

# Questions *for the* ambassador

**Angela Spindler-Brown** had a number of queries she put to Nick Archer, the new and 31st UK ambassador in the Thun Palace, Prague

## How is Prague treating you?

Very well, of course. I sometimes fear being killed with kindness amidst all the agreement and beauty. We get on very well on most questions and a good deal of cooperation just happens – university to university, business to business. But Brexit has put the grit in the oyster, so I am getting lots of professional satisfaction too. The Thun Palace is very impractical but hard not to love, and my ambition there is the traditional Ambassador's; leave it a little better than you find it.

## During your diplomatic career you have been posted to many countries, do your diplomatic activities require a different approach in Prague?

The key, wherever you are, is to listen and to like – as far as you can. The liking is perhaps easier here than in many places – I have hardly met anyone who wasn't warm, keen to talk, and in some sense pro-British. Pro-British came as a surprise; I had no idea how well you knew us, or how many connections there are, historic and actual. And for me as an architecture and classical music nut, I can effortlessly like Czech culture. Indeed, I love the way Czechs don't expect you to dumb down and pretend that football and rock music are what get you through the day.

## The diplomats have possibly been rendered even more obsolescent by the advance of modern technology, says Richard Bassett, one-time *Times* foreign correspondent, in his latest book *Last Days in Old Europe*. Is he right? To what degree has your work changed in your time?

I like 'even more obsolescent' – very Richard. Tech has liberated us and clarified where we add value, because the facts are now all out there. So I no longer need to spend hours reporting what has happened, or what the latest economic figures are. I concentrate on explaining, and trying to understand, since I am in the end responsible – with Libor Secka in London – for ensuring that the governments, and indeed populations more widely, understand each other. One example: the Czech Republic is perhaps the European country closest to Israel. Fact. But why? That's quite complicated to explain but good to understand. So yes change, but change for the better.

## What is the relationship of the Embassy with the locals? Main requests? What are the social and cultural contacts?

Most of my team are Czechs (or Slovaks) and they bring their personal networks to the Embassy, so I honestly don't think in 'Embassy versus locals' terms. Our relationships are so diverse that it's hard to summarise; we have one party each year for



**Nick Archer, who has previously served as the UK's ambassador in Denmark and as High Commissioner in Malta**

consular contacts at which I see our favourite funeral director and psychiatric nurse as well as lots of policemen – last year they all came in Harry Potter costumes. But we also do the more conventional stuff with officials and ministers and politicians, all of whom are remarkably accessible here – it's not like that everywhere. As a G7 economy and a permanent member, we should know everybody, so that's our aim.

## Diplomats prepare to be ahead of the news. What are you working on at the moment?

My mission is in the end to ensure that the relationship comes through Brexit stronger than before. This year, our 100th in the Thun Palace, was about taking stock, and showing people, through our STO LET programme, how wide and diverse the range of things we do together is. Looking ahead, we need to ensure that the transition to a post-Brexit world does no harm to existing relationships, business, educational, people-to-people, government-to-government, and that we spot the new opportunities which there will certainly be to do things 'bilaterally' – together.

## What are the needs of the British community in the republic? Main issues?

People are well-integrated; their needs are few. And they are strikingly resilient; I wonder sometimes at how quickly Britons here adopt the phlegmatic approach to life I associate with Czechs. People have been

terrific about Brexit; a recent public meeting which I was slightly dreading turned into a kind of 'share experiences and help each other' session – almost a party. But Brexit is, obviously, the big issue for most and I take the ghastliness of living with uncertainty very seriously.

## The British public expects its diplomats to provide ministers with and 'honest, unvarnished assessment of politics in their country'. When will be your despatches made public?

When somebody puts in a Freedom of Information request, I suppose; they are not controversial, and I cannot imagine that they'd be withheld. The trick is to remember to write 'everybody says he is a fraud' rather than 'he is a fraud'.

## What has been your most lasting and perhaps most surprising impression of Prague/the Czech Republic?

That affinity I mentioned. Most people say 'we share a sense of humour', but I think we and the Czechs really do. Michael Palin said the day he got his knighthood that he thinks them the funniest people in the world – 'they see humour in everything'. Maybe it's the Celtic gene Czechs have – which was the other great surprise. I noticed lots of red hair in Brno and did not believe the Celt explanation until the president of the Academy of Sciences told me that it's proven. So there you are – amusing Celts in part, just like us.