
Policies, Politics and Positions

Judith Hart

It should never be assumed that what the British say and do in United Nations conferences involving development issues is determined by a precise and perfect process of political consultation and consideration. The facts of life are uncomfortable. Any such conference normally spans two, three or more weeks. It begins with formal speeches in plenary sessions, and then gets down to the serious work of committees, resolutions, texts, and amendments to them; towards the end come the compromises or the confrontations, as a result of the work in committee. Present custom allows "the Minister" to attend for only a few days; and in practice, "the Minister" often flies to the other end of the world to deliver a prepared plenary speech, which allows of no interaction or response to an emerging mood (because it hasn't yet emerged: the other plenary speeches are also pre-prepared formal statements of position, tending to platitude and declaratory exhortation). He then goes on to do a few days' "visiting" in the area, and returns to London.

He leaves behind a substantial team of officials. They are sent out by the Foreign Office (because any UN conference is Foreign Office business); by the Department whose field of responsibility covers its theme and sponsorship; and by the Departments with peripheral interests—Trade, Employment, Environment *et cetera*; and by the Treasury, for there are always financial implications and the Treasury must be ever present. They service the committees, oppose or accept texts, propose amendments, and vote on them on behalf of the United Kingdom. The team has been meeting in Whitehall for some time, preparing the "briefs" for inter-departmental agreement. And they are firm and final, as they are packed into the official briefcases for the flight out. This is "the British position". It will be modified only if the conference becomes awkward, and the official team abroad, on the basis of its detailed reporting home by telegram, is advised to give a little here, but stand firm there, by the matching officials back in Whitehall.

This is the general pattern. It is disturbed only in two situations. The first is when Very Important People are involved, or a new international issue has arisen. The Prime Minister is going to a

Commonwealth Conference? The Foreign Secretary is going to the General Assembly? Then the issues are raised to the level of think-tanks and Permanent Secretaries and quantities of Ministerial correspondence and committees. Political decisions are made, and carried out.

The second is when a departmental Minister decides to exercise his responsibility for policy decisions in his own field. His first efforts will be devoted to asking for the papers—the agenda, the questions at issue, the texts. For they are unlikely to have reached his desk from below. His later efforts will be spent on time-consuming involvement in the line to be taken by his own officials at the inter-departmental meetings; and perhaps in arguing the toss with his colleagues when the "officials' meetings" have not accepted his view; in trying to keep informed about progress at the conference; in sending his instructions—which probably arrive too late, because of the time difference. He may even discover that in a committee vote on a text, the British delegation didn't realise he would like to be consulted, and has done something which appals him. (His inquest establishes that this had been the standard approach on this particular point of principle laid down by the previous Conservative government.) He is not reassured about the efficiency of British government in its international relations: but he becomes the more convinced that the power of the bureaucrats in this field is even more intractable than in the familiar area of home affairs. You cannot, he realises, have a face-to-face discussion or confrontation with a reporting telegram.

But he draws certain conclusions. One is that there must be a Minister—at least a good junior Minister—on the spot in the last week of conference decision-making. That is a good deal more important than the formal courtesy visit to foreign parts. Another is that his attempts to establish an interdepartmental committee at Ministerial level to determine "the British position" at all conferences and international meetings with a development content would have been better not frustrated. A third is that it is just as well that academics and pressure groups are so determined and active. And his last conclusion is that all is not well in the way we run our affairs, and it is a pity that Important People have such an uncritical faith in the System.