
British Diplomatic Oral History Programme

Sir Mervyn Brown

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British Diplomatic Oral History Project

Interview with Mervyn Brown on 24th October 1996

Recorded by Malcolm McBain.

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M.M. How did you come to join the Diplomatic Service?

M.B. When I was at school I quite liked the idea of going into the Diplomatic Service. My best subjects were history, geography and French which all seemed very relevant. I had no family or any other connections with the Diplomatic Service, but it seemed very glamorous and a worthwhile job. However, my academic career was interrupted by the war and I lost the habit of study somewhat and I thought: well, it's going to be too difficult to get into that Service so I opted for teaching and went through the motions of getting a teaching diploma and started teaching; and then I got engaged and my wife was rather keen on the Diplomatic Service and said; why don't you give it a go? So I did. And probably because I was relaxed and not really expecting to succeed I managed to get in.

M.M. Wonderful. And so you were first appointed to the Foreign Office direct and did you receive a posting more or less straight away?

M.B. Within a year, to Buenos Aires.

M.M. Now that would have been 1950. How did you find the situation in Buenos Aires?

M.B. Well, it was a very good first posting. It was a medium-sized Embassy with a good mixture of diplomatic and other kinds of work. I was in fact Third Secretary in Chancery so I did mostly political work, also general Embassy work. It was from the living point of view very glamorous because I went from wartime austerity, which we still had in 1950, to the land of plenty which Argentina was in those days, huge steaks, half a pound of butter with each dish of vegetables and so on. I put on about 20 lbs in about six months! Then I had to take it off again! But it was very interesting politically, because of course it was the heyday of Peron and Evita and I actually shook the hand of Evita on two occasions. I was there when she died - a very interesting political situation. A year before she died she tried to become Vice President and mustered a lot of support and organised some

great manifestations in support of herself; but then the army realized that if she became Vice President and President Peron disappeared she would become President and Commander in Chief. The Argentine is very macho and so they formed up to the President and said she cannot become Vice President. So she had to withdraw her candidacy and a year later she died. So it was very interesting to see the Peronista regime at its height. And, of course, we also had the echoes of the Falklands dispute which was still rankling with the Argentines. From time to time they had demonstrations on this and in fact while we were there, there was a dispute, not about the Falkland Islands but about what we call the Falkland Islands Dependencies, the Antarctic territory, which was, and I think still is, subject to dispute. Peron was pursuing a very aggressive line and he had set up a base quite close to one of our bases in the Antarctic and then in a rather provocative way his chaps came and set up a base on one of our airstrips.

M.M. When was that?

M.B. 1952, I think it was. However, our Prime Minister in those days was one Winston Churchill who wouldn't want them to get away with that. So what happened was a frigate was sent down and it was done in a polite, very civilized way. The frigate had some marines on board and it also took down a magistrate from the Falkland Islands and a couple of policemen and these policemen and the magistrate evicted these Argentine interlopers on the basis of Falkland Island legislation - like immigrating without a permit etc.! So that was a slap in the face for Peron which we wanted to keep quiet. So we said we are not going to publicize this - we have kicked you out but we don't want to crow over it; just keep quiet; but somebody got wind of it and publicized it. So the Argentines had to react and there were demonstrations against the Embassy, with the slogan 'Maté si, whisky non'; maté is a herbal tea which is their national drink.

M.M. What were our commercial relations with Argentina at that time?

M.B. Well, they were very important. We still had bulk buying of meat. I remember when we arrived (we went out by sea, of course, in those days). The meat negotiations were going on and I was hauled in from the hotel at 10 pm to do some deciphering. Once a year we had these meat negotiations; the Argentines were pushing up the price all the time and so the negotiations were rather bitter; but it was a very big market for us also. Britain had been very much involved in Argentina in the years before the war; people used to call

it the sixth member of the Commonwealth because British interests were so important in transport, in railways, in tramways and the meat packing stations, insurance; we ran all that kind of thing. When Peron came in he nationalised quite a lot of the railways, tramways etc.. A lot of my work was dealing with the question of pensions for former rail workers and so on. We had a very large commercial section headed by a Minister and a Counsellor.

M.M. Was there a large British community?

M.B. Yes, there was. There again, it was probably the biggest outside the Commonwealth, probably, I think, about 45 thousand; some of them had been there for 5 generations. They were involved in ranching and then railways, tramways, insurance, banking and that kind of thing. And still some of them, after 5 generations, spoke Spanish with a strong British accent; and there was a suburb where they lived called 'Hurlingham' in fact! It was built around the Hurlingham Club, which is one of the most magnificent sporting clubs anywhere in the world. The only grass courts in South America, polo fields, bowls, a marvellous club house, it was a great centre.

M.M. So following Buenos Aires you were then posted to, was it directly to UKMIS New York?

M.B. Yes, directly, with just a bit of leave in between. I was posted to the economic and social section so I didn't deal directly with political matters. The Economic and Social Council meets once a year in New York and once a year in Geneva so it meant that every summer we went to Geneva which was a very pleasant diversion and in the General Assembly we dealt with the economic and social committees. We had one boss of the section, and one person doing economic work and I did the social and human rights work; this was very good training in diplomacy generally, perhaps more so in the Economic and Social Council and various committees than on the political committees for a young officer. If you were a young officer dealing with political matters you would be sitting in seat no. 3 or 4 or 5 with perhaps the Foreign Secretary and Ambassador in seats no. 1 and 2 but in the ECOSOC committees I would be sitting in at least the no. 2 chair and sometimes even in the no. 1 chair myself. One got practice in talking in public and debating and negotiating. There was a great deal of negotiating in committees and so on and one learnt a lot about the attitudes of different types of countries. It was a very good general training in

diplomacy. It was not particularly glamorous or exciting; one rarely had any major issues, but it was good training. Compared with a normal diplomatic post, where you spend most of your time in an office and go out occasionally to meet people, so you don't have an enormous amount of contact with foreigners, in the UN you are meeting, discussing, debating with foreign delegations all the time; so from that point of view it was a very good training.

M.M. Could you give an example of a typical problem that would be dealt with by ECOSOC?

M.B. Yes, on human rights the big current of opinion in the 1950's in the UN was anti-colonialism because some of the third world countries had recently got their independence like India, Pakistan, Ceylon, Egypt and so on and of course the Latin American countries regarded themselves as anti colonial. So their main objective in the UN was to get the colonial powers to de-colonise as quickly as possible. The other theme which went on for many years afterwards, of course, was apartheid and Namibia which were special cases. But human rights was rather like the tendency in the 60s and 70s to turn every subject for debate in the UN into a forum for attack on South Africa; similarly any subject we discussed in the UN in the 1950's became an attack on the colonial powers and this was true of human rights a lot of the time. I spent a lot of time in the Human Rights Commission and in the Third Committee of the General Assembly and of course the report of the Human Rights Commission was taken in ECOSOC and then in the General Assembly and you would have the same debate perhaps repeated several times. And the subject became specifically anti colonial in the debate on the International Covenants on Human Rights which were being discussed and, I think, were eventually adopted by the UN - because in the draft covenants, the first article was 'all peoples shall have the right to self determination'. The anti colonial lobby was very keen to get this adopted because this was the legal basis for their insistence that the colonial countries should be liberated. So we, the colonial powers, combined to try and resist this. It was a very bad article as a legal document - how do you define 'peoples' - does Northern Ireland have the right to self determination? Do the Somalis in Ethiopia have the right to self determination? Does Kashmir have the right to self determination?

So we had some very interesting debates there but in the end logic didn't matter; this was a basic principle of anti-colonialism. We put up a very good fight and only lost in the end by a very small number of votes. That was the sort of subject which raised most

passions but there were also things like the status of women which again was a useful way of attacking colonial powers; although I do remember that one of the leaders of the anti-colonial lobby in the Third Committee was a chap representing Saudi Arabia although he was a Christian Lebanese. He was a very eloquent chap. He would question us on why women didn't have the vote and he would say his piece about the colonial countries where women didn't have the vote, whereupon he was demolished by a splendid lady from India called Mrs. Menon, if I remember, and she came sweeping in in her sari and said 'how is it that this gentleman from Saudi Arabia can criticise the lack of vote for women in colonial countries when in his country even the men do not have the vote'; so that was a moment of humour. Human rights was the main issue I dealt with but there were special committees on the status of women, the population commission, the narcotics commission - I learnt a lot about narcotics then and the population commission. I realised then in the '50's that the great, the greatest, danger facing the world was not the atomic bomb but the population explosion which I think is still true today.

M.M. Going back to the anti-colonial movement, do you think that the people who used to rail against the colonial powers were doing so out of pure motives or was it part of the cold war?

M.B. It was part of the cold war in that the Soviet Union often took the lead in this and egged on the third world countries. The Soviets used their influence and possibly their financial influence to buy votes, I would say. And one had this extraordinary difference of attitude towards, on the one hand, Western colonial powers and, on the other, Soviet imperialism which was totally disregarded; and I think someone in the Colonial Office described this as the salt water fallacy - it was wrong to acquire colonies across salt water but it was all right to acquire colonies over land; and so the vast Soviet empire that was accumulated in the 19th century was disregarded for criticism - these were all just part of the USSR. They were semi-independent members of the federation. But one interesting feature of the UN in those days which is less obvious now - at the conference setting up the UN in San Francisco it was agreed to balance the fact that Britain had various Commonwealth members having independent votes by allowing the Soviet Union to have separate votes for Belorussia and the Ukraine which pretended to be independent. There were several funny occasions when there was a vote and the Soviet representative put up his hand and the Belorussian and the Ukrainian put up their hands and then the Soviet adviser would whisper in his representative's ear and the chap would say I am very sorry

I misunderstood the question I should have voted against instead of abstaining whereupon immediately the Belorussian and the Ukrainian would have to say exactly the same thing; they had to toe the line rigidly.

M.M. An interesting situation really. I suppose it is arguable that there was no point in criticising the Soviet Union at the UN because they wouldn't do anything in response.

M.B. Yes, I think that is true; and one reason why people have always attacked the British government in that kind of situation is that they are very responsive to public opinion. And also, of course, within our own country there were a lot of people who believed in anti colonialism as well and sympathised with the peoples of the colonial countries and wanted us to give them independence as soon as possible.

M.M. That is very interesting. Thank you. So after your time in New York, Sir Mervyn, you came back to the Foreign Office and what was your job there?

M.B. Well, I was posted to the Africa Department and I was told that I was going to be responsible for the Sudan desk. I should say at that stage I had no experience whatsoever of the Middle East. The Africa Department in those days only dealt with North Africa and the Horn of Africa because the rest of Africa was either under the Colonial Office or Commonwealth Office or the French Colonial Office and so the Foreign Office did not deal with the rest of Africa. So it was North Africa and principally Egypt and, of course, the Department became very much involved in the Middle East. I was posted to the Sudan desk but when I arrived there, at the office, I was told that the officer responsible for the Suez Canal desk, the Suez Canal and Nile Waters desk, was going on leave prior to a posting and would I therefore take over the Suez Canal desk. This was five weeks after Nasser had nationalised the Canal so the crisis was going absolutely full blast! So here I am, my first day in the office, the desk officer for Suez and it was the most hectic time I ever had in the Service; from the time I arrived, I think, one worked late at night to nine or ten on six, sometimes seven, days a week with maybe one afternoon off. At the time we were looking for a house and my wife would spend the week looking at houses and then on my one Saturday or Sunday afternoon off I would go and look at the ones she had chosen. So it was a very hectic time indeed. I remember on my very first day being asked to take a note of a meeting between Selwyn Lloyd and Mr. Spaak, the Belgian Foreign Minister when they were

discussing what was called operation 'Pile Up' which was the withdrawal of the pilots from the Suez Canal who were supposed to have great expertise; and it was assumed that once these were withdrawn the whole operation would collapse; but of course, as so often, the experts' expertise was grossly exaggerated. There was a splendid letter in 'The Times' from an ex Commander RN saying 'I don't know what all this fuss is about expertise. I took my destroyer through the Suez Canal in 1942 without a pilot. Just steered straight down the middle'. So we had this extraordinary experience which of course just now is the 50th anniversary of the invasion practically. We knew that Eden was raring to go and send in troops but he couldn't find the excuse. In fact we were doing our normal Foreign Office job of trying to resolve the crisis by diplomatic means and we had these conferences in London in August and September and there was this idea of Dulles's of setting up a Suez Canal Users Association; and we attended those conferences. This was an organisation that was going to be set up with its headquarters in London - all the maritime nations would join and the idea was that the people going through the canal should pay their dues to the Suez Canal Users Association or SCUA and this would humiliate Nasser etc., etc. I remember one of the most wasted days of my life; I spent a whole Sunday in the office drafting a convention for privileges and immunities for the staff of SCUA which turned out to be a total waste of time. Then the timing was such that when the General Assembly of the UN started meeting in September there was no way that this subject could be kept away from them. Negotiations between Selwyn Lloyd and the Egyptian Foreign Minister Fawzi ended up quite successfully and a resolution was adopted in the Security Council with 6 points for the settlement of the Suez Canal crisis. This met all our legitimate interests in that it guaranteed free passage for all nations and compensation for shareholders of the Suez Canal Company; it guaranteed that money would be spent on improving and maintaining the canal, all that kind of thing. We couldn't legally object to the nationalisation; it was a company within the boundaries of Egypt and therefore they had a right to do this. But Eden wasn't happy, - his aim was to overthrow Nasser - he didn't want a settlement, he wanted a situation which would provoke Nasser into doing something which would give us an excuse to invade. Meanwhile an armed invasion force was being built up in Malta ready to go. It couldn't be kept there indefinitely so in October there was this extraordinary secret meeting where the French agreed with Eden, Selwyn Lloyd and the Israelis that the French and British would go in on the back of an Israeli attack and we in the Office below a very high level knew nothing at all about it. I believe even the Permanent

Under Secretary was kept in the dark. The Assistant Under Secretary was brought in just after the decision had been taken; there was no question of advice being asked because of course the advice would have been against it. So the first we knew about this was when we opened our papers on the way to the Office and saw the headlines 'Bombs away' with British aircraft bombing Egyptian airfields. That was a most astonishing thing and the hostility towards Eden in the Office was quite remarkable. I doubt whether there has been any issue in modern times where the Office has been so united on a matter of policy. I think that Suez was a disaster, a major disaster, and one reason was that the Prime Minister took foreign policy into his own hands and ignored the Foreign Office or didn't consult the Foreign Office because he knew it would be against him. It reminds one a bit of Munich where Chamberlain took foreign policy into his own hands; but that in a way was less of a disaster because there is an argument, a good argument, to be made for the appeasement policy Chamberlain had at that time. It turned out to be mistaken but in the Foreign Office and within the country generally there were quite a lot of people who supported it. But in the Foreign Office I don't think there was a single person who supported what turned out to be Eden's policy on Suez and also life was made very difficult for us, in the department, especially myself on the desk, because of Eden's constant interference from No.10. Prime Ministers are supposed to leave Foreign Secretaries to get on with the business of running foreign policy; they may from time to time attend some of the conferences but Eden, of course, had been Foreign Secretary for perhaps 12 years or so before then and just couldn't leave Selwyn Lloyd alone. Every day we would get a telephone call or a letter from No.10 saying the Prime Minister has seen Cairo telegram so and so and would like to know how you propose to reply or would suggest you should reply in the following terms. All this doubled the amount of work; in addition to drafting a reply to the telegram you had to draft a reply to No.10 saying why you were doing what you were doing and why you didn't agree with the Prime Minister. There was one particular episode where Eden's great argument was 'the thumb on our wind pipe' - that we couldn't allow Nasser to have control of the Suez Canal which was an absolute essential lifeline for the British economy; which of course was absolute rubbish. It was as a result of Eden's policy that the canal was closed. The policy was supposed to keep the canal open; the direct result was it was closed for about a year. Our economy didn't suffer. We just built bigger tankers that went around the Cape. Anyway he was trying to develop this argument, saying that if Nasser can close the Canal, then perhaps we should look at the possibilities of cutting off the Nile waters! Imagine, we

were asked to look at the feasibility of this. It was incredible that he should equate the two because if you had been able to cut off the Nile waters and stop the flood waters reaching Egypt then there would have been no harvest and perhaps millions of Egyptians would have died of starvation. So that wasn't possible at all, apart from the morality of the thing. My desk was ...; I still kept the Sudan bit going, but the desk I was spending most of my time on was called Suez Canal and Nile Waters so I had had to become an instant expert on the Nile waters. I was able to explain that most of the flood water came from the Blue Nile from Ethiopia, which we could not control but we could control the waters of the White Nile which came from Lake Victoria via the Owen Falls Dam in Uganda. We could in theory cut off the water at the Dam but the water from Lake Victoria took 9 months to get to Egypt going through the swamps in southern Sudan. So if you did take this decision it would be nine months before it had any effect. So it wasn't a very effective weapon in this war and of course it would damage the Sudan before it would damage Egypt; and moreover, in order to stop the water, you would have to raise the level of the dam by a considerable amount which would flood vast areas of Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania; so on the whole we concluded it wasn't a very good idea. I rather enjoyed writing that!

M.M. Who did that minute go to? How was this argument conducted?

M.R. Well it was a letter from the Private Secretary of No 10 Downing Street to the Private Secretary of the Foreign Secretary which was then referred to us for us to draft a reply. So I drafted the reply from Private Secretary to Private Secretary which would then go up, via the Head of Department. We then heard nothing more. So the feeling against Eden was already fairly strong because of the way he was interfering in these things and making wild suggestions and then boiled over when the invasion was actually launched in this very underhand way. The worst way you could do this was to go in as the allies of the Israelis and the French who were also hated by the Arabs because of what they were doing in Algeria. And this was something that wasn't hindsight; one knew instantly that this was leading to disaster and would do very serious damage to our position in the Middle East. So we were absolutely furious with Eden. I remember very early on maybe the next day after the announcement of the ultimatum Eden was leaving No.10 to go and make a statement in the House and our offices were on the second floor in Downing Street overlooking No.10. We couldn't actually see the crowd but we heard the cheer, from the crowd in front of No.10 as he went out so the whole of the Department as one man rushed to the window and booed Eden, which I think must be unprecedented in the history

of the Foreign Office but that was the strength of feeling!

M.M.. Would he have heard?

M.B. No, unfortunately; there were only about half a dozen of us in this room and we were two floors up, the crowd was cheering below; we rather wished he had.

MM Were there any resignations?

M.R. I think that there were two people, not in our Department. I think that in our Department we were so busy that we wouldn't have had time to write a resignation letter! And I think also we felt that it was our duty to help clear up the mess. I think there were two resignations, one I think was Evan Luard who later went into politics; the other one became a journalist. There were many people in the Foreign Service who felt they ought to resign and formed up to the Head of Personnel Department who was, John Henniker, - you may remember John Henniker, an absolutely first class man, - and he felt that it was his duty to dissuade them, saying, 'no, it is not the job of civil servants to resign; it is the job of politicians to resign; it is our job to keep going; there is a very great deal to do'. Because once the decision was taken to withdraw there was a tremendous amount to clear up - compensation to the British community who were expelled and the negotiations to put in the UN force. So there was a lot to do. The main resignation was Anthony Nutting and he as it were preserved the honour of the Foreign Service. I admired him very much. I had already worked with him a little bit in New York because as Minister of State he had come out to the General Assembly and I had got to know him there. During the Suez crisis I attended a number of meetings which he had attended with Selwyn Lloyd and it was apparent that he was not happy with the militaristic view of the plans to invade Egypt. So he was in on the very early talks at Chequers where the decision to take part in this plot was taken He then told Eden that he would like to resign but he delayed out of loyalty until a week after the troops had gone in; but the result was that his career was destroyed; a very great pity.

M.M. What about other international repercussions? How did we get out of the mess?

M.R. Well, I think we only got out of the mess because of our reputation build up over the years of good behaviour and our great reputation at the end of the War. The fact that we had many genuine friends who I think recognised that it was an aberration of Eden himself; and

therefore, although the immediate repercussions were severe, they didn't last too long, especially after Eden resigned. But it did seriously weaken our position in the Middle East and it did the opposite of what was intended; it strengthened Nasser's position. The idea was to destroy Nasser but in fact it strengthened his position because he was the hero of a resistance against imperialistic forces. About 18 months later came the collapse of the Iraqi monarchy and our friend Nuri el Said, the Prime Minister, who was a great friend of Britain. During the early days of the bombardment our Ambassador in Baghdad - who was Sir Michael Wright, - was absolutely desperate - he said, "how can you pretend that what you are doing is an impartial dividing of the forces when you are bombing Egypt and doing nothing against Israel. Can't we drop just one bomb on Israel?" But, of course, he got no reply to it because obviously we couldn't bomb what was our ally. But Wright told us that this would be a desperate blow to our friends in Iraq and 18 months later there was the coup in which King Faisal and Nuri el Said were assassinated and replaced by a regime hostile to us; and Iraq has remained hostile to us ever since. It weakened our position and strengthened Nasser and therefore strengthened his hand in Africa because he was conducting propaganda against our position in Africa as well. So it was a major disaster. And it was a miracle that the damage wasn't greater.

M.M. Well, a fascinating period of time. When did you finish in the Foreign Office at that stage.

M.B. I had about two and a half years altogether; in fact, I only had four months from the September to December on the Suez desk. I was replaced by about four people – they set up a whole new section under an Assistant Head of Department to cope with the aftermath. So I was taken off Suez and put back on Sudan but as it was hardly a full time job I kept taking over other desks as well so I became a sort of trouble shooter; and I was put on the Libyan desk at one time which was quite exciting. It was very shortly after the independence of Libya. Then I was put onto the Maghreb, North West Africa; it was a very busy time because of the Algerian war and also there was a major Tunisian crisis when French troops, pursuing some of the Algerian rebels who had taken refuge in Tunisia, crossed the frontier and attacked a place called Sakiet, I think. This required a major diplomatic initiative with senior officials from the State Department and the Foreign Office going out there to try and sort it out.

And then I was also for a time dealing with the Horn of Africa, another tricky time because of Somaliland; in those days we had the French colony of Djibouti, British Somaliland and Italian Somaliland and our policy was, in fact to unite the British and Italian territories into Somalia

which was agreed but was very unwelcome to the Ethiopians because a large number of Somalis live inside Ethiopian territory; and interestingly there was pressure from the anti-colonial people for us to decolonise Italian Somaliland and British Somaliland but with Ethiopian Somaliland of course there was no question; they couldn't possibly have that! Ethiopia as an African country couldn't be a colonial power; in fact Ethiopia was an imperial power and there had been a partition of Somaliland just like the partition of Poland a hundred and fifty years earlier - in which it had been partitioned between Britain, France, Italy and Ethiopia, Ethiopia taking a very substantial slice; and therefore, if you didn't have this curious attitude that only Europeans can be colonialists, they should have insisted on Ethiopia giving up its Somali territory to this new Somalia. So at any rate the fact that we were pushing for a united Somalia was very unwelcome to the Ethiopians and we had a rather difficult time with our relations with them.

M.M. Going back to events after Suez, did you have any impression of how our relationship with the French developed? Because they had been our allies and then, of course, we pulled out of the military action.

M.B. I think that they were bitterly disappointed and then accusing us of being 'Albion perfide' having gone in with them and then let them down at the last minute. I think that this certainly did have an impact on our relations. On the other hand, governments in France at that time were succeeding each other about every six weeks; therefore there wasn't the continuity and they became more and more absorbed in their Algerian crisis. I think relations with France did improve reasonably soon. It was the people directly involved at the time who, of course, were very bitter about being let down. My view is that there was no way in which we could have stayed on in the Canal. The view has been expressed in the context of this 50 year anniversary that we should have gone on to the end of the canal, that this would have made all the difference. I do not think that there is any truth in this at all. Whether we stopped at the other end of the canal or 20 miles down it we would have been forced to pull out because of American pressure; one of the biggest follies of this was disregarding the views of the Americans and the Commonwealth and all our friends. Eisenhower in particular, was absolutely furious because we did this without telling him three days before his re-election and therefore, when there was the run on the pound - inevitable from this act of folly, - when Macmillan appealed to the Americans for financial support, - they said "not unless you pull out". So there was no way we could have continued.

M.M. Thank you very much for that. So after this very hectic and exhausting period in London you then went to Singapore in 1959. What sort of situation did you find there?

M.B. Well, I was posted to the office of the Commissioner General for S.E Asia, not actually to the Singapore government itself. It just happened to be that this office was situated in Singapore and it was connected with the military forces out there and the Commissioner General was also Commander in Chief of the forces. He was a Foreign Office man but he was head of the British Defence Co-ordinating Committee which was a sort of collegiate commander in chief, consisting of him as chairman and the officers commanding the Army, Navy and the Air force. Our job in the Foreign Office was really to provide support to this military establishment, rather like the Joint Intelligence Committee and the Joint Planning Committee do in Whitehall. In fact, I worked successively as a Foreign Office member of the S.E. Asia Joint Intelligence Committee and then the S.E. Asia Joint Planning Committee. So it was an unusual job for a Foreign Service Officer. Most of my time was spent working with the military and attending meetings of SEATO - South East Asia Treaty Organisation, which was still going, - once a month in Bangkok. Then once a year we had Council meetings in one of the capitals of a SEATO power. The year I was there it took place in Washington so I had a nice trip round the world to Washington and back. One could observe Singapore politics, although one wasn't involved in the situation. Lee Kuan Yew, a fiery left wing politician, came to power for the first time. Because I was there when the elections were set up for local government which provided autonomy but not full independence and this fiery left wing chap - we thought it would be awful if he gets control. I remember on the night of the elections we were told not to go into town because they thought there might be riots. In fact we decided to go into town and everything was very, very quiet and, of course, in time Lee Kuan Yew became the most conservative leader in Asia.

M.M. Do you recall who the Commissioner General was?

M.B. Yes, well there were two in my time; Sir Robert Scott, a very fine man who had been in the Consular Service and he had also specialised on the information side. He had been in Singapore when the Japanese came, he escaped on a ship which was then bombed; he then got away on a boat that landed in Indonesia. He was captured and taken to Changi jail; and this wasn't reported so everyone thought he was dead. He is one of the very few

men who read his own obituary in 'The Times'! There is a nice little story about that; 'The Times' correspondent was someone called Bill Morrison, a famous Far East correspondent, who had this liaison with Han Suyin and her book 'Love is a Many Splendoured Thing' is about their love affair. And after the war Rob Scott apparently said to Bill Morrison 'thanks very much for writing my obituary; I will do the same for you sometime'. And he did, because Bill Morrison died in an air crash and Rob Scott wrote his obituary. He was followed by Lord Selkirk who was a politician.

M.M. I am just going back to Lee Kuan Yew, recalling I knew Malcolm MacDonald quite well for a time. He always claimed that he had recommended that Lee Kuan Yew should be regarded as a sound and sensible chap but MacDonald had been Commissioner General, the first one, before Rob Scott.

M.B. He was first of all Governor General of Malaysia and then when the Malayan part became independent he became Commissioner General, the very first one.

M.M. Could you tell us very briefly what SEATO was up to in those days?

M.B. Well, it was set up, I think, in the aftermath of the French Indo China wars leading to the independence of Vietnam - although it was divided into North and South Vietnam, of course. This was the time when Dulles was Secretary of State under Eisenhower and it was the time of McCarthyism in Washington; so North Vietnam falling to the communists was regarded as a great disaster and SEATO was really set up to stop communism spreading any further in S.E. Asia. So we had defence plans and military plans on what to do if South Vietnam was invaded or there was a coup in Thailand or what to do about Laos. So that is essentially what it was doing, to stop the spread of communism. Because the Americans believed in the domino theory in those days.

M.M. The domino theory did look quite plausible at that time.

M.B. Yes, it did; but I think like many of those situations in S.E. Asia the problem was a political one not a military one and we would have done better to devote our energies to working for a political solution rather than a policy of supporting anyone, however unsuitable, who was opposed to communism, which led the Americans to support some very dubious characters.

M.M. Indeed. But in the Federation of Malaya we had succeeded, had we not?

M.B. Oh yes, there was a case where military action was successful but it was also combined with political action because essentially the thing which defeated the insurgency in Malaya was the granting of independence. Once they had become independent then the rebels were attacking the Malaysians rather than the British.

M.M. The solution being political rather than military. I think you were commenting on the validity of the domino theory.

M.B. Well, yes. As I say, the trouble about these theories is that you never know. You can't test it scientifically by recreating the situation and following another policy; but my experience, which perhaps I can go into in more detail when I talk about Laos, is that the best defence against communist expansion is nationalism and you should encourage the nationalism of countries under threat. A lot of countries, colonial countries, when they are approaching independence appear to be communist because they accept communist aid, because they don't get aid from anywhere else, because they won't get aid from other colonial countries and the only other countries which are going to give them help are the Soviet Union or China. But as soon as these countries become independent they want to be independent, they don't want communist control any more than they want colonial control. Lee Kuan Yew is a case in point; he was regarded as a dangerous communist because he did get support from the Russians while he was clamouring for independence; once he had got it he didn't want anyone else telling him what to do.

M.M. He was a remarkable man. Then after Singapore you went off to Vientiane: what was your position there?

M.B. I was No. 2 to the Ambassador and Head of Chancery.

M.M. Who was?

M.B. John Addis. A remarkable man who was posted to China in the late '40's and was very cross. He was very cross because, like most diplomats of his generation, he thought that the best jobs were in Europe but he became absolutely passionate about the Chinese culture, collected Ming porcelain and all that and his great ambition was to become Ambassador in China which fortunately he did before he died. And he was a bachelor, a

very honourable man, a very upright man and coming from a sufficiently comfortably off family sufficiently so as to be able to stand up for policies he believed in, whereas other people might have just followed instructions. At any rate this was the most memorable period of my foreign service career because for most of it Laos was the centre of a world crisis, and a most unlikely place to be the centre in a world crisis. Vientiane is a sleepy little town; Laos had a population of about 2 million peasants, peace-loving and happy people whose misfortune was the country's geographical situation between Vietnam and Thailand on the frontier of the cold war.

M.M. The next domino.

M.B. That's right; and that was why it got dragged in. One has to go back to the 1954 Indo China settlement under which it was agreed that, temporarily, North Vietnam should be communist and South Vietnam should be anti communist. There were supposed to be elections after a year but the Americans, fearing that Ho Chi Minh would win, reneged on that one. Then Laos and Cambodia were to be neutral. In fact the political history of Laos is very complicated; there were supplementary agreements in 1957, settling the local war in Laos and setting up a neutralist government with the participation of communists and the right wing; but Dulles and his boys didn't like having communists in the government; for them that was the beginning of the end. So they manoeuvred to over-throw this neutralist communist-participation government and it was replaced by a right-wing government with strong American support, overt military assistance; and the communist leaders were arrested and put in jail and that was the situation shortly before I got there. Just before I got there the communist Pathet Lao as they were called - they weren't nominally communist but were very close to N. Vietnam -, their leaders escaped to the north of the country which they still more or less controlled. Six weeks after I arrived there was a neutralist coup by a little chap called Captain Kong Lae; he was a parachutist captain who had been involved in this fighting and he couldn't understand why Lao should be fighting Lao when it was just these people outside that were pushing them to it; so he wanted to put in power the neutralist leader, who was Prince Souvanna Phouma, a fine elder statesman, who was the best Prime Minister for Laos in that situation because he just wanted peace and to balance relations between East and West and not get involved in the Cold War. So this coup took place six weeks after we arrived and Souvanna Phouma was put back in power; but

of course immediately the Americans and the right wingers started intriguing against him and they were supported by the King who was right-wing by his own inclinations and was jealous of Souvanna Phouma, who was a remote cousin of his, and so they could count on his support. I can't recall his name, we just called him the King! There are a lot of amusing aspects to this; in fact we called him the invisible King because after Souvanna Phouma came to power he was endorsed by the National Assembly. He got a vote of confidence from the National Assembly which was in Vientiane which was the administrative capital. The King was up in Luang Prabang, a remote kind of Shangri-La city up in the north. He didn't like Souvanna Phouma and so delayed approving his appointment as Prime Minister; so the UN representative who played a part in trying to negotiate a settlement, flew up to Luang Prabang taking with him the resolution of the Assembly appointing Souvanna Phouma as Prime Minister which would have to be signed or endorsed by the King. This threw the Palace into consternation so he was left waiting; an emissary went off to see the King and came back with the message 'le Roi n'est pas visible et ne le sera pas' and after that we always called him the invisible King. Anyway, the Thais were very unhappy about this coup and so were the Americans; so Thailand cut off the frontier, closed the frontier, which caused difficulties for us because all our supplies came by the railway and across the river. We also suffered from attacks across the river and on at least one night we had rifle grenades exploding in our garden. Then the Americans build up the forces in the south of the country and sufficient of the Assembly were lured away to Luang Prabang and they voted in another Prime Minister, Prince Boun Oum, who was a Prince of the South supported by the right wing General, General Phoumi, Phoumi Nosavan. He was from the South and the Americans built up the right wing forces, provided them with military advisers, tanks and things and they gradually advanced on the capital city. And in December 1960 we had a battle which started 200 yards away from our house and went through our garden by the Mekong. I remember we had a fence along the road which had some gates and as soon as the battle started we rushed out and closed the gates thinking that the soldiers would come along the road and get into our compound. They came through the garden so we had to rush out and open the gates to let them out. There were bullets flying around and mortars going off and bazookas going off and they went through anyhow without injuring anybody but blasting a lot of our windows and then the soldiers went off and the battle continued in the centre of the town. And then in the afternoon some landing craft came up the river with mortars on board and they started shelling the neutralists' positions in the centre and north of the city and then apparently the Russians flew in

some artillery which started firing back at the landing craft; so they retreated very hastily down the river and the shells stopped at about opposite our house and then they started moving in to the river bank where our houses were; so we were just face down on the floor hoping that the next shell wouldn't land on us. In the middle of the night there was a tank battle just outside our house on the road outside the compound which consisted of about four houses just by the Mekong. Guns blasting away, a tremendous din and there we were; but we all survived. There weren't as many casualties as you might have expected because the Lao are Buddhists and we heard that the confronting troops before the battle started had agreed that they would fire mainly in the air. But of course when you fire mortars in the air they do land somewhere and there were a lot of casualties afterwards. There was one small hospital and all the Lao nurses, mainly male nurses, had fled and there were a few French doctors and a couple of English doctors who had to deal with these casualties. Beth, my wife, went into the hospital and actually took control of a ward and acted as a sort of nursing sister although she had no training at all; she washed sheets and assisted at operations and that kind of thing. It was a very exciting time; the battle lasted about three days with shells dropping all over the place. We, having had some foreknowledge that the battle would take place, concentrated our families in two centres; one was this group of houses by the Mekong, which proved to be a very bad place, and the other the Ambassador's house and office in the centre of the city where shells were dropping quite a bit. Luckily we didn't have any casualties. During this time our supplies were running very low and we decided after the battle had gone past, to evacuate all nonessential staff, not because there was any danger, but because we were running out of supplies. So wives, children and less essential staff were flown off to Bangkok.

M.M. You mentioned guerilla attacks at the start of this battle: do you know who was behind them?

M.B. The Thais.

M.M. They were being encouraged by somebody.

M.B.(I imagine the Americans encouraged them, but they did not need encouragement). The Thai regime was anti communist and the right wing government in Laos which was ousted by the neutralist coups was very close to the Thais; I believe General Phoumi

Nosavan, the right wing leader, was a nephew of the then Prime Minister of Thailand; so they were close buddies and they both wanted to get rid of the neutralists. In Dulles's terms a neutralist is just as bad as a communist - he that is not with me is against me

M.M. So once this three day battle was over, what then transpired during the remainder of your tour?

M.B. Well, it was even more interesting at times. The neutralists were driven north to a place called the Plaine des Jarres, a rather romantic place which was studded, it was a big sort of plateau area, studded with huge stone prehistoric jars the precise origin of which was not really known, where they joined up with the left wing forces, the Pathet Lao, who were under Prince Souvanna Phouma's half brother, Prince Souphannouvong who was a quite remarkable man; I got to know him quite well later on. The right wing government which was formed under Boun Oum with General Phouma as the strong man supported by the King took control of Vientiane, the capital. However, shortly afterwards, no doubt with some Russian support, the neutralists and the Pathet Lao counter attacked and drove the right wing forces in front of them. Because on the whole the Laos were rather terrified of the Vietnamese. They thought these Pathet Lao were being supported by the Vietnamese, and it looked as if they would sweep everything before them. At this point diplomacy intervened and a cease fire was arranged. A Geneva conference was set up under British and Russian chairmanship and an International Control Commission was brought in which consisted of India as chairman and Poland and Canada as the other two members. So they were to keep the peace in Laos; there was a sort of rough cease fire line while a political settlement was negotiated in Geneva. The conference in Geneva consisted of all the countries concerned in the neighbourhood, including China and Russia, with Malcolm MacDonald as British co-chairman. I can't remember now the name of the Russian co-chairman but he was someone pretty senior on the Russian side. These negotiations lasted from about February/March '61 to June '62. Now during this time there was a tremendous amount of negotiating going on in Laos itself and we, as the British Embassy, representing the co-chairmen, played quite an important role in this. One good feature was that we used to go and visit the two Princes up on the Plaine des Jarres regularly. Once a week there was a plane which went up, an international control commission plane, a little Beechcraft thing. And once a week or so one of us from the Embassy would go up, just to keep in touch with Souvanna Phouma and Souphannouvong. We were officially neutral in this but our sympathies were more with Souvanna Phouma than with General Phoumi and so this was a fascinating experience. We would go up there. They were living in a sort of converted military barracks in very

simple circumstances; and we would usually take them up a little gift like a couple of bottles of wine or some smoked salmon which was very gratefully received; and then we would sit down and talk and they would produce some lunch and they would say 'qu'est ce qu'on dit a Vientiane' and we would tell them what was going on and we would say 'the right wing are proposing this and we are proposing this and what do you think?'. We might take a message and this was all fascinating to be in real live negotiations with the principal parties; and one got to know the two Princes quite well under those circumstances.

M.M. Did you speak to them in French?

M.B. Yes. Souvanna Phouma was a splendid fellow; he had become quite French as he had spent a lot of time in Paris; and he was a grand seigneur - he liked his wine and his food - and he puffed his cigar; but he was a statesman; he was really looking for peace and for the good of his country. His brother Souphannouvong was a remarkable man - very, very bright indeed; apparently he was quite brilliant at his Lycée in Hanoi, top of the class. He had the chance to become a Latin scholar but he preferred to become a civil engineer which was what his country needed. He came top of the class in the Ecole des Ponts et Chaussées in Paris but when he was sent back to his own country he was given inferior jobs to Frenchmen who were less qualified than him. He then went pretty far left and became close to the North Vietnamese. But he was a highly intelligent man and a patriot and I quite liked him. At any rate we had developed this relationship and meanwhile in Vientiane we got involved in very detailed political discussions. So while the two princes were up on the Plaine des Jarres we were, of course, in Vientiane where detailed negotiations were going on in parallel with the discussions in Geneva; because from the start the aim was to set up a government of all the parties presided over by the neutralist Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma and with General Phoumi and Prince Souphannonvong as deputy Prime Ministers; and to have a balanced government reflecting these forces it was thought that there should be sixteen ministers of which eight should be neutral, four left wing and four right wing; but it didn't stop at that in the discussions in which we were involved with the Americans and the Russians. An interesting feature of these negotiations both in Vientiane and in Geneva was that the Russians were on our side; we were working together because the Russians had agreed, Khrushchev had agreed with Kennedy, that Laos was not worth a world war, and so we were all working together to knock these heads together to produce a political/diplomatic solution. So we used to have meetings with the French, Americans and the Russians to work out the detailed composition of the government, a quite extraordinary situation for diplomats to be involved in, and we would have meetings with Souvanna Phouma in which we would say

'well, so and so was a neutralist but he is really left wing now; he should be considered a left wing one; and Souvanna Phouma would say 'mais non, c'est mon cousin'. And then you would have to balance that; you would have to balance left wing neutralists against right wing neutralists and then fierce left wingers against fierce right wingers ..! So we were literally involved in cabinet-making and they couldn't reach agreement in Geneva until we had reached agreement on the ground on the detailed composition of a balanced cabinet. So that was a fascinating job for a diplomat. And then it was towards the end of the Geneva conference I had my great adventure when I spent a month as a prisoner of the Pathet Lao. This came about because we had two British doctors working in the south of the country close to the cease fire line under Colombo Plan Technical Assistance arrangements. It seems that they were touring their little area dishing out drugs etc. in a village when suddenly the local Pathet Lao troops came in, swept into the village and seeing two white men assumed that they were American spies and made them prisoners. They had maps and binoculars so they said 'aha, spies' so they took them off. They were allowed to send out a letter to the Embassy saying what had happened. Shortly before this happened we had spoken to the two Princes in the north, saying we were a bit worried about these two doctors working so close to the Pathet Lao; and the Princes said 'oh yes, its fine; we will authorise them; we will tell our people that it's all right;' the message didn't get through but we had specifically got the approval of the two Princes, the rebel Princes as they were called, to these doctors working. So they told their captors this and they said that if you can get a letter from the two Princes saying it is all right you will be freed, never thinking it would be possible. This message came to us. I flew up to the two Princes on the Plaine des Jarres and persuaded them with some difficulty to write a letter saying that these two doctors should be released. It was written in Lao which I did understand reasonably well; I had been learning Lao, and they signed it. So armed with this I then flew down to the area with the Assistant Military Attaché and came to a village near to one where the doctors had been working. We commandeered a jeep and drove off into the jungle looking for the Pathet Lao. We actually found them and the first lot were OK and I said I had brought a letter about the doctors so they said that's all right and sent us on to the next village. At the next village a higher ranking Pathet Lao didn't like this at all and arrested us. Tied us up with ropes and let us spend an uncomfortable first night and then next day took us East across the Sekong river which is a big river, a tributary of the Mekong, into definitely enemy territory where we met up with the two doctors who were with a local band led by a chap called Sithone Kommadom. Kommadom was one of the Kha people; the Kha were the montagnards, the aboriginal people rather like the Moi people in Vietnam and he was the local big chief. His father had been the big chief who had conducted a resistance

movement against the French for many years until the 1930's when he was ambushed and killed and his son Sithone Kommadom was wounded and taken prisoner and sent off to life imprisonment in the North, many hundreds of miles away. He survived that and was released at the end of war and then the French came back and he went off into the jungle again. So his whole life had been spent fighting against the French. So he was a chap I rather admired; he was an upright chap. He denied he was a communist and said 'I have been fighting all my life against the French and now against the Americans; and if the Vietnamese try to take over my country I will fight against them'. Which bears out what I was saying earlier about nationalism being the best defence against communism. At any rate I must cut this very long story short. He couldn't believe I had really brought this letter; he said it was a forgery. And I said it is not a forgery; I have been to see the two Princes. And he said 'no, you are going to stay here'. So I said 'can I write a letter?' and he said 'only if you write it in Lao' so I wrote a letter in Lao back to the Embassy, where of course they had Lao interpreters, saying what had happened. That turned up some weeks later. My Lao teacher who was in the Embassy recognised my writing so said it was genuine. Meanwhile messages had been going back to the two Princes and the Embassy had got in touch with the two Princes and Prince Souphannouvong said: 'well, my chaps have made a mistake and I will sort it out'. Messages were going back and forth and eventually, after four weeks, we were released during which time we had walked miles from village to village. It was an absolutely fascinating experience because these villages were in an aboriginal area and they were living in the stone age; there was no electricity, no roads, no beds, no chairs, no tables, no chimneys; one squatted on the floor, ate with one's fingers off banana leaves; and the smoke went out through the door; - they weren't allowed to clear away the soot because spirits lived in the upper part of the houses. So that really was a fascinating experience which I wouldn't in retrospect have missed! Finally we got out and by the time we got out the agreement in Geneva had been signed and we had this brief period of the neutralist government with Souphannouvong and Phoumi presided over by Souvanna Phouma; and we had the job then of trying to make this thing work with all kinds of economic aid as it was a very very poor country. I sat on a committee with a Russian; I worked with a Russian called Mr. Kuznetsov looking into the finances of the International Control Commission which all the treasuries wanted to be reduced; and I was able to reduce the budget by 1.4 million dollars because the Indian accountant had put down the cost of the hire of a D.C.3 aircraft as 1.5 million dollars which struck me as being rather large. The Indians have lakhs (of rupees) which mean 100,000, and in writing numbers they put the comma in a different place to us. It should have been 150 thousand dollars and no one had seen this except me so that was an interesting coup I had! But the interesting thing was that the Russian didn't

make any contribution; their system is such that they are terrified of taking any initiative; and so they had to agree with anything I said. In the '50's one had the feeling these Russians are so clever; their system, they have highly trained people - the cadres - and you have to sup with a very long spoon with Russians. I didn't find this at all difficult.

M.M. Thank you very much for that, Sir Mervyn. After Laos etc. you went back to the Foreign Office in 1963 and you were there for four years during which time you did ..?

M.B. I was posted to the Southern European Department which curiously also dealt with Scandinavia. It was really the fringe European department. It dealt with Scandinavia, the Mediterranean countries. I was then the deputy head of department. I suppose the main problem we dealt with was Cyprus because, shortly after I got there in '63, I think it was Christmas '63, there was the first big crisis when the Greek Cypriots tried to take over the whole island and diminish the power of the Turks; and this was the major crisis leading up, of course, to the Turkish invasion which was 10 years later. Well, that was a big crisis in the Foreign Office, because we were involved as guarantor of the Cyprus settlement and because of our military bases there. I don't think I can say that there was anything specific, just a very, very busy time. A year later I was posted as Assistant Head of Western and Central Africa Department. This was only a few years after most of the black African countries had become independent and so there were all kinds of adjustments being made and all kinds of crises blowing up in different parts. So we were dealing directly with the newly independent governments which were formerly French or Belgian. The Commonwealth Office still dealt with, of course, Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya and Tanzania so there was this division here which eventually ended when the two services were amalgamated. The first big crisis shortly after I got there was in what was used to be called the Belgian Congo, now Zaire, when a group of rebels calling themselves 'Simba' - lions -, they were left-wing rebels, took over the north of the country - Stanleyville - and they began very quickly killing missionaries and killing a lot of the local people as well; and they were finally defeated by a small group of mercenaries, which you may remember - Belgian, Rhodesian and South African mercenaries. It was remarkable in the way history was changed by such a small group of people. Tshombe was still the Prime Minister and Lumumba had been killed the year before. Anyway there was a great deal of work there, not only political work, UN work, but looking after British

subjects because quite a few British subjects were involved; and one of them was the young man who was the representative of BAT up in Stanleyville. He was one of those captured by the rebels. He had some hair-raising stories about how he had to go and negotiate with the leader about the condition of the prisoners; this was a very delicate matter. The leader, whose name I can't remember, once got so angry with what he was being told he got out his gun and shot one of his own guards as an expression of his anger which is rather alarming when you are talking to the chap! That finally was resolved, thanks to the mercenaries, and things became quieter. Finally Mobutu took over and is still there; but it's not a very happy country.

I got there at the end of '64 and then, of course, in '65 - in November '65 - we had Ian Smith's declaration of independence and that became the main focus of practically all our efforts. That was another major crisis.

I was involved first of all in the Suez crisis, the Laos crisis and then I was in the middle of the Rhodesian crisis. Rhodesia was, of course, the responsibility of the Commonwealth Office but since it also affected many non-Commonwealth countries and also involved negotiations with the Americans, the French and the UN we had quite a large section of the department - in fact what happened was that we had two Deputy Heads because it was a very large area. One of them who had dealt with South Africa and Rhodesia took over Rhodesia exclusively and I took over South Africa as well as West and Central Africa so it was a very large area indeed. As I was responsible for relations with South Africa I was naturally very much involved with the Rhodesian thing, as well because South Africa was the key to the Rhodesian settlement as was proved when they put the pressure on in 1974 which finally led to the independence of Rhodesia. So that again was a very exciting and hectic time. One of the problems was the divided responsibility between the Commonwealth Office and Foreign Office. I don't think it created any real difficulties but obviously it involved quite a bit of duplication of effort. Our office was next to the hole in the wall dividing us from the Commonwealth Office. We were going back and forwards having constant meetings but that was a major crisis and a lot of work for everybody.

M.M. That must have been extremely hectic. Did you get involved at all in the negotiations over Rhodesia?

M.B. Not directly. I knew of them of course; that was mainly the responsibility of my head

of department, Martin Le Quesne, who went on these two warships - Tiger and Fearless - weren't they? He went on both of those. I kept in very close touch but was not personally involved. Because my head of department was so heavily involved I had to take a lot responsibility for relations with the West African countries, the Congo and South Africa. Of course I remember being there when Vervoerd was assassinated. We got news of it just before lunch and then a message from No. 10, asking who does the Foreign Office think will succeed? A silly question. What difference does it make whether you know or not in advance. In fact I had only come new to the desk but as South Africa was moving to the right I suggested it might be Vorster, the strong arm man who was Minister of Justice, which was not what the Embassy in South Africa said - so I got it right! Just on broad principles, in a situation like that the people go for the strong man.

M.M. That was a fortunate outcome.

M.B. Yes, I got it right for once.

M.M. Did you have any other crisis or exciting times during your periods in London?

M.B. I was dealing with Africa from '64 to '67. After the Congo crisis was resolved, Rhodesia and South Africa occupied nearly all my time.

M.M. Did you have any contact with Ministers at that stage?

M.B. Oh yes, quite a bit. George Thomson, Lord Walston I saw a lot of - was the Under Secretary in the Lords and he had particular responsibility for Africa and a great interest in Africa - and we had a succession of Foreign Secretaries at that time. We had Gordon Walker and then he failed to hold his seat in the House of Commons, then Michael Stewart and then it was George Brown and then it was Michael Stewart again. In the previous few years we had Selwyn Lloyd, Douglas Home and then Butler. I remember thinking at the time how badly we conducted our Foreign Secretary appointments because I remember counting that between 1960 and 1968 we had eight Foreign Secretaries in eight years and during this time the Americans had one, Dean Rusk, and the French had one, Couve de Murville. How could our chaps cope with the experience of these chaps? It was a serious disadvantage to the conduct of our Foreign policy that we changed our Ministers so often. Later we had much more

continuity, people like Carrington and Douglas Hurd staying much longer. I remember George Brown went to a farewell lunch for one of the Ambassadors we dealt with and this Ambassador got up and made a speech saying how sorry he was to be leaving London and George Brown who had had quite a few drinks by then got up and said, Well no one in the office ever tells me anything, no one told me the Ambassador was leaving and I'm going to have words with Paul Gore Booth (the Permanent Under Secretary) when I get back to the office - publicly. And then of course, when he got back he was shown a piece of paper which said the Ambassador is leaving etc. with his signature on it; that is the sort of thing that happened. It was a pity because he was generally regarded as a very good Foreign Secretary when he was sober. He had a very good brain and a very good vision of what he wanted to do. His great hero was Ernie Bevin but, alas, Brown's own personal weaknesses destroyed him.

M.M. A great tragedy really.

M.B. George Thomson, no.2. I admired him very much; he was very very good and I admired him. Lord Walston and I got along very nicely.

M.M. And Michael Stewart?

M.B. He was a very able man, had a very good mind indeed; he was good to deal with.

M.M. And that only leaves Gordon Walker.

M.B. He was there only for a few weeks. He lost his seat in the election and he was immediately offered the chance of another seat which gave him a good chance of getting in. So he was appointed Foreign Secretary provisionally on the assumption that he would get in in the bye-election. One poor chap was asked to resign to leave a space for him; apparently he lost even this seat. I think people, I think local people were fed up; having elected someone they wanted and then having him kicked out and having somebody thrust upon them. So they reacted by voting out Gordon Walker; so he only lasted a few weeks.

M.M. So, after your period in London, off to Madagascar in 1967.

M.B. Yes, this was one of the few cases where there was some planning in my career

because throughout my career I had put down on my post preference form Paris, Rome, Athens, Madrid and that kind of thing and they sent me to Laos and Madagascar, not taking any notice. But in fact I had been dealing with Madagascar as, of course, it came under the department and I had met the Ambassador and one or two other people and it was put to me quite early on, about an year in advance, would I like to become Ambassador in Madagascar and, of course, it is quite nice being an Ambassador relatively young and it sounded a fascinating place and I said, yes. I never regretted it because it became just about my favourite country and shortly after my appointment was announced the foreign minister visited London and I therefore arranged to accompany him throughout his visit which was a great success. The Foreign Minister arrived the day before the start of the Six Days War in the Middle East and that was on a Sunday; he had an appointment with George Brown and a lunch with George Brown on Monday. When he turned up at the Foreign Office, the Madagasy Foreign Minister, immediately said 'I imagine the Foreign Secretary will be too busy with the Israeli crisis to see me' but George Brown received him, said I am very busy but gave him a brief rundown on what was happening and said 'I am sorry I cannot spend much more time with you now but we will meet at lunch; meanwhile my colleague George Thomson will talk to you'. George Thomson, given five minutes notice, was absolutely superb; he sounded as if he had spent his whole life dealing with Madagascar. George Brown gave this chap lunch and didn't rush away. He had a few glasses of wine and said a few things he shouldn't have said. George Brown was an engaging personality but he treated some of his staff rather badly.

So I then went out to Madagascar- it was my favourite country - but my first period as Ambassador there was not very eventful. It was just extremely pleasant. Madagascar is a country which is very little known. As you know, having been Ambassador there yourself. It was interesting because the people were not what you'd expect, being a mixture of Indonesian and African. It is a very beautiful country. It was stable and peaceful while I was there. It had had the same government since independence and this was almost a one party state but a fairly benevolent one party state and therefore there were no crises. The only political item of what might be called general interest was the effect of Rhodesia. In those days the Rhodesian crisis was going full blast and we had instituted the Beira patrol. We had got the UN to impose oil sanctions against Rhodesia which meant stopping oil tankers going into Beira in Mozambique where there was the pipe line going up to Rhodesia - it was a small success of the sanctions policy, probably the only one. In order to help the Royal Navy we installed a small squadron of Shackleton coastal command aircraft in Madagascar to patrol the Mozambique Straits and this was something General de Gaulle did not like because Madagascar was French. It had been

independent for seven years but the French still regarded it as their own property and the Malagasy government had agreed to this against General de Gaulle's wishes; but there was never any public reference to the existence of the RAF.

M.M. Where were they based?

M.B. Majunga, the airfield there. I used to go and see them sometimes; otherwise I travelled around a great deal, seeing the country and trying to improve relations; it was a very pleasant time but no crisis. Madagascar was not a crisis country in those days.

M.M. Did you get down to Fort Dauphin?

M.B. Yes, I did.

M.M. And did you come across the illegal contact with the Rhodesian regime down there.

M.B. No, it possibly hadn't developed in those days.

[end of tape 1]

M.B. Neo colonialism was very evident in Madagascar. It is normal when a country becomes newly independent that colonial officials should remain in important positions for a short time; this certainly happened in Kenya and Nigeria where we had a governor general who stayed on and quite often we had people in the army, the police force and the civil service for a hand-over period of two to three years. But in Madagascar, even ten years after independence, the French were still there in force. In the President's office his secretary general was French and the head of security was French, the head of his personal staff was French, a gendarmerie colonel; and they weren't very discreet about it. If only they had exercised control behind the scenes. It was all rather too obvious and this was to lead to the collapse of this peaceful regime two years after I left.

M.M. Yes, it was ill-judged.

M.B. It was very ill-judged and in that case it was probably the particular Ambassador concerned who was a chap who rather liked to play the role of the pro-consul or the governor. So a lot of people said that he was to some extent responsible for the collapse of the regime. He was not a professional I am glad to say; a more discreet person might not have allowed this to happen. All these events took place after I left.

M.M. So perhaps we should move on to your next posting.

M.B. Back in the office as an Inspector. Do you want me to say anything about the role of an Inspector?

M.M. I think we can probably skip that.

M.B. It is nothing special; it is a routine job, but very interesting. Then after that I was first of all Head of Communications Department and then Under Secretary for Communications. Again, that is a routine administrative job and not a normal diplomatic job at all.

M.M. But anyway it was a step up the ladder and that led onto your next post.

M.B. High Commissioner in Tanzania.

M.M. Yes, indeed, rather an important Commonwealth country.

M.B. It was an important country particularly in the context of Africa generally because of the personality of Julius Nyerere, the President, who was quite an outstanding man and regarded as one of the main African leaders particularly in the context of the Rhodesia problem, because he was chairman of the front line states. Front line against white supremacy in South Africa, Rhodesia, Mozambique, Angola and Namibia - that's about it. Nyerere was the chairman of the front line states and played a key role in all the negotiations over Rhodesia; and again I was fortunate, or unfortunate, in my timing in that the Rhodesia crisis, having been stagnant for some time because Ian Smith wasn't going to budge, suddenly opened up following, I think, the collapse of Portuguese rule in Mozambique and Angola, which I think led Vorster to think that he couldn't hold the fort indefinitely and that he would have to come to terms with black Africa and that the existence of the white regime in Rhodesia was ultimately indefensible; it weakened South Africa to have all this world hostility directed against them for propping up this regime. Therefore, in 1974, he put pressure on Ian Smith to release the main nationalist leaders who were in jail, like Mugabe and Nkomo and Sithole etc. This was in December '74 and I arrived in Tanzania in January '75 just when this was opening up and I therefore was host to a series of visiting delegations. Callaghan came; he was the Foreign Secretary and was the first one. In fact, I flew out with his delegation. We started in Lusaka, went round the other countries and finished up in Dar es Salaam - so I got off in

Lusaka and flew up to Dar es Salaam and was there to receive them and then after that we had various other missions. We had Ivor Richard; he was our man in New York; and he was in charge of a mission to try and reach a settlement but he didn't succeed; and then David Owen came out and he had a scheme under which Field Marshal Carver, just retired as Chief of Defence Staff, should go in and take over command of Rhodesian forces etc.. Kissinger came and I remember he arrived late on Sunday night. In fact, it was early on Monday morning and a message came to me and the American Ambassador about 11 o'clock at night - I was already in bed - saying that Mr. Kissinger would be arriving at 1 o'clock and he would like to see us. What incredible energy people like him have! So at 1.30 a.m. or something- we were sitting in a hotel room, the Kilimanjaro Hotel in Dar es Salaam where Kissinger was staying with his delegation and for fear of bugging we had in the background a tape with a jumble of his own voice, his own voice jumbled up as background, - he has this very deep guttural voice - we had this horrible noise in the background and him speaking in this guttural voice which made it very very difficult to hear especially at 1.30 in the morning! At any rate that was one of the very many visiting delegations we had and of course the problem was not resolved in my time. We also had ..., I think the first time British government people met with people like Nkomo and Mugabe was in my house in Dar es Salaam; my dining room was arranged as a conference room where David Owen met the Rhodesian delegation Nkomo, Sithole and Mugabe.

M.M. How did they get there?

M.B. Well they flew out from Rhodesia. Smith facilitated this as he was under some pressure from South Africa to reach some kind of settlement. I was involved in these first contacts which were very interesting indeed and also called on both Nkomo and Mugabe in their hotels with messages from our government. So that was interesting but the most interesting of all was that I was in constant contact with Nyerere throughout; because he played a key role; and we knew that we had to get his support for any proposals we had; and so there was a constant stream of messages from whoever was Foreign Secretary to Nyerere through me; and I would ring him up and I must say he was marvellous to deal with. A very intelligent man, very articulate and very easy, no protocol; he would wear just a sleeveless sports shirt; he was a man without any pomposity at all. He had a splendid State House which had been the British Governor's house which was his official residence but he didn't live there; he lived in a modest little chalet by the sea and I would ring up his private secretary but would very often get to him direct and just say 'I have

a message from Mr. Callaghan or Dr. Owen, can I come and see you? - Sorry it's late on a Sunday night' - 'Any time you want to talk about Rhodesia, I am free'. So I would see him, very often on his own, and we would have an hour or so of talk and I would pass on the message and he would give me the reply straight away while I jotted it down; and his mind was so logical that when I took my notes I could dictate the telegram straight off; I didn't have to adjust them to make them more logical or coherent. So I admired him very much. He lived very simply; he had these noble ideals that didn't work out in practice when it came to running a socialist economy; but at least he was a genuine egalitarian; he wanted to help the people, he didn't want to create a lot of rich people; and he took cuts in salary and lived very very simply himself. So in his time there was no division between rich and poor and it was a stable country; it was a poor country but with no serious social divisions; and he was a very intelligent man; I admired him because at the age of 12, he came from a very humble family of a Nilotic tribe near Lake Victoria, - aged 12 he hadn't been to school, didn't speak English or Swahili, just a Nilotic dialect. He was sent to school at the age of 12 and two years later was top of the whole territory in Swahili exams and then went to a British school at the age of 14, learnt English, and was the first Tanzanian to go to a British University and then in adult life he translated Shakespeare into Swahili, so a remarkable man.

M.M. He clearly had great appeal for most British ministers who came across him. I wonder what Kissinger made of him.

M.B. I think they got on quite well really. I was there when Kissinger made his first call on him and you could see that Nyerere was quite keyed up to meet this great man. They both had a sense of humour and I remember one particular time when Nyerere was explaining why white people in Rhodesia supported Smith; he said they were mainly people of fairly humble background in England who went out there after the War from poor living conditions and finding a place where they could have a nice farm, servants and swimming pools and a great life. Kissinger said "That sounds like the kind of place I am looking for!" Which went down very well! Yes, they got on well; they respected each other.

M.M. Did you find that the Americans were helpful in the negotiations?

M.B. Yes, I lived next door to the American Ambassador and used to pop in quite often to see him; we used to keep in very close touch. We carried the ball, of course, but we got their support.

M.M. Were there any other key players in the negotiations?

M.B. Not in Dar es Salaam.

M.M. Canadians, Australians?

M.B. No, not really. In the actual negotiations just the British; others would come into it in the UN, with Nyerere and the Africans and the Americans. When Kissinger came we hoped that he would carry a bit more clout and persuade Ian Smith to go along; but of course Ian Smith was very difficult to deal with.

M.M. Did Nyerere understand the stance that was being taken by the British?

M.B. Yes, but he didn't approve of it. I had a brief spell in the UN between Tanzania and Nigeria and I was deputy to Ivor Richard; I made a mistake when I first met him; I was talking to him and said that I admired Nyerere and he did not like that at all because, he said, Nyerere scuppered his negotiation which was true. Ivor Richard came to Dar es Salaam and then went off to South Africa, Rhodesia and Lusaka; while he was in Lusaka, Nyerere made a statement which really said that Ivor Richard's proposal was unacceptable or something to that effect; which meant that his negotiations had failed. So you can understand ... But essentially what we were trying to do in the early days of the Rhodesia crisis was to solve the problem without getting ourselves involved. We said we are happy to organise a meeting, we will organise a meeting in Geneva or in London between Ian Smith, Nkomo, Mugabe. You know, knock their heads together and hope to get an agreement. Nyerere said "No, that's not good enough. The trouble about Rhodesia was that it wasn't decolonised properly". I used to tell him: "You can't really blame us about what is happening in Rhodesia; we gave away the power in 1923 and that was the year in which I was born so you can't blame me!" But Nyerere would say: "Rhodesia was your responsibility and it should be decolonised in the proper manner; which means you have to go in, take control of the situation, appoint a governor and then preside over elections. Because we don't trust any elections that Smith might organise". There was also talk of UN elections but he said: "No. As long as Smith is in control, the Rhodesian army is running the country; then we can't trust what is going on. Britain has to go in." And there were other schemes: making it the responsibility of the UN, Field Marshal Carver to command the troops, anything! We didn't want to get involved

because we knew it would be a difficult and dangerous situation and would cost money; but finally that is what we had to do and essentially we had to accept Nyerere's policy. Because he had said from the outset: you must go in, take control, make it a proper colony again, cancel the illegal declaration of independence, and then decolonise it properly, and he may well have been right.

M.M. Yes, indeed it was a fascinating time in Tanzania. Did you have anything to do with the development plans that were afoot.

M.B. Yes. I don't know if you remember, but way back in '65 I think it was, when Rhodesia became illegally independent this caused a strong protest in Africa against Britain - why doesn't Britain do something about it? Something had happened in Aden and we had sent troops in there - why didn't we sent troops into Rhodesia? But of course this was a different matter altogether. But there was a meeting of the OAU Foreign Ministers (December 1965) who recommended that all African countries should break off relations with Britain and I was actually there in the department and this recommendation had to be endorsed by the summit meeting of the heads of government, heads of State of the African countries in Addis Ababa and I was sent out by the Foreign Office during this time to go to Addis Ababa and wander around the corridors trying to persuade them not to break off relations with us. This was a very interesting period for us. Most of the African countries realised this would not help at all and they disregarded the views of their Foreign Ministers but eleven - I think it was eleven - of the so-called radical countries, people like Mali, Guinea, Sudan and Tanzania, they decided to break off relations with us. I remember discussing this with Nyerere later; I more or less said: this was not a very civilised thing to do. And he said: "Well, I felt that we would look very foolish if our Foreign Ministers came to a decision and then we reversed it." One consequence of this was that we were about to sign an aid agreement and of course when they broke off relations that aid agreement was not signed and so we stopped aid to Tanzania for a period of about 10 years. In 1975 when I went out we had just decided sort of coincidentally, I think it was a coincidence rather than a link with the Rhodesian negotiations, to resume aid. I think it was the Labour government coming in in '74; Judith Hart was Minister of Overseas Development and she was very keen that politics should not interfere with aid. She came out when I was there to start up an aid programme. So I was very much involved in starting up an aid programme from scratch. My experience there was not too happy because we had the East African Development

Division which was a branch of the ODA in Nairobi which was there to supervise the aid programme. I found that a great hindrance to the development of the aid; they seemed to be there to stop aid being given. They had economists and people who applied rules which might have been appropriate in Western Europe. There was some project we had for developing the fishing industry and providing boats and they insisted that this project should have an investment return of 11 3/4 % otherwise they wouldn't support it. Anyway they made so many rules that after about two years there was nothing on the ground and I remember making a great fuss about this. Partly because the ODA have fashions and Judith Hart's great thing was that we should help the poorest countries more than others and the poorest parts of the poorest countries; this sounds great but in fact the poorest parts of poorest countries are in such a condition for very good reasons because the climate is wrong, the soil is poor or there is not much population etc. and there is a lot to be said for developing what is going well, building that up and then using the surplus revenue to help the other parts. So whereas we had some nice proposals to support moderately prosperous areas like the coffee growing area near the Kenyan border, which would also be very convenient for the Development Division; they wanted to give some help to remote areas where communications were bad and the population untrained and uneducated; and that would have been much more difficult. So we had problems like that. Nothing much happened in my time. I had an ODA man on my staff and I did spend a lot of time on aid. Later, I think, the programme did develop; it took a long time to get off the ground.

M.M. Did you find that they similarly impeded development in Madagascar?

M.B. Yes, from the theoretical point of view, I think, when I was in Madagascar the second time. The first time I hadn't any problems because we were giving our main aid to English teaching which, of course, is sensible; and we had a few other little projects which went quite well, nothing on a big scale. But second time around they had a theory that all aid must be developmental, whatever that was, and everything must be judged by that criterion; and they wanted to cut back on the English teaching. I remember a phrase from an ODA minute which was copied to me by mistake; it said - 'English language teaching is very non-developmental' - a ridiculous phrase - whereas, of course, teaching English to Malagasy was very important to open their contacts in all spheres, to open international communications and relations with their neighbours and so on. And the other buzz word of the time - population control - which I am very much in favour of. As I mentioned before, I think it is essential if the world is to survive. Anyway, at the time any mention of

population control would get the green light from the ODA straight away. So a new government came in while I was Ambassador the second time and they set up a Ministry of Population. The ODA said; "good, good. Let's give lots of aid". But the Ministry of Population wasn't a ministry for population control; its name was Ministry of the Population which just means ministry of the people. In fact, it was a rag bag. Anything left over from other government departments the ministry of the people would deal with and population control was not one of them. So one did have problems with the ODA.

After Tanzania I was asked to go to New York as no.2 to our Ambassador there, Ivor Richard. He was a political appointment and, as is the custom when you have a political appointment, you have to have a fairly senior officer as his no.2. In fact, by the time I arrived he had been there for four years and he didn't need anyone to hold his hand. In the event, I was only there for about six months. During this time I dealt almost exclusively with African problems specifically Rhodesia and Namibia. I suppose that was quite interesting because it was the time when there seemed to be a break-through on Namibia. Five Western countries who happened to be on the Security Council - the group of five, Canada, Germany plus France, Britain and the United States - produced a possible solution for Namibia which was half way between the two extreme positions of the SWAPO Nationalist movement and the South Africans. This, to everyone's surprise, was accepted by the South Africans; but the Namibians at first did not accept it. So by the time I got there it was agreed that representatives of this group of five, senior diplomats from each of the five countries including myself, should go out to Angola which was the base of the SWAPO people and try and persuade them to accept this agreement. So we spent long hours negotiating with SWAPO leaders and getting absolutely nowhere; but the next day they would announce that they had accepted our proposals. In fact, we weren't really doing the negotiating, we were providing a cover for the front line states, Tanzania, Zambia, Angola and Mozambique; they wanted a settlement and they weren't going to be stopped by the SWAPO leaders. So we would have these discussions with the SWAPO leaders during which they were saying: "No, no, no; we can't accept this" and the next day they said: "Yes, we can accept this". This was because in between their arms were being twisted by Tanzania, Zambia, Angola whose foreign ministers were waiting in the corridors. But they didn't want to be seen by the OAU putting pressure on their African brothers and therefore we were the cover, we were the ones supposed to be persuading the Namibians. So that was an interesting episode, flying out there and being in on the negotiations which looked as if

they were going to reach a settlement because we had the South African agreement and then the SWAPO agreement. So then we went back to the UN, had a Security Council meeting endorsing our proposals, and then we had a General Assembly meeting; but unfortunately meantime something had happened. Vorster became ill and retired and was replaced by Botha who was taking a much tougher line. Immediately they started back pedalling and, in fact, did not follow up the agreed plan; they hung on for a few more years before they finally packed it in.

I would be making speeches in General Assembly committees about Namibia, Rhodesia or whatever and then while I was there David Owen was the Foreign Minister. One day he was sitting in the front seat in the Security Council and he called me out. I may have been sitting in the seat behind him, and he turned around and said would you like to go to Nigeria? I said I would think about it, but I knew I wouldn't think about it - I would say yes. It was a very big and important job and a promotion so I said yes. So I spent six months in New York. I don't know how the vacancy in Nigeria had arisen; at any rate I was offered the job and I took it. I never regretted it. It was a big job and a difficult job but very interesting.

M.M. You didn't go there just after the British High Commissioner had been expelled?

M.B. No, that was about three years previously. There was a gap and then a chap called Sam Falle was in for less than two years. I don't know why I was given relatively short notice of it which rather implies they had another appointment in mind and that fell through for some reason or other. My African experience was pretty wide by then. I was considered the most 'African' of my generation. I had had more African experience than anyone else, what with two spells in Africa Department in the Foreign Office, two posts in Madagascar and Tanzania.

M.M. So how did you find Nigeria when you first got there?

M.B. Well, huge and sprawling with a population spilling all over the place. Lagos is a place - just pullulating is a word that comes to mind - people everywhere, noise, heat, humidity, smell - not the most pleasant place at first sight. A terrible place to visit but not a bad place to live in because if you live there you can organise your life, air conditioning and also your electricity supply. Because the worst feature a few years before had been very

intermittent electricity supply, water supply, roads absolutely crammed everywhere so every journey took ages and telephones not working. So everything was very difficult for embassies but by the time I got there things had improved. They had improved the roads; the electricity was still bad but we had put in generators for all our residential properties; we had our own well in the Embassy compound and a dowsing distributing water. So we had the basic elements of life and with those secure it wasn't a bad life at all. A big thriving city, a very interesting population - international and domestic - and for leisure you could do anything you wanted, tennis, cricket, boating, sailing, polo and even highland games. I think the thing that struck me most, once I had settled down, was how British, in many ways, the Nigerians are, how they have this love/hate relationship with Britain; they love and admire Britain but they hated our being the colonial power. But they really admired Britain and they wanted to be as like Britain as possible; their Army was based on Sandhurst and their Navy was based on the British Navy; and they had a lot of British teachers in their colleges and universities and they liked to send their children to school and university in Britain; so that was a very nice feature of life there.

M.M. There were still a few British members of their Civil Service.

M.B. Very, very few. I think the last one was a police chief who left while I was there. I think the others had already gone. Despite the difficulties now, the relationships, apart from this High Commissioner earlier and the one after me who was also expelled, relations were still very close. We had military training staff at their Staff College. Close collaboration through various Commonwealth organisations: the Commonwealth Law Association, Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, etc.. We had meetings of lots of these Commonwealth bodies, lots of exchanges like that. I was there at the tail end of the military regime of Obasanjo and then after nine months they had elections and handed over to the civilian government of President Shagari. I was there for most of the time under the civilian government when they had a Senate and a National Assembly and the chairman of the Senate and the Speaker of the National Assembly wore wigs in this hot atmosphere. It was very British and when issues were put to the vote it was between the 'ayes' and the 'noes' - straight out of the parliamentary procedure book of Erskine May. The judges all wore their horsehair wigs and heavy robes in this stifling heat. The judges, certainly in my time, were still dispensing impartial justice and this was partly because of their respect for Britain. They had all been to the Inns of Court in Britain; they loved to go back to England and have a dinner at their old Inn; and I think that they would have been ashamed if their colleagues had thought that they were corrupt and so they

weren't. This system persisted throughout the military governments. Recently things have been so difficult it might have changed but I don't know. In my time the justice was impartial and an ordinary citizen could take the military government to court and quite often win.

So there were a lot of good features about Nigeria which I appreciated. Now when I got there during my first year Rhodesia was still a big issue as it was for all our posts in Africa as long as the Rhodesia crisis was going on. That was the main thing one talked about to the government you were accredited to. I had a very difficult first year because '79 was when, of course, Mrs. Thatcher's government came in in opposition and in the election campaign Mrs. Thatcher had made it clear that she supported Ian Smith and Bishop Muzorewa and it seemed likely that she was ready to recognise the government of Smith and Muzorewa which, of course, the African countries and especially Nigeria did not like at all. Obasanjo's Nigeria was flexing its muscles in the international arena. They had made major interventions in the Angola crisis by supporting the Angolans against South Africa; they liked to take the leading role in African issues. They immediately made it known that they would take a very dim view if we did recognise Ian Smith and Bishop Muzorewa and fortunately before we did the Government sent out Lord Harlech, David Ormsby-Gore that was, former Ambassador in Washington, ex- Minister of State in the Foreign Office, to go around to visit the major African countries to canvas their opinion on a possible settlement. He came out while I was there and was told by the Nigerians and by me that it wasn't on to recognise Smith and Muzorewa. I remember during this time when there were indications that they were going to do this. I myself was sending telegrams back saying please don't do this; the Africans won't like it; the Nigerians won't like it and Nigeria is very important to us for trade and everything else. I was tipped off privately by the Permanent Under-Secretary: go easy on this kind of advice; we agree with you, but this kind of advice, publicly given, is not too welcome to the Conservative government, so cool it a bit.

M.M. Publicly given?

M.B. Well, in the sense that telegrams circulated widely in Whitehall. In other words, publicly within the service to disagree with the government's policy. Eventually the weight of opinion was so strongly against recognising Smith and Muzorewa that eventually they abandoned that idea. Everyone said you have got to have properly conducted elections to produce the new regime and you, Britain, have got to organise

this. So this became our policy about the end of July. In fact, it was announced in Parliament that we weren't going to recognise Smith and Muzorewa and we felt there had to be a new electoral consultation first. Then this was going to be endorsed by the Commonwealth Heads of Government conference in early August. I had come home on leave, though not so much on leave but to try and persuade people in person that we mustn't recognise Smith and Muzorewa, and while I was there this announcement was made in Parliament that the correct policy was going to be followed. So I heaved a sigh of relief and went off on holiday in Spain and then a week later I was summoned back because Nigeria had nationalised BP. This was the day before the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in Lusaka. The timing was deliberately provocative and we understand in fact that Obasanjo was seriously considering leaving the Commonwealth - making a big gesture in his last months of office. To go down in history as the man who walked out of the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting. In fact though, the policy had changed to the one the Africans had wanted so there was agreement at the Commonwealth Conference. The result was that Mrs. Thatcher and Lord Carrington were very annoyed that when they had done what the African governments had wanted them to do the Nigerians responded by nationalising BP. In fact BP deserved to be nationalised; they had behaved very foolishly. Do you know what provoked it?

M.M. No.

M.B. Well, Shell was the big Company which did all the exploration and production but they had a joint operation with BP, which was mainly a retail operation. BP had a lot of filling stations and so on. But BP also as a customer took off some of the oil from Nigeria in tankers and early in '79 it was discovered that one of the BP tankers which was taking oil from Bonny in the Niger delta was not only owned by South Africa but had a South African crew, which was just sheer stupidity. This was just because it was convenient to the chap who was organising the movement as the tanker was on its way back from South Africa and they were surprised when the Nigerians took exception to this. I think on this occasion they were fined a substantial sum. The Shell manager, who later became head of Shell world-wide, managed to tone down the Nigerians' response. Then they did something else silly. I think they wanted to do a complicated switch of source to disguise the source in order to supply somebody they shouldn't have been supplying. Instead of just doing it and keeping quiet they actually wrote to David Owen who was then Foreign Secretary and asked whether this was all right? After he left office he

leaked this to 'The Guardian' so the Nigerians responded by nationalising BP - deservedly. At any rate, that created a crisis in our relations and I was summoned back from Spain and within 24 hours of receiving a message in Spain I was back in Lagos. I hitched a lift on a Spanish beer millionaire's plane, the chap who owned San Miguel beer; he had just flown out on his private jet from England to Malaga and they were returning to their base at Luton so I hitched a lift on that and flew out to Lagos the next day. And this, of course, created quite a crisis in our relations. I had to go and see Obasanjo and tell him this was not on, when we had done what he wanted, etc., etc...

M.M. What was he like to deal with personally?

M.B. He was straightforward and quite good. I think he was like all military men; he didn't believe in half measures. I remember one thing that I objected to that happened before my time; the Commonwealth Development Corporation (CDC) was operating in quite a big way in Nigeria and, as you know, they are not a government body. They have semi-independence, a quango kind of thing, and when Nigeria nationalised all foreign companies in 1976 and took over 51% or 60% of the shares of all foreign companies they nationalised CDC as well. So I said this is ridiculous; this is not a normal profit-making kind of company; it is doing good work for Commonwealth development. And he said "you can't make exceptions". That is a typical military attitude; you say "yes" or "no" and once you start making exceptions the whole thing goes away. So he had that military directness which had its disadvantages; there wasn't much diplomatic subtlety. I think he genuinely wanted to make a big splash and get his name in history by leaving the Commonwealth and was cross when we did what he wanted us to do. Earlier on, actually just when Mrs. Thatcher took over, there was talk that she would recognise Muzorewa; there was an article in the 'Economist' about the Nigerian attitude headlined "bark but no bite". It said that Nigeria is talking big about what Nigeria will do to Britain if Britain recognises Ian Smith. Nigeria has too many important commercial links with Britain and won't be able to afford to have Britain pull out. Therefore this is just bark without bite. Next day they put an embargo on all British contracts in Nigeria. The Prime Minister, who was no.2 to Obasanjo, said "we are showing you that we can bite as well as bark!" That is an example of where a silly newspaper article has serious consequences, proving their virility, as it were. Yes, we had a lot of big contracting companies, Balfour Beatty and so on. They used to make a lot of money in Nigeria and suddenly they weren't being given any contracts. When we got the agreed Commonwealth

position I went to see Obasanjo and said we have agreed to what you wanted so now you can stop this embargo. But he said 'Oh I'm not sure. We must wait and see what happens.' So I protested to him, all very friendly, but I don't think that they removed the embargo until the new government came in. So that was the politically most interesting time when we were having this row over Rhodesia and then, of course, after they set up this Lancaster House conference, Nigeria was very involved in that. They even sent a special emissary who used to go and see Mrs. Thatcher from time to time. They were much involved as 'go-betweens', talking to Rhodesian leaders and so on; and they were very suspicious about what we were up to.

M.M. The Nigerians were?

M.B. The Nigerians were suspicious of what we were up to. They thought, perhaps with good reason, that we were trying to arrange things so that Muzorewa would win and they were agreeably surprised when we did run a proper impartial operation for the elections and Mugabe, of course, won.

M.M. They had an observer there?

M.B. Indeed they did. Yes, yes. I would be summoned from time to time by the Foreign Minister saying, we have heard this report that the Rhodesian Army are using their power to coerce voters. I would say that we have had reports that Mugabe's boys were terrorising people to vote for them. So we had a bit of a conflict there. That was all resolved after Mugabe came in and after that really we had no major disagreements during the rest of my time there. Lots of little problems, because Nigerians can be difficult people. I had a lot of friends, intelligent people with a great sense of humour, able to laugh at themselves; but they were very touchy, especially about matters affecting Britain. We were important because, in my day, we had 20% of the market. It was a very big market, it was the 10th largest market in the world for us. There was no other major market where we had anything like 20% - we had say bigger exports to Germany and the United States where we would have only 3 or 5% of the market in the really big markets; but in Nigeria we had 20% of the market. This was due to traditions but also this love/hate relationship. The Nigerians liked the British really and so they watched what we did more closely than anyone else.

There is one small example. There was at the time an arms embargo against South Africa which was monitored by an anti apartheid committee in New York. I saw a newspaper

article which was headed 'Britain breaches UN arms embargo' and then you look at the small print which says that the anti apartheid committee has reported that Germany is breaking the arms embargo by supplying arms, France is breaking the arms embargo, Italy is supplying weapons, Japan is doing this that and the other. The committee also mentioned that Britain was supplying some dual purpose equipment. The article was headed 'Britain breaches arms embargo' and the text mentions Germany, France, Italy, Japan all supplying lethal weapons to South Africa and at the bottom, in one sentence, it mentions Britain was also supplying dual purpose equipment which could be army boots or army uniform, definitely non-lethal. I said to the Nigerians "Why are you criticising us in the headline when these other people are doing far worse things" and they said "We expect better of you British!" Which was nice in a way but a bit infuriating. So one had little problems constantly arising. What the chap in the Foreign Office department dealing with us used to describe as 'banana skins, constant banana skins' in our relationship with Nigerians and the job of the High Commissioner was to try and not slip too far on them. It was an interesting time seeing how Obasanjo restored civilian government. They had, really, quite a good constitution for this and they tried to get over - the big political problem was the domination of the country by the people of the north, the Muslims of the north, and the constitution had been arranged to minimise these regional differences so that the President had to get minimum support in all the regions and also the government had to contain ministers from all the regions. It worked out, in fact, there were nineteen States and in the State elections, I think there were something like four or five parties, and each party got control of two or more States, so there was division of the spoils. It should have worked out quite well but the thing collapsed, as the first Republic had collapsed, on corruption and one knew that any contract involving supplies or building that money had to pass over in the form of a 'commission'. It had to be disguised as much as possible, it was a very substantial sum. Corruption was nation-wide, right down to the lowest level of people administering National Provident Fund pension payments. Retired people of very humble means couldn't get their monthly payments of national insurance unless they passed a little bit over to the clerk. It was a nation-wide problem and very difficult to eradicate but, of course, it didn't touch me personally.

I had a very interesting time. A huge country to travel around in - I visited as much of it as I could. Each of these States; it was definitely a federal system with each State government controlling its own internal problems leaving defence and foreign affairs, and distribution of the revenues, to the central government. So these were important people and each State government would have a budget bigger than that of any other West African country. Ghana, Liberia, the Ivory Coast would have a smaller budget than say Kano or Ogun

states so they were important people. It was a very very varied country with very varied people. I had four and a half years there which was longer than anyone else.

When I was appointed Ted Rowlands who was the junior minister who dealt with Africa said ' I am sorry, Mervyn. I was the one who recommended you for this. I know it is a terrible place but you need only go there for two years - nobody can stand Lagos for more than two years and then you can have another posting'. At that time I was less than 5 years from retirement and I thought to myself if I go to Nigeria for two years, it is a big country, very complex and you can only begin to understand what is going on then I have to go somewhere else and then I would only have two more years in some other place with the same trouble. So before I went I said: "I am going to see out my time here" which meant four and a half years. I never regretted it because I think I was right. With just two years there you just scratch the surface; as it was, I think I got to know the country well which meant I could do a better job and I left with tears in my eyes. I made a lot of friends there, they were very warm people, though often arrogant. The Yorubas are supposed to be the arrogant ones; they speak in very loud voices but they have a great sense of humour. They shout with laughter and tell great stories against themselves. I still keep in touch with some of them.

M.M. A wonderful rich country in so many ways.

M.B. Culturewise. Of course, I was there at the best time from the commercial point of view. Commercial work was a very big part of my work there because it was, as I said, our 10th largest market and we were exporting, this is 17 years ago, one and a half billion pounds of goods a year which is a very, very large amount. We were constantly receiving trade delegations, managing directors of companies coming to see me and wanting advice on the political situation. I think that one of the main things that Embassies can provide is the political background; we can't sell the goods but we can help them. One of the best ways is to brief them. So I enjoyed that part of it and I got to know quite a few important business men. And, of course, quite a few politicians came out, Lord Carrington, Ian Gilmour and several other ministers and a lot of senior civil servants. So it was enjoyable. It was a big important, exciting job as well. A big staff, of course.

M.M. How big was the staff?

M.B. Well, 60 UK based and about 100 locals and, of course, we had deputy High Commissioners in Kaduna. Unfortunately, when I started we also had one in Ibadan but

the decision had already been taken to close that; but I managed to keep the house, which belonged to us so that I could use it as a base when I went up there. A lot of sad things about government policy at that time which I regretted. We had this wonderful position in Nigeria; really, we were the most important country for Nigeria because of our Army, Naval, Royal Air Force links and because of our very strong trade links; and our strong position was due to these very close non governmental links, especially education. I think that was particularly the case with so many people sending their children to Universities in Britain and so many British teachers at the Universities in Nigeria. Before I got there two decisions had been taken which destroyed this position. First of all, the Ministry of Education decision to stop subsidising Commonwealth students; I am told the decision was taken without consulting either the Foreign Office or the British Council or anybody else which I think was absolutely monstrous. And so as a result instead of Nigerian students going off to British Universities they went off to American Universities or Canadian which was surely madness from our point of view. And the other thing was, I think, at the time I got there, or just before I got there, we had something like 600 or 700 professors and administrators in the numerous Nigerian Universities which again was very good for influence and we taught something like a British curriculum and recommended British books. There was a book trade and we exported about 60 million pounds worth of books a year and this was because the teachers or professors had been trained in England or were British and yet this was thrown away. This situation was supported by a scheme called BESS (British Expatriate Supplementation Scheme) under which a British professor taking up a job in say Kano University or Ibadan University would be paid the Nigerian going rate by the Nigerian government but would be supplemented by the British government to increase the salary to such as he would get in England if the Nigerian salary was lower, plus the kind of foreign service conditions we had; like visits from children, air passages for children during holidays. This meant we had 600 or 700 people in key positions in the educational system. This was abolished just before I got there. As a result there were only about 100 left who were mainly bachelors or young people dedicated perhaps. The others were replaced by Canadians, Poles, Pakistanis (I used to shudder at the thought of Pakistanis teaching English to Nigerians) and Russians. So this again was a disastrous decision imposed by Treasury cuts. The other thing was that the British Council, which had a very large presence, was cut by about 50%. We had in the main University towns British Council libraries which, I just saw the tail end of this, were absolutely packed with Nigerian students reading British books, surely being influenced to buy British

books. Having been given a 50% cut one of the things they had to do was close their British Council libraries; they also had to close down their office in Ibadan, one of the biggest University centres in Africa. So short-sighted. Just to save a bit of money. I wrote a great dispatch denouncing the Treasury, in fact, in my last year, when I had nothing to lose. The Foreign Office just said we agree with what you have to say but there is nothing we can do about it.

Just another little example, we had a very nice scheme under which we took quite a lot of, something like 2000, Nigerian technicians for training in England, training on British tools and equipment. Surely a good thing? Perhaps they would go back and they would be in favour of British tools and equipment. And suddenly the subsidy was withdrawn. Of course, these courses were being offered at very heavily subsidised rates, the full price for the cost of these courses was treble or quadruple; and so they stopped going to Britain and went to Germany, Canada, France, America. It was so short sighted just to save money on this year's budget. Another silly little example of the way in which the Treasury used inter-departmental accounting. I, as you know, am fond of music and used music throughout my career, a great tool of diplomacy, giving musical parties, concerts for charity and so on. So when I got out to Nigeria there was a very battered old piano there. So I said this wasn't good enough and that I needed a new one since I also needed a new house which I knew they couldn't give me. So they said well, poor chap, we can't give him a new house but we will give him a piano. So there was a new piano waiting to be shipped out to me. Now we used to have RAF training flights of cargo aircraft, big cargo aircraft, Britannias or whatever they called them, and they would sometimes bring equipment for, say, our training teams in the Staff College but they mostly came out empty. So I said here is an opportunity. Why don't we ship out the grand piano on this cargo plane. It won't cost the tax payer a penny. 'Ah', said the Treasury 'In that case the Ministry of Defence must charge the Foreign Office for the equivalent air freight weight'. Well, the Foreign Office didn't want to do this they said; 'If it is coming out of our budget it is cheaper to send it by sea.' So, therefore, they did send it by sea and paid someone outside the government rather than an internal transfer. And so it cost us £1000 to have it shipped out when it could have been flown out for nothing. So the tax payer lost a thousand pounds because of Treasury rules.

M.M. Well, that's a jolly sad note to end on!

M.B. Alas, yes. Well, that's one of the weaknesses of our governmental system; but at

any rate I had a great time in all my years of service and I don't regret any of it.

M.M. Well, thank you very much indeed.

M.B. OK. Well, I hope it was useful.