

**A story of engagement:**  
**the British Council 1934–2009**

Ali Fisher





#### About the Author

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Counterpoint is the cultural relations think-tank of the British Council.

Details of its other publications can be found at [www.counterpoint-online.org](http://www.counterpoint-online.org)

#### Foreword by Neil Kinnock

The British Council has been unique since its inception in 1934. At that time, some European states were manifesting their approach to international relations with the aid of rearmament, marching songs and aggressive declarations about *mare nostrum* and *Lebensraum*. By contrast, British establishment genius thought that a more desirable way of spreading and strengthening influence would be through the development of cultural relations – although King George V declared in a rather muscular way that the British Council had been created ‘to show the world what it owes to Great Britain’.

Happily, the first employees of the British Council had more emollient and creative aspirations. Accordingly, they then set about fulfilling the purpose of the organisation, defined in the founding Charter as ‘promoting abroad a wider appreciation of British culture and civilisation [by] encouraging cultural, educational and other interchanges between the United Kingdom and elsewhere’.

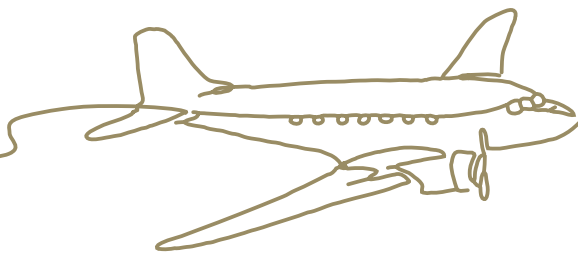
That, essentially, is still the mission of the British Council, though there have, of course, been

profound modernising changes in method, and major alterations in the way that we function as an organisation that now has over 220 offices in 110 countries and territories across the world, a turnover of more than £600 million and 7,400 employees – 15 per cent of whom are in the UK and 85 per cent in the other countries in which we operate.

Put simply, the British Council exists to build trust between the UK and other countries and people and thereby win lifelong friends for Britain. Around the world, we transparently seek the engagement of high-level groups such as ministers, university heads, business leaders and those media professionals that influence public perceptions, and we also give particular priority to working with, and for, young people from every background. In addition, we act as agents for change and development by our contract work with the Department for International Development, the European Union and other international bodies. Our activities extend over a huge spectrum, including educational promotion and provision at all levels, creativity of every kind through our arts and science programmes, governance training, human rights projects, support for education reform,

and training for community and sports leadership. In short, our work is not abstract: the British Council strives to ensure that the partners and users with whom we engage gain aesthetic, vocational or enabling benefit so that they can value the engagement, contribute to it with confidence, and – on that basis – develop trust.

Plainly, we do not have or seek a monopoly on trust building. It is obviously a basic purpose and activity of governmental diplomacy in all its forms. But governments must – by definition – give primacy to national policy priorities, and relationships can therefore be transient, focused on short-term considerations, and subject to the trials and travails of political conditions. The trust-building efforts, the *public diplomacy* efforts, of the British Council are obviously not conducted in a political vacuum – nothing is. But they are people-to-people rather than government-to-government. They are characterised by exchange, by what we call ‘mutuality’, rather than one-way transmission. They are developed over the long term and *for* the long term – sometimes arduously. They convey pride and confidence in British values, accomplishments and qualities – but they also acknowledge



shortcomings and recognise dissent. And they are substantially based on the useful tangibles of educational enablement and broadly manifested cultural access and opportunity. Because of these characteristics the trust that is built is durable – it does not merely flourish in times of calm and agreement, it continues in times of turbulence and disagreement.

As we come to our 75th anniversary, we are reaching nearly 130 million people a year and our educational information services are used by more than 12 million potential students who visit our Education UK website. We administer almost two million examinations for UK boards and institutions annually and, at any given time, a quarter of a million people are learning English through British Council courses.

All of our activities stimulate, facilitate and foster understanding of the UK. Vitally, they also invite the contribution of other cultures by means of partnerships of various kinds and by the visits to Britain of artists, or performing companies, or journalists, or academics, or politicians or other groups. From our foundation, the British Council – unlike counterparts in several other countries –

has never been in the culture export trade, we have always been in the cultural relations export–import business.

Sustaining our work has always, of course, required accountability to Parliament and British governments, not least because we currently receive grant-in-aid of nearly £200 million a year from the Treasury, paid through the Foreign and Commonwealth budget and, since 2000, for the first time ever, ring-fenced. The remainder of our budget is now financed by our earnings from contract work for ministries and international organisations, with course fees paid by individuals and companies, marketed products, and sponsorship.

Throughout the last 75 years, our relationship with governments has usually been amicable, and the British Council has always been operationally independent of political direction or control. That, of course, is a vital characteristic that differentiates us from organisations in other countries with comparable functions of promoting their national cultures and it is crucial to our long-developed reputation for being unequivocally non-partisan.



In an age when communication has never been easier but understanding between people and cultures is still fragile – sometimes perilously so – the distinctiveness and dependability of the British Council have particular worth. Those attributes will continue to have special value when there is greater movement and mixing of peoples and cultures across the planet than ever before, when new economic superpowers have advanced beyond infancy, when climate change imperils every part of the world, when information technology has erased geographical borders, and when traditional diplomatic, commercial and military power are proving to be an inadequate means of achieving enduring influence. Despite these seismic changes and the fresh demands and opportunities they generate for public diplomacy, there are still some in politics and the press who would – misguidedly – prefer the British Council to be a ‘messaging’ component of national defence and security policy.

Such failures of comprehension are, of course, not new: the press magnate



Lord Beaverbrook, for instance, conducted a merciless 20-year vendetta against the British Council, whose very existence, according to his biographer, sent him into a ‘blind fury’, and his newspaper journalists into attempts to ‘terrorise’ the institution with what contemporary British Council officers called ‘a false caricature’ of the organisation as ‘a bunch of effete and ineffectual amateurs and cultural dilettantes who were damaging Britain’s robust picture of itself abroad as tough, no nonsense islanders who did not dabble in the effeminate, cultural, pseudo-intellectualism [of] funny foreigners (such as the decadent French)’.

Patently, the demonisation of the British Council did not work – and, as this short history of the British Council by Dr Fisher makes clear, neither that nor periodic spending cuts and repetitive reviews have inflicted any lasting harm on the enterprise. Beaverbrook is 40 years dead. The British Council is bigger, broader, and more widely used than ever. The dedication and professionalism of our people in this businesslike, modern organisation obviously contributes greatly to that, and I pay

tribute to our staff everywhere – especially in the several hazardous places in which many of them work. But perhaps the main source of success was best articulated by one of my early predecessors back in the menacing conditions of 1941:

‘We should,’ said the then British Council Chairman Lord Lloyd, ‘give the world free access to our civilisation and free opportunity to form its own judgement on our outlook and motives. We have in many places a wary and critical audience but, everywhere, people turn with relief from the harshly dominant notes of propaganda to the less insistent and more reasonable cadences of Britain. We do not force anyone to “think British”, we offer them the opportunity of learning what the British think.’

In the British Council that is what we still do at a cost of about £3 a year per head of population. And, for Britain, and for millions of people around the world, it works. Long live the ‘cadences’.

**The Rt Hon. Lord Kinnock of Bedwellty**

Chair, British Council

## Author’s preface

In approaching a short history it is possible to become focused on structure, status and the various government reports relating to the work of the British Council. However, I have taken a different approach. While important, these landmarks are only a very small part of the story of the British Council. The real work over the years has not been done sitting in offices contributing to reports; it has been done engaging with communities around the world and bringing individuals together.

Inevitably in a short history many stories have had to be omitted and very few staff members are named. However, it is worth taking a moment to highlight the commitment and sacrifices made by ‘local’ staff; employees who are either nationals of the countries in which the British Council operates or other nationals. In peaceful times their understanding and connection with the local community is invaluable for the effective development of cultural relations.

In times of crisis, whether under pressure from the local community groups



or national authorities, local staff have continued to engage and, as a result, borne the brunt of local dissatisfaction with, for example, British foreign policy. When UK staff have been withdrawn or sheltered by diplomatic immunity, local staff continue to work toward the openness vital for effective communication. In working for the British Council in their local communities they are the embodiment of cultural relations.

With so many examples to choose from, my focus, in the end, has not been on the biggest or most famous programmes. Instead, my account has been shaped by significant events in international relations. In writing I have asked myself two questions: what was happening in the world at a given time and what was the British Council doing at these moments? These may be occasions of division, such as world war, cold war and apartheid or opportunities for engagement, such as the opening of relations with China in the 1970s or the fall of the Berlin Wall. These events provide a prism through which to view the British Council, the changing nature of its work and the shifting emphasis

it has placed on countries as the geo-political context has evolved. I readily admit that this approach will not illuminate every region or thematic equally or thoroughly. Neither does it chronicle the way the British Council is funded or governed nor the way it earns its keep. These respectively are the province of two full-length histories of the organisation and of its annual reports, which I commend to the reader wanting to know further fascinating detail.

**Ali Fisher**

**Mappa Mundi Consulting**





## A story of engagement: the British Council 1934–2009

The British Council, originally known as 'The British Committee for Relations with Other Countries' was established by private initiative and with the support of the Foreign Office in 1934. The creation of the Committee brought together a coalition of interests, from government departments, industry, the arts and science, to actively promote an understanding of Britain across the world. Before 1934, while many European governments routinely spent public money to project their respective language, arts, literature or science, there had been minimal commitment to the cultural promotion of Britain. With the end of the 1920s came the Wall Street Crash, the onset of economic depression and increasing competition between European powers. It was against this backdrop that arguments for the promotion of cultural relations between Britain and other countries began to gain support.

*Opposite: The Allied Centre, Liverpool, which was opened in April 1941 for refugees, exiles and overseas service personnel*





Initially designed to promote the understanding of Britain by arranging for lecturers and books to be sent overseas, as well as arranging visits to the UK, the British Council has constantly adapted to the changing challenges of the day; as one commentator has noted: 'Through the exceptional war years and beyond into the era of rapidly improving interchange through modern communications, the Council has seen its work in Britain develop and expand in response to a changing world. The work has changed as one development has followed another.'<sup>1</sup> Each development has built on previous relationships to promote co-existence, co-operation, mutual respect and understanding.

In both peaceful times and times of crisis the British Council has continued to develop relationships with communities around the world. Where historically international relations has created temporary barriers between countries, the British Council has sought to swiftly re-establish cultural relations once such barriers are removed. In doing so, the British Council has provided a channel for peaceful co-operation and the development of solutions to shared problems. In this

context the British Council's current work includes empowering participants to find collective responses to the challenges of climate change, and peaceful engagement through encouraging 'intercultural dialogue'.

Cultural relations relies on partnership – because partnership ensures the development of programmes relevant to local audiences. Experience has 'shown that the Council's best work is done in close co-operation with the relevant authorities, especially the educational authorities, of other countries'. This commitment to collaborative partnership is longstanding; as a 1960s internal review noted, the 'cardinal principle of the Council is to aim at mutual benefit both to Britain and to the other country'. As a result, work is 'conditioned by overseas demand' to ensure a mutually beneficial partnership between organisations with which the British Council works both in the UK and overseas. The focus on partnership requires the ability to work with varied interests and methods including education, the teaching of language, the arts, science and sport.<sup>2</sup>

While the British Council works to develop cultural relations around the world, that work is dependent on partnerships with organisations in the UK. Every exhibition, exchange or training programme relies on UK partner organisations to enrich the work of the British Council. Historically, the effective leveraging of these partnerships, at home and abroad, has resulted in lasting relationships with artists as diverse as Henry Moore and Tracy Emin, engagement with groups in the Soviet Union at the height of the Cold War, support to the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa, and the creation of UNESCO.



## **Making the case for a British Council; building on private initiative**

By the late 1920s France already had a history of promoting its own culture as a component of diplomacy; the extent of this effort even prompted comment in the German Reichstag by Herr Stresemann: 'Look at the French Republic: she has never spared funds for this; she knows exactly how she has won over the Orient intellectually, with her French schools and her French influence.'<sup>3</sup> Other significant powers, such as Italy and the Soviet Union, had also increased their commitment to cultural relations and propaganda – yet Britain remained 'a helpless bystander' until 1934.<sup>4</sup>

A significant date in its journey from bystander to effective cultural relations practitioner was 1929 – the year an Australian called Sir Reginald ('Rex') Leeper joined the News Department at the Foreign Office, and the D'Abernon report, of the trade mission to South America, was published. This influential and ground-breaking report highlighted the need for greater emphasis on cultural relations because of the 'commercial importance of cultural influence'.<sup>5</sup> Rex Leeper, arriving at the

Foreign Office at the same time, would be pivotal in persuading the Treasury that such 'cultural influence' was indeed of huge value. The apparently minor coincidence of Leeper's arrival and the publication of the D'Abernon report set Britain on a new path.

In the early 1930s there were many small-scale private and governmental initiatives to increase the volume and efficacy of what was then known as 'cultural propaganda'. Two organisations in particular would be important to the development of the British Council: the Travel Association and the All People's Association (APA). Together these organisations promoted Britain as a tourist destination, promoted British exports, and so demonstrated the importance of developing cultural relations. These efforts, combined with Foreign Office interest, led to the creation of the Committee of International Understanding and Co-operation in 1934. It was chaired by Sir Evelyn Wrench, who was also Chair of the APA. While the Committee itself was short-lived, it was a significant early attempt at linking private and governmental efforts in promoting cultural relations. The lessons

learned from this Committee, particularly by Rex Leeper, helped in the development of the British Council later that year. In addition, Lieutenant Colonel Charles Bridge, who had been Honorary Secretary of the Committee, became the first Secretary-General of the British Council.

The creation of the British Council in November 1934 built on these early initiatives. While quickly renamed 'The British Council for Relations with Other Countries' and later shortened to 'The British Council', the initial use of 'committee' highlights the fact that the organisation was a combination of the various interests of the members, both governmental and private, in developing British cultural relations. The British Council received a Royal Charter in 1940, which gave it independent permanent status for the first time and was granted a coat of arms the following year.<sup>6</sup>



## Early partnerships and world war

The funds available to the British Council were very limited in the early years; it made do with a budget of a few thousand pounds, where French, German, and Italian counterparts enjoyed budgets stretching into the millions. Initial progress was consequently slow – but not ineffective. British Council representation was quickly established in Egypt, Portugal, Italy, Poland and Romania, relying in many cases on partnerships with local and pre-existing organisations or associations.

An important milestone was the publication of *Higher Education in the United Kingdom*.

This handbook described the costs and requirements of university education in the UK, along with listings of courses. In its many revisions this publication proved to be a vital resource; for well over half a century its provision of practical information to prospective students has contributed significantly to the development of education as a tool for cultural relations.

The military build-up prior to the Second World War presented the first major challenge for the

British Council. Appealing for an increase in funds in 1936, the British Council chairman, William Tyrrell, asked the Chancellor to regard the British Council as an organisation 'assisting practically in our national defence. Modern defence consists not only in arms but in removing misunderstanding and promoting understanding'.<sup>7</sup> Tyrrell's successor, Lord Eustace Percy, was well aware by 1937 that as a result of the changing political context and subsequent increase in funding 'the original conception of the Council's work had changed radically since its foundation'.<sup>8</sup> The British Council was 'no longer expected merely to rescue British prestige from neglect; it has now to defend that prestige from deliberate attack'.<sup>9</sup>

The outbreak of war put an end to the British Council's work in large areas of Europe; representation in Poland, Italy and Romania, for example, all had to be withdrawn. But the war also provided impetus for cultural relations to become both a tool to strengthen relationships with allies, actual and potential, and with those seeking refuge in the UK who would shape the post-war future.



From 1940 onwards British Council representation was extended to Turkey, Spain, Sweden, Iceland and South America. This latter focus on an increasingly important corner of the world resulted in representation in Brazil, Venezuela, Chile, and later Argentina and Bolivia. This work, while linked to the war effort and concentrating on areas deemed strategically important, was conducted by an organisation that continued to maintain distance from government. The British Council's independence was preserved by support in parliament and despite a hard-fought battle with the Ministry of Information. Even in wartime, the British Council's supporters were to argue the importance of relationship-building over political propaganda.



## Building relationships at home

While overseas expansion was a vital part of the British Council's early history, the work done at home in the UK was equally important. The 'Home Division' continued cultural relations with individuals from countries now physically beyond the British Council's reach. By 1940 it was officially responsible for the education and cultural welfare of allied civilians and merchant seamen and was developing its connection with the armed forces. Britain also hosted exiled governments from eight countries including Belgium, Czechoslovakia and Greece, along with the French National Committee under Charles de Gaulle. 'The Council helped these governments to establish national centres in London to serve as clubs, educational centres and general rallying places for their communities.'<sup>10</sup>

Work was not confined to London – refugees, exiles, and overseas service personnel were spread across the United Kingdom. A destroyed mosque was replaced in Cardiff, and the Allied Centre was opened in Liverpool in April 1941. Following the Centre's destruction by bombing,





a second centre was set up, this time with a French Room opened by de Gaulle in 1942. Welcome was also extended to stranded seamen – among them a group of Congolese seamen who arrived after four days in a lifeboat. This operation expanded with the arrival of allied troops from Canada and the United States. By 1945, 100 courses attended by 4,000 service personnel were being run by the Home Division outside London.

Under the direction of Dame Nancy Parkinson the Home Division ensured that these refugees and service personnel, upon returning to their home countries, would recount to fellow citizens that they were treated well in the UK. Then, as now, it was recognised 'the truth about Britain is not what we say or write about it, but how we behave'."

As overseas work continued to expand – new offices opened, for example, in Ghana and Nigeria – one element of the work in London would have a major impact on the post-war effort to re-establish cultural relations. In 1942, working with the Board of Education, the British Council

*Opposite left:* Arrival in Mexico for the Conference of Allied Ministers of Education, which established UNESCO: Sir Ronald Adam, Chairman of the British Council (*second from left*), with David Hardman, Parliamentary Secretary, Ministry of Education, Nancy Parkinson, the Chargé d'Affaires, Mexico and Ritchie Calder of the *News Chronicle*, 1942;  
*Opposite right:* Visit of General de Gaulle to the Allied Centre, Liverpool, 1942



invited representatives of Allied nations to a meeting to discuss co-operating on education matters during and after the war. Under Nancy Parkinson's direction, this resulted in the Conference of Allied Ministers of Education (CAME). Two months after Japan's surrender, the movement started by the creation of CAME resulted in 37 countries founding the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

*Opposite:* Russian seamen waiting to watch Everton play Blackburn Rovers; they are escorted by Ernest Edwards, who helped the British Council 'link all lads' through sport, 1946





## The coming Cold War

As the Second World War ended many barriers to cultural relations work came down and partnership opportunities increased. Representation in France and the Netherlands was soon established, building on the work that had been done by the Home Division during the war. In the years that followed, the British Council expanded to include representation in Kenya, Sudan and Australia – where the British Council partnered with the Old Vic Theatre Company to produce a 1947 tour headlined by Laurence Olivier.

The evolving post-war relationship with the Empire meant the cultural relationship with former colonies had to be renegotiated. This was particularly the case with India. Any programme of building cultural relations with India had to be conducted in a way that was sensitive to the new dynamic between the two countries. Merely projecting British culture, it was felt, would be unhelpful in developing a long-term cultural relationship. *A Monthly Review of the British Council*, produced in 1947, recognised this point:



'The longer one is engaged in cultural relations work the clearer becomes the essentially reciprocal nature of the operation, and the clearer the wisdom of the maxim that each party should give the other what the other wants, rather than what the giver thinks is good for him.'<sup>12</sup>

This emphasis on partnership has continued up to the present day, emphasised by UKIERI. The UK–India Education and Research Initiative was announced by the then Prime Minister, Tony Blair, during his visit to India in September 2005 as 'a five-year initiative to create a "step change" in educational relations between India and the UK, so that in the longer term the two countries become each other's partner of choice in education'.<sup>13</sup> UKIERI is delivered with corporate partners, including BAE Systems and Shell, and in the last two years, UKIERI has created over 475 new Indo-UK higher education and school links.

While Canada refused representation until 1959, the British Council was invited by Pandit Nehru to begin work with India in 1947. In the event the partition of India and Pakistan delayed the

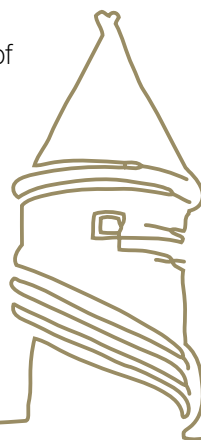


development of work until representation could be established in both countries in 1948.

In the same year representation in Hong Kong, Singapore and Jordan was established.

While the British Council steadily developed representation in Asia and the Middle East, attempts to work in Europe were influenced by the changing context from world war to Cold War. The work of the Home Division during the war included using sport to the foster inter-forces relations. This included, in 1946, Russian seamen being taken to visit Everton football ground. They were accompanied by Ernest Edwards ('Bee'), who, in three years, provided tours for 3,000 American, Canadian, Belgian, Polish and other troops assisting the British Council to 'link all lads' by means of sporting ties.<sup>14</sup>

Football had become equally important elsewhere; as A.J.S. White recorded, Sir Eugene Milton-Drake (perhaps better known for his involvement in the sinking of the *Admiral Graf Spee*) received a standing ovation at a stadium in Uruguay after inviting a football coach to help a Uruguayan team beat a team from Argentina.



Partnerships developed through sport, as well as arts and education, were among the approaches used to extend cultural relations in Europe. Representation was soon established in Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia and Poland – and expanded to Bulgaria shortly after. This work was short-lived. By 1950, following the defections of British Council representatives in Hungary and Czechoslovakia, the organisation came under sustained pressure and harassment. As Frances Donaldson recorded:

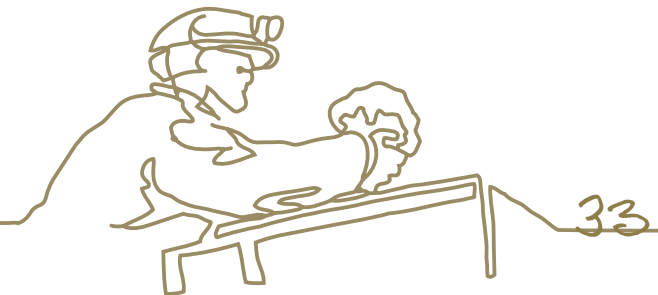
'The policy of the Council was not to quit voluntarily since it was thought that this was what the enemies hoped for, but in the spring of 1950 the governments, first of Hungary and then of Czechoslovakia, asked that they should be withdrawn.'<sup>15</sup>

The Bulgarian government asked the British Council to leave shortly after, but work continued in Poland and Yugoslavia, where the growing split between Tito and Moscow facilitated the British Council's work.



In China links had been established following an initial fact-finding investigation in 1941. Representation increased at the end of the war and for a short period after the tumultuous events of 1949; the British Council was initially able to continue to operate, in contrast to organisations such as the British Information Services (BIS) and the United States Information Service (USIS).<sup>16</sup> British Council work in China was disappointingly brief, however, and by 1951 pressure exerted through visa requirements led to a suspension of activities. Funds were redirected to Japan. The British Council's relationship with China was re-established in the late 1970s in line with closer general contact between China and the West. In 1980 work produced by the Ashington Group, which began in the 1930s as an evening class of Northumbrian pitmen keen to learn about art and whose paintings form a record of life in the mining community, was 'taken to China and shown as the first exhibition from the West since the Cultural Revolution'.<sup>17</sup> The British Council now has information centres in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Chongqing and has run numerous projects over the

*Opposite: Mother and child: block seat, by Henry Moore, 1983-1984. Reproduced by permission of the Henry Moore Foundation. Photo by Ricky Wong.*



years. Notably in 2000, a major exhibition of Henry Moore sculptures was opened by John Prescott in the former Imperial Gardens adjacent to the Forbidden City.<sup>18</sup> Interestingly, Henry Moore worked in partnership with the British Council on numerous occasions including in Spain, and Portugal in 1981. Moore's work had previously been exhibited at the 1948 Venice Biennale, for which the British Council has been responsible for the British presentation since 1938. On that occasion Moore was awarded the prize for best foreign sculpture.<sup>19</sup>

Post-war attempts to develop cultural relations across what Churchill would later call the 'Iron Curtain' were curtailed by the British Council's withdrawal from some Eastern European countries. The 1950s were equally troubled. Following the 1956 flight of refugees to Austria from Hungary the British Council worked in partnership with the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals to enable 150 Hungarian students to travel on scholarships to universities in the UK. While this allowed Hungarians to travel to the UK, the fallout from the 1956 Hungarian rising led to

the cancellation of proposed visits by the Bolshoi Ballet and Sadler's Wells, which had been arranged as a result of work done by the Soviet Relations Committee, set up in 1955.

Other 1950s political events, including the Suez Crisis and the deportation of Archbishop Makarios from Cyprus, forced the British Council to limit its work in affected countries.<sup>20</sup> The travel writer Lawrence Durrell, one of many writers over the years employed by the organisation worked for the British Council in Argentina and, in the 1950s, taught in Cyprus. He left the island as the political situation deteriorated, including the arson attack that destroyed the British Institute Library. Soon after leaving he published his travel book about Cyprus – *Bitter Lemons*.

The Suez Crisis, as A.J.S. White recalled, 'ended for the time being the Council's work in Egypt and the Council's London-appointed staff had to evacuate Syria and, for a brief period, Jordan though the local staff in Jordan carried on the work'.<sup>21</sup> While British Council work did not resume in Egypt until 1959, relations were partly maintained

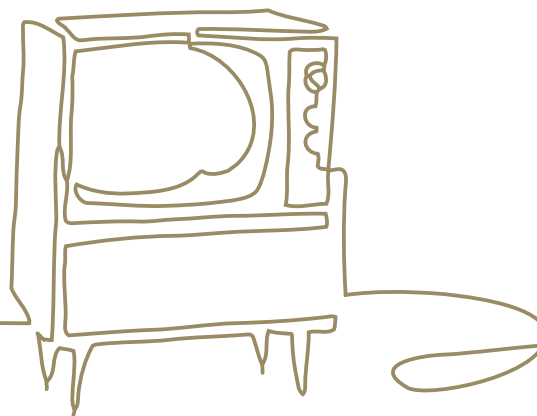


by the provision of assistance to Egyptians wanting to study in the UK. Notably, due to the strength of the relationships developed, many functions that the British Council had fulfilled were continued under the direction of the Egyptian authorities. This included language classes and a performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.<sup>22</sup>

British Council work in other parts of the world continued to grow. Despite political upheaval in Tehran, the British Council was able, by the late 1950s, to expand representation in Iran. Offices in Basra and Baghdad were also maintained at the request of Iraqi authorities. The office in East Jerusalem was reopened in 1958 through which the British Council has continued to engage with the Palestinian Territories. In 1959 British Council offices opened in Canada and the Federal Republic of Germany – while exchanges began with Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia and Hungary. A partnership with the London Symphony Orchestra resulted in their playing in Jerusalem. Around the same time, language teaching, in association with the BBC, became a core element of British Council work. The two

organisations also began to explore the potential of using television for language teaching. This work continued into the 1960s when a representative in the Persian Gulf recorded that the British Council's 'most spectacular success has been the new series of English by Television'.<sup>23</sup>

By the end of the 1950s the annual budget of the British Council had risen to almost £6 million, little more than other Europeans had been spending when the British Council was founded. Yet through partnerships in Britain and overseas that expenditure had allowed the British Council to expand representation across the Middle East, Africa and Asia, and create the foundations in Europe for continuing cultural exchange at a time when barriers were being erected to limit exactly such contact.



## New ways to engage; the Cold War in full swing

As Cold War tensions increased in the early 1960s the British Council had to find new means and methods to do its work. In Yugoslavia a new press law challenged the status of the British Council, in addition to other foreign information, cultural and educational organisations – but the British Council was able to comply with the law and, as a result, took over the running of the British Embassy Reading Rooms in Belgrade and Zagreb.

Two months later the erecting of the Berlin Wall created another barrier. At the time the National Youth Theatre was presenting a modern dress production of *Julius Caesar*, and ‘won high praise for . . . appearing at the height of the September crisis’.<sup>24</sup> The National Youth Orchestra also performed in Berlin en route to performances in Moscow and Helsinki.

As the Soviet Union and America went eyeball to eyeball in the early 1960s, the British Council continued to develop relations with people in the Soviet Union; this included an Old Vic theatrical

tour whose final Moscow performance was attended by President Krushchev. This was followed in March 1963 by the British Music Festival, which included performances by Benjamin Britten. A year later, following a performance of the English Opera Group, the Minister of Culture told Benjamin Britten that she intended to encourage the formation of a similar company in the Soviet Union.<sup>25</sup> Despite continuing global political tension, the Shakespeare Quatercentenary provided the impetus for a number of theatre tours including to Israel, Ethiopia, Malaysia and numerous countries in Europe.





## The importance of reciprocity

In southern Africa, the Unilateral Declaration of Independence by Rhodesia in 1965 caused the British Council representative to be withdrawn. As the crisis deepened a number of southern African countries broke off diplomatic ties with the UK, although most allowed the British Council to continue working. This was because, in part, of the emphasis placed on reciprocity and partnership according to which newly independent nations increasingly requested the provision of English language teaching. Around the same time the government in Burma refused to allow libraries to be opened to Burmese citizens. Despite these setbacks the British Council was able to extend its work in countries as challenging as Saudi Arabia had been previously.

Work in the Middle East and South Asia was often difficult. The 1967 Six-Day War, for example, had repercussions for British Council offices around the region. One British Council representative recalled that, in Karachi, a crowd gathered at the British Council's offices to protest, blaming Britain

*Opposite: British books for children displayed in the British Council office in Rabat, Morocco, 1979*



and America; on that occasion the British Council office was saved by the protesters rationale that 'if we destroy the British Council and their books we'll have no books to study'. USIS and the British Information Service were not so lucky. Later, the division of Pakistan and Bangladesh caused further interruptions for British Council activity but staff, including Clive King, author of *Stig of the Dump*, working as an adviser at the Teacher Training College in Dhaka, continued to encourage intercultural ties. The war in Lebanon also severely restricted British Council operations, and cost the lives of two staff members.

## New partnerships and new challenges

Recognising the important role voluntary work can play in building cultural relations, the British Council supported the work of Voluntary Services Overseas (VSO) during its early years. By the mid-1960s this support had increased and the British Council was invited to act as the overseas arm of VSO engaging with more than 1,000 volunteers. Since that time the British Council has maintained strong links with VSO; David Green, British Council Director-General 1999–2007, was previously Director of VSO. In addition, the continuing collaboration with VSO has resulted in the Global Xchange partnership, which aims 'to support the development of active global citizens, committed to working for positive change within communities' through 'a six-month exchange programme, which gives young people from different countries a unique opportunity to work together, to develop and share valuable skills and to make a practical contribution where it is needed in local communities'.<sup>26</sup>



As attention switched to Europe, following meetings between the French and British governments in 1970, the so-called 'Heath-Pompidou money' was made available to support new programmes of youth exchanges, scholarships and civic links between the UK and France. Other programmes were also reaching vast numbers and, in 1974, working with the United Nations, the British Council supported the 20,000th UN Fellow, a student at London Zoo.

Other developments in the British Council included the development of the Visiting Arts unit. This occurred in 1977 following the Helsinki Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe at which it was highlighted that despite the earlier emphasis on reciprocity, Britain had been exporting vastly more than it had been receiving in return. Visiting Arts was intended to redress that deficit and by 1981 visual or performing arts from 49 countries had been supported to travel to Britain.

Around this time, the British Council also developed a partnership with the UK government through the Overseas Development Administration. This partnership supported programmes that

*Opposite left: Dr Shelton Atapattu, the 20,000th UN Fellow to study in Britain, operating at the Animal Hospital, London Zoo, 1974; Opposite right: Monika Shirpai from Iran attending the Radioisotopic and Labelled Reagent Microanalytical Methods course at the Nuclear Medicine Laboratories, Middlesex Hospital, 1980*





included the Key English Language Teaching Programme and numerous technical exchanges. During the mid-1970s the idea that newly rich countries should pay for their own technical aid and language teaching gained support. Iran, for example, was quickly identified as a country that should be paying for such services. However, the context for the British Council's work in Iran changed dramatically in 1979 as a consequence of the Islamic Revolution, forcing the withdrawal of staff. While this severely curtailed the opportunities for cultural relations, some engagement did continue.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan created a similar barrier to cultural relations. Politics had once again reared its ugly head.

While these events created barriers to cultural relations, other developments created opportunities, particularly in the teaching of English. For example, Kevin Keegan's transfer from Liverpool FC to Hamburg SV, where he was Footballer of the Year for two consecutive years, provided the opportunity to promote the Direct Teaching of

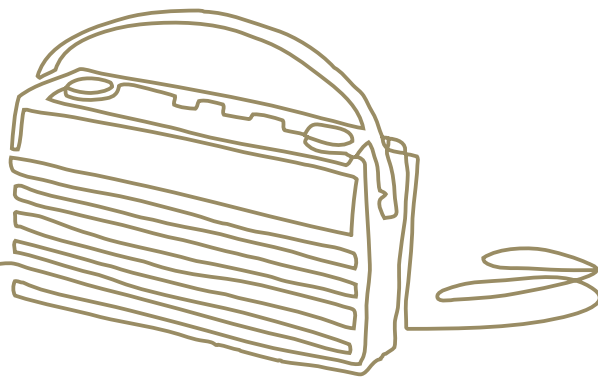
*Clockwise from top left: Kevin Keegan at the DTE (Direct Teaching of English) Open Day, Hamburg, 1978; Dreams + Teams Young Leaders in South Africa © Peter Machen; Non-formal education from a Punch and Judy show, Kathmandu, 1977; Adult literacy centre at the Jothi Venkatachalam Colony, Madras, 1979*



English programme. In this way sport continued, as it does today, to play an important role in cultural relations.

The British Council also began working on developing or adopting new methods of teaching. In addition to the use of radio and television for language teaching, non-formal education became popular, for example, in India; such methods are still used as part of the European SALTO-Youth programme, a British Council partner.

In keeping with the British Council's commitment to understanding new methods of training, John Munby published *Communicative Syllabus Design* in 1978. Munby was one of the applied linguists who revolutionised the teaching of English as a foreign language. New methods placed the student at the centre of the learning process and used current English as a language of real communication. He retired as Director, British Council Greece, in 1997; the book is still in print.



## Relationships in an era of fragmentation

The late 1970s and early 1980s, an era of sustained global political strife, is easy to characterise as a time of barriers to cultural relations. The Falklands War followed crises in Afghanistan and Iran, and tensions increased between the USA and what Ronald Reagan infamously described as the 'evil empire'. Yet the British Council's successful model of partnership building allowed the organisation to continue to work to break down the barriers to understanding and opportunity, notably in apartheid South Africa.

While many organisations chose to leave apartheid South Africa, the British Council, in line with a European Community decision, remained. The British Council continued both its programmes of assistance to non-violent, anti-apartheid organisations and education programmes for the non-white community.<sup>27</sup> This included, for example, providing training in the UK for 200 non-white South Africans, and working with the Molteno Project, a non-governmental organisation involved in language education in black primary schools. Molteno promoted the development of an alternative curriculum, and introduced new ways of teaching young children to read. Later, following his release from prison,

Nelson Mandela requested help in preparing for the reform of the post-apartheid diplomatic service. In response a partnership was developed to establish a ten-week training course for 25 aspiring diplomats, held in the UK in 1993. This work, which supported diplomatic reform, was mirrored by British Council work, which promoted education reform.

Towards the end of the 1980s barriers to cultural communication across Europe began to crumble. The fall of the Berlin Wall, and the subsequent renewal of contact with Eastern Europe, led to increased opportunity for cultural relations work. The British Council set up many new offices, projects and English teaching centres across the former Soviet Union, and embarked on a significant expansion in Russia itself. In response to these changing political circumstances and a request from President Yeltsin, the Chancellor's Financial Sector Scheme was set up. Managed by the British Council in Moscow, the Scheme offered professionals from the former Soviet Union practical experience of working in the financial sector of a free-market economy, and included placements at Chase Manhattan Bank and the Bank of Scotland.

## Toward a peaceful future

Through the 1990s the British Council's work became increasingly kaleidoscopic. The chaotic break-up of Yugoslavia created another imperative for building cultural relations. The British Council opened an office in Podgorica, to support the reform effort in Montenegro, while the Belgrade office received awards from the Serbian Ministry of Culture for its contributions to education. Other work sought to improve the health of civil society in the Western Balkans.<sup>28</sup> The British Council also linked up with the FIFA-supported Football for Hope Movement, to provide free English classes to the young participants. Football remains an important medium for cultural relations work – the Dreams + Teams project has, with partners in 20 countries, engaged 10,000 participants to develop leadership skills and cross-cultural awareness through sport and international educational links.

The development of international links was also promoted by the Central Bureau for Educational Visits and Exchanges, which merged with the British Council in 1993.





Founded in 1948 the Central Bureau focused on providing curriculum-related international experience for young people. Throughout its history this was achieved by a relationship with 'the Bureau's closest working ally, the British Council', who provided support in many areas, particularly the British Language Assistant programme.<sup>29</sup>

A year later, Douglas Hurd, then Foreign Secretary, renamed the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's Scholarships and Awards Scheme 'The British Chevening Scholarships Programme'.<sup>30</sup> 'The Chevening Programme consists of the UK government's flagship Chevening Scholarships scheme, aimed at exceptional international postgraduate young professionals, and the new Chevening Fellowships scheme, for mid-career professionals who have already succeeded in their chosen fields.'<sup>31</sup> Managed by the British Council in 2005–06 the Chevening Programme enabled 1,885 new Chevening Scholars and Fellows, to study and conduct research in the UK.

*Opposite: Boys and Girls (Come out to Play), © Richard Deacon, 1982, courtesy the British Council Collection*



In efforts to build a more peaceful future, the British Council also established the pioneering Peacekeeping English Project. This initiative, already ten years old, has managed more than 30 new programmes in 24 countries. Many of these support 'interoperability' to enable multinational forces involved in NATO, EU and UN peace support operations to communicate effectively with each other. The programme also facilitates greater communication for humanitarian operations and provides skills to border guards and police to combat drug smuggling and human trafficking. In this way the provision of language training directly contributes to the development of a safer and more peaceful world.

The appointment in 1998 of Helena Kennedy as Chair of the British Council, the first woman to be appointed to this position, highlighted the increasing emphasis on engaging with grass-roots community non-governmental organisations in the field of human rights and governance. This shift in emphasis was not limited to programmes run by the organisation – internal changes resulted in the British Council winning an award from Stonewall as the UK's top employer for gay people.



## The present

Present conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq have once again required the British Council to rebuild cultural relations in a post-war environment. The British Council has had a long history of operating in Iraq; current projects include Capacity Building for Iraqi Higher Education, which aims to allow 1,000 top-level Iraqi students to study in the UK over the next five years and provide links for all 18 Iraqi universities with UK counterparts. Fifty-five tonnes of books and journals have been donated by more than 30 organisations and individuals.

The British Council, in partnership with the Scottish Government, supported the National Theatre of Scotland's tour of *Black Watch*, in the United States.<sup>32</sup> This powerful piece of theatre tells the story of Scotland's legendary 300-year-old Black Watch regiment and the experiences of the soldiers on the ground in Iraq.<sup>33</sup> This provided a platform upon which to discuss attitudes towards war and the military, the 'special relationship' between the USA and Britain, and what role the arts can play in discussing divisive social issues.







In Afghanistan the British Council has been supporting English language training and English resource centres, which are used by 12,000 students and teachers. In addition, a delegation on Afghan faith education has visited the UK, and the British Council has worked with the British Museum to develop training for employees at the Kabul Museum; support for the protection and restoration of historical items of cultural importance has long been a means of developing the cultural relations between countries. Similarly important work was conducted in Colombia in the early 1970s and, more recently, with museum curators in Iran.

At the invitation of the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, the British Council organised the Turning Points exhibition – ‘the first exhibition of British art ever to be seen in the Islamic Republic’.<sup>34</sup> This exhibition was organised to coincide with the 25th Anniversary of the founding of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The British Council organised an educational programme to coincide with the show, including a bronze conservation workshop led by Michel Muller of the Henry Moore Foundation along with lectures by Tim Marlow, Director of the White Cube Gallery, London, and Stephen Deuchar, Director of Tate Britain.

*Opposite left:* Global Xchange volunteer, James, doing daily chores with host brother, Lennox, in Malawi © Simon Rawles/VSO



## Looking forward

The political context in which the British Council has developed cultural relations over the past 75 years has changed, priority areas have shifted, and working methods have evolved. Today, just as in 1934, the British Council unites a range of interests and objectives – from supporting UK government strategic priorities, to engaging in partnership with multinational corporations and NGOs. These partnerships engage organisations such as the BBC, the World Economic Forum, the World Bank, and education ministries in the UK and overseas. The partnerships focus on the development of networks to aid participants to find collective solutions to common challenges, including climate change.

To be successful, these cultural relations programmes seek ways to break down the barriers to understanding between cultures. To support the development of new thinking in this area the British Council founded the think-tank Counterpoint in 2002. Counterpoint's aim is to bring together cultural

relations and public diplomacy practitioners, thinkers, writers, journalists and policy-makers from around the world to challenge orthodoxy and confront the barriers to genuine and equal dialogue within and between cultures. While the promotion of a national culture is an understandable desire today, mutuality, trust and cultural relations are at least as important.<sup>35</sup> As in 1936: 'Modern defence consists not only in arms but also in removing misunderstanding and promoting understanding.'<sup>36</sup>

Building relationships and networks to face common challenges is a two-way process. In focusing on common points of interest it is hoped an increased familiarity will develop. As Sir Ernest Barker wrote in 1947: 'To see the cities and to know the minds of the men of other countries is not only a liberal education, it is also an induction into political understanding, and a cornerstone of the building of peace.'<sup>37</sup> As the British Council enters its 75th year, it continues to strive for just such a combination of understanding and peace.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The British Council in Britain, British Council *Annual report*, 1962–63, p. 28

<sup>2</sup> What is the British Council? British Council *Annual report*, 1965–66, p. 10

<sup>3</sup> A.J.S. White, *The British Council: The First 25 Years 1934–1959*, London, 1965, p. 2

<sup>4</sup> Philip M. Taylor, *The Projection of Britain: British Overseas Publicity and Propaganda 1919–1939*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1981, p. 137

<sup>5</sup> Report of the British Economic Mission to South America, 18 January 1930, PRO, FO 371/14178, A1908/77/51, p. 55; quoted in Frances Donaldson, *The British Council: The First Fifty Years*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1984, p. 18

<sup>6</sup> British Council website: [www.britishcouncil.org/history-1940-royal-charter.htm](http://www.britishcouncil.org/history-1940-royal-charter.htm)

<sup>7</sup> Tyrrell's statement to the Chancellor, 27 January 1936, quoted in Philip M. Taylor, *The Projection of Britain: British Overseas Publicity and Propaganda 1919–1939*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1981, p. 162

<sup>8</sup> Philip M. Taylor, *The Projection of Britain: British Overseas Publicity and Propaganda 1919–1939*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1981, p. 163

<sup>9</sup> Percy to Eden, 8 June 1937, quoted in Philip M. Taylor, *The Projection of Britain: British Overseas Publicity and Propaganda 1919–1939*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1981, p. 163

<sup>10</sup> 'The Council in Britain: The origins and work of the Home Division', British Council *Annual report*, 1966–67, pp. 12–18

<sup>11</sup> 'The Council in Britain: The origins and work of the Home Division', British Council *Annual report*, 1966–67, p. 12

<sup>12</sup> 'Commentary', *Monthly Review of the British Council*, vol. 1, no. 1, June 1947

<sup>13</sup> UKIERI website: [www.ukieri.org/about-ukieri.htm](http://www.ukieri.org/about-ukieri.htm)

<sup>14</sup> Quote taken from details of programme on rear of photograph.

<sup>15</sup> Frances Donaldson, *The British Council: The First Fifty Years*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1984, p. 152

<sup>16</sup> A.J.S. White, *The British Council: The First 25 Years 1934–1959*, London, 1965, p. 79

<sup>17</sup> Ashington Group website: [www.ashingtongroup.co.uk/about3.html](http://www.ashingtongroup.co.uk/about3.html)

<sup>18</sup> Henry Moore in China, British Council website: [www.britishcouncil.org/arts-art-sculpture-henry-moore.htm](http://www.britishcouncil.org/arts-art-sculpture-henry-moore.htm)

<sup>19</sup> Frances Donaldson, *The British Council: The First Fifty Years*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1984, p. 148 and British Council *Annual report*, 1948–49, p. 36

<sup>20</sup> Frances Donaldson, *The British Council: The First Fifty Years*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1984, p. 208

<sup>21</sup> A.J.S. White, *The British Council: The First 25 Years 1934–1959*, London, 1965, p. 103



- <sup>22</sup> British Council website: [www.britishcouncil.org/history-where-middle-east-and-north-africa-after-suez.htm](http://www.britishcouncil.org/history-where-middle-east-and-north-africa-after-suez.htm)  
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- <sup>23</sup> 'Review of the year', British Council *Annual report*, 1963–64, p. 27
- <sup>24</sup> 'General survey of the year', British Council *Annual report*, 1961–62, p. 41
- <sup>25</sup> 'Review of the year', British Council *Annual report*, 1964–65, p. 32  
'Review of the year', British Council *Annual report*, 1962–63, p. 44
- <sup>26</sup> Global Xchange website: [www.vso.org.uk/globalxchange/index.htm](http://www.vso.org.uk/globalxchange/index.htm)  
Also see Aurélie Bröckerhoff and Nick Wadham-Smith, *Volunteering: Global citizenship in action*, British Council, 2008
- <sup>27</sup> 'Working under apartheid', British Council website: [www.britishcouncil.org/history-where-sub-saharan-africa-southafrica--working-under-apartheid.htm](http://www.britishcouncil.org/history-where-sub-saharan-africa-southafrica--working-under-apartheid.htm)
- <sup>28</sup> House of Commons, Foreign Affairs Committee, Third Report proceedings 2005:  
[www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200405/cmselect/cmfa/87/8702.htm](http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200405/cmselect/cmfa/87/8702.htm)
- <sup>29</sup> Tony Male, '40 Years of Central Bureaucracy', in *Forty Years of International Understanding Through Exchange: Central Bureau for Educational Visits and Exchanges Annual Report 1987–88*

- <sup>30</sup> Chevening website: [www.chevening.com/home](http://www.chevening.com/home)
- <sup>31</sup> Chevening *Annual report* 2005–06
- <sup>32</sup> See Nicholas J. Cull, *The National Theatre of Scotland's Black Watch: Theatre as Cultural Diplomacy*, published by USC and the British Council: [www.britishcouncil.org/files/documents/usa-arts-theater-black-watch-cultural-pub.pdf](http://www.britishcouncil.org/files/documents/usa-arts-theater-black-watch-cultural-pub.pdf)
- <sup>33</sup> See British Council website: [www.britishcouncil.org/usa-arts-theater-black-watch.htm](http://www.britishcouncil.org/usa-arts-theater-black-watch.htm)
- <sup>34</sup> See British Council website: [www.britishcouncil.org/arts-art-sculpture-turning-points.htm](http://www.britishcouncil.org/arts-art-sculpture-turning-points.htm)
- <sup>35</sup> Martin Rose and Nick Wadham-Smith, *Mutuality, trust and cultural relations*, Counterpoint, 2004:  
[www.counterpoint-online.org/download/156/Mutualit\\_Report.pdf](http://www.counterpoint-online.org/download/156/Mutualit_Report.pdf)
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- <sup>37</sup> Sir Ernest Barker, 'Cultural Relations with the Low Countries', *Monthly Review of the British Council*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1947, p. 35