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Crisis Management: Is Being Tough Now Impossible?



Charles Crawford CMG is a communication consultant who has drafted speeches for members of the Royal Family, Prime Ministers and other senior figures. He gives masterclasses in negotiation technique and public speaking / speechwriting. He is an expert on central Europe, having served as UK Ambassador in Warsaw, Belgrade and Sarajevo.

An instructive episode unfolded at the British Embassy in South Africa back in 1990.

First, the policy and operational context.

The South Africa *apartheid* system was by then fast decaying, but the Afrikaner-dominated National Party remained firmly in control. Nelson Mandela was in prison on Robben Island. The African National Congress (ANC) and the South African Communist Party (SACP) plus some other unwavering anti-apartheid organisations were still banned and/or in exile. However, proxies for these organisations were active within South Africa, most notably the United Democratic Front (UDF), a nationwide collection of different organisations of all shapes and sizes that did what it could to promote the ANC/SACP approach.

There was, of course, a strong international consensus that the apartheid system had to end. But views differed sharply on how to help make that happen. Western governments represented in Pretoria had to tread a difficult line: dealing more or less normally with the South African government, while quietly engaging with the anti-apartheid opposition groups active in the country.

The then UK government led by Margaret Thatcher defiantly opposed comprehensive sanctions. We aimed to make up for this on the ground through a unique programme of ‘township diplomacy’, a sizeable programme of small-scale projects that amounted to a practical vote of support for anti-apartheid if not proto-ANC local communities. The Ambassador, Robin Renwick, coordinated this work from the main Embassy building in Pretoria or from the smaller Embassy outpost in Cape Town when Parliament was sitting.

Thus it happened that one day several UDF activists made their way into the main Embassy area of the Netherlands Embassy in Cape Town and staged a sit-in, to publicise various political demands and to try to bounce the Dutch into much more active support for anti-apartheid positions. Our Dutch colleagues struggled to manage this mini-crisis. The Embassy was fully entitled to invite the South African police into the embassy and remove the activists, but (to put it mildly) that would not have looked good and so would have played into the activists’ hands. After some eight hours and goodness knows what Dutch private blandishments, the activists were persuaded to leave.

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Imagine Robin Renwick's surprise a few days later when I went into his office in Cape Town to tell him that another group of UDF activists were in the foyer of our own Pretoria embassy, proclaiming a new sit-in. He let fly a long series of imaginative expletives that scorched the wallpaper before issuing instructions:

- (a) the activists must NOT be allowed past the foyer into the Embassy proper
- (b) however long this sit-in lasted (hours/days/weeks), the activists would get NOTHING from us: no food, no water, no WC facilities
- (c) no-one from the Embassy would talk to them or listen to their 'demands'
- (d) Embassy colleagues should tell all available senior UDF contacts that the British simply would not deal with anyone engaging in such political stunts

This blunt and uncompromising approach worked wonders. Unable to do anything other than sit uncomfortably in the foyer while pondering their plight in solitude, the activists left the embassy after a few hours having accomplished precisely nothing.

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So, question.

Would such a tough and in its own way principled line be sustainable today?

Today's activists arrive armed with all sorts of hi-tech kit that allows them to spread their messages almost 'live' in text, photographs and videos in real time. Not only might they make a noisy protest in a remote British embassy foyer. As they do that they can mobilise social media clamour and resultant media pressure back in London and around the world.

The UK Ambassador Robin (now Lord) Renwick in South Africa during this period used to quote a long-lost earlier senior British diplomat:

"That's important – but it doesn't matter!"

In the heat of any crisis, and especially now when social media creates flash mobs of angry 'virtue-signalling' people in just minutes, that distinction is one of the hardest things to grasp. Everything is important! But how to stay disciplined and keep an eye on the bigger picture?

In this Pretoria sit-in case, the Ambassador was completely inflexible. He thereby upheld the reputation of steely British diplomacy for the UDF/ANC and South African government alike. But would any Ambassador today be bold enough to do the same, and be confident of full support from his or her political leaders back home? What about top corporate executives facing a sudden protest in a company building?

These days any government minister or CEO needs iron nerves to tell the media straight that these activists might well be bravely opposing oppression, but however hot it gets in that foyer they won't get a glass of water or a visit to the lavatory.

"Wait ... what are you saying here? Don't you care?"

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+44 (0) 7950 944 010

tracey.stewart@ambassadorllp.com

www.ambassadorllp.com