

Submission to the Senate Defence and Foreign Affairs Committee Inquiry into Public Diplomacy

14 December 06

Dear Committee Members,

There is little that is of more importance in terms of securing Australia's future in the global village than public diplomacy. The rise of democracy around the planet demands that Australia must increasingly engage with broad publics (rather than political elites) to achieve our national objectives.

The pundits at DFAT will nod their heads in sombre agreement with such statements, throw in a few 'riders', talk about 'integration', then add the weight of their combined intellect to the collective inertia of the status quo (while asking, no-doubt, for more funding).

The status quo ensures the survival of boffins and intellectuals in an old-world network of diplomatic rank and privilege that secures Australia's source of breathless political cables and economic updates – sometimes a full day ahead of *The Economist* – but little else.

This picture of Australian diplomacy is, alas, only slightly unfair. The truth is that DFAT attracts highly dedicated, talented and committed people. Those who survive their first two postings are moulded into the talented form of their respective mentors, thus ensuring the continuation of the diplomatic tradition.

No matter what they tell you, this tradition does not include public diplomacy.

When I came to DFAT, after serving as an Army public relations officer in Cambodia, I thought I was going from promoting the Army to Australia to promoting Australia to the world. Bright of eye and bushy of tail I bounded naively into the fray.

The first thing I found was that DFAT was far more concerned about its' reputation in Australia than Australia's reputation in the world. At the first glint of the razor in 1996 DFAT gleefully disbanded the entire International Public Affairs Branch, but left the domestic 'media' team untouched.

The loss to Australia was more than old guys in suede shoes and safari suits. It's fair to say the IPB had its share of dead wood, but the cut had far greater consequence than just sacking 50 or so people.

The loss of the branch, and its' overseas-based public diplomacy specialists, not only stripped DFAT of public diplomacy expertise, it stripped Australia of public diplomacy **ideas** – the very currency of the business. The rationale at the time, and now, was that DFAT didn't need specialists. Then Secretary Michael Costello explained that marketing and communications had been 'demystified' and anyone could 'do it'.

DFAT will tell you this has been proven true. The truth, however, is that public diplomacy stopped dead in its tracks. But for the occasional high profile 'event', very little has been achieved in terms of hard nosed public diplomacy in the intervening decade. DFAT will, of course, argue the reverse; but I'd urge the Committee to critically evaluate every supposed public diplomacy triumph the Department identifies and, more importantly, ask what has been accomplished in the other parts of the world that they don't tell you about. If the function is truly 'integrated', as is the claim, there must (and should) be a bundle of success stories for every post.

I was privileged to serve my country at our Embassy in Jakarta as the Counsellor Public Affairs from 2000-04. Jakarta was one of only four remaining posts with A-based communications specialists. It was a fantastic experience. I worked with some wonderful people, but it did enlighten me as to the true understanding and perception of public diplomacy in the Department. The almost total lack of sophisticated understanding of modern communications means the true perception of public diplomacy is that 'it's a bit of a wank'. I can back this up with many examples, but I won't bore you with them here.

The consequences of boring the Committee are too great to risk.

DFAT will claim the continued diminution of the now tiny group of overseas public diplomacy specialists (recently in Jakarta then more recently in Washington where the position was downgraded) is evidence of the 'integration' of the function into 'generalist' streams.

DFAT places great stock in education, training and experience in the diplomatic service. If these things are important for political officers, why then are they not equally important in public diplomacy? DFAT now stands almost alone in its' tribal aversion to communications specialists. DFAT continues to reduce the overseas representation of public diplomacy expertise while increasing, at the slightest excuse, the representation of the 'breathless cable' brigade. DFAT doesn't register the cost – but Australia bears it. We bare it in the opportunities that are lost every day at our posts around the world:

- opportunities to enhance, or defend, Australia's reputation.
- opportunities to understand how we are perceived and to act to change this where necessary
- opportunities to influence foreign governments by influencing their constituents

Two paragraphs ago I said the consequences of boring the committee were great. I hope I haven't tempted fate by allowing my passion for the subject to turn to verbosity. So, at last, I'll get to my point. It is my strongly held view that the function of public diplomacy needs to be passed to a new agency with an holistic all-of-government approach to delivering communications expertise and outcomes in the global village for all Australians. This will be fiercely resisted by DFAT. But they have now had the best part of 20 years to build the function into the modern powerhouse of world-class communications expertise it should be. Instead they stripped it bare, picked over the bones, and applied the bandaid 'it's all integrated' excuse to cover the crime.

The reality is that Australian public diplomacy has been relegated to a level of importance equivalent to that of Embassy gardens. It's now almost exclusively managed around the world by locally engaged staff. DFAT will argue that dedicating 30 percent of the duties of the 3rd Secretary Political as a 'supervisor' is sufficient for the task. It is not. Under DFAT this incredibly important function will remain the domain of the garden shed while the increasingly redundant work of the traditional diplomat will maintain its place in the ivory tower.

Evolution hasn't worked. A revolutionary approach is now demanded – and that revolution could well start with this inquiry.

I'd urge you to ask tough questions about results. Ask about surveys, market research and individual country (every post)/region communications strategies. How are they integrated? What are the objectives? How are they measured? Ask for a comparative analysis of expenditure on public diplomacy now and a decade ago. They will respond with costings based around public diplomacy work as percentages of full time overseas employees. Ask how much the employee cost and what the public diplomacy results were. Ask if this represents value for money. Ask the Government Communications Unit to evaluate the efficacy of Australian public diplomacy communications strategies overseas.

The answers will paint a sorry story.

I am not a disaffected former officer seeking some form of retribution. I left DFAT on very positive terms with no enmity and many friendships firmly in place. DFAT officers are, almost to a person, excellent at what they do. They just don't 'do' public diplomacy.

As discussed above, I have a wealth of evidence to back up my assertions. I lived it as an insider and I can tell you, with my hand on my heart and nothing to gain, Australia's public diplomacy is shambolic and in desperate need of the attention of your Committee.

I wish you only the very best in your endeavours.

Yours faithfully

Kirk Coningham