

Special Feature

Who Needs Another National Day?

Gordon Brown has recently caused some interest by proposing that there should be a national day for Britain. In my simplicity I thought that in so far as we needed such a thing, it was the Queen's official



Bakhtiar tent in a Persian garden

birthday that was our day. We may not be the tops in ski jumping or even, dare I say it, in many of the games that we invented, but we know who we are, or we did, and there did not seem to be much point in a special day, apart from the splendid parade on the Horseguards.

The Queens Birthday Abroad

Abroad however it is a different story. I have spent some 20 years of my working life serving in foreign parts, and among the plethora of national days, which in reality were something of a burden; it was indeed the Queen's Birthday that our embassies and consulates celebrated as National Day of the United Kingdom. I have said national days were often something of a burden and my wife Jane, whose diplomatic life led her to different lands from mine, would heartily agree with that. They certainly gave rise to the myth that a diplomat's life is one long round of drink parties. In a capital with 40 or 50 embassies - and many capitals have more - the incidence of national days did become a trial, only alleviated

by the relief brought if Britain did not have diplomatic relations with the country celebrating. For spouses the tendency for men and women to group separately was an added objection. At NATO in

Brussels, it was

accepted that none of the members of the Alliance marked their national day; we left that thankfully to our embassies to Belgium, though when I was there I did feel it right to give a party for the hard-working and under-recognised British staff of the Alliance.

Bagging a Minister

For all that, in some countries, particularly those where for one reason or another access to senior officials and ministers was difficult, national days had their uses. Curiously, in such countries ministers and others seemed to see it as more or less a duty to attend national day parties.

It became a game among the Diplomatic Corps in Iraq, for instance, in earlier days, to try to judge the state of relations between Iraq and the giver of the party by the number and seniority of ministers who attended. 'I claim the Foreign and Interior Ministers at my party, against the Ministers of Culture and Sport at yours.'

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More seriously these occasions afforded the opportunity to meet ministers and senior officials socially which otherwise never happened. Obviously the style of the occasion varied according to the country. In Washington DC, the Queen's Birthday garden party was a major social event, invitations to which were much prized and sought after. Strawberries and cream, I remember, were the traditional fodder in the splendid garden of the Ambassador's Lutyens residence.

In Kuwait it's 'Flash' and Tonic

In Kuwait, more modestly, we celebrated the occasion on the Queen's natural birthday, 21st April; it was just too hot for a garden party in June. In a country that was legally 'dry', many expatriates in my time produced their own potheen; a fiery liquor known as 'flash', that went down fairly well if heavily disguised by tonic or bitter lemon. The Embassy's party for the Queen's Birthday was nevertheless an event at which the expatriate British community flocked to slake their thirst in honest beer and whisky. For some, I recall, these unaccustomed refreshments proved too much.

The KGB and the Colonialists

I always took the view that in places such as Kuwait the party had to be seen primarily as an occasion for the expatriate British who do so much for the prosperity and good name of this country, to celebrate, while not neglecting the prominent citizens of the host country as well as one's fellow diplomats from other lands. One such was my Soviet colleague, clearly a member of the KGB. I remember him telling me that in his briefing before coming to Kuwait, he had been told that he would find 3,000 colonialists living on

the sweated labour of the natives; after two years he had realised that it was the natives who lived on the sweated labour of the colonialists.

Tehran is a Dry Place

Perhaps my most bizarre memory of these occasions was in Tehran in 1979. The Shah had left and the Islamic Revolutionary Government was in power. The country was rigidly dry and even embassies were not able to import drink. Gray MacKenzie, a British trading company that had operated a brewery in the Shah's time, had to turn to producing non-alcoholic beer, though what the resulting liquid tasted like I dread to think. Clearly there was no prospect of entertaining the mullahs, so I decided that the party must be for the surviving British community, down at that time to about 400 from 10,000 a year before, whose morale, always splendid in times of adversity, still needed encouragement.

The Boots Beer-Kit

We did not have sufficient stock in our dwindling cellar to feed such even a reduced multitude, so my late wife and I set to brew beer in our bathroom, using the Boots kits that we had managed to import unrecognised past the eagle eyes of the Iranian customs. As with 'flash', the strength depended on how much water you added and, though somewhat sweet for my taste, our brew was fairly strong. My wife, writing home to our daughter on the morning of the day, noted that: 'the men are busy putting up tables and tents and making the most terrible noise... Oh! my goodness, it is "God Save the Queen" on the gramophone' The party was a great success.

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