

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

Let us begin with a lie told to a princess.

The princess was important. Princess Diana, recently departed from the British Royal Family, was then at the height of her fame. It was also an important lie. For as a result of it Diana became involved in The International Campaign to Ban Landmines, collaborating with the Mines Advisory Group (MAG) and the Landmine Survivor's Network (LSN), among other organisations. Her interest in the cause, visits to minefields and meetings with landmine survivors, won it tremendous publicity and moved landmines up the political agenda. According to Kenneth Rutherford, the co-founder of the LSN, 'Princess Diana's involvement helped MAG and LSN transform the landmine debate from a military to a humanitarian issue in many people's minds, including those of many diplomats'. He also states that her lobbying encouraged the then British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, to honour his party's election promise to ban mines.<sup>1</sup>

Diana's last public appearance in August 1997 was with landmine survivors in Bosnia. A few weeks later she died in a car accident just days before the international conference convened in Oslo to negotiate the treaty banning landmines. As Rutherford notes, this meant that the conference 'came on the heels of an emotional week of outpouring for the death of Diana'. More attention focused on the meeting, and pressure increased for a satisfactory resolution. Her influence was apparent in the rhetoric of those present. The Norwegian Foreign Minister, speaking in the first session, stated that 'We shall spare no effort . . . to achieve the goals she set for herself'. The British Foreign Secretary said that the treaty's 'achievement is due in part to the work of Diana . . . who did so much to focus the attention of the world on the horrific effects of anti-personnel landmines'. The US did not sign the treaty after its attempts to water down some of its provisions were defeated. This prompted US President Bill Clinton to complain that his proposals 'were rejected, partly because the Landmine Conference was determined to pass the strongest possible treaty in the wake of the death of its most famous champion, Princess Diana'.<sup>2</sup>

It is impossible to gauge what Diana's impact was on the Campaign or the treaty negotiations.<sup>3</sup> Indeed it would be misleading to focus too much on any one person. The treaty to ban landmines was the work of many social movements and many individuals. The six founding organisations of the Campaign grew to over 1,000 groups; 130 NGOs attended the Oslo conference, and 350 the signing ceremony.<sup>4</sup> In October 1997 the Campaign and its co-ordinator, Jody Williams, were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. It was accepted for the Campaign by Rae McGrath, who founded MAG, and by Tun Channareth, a Cambodian landmine survivor. They did so on behalf of a multitude.

Nonetheless, even though she joined the campaign late, and was just one of many, Diana's individual contribution was considerable. And for that reason we need to get back to the lie. For it explains how she got involved with the campaign – with the momentous consequences I have described. To understand how it came about we must listen to Rae McGrath's account of a meeting he had with her.

Rae is an unassuming recipient of the Nobel medal. I once invited a Nobel laureate to talk at my University and was told this normally commanded a \$50,000 speaking fee, plus expensive air tickets. Rae, in contrast, met me for our interview at the train station near his home in an old and battered car. He was then still pursuing his profession, managing programmes in refugee camps in dangerous parts of the world. The Nobel medal hangs unobtrusively on the wall amidst other pictures and memorabilia and he did not seem to mind that I was unaware that he had received it. Rae also has a felicitous mix of pragmatism, opportunism, a good sense of humour and a delight in the ridiculous that has given him many interesting stories to tell, and a good way of telling them. The story of Diana's recruitment to the cause is best told by him partly for that reason – and partly because it was he who told the lie. I therefore quote extensively from my interview with him below.<sup>5</sup>

Diana had visited Angola with the British Red Cross in February 1997, and pictures of her walking in a minefield in full protective gear had covered the world's papers. It was a wonderful publicity coup for the landmine cause. However, when speaking to reporters on that trip Diana said that she thought the landmines should be banned. This was not then the UK government's position, and ministers accused her of meddling in politics. The iconic images suddenly seemed to portray a celebrity out of step with the issues and their politics.

Rae, however, noted her words. He had found it difficult to get the Campaign's view into the tabloids, and was frustrated because the UK government's position was prominent in the popular press. He was keen to engage Diana's powers of obtaining good media coverage.

His opportunity came when he attended a conference in Japan starting the national campaign to ban landmines there. Diana had been invited, but, unable to come, had written to send her apologies. The conference organisers asked Rae what the protocol was for conveying their thanks for her letter. He advised them that it should be sent in person, and that he was prepared to take it to her. The organisers accordingly asked Michael Gibbons, Diana's secretary, if she could receive Rae in order that he might convey their thanks to her. This was arranged and Rae had his invitation to Kensington Palace.

It was a rather daunting prospect:

'I took some gifts from the Japan campaign and the conference report to Kensington Palace to meet Diana. It was like Coronation Street and East Enders all rolled into one.'

And it was a meeting with a problem, because it was meant to be a simple gesture of thanks, but Rae wanted to use it to invite a publicity-conscious person to get involved in a cause in which she had already been somewhat humiliated publicly. Neither Rae nor Diana was well prepared for it:

'I roll in there, this complete anti-royal, and no idea what I was going to say or how I was going to twist this thing round to make it work. She came in and as you'd expect was very charming and everything but probably had no idea what this was about. She'd have had a briefing document on me, so she'd know a little bit about me, she knew about MAG and she thought I was going to give a report about the Japan thing.'

As it turns out, when Rae made his pitch, it may well have been better for its spontaneity:

'So I shook hands with her and we sat down on these remarkable ancient sofas they had there. [We had] a cup of tea and I got rid of the Japanese conference in two or three minutes. [I said] "It was very good and they asked me to bring you these" and put them on the table. She said "How lovely" and everything. And then there was just this moment where I realised that this was going to end two minutes later or I was going to be able to do it and I just said "So how much are you interested really in landmines?" And I deliberately said it quite bluntly as a challenge. And she became quite defensive and said "This was the most terrible thing I've ever seen." She didn't talk about the minefield at all, she talked about the hospital wards. And she said "Have you ever seen it?" and I said "Yes, absolutely, that's why I asked you. You said you thought that landmines [should] be banned, can you help us?" She said "I wish I could. What can I do?"

So then we started a discussion. I said "Well the first thing is that you have got to know more, because you saw one minefield but they are all over the place and that's [just] one country." I just gave her a very quick briefing about the countries and the problems and particularly the impacts on youngsters and the fact that these things were just growing, and they were making more. They were becoming less controllable because they were air delivered and then add to that the problem of cluster munitions and I painted this picture very, very quickly and I said "We need help." And I bluntly said "I can talk to the Guardian and I can talk to the Telegraph [but I cannot talk to the tabloids]." She then completely opened up, rang the bell got more tea, had a word with Michael Gibbons which was obviously cancelling whatever was next and we got into it.'

So Diana was now really interested in helping, but her input needed a focus. This is when Rae's pragmatic streak took to the fore.

'I realised that this couldn't go on for ever and I needed to bring it to what's going to happen next. And she said "I have been wanting to make a keynote speech; something that really says what I feel about this." And I just lied through my teeth and said "But that's perfect because we are in the process of organizing an NGO seminar on landmines and we don't have a keynote speaker and I don't

want it to be someone political.” And of course it was just complete lies I was just inventing it.’

It was only a brief lie. For at the very moment he spoke it Rae was rather actively planning that seminar. He had to. For a start he needed to conjure up some more details about this meeting to make it an attractive and realistic prospect for Diana to attend.

‘She said “Well where will it be?” and I thought “Oh fuck” because I knew that instantly if I said the wrong place it wasn’t going to happen because anything where royalty goes takes months and months to actually approve. They have to send security people to check it. I had walked past the Royal Geographical Society on the way there so I said “The Royal Geographical Society” because Prince Philip talks there. She said “That’s wonderful because they have everything.” I said “Yeah, it would be great if you could do it.” She said “What date?” I said, “Well, we’ve got a couple of dates at the moment but because we didn’t have a speaker we have been trying to keep it loose, but it’s in about a month’s time.” She said “We’ll sort that out in a minute.” We went out and saw Michael Gibbons [who] gave me two dates.’

Well, Diana was on board. But unfortunately none of the other participants were. Nor yet was the rather prestigious venue aware that it was going to host this gathering. Rae had a realistic approach to the challenge, as he put it:

‘I’d given myself a massive fucking problem.’

And in such a situation it helps to appeal to other people’s pragmatic streaks.

‘First of all I called MAG and I spoke to my brother and said to him [we need] a seminar on landmines, he said “That’s a bit short notice.” I said “Yes, Princess Diana is going to be the keynote speaker.” He said “OK, right, we’ll get everything moving.”’

Two other NGOs quickly joined the meeting. This is technically called ‘convening power’ in the celebrity literature. It describes the ability famous people have of making all the rest of us abandon our plans to fit around their agenda and needs.

But NGOs hungry for publicity are easy to enrol. Booking out the Royal Geographical Society (RGS) at just a month’s notice was going to be a harder prospect. Rae knew this and after finishing the call with his brother, he quickly called the RGS.

‘The bookings co-ordinator started to be negative and I said “I’m just up the road can I come and see you” because I knew on the phone I was just going to get a “no”. So I went and explained the whole thing, about MAG and about the work we had been doing and I didn’t mention Diana. And the co-ordinator said “Well, what are the dates?” And I gave the two dates and the co-ordinator opened the book and said “No, they are both [taken]”. And I said “O damn, I am going to have to somehow sort this out because these are the only dates that Diana can do it.” And the co-ordinator said “Diana?” I said “Yes, Princess Diana, she’s going to be the keynote speaker. I’ve just come from Kensington Palace, she’s agreed, but

these are the only two dates.” And of course the co-ordinator said “Hmm, well these people haven’t confirmed; they should have confirmed two days ago. OK, well we’ll pencil you in.”

Convening power, it seems, could even work with the RGS. A conversation over a cup of tea had blossomed rather remarkably. In the space of a couple of hours, as Rae put it, ‘I had the RGS, I had three NGOs, I had Princess Diana’.

The seminar, moreover, occurred in June 1997 just a month after the new Labour government of the UK had taken office. They were keen to adopt a different stance from their Conservative predecessors. Clare Short, the Minister of the newly created Department for International Development also spoke as the second speaker (Rae recalls ‘I absolutely loved telling her she wasn’t the keynote’). Diana’s speech was written by the late Lord Bill Deedes, a patron of MAG, based on key campaign themes and emphases agreed by Rae and Princess Diana. That speech, the seminar of which it was part and Diana’s subsequent involvement are credited by Rutherford as helping the Campaign move the landmine issue from being a military problem to a humanitarian cause. A mountain of publicity and a determined, motivated Oslo conference all derived from one small but momentous ‘lie’.<sup>6</sup>

But the story is not quite complete. For if we see this as merely a piece of brilliant opportunism by media hungry NGOs we will only see their side of it. We will miss Diana’s own needs and skills. According to Rae:

‘She had this extraordinary understanding of how the whole media mechanism [worked].’

She delivered the speech on the day very well:

‘She was a very clever speaker. She broke down the speech into a number of sectors she felt comfortable with. She had this ability to deliver a speech very well, she was very clear about the optimum length she could give. She learnt it [and] knew when to look up at the press.’

She was also thoroughly, and, in Rae’s experience of public figures, unusually engaged:

‘What was important about her and what made her a good personality in that way was that she understood that what she was talking about was something important. It is not enough to go and see a hospital ward to do that. I don’t think that it comes with intellectual capacity or cleverness or education. [The landmine cause] was something that made her angry and upset and she believed that she could make a difference and so she gave time to it. That to me is quite rare.’

Furthermore, while MAG and other organisations could inform her about important issues, she had to put all this into her voice and in a way which would appeal to the people she knew listened to her.

‘We needed her to say the right things but at the same time in her voice. If she was going to say the same things that I said or that MAG said or anyone else it

was just a princess. And for me that was not useful. You needed to use her personality, her voice and her world. Who are the people who listen to her who don't listen to us? What would she be interested to say and what would they be interested to hear her say? What would make them engage with what we were doing?'

This was a task she clearly achieved.

Moreover Diana combined that skill and passion with a more personal reason to take up this cause. She explained all of this to Rae at their first meeting in Kensington Palace.

'One of the extraordinary things was that she completely opened up then and was completely honest in the way that I tend to be and just said "Look, I'm not pretending. I care about this but I also realise that if I am going to survive, in the situation I am in, I have to be visible, I have to be engaged. I'm engaged on AIDS. I need to be engaged with things that people care about."

Basically she knew that, if you fuck up the Royal Family, if you are to survive, you need to have the right sort of profile. And in that way she did not come across as fluffy headed. She was able to put the two things together in a very logical way and then talk business about it.'

Author: 'The two things being?'

'Well her personal need to do it and the fact that she cared about it.'

Her 'personal need' refers to her need for a good public image and favourable publicity with causes that mattered to the public. This mix of motives strengthened her ability to serve the Campaign:

'The two things [are] to me perfect. You have got somebody who has a personal commitment, a survival commitment, and at the same time they really do care about it and they've seen something of it. Fantastic, that was all I wanted.'

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<sup>1</sup> Rutherford, 2011: 102-3.

<sup>2</sup> All cited in Rutherford, 2011: 107-114.

<sup>3</sup> A treaty signing ceremony had already been announced before Diana joined the campaign, and the process to negotiate the clauses that would be discussed in Oslo in September 1997 was underway when she first went to a minefield in Angola. Diana's posthumous influence was on the negotiation of those clauses. According to Rutherford, the sessions were recorded but he was unable to find copies of the tapes, and it is not clear where they are held (pers. comm. 27<sup>th</sup> June 2012). Without them it will be difficult to determine what lies behind the rhetoric of ministers proclaiming her influence. With respect to her influence in setting the political agenda and facilitating dialogue and meetings Rutherford writes 'In my personal day-to-day dealings on landmines during that time period, the words "Princess Diana" were on everyone's lips [with] regards to landmines . . . agenda setting, opening doors, attracting political and media attention, were less challenging with her involvement period' (pers. comm. 27<sup>th</sup> June 2012). On reading a draft of this introduction he wrote 'At the Center for International Stabilization and Recovery, we all personally think your conclusion should be that her influence continues today. Almost everyone we meet who knows where we work brings up Princess Diana; she was a huge influence on the world on this topic' (pers. comm. 28<sup>th</sup> September 2012). Brendon Cox's analysis of the campaign notes Diana's influence, but does not assign it a crucial role. Instead he emphasises the importance of the close working

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relationship the campaign enjoyed with the Canadian government (Cox, 2011: 46). See also Scott (2001) and Huliaris and Tzifakis (2010).

<sup>4</sup> Cox reports over 1,000 groups being part of the ICBL (2011: 34); Rutherford reports attendance at the treaty negotiations and signing ceremony (2011: 110, 117).

<sup>5</sup> I have smoothed the transcript of the interview, missing out 'erms', 'you knows', 'sort ofs', and occasional asides and I have not indicated with '...' where those cuts fall. This polished version reads better, and is thus a more accurate experience of listening to Rae's well-told story. Rae has also checked this version. I am grateful to him for permission to use it.

<sup>6</sup> More well-known lies in celebrity advocacy, which were also momentous, were those told by Bob Geldof (a musician) to the managers of the bands he was persuading to make the record *'Feed the World'* in aid of famine relief to Ethiopia in 1984. He told them that the other bands were on board, when in fact they were not. Collectively deceived, they all joined in (Geldof, 1986).