Episode Book

EPISODE #5791

How to Become an Honorary Consul for a Tiny Nation

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SYNOPSIS

A retired management consultant in a Welsh village runs a country's consulate out of his house — because his wife is from Kiribati and the president asked him in 1996. That's the whole qualification. So can you engineer it on purpose? This episode walks the actual mechanism: the 1963 Vienna Convention's split between career and honorary consuls, why only the sending state can nominate, the receiving state's exequatur veto, and the U.S. geographic filter that means you don't pick a country — you pick a country with a hole shaped like your city. Plus the Easter Island tour operator who "basically appointed himself," the Ethiopian architect whose consulate began with a stranded Icelandic motorcyclist, and the honest endgame: a plaque, a flag, business cards, and thirty to forty emails a week.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

A retired management consultant in a village in Wales, population about two thousand. His house is the consulate. The country he represents has three embassies on the entire planet, and one of them is a room in New York.



Herman

And his wife is from there. That's the whole qualification. He married a Kiribati woman, and in 1996 the president of Kiribati asked him to be the honorary consul. That's the job. That's how it happens.



Corn

So Daniel wants to know if you can engineer that on purpose.



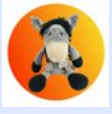
Herman

Right, because we did the institution a while back. What it is, roughly who does it. This one's different. Daniel's asking for the personal mission. Someone decides, cold, that they are going to become an honorary consul of somewhere. And he's flexible about the somewhere. Tiny Pacific island, country he's never been to, place his friends would have to look up.



Corn

He wants the playbook. Identify countries that might say yes to an unsolicited offer, find the right person to email, write the pitch, navigate the approval, and then, at the end of it, figure out what you've actually got. A plaque? A flag? A little flag for the desk is his phrase. He wants to know if the glamour survives contact with the actual job.



Herman

And the honest answer is yes, you can do this. It's been done. Repeatedly. By exactly the kind of person he's describing.



Corn

The catch is where the permission comes from. Which is not you.



Herman

Start with what the thing actually is. The 1963 Vienna Convention on Consular Relations splits consular officers into two categories. Career, and honorary. Career consuls are the ones with the foreign service exam and the posting and the pension. Honorary consuls are private citizens. Part-time, usually unpaid, and here's the structural oddity, they don't have to be nationals of the country they represent. A career consul carries the sending state's passport. An honorary one can be a citizen of the country they're sitting in. Or a third country entirely.



Corn

So a Welshman can represent Kiribati to the British.



Herman

And they rank below career heads of post in every class. That ordering is in the convention. It tells you what the institution thinks of them.



Corn

Now the part that kills most versions of this fantasy. The nomination.



Herman

Only the sending state can nominate. That's the embassy or the foreign ministry of the country you want to represent. Not you. France's foreign ministry says it flatly, only the embassy of the foreign state concerned is entitled to present a candidate for the office of honorary consul. Global Affairs Canada, same language. Honorary consuls are not self-appointed or self-re-appointed.



Corn

Which sounds like the door shutting.



Herman

It's a door with a very specific sign on it. Nobody but the sending state can walk through. But the sending state can only walk through if it has a candidate. And where do you think candidates come from?



Corn

They get volunteered.



Herman

The Easter Island case is the purest version of this. James Grant-Peterkin is a Scottish tour operator living on the island. A Finnish tourist vandalized one of the Moai. Grant-Peterkin, who had no official standing whatsoever, took it on himself to deal with the fallout, and somewhere in that process he approached the British embassy in Santiago and said, essentially, you should have someone out here. He describes the outcome as: I basically appointed myself.



Corn

He says it like that?



Herman

They were fairly surprised, he says, but in the end they thought it was a great idea. Britain is now the only country with consular representation on Easter Island. He runs it out of a wooden bungalow with a brass plaque on it. His car has the British coat of arms on the door.



Corn

So the door has a sign on it, and the way through is to make the embassy realize it wants a door.



Herman

That's the whole mechanism. Now the receiving state gets a veto too, and that's the piece people skip.



Corn

The exequatur.



Herman

The receiving state has to consent to the post existing and to the specific individual holding it. Then it issues the exequatur, which is the document that authorizes consular functions. Without it, you are a man with a plaque. You have no consular privileges, no standing, nothing. And using the title anyway can be a crime, which we'll get to, because the case is spectacular.



Corn

Two governments sign off and neither of them is you.



Herman

And then there's a third filter that's the most actionable thing in the whole episode. If you're in the United States, the State Department's Office of Foreign Missions has to approve the post. And it will not permit an honorary post in any metro area where the sending state already has a diplomatic mission or a consular post.



Corn

So you don't pick a country. You pick a country with a hole in it that happens to be shaped like your city.



Herman

That's the game. Check the embassy list first. If they've got a consulate within a reasonable drive, you're wasting your time, and no amount of determination changes it. The filter isn't about you at all. It's about geography.



Corn

Which tells you which countries to look at before you look at a single one of their foreign ministries.



Herman

Small and poor states. That's the target class, and it isn't an insult, it's arithmetic. Kiribati has three embassies in the world. Fiji, Taipei, and the UN mission in New York. Three. And nine honorary consulates. Michael Walsh, the man in Wales, puts it plainly. For a country as small and poor as Kiribati, overseas representation is just too expensive.



Corn

An embassy is a building, a staff, a diplomatic pouch, a school for the kids. A consulate that lives in somebody's house costs a flag.



Herman

Iceland has two embassies in all of Africa. Two, on a continent of fifty-four countries. Liechtenstein started establishing honorary consulates in 2004, appointed a batch between 2007 and 2009, and the stated purpose was to fill certain representational voids. That's the language they use. Voids.



Corn

You are applying to be a void-filler.



Herman

And states publish their criteria, which is generous of them. Sweden's list is the most usable one. Posts are established on a reciprocal basis. There has to be an identified need for consular services. The functions have to be meaningful and exercised regularly. Preferably a city that isn't rural. And they recommend it where the country has no mission in Sweden.



Corn

Reciprocal. Meaning Sweden wants one of its own somewhere in your country.



Herman

It helps. It's not a hard requirement in every case, but it's the kind of thing that turns a cold email into a conversation. Which brings us to the actual approach, and this is where I want to be honest about the limits.



Corn

Go on.



Herman

There is no published playbook for cold-emailing a foreign ministry and becoming honorary consul. I looked. Every documented case runs through the sending state's embassy or its foreign ministry. So the honest answer to Daniel's question is: you can pitch, but you cannot nominate. You are supplying the candidate. The state supplies the nomination. If you write to a foreign ministry and it works, it works because someone there decides you're worth the paperwork and starts the process on their side.



Corn

So the email isn't an application. It's a suggestion that arrives with the application already attached.



Herman

And the pitch has a shape. It's not a résumé. The thing that gets read is: I live in a city where you have nothing. I have been here this long. I'm connected to these institutions. I will work unpaid. And here's specifically what I'll do for your nationals, your trade, your students, your sailors who end up in the wrong port.



Corn

Concrete promises.



Herman

Concrete. Iceland's honorary consul in Ethiopia is the best illustration of how these actually begin. Abduselam Ademnur is an architect in Addis Ababa. In 2018 he helped a stranded Icelandic motorcyclist. That's it. That's the origin. The motorcyclist told Iceland's ambassador in Uganda, who flew to Addis Ababa to thank him personally. And then the process took years. He was appointed in 2025. Years of review, from a single good deed.



Corn

The ambassador flies out to thank you, and then you wait seven years.



Herman

Iceland's foreign minister joked that they need him for the next thirty years. Which tells you the other half of it. They weren't doing him a favor. They found someone good and they're holding on.



Corn

What are they actually checking in those years?



Herman

The receiving state's requirements, mostly. Twenty-one or over, in most cases. A citizen or permanent resident of the country where you'd be posted. No conflicting government position. Canada will only take Canadian citizens or permanent residents. France requires



Herman (continued)

that you be a permanent and tax resident in the place you'd serve. And then the softer things. Local connections. The financial resources to actually run an office, because the office is your house and the phone bill is your phone bill. A willingness to absorb costs without being asked to.



Corn

So the qualifications are mostly a demonstration that you're already doing the job.



Herman

The strongest candidates are people who were doing it before anyone asked them to.



Corn

What's the timeline once someone does say yes?



Herman

France says allow about two months for a reply, which is the government-speaking-for-itself version of we'll get to it. Australia's accreditation runs five years and is renewable. And the U.S. side is instructive. The State Department trusts foreign governments to vet their own nominees. A former assistant chief of protocol, Lawrence Dunham, put it in four words. It's on the honor system.



Corn

A thousand-odd honorary consuls in the United States and the vetting is a trust fall.



Herman

An estimated eleven hundred as of 2022. And there's a number that goes with it. Of the hundred and eighty-plus countries that could publish a list of their honorary consuls, forty-two actually do.



Corn

So the list of who represents whom is, in most cases, not a list.



Herman

Not a list anyone maintains. Which is fine when the system is working and catastrophic when it isn't, and that's the second half of the episode.



Corn

Before that, let's do the endgame. Daniel wants to know what you get. Plaque, flag, business cards, receptions, genuine privileges.



Herman

You get the plaque. You get the flag, and the flag is real, meaning you can fly it and it means something. You get business cards with a title on them that will make people at a dinner party ask a follow-up question. You may get diplomatic plates. Texas has issued or renewed over thirty-nine hundred honorary consul plates since 1994, so that's a real category of plate, not a novelty.



Corn

And privileges?



Herman

Much thinner than people assume. Australia's guidance is explicit that honorary consuls do not get immunity for traffic offenses. Your home does not acquire diplomatic status. You are not a diplomat in the sense that word gets used in movies. You are a private citizen with a mandate to perform certain consular functions, and the mandate is the only thing that's special about you.



Corn

What are the functions?



Herman

Helping nationals in trouble. Replacing lost passports, in theory. Visiting people in detention. Reporting on local conditions back to the ministry. Promoting trade. Attending the things a country needs a body at. Michael Walsh's actual workload is one to two hours a day and thirty to forty enquiries a week. And here's the detail that should deflate anybody's fantasy. After the EU liberalized travel, he issued almost no visas at all. The single most glamorous thing an honorary consul is imagined to do, stamping visas, went away, and what was left was the email.



Corn

Thirty to forty a week.



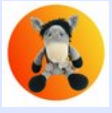
Herman

And the emails are not from Kiribati nationals. There are roughly fifty Kiribati-connected people in the whole of Britain, and about five of them are citizens. So the person writing to him is not a Kiribati citizen. It's somebody who wants to buy land in the Pacific and thinks the man with the flag can help, and he can't, because he isn't a real estate agent.



Corn

So you spend your unpaid afternoons explaining that you are not the thing people think you are.



Herman

Which is most of what any small official post actually does.



Corn

Now the dark half. The shadow diplomats investigation.



Herman

ICIJ and ProPublica, December 2022. They built a database of honorary consuls and found at least five hundred current or former ones implicated in crime or controversy. One in four of those had exploited the position for personal gain. And then the breakdown, which is worse than the headline. Over a hundred and fifty accused or convicted of tax evasion, fraud, bribery, corruption or money laundering. Around sixty tied to drug or weapons offenses. Thirty sanctioned. Nine linked to terrorist groups.



Corn

Nine.



Herman

Nine. Spain and Russia hosted the most controversial consuls, twenty-six and twenty-four. A law professor at Nova Southeastern, Bob Jarvis, said of the whole arrangement: no one is checking them out. What are we doing? Who are these people? And a banking compliance specialist, Sarah Beth Felix, said an honorary consul can be used much like a gatekeeper, and that it's a great way to run dirty money. That's the mechanism. A title that gets you past a front desk.



Corn

The vetting is a trust fall, and the reward is a title that opens doors.



Herman

Exactly the combination you'd design if you wanted this problem. And the U.S. number frames it. Eleven hundred posts, forty-two countries publishing lists, and a former protocol official saying it's on the honor system.



Corn

So when does it tip from irregular into criminal?



Herman

There's a very clean case, and it's clean precisely because it isn't about fraud at the start. A Bordeaux wine merchant was appointed honorary consul for a West African nation in 2022. Then in March 2024 he was detained at Charles de Gaulle. The issue wasn't that his appointment was fake. The issue was that he never received a French exequatur.



Corn

So he had the sending state's nomination and no receiving state's authorization.



Herman

And he operated anyway. He used diplomatic plates. He called himself His Excellency. He issued notarized statements and visa support letters. All of it without the one document that makes any of it lawful. He got a criminal investigation for misrepresentation, abuse of title, customs violations, and a suspended sentence.



Corn

The title without the exequatur isn't a lesser version of the title. It's a different legal object entirely, and it's the one with a criminal penalty attached.



Herman

That's the trap in one sentence. And then there's the version where the country isn't real at all. Harshvardhan Jain ran a fake embassy in Ghaziabad for a decade. He presented himself as ambassador and honorary consul of micronations. Westarctica. Seborga. Paulovia. Ladonia.



Corn

Those are all self-declared.



Herman

All self-declared. He had purchased honorary titles, fake diplomatic plates, and doctored photographs of himself with dignitaries. And the pitch was jobs abroad, to people who paid for the promise. He was arrested in July 2025. Ten years.



Corn

So the dark mirror is: if the real states won't have you, there's a whole counterfeit layer that will.



Herman

And it's cheaper. The micronation titles are for sale. Which is exactly why the real ones aren't.



Corn

So how much of the fantasy survives?



Herman

The fantasy of the plaque survives completely. You can get the plaque. The fantasy of the standing survives conditionally. It depends entirely on a document issued by a government that has never heard of you, on the strength of a nomination made by a government you had to persuade. And the fantasy of the glamour evaporates the first week, because the work is email.



Corn

Let's do a few more of the routes, because the routes are the fun part.



Herman

They are. Samoa. Tiumalu Geoffrey Clarke is a businessman who spent years promoting English cricket in Samoa, and in 2016 Pakistan made him its first honorary consul there. The qualification was cricket and connections, which is not a joke, that's the actual currency of the job.



Corn

Cyprus. A man named Joseph Borghese was appointed honorary consul of Tonga by royal decree of King Tupou VI, and the exequatur was granted by the president of Cyprus in January 2021. So in that case you can trace both halves of the thing, the decree and the exequatur, on the public record.



Herman

And then the ones that are just geography. A small yellow house in Chugiak, Alaska, is both a Lithuanian museum and an honorary consulate. Namibia named its honorary consul in Albany, Georgia, rather than Atlanta, which is a hundred and seventy miles away and has the airport and the population. Somebody in Windhoek looked at a map and picked Albany.



Corn

Why Albany?



Herman

Because the person who was willing to do the work lived in Albany.



Corn

There it is.



Herman

That's the whole answer. The post follows the person. It doesn't follow the city.



Corn

Which is the strongest argument that this is achievable with a laptop and a spreadsheet, and also the reason it's dangerous, because the same "we don't really look" that lets a retired consultant in Llanddewi Rhydderch do good work lets a man in Ghaziabad run a fake embassy for ten years.



Herman

The looseness is not a bug in the system. The looseness is the system. Small states can't afford anything else.



Corn

Daniel's question, could an ordinary but persistent person bootstrap themselves in. The answer is yes, with a condition, and the condition isn't effort. The condition is that at some point a foreign government has to want you specifically.



Herman

You can't appoint yourself. But you can make yourself appointable. Those are different verbs and the whole episode is the distance between them.



Hilbert

Four hundred and sixty dollars. That's what the seal cost.



Herman

The seal?



Hilbert

Brass. About the size of a half dollar. My second cousin twice removed on my mother's side was honorary consul for one of those little European principalities. The consulate was the garage. Converted. Desk in the back, flag on the desk, two chairs for visitors, one of which had a wobble. And the seal lived in a Tupperware container, because the good box was full of Christmas decorations.



Herman

The Tupperware was the archive.



Hilbert

Now, the hosts here are right that the glamour goes. Nobody's arguing. But they've missed the best part of the job, which was the parking. There was a designated spot at the airport. Diplomatic. I used it every time I flew in. I was not, strictly, allowed to.



Corn

How many times?



Hilbert

Every time. It's a good spot. Close to the terminal.



Corn

Did anyone ever stop you?



Hilbert

Once. I said I was there on consular business, and that was that. Now the actual consular work, the one real case I know of, was two of their nationals and a stolen bicycle. Neighbors. Both from the same town. It had gone on for months. The official report on that matter was three sentences long and it was written on a napkin, because the printer was out of paper and had been for a while.



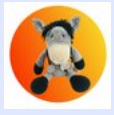
Herman

The napkin was the official record.



Hilbert

The napkin got stamped. Which answers the question you're about to ask, Herman.



Herman

I was going to ask how often the seal came out.



Hilbert

Once. One time. The neighbor's cat needed an international travel certificate. That is not a real document. The neighbor wanted one anyway. So the seal came out of the Tupperware and it went on the form.



Herman

For a cat.



Hilbert

It flew. The cat was fine.



Corn

Of course it was.



Hilbert

Then when my cousin retired, they offered the post to me. I said no. Two hours a day was required, and I don't spend two hours a day on my taxes.



Herman

You turned down a consulate.



Hilbert

I turned down a consulate. I still have the cards. They're printed up. I hand them out at funerals. People take them, they don't say anything, and it saves everybody having to talk.



Corn

Does the card say honorary consul?



Hilbert

It says consulate. It doesn't say of what. The second line is a phone number that hasn't worked since the garage.



Herman

The Tupperware seal endures, the phone number doesn't.



Hilbert

I've got a levels pass to run on this recording, so finish up.



Corn

The trade-off is the thing I keep turning over. Five hundred consuls implicated in crime or controversy, out of a system whose vetting is described by the man who used to run the vetting as an honor system. And yet the same looseness is what put a tour operator on Easter Island and a retired consultant in a village in Wales, both of whom did real work for real people.



Herman

Tighten it and the small states lose the tool. Leave it and the fraudsters keep finding the gap.



Corn

The gap is the exequatur. It's the one bright line in the whole thing. Everything on one side is legitimate and mostly thankless. Everything on the other side is a man calling himself His Excellency at an airport with plates he shouldn't have.



Herman

If you're going to try it, the plaque is not the goal. The piece of paper from the receiving state is the goal.



Corn

Thanks to Hilbert Flumingtop, our producer, who has a consulate card in his wallet and a phone number that doesn't work.



Herman

This has been My Weird Prompts. Send us your own prompt on Telegram at t dot me slash MWP listener bot.



Corn

We'll be back soon.

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