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There is so much to gain from strengthening links with Iran

Last week on Radio 4's Today Programme, the presenter Matthew Price stated apocalyptically that "there will be some who view what is about to happen between Britain and Iran as a mistake of colossal historic proportions". What could this dreadful mistake be? Was someone about to declare war? Not quite.

Britain's Foreign Secretary, Philip Hammond, was re-opening our embassy in Tehran. The Iranians have done likewise in London. Britain has simply aligned itself with most of the world – among some 100 countries from Japan, Russia and Germany to China, Brazil and Mexico – who have full diplomatic ties with Iran.

In November 2011, a mob tacitly backed by elements of Iran's government stormed the British embassy in Tehran and rampaged through the compound, destroying paintings and damaging other property. Seven embassy staff were seized, though later rescued by Iranian police. The British government closed the embassy in Tehran and banned financial institutions in the UK from doing business with Iran. The Iranian ambassador in London was given 48 hours to leave.

The attack was condemned worldwide, including by the UN Security Council; a sine qua non of diplomacy is that embassies are sacrosanct. But diplomacy is not just with those we admire – it exists to advance our interests.

The nuclear deal created the space to re-establish ties with Tehran. The timing could not be more important.

As the cataclysm unfolds of the so-called 'Islamic State in Iraq and Syria' or ISIS – a cause to which Iran is bitterly opposed, but which attracts shocking numbers of British citizens to join the fight – it has become embarrassingly clear to Western policymakers that Iran and the West share a common interest.

The 'Sykes-Picot' boundaries of the Middle East drawn up in 1916



■ Richard Bacon, South Norfolk MP, in Tehran with Iranian foreign minister Javad Zarif. Left, some of the tasty treats on offer in a Tehran market.

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essential player.

Islam is riven between the Sunni, including 85 per cent of the world's Muslims, and the smaller Shia – comprising only 15 per cent – who nonetheless make up over 90 per cent of Iran's population and up to 70 per cent of Iraq's. The Sunni tend to coalesce around Saudi Arabia while the Shia look for leadership to Iran. There will be no lasting solution without the agreement of Saudi Arabia as chief protagonist for the Sunnis and of Iran representing the Shia.

Unfortunately, Britain's relations with Iran are tainted by imperial baggage which has left almost unique levels of suspicion and distrust, not just the 1953 British and CIA-backed coup but much besides. The Iranians remember the Americans shooting down a civilian airliner; Iran Air 655, on July 3 1988,

killing 290 passengers including 66 children, an incident almost entirely forgotten in the West; and also the US giving Saddam Hussein satellite imagery which he used in targeting chemical weapons against Iranians.

It is hard to overstate the effects of Iraq's aggressive war against Iran. As former Foreign Secretary Jack Straw put it: "We understand nothing about Iran if we do not understand the deep and still contemporary trauma that the Iran-Iraq war inflicted on Iranian society – the near-million killed and the sense of isolation which that war reinforced as one Western nation after another, the UK included, unworthily supported Iraq".

But a key component of Dr Rouhani's surprise election as President of Iran in 2013 was that Iranian voters actually want a normal relationship with the West. Despite the difficulties, Iranians often do look westwards and many have relatives here.

The diaspora includes more than three million Iranians in the US and some 350,000 in Britain. Indeed, there are more American PhDs in President Rouhani's Cabinet than in President Obama's. Dr Rouhani is an exception: he obtained his PhD in

Britain. The most significant benefit of reaching out to Iran is the strategic reach and insight which she offers in the Middle East at a critical moment. But we should not overlook the wider potential in education, commerce and cultural exchange. The truth is that Iran is better known to us than we realise.

We feel her influence every day, since Iran's language – Farsi – is Indo-European, unlike Arabic. Many words will seem strangely familiar, such as pedar (father), dokhtar (daughter), nam (name), dar (door), moush (mouse) and, strikingly, the suffix of the verb 'to be', am, as in the sentence 'I am an Iranian' – Irani-am. Iran's linguistic influence extends into our daily lives with words as varied as cheque, magic, papoose, caravan, kiosk, lemon and sugar.

As Maya Angelou wrote: "Perhaps travel cannot prevent bigotry, but by demonstrating that all peoples cry, laugh, eat, worry, and die, it can introduce the idea that if we try and understand each other, we may even become friends."

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A toast to all the marvellous tales from silly season

Negotiating the so-called "silly season" is not a breeze but we manage.

Traditionally this is when news is scarce because Parliament, footballers and just about everyone else are on holiday.

There have been some famously daft stories produced to tide the media over the period.

Currently, I note the BBC is eking out the Strictly Come Dancing news by drip feeding us a contestant a day.

Politics has been almost entirely confined to the Labour leadership contest which, though enlivened by a candidate people are warned to vote for at their peril, has not been oozing charisma.

It's a times like these you might be driven, in desperation, to watch cute baby animal videos on YouTube or be whipped into a frenzy by a picture of a potato crisp with the face of David Beckham.

Checking through some archive national newspaper stories published at this time of year it's hard to imagine a better front page picture than the one The Times gave us in August 2009 when it mourned the death of Benson, the carp. In the 1990s, The Sun's "Victor Meldrew found in space" is a marvellous thing, comprising a dot-to-dot image in stars of the sitcom grumpy pensioner, played by Richard Wilson.

This tabloid also gave us a page 13 "Invasion of the chipmunks" on a slow July day in the noughties.

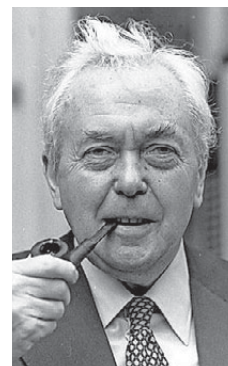
In August 1998 papers ran with the story of a Tynemouth policeman who reported that dive-bombing herring gulls had almost made his family "prisoners in our own home".

It was a lucky news day in 2008 when the Daily Mirror discovered prime minister David Cameron was spending his Cornish

holiday in a house haunted by a white witch called Mother Ivey.

In 1973, during his customary break in the Scilly Isles, then leader of the opposition Harold Wilson (pictured) slipped off a rubber dinghy and had to be rescued.

The world is a very serious place and it is good, from time to time, to be



reminded that silliness is okay too. It is generally inoffensive and at best makes us lighten up and smile and at worst, humph about muttering "and they call that news".

According to my online muse Wikipedia, silly season is also known as "cucumber time" in many places. The term, I read, was coined in 1861.

As Pimms dates back to 1823, I have jumped to my own, undoubtedly erroneous, conclusion that cucumber time may be associated with drinking this summer fruit cup (hic).