

# Witnessing the United Kingdom at the United Nations

By [Helene von Bismarck](#) | Published: July 30, 2013

© The British Scholar Society

Citation advice: Helene von Bismarck, 'Witnessing the United Kingdom at the United Nations'. Essay for The British Scholar Society, July 2013, <http://britishscholar.org/publications/2013/07/30/witnessing-the-united-kingdom-at-the-united-nations/>



**By: Dr. Helene von Bismarck, Associate Editor**

On 22 May 2013, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) hosted a seminar about 'The History, Role and Functions of the UK Mission to the United Nations in New York'. The event formed part of the Witness Seminar Programme that is organized by the Institute of Contemporary British History (ICBH) of King's College in London, and was sponsored by the Arts and Humanities Research Council.<sup>[1]</sup> In examining the work of a British diplomatic mission abroad by discussing it with a number of distinguished FCO alumni formerly posted to the mission in question, it was the fourth event of its kind, following witness seminars about the British High Commission in New Delhi, the British Embassy in Beijing and the British High Commission in Canberra, all of which have been organised at the FCO since 2011. The explicit aim of these seminars, which are recorded and later published on the ICBH's website, is not only to provide interested academics studying the workings of British diplomacy with useful oral history sources, but to connect retired diplomats closer to the FCO and let the latter benefit from their experiences.<sup>[2]</sup> The argument that history should inform today's foreign policy has been put forward by Foreign Secretary William Hague, himself a historian and the author of two acclaimed biographies, in a report of the Foreign Affairs Committee about 'The Role of the FCO in UK Government', which was published in April 2011. The audience of the seminar about the UK Mission to the UN (UKMIS) in May was therefore comprised of a significant number of acting and retired British diplomats, many of whom have held distinguished postings, as well as journalists, historians and political scientists. Consequently, the discussion ensuing from the presentations of the panellists was greatly enriched by contributions from the floor.

The seminar was divided into two different sessions: The first, rather clumsily entitled 'Towards the End of the Cold War', covered the period from the mid-1970s to 1990 and featured Sir Thomas Richardson and Charles Humfrey, both of them former First Secretaries at UKMIS (from 1974 to 1978, and from 1981 to 1985, respectively), as well as Sir Crispin

Tickell, who was UK Permanent Representative at the UN from 1987 to 1990. In the second panel, Lord Hannay of Chiswick, Sir Stewart Eldon, and Sir Emyr Jones Parry, all of them former UK Permanent Representatives to the UN, discussed the post-cold war period from 1990 to 2007 under the heading ‘New World Disorder?’.<sup>[3]</sup> To a certain extent, the event marked a departure from the previous direction of the witness seminar series about diplomatic missions abroad, because, for the first time, it was not a bilateral embassy or high commission that was the object of enquiry. There was a general agreement among the speakers about the special nature of multilateral diplomacy and the distinctive requirements it has put on the staff of UKMIS. Like NATO and the European Union, the United Nations appears to have offered British diplomats posted there more chances to really negotiate than bilateral embassies usually do, and has required them to think and act like politicians rather than civil servants. Several speakers and members of the audience remarked on the decisive impact personal relationships with key people from other missions could have on the outcome of negotiations at the UN. Another important point which emerged from the discussion was the UK’s status as one of the United Nations’ five permanent Security Council members, a role which largely defined the work of UKMIS and explains the importance attributed to this diplomatic mission by the government in London. The third, and arguably the most interesting recurrent theme of the seminar, was the conduct of the Anglo-American relationship at the United Nations, which appears to have been far from easy. The frequent absences of the US Permanent Representative at the UN, who was at the same time a member of the US Cabinet, from New York, posed a constant challenge to his counterpart from the United Kingdom. The significant and ever-increasing discrepancy in power between the US and the UK and, as a result, the diverging attitudes towards the UN must have been all too apparent.

It is in the very nature of oral history to be highly subjective and to offer fragments and impressions rather than a coherent narrative of the past. In this, the witness seminar at the FCO about UKMIS was no exception. The discussion was based mainly on a large number of anecdotes that were supplied by the speakers and a few members of the audience. However, this did by no means reduce the value of the event, and of its forthcoming transcript, as a starting point of historical enquiry about the UK Mission to the UN, which has, until now, failed to attract any scholarly research. After all, with the exception of one speaker, all of the recounted experiences date from times for which the archival record is not yet available due to the 30-year rule. What is more, thinking about the questions to ask about the past is just as important a part of the historian’s job as searching for the answers to them and a witness seminar is an excellent way to start this process. Finally, while the aim of the event may have been merely to analyze the methods and dynamics of diplomacy conducted by the UK Mission at the UN in New York, the discussion about this involves a much larger issue that ought to be studied by historians: namely whether the international negotiations and debates at the United Nations can be regarded as a mirror of Britain’s changing position in the world during the last three decades.

---

[1] The Witness Seminar Series at King’s College’s ICBH is directed by Dr. Michael Kandiah, who is also an associate editor of The British Scholar Society.

---

2[2] The transcript of the witness seminar on 22 May 2013 has not been published yet. Check the ICBH's website for updates: <http://www.kcl.ac.uk/innovation/groups/ich/witness/index.aspx>

3[3]*New World Disorder* is also the title of a book authored by Lord Hannay about his experiences as UN Permanent Representative at the UN from 1990 to 1995: David Hannay, *New World Disorder. The UN after the Cold War – An Insider's View* (I.B. Tauris 2008).

This entry was posted in [News](#), [Two Pence](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#). Both comments and trackbacks are currently closed.

---