

## Diplomatic Lessons:

# Embrace Responsibility

by H.E. Ambassador Leigh Turner

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When I started work as head of the Overseas Territories Department of the FCO (as it then was) in July 2006, I inherited from my predecessor three steel cabinets stuffed full of files. They covered all the fourteen territories for which I was responsible. Being a tidy type, I went through them and threw away as many papers as possible, ripping up documents and throwing the shreds into paper sacks.

After one such spree, a question arose about an undertaking, signed years before by a long-retired Permanent Under Secretary, about paying for the “Pacific Marlin”, the supply vessel for the British Indian Ocean Territory, or BIOT – of which I was the Commissioner, or non-resident Governor. We needed this document. No-one could find it.

In those days, the PUS, the highest-ranking civil servant in the Foreign Office, wrote on distinctive blue notepaper. I recalled tearing up numerous such documents. Had I destroyed it? Might I, as Commissioner, be personally liable for funding the supply ship? I emptied out four sacks of ripped-up papers and scrabbled through them, seeking anything with the PUS’s distinctive signature.

We never found it. I spent several uncomfortable weeks before securing agreement that the money could be found. I had learned a key lesson. Dealing with the Overseas Territories or OTs, you must have attention to detail; a powerful sense of responsibility; and above all, a long memory. OT work involves enormous responsibilities – and liabilities – and is in some ways closer to working in the home civil service or on pre-1997 Hong Kong than most “foreign” policy. That makes it immensely rewarding – and, occasionally, scary.

*It is important to visit at least a couple of OTs early on, my handover notes of 2008 suggested to my successor, before your diary gets too packed.* My wise boss urged me to visit as many of the territories as I could. Most are modest in size with small populations. Over two years I travelled to Ascension Island; the Falkland Islands; St Helena; Bermuda; Anguilla; the British Virgin Islands; the Turks and Caicos Islands; the Cayman Islands; Anguilla; and the British Indian Ocean Territory, some of them several times.

Travelling to the territories can be an experience. To reach St Helena I flew to Johannesburg, caught a connecting flight to Walvis Bay, then travelled on the RMS St Helena for four days to the island capital, Jamestown (since then, an airport has been built, and you can fly to St Helena – recommended). For the Falklands I flew from RAF Brize Norton on a snow-white 747 with Tagalog signage for 16 hours, stopping to refuel at Ascension Island. I never made it to the British Antarctic Territory, of which I was also Commissioner, to South Georgia, or to Pitcairn.

Several of the territories are subject to long-running legal disputes or territorial claims that reach back decades or centuries. *For an understanding of BIOT history, my handover notes read, the best account is the Ouseley Judgement...* this is readable but long.

The fact that each of the populated OTs had a distinctive form of representative government and its own constitution generated rich policy challenges. I took part in regular meetings with OT governments on constitutional reform, alongside skilled FCO legal advisers. The balance of power, responsibilities and liabilities between London and OT representatives was a source of regular discussion and, occasionally, tension.

To work with people from the OTs – as diverse and engaging a group as one could wish for – was a privilege. Whether visiting a prison on Anguilla; being interviewed on a radio station in Montserrat; meeting Falkland Islanders in Goose Green; or “Saints” on a sponsored walk in St. Helena, encounters were fascinating and memorable.



Diana's Peak is the highest point of Saint Helena

Little remains of the former capital of Montserrat, Plymouth, under the brooding (and still active) La Soufrière Volcano



We had a lot to talk about. Many OTs are islands, remote, or remote islands, making them vulnerable to disasters from hurricanes to harbour accidents making it impossible for ships to land. Many have unique flora and fauna: conservation initiatives in the territories are making a vital contribution to preserving biodiversity worldwide. Within the territories, opinions often differ on policy issues, including relations with the UK; quiet moments are few and far between.



The Wideawake Tern, once endangered on Ascension Island, is now thriving

Together perhaps with working on Hong Kong, being director of Overseas Territories was probably the job in my career that presented the most regular stream of knotty policy issues. I recommend OT work to anyone who wants a high level of responsibility, fulfilling work and unexpected challenges.

As I wrote in my handover notes to my successor: *Best of luck for one of the most challenging, unpredictable and (on a good day) fascinating jobs in the FCO. You will have a great deal of autonomy and may find yourself taking decisions of a kind you have never faced before. Never sign anything – especially a legal document – in a hurry. The maxim that it is the quiet OTs, from which you have not hear much recently, where the biggest problem is brewing, has some validity. Good luck.*

The Austro-British Society is looking forward to your views and comments!

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#### *About the author*



**H.E. Ambassador Leigh Turner** is Her Majesty's Ambassador of the United Kingdom to Austria, UK Permanent Representative to the United Nations and other International Organisations in Vienna and is Honorary President of the Austro-British Society since his assignment started in 2016. He grew up in Nigeria, Exeter, Lesotho and Swaziland. After Grammar School in Manchester, he attended Downing College, University of Cambridge, from 1976 to 1979. He then worked in the Department for Transport and the Department of the Environment, and from 1983 he worked for the Foreign Office in Vienna (1984 to 1987), Moscow (1992 to 1995) and Berlin (1998 to 2002), among other places. From 2006 he was Director of Overseas Territories in London, and in 2008 he became Ambassador of the British Embassy in Ukraine. As of 2012, he was British Consul General in Istanbul, prior his move to Austria.

The opinions expressed in this article are entirely his and reflect in no way the opinions of the ABS.