



**Members' Dinner
24 January 2019, Apothecaries' Hall
Speech by Edwina Moreton**

Good evening everyone—including any Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen who may have snuck in despite Gaye's watchful eye!

I have two tasks this evening. The chief one is to introduce our speaker, a distinguished former diplomat and now international banker. I will get to that with great pleasure in a moment or two.

But first I want to offer a very warm welcome to all members here tonight: Liverymen, Freemen and Journeymen—and especially to those who are joining us for the first time this evening. Can I ask those newly installed Freeman and Journeymen present to please stand and take a bow: Freeman Tony Grimshaw, Barry Leahey and Dimitri Varsamis; and Journeymen Giulio Capodimonti and Simon Herland. Also Nick Mayhew, chairman of our Tacitus Committee, who today became the newest member of our Court. Congratulations all.

There are only two events in our year reserved just for Members: this evening's Members' Dinner and Common Hall, which will be in late May. So please take this opportunity to meet more of your fellow World Traders. You are an enjoyably varied bunch!

Now to introduce our speaker. Not for the first time in matters of my Master's year, I am going to take the advice of Past Master Eric Tracey, who sadly is prevented by illness from being with us tonight. After my Installation last October, Eric told me he thought I should find an opportunity to say a little more to you about my own professional background, in journalism. But I am one of those (you might think slightly unusual) journalists who avoids talking about themselves; it gets in the way of the real story.

So I thought this evening I would kill two birds with one stone: please Eric and introduce our speaker, by drawing a few comparisons and contrasts between the sorts of things I might occasionally have got up to as a journalist and the sorts of things he definitely got up to as a diplomat!

You see, diplomats and journalists have something of a love-hate relationship. They love some of the same things, and hate some of the same things—including, at times, each other!

They both love a good bit of bad news. It is, ultimately, the point of their different professions. They relish the challenge of a difficult problem, the knottier the better! A journalist's job is to explain a complex world to their readers or listeners, by separating out the facts from what is now called "fake news" (but was once merely called fiction), delving sometimes into the murkiest places in search of their story. A diplomat's job ultimately is to sort out the world's messes, figuring out the acceptable compromises, finding as many ways as possible to "let others have our way", as the

saying goes—or simply figuring out how to kick the can far enough down the road to let time become part of the solution.

In other words, diplomats and journalists both run towards problems, rather than away from them. That gives them something of a shared bond. Both professions can require a certain deviousness of spirit for success—I've heard it called rat-like cunning! That gives them another!

Rather like the characters in “Scoop”, the novel by Evelyn Waugh, diplomats and journalists can often find themselves holed up in godforsaken places with a tricky, and at times dangerous, job to do—sometimes even propping up the same bars, with only each other for company. Because of that, both soon learn to find their way to the bottom of a beer or wine bottle.

Unlike in “Scoop”, however, where the worst that seemed to happen was professional fame unearned in a fit of total absent-mindedness, these days the dangers are rather more real: both journalists and diplomats the world over risk their lives for the job they do.

I can speak here only as a journalist. But there was a time when the biggest threat you faced in donning a flak jacket with the word “PRESS” emblazoned across the back was that some cheeky squaddie with a 12-year-old's sense of humour would do just that: press the back of your flak jacket!

These days both diplomats and journalists are often themselves prime targets. The journalists' memorial in St Bride's church, over the way here, attests to that. And I have a number of times found myself signing condolence books for brave diplomats I have known, from a variety of countries. I am sure Sherard has signed many more, with an equally heavy heart.

In their different ways, both diplomats and journalists are also similarly under pressure as never before from the Information Age we all inhabit. Any fool and his or her iPhone can—and sadly often does—lay claim to being a journalist. Presidents and prime ministers can tweet out their thoughts directly to each other, even if only as a way of relieving night-time indigestion after too many burgers!

For all these reasons and more, diplomats and journalists can develop a grudging respect for one another—but only up to a point.

It is said that it is part of a diplomat's role at times “to lie convincingly” for his or her country. Well, when they do, it is a journalist's job to find them out! Similarly, diplomats trying to get serious problems fixed can sometimes think it must be in any journalist's brief to embroider equally convincingly for better circulation figures. (That said, I am enormously proud to have worked for 30 years in a rather different part of journalism—where getting a story right was always to be preferred to merely getting it first. Though it has to be said, successive *Economist* Editors would still rather you did both!)

When journalists want to puncture what they might see as the self-regard of diplomats (present company of course excepted), they like to remind their

diplomatically better protected fellow thrill-seekers of what was said of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers: that she did everything he did, only in heels and backwards!

Yet both these professions, often vilified, both easy targets for criticism that people are sometimes too lazy-minded to direct to the correct address, have something else in common: the best people of both professions are some of the most capable, resourceful, talented, hard-working and courageous people on the planet. They head willingly for places where others would fear to tread, just to get the job done.

I had the privilege for 30 years of working alongside some of those people. And we have one of those sorts of diplomats with us tonight as our speaker.

The rather brief cv that Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles sent through to Gaye mentioned of course his ambassadorships: in Tel Aviv, in Riyadh and in Kabul, and his lofty and incessantly-travelling current role as Head of Public Affairs and much else at HSBC.

But if you really want to understand what it takes to succeed as our man or woman in some of the most complex and dangerous parts of the world, then I suggest you pick up the two books that Sherard has already published.

In chronological publishing order, the first was a pretty searing critique of western policy in Afghanistan (indeed everybody's policy in Afghanistan); the second a highly entertaining account of Sherard's diplomatic career from when he first set foot in mission control on King Charles St.

It is a wonderful manual, explaining among other things when it is diplomatically impossible to get out of sucking up the snot-like brains of a particular species of fish found in the Nile delta, so as not to offend your hosts. It takes the reader through the pranks and pitfalls of life at the FCO in London, describes the high pomp and low cunning of organising state visits both here and abroad, and gives a refreshingly clear-eyed view of some of the most searing events of recent decades.

In the enigmatic fashion of a true mandarin, or with his familiar jester's hat on, when I asked Sherard what he would be talking about this evening, he said high-mindedly: "Strategy and Tactics: in Life and in Theory". If that was designed to make me chuckle, it did. I'm afraid I have no idea what he is going to say! But I do know that he has agreed to take questions afterwards.

Sherard, thank you for taking the time to be with us this evening.