as an institution is that you are universally acknowledged not only as the best diplomatic service in the world...

...but also the one driven by the clearest sense of purpose.

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Last year, I set out a vision of Britain Reconnected in a Fabians pamphlet.

Reconnected for security. For prosperity. For climate. For Development. And for diplomacy.

Over the last 14 years of Tory chaos, Britain has lost influence over international decision-making.

We still have incredible assets.

Permanent UN security council membership.

Compelling soft power, personified by our arts, culture and creative industries.

The English language.

business and legal sectors which penetrate every continent.

World-leading capabilities in science, technology and advanced manufacturing

Universities to which the most able and ambitious students and researchers from around the world continue to flock

Alongside the excellence of our diplomats and armed forces

But all of these institutions and sectors have suffered from, at best, a lack of focus...

...and at worst, political delinquency.

I can't begin to imagine the embarrassment faced by those ambassadors forced to transmit overnight aid cuts to their hosts.

The foolishness of Rishi Sunak becoming the first Prime Minister in a decade to skip the UN General Assembly.

The short-sightedness of Boris Johnson's Brexit without a plan.

The trauma of explaining Liz Truss' budget...

...or her failure to recognise the French President as our friend, not foe.

And this period of looking inwards came at the worst possible time.

The past ten years have seen the most significant geopolitical shifts at least since 1989.

The Middle East in its worst turmoil since 1973, with humanitarian catastrophes not only in Gaza, but also Yemen and Sudan.

The climate crisis accelerating away from our efforts to contain it.

Revolutionary technologies at risk of racing ahead of our capacity to regulate them.

Or to harness the opportunities they bring.

A return to superpower competition, without the guardrails of the Cold War.

China veering increasingly close to throwing in its lot with Putin.

The Kremlin waging war within Europe's borders

And manoeuvring Iran, North Korea and Syria to support its aims.

The rise of a host of new powers able to shape their own reality and maintain multiple, shifting allegiances.

The peril of Ukraine facing a Russian army that outnumbered and outguns it.

The horror of a Middle East still without a two-state solution.

The jeopardy of the rules-based order, on which Britain depends, collapsing.

This is an historic inflection point.

A moment crying out for energetic diplomacy to match it.

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I argued in a Foreign Affairs article last month that the next Labour's foreign policy doctrine should be progressive realism.

Taking the world as it is, not as we would wish it to be.

Dealing head-on with a worsening security environment.

Starting, unfortunately, from a position of low growth, weak productivity and insufficient investment.

But believing that we can get Britain its future back while delivering for the wider world.

In government the how matters just as much as the what.

Labour's foreign office will have five guiding principles.

First, clarity of purpose.

We will make the FCDO the International delivery arm of Keir Starmer's missions.

That means, above all else, delivering growth and jobs

Addressing the climate and nature emergency...

...and defending the UK's security...

...in an era in which domestic and international policy have drawn ever closer.

It is diplomacy that creates the long-term strategic partnerships which will drive investment into cutting edge industries in the UK, from chip design to biotech to EV plants.

It is diplomacy – through Labour's plans for a Clean Power Alliance - that will help bring more countries on to a net zero trajectory.

It is diplomacy - through Labour's proposed UK-EU Security pact - that will help protect Europe from Russian threats.

And it is diplomacy - through reform of the UN, the IMF and the World Bank - that can revitalize the faltering international system.

In all of these cases, our domestic leadership and international impact are inseparable.

So, if we win the election, I want every ambassador and embassy demonstrating clearly

how they are delivering growth to the UK economy

how they are delivering security to the British people

and *how* they are helping drive the low carbon transition.

The last Labour government drove up standards in domestic policy through a relentless focus on monitoring and evaluation.

Yes, foreign policy is different.

But we should place greater emphasis on delivering tangible outcomes to demonstrate diplomacy's impact.

Second, our diplomacy needs to rediscover the art of grand strategy.

We need to set our own efforts not only in the context of our closest comparators such as the French...

...whose economic diplomacy can often feel more hard-headed and realist than our own...

Or other G7 nations such as the US and Japan

We also need to address - and sometimes learn from - the increasingly dynamic diplomatic approaches of countries like India, Brazil and the UAE.

Lasting security demands long-termism.

The last Labour government upgraded the then Policy Planners function into an expanded Strategy Unit.

Countries that execute international strategy effectively – from the US to Singapore – place a huge emphasis on such functions.

But at present, neither the FCDO nor the National Security Council is delivering the sharp, coherent international strategy which the country urgently needs.

Without such strategy, we should expect to be buffeted by the tides of superpower competition.

Not only between US and China, but also by the many rising powers who are threatening our competitive advantages, economically and militarily.

We will build up and empower the existing strategy unit to put it at the heart of the organization...

...making it the place to go for the sharpest geopolitical minds.

Third, technology.

Diplomacy is not a luxury.

It helps partnerships to evolve, nations to thrive and crises to evaporate before they reach the news cycle.

But we cannot meet the disruptive challenges of the 2020s with a 20th Century diplomatic playbook.

In an era of fiscal constraint, we need to work smarter, adapt our tools and make better use of technology.

We should cut the time spent by staff in King Charles Street compiling biographies and background briefings.

We should make better use of existing resources to ensure that as many staff as possible are working in the field.

The FCDO should double down on adopting AI and other emerging tech...

...to generate insights and to free up staff to concentrate on frontline activity.

Recent events from Gaza to Ukraine have demonstrated, for example, the huge gains available through OSINT – open-source intelligence.

Given the capabilities within the country, the FCDO should be at the front of the pack in developing open-source analytical capability...

In Kyiv this week, I was alerted by three air raid sirens in just one day.

I saw first-hand how indispensable Open-Source Intelligence is to Ukrainian decision-makers as they fight back against the Russian advance.

This is why Labour will drive the integration of emerging technology and diplomacy.

We also need to recognise that diplomacy and development no longer operate within the old institutional boundaries.

On my travels, I've encountered countless organisations and individuals – from businesses to the arts – who can act as powerful informal advocates for the national interest.

But too often they are not invited to do so.

This is particularly true of the arts and creative industries, which this government has treated with disrespect.

The next Labour government will establish a soft power council

Which brings together leading figures from across arts, culture, creative industries and academia to work together to advance the national interest.

We have seen this work before in campaigns such as that in advance of London 2012.

We can do it again.

Fourth, openness.

I know that there has been significant progress over the past few years,

but there remains a persistent view of the FCDO as remote and elitist.

I do not think that is a fair reflection, but this is an image which we must lose.

This geopolitical moment requires fresh ideas.

The FCDO needs to be out and about in the UK as well as overseas – talking to business, academia, think-tanks and the rest of Whitehall.

Leading the debate on the UK's role in the world and demonstrating that it welcomes challenge and argument.

The root of diplomatic expertise will always be deep understanding of host countries and regions.

But the emerging diplomatic issues of our age are the thematic threats and opportunities presented by, climate, technology and health.

For too long the foreign office has been seen by the outside world and the rest of Government as generalist dilettantes.

Once again, Michael Gove was wrong.

In a modernised Foreign Office, as in wider government, we need more experts, not fewer.

If the foreign office is to change the global debate on technology, then we need serious technology experts.

If we are to understand China, we need serious Chinese experts, both here and in Beijing.

And if we are to shift the dial on nature, we need people who really understand the natural world.

Openness also means considering how and where we can generate the biggest bang for buck with our diplomatic network.

In a time of fiscal restraint, we should not just accept that the traditional model of an embassy works in every country.

We should consider collocation with our key partners when that provides a means of expanding into new areas.

For example, in the Pacific Islands Forum nations, where climate change and great power competition intersect most sharply.

Finally, excellence.

William Hague was right to create the Diplomatic Academy and revive the language school.

But that was more than a decade ago

and a new generation of diplomatic excellence requires a new institution to support it.

I propose upgrading it into a new College of British Diplomacy

... that sets the global gold standard for both diplomacy and development.

It should draw on best-practice and talent from across the world.

Not just British expertise

...but learning from the innovations made by our allies and partners...

...nor least from our Ukrainian friends in their pioneering defence against a hostile state...

It should open its doors not only to all of Whitehall...

..but also to international diplomats from friendly countries.

It would offer courses in core skills – such as languages and history.

But it should also teach the key diplomatic issues of the future - such as climate science and AI.

And it would also have the same relentless focus on delivery that Michael Barber pioneered in the last Labour government

which drove up standards and outcomes across vast swathes of domestic policy.

The College *will* be cost-neutral.

Financed through charging overseas diplomats for courses.

And also through generating partnerships with the private sector, in much the same way as institutions such as the Blavatnik School of Government.

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Many foreign secretaries of the past decades have encouraged the office to be more creative and to embrace risks.

I believe one such initiative asked staff to think up ways of scratching the Rolls Royce...

...but vanishingly few marks were made.

I hope my words today have begun to describe a different future.

Strategic; open; innovative and technologically enabled.

A new Great British vehicle. Perhaps an electric one.

But above all driven by a compelling sense of mission.

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I believe my lineage tells a story...

That modern Britain and the modern world has been a story of progress.

Progress that is the result of politics...

Progress that has come out of diplomacy...

Progress that advances through policy...

No matter how complex or difficult the task.

And I know...

We will rise to the challenge.

Thank you

