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Diplomats 'face lifetime gag' in new rules from Foreign Office

By Hugh Miles

THE Foreign Office was accused yesterday of trying to gag diplomats for life after regulations were issued stopping them from commenting on international issues even after retirement.

Serving officials have always been required to seek permission before giving media interviews, writing public letters, publishing books or taking part in conferences. This restriction applies if any of these activities would "draw upon experience gained during the course of official duties".

But a letter from the Foreign Office director of human resources, circulated to ambassadors and senior staff, effectively makes this a lifetime obligation. In a passage underlined for emphasis, the letter states that "your obligations of confidentiality continue after you have left the service".

All serving diplomats are asked to show they agree to the requirement. They are asked to note that their "particular attention" has been drawn to the regulations covering the "use of official information or experience" in "publications, contacts with the media, lectures, speeches and conferences".

A former ambassador said this amounted to a lifetime gag. "The Government attempt to gag diplomats is regrettable not only because it makes their assertions that they want more freedom of speech appear hypocritical, but also because it is ineffective," he said.

"Experience shows that the courts will not support arbitrary action by government, and that juries will not convict on laws they believe to be unjust."

Many retired diplomats have become keen bloggers on international affairs. Without Foreign Office clearance, their successors would be unable to do the same.

Retired senior officials have repeatedly embarrassed the Government by speaking out against what they have seen as major policy failures. Three years ago, 52 former ambassadors, high commissioners and other senior figures wrote a public letter to Tony Blair, then Prime Minister, criticising his Middle East policies.

In 2005, Sir Christopher Meyer, the former ambassador to Washington, published memoirs

which were deeply critical of some ministers. Critics believe that the latest regulations are designed to stop any repeat.

"Former ambassadors have a strong sense of loyalty to their country and a unique stock of experience and knowledge. It is in the national interest that they should be able to take part in the national debate on foreign policy," said the retired ambassador. "An individual may sometimes go too far, some of us think Christopher Meyer did, although he had Cabinet Office clearance for his book. But no real harm was done."

Last year, Sir Peter Ricketts, the permanent secretary at the Foreign Office, halted the tradition of ambassadors writing farewell despatches after a missive from Sir Ivor Roberts, the retiring envoy in Rome, was leaked. Sir Ivor, now president of Trinity College, Oxford, criticised what he saw as the Foreign Office's obsessions with management at the expense of policy advice.

Some rules and regulations governing diplomats' conduct have legal force while others do not. Testing the latest requirements in court may show they are illegal under the European Convention on Human Rights, which guarantees freedom of expression

