

# Hot Seat



## Tom Fletcher

Into his first term as British Ambassador, **Tom Fletcher** tells **Lucy Knight** how he is learning to watch his tongue.

### How are you settling in?

It's been almost two months and I'm now on my paternity leave. Overall it's gone pretty well. It's been absolutely exhausting. People are being very generous, so every night I'm out to a dinner until quite late.

### This is your first appointment as an ambassador. Has it been as you imagined, so far?

I suppose you're never off duty, and that's the thing I'm finding most difficult to adjust to. Pretty much if I'm out at a drinks thing or a dinner, anything I say might be interpreted or passed on. You can't make flip, offhand remarks about things.

### So you're learning to be very careful about what you say?

Definitely, I can't just say the first thing that comes into my head. It's a difficult balance, you've got to have respect for the position without letting it change the person. You could end up going around using this *langue du bois*: very flabby, diplomatic platitudes.

### At 36, are you the youngest ambassador?

I am at this level, senior

ambassador, but remember George Osborne was Chancellor at 39 and David Cameron was Prime Minister at 42. I feel like I'm in the right job. I've done many other jobs and so far this is the one I feel most comfortable with.

### And you volunteered for Lebanon?

I'd kind of fallen for Beirut when I was working in Paris. I knew a lot of Lebanese folk there and I thought the politics were that much more exciting out here, that much more raw. As an ambassador here you're actually in the political game.

### What do you want to achieve while here?

To still have a stable Lebanon that has weathered the shocks of change in Syria and elsewhere. Making the UK safer, and here that means trying to prevent conflict, trying to influence the wider Middle East region in the right direction, building up the Lebanese Army, increasing the capacity of the Lebanese Police to do their job. If you win the arguments for co-existence here, then you won't end up losing them in Manchester or London.

### What issues do you think the government should be focusing on?

Getting the electricity sorted, the high speed internet in so people can just get on with it, then sort out some of the corruption legislation. If they did just those three things on the economic side, I think it would make a massive difference. I keep banging on about giving 18 year olds the vote. If you look at the Arab Spring, you've got to engage youth and challenge them, or you lose them. The danger at the moment is that they just emigrate because they don't think there's a life for them here.

### Do you get any free time?

I don't have much, not since arriving. I play the piano—well enough for me to enjoy doing it and for Louise to just about tolerate it—but I wouldn't inflict it on guests. And some running.

### Have you had a chance to enjoy the nightlife?

Not properly, partly because I've just been so flat out on work and

partly because Louise is close to giving birth, so it didn't seem right to be charging around town. I came over and had a little recce without bodyguards and had a very good weekend.

### What's the coolest thing so far about being an ambassador?

The whole thing. I love going to the office and thinking, I'm in charge of this. I love that feeling of being in control of something. If I'm honest, sometimes I quite like arriving at a reception or something with the bodyguards. And you get to meet pretty amazing people.

### If your life had a theme song what would it be?

This is where I should come out with some terribly clever thing. I do love Freebird by Lynyrd Skynyrd and Black Eyed Peas always gets me going on the treadmill.

### If you weren't an ambassador what would you be?

I would probably be a journalist and a frustrated writer. We kind of are journalists except that no one reads our stuff. I'm sure William Hague reads it, but not many others.

### Where do you see yourself 20 years from now?

Probably writing a book actually. I think I'll be in a French farmhouse writing fiction.

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