

Diplomatic lessons, Vienna 2016-2021: Give something back

by former Ambassador Leigh Turner

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Catching the train to Vienna at the start of my posting, August 2016

When I was appointed as a junior diplomat to Vienna in September 1984, my letter of appointment, signed by Her Majesty the Queen and Foreign Secretary Sir Geoffrey Howe, contained the phrase: “Whereas it appears to Us expedient to nominate some person of approved Industry, Fidelity and Knowledge [my emphasis] to perform the functions of an Officer of Our Diplomatic Service...”

32 years later, my 2016 letter of appointment as Ambassador to Austria, signed by Her Majesty and Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson, said: “Whereas it appears to Us expedient to nominate some person of approved Wisdom, Loyalty, Diligence and Circumspection to represent Us in the character of Our Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary at Vienna...”

The choice of adjectives is, in each case, intriguing. Fidelity and loyalty are, arguably, similar, as are industry and diligence. Knowledge can, perhaps, be tested in an exam such as those you have to take to become a British civil servant. That leaves wisdom and circumspection. Is an ambassador more wise, or circumspect, than a first-time diplomat? How do you acquire those qualities? Can you pass them on?



With my mum after presenting my credentials in Vienna

I arrived as ambassador in Vienna three months after the 23 June 2016 referendum on the UK's EU membership. The negotiations for leaving the European Union would have a major impact on the work of British ambassadors, including in EU member states. My first visitor, in September 2016, was Foreign Secretary (now Prime Minister) Boris Johnson, here to call on Foreign and Integration Minister (now Chancellor) Sebastian Kurz. Later political visitors included David Davis, Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, Transport Secretary Chris Grayling, Europe Minister Alan Duncan, and, twice, Prime Minister Theresa May.



Boris Johnson visited Vienna in September 2016

We were also honoured by a visit to Vienna in 2017 by Prince Charles and the Duchess of Cornwall.

Work on EU Exit continued up to the UK's departure on 31 January 2020, through the Interim Period to 31 December 2020 – and continues still, whether on policy issues such as the Northern Ireland Protocol and Gibraltar; on working with our Department for International Trade (DIT) team to help companies in the UK and Austria; or in supporting the roughly 11,000 British citizens living in Austria.



Meeting British citizens in Innsbruck to talk about EU Exit

It was fascinating to meet around half the Brits in Austria personally as I travelled the country, supported by colleagues from the embassy and from the Austrian Interior and Social Security Ministries, explaining how EU Exit would affect them. If you are a UK citizen living in Austria and have not yet applied for your Article 50 Card, please do so now – [more details here](#). If you know someone else who has not yet applied, please encourage them to do so now.



At the UN in 2019

As UK Permanent Representative to the International Organisations in Vienna, I had responsibility until 2017 for the work of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action on Iran (JCPOA), and until 2018 for the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty Organisation (CTBTO). I chaired the Wassenaar Arrangement on convention arms control in 2018, and led UK participation in the UN Office on Drugs and Crime and other Vienna-based agencies. I treasured the interaction with multilateral ambassadors and other talented diplomats in tackling (and occasionally solving) intractable issues. Visiting Ground Zero in Nevada or inspecting drugs at the UNODC labs in Vienna was fascinating. As multilateral policy junkies will know, sitting in your national seat at the UN is always a privilege.



Discussing EU Exit on Austrian TV

Understanding Austria was helped by having [*served in Vienna in the '80s*](#) (see link for embarrassing picture of me with beard). I knew the country and had friends who helped explain it. A month of German immersion in Salzburg before I started helped, as did regular visits to Austria's nine provinces, from Vorarlberg in the west to Styria in the east. Since March 2020, COVID-19 has constrained much travel and face-to-face activity in Austria, and presented new challenges such as seeking to help stranded Brits get back to the UK.

Before COVID, I particularly enjoyed meeting young people – from Fachhochschulen (universities of applied science), universities and schools. Many were keen to learn about the UK, diplomacy, Brexit and more, and specialised in asking challenging questions. Speaking to a packed room of people is similar in many ways to appearing in a live discussion programme on TV: it helps to be clear on what you're trying to say.



Launch of the all-electric Jaguar i-Pace in 2018

Indeed in this, the final posting of a career that (see “Diplomatic Lessons” blogs 1-10, links below) has spanned over forty years, I found sharing experience with others particularly rewarding. I mentored colleagues around the world online; gave speeches on diplomacy, social media and other subjects; and held best-practice sessions on diplomatic tradecraft for staff in Vienna and beyond. Some people were kind enough to say they found my efforts helpful – and even interesting.



Cycling in my kilt to the President's New Year reception (spot the knees)

If I would draw one lesson from five lively years in Vienna, it would be that giving something back – seeking to share with others what you have learned – is not only a good thing to do, but enriches you, too. I'm not sure if 42 years working for the government is evidence of wisdom, but it has certainly given me a lot of experience.

As for circumspection, I'll leave you to decide that.

It's a truism that one of the best ways to be happy is to help other people. But it happens to be true. Thanks to everyone – so far – for listening.

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

P.S: Since his retirement on 11 September Leigh Turner is a full-time author. You can subscribe to his blog at <https://robertpimm.com/>.

About the author



Former Ambassador Leigh Turner was 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, where he retired from his diplomatic career in 2021 and decided to stay in Vienna to work as a full-time author.

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