

British Diplomats Criticize American Presidents

by Michael Curtis



Former British Ambassador to the US, Sir Kim Darroch

On July 17, 2019, the most astute political commentator in the United States, the 72 year old O.J. Simpson, announced he was afraid of what's happening in America today. He attacked the Democratic party for its failure to agree to impeachment of President Donald Trump. The vote the same day to postpone the resolution calling for impeachment was passed 332-95 by Congress. 137 Democrats and one Independent voted with almost all the Republicans to adopt the resolution. The football star turned political pundit who now has 857,000 followers on Twitter, warned Trump, with whom he had been friendly before his trial June 1994- October 1995. for murder of his ex-wife and her friend, that he should stop hanging around with people

like Roger Stone.

In democratic systems professional diplomats, especially Ambassadors, theoretically non-partisan, are more discreet, and are obliged by *métier* to be so, than O.J. in their public comments, but must give their true opinion on events and persons in private communications with their political leaders. Political ministers decide policy and make decisions, and those decisions will be sounder if they receive honest advice from their civil servants who are not muzzled and whose opinions stem from political impartiality.

This problem of advice given by British ambassadors in Washington, D.C. to their governments has given rise to political crises on two occasions in the last year, and, among other matters, it raises the question of whether the so-called special relationship between Britain and the U.S. has been affected or damaged by them.

The first case arises from the official newly released publication in July 2019 of the papers of Sir Robin Renwick, former Ambassador to South Africa, 1987-91, and to the U.S., 1991-5. The most intriguing and questionable papers are Renwick's blunt assessment and candid remarks in May 1994 on the presidency of Bill Clinton, an individual he held was weak on foreign policy, though strong on economic and domestic issues, and who was excessively preoccupied with the views of the media on his presidency. In Renwick's unflattering portrait he wrote that the White House under Clinton was chaotic, and a roller coast ride.

Renwick addressed the effect of the numerous scandals in Clinton's administration, and the toll taken by personal stories of Clinton on his popularity. Clinton continued to have difficulty winning the approval of more than 50 per cent of the American people and that, Renwick believed, could be constant throughout his presidency. Clinton was concerned about the treatment he had been receiving in the British press

where most of the coverage had been dominated by the Paula Jones sexual harassment charge, and by the Whitewater scandal, the failed property project in which Clinton had invested, and the real estate dealings of Hillary and Bill Clinton, and in which he was cleared of wrongdoing.

In November 1999, Clinton paid \$850,000 to settle the Jones issue without apology or acknowledging culpability, in exchange for Jones dropping her charge and claim.

No one, Renwick wrote, believes the full Paula Jones story of his exposing himself to her in a hotel room when he was governor of the state of Arkansas, but he thought that the fact that Clinton might have to testify in court against Jones was troubling for the White House.

The more recent case is that of Ambassador Sir Kim Darroch, prominent in the British civil service since 1977, and a close advisor to various prime ministers, Labour Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, and Conservative David Cameron to whom he was national security advisor. It is different from the Renwick case in a crucial way. Darroch's statements were not officially published. Confidential messages of Darroch were leaked to a London Sunday newspaper by a still unknown person. They are even more stark and potentially more damaging than those of Renwick. In them Darroch describes Trump's administration as "clumsy and inept."

The leak has caused consternation for at least three reasons: by its strong criticism of Trump; by what appears its sustained attack against civil servants; and the unprecedented treatment of Darroch for possible lack of adhering to principles of objectivity and impartiality.

The most important aspect of the leaks is the damage that might be done to British relations with the Trump administration. But the more general aspect is whether leaks should be stopped and punished, because it may undermine the

offering by civil servants of honest advice to ministers, or whether stopping the printing of leaks would represent infringement of press freedom and public debate. In this case, public policy is involved.

The leaker may be a believer in Brexit, and wants the successor of Darroch to be more Brexit. but other issues were revealed. One is Trump's decision to abandon the Iran nuclear deal which President Barack Obama in 2015 thought was a "historic understanding," when Iran agreed to reduce its uranium stockpile. In a telegram to then foreign secretary, and present contender to become prime minister Boris Johnson, Darroch wrote, "The U.S. is set on an act of diplomatic vandalism, seemingly for ideological and personality reasons." Trump disagrees. Darroch reported that Britain tried but failed to stop Trump abandoning the Iran nuclear deal. Boris Johnson had flown to D.C. on May 7, 2018 to try to save the deal. Trump abandoned the Iran deal to spite Obama.

Darroch was critical of Trump's decision to call off the retaliatory missile strikes against Iran after the country had shot down a U.S. drone, because it risked killing 150 Iranians. and then worried this might seem a reversal of his 2016 campaign promises, and hurt him in 2020. Darroch pointed out differences between the UK and Trump on a number of issues: climate change, media freedoms, death penalty.

He was pessimistic about Trump: he did not believe the President would become substantially more normal, less dysfunctional, less unpredictable, less diplomatically clumsy and inept. He spoke of bitter divisions in the White House. The Trump Presidency could crash and burn. Trump was insecure and incompetent. His opposition to global trade could wreck the system,

Darroch resigned on July 10, 2019 after Trump called him a pompous fool and very stupid, and Brexit leader Nigel Farage thought him totally unsuitable. Disconcerting though the

incident is, it is unlikely that relations between UK and U.S. will be damaged in any real way. More problematic is the issue and publication of leaks. So far, a suspect has been identified, and the possibility of a computer hack by a foreign state is possible. Scotland Yard warned media against publishing leaked government documents, advising the social and mainstream media not to do so. Yet the problem remains, the right of media to publish leaks if it judges them to be in the public interest. Who is to judge? It is doubtful that the communications by Renwick and Darroch could be considered to be in the public interest.