

‘Crown Service’

Speech by Professor the Lord Hennessy of Nympsfield
at the OSPA Farewell Luncheon on 8 June 2017 at the Grand Connaught Rooms
Introduced by The Rt. Hon. the Lord Goodlad, KCMG, OSPA President

LORD GOODLAD: My Lords, ladies and gentlemen, before I introduce our Guest Speaker I do want, on behalf of all of us here, to say how enormously we appreciate David Le Breton’s 25 years as Secretary of OSPA! David, thank you and congratulations. *[Applause]*

Peter Hennessy will be known to everybody in one capacity or another: as a journalist for *The Times* and *Sunday Times*, as a broadcaster on the BBC and others – you can listen to him at seven o’clock tomorrow if you want – as a writer of authoritative books about government in this country, as a former Professor of History at London University and indeed of rhetoric – there are not many professors of rhetoric around; Peter is one of them.

Since 2010 he has been a member of the House of Lords which contains a large number of people who think that they know something about the Constitution or are indeed part of the Constitution. As always Peter Hennessy has become pre-eminent among them and we are extremely lucky that he has very kindly made himself available to speak to us today. Lord Hennessy! *[Applause]*

LORD HENNESSY: Thank you, Alastair, very much, for that very generous welcome.

It is such an honour to be with you on this special day of valedictory and reflection. It is also a huge honour to be asked to say a few words on the subject of “Crown Service” in these glorious Connaught Rooms, associated with the legendary Corona Club dinners of the past.

“Crown Service” is the theme, the bonding that binds all of you in this grand room whenever and wherever you served, and the reach of locations reflects the extraordinary extent of the British Empire and Commonwealth.

“Crown Service” is also the theme which binds you with today’s public servants and the generations of Crown servants still to come in the Civil and Diplomatic Services, the Secret Services, the Armed Forces and the Judiciary.

The strand of non-political career service based on merit not patronage runs like a precious thread through our history since the mid-nineteenth century and, as I shall explain briefly in a minute, it was an import from the Empire to the home country, having reached its first flowering in the fabled Indian Civil Service.

But first let us savour together the expression of its essence as framed at the very highest level by Her Majesty The Queen a year-and-a-half ago.

The location: the Home Office. The occasion: the presentation of the annual Civil Service Awards. The date: 12 November 2015.

“Occasionally”, said Her Majesty, “it is right that we pause to recognise the vital work being done every day throughout the United Kingdom in the name of public service. From policy makers in Whitehall to public-facing staff across the country, we trust public servants to show integrity, stamina and selfless duty, as well as essential values such as being fair, keeping one’s word, speaking the truth – even when that truth is unwelcome – and judging every case on its merits, even in trying and pressurised circumstances.”

Her Majesty went on:

“These unwritten but deep-rooted values, nurtured over 160 years since the modern Civil Service was founded, are the essence of the British spirit of public service, which is recognised throughout the world, and it is important that they continue to be celebrated and encouraged.”

The key figure in that refashioning of the Civil Service that Her Majesty mentioned was Charles Trevelyan, child of an evangelical West Country family, brother-in-law of the incomparable historian and politician, T B Macaulay, who joined the East India Company's Civil Service in 1826.

In 1840 he returned to London with very advanced ideas about the nature of effective Crown Service and was appointed Permanent Secretary of the Treasury at the age of 32 and set about creating what we would now call a meritocracy within his own department. But not until the happy coincidence of Mr Gladstone becoming Chancellor of the Exchequer in 1852 could the “Indianisation” of the British Home Civil Service proceed. Trevelyan was commissioned by Mr Gladstone, as Minister for the Civil Service, along with Sir Stafford Northcote, to produce his classic report on the Civil Service of 1853.

Its key passage eventually impacted upon all government departments, though the Foreign Office held out longest for the reservation of ministerial patronage against merit as revealed through competitive examinations, which was the basis of your recruitment. You are direct descendants of that breakthrough, meritocrats overseas you can call yourselves.

Here are the words in the Northcote-Trevelyan report that really mattered – and I hope you will recognise something of yourselves in them:

“It may safely be asserted that as matters now stand the Government of the country could not be carried on without the aid of an efficient body of permanent officers, occupying a position duly subordinate to that of Ministers who are directly responsible to the Crown and Parliament, yet possessing sufficient independence, character, ability and experience to be able to advise, assist and, to some extent, influence those who are from time to time set over them.”

The notion of speaking truth under power, fearlessly, as Crown servants, is embedded in there and it is pure Indian Civil Service, pure Charles Trevelyan.

This tradition – your tradition – is, I regret to say, under a good deal of strain in contemporary Whitehall, as some of you will know.

Sir Martin Donnelly, a recent Permanent Secretary suffused with the great tradition, went public on the matter just a few weeks ago after retiring from the fledgling Department for International Trade which he helped set up as part of the run-up to Brexit. This is what he told the Institute for Government:

“We have to be seen by Ministers, by Parliament and by the public as reliable, honest and competent – the criteria for being trusted, and trusted to be frank.

If the price of being accepted into inner counsels is to compromise our honest advice then the price is too high and we must not pay it. If, while genuinely seeking to deliver ministerial priorities, we fear to tell it like it is because we are afraid that our analysis or advice will be criticised – then we are failing in that trust.”

It is very significant that a recently retired Permanent Secretary had to be as candid as that in public. They were powerful words; worrying words. That trust was your trust too. It was part of the essential make-up, was it that right not, of Her Majesty's Overseas Civil Service?

The Trevelyan tradition first shaped and honed in the British Empire was, in my judgement, the greatest single governing gift bequeathed by the Nineteenth Century to the Twentieth. If it withers and perishes in the first decades of the Twenty-first century it will be a national own goal of dreadful proportions, with profound consequences for the quality, perhaps even the decency, of UK government; heaven forbid that creeping politicisation should touch the Armed Services and the Secret Services. It is vital that your tradition of Crown Service endures.

In my opening words, I stressed the honour I feel at being with you today. I should have added the word "humility". The man you really needed to talk to you today we lost very nearly 40 years ago, Cyril Radcliffe, Lord Radcliffe, the great lawyer and administrator who had the terrible task of determining at great speed the boundaries between India and Pakistan and the knowledge that wherever his pen settled there would be blood either side of the line. I interviewed Lord Radcliffe as a young man on *The Times* shortly before he died (he had just finished his last great service to the country which was a report on mistrial memoirs after the Crossland Diaries affair). In our wider conversation about his public life, he touched on India/Pakistan 1947 and it was plain he had never fully recovered from that boundary commissioner experience – who would?

In October 1947, shortly after he returned to the UK from India, Lord Radcliffe gave a talk for the BBC on what we then called "the wireless" on *Thoughts on India as 'The Page is Turned'.* It was a remarkable broadcast and it was the kind of "elegy" that I wish I could produce for you today to show my respect and affection for you, but I cannot match Cyril Radcliffe however much I may wish to.

Radcliffe finished his broadcast with his thoughts just a few weeks earlier as he stood at the gates of an old cemetery in Calcutta. This is what he said:

"I will end ... with a little elegy in a Calcutta churchyard, because some day the long history book of the people of this country will be closed and future historians of the world will try to assess what they stood for and what they did. I do not want to anticipate what they will say. But, if the account had to be taken today (if let us say, history were now put an end to by some atomic bomb even more devastating than the one which civilisation has yet evolved) I can think of one thing we could at least say of ourselves: we certainly got about the world.

We have been such wanderers that the mud of every country is on our shoes. It is quite an essay in geography to list the places in the five continents in which British soldiers are buried; and we would need a new list for the British civilian cemeteries overseas. In all recorded history up to the present no people has ever so mixed its dust with the dust of the entire wide world.

Is that not a wonderful sentence? He concluded with this:

"Eccentric, tiresome, interfering, if you like, but, surely too, adventurous, ingenious, courageous and enduring. And yes, for better or worse, very remarkable!"

That 70-year-old elegy, delivered in the year I was born as a subject of the last King Emperor, George VI, shortly before the end of the Indian Empire, was very memorable.

You served the Crown in what turned out to be Britain's imperial twilight. Nearly 30 years ago I had a conversation with one of Her Majesty's Private Secretaries, who many of you will know, Martin Charteris, a wonderful man, Lord Charteris of Amisfield, and we touched on your years – the years of morphing from Empire to Commonwealth. "Has anybody", said Martin, "ever thought of a more dignified way of getting out of Empire?"

It was David Harlech, Lord Harlech, who told the *New York Times* in October 1962 when he was Harold Macmillan's Ambassador to President Kennedy's Washington that:

“Britain will be honoured by historians more for the way she disposed of an empire than for the way in which she acquired it.”

That was a great tribute to the generations represented here today because it was the task that fell to you, just as described by David Harlech.

There was, for me, a real resonance of that earlier this year on 17 January when the Prime Minister, Mrs May, delivered her speech at Lancaster House on the ingredients of her Brexit negotiating strategy. The room – which some of you would have recognised straightaway – in which she spoke to her Cabinet, the London Diplomatic Corps, assorted great and good and the journalists, was the same room, exactly the same place, where so many of the independence negotiations took place as part of the long period of imperial disposal. I wonder if she or her advisers chose that venue for exactly those reasons as now the country begins the greatest geopolitical shift since the ending of our territorial empire.

It is interesting to contemplate the differences. When you think about it, disposing of the British Empire was accomplished to a set of timetables largely, but not wholly, in the control of British ministers. Leaving the European Union is not. Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty requires us to do it in two years – and 27 other countries are involved simultaneously.

Brexit, too, as time goes by may well illustrate another comparison. It was far easier in many ways to acquire a territorial empire over the centuries than to shed it – a task which, as you know better than anyone else, involved a great deal of “sloggy” casework – not least in Lancaster House. “Brentry” as *The Economist* magazine neatly called our accession to the European Union, will, I suspect, strike us in retrospect as a relatively swift process once Ted Heath and Georges Pompidou fired the starting gun in 1970. For all the 2-year Article 50 timetable I cannot see a final settlement falling into place until at least the early to mid-2020s.

A few concluding thoughts. Your generation has lived through a stunning and often unforeseen set of transformations:

World War to Cold War and the coming of the atomic bomb

Much later the fall of the Soviet Union

Empire into Commonwealth

The third industrial evolution of the digital age

The rise of terrorism – international and domestic

What will now be a 46-year aberrational integration as part of the European Community.

But, above all, you will have been part of the last stages of what Lord Beaverbrook once called “An Empire broad as the Earth”

A remarkable, a singular experience.

The British imperial experience in all its aspects – indeed its very justifiability as a phenomenon – will be debated as long as the British take an interest in their own history.

Whatever the future judgements, you brought to it, to your task, the best that brain, heart and sinew could provide.

You did the state and the Crown very considerable, very special service – and I salute you for it. Thank you very much. *[Applause]*

LORD GOODLAD: Lord Hennessy, you said that you could not produce an elegy similar to that produced 40 years ago by Lord Radcliffe but I think I speak for all of us when I say that you came very close to doing so. It was the most fascinating analysis and we will have a lot to think about, a lot – and I speak not for myself but for those here – to be proud of, reflected in what you said. We thank you very much indeed for giving us such an amenable discourse. Thank you.

My final word of thanks is to all of you for coming here today and making this such a memorable occasion. We will, I know, reflect on today for a long time to come, seeing old friends and making some new ones, and our own participation in various ways at various times in what I like to think of as the empire of the mind. We will not be gathering again like this, we will be meeting together, I hope, during the remainder of our natural lives, but we shall meet again no doubt – I hope – all together in a better place. Until that happens, Godspeed to all of you. Thank you very much.