

## Interview - Carne Ross

Written by E-International Relations

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Carne Ross is founder and director of Independent Diplomat, a diplomatic advisory organisation. They work to advise un- or under-represented countries, governments and political groups on participation in the international system. Before founding Independent Diplomat he worked as a British diplomat and resigned in 2004 after giving secret evidence on UK participation in the Iraq war to a British inquiry. He is the author of two books: *Independent Diplomat: Dispatches from an Unaccountable Elite* and *The Leaderless Revolution: How ordinary people will take power and change politics in the 21st century*.

**Could you shortly describe what Independent Diplomat does? And explain the pre-history that prompted you to found the organisation?**

Independent Diplomat advises countries, democratic governments and political groups on how to advance their needs and interests in diplomatic processes about them. We are a diplomatic advisory group. Our advice covers the main elements of effective diplomacy.

What prompted me to found the organisation: I was a British diplomat for many years, including several years on the UN Security Council. By and large you could guarantee that the one group of people that would not be in the room when we were discussing a particular place was the people from that place. Whether Kosovo, Palestine or Iraq, you could pretty much guarantee that there would not be Kosovars, Palestinians or Iraqis in the room when we were discussing the future of their country. That seemed to me not only wrong, but also it did little for the outcomes of that institution.

Most particularly, I was in Kosovo in 2004, and Kosovo, despite having a democratically elected government, was excluded from the diplomatic process about the future of Kosovo. And that was a very glaring deficit, but I also saw how that exclusion contributed to political tension and sometimes violence inside Kosovo. I saw a very direct connection between diplomatic exclusion and conflict. Independent Diplomat was designed to address that problem.

**You moved out of British diplomacy after you gave a testimony on the Iraq war, a negative testimony. Recently the Chilcot report was released, what is your take on it? Were you surprised by certain parts of it?**

These are very big questions. I have written a great deal about Iraq and indeed about the Chilcot report. I am generally happy with the Chilcot report because, by and large, it tells the truth about what happened. It was good that the things I had been saying over many years have been confirmed by the report, so I feel personally vindicated. I personally testified about subjects such as the exaggerations of the threat posed by the Iraqi government and the deliberate ignoring of alternatives to war, which were issues that I emphasised in my own testimonies to the Butler and Chilcot inquiries, and those issues were affirmed in the Chilcot report.

On the other hand, I do not think that a report of that kind amounts to true accountability. I think war crimes were committed; I think it is a war crime to go to war when you do not need to. And that is what the British government did. The British government abused the UN Security Council, and nobody has ever been held accountable for this. The public shame that Tony Blair and others suffered for approximately one day does not amount to true accountability.

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There needs to be real consequences for these acts.

### **How do you think the current diplomatic and international systems are problematic?**

My organisation is set up to address one particular, persistent problem in the whole system—which is the frequent exclusion of those most impacted by decisions in that system. The reason for that problem is that it is a state-based system that was designed, for the most part, a long time ago for a world that looked very different from the world that we have today. I think that the diplomatic system is very bad at addressing globalised problems, whether they are economic or security problems. Treaties get passed, agreements are made, sessions are held at the UN, but these are activities and not results. In terms of results, I think it is pretty clear that we have some chronic problems that are not effectively being dealt with.

### **What is your take on the current conflict in Syria? You advise a Syrian actor in the conflict. What has the international community done wrong in this conflict, and what can it do to correct this?**

What has been done wrong, from the very beginning, is that the international community as a whole has not given sufficient support to the revolutionaries demanding democracy in Syria. That happens for two reasons: first of all the international community is divided, some parts of it, Russia and Iran in particular, have supported the Assad regime. Also, the countries that claim to support democracy in Syria have not done enough to support the democratic forces there. And as a result the Assad regime and its Russian ally have gotten away with murder.

### **Maybe you could explain what work you do for the Syrian opposition coalition you are advising.**

We do for them what we do for all of our clients, which is advising them on the diplomatic discussion, including both the positions of key states and what to do to advance their interests, including in direct negotiations when they happen, for instance, in Geneva, which were UN-mediated direct negotiations between the regime and the opposition.

So, we provide a range of services for our clients, including the Syrian Coalition, covering all aspects of contemporary diplomacy.

### **You also advised South Sudan, an engagement you broke off in 2014. Can you talk a bit about that engagement?**

Well, Independent Diplomat will only support those who are committed to democracy and the protection of human rights. As soon as it became clear that the government of South Sudan was abusing the human rights of its people, particularly in the wake of the violence that broke out in 2014, we terminated our relationship with the government of South Sudan. We are very explicit with our clients that we will not work for them if they breach our ethical criteria, according to our own judgement.

Before that, we advised South Sudan on the diplomacy surrounding the referendum, and the independence of South Sudan. And this was at a time when it seemed that the government was committed to both a peaceful and democratic process and a peaceful and democratic government in South Sudan after independence. Unfortunately that has not proven to be the case.

### **This maybe touches upon the difficulties of the work you do, there are all these unrepresented peoples and states in the world but at the same time it also is maybe difficult to find credible actors on the ground. How is this built into the work of Independent Diplomat, what kind of precautions do you for example take?**

I disagree. I think it is always possible to find people who are representative and legitimate. It is just that the state-based system often does not refer to them or take them seriously. But, actually, if you go to any country, except maybe North Korea, there are groups of people who have legitimate needs and legitimately represent groups of

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people who have needs that need to be expressed.

We do not have any difficulty identifying those groups. What is difficult is making sure those groups are given the attention that they deserve. Yes, it is a complicated world out there, and it is not always easy to figure out who are the good guys, but I think that if you apply certain values to your work, and always seek to help those who are supporting democracy and human rights, then you are basically trying to work on the side of the good. It is not always clear about what you should do, but if you are clear about your values then the way forward is less complicated than it would otherwise be.

### **Have you kept following the situation in South Sudan after 2014? What is your take on the current troubles in the country?**

We followed it because we know the situation well and know many of the personalities. I was with Riek Machar the day that South Sudan became a member state of the United Nations, which was a very happy day for his country. He was then the vice president of South Sudan and led the delegation. So we are very familiar with the personalities. I think it is tragic what has happened to South Sudan, and I think the leaders of South Sudan, Salva Kiir and Riek Machar in particular, bear a great deal of responsibility for what has happened and the atrocities that have been visited on the South Sudanese people.

### **How do you think the international system will evolve in the future, say the next 20 to 30 years? What direction do you want to make it evolve in through your work?**

A trend one can clearly identify is that the diplomatic system is becoming more procedurally complicated. Each international body is spawning whole sets of sub-processes, sub-groups, and activities under different labels, which is becoming formidably difficult to follow. Increasingly, I feel that foreign ministers and diplomats are just caught up in an endless procession of meetings with very little reference to real events. And that is a very big problem. You do not solve the world's problems by inventing ever more bits of diplomatic machinery to solve them.

### **And how do you think actors like Independent Diplomat can function in this new complex world? What is their role in international relations?**

In the international system, states themselves are more receptive to NGOs than they may have been a generation ago, when governments saw diplomacy as their own exclusive preserve. You can see this in certain processes like the UN climate change process. Even if the eventual agreement is a government agreement, like the Paris Agreement, NGOs were still very involved, and they were often in the room during negotiations. I think that is a positive and new development in the evolution of diplomacy.

So there is a place for organisations like Independent Diplomat. It is very hard to be small in the world of diplomacy. You are up against very powerful actors with enormous resources. A big government can flick a switch and send in demarches from 195 embassies in every state of the world. We neither have that power nor do we have that intelligence or information-gathering capacity. On the other hand, we are very nimble, we are very autonomous, and we are not bureaucratic. And that gives us a lot of maneuverability, makes us very smart, and it also means that Independent Diplomat is a great place to work.

### **Can you give an example where your organisation being nimble managed to get something done in the international system?**

I am always reluctant to talk about our successes because they are, above all, the successes of our clients. If we achieve things, we achieve them because we fly under the radar and we do not trumpet that we changed particular outcomes. But I can assure you that we did. I think one of the encouraging things about Independent Diplomat is that even if you are very small, you can make a big difference.

The Marshall Islands in the climate change process has demonstrated that even very small countries can have an

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outsized influence in diplomatic processes that involve bigger countries. The Marshall Islands managed to recruit a coalition of what became 100 countries in Paris—the High Ambition Coalition. That group of countries was to a significant degree responsible for the fact that the Paris Agreement was much stronger than many people had anticipated. And that was the Marshall Islands who did that, a tiny tiny country in the middle of the Pacific.

So I think that example shows that you can be small but still have a big effect.

### **Maybe you can tell us something about your intellectual influences, what shaped your thinking and the work you do at Independent Diplomat?**

I do not think we follow a particular philosophy, except our own, which is very simple: people have the right to be part of the decisions about them. That is the philosophy that drives us.

If I have a philosophy it is one of anarchism. I count myself as an anarchist. Anarchism is premised on that philosophy that people should have control over their own lives, control over their own futures, and that nobody should have power over anybody else. If I think I believe anything, I believe that.

But I cannot speak for my colleagues, and I do not think that Independent Diplomat as an institution could be described as an anarchist organisation. It is not. But it does live by the golden rule that people should be part of the decisions about them, in this case diplomatic decisions.

### **Anarchism is largely not present in academic international relations...**

Well it should be. In academic international relations there is this kind of view that states the international system is fundamentally anarchic, and that there are these constant attempts to impose order on an otherwise anarchic system. But I do not look at anarchy in that way. That is not the anarchism that is relevant today. My anarchism is much more about individual and local organisation, together with self-government.

### **What do you think then that academic international relations can do better right now?**

I think this is a general problem of think tanks, as well as academia, but I see far too little original, innovative analysis of difficult situations. Some parts of IR, the IR academia, have disappeared into a self-referential world of pure theory, which has almost nothing to do with the world I see in diplomacy. What I do see in diplomacy is that in many of these situations, Syria, Sudan, the future of states, self-determination, there is remarkably little high-quality, empirical work based on quality on-the-ground research. There is really very little.

I think that is a great pity. If I had one recommendation or suggestion it would be that IR academia comes back to the ground and looks at individual situations from the ground up. I think that theory is by and large very non-instructive, as a predictive model, or even as an explanatory model. I have been involved in some of the world's most difficult issues, whether Iraq, Syria or Afghanistan. I have not found one theoretical construction particularly helpful in guiding us, or in explaining what has happened.

Diplomacy is a human business. It is highly variable. It is sometimes arbitrary. It is sometimes random. It certainly does not follow simple rules or coherent theories of change.

### **Anarchism, as a theory, offers a better way to understand all this in your opinion?**

I do not think any one theoretical model should be supreme. I do not think there is one social or political theory that explains everything in diplomacy or indeed anything else. I think in diplomacy you should be applying a range of different analytical techniques including basic human psychology, an understanding of emotions and emotional intelligence, an understanding of how information works. I think information theory is incredibly important, an understanding of how institutions work, which again is a different subset of anthropology, if you like, but also anarchists have a lot to say about institutions.

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I think you need to be conversant with lots of different schools of thought and ready to apply them as necessary. I think the application of any one doctrine to international relations is always going to be grossly overly simplistic.

**Normally I would have now asked to give your advice to young scholars in international relations, but I think you already answered that. What would you recommend to young diplomats going in the field or being trained right now?**

That is a difficult question, and it depends for whom you are a diplomat. My advice to a Swedish diplomat would be very different from my advice to a Chinese diplomat.

I have two suggestions. One is to develop a very clear sense of your own morality and what is moral. That is not difficult to do. What is moral to do in any situations is often pretty clear, namely treat other people with respect and do not harm them. That is a pretty basic moral rule that should always be followed. But, unfortunately, states work according to different moral rules, and I think one has to be very aware of that discrepancy as a diplomat and refer above all to human, not state, morality.

The other thing I would say is calibrate what you do and what you think, your policy, according to the circumstances on the ground. Unfortunately, that is not what states tend to do. They tend to formulate their policy on the basis of what they want, which is very self-referential and often profoundly ignorant of the circumstances on the ground, and therefore likely to fail as policy.

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*This interview was conducted by Tom Cassauwers. Tom is an Associate Features Editor at E-IR.*