

# Distinguishing Cultural Relations From Cultural Diplomacy: The British Council's Relationship With Her Majesty's Government

By *Tim Rivera*

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HER MAJESTY'S GOVERNMENT  
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## **Distinguishing Cultural Relations from Cultural Diplomacy: The British Council's Relationship with Her Majesty's Government\***

### **Introduction: Setting the Scene**

Peoples and cultures around the world encounter each other now more than ever. Some of this engagement is facilitated and directed by states, but much of it occurs organically. These practices have alternately been called public diplomacy, cultural diplomacy, or cultural relations. Academics, policymakers, and practitioners all have their own definitions and frameworks for these practices, but why are distinctions between public diplomacy, cultural diplomacy, and cultural relations necessary? The British Council, the UK's organization for international cultural and educational engagement, describes its own work as 'cultural relations,' whereas Her Majesty's Government (HMG) has called it 'cultural diplomacy.'<sup>1</sup> This linguistic muddle raises questions of terminology as to what the organization actually does and what 'cultural relations' really means. James Pamment acknowledged that, in this field, "terminology is not to be taken lightly"<sup>2</sup> and quoted a British Council Country Director who laments this gap in the academic discourse in classifying these practices:

I don't think anybody [in the academic field] really fills that gap of understanding what non-governmental diplomacy... or cultural relations, is really about...[T]he whole frame of thinking about this subject is governmental.<sup>3</sup>

This paper develops a preliminary framework that aims to fill that gap by building on Pamment's efforts to differentiate cultural diplomacy and cultural relations from public diplomacy. This framework is also normative in that it presents cultural relations as a more effective soft power practice than cultural diplomacy. The

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\* This paper is adapted from the author's master's dissertation originally submitted to and published by King's College London.

The views expressed in this publication are the author's own and do not reflect the views or policies of the European Union.

role of government across these practices further untangles them and establishes some helpful conceptual and practical boundaries. The British Council's recent history from 2010 to the present, and its unique relationship with the British Government, serves as a useful case study for the purpose of identifying key differences between the two practices.

The British Council describes its work developing long-term relationships with other societies as 'cultural relations'; but the organization's most complex, and sometimes fraught, relationship has been with its own Government. In the last five to ten years, the British Council experienced a period of significant change in response to three trends, which will be discussed in subsequent sections of this paper.

- 1) Soft power's increased currency in the Government's foreign affairs, HMG's evolving view of public and cultural diplomacy, and its consideration of the British Council's role in those efforts.
- 2) The Government's requirement of greater overall accountability from Non-Departmental Public Bodies (NDPBs), such as the British Council, through augmented oversight mechanisms.
- 3) Deficit-reducing policies which have shrunk public sector budgets, including the British Council's annual grant-in-aid from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) and the introduction of Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) spending quotas.

To clarify and demonstrate the terminology around the British Council's practices as either cultural relations or cultural diplomacy, this paper investigates how the organization has evolved through this most recent period, how its structures have responded to adapt to this new environment, and the impact of these three trends on the organization's relationship with the British Government.

By detecting changes in those mechanisms that constitute the British Council's 'arm's length' relationship with and 'operational independence' from the Government, observers can better understand that relationship and what it means for the practice of cultural relations. This paper argues that the three aforementioned trends have shortened the metaphorical arm between the British Council and the British Government and brought them closer together. This development has been further encouraged in the Government's recently published *Triennial Review of the British Council*, significantly threatening the organization's operational and editorial independence from Government. This independence is vital for the Council's stated 'cultural relations' mission to build trust and understanding. A closer institutional and operational relationship with the Government would move the British Council away from the practices of cultural relations towards cultural diplomacy.

### **The Importance of Independence: Cultural Relations, Cultural Diplomacy, & Soft Power**

The rise of soft power on foreign policy agendas has included questions of what it is, how to manipulate it, and how to deploy it. Soft power has always been a force in international relations, but it was given greater currency and a label by Harvard academic Joseph Nye in the late 1980s.\* He defines soft power as "the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments. It arises from the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals, and policies."<sup>4</sup> Just as Nye identifies three sources of soft power, there are three mechanisms through which a country can develop, deploy, or engage its soft power with other countries: public diplomacy, cultural diplomacy, and cultural relations. As part of distinguishing the latter two, it is important to define 'diplomacy' and establish it as fundamentally an activity of government.

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\* The concept of 'soft power' has been the subject of numerous debates and critiques, including Joseph Nye himself, who in a 2009 *Foreign Affairs* article advocated for the term 'smart power' to reflect a more desirable combination of hard and soft power.



The practice of diplomacy has been central to relations and communications among states, cities, and civilizations for centuries and it has changed over time. But what has not changed is its ‘official’ nature. Ernest Satow’s definition of diplomacy as “the application of intelligence and tact to the conduct of *official relations between governments* of independent states” reinforces this point.<sup>5</sup> Geoffrey Berridge’s definition elaborates on the instrumentality of diplomacy for governments:

Diplomacy is an essentially political activity... Its chief purpose is to enable states to secure the objectives of their foreign policies without resort to force, propaganda, or law. It follows that diplomacy consists of communication between officials designed to promote foreign policy.<sup>6</sup>

These definitions quite explicitly link diplomatic practice to government, but Berridge and Satow do not capture how diplomacy has changed such that the target audience of diplomatic activity has broadened considerably. However, the original link to government as the chief actor in diplomacy and the achievement of policy objectives through diplomacy remains. Jan Melissen may believe that “it is neither helpful to hang on to past images of diplomacy... nor is it advisable to make a forward projection of historical practices into the present international environment,” but doing just that may be the most effective way of distinguishing between the practices of cultural diplomacy and cultural relations.<sup>7</sup> This paper argues that the role of government is a key variable to examine in order to disaggregate and distinguish them.

### *Cultural Diplomacy vs. Cultural Relations*

The Oxford English Dictionary defines culture as both “the arts and other manifestations of human intellectual achievement regarded collectively” and “the ideas, customs, and social behavior of a particular people or society.”<sup>8</sup> These ‘manifestations’ include all variations of the arts, educational opportunities, language, ideas, food, religion, sport, and more. The core content of both cultural diplomacy and cultural relations programs unsurprisingly revolve

around ‘culture.’ Pamment has gone so far as to acknowledge that “[c]ultural diplomacy should not necessarily automatically be considered within the spectrum, or under the umbrella of public diplomacy” but did not go far enough in explicitly identifying differences between cultural relations and cultural diplomacy.<sup>9</sup> However, he quoted a British Council Country Director as saying that these differences are significant for practitioners: “I think the nomenclature causes a lot of problems...I mean the sort of work the British Council’s done over the last 70 years we’ve called various, rather sloppily things like *cultural diplomacy* and *cultural relations* without I think thinking it through.”<sup>10</sup> Cultural diplomacy and cultural relations diverge in important ways—their means, objectives, and motivations. All of these differences can be traced to the particular role of government. For the British Council, “public diplomacy is a governmental activity, and whatever we call what we do, it is not a governmental activity” but something that falls outside the definition of diplomacy.<sup>11</sup>

### *Cultural Diplomacy*

Richard Arndt provides very clear and useful definitions of cultural diplomacy and cultural relations. In keeping with earlier definitions of diplomacy, he uses the lens of the role of government to distinguish the two practices:

‘Cultural relations’ then...means literally the relations between national cultures, those aspects of intellect and education lodged in any society that tend to cross borders and connect with foreign institutions. Cultural relations grow naturally and organically, without government intervention...If that is correct, cultural diplomacy can only be said to take place when formal diplomats, serving national governments, try to shape and channel this natural flow to advance national interests.<sup>12</sup>

When asked to define cultural diplomacy as distinct from cultural relations, Ben O’Loughlin, Professor at Royal Holloway, University of London said, “Cultural diplomacy is a more specific term insofar as diplomacy is usually associated with states. States’ public diplomacy is states liaising with publics in other states, so

cultural diplomacy being states liaising with other states or their peoples through the medium of culture.”<sup>13</sup> Though the target audience of cultural diplomacy programming may be individual citizens or groups, the programming itself is funded, designed, and delivered by government. Pamment noted this strong governmental role, or in his words, “the dominance of the governmental, advocacy perspective over the very nature of cultural diplomacy.”<sup>14</sup> As with any other diplomatic activity, and in keeping with Berridge’s earlier definition, cultural diplomacy is influenced by the politics inherent in foreign policy. It is likewise accountable to relevant state institutions and can be instrumentalized to support policy objectives. The contemporary American model of international engagement would fit within this definition of cultural diplomacy.

The U.S. State Department has a Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs which manages a wide range of cultural diplomacy programs, including exchanges, tours, and exhibitions. It is subject to the oversight of the Secretary of State, the White House, the Government Accountability Office (GAO), and the U.S. Congress and is open to political influence. Cultural diplomacy programs are designed explicitly to support foreign policy and the national interest; however, governmental efforts in cultural diplomacy can undermine those desired foreign policy outcomes if those efforts are considered propaganda. If cultural diplomacy programs present an inaccurate or unjustifiably glorified view of reality or policy, then its attempts to win support for that country or policy could easily backfire. The United States experienced this problem with its cultural diplomacy programs focused on winning back support across the Middle East during the Iraq War.<sup>15</sup> The UK too has defined cultural diplomacy in a similar vein and linked it to government and national interests.

The British Government’s most recent definition of cultural diplomacy, articulated in its *Triennial Review of the British Council*, echoed the link to such objectives by defining cultural diplomacy as “the promotion of culture and values to further national interests,” and including Milton Cummings’ definition of cultural diplomacy: “the exchange of values, education, knowledge, art, music, and other

aspects of culture or identity among countries and people to foster understanding and strengthen relationships.”<sup>16</sup> But Cummings’ definition alone just describes cultural relations, as it ascribes no role for government and does not specify for what purpose such understanding and relationships are being sought. It is the introduction of government, national interest, and support of policy which makes such exchange cultural diplomacy. Cultural diplomacy utilizes cultural content in its programming, but takes an ‘advocacy’ approach to support policy objectives and advance national interests. Cultural relations differs from cultural diplomacy in each of these ways—in its methodology, objectives, and outcomes.

### *Cultural Relations*

The absence of government is just as important for cultural relations as its presence is for cultural diplomacy. Cultural relations, as intimated previously, is the mutual exchange of culture between peoples to develop long-term relationships, trust, and understanding for the purpose of generating genuine goodwill and influence abroad. Richard Arndt’s definition of cultural relations cited previously stipulated that cultural relations generally take place organically between nations without government intervention. The British Council itself has expressed that government has only a peripheral and indirect role to play in “creating the conditions for cultural exchange to flourish.”<sup>17</sup> Government can financially support cultural relations so long as those activities remain free of political influence and independent of foreign policy objectives. Cultural relations can support the ‘national interest,’ but any such support would only be an indirect byproduct of the trust, understanding, and relationships developed through cultural relations. Jan Melissen correctly noted that “[c]ultural institutes prefer to keep the term ‘cultural relations’ for their own activities, serving the national interest indirectly by means of trust-building abroad,” but also argued that “[m]odern cultural relations as a wider concept result in a measure of overlap with the work of diplomats.”<sup>18</sup> This paper argues that the active intervention of government or diplomats in cultural relations fundamentally changes the nature of the practice.

A non-governmental voice lends more credibility and honesty to cultural relations than the voice of government. Melissen acknowledged this perspective, writing that “[c]ultural relations are in this view distinct from (public) diplomacy, in the sense that they represent the non-governmental voice in transnational relations.”<sup>19</sup> In a way that public or cultural diplomacy may not, “[c]ultural relations portrays an honest picture of each country rather than a beautified one.”<sup>20</sup> The authenticity of cultural relations, made possible by independence from government, helps establish trust with others. In the British Council’s words, “[p]eople trust people more than they trust governments, so connections between people often make a more significant contribution to soft power than government-led activities.”<sup>21</sup> The Council’s Chief Executive, Sir Martin Davidson, explained this distrust of government in remarks to the House of Lords: “If government fingerprints are all over the [cultural relations] activity then, almost by very definition, it is seen as less trusted, less open, less honest and moving more towards the propaganda area.”<sup>22</sup> The British Council’s own *Trust Pays* report found that, in the ten countries surveyed, “trust in people from the UK generally runs ahead of trust in government from the UK.”<sup>23</sup> In addition, the findings of the latest Edelman Trust Barometer show that global public trust in government is extremely low and that “NGOs remain the most trusted institution globally.”<sup>24</sup> Even without its emphasis on building trust with others, the British Council as an NGO is still likely to be more trusted abroad than the British Government. NGOs have different interests than governments because “states don’t have friends. Internationally, trust exists, where it exists at all, between people and between peoples, where *raison d’état* doesn’t hold sway. Trust is built through relationships between people and peoples, not between governments.”<sup>25</sup> In order to develop understanding and relationships of trust, cultural relations must take a different approach from that used in cultural diplomacy.

Cultural relations’ approach goes far deeper than the advocacy of public and cultural diplomacy. Gordon Slaven, the British Council’s Head of Education Services, described the organization’s approach to cultural relations:

[T]he first thing we do is we listen and we hear what other people are saying and we work from that basis, rather than telling them what we think they need to know. It's the mutuality, I think, that is the uniqueness of what the British Council does.<sup>26</sup>

By focusing on listening, cultural relations invites a deeper level of engagement with others than would the more promotional cultural diplomacy. Pamment also made this distinction, writing that “[w]hile cultural work might focus on long-term relationships predicated on mutual interests...advocacy is about lobbying for political and economic objectives.”<sup>27</sup> Linking the concept of mutuality to the long-term focus of cultural relations, Rose and Wadham-Smith wrote, “Mutuality says, ‘I’ll behave in this way regardless of how you respond in the short-to-medium term, because I have confidence that implementing these values with no strings attached is the only way to build trust in the long-term’.”<sup>28</sup> Governments, for a number of political and structural reasons, are far more concerned with achieving short- to medium-term foreign policy outcomes. “The distinction between cultural relations and cultural diplomacy was interpreted as one between long-term objectives of mutual understanding between peoples and short-term interests of commercial or political advantage,” which governments may pursue in their foreign policies.<sup>29</sup> Where appropriate, these advantages can frequently be achieved through public or cultural diplomacy ‘advocacy’ initiatives, an approach which is anathema to the long-term ‘mutuality’ of cultural relations necessary to build trust. So much of what defines cultural relations (and what distinguishes it from cultural diplomacy)—the longer timescale, honesty, mutuality, and trust—is made possible by its independence from government. They are also what makes cultural relations more effective as a soft power practice.

### **HMG’s Evolving Definition of ‘Cultural Diplomacy’ and the GREAT Campaign**

Over the last 13 years, HMG has been wrestling with the concept of soft power and how best to acquire, manage, and deploy it. Three reports in particular – the *Wilton Review* (2002), the *Carter*

*Report* (2005), and the *Triennial Review* (2014) – articulate the Government’s evolving view of public and cultural diplomacy and address the question of where arm’s length institutions such as the British Council sit in the broader architecture of Britain’s overseas engagement. Government’s increased interest in these issues foreshadows the establishment of the GREAT Britain campaign in 2012, as well as the growing involvement of the Government in the British Council’s affairs. HMG’s entreaties to the Council to more directly and explicitly support the UK national interest have increasingly threatened the organization’s commitment to cultural relations. In the words of James Pamment, “Prior to this policy era, there was a certain ambiguity of roles which allowed actors like the [British Council] to act both as an NGO and as an official government body.”<sup>30</sup> That ambiguity has steadily dissipated over time.

*The Wilton Review* (2002), *Carter Report* (2008), & *Triennial Review* (2014)

The *Wilton Review* was the first assessment of British public diplomacy work after the 9/11 attacks. The *Review*’s primary impact for the British Council came in the form of changes to the Government’s definition of public diplomacy. The *Review* said that “all of [the British Council’s] activity falls under the heading of cultural relations and is therefore part of public diplomacy.”<sup>31</sup> The Public Diplomacy Strategy Board (PDSB), set up in the wake of the *Wilton Review* to coordinate British public diplomacy efforts, added a key phrase (below in italics) to the *Review*’s definition of public diplomacy.

Work which aims at influencing in a positive way, including through the creation of relationships and partnerships, the perceptions of individuals and organizations overseas about the UK and their engagement with the UK, *in support of HMG’s overseas objectives.*<sup>32</sup>

In his analysis, James Pamment wrote that this new definition “set cultural relations within a government remit and implied that these different actors...should arrange their objectives within the broader

national interest” and that it was motivated by demand for greater public accountability and transparency.<sup>33</sup> This paper’s framework maintains that cultural relations should be considered separately from both public and cultural diplomacy and that any contribution to the national interest would be incidental to cultural relations activity, but the *Carter Report* went even further in articulating the British Council’s role in supporting the national interest.

The *Carter Report* evaluated the overall effectiveness of British international public engagement. The *Report* claimed to appreciate “the importance of appropriate editorial and managerial independence” for the British Council and the BBC World Service (BBCWS), but its updated definition of public diplomacy betrayed that claim.<sup>34</sup> According to the report, public diplomacy activity (cultural relations included) was to be delivered “in a manner consistent with governmental medium and long-term goals.” The *Carter Report* more explicitly linked support for the ‘national interest’ to HMG policy, in Pamment’s view, by “us[ing] the notion of HMG to embody a sovereign national interest beyond ‘short-term’ politics. Actors like the [British Council] and BBCWS represent Britain’s interests and therefore should act in line with the FCO’s strategic plans.”<sup>35</sup> The British Government’s increased concern with public and cultural diplomacy supporting its foreign policy objectives in 2005 could reflect the British Government’s tarnished reputation abroad following its participation in the Iraq War. Public and cultural diplomacy, including the work of the British Council, served as the Government’s primary tools to address this urgent problem. But minutes from a later meeting of the British Council’s Board of Trustees distanced the organization from any such notion. “[The Board] were clear that the Mission of the British Council was never to defend the UK’s interests, which was more properly the job of the FCO.”<sup>36</sup> When cultural relations activity is linked to support the national interest as embodied or determined by Government, by the definitions provided earlier in this paper, it would no longer be cultural relations, but cultural diplomacy.



The recently published *Triennial Review of the British Council* goes even further on this particular point in its definitions and in its recommendation for greater British Council alignment with HMG priorities and the national interest. The *Review* awkwardly defines cultural diplomacy and contrasts with the British Council's assertion that it does cultural relations:

For the purposes of the Review we refer to the activities of the British Council broadly as 'cultural diplomacy'...The term broadly encompasses promotion of a country's culture and values to build positive relationships and influence, thereby furthering national interests. In other words, use of national culture in support of foreign policy and diplomacy.<sup>37</sup>

The first sentence of this definition would align with cultural relations (national interest being incidental), whereas the second sits squarely within a cultural diplomacy framework. By calling the British Council's work cultural diplomacy, the Government is, "in effect, using the strategy of influence over the terms of discourse to reposition identities and roles" in relation to the British Council.<sup>38</sup> In support of its recommendation for greater alignment with HMG, the *Review* also calls for a greater focus on 'promotion' and a more muted effort on 'mutuality'—a key component of cultural relations. "[T]he emphasis on 'mutuality' (or, previously, internationalism) as a core British Council value should not detract from delivery of the [Royal] Charter object to 'promote a wider knowledge of the UK'."<sup>39</sup> But according to several of the British Council staff interviewed for this paper, the organization's work and strategy are already aligned with that of not only the FCO but other HMG Departments as well. One member of the headquarters staff said that "at a strategic level we seek alignment with the overall aims of UK government policy."<sup>40</sup> The Council's most recent corporate plan (published before the *Review*) reflects this approach:

As part of our strengthening alignment with government objectives for culture and education, we have already consulted on this Corporate Plan with the Department of Business, Innovation, and Skills (BIS), UK Trade and Investment (UKTI),

and the Department of Culture, Media, and Sport (DCMS), as well as the FCO.<sup>41</sup>

But perhaps the most obvious example of the British Council's programmatic alignment with the Government in recent years has been through the Council's participation in the GREAT Britain campaign.

### *The GREAT Britain Campaign*

The British Government established the "GREAT campaign" in 2011 to capitalize, quite literally, on the world's increased focus on the UK in 2012 with the London Olympics and Diamond Jubilee celebrations. The campaign has continued after 2012, receiving £45 million of HMG funding in 2014-15 (an increase of £15 million on previous years) to promote the UK as a 'GREAT' place to invest, trade, visit, and study.<sup>42</sup> The campaign, "a political initiative directed by Number 10," is governed by a program board with representation across HMG and chaired by the Secretary of State for DCMS.<sup>43</sup> The GREAT campaign supports the Government's 'prosperity' agenda as a marketing or 'nation-branding' initiative to "drive growth and prosperity for the UK."<sup>44</sup> A member of the British Council's corporate team said, "Every [Government] department sees itself as an economic department and making an important contribution to the UK and it's important that we also play a role in that."<sup>45</sup> Many of the GREAT campaign activities and events at British diplomatic installations around the world, including celebrations of British film, music, and fashion, "could quite reasonably be considered public diplomacy, cultural relations, or soft power."<sup>46</sup> But from the British Council's perspective, "you could have really good cultural relations work that produces no prosperity for the UK at all...The relationships have developed, the learning between countries had improved, but no immediate financial result" is evident.<sup>47</sup> This possibility stands in contrast to a British Council-authored report entitled *Culture Means Business*, which touts the economic benefit to the UK of cultural relations. But the British Council's participation in the GREAT campaign has had mixed reactions from the members of staff interviewed.

According to Paul Fairclough, the British Council's Program Manager for the GREAT campaign, the organization's contribution to the broader campaign is primarily promoting the UK as a place to study. According to Fairclough, for 2014-15, HMG contributed £2 million to the Council's efforts and the organization put in £1 million itself. Despite its focus on promotion, he still sees the campaign as fitting within the British Council's commitment to cultural relations:

I don't think it's contradictory to cultural relations...Our core activity is about building relationships which are mutually beneficial. The GREAT campaign is fundamentally a marketing campaign. So there is a difference there, but I think from our point of view, we're using it in...situations and circumstances where it is fitting and appropriate. For example, it is appropriate that we should be promoting UK strengths in education.<sup>48</sup>

Fairclough's argument that promotional activity may have an appropriate place within some circumstances makes sense. To convince people and institutions to develop mutually beneficial links with the UK higher education sector, the organization has to promote the strengths and value of the sector itself. But not all British Council staff necessarily agree with that approach as it relates to the GREAT campaign.

Though it has only appeared in some of the 110 countries in which the British Council operates, the GREAT campaign hasn't worked equally well across the board. Some have found GREAT to be inconsistent with the British Council's stated cultural relations approach.

We find it weird when the GREAT campaign say [sic], "Well why don't you just use GREAT as your brand?" Because a lot of what we do and the way we build relationships and what people appreciate is [that] the UK comes quite honestly about what it's good at and what it's not good at and what it has to learn and the phase of any journey it's going on. And people really appreciate that. GREAT to some degree threatens that in a way. If we took a GREAT approach, then we'd only be focusing on the positive.<sup>49</sup>

As a marketing campaign, GREAT is less conducive to the honesty and reciprocity which is at the core of cultural relations' mutuality. But the British Council's participation in the GREAT campaign is incumbent on the organization using the campaign's distinct branding, logos, and images. These materials and visuals are also used by a number of Government departments, perhaps creating some problems.

One staff member felt that use of the GREAT campaign brand dilutes the British Council's and goes beyond recognition of HMG funding for the purpose of GREAT-related higher education promotion:

You could argue it's diluting the British Council's brand, because now we've got two brands in our higher education promotion work...I'm a bit surprised the [GREAT] brand appears on the front of our annual report and our corporate plan, considering the amount of resources we get from DfID, BIS, the FCO, etc. and £2.4 million means you get your brand on the front of our corporate plan; I think there's something else going on there.<sup>50</sup>

The placement of GREAT branding on the British Council's corporate documents, whose primary audience are UK-based stakeholders including officials within HMG, could be interpreted as signaling strong British Council alignment with Government initiatives and priorities around prosperity. In the *Triennial Review*, the Government has taken note of the apparent ambivalence of certain quarters of the British Council towards the GREAT campaign and has somewhat pointedly asked for more constructive cooperation.

The British Council is a partner in the Government's GREAT campaign, but is not always seen by colleagues in Government departments as fully 'bought in'. We are sympathetic to the British Council's need to pursue longer term engagement and maintain its distinct institutional identity... We recommend that the British Council adopt a more consistent practice of positive engagement and contribution to the GREAT campaign.<sup>51</sup>

The *Review* on several occasions explicitly recommends that steps be taken to improve the British Council's "alignment with broader national interest."<sup>52</sup> These particular recommendations in the *Triennial Review* reflect the broader trend identified in this section around the UK Government's understanding of cultural diplomacy and the place of the British Council in the UK's soft power 'arsenal.'

Since the *Wilton Review* of 2002, the British Government has taken greater interest in public and cultural diplomacy to build up, manage, and deploy soft power and considered it a source of strength for Britain. The British Council, as a cultural relations organization, has been at the heart of these considerations and reviews. However, the Government's understanding and definition of public and cultural diplomacy has evolved during this period to encompass the British Council's work in cultural relations. By considering the Council's cultural relations work of long-term relationship-building for influence to be the purview of government and linking it to the support of short to medium-term national interests as defined by HMG priorities and objectives, the British Government is pulling the British Council closer to the practices of cultural diplomacy. The Council's participation in the GREAT Britain campaign is just one example of this alignment process. The next two sections describe how the demand for greater accountability from NDPBs and cuts to the British Council's grant-in-aid have contributed to the organization's further alignment with Government and thus with cultural diplomacy.

### **New Levels of Public Accountability and Evaluation: The British Council as 'Quango'**

Questions of accountability and value for money are not new for the British Council; they have affected the organization for decades. Accountability for the purposes of this paper includes governance and oversight, both of programs and finances, as well as monitoring and evaluation. These latter two aspects of accountability and transparency are linked, as greater oversight and 'proving value' demands more and better data through evaluation and measurement

of impact. The levels of accountability progressively expected of the British Council, in terms of overall corporate management, financial controls, and intensity of measurement and evaluation, are arguably higher than they have ever been in its history. This section argues that mechanisms in place to exercise oversight and demonstrate value for money can become a strong vehicle for Governmental influence on the British Council's strategies and priorities, contributing to its process of moving towards cultural diplomacy. This section addresses general trends in the Government's efforts to reform NDPBs and examines current and recommended governance models for the British Council as well as the financial controls and evaluation requirements to which the organization is subject.

### *General Trends*

The demand for greater accountability and better measurement is not unique to the British Council or the sector of public diplomacy or cultural relations. According to Ben O'Loughlin, the British Council is caught up in "the broader culture in society of accountability to the taxpayer":

The British Council's work in cultural and public diplomacy is having to adjust...But at the same time, so has the military, so have universities. We now have to measure our impact. So what's happening in cultural diplomacy and cultural relations is part of a broader shift in management of knowledge.<sup>53</sup>

The organization is adjusting to the current Coalition Government's efforts to reform NDPBs or 'quangos'—quasi-autonomous non-governmental organizations. Quangos deliver those public services which are judged to be better provided at arm's length from Government departments and insulated from the political influence of Government ministers. Successive British governments have tried to bring down the number of NDPBs without much success.<sup>54</sup> This trend changed after the 2010 general election.

When the Coalition Government came to office in May 2010, there was talk of a "bonfire of the quangos" and some reports that

the British Council itself would be axed.<sup>55</sup> Quangos were to be either reformed or abolished “to save money *and* increase democratic accountability.”<sup>56</sup> Flinders et al. argue that, unlike its predecessors, the current Government has been able to make sweeping changes to the way NDPBs are managed and run, reforming a number of arm’s length bodies and bringing them closer to the Government in the process.

The most significant finding of the research on which this article is based is therefore a shift in governing relationship that is frequently characterized by officials as a move from a ‘loose-loose’ to ‘tight-tight’ relationship between arm’s length bodies and their parent departments.<sup>57</sup>

They identify several measures taken by the Government that contribute to the new “tight-tight” relationship including an overall review of all NDPBs, the triennial review process, and increased financial controls and data-collection requirements.<sup>58</sup> Like any other NDPB, the British Council “would now be subject to a triennial review process that would question their continued existence.”<sup>59</sup> The *Triennial Review* cited in this paper is the first result of that process for the British Council.\* The next section identifies some of the relevant recommendations for the British Council’s overall governance and relationship with its sponsor department.

### *New Accountability, Governance, and Financial Controls*

The British Council is simultaneously an NDPB, a charity, and a public corporation run by a Chief Executive Officer with the oversight of a Board of Trustees, led by a Chair. Its status as a charity and public corporation requires the British Council to comply with applicable regulations, obligations, and policies set out by the Charity Commission. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office is the ‘sponsor department’ for the organization’s NDPB

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\* It is important to note that the *Triennial Review* recommendations mentioned have, at the time of writing (December 2014), been published but not yet fully implemented, but they clearly demonstrate the Government’s intentions and plans for the British Council moving forward.

status. The Council's governing documents include a Royal Charter, last updated in 2011, as well as a financial memorandum of understanding (MoU) and management statement that outline its relationship with the FCO, last updated in July 2013. The latter documents outline the responsibilities of the British Council and its Board of Trustees to report to the FCO on financial performance and contribution to the "UK's long term international aims as set out by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office."<sup>60</sup> The *Triennial Review* noted, however, the contradiction inherent in the governance of the British Council, an organization with three different statuses:

Governance and accountability emerged as significant themes during the Review Consultation. The model of Royal Charter body, charity status and NDPB complicates both. For example, the Foreign Secretary is answerable to Parliament for the activities of the British Council but the organization is governed by a Board of Trustees whose responsibility is to the interests of the charity rather than to Government or broader national interest.<sup>61</sup>

That statement omits that the Foreign Secretary must approve the appointments of the British Council's Chief Executive, Board Chair, and Vice-Chair and can appoint one representative of his own to the Board. In 2008, then-Foreign Secretary David Miliband did not exercise that prerogative,<sup>62</sup> but in June 2011, William Hague nominated Permanent Under Secretary to the FCO, Simon Fraser, to join the Board.<sup>63</sup> Ministers across Government (including BIS, DCMS, and DFID) are consulted in the drafting of the British Council's corporate plan<sup>64</sup> and "the final draft has to be signed off by the Foreign Secretary."<sup>65</sup> These mechanisms are among the tools available to the Government to exercise its oversight, but the *Triennial Review* claims that they are insufficient.

The strongest recommendations to emerge from the *Triennial Review* centered on these questions of accountability and oversight. The following selection is the clearest request for a closer governance relationship between the British Council and its sponsor department:



We recommend that the FCO strengthen capacity to provide effective oversight of and closer engagement with the British Council. We further recommend that the FCO and British Council consider additional ways of strengthening the institutional relationship and building trust e.g. through secondments into relevant positions in both organizations.<sup>66</sup>

The *Review* builds on that general guidance with some specific proposals for increased oversight, including “rigorous ongoing evaluation by the FCO,” “giv[ing] other relevant government departments a voice on British Council activities in their areas of interest,” additional coordination with British Embassies/Consulates, and changing the Council’s Principal Charity Regulator from the Charities Commission to the Foreign Secretary.<sup>67</sup> As these proposals have not yet been implemented, their impact on the British Council’s day-to-day ‘operational independence’ is unclear. But a closer institutional relationship between the British Council and the Government and additional oversight by the latter would, if the Council’s history is any indicator, reduce the independence so critical to its identity as a cultural relations organization. These developments are paralleled in the area of financial control and oversight.

As with the institutional relationship described above, the demand for greater financial oversight of NDPBs is widespread and not unique to the British Council. Controls introduced by the Coalition Government include a spending freeze in a number of areas, “covering spending on advertising, consultancy, IT, procurement, and the hiring of new staff. In addition, the Cabinet Office and Treasury have increased the amount of data that public bodies must regularly provide.”<sup>68</sup> These controls are echoed in paragraph 11 of the British Council’s financial MoU with the FCO in which the Government sets out “any targets to be achieved, such as in relation to Official Development Assistance (ODA) spend, or efficiency savings.”<sup>69</sup> The MoU also stipulates that the FCO’s oversight of financial matters extends to British Council activities not supported by grant-in-aid, including its income-generating English and Exams business,<sup>70</sup> and that the organization’s “financial

plans and targets...will be agreed in consultation with the FCO for all of its activities.”<sup>71</sup> In response to Council claims that much of its financial data is commercially sensitive,<sup>72</sup> the *Triennial Review* “questions whether this is necessary” and recommends further review to identify additional data which can be made public.<sup>73</sup> The FCO is not the only institution of Government which has financial oversight of the British Council.

At the recommendation of the House of Commons Select Committee for Foreign Affairs, the National Audit Office (NAO) reviewed the British Council in 2008 to evaluate whether it was providing value for money to the Government and UK taxpayer and “its impact in meeting public diplomacy objectives.”<sup>74</sup> Their general conclusion was “that the British Council’s performance is strong... There is a need for improvement in support functions and in terms of the management information and tools that it has in place to run its business.”<sup>75</sup> The report made recommendations to better manage the organization’s finances, estates, and procurement as it changed its programming structure from programs devised at country level to programs managed and run at a global or regional level.<sup>76</sup> Many of the steps outlined in the NAO report seem to reflect a strong need to modernize and professionalize the British Council’s operations and systems. However, as noted above, the impetus for the report and for such professionalization was the request of the House of Commons. On paper and in theory, the British Council’s Board of Trustees is responsible and accountable for the organization’s performance and management, but as the previous two sections have made clear, the FCO and other organs of Government do take a very active role and interest in this area. This interest has extended to how the British Council measures the effectiveness of its work and evaluates its programs.

### *Measurement, Evaluation, and Accountability in Cultural Relations*

Questions abound in cultural relations organizations about how best to measure the impact of their programs, both for their own benefit and for the oversight bodies that assess their performance. As

James Pamment writes, “evaluation data is produced in order to be used in annual reports which are the subject of scrutiny by internal and external stakeholders.”<sup>77</sup> In the case of cultural relations, the push for more and better evaluation emerges from “the idea that influence should be measurable.”<sup>78</sup> Pierre Pahlavi goes further in an article in which he claims that without the proper evaluation tools, practitioners of public diplomacy would not be able to “demonstrate that soft power diplomacy is more than mere rhetoric, and that the investment that it receives is not superfluous luxury.”<sup>79</sup> The same argument holds true for cultural relations, no matter if the stakeholder is government or another non-governmental entity.

The British Council’s framework for evaluating impact focuses on the Government as the primary audience and stakeholder. A member of the management team in the Education & Society unit touched on this notion. “The main aspect of what we’re monitoring and evaluating in the corporate scorecard... is what we’ve committed to the FCO and the Foreign Affairs Committee who are the judges of our performance.”<sup>80</sup> However, in recent years, this framework has become more complex for the British Council as the mixed economy model has meant a larger number of relevant stakeholders. It must now determine if activities have been “good international development or whether it’s been good CSR [Corporate Social Responsibility] or whether it’s been good brand-building activity.”<sup>81</sup> This statement aligns well with Pamment’s argument that evaluation demands and concerns have contributed to changes in project design and practice in this field.<sup>82</sup> However, the challenge of more stakeholders the demand that British Council programs demonstrate greater impact for UK national interests puts more pressure on the organization.

The British Council uses a corporate scorecard to record relevant data, qualitative and quantitative, from all of its programs. Ben O’Loughlin indicated the frustration of those British Council staff with whom he’s engaged regarding the greater focus on evaluation.

From the British Council staff that I've spoken to...they feel micromanaged. They have complained on a personal basis about having to measure everything...They spend so much time measuring what they're doing that they don't really have time to do anything.<sup>83</sup>

A member of the British Council's headquarters staff reflected a similar view, saying, "I do think that we do spend quite of time in terms of resource on managing some of the government areas...we do put an awful lot of resource into it."<sup>84</sup> Interestingly, both of these answers were in response to the following quotation from Flinders et al. referring to the situation of all NDPBs. "From a situation where many bodies had assumed 'orphan status,' the common criticism from the chairs and chief executives of public bodies is now that the Cabinet Office is too controlling to the point that micro-management risks undermining the arm's-length relationship."<sup>85</sup> Other interviewed staff members did not necessarily agree with the quote, but there does seem to be a link between perceived 'micro-management,' the arm's length relationship, and program evaluation. By requiring additional data to prove the effectiveness of the British Council's programming and its contribution to the national interest, the Government constrains the design, format, and content of cultural relations programs such that they can be evaluated against its particular desired outcomes.

The British Council is such a complex organization working in so many different countries and sectors that the relationship to Government varies tremendously. As Gordon Slaven put it, it's not that the arm between the Government and the British Council is universally getting shorter, but "in some sense, in some part of the arm, it's gotten considerably shorter and in other areas, it's gotten a lot longer."<sup>86</sup> The *Triennial Review's* recommendations reflect a desire to both tighten and perhaps standardize the relationship across the organization. The risk in doing so, to paraphrase the metaphor used by a senior civil servant in Flinders et al, is akin to a tourniquet tied around an arm is too tightly or left on for too long, which risks the arm falling off completely.<sup>87</sup> Time will tell whether a tighter

approach to the British Council's accountability to Government will have that effect.

### **Cultural Relations & Austerity: Shrinking Grant-in-Aid and the Mixed-Economy Model**

Since the British Council initiated the mixed-economy model with the introduction of fee-paying English language instruction and exam provision, HMG grant-in-aid as a proportion of British Council's annual turnover has steadily decreased. Thirty years ago, "the vast majority of the money was grant. Now it's down to less than 20% which is quite a remarkable change, and it's gone down more than 10% in the last four years, at the same time as we've raised our turnover quite dramatically."<sup>88</sup> As the income the British Council has earned has grown and its sources diversified (contracts, partnerships, full cost recovery services), the British Council's operating model has become more complex. As of the end of the 2012-2013, the Council had established 12 subsidiaries to ensure its commercial activities comply with local tax and status regulations.<sup>89</sup> These subsidiaries are crucial to ensure that the British Council can earn addition income to blunt the impact of the cuts the organization absorbed after the General Election in May 2010.

#### *Finding Savings in a Time of Austerity and the Challenge of ODA*

In the Coalition Government's Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR) of 2010, the British Council was not immune from public spending cuts. The Review said that, "As part of the settlement, the British Council and BBC World Service will find savings by finding greater efficiencies and enhancing the commercialization of their operations."<sup>90</sup> All of the savings and commercial figures and statistics cited below were contained in or determined from data publicly available in the British Council's annual reports and corporate plans going back to 2005-2006 (see Appendix B). Between 2010 and 2015, the British Council saw its grant-in-aid drop 23% or £47 million, but it admitted that, "The FCO grant reduction, the loss of the [Department for Education] grant, the likely impact of inflation, the continuing weakness of sterling, and the need to find money for

investment mean that we need to save about £70 million of grant costs annually by 2014–15.”<sup>91</sup> The complexity of the Council’s internal financial structures, and the requirement that grant-in-aid not subsidize commercial activity, mean that cuts from the grant cannot easily be replaced by a corresponding proportional increase in commercial activity. The British Council made this point clear in response to a House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee report.

[I]t is not possible to simply substitute £1 of grant with £1 of self-generated income. Overall our current portfolio of services generates a surplus of £1 for every £10 we earn – so to match a £1 reduction in grant, we would need to increase our self-generated income tenfold.<sup>92</sup>

The British Council allocates surplus from its commercial operations to support other cultural relations activities normally funded by the grant and bolsters reserves.<sup>93</sup> Accordingly, replacing £70 million in grant from surplus would require an additional **£700 million** from income-generating activity. The British Council’s Chair, Sir Vernon Ellis, considered this to be “quite an ask.”<sup>94</sup> The organization did make a significant push to increase its earned income, but it also did have to make some painful cuts.

Through a voluntary early retirement program and forced redundancies, the British Council reduced its headcount of staff in the UK from 1,117 in 2009-2010 to a low of 710 – a cut of 36%. The British Council also underwent an internal restructuring, merging geographic regional directorates from twelve to eight and consolidating activity into three strategic business units (SBUs) – English & Exams, Arts, and Education & Society.<sup>95</sup> The Council also consolidated a number of back office functions at a hub in Noida, India.<sup>96</sup> The organization also signed on to the Government’s “One HMG” program to physically bring together British overseas representation to save on estate costs. In 2013, the Council shared premises with the FCO in some 30 countries, but in many places cannot do so because of international prohibitions on commercial activity being run from diplomatic premises.<sup>97</sup> Sir Vernon warned that “we don’t want to be seen as part of the Foreign Office.”<sup>98</sup>

However, in some countries, British Council operations already have a quasi-diplomatic appearance through shared premises with the Embassy or Consulate and through the dual job title of British Council Country Director and Cultural Counsellor.<sup>99</sup> In addition to the restructuring and co-location, the British Council has “had to stop doing some things...and pursue more work through partnership.”<sup>100</sup> Among the programs cut were several initiatives on climate change, drawing a furious reaction from a range of British artists, authors, and intellectuals.<sup>101</sup> The most dramatic changes in programming, however, have come as the result of the introduction of specific requirements for British Council spending.

As part of the Government’s commitment to spend .7% of gross national income on aid in the 2010 CSR, the British Council’s grant is now divided by what can and cannot be spent on activities or in countries that would qualify as ODA as defined by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Under current plans, by 2016 fully 69% of the Council’s activities supported by grant-in-aid must qualify as ODA. British Council CEO Sir Martin Davidson highlighted the challenge saying, “Our ability to deploy grant into the developed world is becoming more and more constrained.”<sup>102</sup> As a result, operations and activities across much of Europe, North America, and Australia supported by grant have been cut while other regions might have more grant funds than before. These changes have been particularly difficult for Europe, and Sir Martin Davidson’s description of the organization’s challenge there is worth quoting at length:

[W]ith more and more of [the grant] denominated as overseas development assistance—we are, in essence, going to have to create an operation in western Europe that fully covers its cost through earned income. We have a physical presence in the 28 EU countries... We are looking at the moment, for example, not at stopping work in all those countries, but asking whether the physical presence in those countries adds value.<sup>103</sup>

By ring-fencing funds in the British Council’s grant-in-aid for ODA work, the British Government has a great deal of influence

on the British Council's geographic priorities and the type of programming that can be delivered in these regions. The response for Europe and the rest of the organization has been to focus on earning additional income.

### *Challenges of the Mixed-Economy Model*

Despite having asked the British Council in the 2010 CSR to “enhance” its commercial operations, there are now signals from the Government that it considers the organization to have been perhaps too successful in doing so. Remarkably, the British Council projects its annual income from services will have risen **£434 million in five years** to £796 million by the end of 2014-15 – a growth rate of 120 percent.<sup>104</sup> In 2012-13, the British Council made a surplus of £56 million on its income from services.<sup>105</sup> Contrary to what one might have expected in an atmosphere of austerity, “a decision was taken to embark on a strategy that went from growth as an organization, growing impact and growing revenue.”<sup>106</sup> Despite the British Council's commercial growth, and associated growth in impact, concerns began to emerge in 2012 from several parts of Government about the impact of the mixed-economy model on the organization's alignment with UK interests.

Gordon Slaven provided a useful metaphor from parenting to offer his interpretation of the new dynamics in the Council's relationship with HMG: “A teenager who in our world, [the parent says] ‘Well, yes, I'm cutting your allowance.’ And [the teenager] goes out and gets a job, you know? So you're rather cut off at the knees.”<sup>107</sup> Another member of staff at the Council disagreed, saying that, “even if Government only gave us one pound, technically the Foreign Secretary would still be accountable to Parliament for all our work. So it doesn't really fundamentally change the nature of the relationship very much.”<sup>108</sup> The House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee was the first official organ to share its concerns about these developments:

[W]e have been concerned that the Council's changed financial situation, and its focus on generating more commercial income,



might lead it into making decisions inconsistent with its long-term interests, or with those of the UK.<sup>109</sup>

The income that the British Council earns through commercial operations (primarily in English and Exams) gives the organization flexibility to allocate any surplus to support and grow other cultural relations activities. The potential cost of this additional income, noted by the *Triennial Review*, has added a negative tinge to the Council's reputation. The *Review* acknowledged that the Council "needs to continue to earn substantial income through paid services" but must do so in a way that "mitigates damaging stakeholder perceptions that the British Council is primarily motivated by income generation to the detriment of its broader cultural diplomacy role."<sup>110</sup> This statement in the *Review* stands in contrast to a later assertion that "Promotion of the English language remains the cornerstone of the British Council's international offer and identity," given the centrality of English teaching to the organization's income.<sup>111</sup> Reconciliation of these two positions reflects broader challenges the British Council faces in responding to the Government's policies and recommendations whilst maintaining the independence it needs to be a cultural relations body.

The Government's cuts to the grant-in-aid and ODA funding quota increase its ability to influence British Council management decisions, reducing the organization's 'operational independence.' As part of efforts to spend less than 15% of total expenditure on 'platform costs' such as estates,<sup>112</sup> and keeping with the Government's "One HMG" agenda, several Council offices have co-located with FCO premises, including in the Consulate-General in Istanbul.<sup>113</sup> Such arrangements raise the question of whether co-location reduces the British Council's real or perceived independence from the Government among its external stakeholders and target audiences. The British Council also has to reconcile the Government's dueling concerns for the organization's reputation from earning income whilst ramping up its commercial operations to compensate for lost grant. However, the Council's reputation would probably suffer more if it increased its commercial 'surplus margin' to raise

additional income without additional activity. The introduction of ODA quotas in the grant-in-aid has forced the British Council to rethink its geographical and programmatic priorities – choices it may not have made itself. Cuts to European operations come at a difficult time when the UK's relationship within the European Union is a subject of some political controversy and strained debate. All of these financial measures raise significant questions about whether the Government allows the British Council to have full and meaningful control of operational decision-making independent of political considerations and about the associated impact on the organization's cultural relations programming.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Returning to the metaphors mentioned earlier, the arm between the British Council and the British Government has shortened and the tourniquet has tightened. The three trends identified in this paper—changing definitions of cultural diplomacy, different levels of administrative and financial accountability, and cuts to grant-in-aid—provide some compelling evidence that the Government and the British Council have grown closer together. The British Government has been clear, particularly in the *Triennial Review*, about its desire to exercise greater oversight of the British Council and further align the organization's work with Government priorities to ensure that it explicitly serves national interests. In doing so, the Government erodes and undermines the British Council's operational, editorial, and political independence. In the theoretical framework outlined at the beginning of the paper, this situation raises the question of whether cultural relations or cultural diplomacy is more appropriate to describe the British Council and its work.

In 1995, J.M. Lee asked a similar question of the label that should be used to describe the British Council's work during a period of change:

The distinction that used to be made between cultural relations and cultural diplomacy was often used to distance the Council from the Foreign Office. It used to be claimed that the Council

pursued long-term objectives of cultural relations, not the short term of cultural diplomacy. The story of the Council's reorganization casts doubt on the value of continuing to make this distinction.<sup>114</sup>

The story of the British Council's history over the last five years demonstrates that the currency of the term 'cultural relations' has diminished in relation to the British Council's work. It has become increasingly clear that the British Council is being asked to use the medium of culture to both serve its national government and explicitly advance national interests. While the British Council is a large, complex organization in which pockets of cultural relations activity could still go on, it has lost, or is in the process of losing, many of the core elements which make it a cultural relations body. The British Government clearly considers the British Council to be an important institution for the UK's relations with the rest of the world, but it has taken steps that threaten to devalue the organization.

These developments pose significant dangers to the British Council and its stated commitment to cultural relations. The organization runs the risk of losing its reputation as a credible and impartial actor, damaging its valuable brand of trust which has been carefully cultivated over eighty years. This trust and credibility sit at the core of the British Council's long-term relationships with other peoples and countries around the world. The British Council, as it has before, has adapted to the parameters set for it by the Government in this new environment, but what does the future hold for it? The British Council may still be doing similar work to what it does today, but it will only be able to continue to engage in independent, mutually beneficial cultural relations between the United Kingdom and the rest of the world if the British Government recognizes and values the role it plays in differentiating between cultural relations and cultural diplomacy.

This paper contributes to scholarly and practitioner understanding of cultural diplomacy and cultural relations by offering a preliminary alternative framework for differentiating and defining the practices, emphasizing the important role of government. Existing conceptual

structures are insufficient to differentiate the wide range of activity that falls within these practices and unable to detect and explain changes in these policies and practices. This paper has sought to balance out this debate through a focus on differentiation of practice using the case study of the British Council and by suggesting that 'diplomacy' is a useful term to differentiate between governmental and non-governmental efforts in the broader sphere of soft power. Cultural diplomacy takes a promotion and advocacy approach, using cultural content for the specific purpose of supporting foreign policy objectives and the national interest. Cultural relations take place outside the sway of government, building mutual trust and understanding, and generating amity and influence in the process. How do these outcomes not support and serve the national interest? Does supporting the national interest have to correlate with alignment with Government? Could the national interest actually best be served by Government stepping back from cultural relations? These are all questions ripe for additional consideration and thought.

**Appendix A — List of Interview Subjects**

<u>Subject</u>	<u>Name</u>	<u>Title</u>
1	Anonymous	Anonymous
2	Gordon Slaven	Head of Education Services, British Council
3	Anonymous	Member of British Council Corporate Affairs Team
4	Paul Fairclough	GREAT Program Manager, British Council
5	Anonymous	Senior Management Team, Education & Society, British Council
6	Ben O'Loughlin	Professor of International Relations, Royal Holloway

## Appendix B — British Council Financial Data from British Council Annual Reports and Corporate Plans

<b><u>Financial Year</u></b>	<b><u>FCO Total Grant-in-Aid</u></b>	<b><u>Income from Services</u></b>	<b><u>% ODA</u></b>	<b><u>HMG</u></b>
2004-05	£ 172,065,000	£ 192,279,000		Labour
2005-06	£ 189,210,000	£ 211,252,000		
2006-07	£ 188,124,000	£ 231,808,000		
2007-08	£ 189,462,000	£ 250,502,000		
2008-09	£ 200,963,000	£ 313,228,000		
2009-10	£ 200,763,000	£ 361,844,000		
2010-11	£ 190,082,000	£ 387,116,000		Coalition
2011-12	£ 180,500,000	£ 432,135,000		
2012-13	£ 171,500,000	£ 490,010,000		
2013-14	£ 161,000,000	£ 674,000,000	59%	
2014-15	£ 154,000,000	£ 796,000,000	65%	
2015-16	£ 164,000,000	£ 837,000,000	69%	TBD

<http://www.britishcouncil.org/organisation/how-we-work/reports-documents>

### **Appendix C — List of Standard Interview Questions for British Council Staff**

- 1) What is your name and your role at the British Council?  
How long have you worked for the organization?
- 2) How do you define cultural relations?
- 3) The British Council describes its relationship with the Government as ‘arm’s length’. The term ‘operational independence’ is also frequently used. What do these terms mean in practice?
- 4) How has the British Council’s accountability to Government changed in the last several years? Do you believe it is an appropriate level of accountability?
- 5) In an article on the current Coalition Government’s reforms of NDPBs, several UK academics wrote the following: “From a situation where many bodies had assumed ‘orphan status’, the common criticism from the chairs and chief executives of public bodies is now that the Cabinet Office is too controlling to the point that micro-management risks undermining the arm’s length relationship.”<sup>115</sup> Do you agree with this assessment?
- 6) How have the Government’s requirements that a greater percentage of grant-in-aid be spent on ODA-eligible countries and activities had an impact on the British Council’s structure, operations, and programming?

## Appendix D — Research Methods

This paper uses the British Council as a case study in the broader field of international cultural relations. It utilizes a mixed method approach of interviews and document analysis in order to understand the organizational changes which have unfolded in the last five years, identify the mechanisms and linkages that comprise the British Council's relationship with HMG, and probe any changes in that relationship in the same period. As the British Council is simultaneously an NDPB, a charity, and a public corporation, a great deal of quantitative and qualitative information about the organization's finances, activities, and plans is publicly available. Annual reports, corporate plans, and minutes of British Council Board of Trustee meetings are all free to download. On the governmental side, the reports, written evidence, and witness testimony from committees in both Houses of Parliament offer a wealth of information about how the British Council is held to account. Reports and proceedings from the House of Commons Foreign Affairs and Public Accounts Committees are extensive as is the recently-released report of House of Lords Select Committee on Soft Power. The Government's wide-ranging *Triennial Review* of the British Council was published on July 22, 2014, ("the most extensive review of the British Council since the 1970s") and confirmed the author's earlier notions about the Government's desire for a closer relationship with the British Council.<sup>116</sup> Beyond these sources, this paper also draws upon interviews with six relevant British Council staff and external stakeholders (listed in Appendix A)—all conducted *before* the publishing of the *Triennial Review*.

These interviews and documentary evidence are used complementarily. Several documents create the framework for the British Council's relationship with the British Government, but interviews illustrate how that framework is applied in practice. Interviews took place after the document analysis phase. The individuals interviewed are either identified by name and title or, for those who requested full or partial anonymity, a number (e.g.—Subject 1). Interview subjects were offered anonymity to allow them



to speak freely about the British Council and its relationship with the Government. The author was not able to identify and interview an appropriate Government representative about its relationship with the Council, but HMG's views are made very clear in the *Triennial Review*. The public consultation for that review solicited more than 800 written submissions, reflecting the Council's wide range of stakeholders. Capturing a similar range of views external or internal to the organization is outside the scope of this paper. However, those British Council staff selected for interviews were identified based on their knowledge of the Council's working relationship with the Government and the span of experience they represented, from as few as four years to more than thirty. Participants were asked a combination of stock questions (listed in Appendix C) and questions specific to their role and experience. Not all of those interviewed shared the same views; the excerpts cited in this paper acknowledge these disagreements where most relevant. However, even without the elucidation provided by the interviews, this paper's argument that Government policies have drawn the British Council closer to it, and the associated claims about distinguishing between cultural relations and cultural diplomacy, would remain sound.

## Endnotes

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In 2014, Tim completed a Master of Arts in International Relations with distinction from the War Studies Department at King's College London where his research focused on cultural relations and cultural diplomacy. He graduated cum laude from Yale University in 2010 with a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science focusing on international relations.

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