

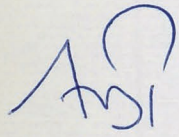
Prime Minister

(4)

MR. COLLE AS-14

VENEZUELA

The Prime Minister may be interested in the attached brief report by Dick Troughton on his visit to Venezuela. The report is interesting in itself and also provides a classic example of what an active Embassy and an imaginative British Council representative can do to restore the British position in a difficult situation.



A.D. PARSONS  
12 July 1983

IN CONFIDENCE

THE BRITISH COUNCIL BOARD

THE CHAIRMAN'S VISIT TO VENEZUELA: JULY 1983

1. We went to Venezuela from 3-8 July. It is a very long way to go for a short visit and very demanding, with unusual hours, but it proved to be wholly worthwhile. I express my gratitude to Sir Antony Acland and to the Director-General for persuading me to go.
2. I learnt, as always, a great deal but above all I learnt what I had not even imagined - the strength of South American nationalism and the support for Argentina over the Falklands war. It seems extraordinary because Argentina is strongly disliked, arrogant and the Prussia of Latin America. But there it is. Our people, both London-appointed and locally-engaged, the Embassy, and British businessmen, and I met a lot, have all suffered severely though no one grumbles or apologises in any way for the war. Contracts have been broken, delayed or postponed, the \$200 million Hawk trainer being one of them; the very prestigious Royal Geographical Society's joint exploration into the interior being another though different postponement. The recent ECGD restrictions were regarded as spiteful rather than prudent. Perhaps it is best summed up in a more ludicrous way by the following. Venezuela, besides being easily the richest country per capita in South America and the fourth biggest oil producer in the world, is the biggest consumer per capita of Scotch whisky in the world! For a month or so all government entertaining was devoid of Scotch whisky, as an anti-British measure, by decree. They gave in in the end because far fewer people turned up at receptions and also because the Venezuelans, who are friendly and warm-hearted basically, Western orientated and one of the few democracies in Latin America, recovered some of their basic sense. But the depth of the feeling as expressed to me was a very great surprise. The French and the Germans of course had a real field day.
3. All the more surprising then has been the extraordinary turn round in the last few months. There has been some very hard work by a very determined, clever and tough Ambassador, and the same by a quite outstanding British Council representation led by the excellent John Mallon, who have pursued with unrelenting vigour the chance given by the Simon Bolivar Bicentenary to show that Britain has indestructible ties with Venezuela both in culture and business; and they have been handsomely supported by the British community and many brave Venezuelans who stood by us. I cannot speak too highly of John Mallon and his staff.
4. The Ambassador attributes this turn round, and the businessmen support him, to the stunning success of the Henry Moore exhibition in Caracas and its travelling successor, and to what the Ambassador - a man not given to extravagant or superficial expressions of opinion - described as "a social and political blockbuster", the London Festival Ballet's "Romeo and Juliet". Both these manifestations were largely supported by private funds

though the Council put some money into them and a very great deal of hard work. Twenty hours at a stretch by Council staff in the customs sheds getting scenery etc through was not in the least uncommon. The London Festival Ballet behaved with their usual professionalism. They are, as I keep reporting, model Ambassadors for Britain - punctual, professional, sober and charming!

5. Up to the last minute of the opening night of "Romeo and Juliet" no one knew whether the President would come; whether he would receive us if he did. Apart from the fact that he was an hour late, he more than made amends. We all sat in his box and retired to his private room to drink champagne; but above all our national anthem was played by the Venezuelan orchestra (and extremely well too). The house was full, and some of the British businessmen who were there said afterwards that that was the most extraordinary event of an extraordinary evening. Every Venezuelan of any importance was there - Presidential candidates included, for there is an election coming up - and among the 800 guests at the reception given by the Ambassador afterwards. We got to bed about 3 in the morning but I believe the party went on till well after 4. Plenty of Scotch was drunk, and I even found some mock Perrier Water.

6. I go on rather about this because I subsequently had a meeting with the President, which was very cordial, very constructive and he was very punctual. And I believe that both the Ambassador and John Mallon felt it was a success because it was not just a courtesy visit. The President's pleasure at the British contribution to the Bicentenary celebrations - by far the best, he said - shows too that great art is international, penetrating layers of society in a totally unexpected way. Henry Moore is indeed a world figure.

7. I will not bore you with the rest of our very busy programme - a visit to the great industrial new town of Ciudad Guayana etc etc. I will take up with the Director-General the many things which I think will interest him.

8. Finally I must say the Board would be very pleased by the Council in Venezuela. Its history has not been one of which we can in any way be proud - indecision, bad decisions, changes of mind etc - but now the convalescent period is over. If it is properly supported with commitment, understanding and money, the Council will do a very <sup>great</sup> deal to help Britain get back the industrial and commercial contracts I know are there and we have got to show, as a country, that we are in business and mean to get them. And the British Council can really help over all this, as I learnt when I addressed the Anglo-Venezuelan Chamber of Commerce, which is composed of the commercial and financial community in Venezuela. John Mallon, supported by his wife Anne, run a very impressive representation. He is clear-headed and determined, speaks excellent Spanish, and has learnt and is prepared to learn from his many and varied experiences. He is able, imaginative and has integrity, and is supported by a loyal and first class staff.

9. My wife and I are shown kindness and understanding - and, in my case, patience with the impatient - by Ambassadors and High Commissioners all over the world. But nowhere more so - and nowhere have we welcomed or appreciated this more in a very tiring programme - than by the Ambassador and Mrs Carless in Venezuela.