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The Saturday Profile

The Saturday Profile: Rebellious Diplomat Finds Work as Envoy of the Voiceless

By Nicholas Wood

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CARNE ROSS

PRISTINA, Kosovo

GUILT is not a word that most diplomats would choose to sum up their careers, but Carne Ross uses just that as he looks back at much of his work over 15 years. Guilt, frustration and anger.

Until about two years ago, this 40-year-old with closely cropped hair had a promising career ahead of him in the most prestigious ministry in British government, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. By his 30s, he had done foreign service in Germany and Afghanistan and held a senior post in the British delegation at the United Nations Security Council, where he was responsible for Iraq policy.

He seemed headed toward an ambassadorship as a member of the elite, fast stream of the Foreign Office, followed by a comfortable retirement.

But things fell apart in the most public fashion, unusual among the tight-lipped mandarins of Britain's foreign service.

Unhappy with American and British claims that Iraq was developing unconventional weapons, Mr. Ross testified in June 2004 at an official inquiry into the British government's use of intelligence. Two months later, convinced he could no longer work in the foreign service, he resigned. Since then he has written many articles criticizing the American and British rationale for going to war.

But it is his broad critique of the way international diplomacy is conducted that has ruffled feathers the most.

In a book released in April, "Independent Diplomat: Dispatches From an Unaccountable Elite," he takes the foreign service to task. He says it routinely made "bad decisions in closed rooms" and acted "with little or no consultation of the people in whose name those decisions are made."

The British Foreign Office scrutinized the book before publication to see if it breached the Official Secrets Act. It deleted some parts and concluded that Mr. Ross "risks damaging the credibility and morale of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the relationship of confidence and trust within the government," according to a statement later released to the news media.

MR. ROSS seems to relish the controversy. The rupture of his career over Iraq, he says, made him realize that much of what he did in the foreign service gave scant thought to the people he was affecting, and that realization gave rise to his anger.

"Diplomacy is too closed a box," Mr. Ross said, dominated as it is by the big powers on the United Nations Security Council. Its permanent members — Britain, China, France, Russia and the United States — create policies without insight into their impact, Mr. Ross argues.

"More often than not, we took decisions with little understanding of the situation," he said. "The people we were discussing were not present, whether it was Iraq, Palestine or the Western Sahara."

That prompted to him to find a way to help those countries and regions he considered to be excluded from the world of international diplomacy.

The result is a nonprofit agency called Independent Diplomat, like his book. It offers advice to inexperienced or politically marginalized regions and groups. Its motto is "a diplomatic service for those who need it most," a phrase that some former colleagues derided, he said.

But while some peers looked at his venture with skepticism, Mr. Ross quickly found financial backers, among them George Soros and the Oak Foundation, and a growing list of clients, among them the governments of Kosovo and Somaliland and the Polisario

Front of Western Sahara — three groups seeking recognition for their regions as independent states.

The Independent Diplomat tries to ensure that poor and neglected regions get access to the decision makers and international forums that make policy, such as the United Nations and the European Union.

Mr. Ross's concerns about that system were slow to emerge. "I was very loyal to my country," he said. He was known as a Rottweiler among his colleagues at the United Nations for his determination in the pursuit of British interests, which he defined in terms of commercial and strategic issues.

"But it concealed a much deeper doubt," he said, that dated as far back as the early 1990s, when he helped Britain dissuade the international community from intervening militarily in the gruesome conflict in the Balkans. He now considers that policy deeply mistaken and morally wrong.

A sabbatical at the New School in New York in 2003, where he studied the limits of knowledge in decision making, helped crystallize his thoughts. Next he was stationed at the United Nations mission in Kosovo, where he says he saw that "the U.N. was governing without enough consultation of the people." He resigned at the end of his posting.

Since then, he has experienced the other side of the negotiating table, notably in Kosovo, where he has helped the government dominated by ethnic Albanians handle United Nations-led talks on its future. With no diplomatic service of its own, Kosovo has had an uphill struggle to lobby and consult with the main European governments, and the United States, that control the process.

In 2005 Mr. Ross attended a Security Council discussion of Kosovo with its prime minister at the time, Bajram Kosumi. "He wasn't allowed to talk," Mr. Ross recalled. "The U.N. didn't even provide an interpreter for him, and we had to find an Albanian-American student to do the translation." Nor, he said, could Mr. Kosumi respond to an attack by the Serbs. "It was very frustrating."

Mr. Ross says he feels similarly motivated by the cause of Polisario Front, which wants to separate Western Sahara from Morocco. Its leaders are based in a camp that is home to 150,000 Sahawari refugees in the south of Algeria. "It is a figurative and literal representation of their isolation," he said.

WHILE his new venture has won recognition — in 2005 he was named by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust as a "visionary for a just and peaceful world" — many of his former colleagues, United Nations officials and European diplomats accuse him in undiplomatic language of liking the spotlight too much; none, however, would go on the record.

The British government has also chipped away at Mr. Ross, saying he has exaggerated his role on Iraq policy and his access to intelligence about unconventional weapons. “I am not sure how important he was,” Margaret Beckett, Britain’s foreign minister, recently told the BBC, although Mr. Ross was Britain’s official Iraq expert at the United Nations for four and a half years.

But he has fans. Richard Whitman, a professor of politics at the University of Bath and a senior fellow at Chatham House, a foreign policy research center, praises the role of the Independent Diplomat.

It is rare for diplomacy to be practiced according to morality and not national self-interest, he said. “What he brings is a moral element to foreign policy. Historically we think of diplomats as almost amoral.”

Mr. Whitman added, “I think they have got the market to themselves.”

As Mr. Ross surveys his new projects, he says: “There are a lot of small countries that have a really tough time because of limited resources. It does not mean their needs are any less legitimate.”