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Our man at the lectern shakes off Straw shackle

By Hugh Miles

RETIRED diplomats have won a victory over the Foreign Office after it dropped a rule restricting their freedom to speak out on current affairs.

A Diplomatic Service Regulation issued in 2006 imposed a lifelong obligation on ex-diplomats to seek written permission from the Foreign Office before making any media appearance or even giving a lecture if it drew on "experience gained in the course of official duties".

But the rule has been quietly abandoned after officials realised it was unenforceable.

Instead, the latest regulations say the Foreign Office "welcomes debate" and recognises a "public interest in allowing former officials to write accounts of their time in government".

The restrictions were imposed by Jack Straw, then Foreign Secretary, after Sir Christopher Meyer, a former ambassador

to Washington, peppered his memoirs with personal criticisms of Tony Blair and a host of Labour ministers.

Retired diplomats still have an obligation to preserve confidentiality and seek clearance for any memoirs. All

are bound by the Official Secrets Act.

