COMMITTEE ON SOFT POWER AND THE UK'S INFLUENCE

Roundtable discussion, Wednesday 9 April

Lord Howell of Guildford, Chairman of the House of Lords Committee on Soft Power and the UK’s Influence, opened the roundtable session by introducing the Committee’s report, *Persuasion and Power in the Modern World* (published 28 March 2014), which drew on evidence given by witnesses from around the world. The Committee’s aim was to ensure that the ideas in the report received wide and serious discussion. Lord Howell acknowledged that it might seem odd to be talking about soft power when television screens were full of images of Russian troops on the border of Ukraine, but he believed that soft or smart power would in the end be what would defeat President Putin.

Soft power was not a new story: the Chinese general Sun Tzu had written that “the supreme art” of war was to defeat the enemy without doing battle, and our own national anthem contains a rarely sung verse that speaks of soft power. What was new, said Lord Howell, was the need to operate in the totally new conditions brought about by a digitised and connected world that had changed beyond all recognition. The report’s basic message was that the UK had massive accumulated soft power assets, which were being underused, and in some cases undermined. The Committee called in its report for the creation of a new strategic unit at the core of government to shape the narrative and assist ministers, but its recommendations were aimed at non-governmental and private sector organisations as well as government departments.

Lord Howell described the need for diplomats to face new audiences and power centres away from government as a new dimension in international affairs. The fact that there were more mobile phones than humans on earth showed how hyper-connected the world was today. As to the undermining of the UK’s soft power assets, Lord Howell said that visa handling arrangements were not adding to the glory and reputation of the UK. In a networked world, economic survival and security were the key issues. He believed that the UK must develop new techniques and methods to meet this new situation. The report noted a new catalogue of network alliances that did not exist fifteen years ago. Lord Howell argued that the UK needed to do more to get closely alongside them—for example, by taking advantage of the ready-made Commonwealth network, which was a gateway to emerging markets. Other countries were already trying to capitalise on their own soft power assets, with varying degrees of success.

Dr Afzal Ashraf from the Royal United Services Institute highlighted the changing nature of force in the modern world—in simple terms, over the last century there had been a shift from armies targeting each other, to populations being targeted as a secondary target, and then to populations being targeted as a primary means of exerting force. In his view, the changing nature of force was contested partly because the military and governments have
had a culture of realpolitik, exerting the national interest through hard power where possible. The Committee was asking for a change in culture, so that the national interest would instead be communicated through mutual interest—a move from coercion to attraction. He suggested that more thought was needed on how to make this significant cultural shift happen. Examples from military history—the aversion of WWI generals to tanks because they scared the horses; the Royal Navy’s slow adoption of the propeller; the RAF’s early neglect of the jet engine—illustrated the difficulty of making such cultural adaptations.

Dr Ashraf noted recent calls from generals and defence industry commentators for an increase in conventional forces, but in his view, such a display of hard power would not make President Putin back down over Ukraine. He was not suggesting that hard power should be neglected, but in his opinion, the recent advocacy of hard power should not draw attention away from the Committee’s recommendations on soft power. To deliver the necessary shift in culture, changes in resources and policy would be necessary.

Emile Simpson, a former soldier and author of *War from the Ground Up*, said that soft power was relevant today because of the change in context in the way in which armed conflict occurred. The nature of war stayed the same, the context changed and it was the information revolution that had altered things. There were now more stakeholders in conflicts, for example Syria and Afghanistan. Mr Simpson said that conflicts had moved away from a situation of binary nations opposing each other—there was now a fragmentation of war situations with more actors. Alongside this change, Mr Simpson argued that there was a change of mindset so that, for example, ‘winning’ a war might mean implementing political stability. He went on to say that in this context, soft power mattered.

Mr Simpson highlighted some opportunities and risks that soft power might bring—opportunities, for example, for Russia, having its troops at the Ukraine border, not necessarily using its military power but showing a mix of soft and hard power. An example of the risks was that the aims of the situation in Helmand were never clearly articulated. Mr Simpson welcomed the Committee’s report, particularly the recommendation for a specific soft power unit in government.

Professor Dame Helen Wallace of the British Academy clarified that the British Academy’s report on soft power mainly addressed societal assets and was complementary to the Committee’s report, which was directed towards government. Dame Helen then went on to speak of the link between government action on soft power and autonomous organisations.

Sir Martin Davidson, Chief Executive of the British Council, made four points contrasting hard and soft power. Firstly with regard to timescale, the soft power agenda was a long-term ‘slow-burner’ rather than being immediate and responsive, like hard power. He described soft power intervention as being an essential element in the current crisis in Ukraine. Secondly, the difficulty the government had with soft power was that the instruments controlling it lay outside of the power of government. Thirdly, soft power was a highly contested territory—there were different narratives from, for example, Al Qaeda or China. Finally, Sir Martin identified a gap in the report: the population need to be capable of engaging in soft power.
Bill Emmott, former editor of *The Economist*, also spoke of Ukraine and how the situation there demonstrated the use of both hard and soft power. Russia believed that it had lost its influence over Ukraine to the EU and was now reasserting the soft power of Mother Russia. Paraphrasing Professor Joseph Nye who said that soft power was about getting people to do what you want, Mr Emmott asked who is ‘you’ and do you know what you want? He said that it was not clear what the UK wanted to achieve in Ukraine. He argued that, just as with using alliances in hard power, soft power should be used to forge alliances.

Peter Horrocks from the BBC World Service noted 1 April 2014 as a significant day which marked the World Service’s independence from the FCO and a move to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. He approved of the Committee holding back from an over-directive approach in relation to soft power. However, he felt the report’s recommendations did not provide an answer to the question of how to nurture soft power effectively.

He spoke in detail about Ukraine in particular relation to coordination across government. He noted extra BBC resource had been put into editorial teams and revealed that the consumption of the BBC Russian website had increased by 600 percent during the Ukraine crisis. Yet he suggested there were more things the BBC could be doing, if prompted by extra resource from different parts of government. For example, he did not think there had been conversations about the possibility of offering capacity-building type support, such as broadcasting to divided communities or languages. For Mr Horrocks, that kind of imaginative thinking combined with broadcasting and immediate publication meant the UK could be doing more and at greater speed. In turn, he felt this could build a degree of long-term attraction.

Secondly, he considered some broader questions specifically about how the BBC related to the question of cross-government coordination, in its nurturing of soft power. He emphasised that effective interdepartmental and cross-government coordination was key in order to make sure the BBC remained effective internationally. He stressed that it would require all parts of government with an interest in international affairs to take an interest in how the BBC projected the UK and its values and culture, in an appropriate independent way. He also stressed that parliamentary support from a variety of committees that had an interest in the BBC’s international role would be required. He noted the significant international asset that he believed the BBC World Service was in the soft power arena and urged that anything that coordinated the nurturing of soft power effectively would be beneficial and fundamental in how significant the World Service continued to be.

Dr Robin Niblett, Director of Chatham House, first focussed on the notion of “smart power”. He questioned whether a combination of soft power and hard power equalled “smart power”. He explained he felt uncomfortable with the concept, and noted that “smart power” often referred to a combination of hard powers, for example, a combination of broadly economic and broadly military power. The United States was in his mind a definer of soft power yet had experienced problems with combining soft and hard powers. Secondly, he spoke about soft power as the power of attraction. He suggested that the best power of attraction was the power of example, which tended to be provided by society and not by government. He felt the greatest value the government played was in releasing, enabling and protecting aspects of a country’s attractiveness and allowing independence from the government. Finally, he questioned whether soft power was really linked to the UK’s export law or whether it was more to do with having the right financing and
educational systems and enabling companies to export more. He believed government found it difficult to provide messages that were supportive of what soft power was, but stated that the UK had a huge amount of it. He also suggested that as the UK’s hard power declined, soft power could grow.

Baroness Armstrong of Hill Top, a member of the Committee, stated that in her view, soft power came from civil society, but that government had an ability to influence that, for good or bad. Therefore, separating them totally would not be helpful. She believed that a shift was needed in the way that government worked, which she felt no one had fully grasped. Baroness Armstrong noted that today’s communication methods, social media and the ability of the public to have instantaneous access to information had fundamentally changed the role of government but that, in light of these changes, government had not yet worked out what its role should be. Today, government needed to be able to respond almost instantaneously, which automatically altered the way it had previously worked. This was significant but Baroness Armstrong was unsure how government should respond to it. It looked as if government were still acting in silos which was a difficult thing to shift. She concluded by highlighting that power and strength in the world now needed to be through soft power.

Michael Lake, Consultant Director of the Royal Commonwealth Society, pointed out that the Commonwealth too was going through an internal debate as to how it could best act in the interest of citizens. He felt that the question at the heart of the report was how the UK could continue to be influential in a highly competitive world. There was a danger of over-intellectualising and clouding the issue with political rhetoric or a domestic agenda. The UK needed to leverage the assets it was blessed with that other countries might not have, such as its Commonwealth connections. NGOs and professional and cultural bodies inevitably provided a web of solid relationships that went beyond intergovernmental connections, but they needed to be integrated with government policy to work most effectively. Some government guidance was necessary to create a framework for businesses and NGOs to act in a concerted way, but the government could not lead others by the nose.

Mark Tokola, Acting Deputy Chief of Mission at the US Embassy, observed that the same debates about soft power were going on in Washington. The dictionary definition of diplomacy was both the art of conducting relations between governments and the art of conducting relations between countries. At the moment, the balance between these two activities was about 80:20 and Mr Tokola argued that the proportions should probably be the other way round. His Embassy was trying to do things differently by creating encounters between people, rather than lecturing them; by being more transparent, publishing more information about their calendars and diplomatic reporting; and by engaging in more active listening, seeking views on US policy and attempting to counter any myths.

Richard Burge, the Chief Executive of Wilton Park, drew a distinction between soft power as a product and soft power as a process. He argued that what was important in the networked world was not information, but knowledge—that is, information interpreted, understood, analysed and digested. People valued the content of knowledge, not the organ

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1 During discussion on the Commonwealth, Lord Howell declared an interest as the President of the Royal Commonwealth Society.
producing it. He cautioned that the institutions of state did not own soft power and should not try to co-opt it.

Ian Bond, Director of Foreign Policy at the Centre for European Reform, agreed with Richard Burge that nothing could be worse than a ‘state narrative’. This was exactly what Putin was trying to create, and it was not very attractive. In a European context, the key for the UK was not trying to be more distinct from the EU, but using the EU framework as a way to multiply soft power 28 times. He felt that this was not being done enough, as the UK did not always treat its natural allies as allies. For example, Latvia could be alienated by the perception that the UK regarded Latvians as benefits scroungers. Mr Bond believed the consonance between values and policies was not always as well understood as it should be. The UK should see itself as part of each network to which it belonged, not as something ‘other’.

Several speakers had referred to the soft power that the UK benefited from thanks to the BBC. Thomas Kielinger, UK correspondent with Die Welt, joked that after working in London for 15 years he was himself a victim of British soft power. He said that people might decry Britain yet were still attracted to it. Examples of this were the dominance of BBC Online in international news, rather than news provided by other nations, and the numbers of people wanting to migrate to the UK although the current and previous government had continued to further restrict immigration. Mr Kielinger said that the UK did not need to worry about attracting people to the UK; it was a prime example of soft power throughout the world. In response to this point, Lord Howell asked how could the UK cash in on this attractiveness. He believed we needed to think of how the UK’s soft power could be more fully utilised to its economic advantage.

James Robbins, BBC Diplomatic Correspondent, said that we underestimated soft power and that, like all governments when they were new, the current Government found it hard to acknowledge how little power it actually had, especially in light of the new social media. He postulated that in terms of the Commonwealth, we were looking at the issue of soft power the wrong way round—it should be from the bottom up rather than the top down. He gave the example of the “car crash” Commonwealth summit in Sri Lanka, which was actually thought to be a huge success by civil society actors. But he believed we were failing to measure and record the success of soft power as it operated at a micro level.

Baroness Nicholson of Winterbourne, a member of the Committee, thought that it was important to focus on the report’s recommendations which would help to create a stronger Britain. She was concerned that soft power needed cohesion from the FCO and also about a lack of resources to achieve change. She said that energy was needed to apply the report’s recommendations, otherwise it would have been a wasted exercise with a very good report.

Sir Richard Ottaway MP, Chair of the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Select Committee, referred to the difficulty in defining the term ‘soft power’ and said that the aim of it was to achieve peace and stability. Sir Richard agreed that the new social media had changed everything and that Britain should not underestimate how people see us, giving the examples of the Grand National and the BBC World Service, used and respected internationally. He also said that the FCO should be at the heart of any formal soft power unit, as it already did so much valuable work through diplomacy.
Jonathan McClory, independent strategy consultant and author of the *IFG-Monocle Soft Power Index*, said that the government had three roles to play: funding, for example, the British Council or World Service; establishing the ecosystem for organisations such as Oxfam or Amnesty to thrive; and setting out a loose national narrative on what the country should do. He suggested that, until recently, the government’s focus had been on prosperity but recent events in Ukraine showed that it needed to look further than exports, investment and tourism.

Hugh Elliott, Director of Engagement and Communications at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, noted that the Committee report had done a great deal already to reframe and reenergise the debate about soft power. At present, there was no formal government position but Ministers would take a position and government will coordinate a response to the report. He welcomed the comments which served as encouragement for the government to continue its work surrounding these issues. He noted that the government would not only be discussing further what it can do, but also how to do it in practice. He suggested that the government’s digital service was very helpful in enabling the whole of government to engage with the world digitally. He believed it was perfectly compatible for government to refrain from direct interference whilst still playing a role in nurturing, framing and encouraging soft power assets in the interconnected world. He added that the report had “succeeded in reinvigorating the debate within Government”.

In his closing remarks, Lord Howell urged those present use their access to public channels and media to continue to ask the right questions surrounding soft power. He suggested that even though much was about the private sector, the government could help illuminate the sort of story the UK was trying to tell. He suggested that all government units had an interconnected face and that these together provided an interface of the UK within the wider world. He gave a word of caution that if soft power were to be viewed as being owned by government or being used as government propaganda, it would become counterproductive. Yet, he stressed, government support and encouragement were needed.

According to Lord Howell, a good story was one which was woven every day. It was not a state narrative as such, but rather a story that provided insight which, in turn, should result in all people naturally knowing what the government line was, while each went about their daily business. He concluded by indicating that a huge shift was often the result of a number of small shifts. He explained that there were all sorts of changes of mind and attitude which could be set by a good central message. The Committee report provided recommendations for a number of detailed shifts which he hoped would become a significant shift.