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MR BRIAN DONALDSON

**interviewed by Malcolm McBain on Thursday 29 March 2007 for the British
Diplomatic Oral History Programme.**

Education and entry to the Diplomatic Service in 1965

MM: Mr Donaldson, may I ask you to explain your education and your method of entering into the Diplomatic Service via the Home Civil Service?

BD: I was born in South Shields, which in those days used to be in County Durham, and I was educated at South Shields Grammar Technical School for Boys. After my education I went to London and joined the Civil Service, first in the Ministry of Aviation but then, after taking an open exam, I transferred to the Diplomatic Service in March 1965.

MM: And what sort of grade did you come in at?

BD: I came in at Grade 10, the very lowest grade in the Diplomatic Service at that time, and did the kind of jobs that people at that entry point used to do, which was working in the various registries in the Foreign Office, where the archives of the Foreign Office are kept.

Posting to Algiers, 1968

MM: And what was your first overseas posting?

BD: I was sent to Algiers in 1968 as the Assistant Administration Officer.

MM: I don't think we need to go into that too much, but of course it was a French speaking post.

BD: Yes it was. In fact French was probably my best and my most popular subject at school, so I was a natural choice I suppose.

MM: Did you need to speak French in Algiers?

BD: Yes very much so; it was very much part of the job to get out and about and to do all those administrative tasks that an embassy requires.

Posting to La Paz 1971

MM: So after that you went to La Paz in 1971. What did you do there?

BD: I was the Head of Registry and the administration officer.

MM: Different language of course. Did you need the local language?

BD: Only for social purposes; it was a behind-the-scenes job with not a lot of contact with members of the public. But obviously it helped a great deal to speak Spanish when going out and about.

MM: So that's two languages already, and then you came back to the FCO in 1974.

Return to Communications Operations Department of the Foreign Office

BD: I went to Communications Operations Department where I was the Head of Queen's Messenger Section, which was responsible for making the administrative arrangements for Queen's Messengers and Assistants who travel throughout the world delivering the diplomatic mail.

MM: Were you there for long?

BD: I was there for two years. I should have been in London for three years but my Ambassador in Algiers, Sir Martin Le Quesne, had by that time been sent to Lagos as High Commissioner. As we had got on rather well in Algiers, he wrote me a letter and said, as Ambassadors did in those days, would I like to be a member of his team? This I was very happy to do; it meant I could cut short my time in London. I joined

the Diplomatic Service for service overseas, and did not much like working in London. So after two years I was posted to Lagos.

Posting to Lagos 1975

MM: And what did you do there?

BD: I was sent as an Entry Clearance Officer. But when I arrived, Sir Martin Le Quesne asked me to spend part of my time arranging for the transfer of his official residence from an impressive site next to the water front to a much smaller house inland. The Nigerian Government had compulsorily purchased the residence and were going to turn it into an officers' mess. So I was rather torn between the two jobs.

These were quite dramatic times in Nigeria because, shortly after I arrived, there was a coup d'état in which the Head of State, Murtala Mohamed, was murdered. The High Commissioner, Sir Martin Le Quesne, who was an ex-military man and very businesslike, agreed to meet the coup leaders at their request in his office. They asked him to send a message to former President, General Gowon, who at that time was studying at Warwick University, to tell him to come back because his friends had seized back power on his behalf. He told them this was something he could not get involved in and suggested they should send General Gowon a telegram. The next day the coup failed, and the newspapers put it about that the coup leaders had been seen visiting the British High Commission to report to their secret service masters on how the British-inspired coup had been going. The following day the High Commission was ransacked by students. We were never in any great danger, although there was a certain amount of teargas in the building. But the day after, Martin Le Quesne, being the ex-military man that he was, went along to the Foreign Ministry to present a bill to repair the damage. This was just the opportunity the Nigerian Government were looking for. They accused him of showing great insensitivity to the nation's loss and expelled him. I had been in Nigeria for only six weeks. So my mentor and the person I'd gone to Nigeria to work for was suddenly thrown out of the country. And there I was in a job that was fairly difficult and demanding, and in a place I wouldn't otherwise have gone to, were it not for Martin Le Quesne's request.

MM: Who was Martin Le Quesne's successor?

BD: There followed a period of enormous tension because Nigerian public opinion truly believed – they were encouraged by the Nigerian authorities to believe – that the coup was indeed organised by the British Government. So John Williams, the Minister, was Acting High Commissioner for about a year. He was replaced by Sir Sam Falle who was sent there specifically to boost morale, which had suffered very badly during those months. One of the reasons for the tension was that the Government put out a claim that the coup leaders were hiding in the premises of High Commission staff. One headline demanded that troops be sent in with fixed bayonets to search all British High Commission property to find these coup leaders. They were eventually found but not on British High Commission property, and were publicly executed by machine gun on the popular bar beach where all of us used to go on a Sunday for picnics with our children.

MM: It was a sad episode in the story of Nigeria really. Did you get out and about much and have much contact with the Nigerians?

BD: They came to us of course. Because I was an Entry Clearance Officer, my colleagues and I saw Nigerians in enormous numbers on a daily basis, all wanting visas to go to the UK. I can't say that I did get out very much. Nigeria at that time was a very dangerous country, and a very difficult country to travel around. Our leisure time was spent in a motor boat which we shared with another family; we just went up the creek where we had a little house by the ocean where we relaxed.

MM: Yes, you would need to get away from Lagos. I imagine that it was tremendously congested.

BD: Very much so. I lived two miles from the High Commission and it once took four hours to get home. I was in a car with my next door neighbour and we got so stuck in the traffic at one point that he got out, did his week's shopping in the supermarket next to where we were parked, and got back in - and I hadn't moved an inch!

MM: That was really awful! But you were there for quite a long time.

BD: Yes, I did more than three years in Nigeria, from 1975 to 1979.

MM: Did you have a lot to do with John Williams?

BD: Not a lot; it was a very big mission and he was a rather remote figure, understandably.

MM: Was Sam Falle also a bit remote?

BD: He's a very outgoing chap, full of bonhomie. He did a good job of restoring morale. So he did get around the office a great deal, but obviously being a senior Head of Post one didn't see much of him.

MM: So, after that experience, you were glad to get your next post.

Posting to Luxembourg 1979

BD: Luxembourg. Yes, there was a policy in those days of swings and roundabouts, taking the rough with the smooth. Luxembourg was my reward for surviving Lagos.

MM: What did you do in Luxembourg?

BD: I was the British Vice Consul.

MM: Was that a promotion?

BD: No it wasn't. It was the same grade. I was promoted to DS9 when I came back from Bolivia to Queen's Messenger Section. I was a DS9 in Lagos and Luxembourg.

MM: So I don't think that need detain us very long. You came back in 1982 to the FCO. Which Department?

Return to the FCO in 1982

BD: I went to Trade Relations and Export Department, where I was the COCOM Desk Officer. I was promoted to DS7, Second Secretary, by the way, when I got back from Luxembourg to London.

MM: Can you explain COCOM?

BD: Yes, COCOM was a strange organisation; it was a secret organisation based in Paris, consisting mostly of NATO countries. Its purpose was to examine applications for the export of goods, materials and equipment that had the potential to be used for purposes such as sophisticated weapons systems, or producing chemical weapons. COCOM acted as a filter system to ensure that nothing that was sent could be used or misused in a way that was inappropriate to the security interests of the West.

MM: That's interesting. Did you do that job for very long? Did you find it interesting?

BD: I did. It was quite absorbing and it required a lot of co-ordination amongst Whitehall Departments.

MM: Such as?

BD: Many of the experts were based in departments such as the Department of Trade and Industry, or the Ministry of Defence. The job involved seeking those experts' views on a piece of equipment that the French wanted to export to Iraq, for example, and of co-ordinating those views. One of my primary roles was to issue voting instructions to the British representative to COCOM so that, when the debate took place, he could put our point of view.

MM: And decisions were taken by vote?

BD: Yes they were.

MM: That was presumably why the Foreign Office was involved in it; it was horse trading, if you like.

BD: To a certain extent. The British representative on the COCOM committee was a member of the Diplomatic Service and First Secretary at the Paris Embassy at that time.

Assistant Private Secretary to Minister of State, FCO, 1983

MM: What was your next move after that?

BD: I received a telephone call one day and was asked if I would be interested in becoming Assistant Private Secretary to the Minister of State, Malcolm Rifkind at the time. I didn't have to think too hard about that; it was a job I'd expressed an interest in in previous years. I went for an interview and I got it.

MM: How did you get on with Mr Rifkind?

BD: Well, superbly well. I think he's a wonderful politician, and a very exceptional person, very thoughtful, very kind and generous with his time, extremely good company, with an enormous sense of humour. It was an absolute delight to work for him.

MM: Did you work long hours?

BD: Yes I did. I would have to be in the office at about 8.00 in the morning, sorting out telegrams, preparing for the day's appointments. I was living at the time in Hayward's Heath so I had a one-and-a-half hour journey to work each day, getting up at 6.00, leaving at 6.30am. It was only very rarely that we would finish work before 7.00 in the evening, and I would be home maybe by 9pm, sometimes by 10pm. A very full day.

MM: How many days a week?

BD: Just five. But the Private Secretary and I divided up the Departments and responsibilities between us, and I would accompany Malcolm Rifkind on whatever overseas trips came up within my area of responsibility.

MM: Where did you go to?

BD: I made many trips with him, mostly in Africa but I do remember a momentous journey by Concorde to Washington to talk about Angola, if I remember correctly, and also we touched on strategic exports, my former responsibility in COCOM, which was quite a hot issue at the time.

MM: What places did you go to in Africa?

BD: Angola, South Africa, Mauritius, Madagascar, Kenya, Somalia, Ethiopia; and those are just the ones I remember. There would have been others too.

MM: Do you recollect anything in particular about any of those trips?

BD: They were very intense. My main task was taking notes at all the various meetings that the Minister had with his opposite numbers; you know, meetings with President Moi in Kenya; and Pik Botha in South Africa. We didn't get to see the President of Angola but we did see the Prime Minister. They were all very enjoyable, but extremely busy and quite stressful. It wasn't just a question of taking a record; it was ensuring that the Minister's programme was adhered to, getting him to places on time, and also negotiating with Embassy staff about the Minister's needs, communicating his views on things that had been said to him or things that he would like to do.

MM: Do you remember anything about the Kenya visit?

BD: Nothing in particular springs to mind. But I do remember I was sent a photograph and press cutting of a report on the Minister's call on President Moi. There was President Moi, Malcolm Rifkind, myself and two others and, about two inches beneath a headline that said, "Five men wanted for murder"! The person who sent it to me had turned the page up so that this appeared directly below the photograph. That gave us a bit of a chuckle.

I remember one trip that we did to the Seychelles very well. Mr Berlouis, the Ministry of Defence at that time, took us out on a fishing trip. Poor Malcolm Rifkind suffered terribly from seasickness and was obviously in extreme distress, but he hid it very well. He managed to catch one fish more than I did, and said that I had arranged that well - so as not to overshadow his achievements.

I also remember a trip on Ethiopian Airlines where the Minister and I swapped seats and, for the next hour, the steward kept referring to me as Mr Minister, to such an extent that it became embarrassing. I resorted to writing a little note on the back of one of my visiting cards and put it on the saucer of my coffee cup, which said, "He's the Minister, not me" and a big arrow to avoid what had become an embarrassing situation.

MM: How long were you there?

BD: As Assistant Private Secretary? About two years.

MM: And what did that lead to?

Posting as Second Secretary to British High Commission, Mauritius, 1985

BD: Immediately afterwards, I was sent as Second Secretary, Aid and Commercial to Mauritius.

MM: How did you find Mauritius?

BD: Compared with all the other places, which, in the main, had been hardship posts, apart from Luxembourg, it was quite something. First of all Mauritius is spectacularly beautiful. And it is possible to lead a more or less normal life. There were lovely things to do, a blossoming economy and tourist industry, and it was a wonderful place for children to visit from boarding school.

MM: I believe there's a High Commission rest house along the beach.

BD: Yes there was - and still is. It was referred to as a 'campement'. It was a very rudimentary building and, when we first arrived, it wasn't in terribly good condition. But to be able to wake up in the morning and walk straight out onto the beach was a real treat.

MM: A bit of a contrast, really, after your long days in London. You were doing Aid and Commercial. What were the main issues coming up under 'Aid' in Mauritius?

BD: We had quite a sizable Aid programme in Mauritius, which was still a developing country in those days. The export processing zone was only just on the point of taking off. We supported a range of projects, including clean water installations. But we also sent advisers of all kinds. For example, we sent an ex-prison governor to advise the Mauritians on how to improve conditions in their prisons, discipline and train staff. In those days, of course, there were no devolved budgets. We received a proposal from the Mauritians, analysed it, talked to a few people, and then sent a recommendation to DFID in London who, if they had the money, more often than not would be happy to go along with our recommendations.

MM: That's interesting; much less formal in those days. And on the Commercial side, were we selling much to Mauritius?

BD: On the Commercial side, there was quite extraordinary interest in buying British goods; it was quite overwhelming. There was a feeling at that time in the commercial world of Mauritius that they weren't getting a very good deal from the French. The French were superbly good at making finance available for various deals

on very attractive terms. But the Mauritians didn't think the quality was there, or the aftersales service and, when we started making an effort, we saw big returns. It was of course at a time when the economy was really starting to pick up. When I arrived, British exports to Mauritius were about £37m a year and, by the time I left, they had risen to £52m. Part of the credit for that must go to the hard work of the staff of the Commercial Section in Port Louis.

There's a bit of a story to that. The High Commission used to be in Port Louis but we were told by experts that the building was unstable. So a decision was taken to move the offices to the residential area of Floréal in the centre of the island. This went down very badly with the Mauritians. The High Commission had been in Floréal for about a year when it was realised that the level of interest amongst local businessmen had fallen dramatically. The answer was to move the Commercial Section back down to Port Louis where we were able to rent a modest suite of offices. Returning to Port Louis meant there was a great deal more interest in what Britain had to offer. Our new offices were always full of people making enquiries, seeking suppliers. In those days, the Department of Trade and Industry had a wonderful system called the Export Intelligence Service. When we identified an export opportunity – for example, someone was going to build a new hotel or was looking for raw materials for a chemical plant – we would send details to the DTI who would match potential suppliers with a computerised database and send an EIS notice informing them of an export opportunity in Mauritius and providing details of the people to contact. It was a highly effective system, which we made full use of. Several exporters confessed to me during their subsequent visits to Mauritius that they had been intrigued by the fact that so many EIS notices about Mauritius were sent to them, and that they just had to come and have a look. More often than not their efforts were rewarded, and they were able to secure lucrative orders.

MM: And did the High Commission then remain in Floréal or ..?

BD: It did for quite some years, and then it too moved back down to Port Louis long after my time. Could I just also add that, after my first year, the importance of the Commercial Section was so great that the Foreign Office recognised that it was

impossible to do both jobs and I became full-time Commercial Secretary, and the Aid work went to another member of staff.

MM: And did you have an independent command?

BD: Yes. I had three locally-engaged members of staff, and we were completely autonomous and independent. Because we were on the spot and very accessible, it was very easy to do business.

MM: You were the public face in fact.

BD: Yes, to a large extent.

MM: Do you remember who your High Commissioner was?

BD: It was James Allan, who went to Mozambique as ambassador. He was replaced by Richard Crowson.

MM: That's a very interesting reflection of life in Mauritius. What was your next appointment after that?

BD: I lost all my bargaining power after Mauritius because it was such a good posting.

MM: But you got a promotion.

BD: Yes I did; while I was in Mauritius I was promoted from Second to First Secretary.

Posting to Yaoundé 1989

BD: I was sent to Yaoundé in Cameroon as the Deputy Head of Mission in 1989. Again the job was very good; I enjoyed Yaoundé from that point of view, but the

Cameroonians are extremely aggressive and it was at that time a dangerous place, not just on the roads but crimewise too.

MM: Worse than Nigeria?

BD: I don't know because our lifestyles were different because of the different jobs that I did. In Nigeria I spent more or less all of my time in the High Commission. In Cameroon it was the exact opposite; I had to get out and about and I had to meet people and travel to other parts of the country. I was always aware of the potential for things going wrong. The comparatively new road between Yaoundé and Douala was said to be one of the most dangerous roads in the world.

MM: Was that because of the driving there?

BD: Vehicles with no lights, vehicles parked at the side of the road. There were hold-ups too it has to be said, but I think the biggest danger from crime was actually in the city. For example, for a period while I was there robbers would sit in parked cars outside restaurants where expatriates were dining waiting for them to go home. The robbers would follow the expatriates home and, when their security staff opened the gates, the robbers would follow them in, attack them, take the house keys, ransack the house and take away all the belongings in the owners' cars. That caused a lot of nervousness.

The authorities were also very aggressive; frequent police checks; odd kinds of tricks, you know. "Get out of your car, there's something wrong with your back wheel." You'd get out and someone would jump in and steal your wallet, your camera, whatever was lying around. It was a very dangerous place.

The job was good and it was at a time when democracy was really taking hold, and opposition parties were being allowed to function for the first time but, shortly after I arrived, there was a show trial of people who'd spoken out against the Government, to which the Diplomatic community went in large numbers to indicate their solidarity with people who were trying to establish a democratic system.

MM: That was Cameroonians. And was this a French-speaking place?

BD: Yaoundé is French speaking. But part of Cameroon in the north-west is English-speaking.

MM: So communicating with the Cameroonians?

BD: Very difficult because of their general uncooperative, aggressive approach. I did not find them the easiest of people to get along with.

MM: So you went from that in 1992 to join Oliver Miles in the Foreign Office to set up the Yugoslav Conference for a few months and then the opportunity of Bangladesh – or else!

BD: Well, I could have turned it down because I was due for a home posting. But for me jobs overseas were always the main attraction.

Posting to British High Commission, Bangladesh, 1992

MM: So how did you find Dhaka?

BD: The posting was to be the Head of the Immigration and Consular Sections in the British High Commission. These combined sections were big; about ninety staff in all. I was told that the man who'd been posted there had taken fright because of the job, and had retired early rather than go there. Bangladesh is really quite a difficult posting. I can't say it was my favourite posting, but I found the job very interesting. Noisy, big; again a certain amount of aggression and a certain degree of insecurity. I used to travel a fair bit, not just on consular business but on immigration business too. The main bulk of Bangladeshi immigrants to Britain came from a place in the north east called Sylhet. There was an immigration advisory office there run by Bangladeshis where I was a frequent visitor. I instituted a PR campaign to explain the background to British immigration law and to explain some of the pitfalls that people would experience. For some reason many people thought they had to lie to get their visas. The message I tried to deliver was that what we were looking to establish the

true situation of visa applicants, and that lying would create unnecessary problems and result in refusal. On the whole this campaign was reasonably successful. But Bangladesh was a place where visas were worth an awful lot of money, so it was big business to try to facilitate them. I was told about a man who lived in Sylhet who would interview potential visa applicants in his office. After receiving a handsome fee he would pick up his telephone and have an imaginary conversation with me in Dhaka in which we agreed between us that the visa would be issued and that the visa applicant should report to window number five at 10 o'clock on Tuesday. And then the visa applicant would turn up, make his application, and maybe the facts that he gave justified the issue of a visa. He got his visa, and the visa agent got the credit. But, if the visa applicant was refused and went back to complain and ask for his money back, the agent would explain that there had been a mix-up and give the visa applicant half his money back. That is just one example of people trying to work the system: lying and cheating in order to enrich themselves on the basis of people's desperate desire to better themselves and get a life for them and their family.

MM: On what sort of basis could your average Bangladeshi get a visa for the UK?

BD: A lot of them were joining families who were already established in Britain. There would be those who were going for studies; the problem often was that the amount of money needed was way beyond the reach of the average Bangladeshi family, and the question my staff would ask was where did the money come from? Did studying in Britain at enormous cost make sense? Would they not be able to do those same studies in their own country at a much lower cost and less inconvenience for their families? Each case had to be dealt with on its own merits.

Another aspect of it all was of course wives joining husbands, or husbands joining wives; and that again was an area of enormous difficulty, proving that the marriage was a genuine one. Also we had to try to establish whether or not young British women who were visiting Bangladesh were being married off against their will, because forced marriage is still a big issue in the sub-continent.

MM: Were many applications refused?

BD: Yes they were. I can't quite remember the statistics now, I can't even hazard a guess, but a large majority were genuine applications and they were approved.

MM: Did you have authority to refuse an application?

BD: Yes. But I have to say that my job was an administrative one - ensuring that everything worked smoothly and that the entry clearance officers and the two Second Secretaries working in the Immigration Section followed the procedures correctly. I didn't get involved in too many applications myself. But the entry clearance officers had the right to make a decision. In the context of Bangladesh, they had to refer their refusals to the Second Secretary, explain the circumstances, and get the Second Secretary's endorsement to their refusal decision.

MM: The Second Secretary could say no or yes, your refusal is justified, and that would be the end of the matter.

BD: Yes. But there was, and probably still is, a right of appeal against refusals though the appeal process was actually tightened up and some rights of appeal were removed after I left Bangladesh. The right of appeal created an enormous amount of extra work because every refusal required the preparation of a detailed appeal statement explaining how the entry clearance officer reached the decision, and bringing in all the relevant facts and explanations and answers to questions and so on.

MM: How long were you there?

BD: For three years.

Posting to the FCO, Personnel Operations Department, 1996

BD: After that, I came back to London into Personnel Operations Department.

MM: The postings department.

BD: Yes, but also managing people's careers and advising them on future jobs through career interviews. People wanted an indication of what jobs they should be looking for next and what the opportunities were; general career advice.

MM: Presumably you were just given your block of countries to look at and your quota of vacancies to fill.

BD: No. I was responsible for a certain section of the alphabet for officers whose surnames began with A-G or something like that. I think I was responsible for about two hundred officers who would turn to me as their career development officer for guidance and advice.

MM: Did you do any other jobs in the FCO?

BD: Yes I did. Originally it was suggested that I might take over from the Director for Personnel Operations but there was a complication with the timing, so I left after about eighteen months and became Deputy Head of Information Department.

Assistant Head of Information Department in the FCO

MM: What did you do there?

BD: I was responsible for ten of the Department's sections, staffed by extremely imaginative and creative people whose task was to produce those things that Information Department used to be well known for, such as the colourful FCO publications that covered every subject under the sun, from slavery to the successes British industry. There were sections creating radio and television programmes and films; another was focussed on the internet and press summaries that were sent to British missions all over the world. It was a very interesting and stimulating Department to work in.

MM: When you say 'subjects like slavery', what do you mean? Was it some kind of guide book?

BD: This particular booklet gave the background to the slave trade and British efforts to end it. To a certain extent Information Department was a 'propaganda' department; its role was to convey the British point of view on controversial issues of the day. The slavery thing I'm thinking of was actually in advance of a slavery conference held in South Africa in 2000, I think. Also, of course, we often served the interests of individual Departments of the FCO. If they identified the need to get a particular message across, they would approach us and we would sit down and discuss how that message could be conveyed and what would be the best medium to use.

MM: So were you in fact the inheritor of what used to be known as Research Department?

BD: No, Research Department was something different.

MM: Were you still sending out guidance telegrams in 1996/97 on matters of current interest?

BD: Yes, I have a feeling that Information Department played a role here too. We had a wide range of products. But sadly, for financial reasons, many of them have disappeared. We produced some quite extraordinary things. For the celebration of the millennium the publications section produced a diary with a sundial on the front cover and a hole to put your office pencil in. You know, silly things like that but very eye-catching. All of those plastic bags with the Union Jack on the side and other promotional material that embassies used to hand out all came from Information Department.

MM: What about the Central Office of Information?

BD: We used to work very closely with the COI but I can't recall where the dividing line was. There may have been a certain amount of duplication there too, both being in the same business. The COI dealt with all British Government departments not just the Foreign Office. But COI did have an input to Foreign Office work; they weren't just servicing the Foreign Office in the way that Information Department tended to.

MM: What was your posting after that?

Posting as British High Commissioner to Namibia, 1999

BD: After Information Department I was sent to be High Commissioner to Namibia.

MM: That was at Windhoek? What did you make of that?

BD: First of all, to get a Head of Mission job was a great thrill. I suppose it's something that everyone in the Diplomatic Service aspires to. Also it was wonderful to be my own boss and to be able to set the pace and decide the policy myself rather than following other people's guidance. Apart from that, the place itself is spectacularly beautiful, with lots to do and very interesting too; wonderful trips to go on, desert, the sea, mountains, the plains, interesting tribes and culture.

MM: Many tribes?

BD: Yes, but a total population of only one and a half million people, in a country which is about the size of Britain and France combined. There were journeys we made on tarmac roads that took three hours and during that time we might see two other cars. So it was a land of wide open spaces.

MM: Had it got a colonial background?

BD: Yes. Namibia was known as South West Africa, was colonised by the Germans and then, after the First World War when German territories were shared out amongst the victors, it was administered by Britain from South Africa. The move towards independence came in the mid-seventies and gathered momentum and developed into a war for independence with terrorist groups operating in the territory. The United Nations decreed that Namibia should be given its independence. But it was too important economically and socially to the South African Government who

were not willing to give it up without a struggle. Independence was achieved only in 1990.

MM: Who were the groups that were operating there?

BD: The South West African People's Party was recognised by the United Nations as the sole legitimate representative of the Namibian people. But the South Africans had great difficulty in dealing with SWAPO. And although they indicated that they were prepared to consider and negotiate independence for Namibia, they weren't prepared to do so with SWAPO.

MM: Who were they dealing with, do you remember?

BD: The South African authorities?

MM: I have a strong recollection that there was a white South African there who was terribly influential but I can't remember his name. Can you?

BD: I'm afraid it's slipped my memory.

MM: So SWAPO was the representative.

BD: And recognised as such by United Nations. But while all of this was going on, SWAPO was carrying out small-scale guerrilla attacks against the South African authorities. The conflict escalated and became quite serious as the negotiations intensified.

MM: This was before Namibia became independent – which was when?

BD: In March 1990.

MM: But you didn't go until 1999, which was nine years after and things had settled down presumably.

BD: Yes. There was a determination on the part of the international community to ensure that Namibia got off to a very good start and, for that reason, most developed countries opened embassies there and were generous with their aid; there was a very extensive aid programme. During my time in Namibia, there were still more than forty diplomatic missions, which contrasts with, for example, Mauritius where there were twelve and Madagascar where I think we've just passed twenty-two. So it was very important. You will recall that Namibia was the last colonial possession in Africa to achieve independence and, from that point of view, it had a very symbolic importance.

MM: Did it have a South African Embassy?

BD: I'm almost certain that it did. It remained important economically for South Africa because of goods that were brought in to the port of Walvis Bay. It was also a major tourist destination for South Africans, which is one of the reasons, I was told, why South Africa was keen to hold onto it. You will remember, there were severe travel restrictions on anyone who had a South African passport, and Namibia was one of the few places they could actually escape to for camping, fishing, and for generally enjoying themselves and relaxing.

MM: I can't remember when South Africa rejected apartheid.

BD: It was when Mandela was released from prison, in the early 1990s.

MM: So it was after Namibia became independent. That's an interesting date order. Anyway, it was important. Were there any big industries there?

BD: The biggest industry, I suppose, was the diamond industry which was very tightly controlled by the Government, with vast areas of the country where people were not freely allowed to have access, guarded by armed mercenaries.

MM: ... employed by?

BD: By the Government or possibly by de Beers. The Government was in partnership with de Beers to ensure that the maximum use was made of the revenue from the diamond industry. The other major revenue earner was uranium. Rio Tinto had a uranium mine on the road between Windhoek and Swakopmund; and increasingly tourism was gathering pace - with magnificent lodges and access to wild life throughout the country.

MM: Where did the tourists come from?

BD: The Germans were quite numerous, as were the French, the Italians and the British.

MM: Were there direct flights?

BD: Yes there were. Air Namibia used to fly from London via Frankfurt to Windhoek to tap into what was seen to be two very lucrative markets.

MM: Did you enjoy your time there?

BD: Absolutely. Without hesitation I would say it was the best posting that we ever had. It is a magnificent country; very well run, very safe, with wonderful things to do.

MM: Is there anything further you want to tell us about Namibia?

BD: I can't think of anything in particular.

MM: Did you have any particular diplomatic problems or development issues?

BD: Throughout my career, I've always felt that, given the position that we hold and given the fact that people tend to listen to what British diplomats say, we should use our influence for good; and that we shouldn't fight shy of speaking out when things aren't the way they should be because our views are reported and they can sometimes influence other government's policy making decisions. Against this

background I did develop a reputation for outspokenness and saying things that weren't very welcome to the Namibian authorities.

One of the occasions I used was the annual Queen's Birthday Party reception. I didn't really think it was right just to give a bland, banal resumé of relations between Britain and Namibia; I used these opportunities to express my concern at some things that were happening, but in a way that wouldn't cause offence or jeopardise my relations with the local authorities. For example, in 2000 the white population of Namibia was getting very edgy about the possibility of a land grab along the lines of Zimbabwe, and the authorities weren't really responding to those concerns. In my Queen's Birthday speech I expressed the concern that was developing and the hope that the authorities would address these issues. I had five hundred badges made in the Namibian colours that said, 'Let's keep Namibia special', and they were given to all the guests as they came into the Residence. I think it was on that occasion, too, that I expressed concern at some of the excesses of the Special Mobile Force, a security organisation that had a reputation for terrible brutality.

These speeches were sent to the Foreign Ministry in advance and the Foreign Minister, who normally attended the Queen's Birthday Party, would respond. In a way, I felt that by speaking out I was contributing to the encouragement of free speech. I was very accessible to the press. I once took part in a live televised debate on the situation in Zimbabwe, which lasted two hours. One of the other panel members was a trade union leader who made the most outrageous statements about Western imperialism and exploitation, which I just couldn't allow to pass. I referred to him during the programme as a dinosaur, and I read out a statement that had been agreed by all African Heads of State committing themselves to peace, democracy, transparency, and good government. It was only at the end that I revealed that it was African leaders who'd signed up to it; he thought that I was reading something from the United Nations. People talked about the programme for weeks afterwards.

I always took whatever opportunities presented themselves to say what I really thought, so I was regarded as a bit of a trouble-maker by some members of the Namibian government. The Namibian people themselves responded quite positively to what I had to say.

MM: Did you have to clear these statements with the Foreign Office?

BD: I didn't feel the need to. I felt that I was on secure grounds to be able to say what I really thought. I used to send copies to the Foreign Office afterwards, and I never had a word of complaint.

MM: Did you get any comment at all?

BD: No, usually not. Quite rightly the Foreign Office saw us as being the experts on the ground and respected our judgement. I would very often send a covering note explaining why I'd said certain things or why I'd acted in the way that I had. I think the Administration at that time could see that it was actually a positive thing that could do nothing but good in a country where there was a possibility of things going off the rails.

MM: It was the era of Robin Cook, wasn't it, and the 'ethical' foreign policy. Presumably it was in line with that.

BD: I suppose to a certain extent I took my lead from that general approach.

MM: Were there any other matters that caused particular interest?

BD: Yes. One of our responsibilities in the High Commission was to get our message across on Zimbabwe, which I did at every opportunity. Because the two countries and the two leaders were very close, that was quite a controversial thing to have pursued. After giving one interview at which I pointed the inevitable consequences of the policy that Mugabe was following on land grabbing, I was called to see the Deputy Foreign Minister and told that the Namibian Government took exception to my demonising a friendly neighbouring country. The Deputy Foreign Minister told me that and that what I was saying was completely unacceptable and improper. I told him that I had a job to do and that I would reflect very carefully on what he had to say, and would decide what to do in the light of that. But I continued to speak out against what was happening in Zimbabwe. Even ordinary Namibians in

the street realised that what was happening in Zimbabwe was very dangerous and if repeated in Namibia could do nothing but harm.

MM: So did the Foreign Office react to that?

BD: No they didn't. Quite rightly they saw that as part of my job - as I did.

MM: What line was the Foreign Office taking on Zimbabwe at that stage?

BD: Our concerns about the situation in Zimbabwe was focussed on several different aspects of the crisis; the seizing of white farmers' land; violence towards those white farmers; the contribution white farmers were making to economic and social development in the country, creating jobs etc; and the serious consequences if the Zimbabwean Government continued to pursue this policy. One aspect of the line that we were taking was that the situation, as presented by the Zimbabwean Government as regards compensation and financial help following the Lancaster House Agreement was a total distortion of the facts. President Mugabe at that time was claiming that the British had agreed to fund the purchase of white land for resettlement and redistribution, when in fact the record showed quite clearly that that wasn't the case. What we actually said was that the problem was so large that it was beyond the resources of any one country to solve, and that we would contribute to a fund to be set up to solve the problem of land distribution.

That was one important aspect of what we were doing. But our duty was also to draw to the attention of the Namibian people and authorities the grave danger that events in Zimbabwe represented to the stability of the region. We prophesied the fact that there would be a mass exodus from Zimbabwe and the serious problem that would be created by those seeking security elsewhere in neighbouring countries.

MM: Were there white settlers in Namibia?

BD: Yes there were. Many of them were third and fourth generation. But there were others who were the source of some discontent, particularly German landowners who would come to Namibia for only two weeks a year to hunt all the wildlife that

happened to have strayed onto their land. The feeling was that these were legitimate targets for any kind of compulsory purchase policy. The Government was aware of the danger of pursuing a Zimbabwe-type approach and expressed their intention of operating in a stable and structured way.

MM: The German land owners weren't actually farming?

BD: No they weren't. They owned the land; they might have a rudimentary building on it, but they weren't using it. The long-term resident settlers from the days before independence were making a living of sorts. But the trouble is that Namibia is very infertile and vast acreages were needed just to support a herd of cattle. So they weren't getting rich. Black Namibians were saying, "It's our land and we want it back; we want our share of the land." But if you sat down and calculated how many Namibians there were and how much land there was, if it was all redistributed, they'd get something like the size of a back yard. Land redistribution had been attempted just after independence but it had failed, with farms turned into dustbowls because the farmers didn't have the skills to maintain it and grow crops. Their aspirations were understandable enough but the realities of the situation meant that it was never going to work.

MM: So that was a good interlude for you anyway. What was your next post?

H M Ambassador, Madagascar 2002

BD: I moved on from Namibia to Madagascar. Bearing in mind that Foreign Office postings are now decided a year in advance, I was chosen for Madagascar in October 2001 with the intention of taking over the post in October 2002. In December 2001, there was a presidential election - with two main candidates - the ruling President, Ratsiraka, and the Mayor of the capital, Antananarivo, Marc Ravalomanana. When the results of the election were announced, Marc Ravalomanana had most votes, but not enough to win outright. He claimed that the results had been fiddled and he'd been cheated out of victory. The High Constitutional Court declared that Ravalomanana had failed to win by the necessary margin and the election would have to move to a second round. Ravalomanana refused to accept that. So began a

crisis that lasted until June/July 2002. The people of Antananarivo and the surrounding areas paraded each day in the centre of town - some say that the crowd was up to half a million strong – and demonstrated in support of Ravalomanana. They wanted Ratsiraka out and Ravalomanana in. There was a great deal of tension; Ratsiraka was forced to leave Antananarivo for his own safety. He established himself in Tamatave where, at one stage, he declared Tamatave to be the new capital and announced the formation of a government. At the same time, Ravalomanana in Antananarivo declared that that city was still the capital and he formed his own government. For a period of about four months, Madagascar had two Presidents, two capitals and two governments.

In the midst of all this, the Foreign Office asked my predecessor to seek agreement to my appointment from the Malagasy Government but there were two of them, two Presidents and two Ministries of Foreign Affairs. He chose the opportunity presented by the death of the Queen Mother and the signing of a book of condolence to ask Ravalomanana's followers if they would accept me. At the same time, he sent a diplomatic note to the official Foreign Ministry and he got their approval. I think that actually makes diplomatic history. There cannot be many Ambassadors who have actually received agréments from two presidents and two governments at the same time.

MM: Where was the Foreign Ministry?

BD: An office representing the Foreign Ministry was set up in Tamatave. It could be that my note went to the Foreign Ministry in Antananarivo before the President decamped to Tamatave.

MM: From the British side, how was your appointment decided?

BD: By a board in the Foreign Office.

MM: You had to apply.

BD: Yes, I had to put my name forward with other candidates.

MM: Were there several candidates?

BD: It is not something that is ever revealed, but undoubtedly there would have been several if not many.

MM: But you put your name forward while you were still in Namibia because you knew that your posting there was coming to an end.

BD: A new system was introduced, I think, in the early 1990s, which involved circulating details of upcoming jobs by e-mail to everyone in the Diplomatic Service and, depending on when you expected to take up your next appointment, you put forward a list of applications for various posts.

MM: So you took over from ...

BD: From Charles Mochan. I should just add that this crisis deepened in Madagascar to such an extent that the people of Antananarivo were sealed off from the rest of the country by Ratsiraka supporters who welded steel containers to bridges and in some cases blew up bridges between the capital and the coast and the ports, to try to starve the two million or so people of Antananarivo out. Fuel couldn't get through, people were running short of food, medicines; it was quite a serious situation.

MM: Did they block the road between Antananarivo and Mahajanga?

BD: Yes, all the main arteries to the big towns outside Antananarivo were blockaded. Embassies started opening only two days a week because there was no fuel for the local taxi services or buses, and staff had difficulty getting into work. There were electricity and water cuts; things became very serious indeed. My predecessor started sending reports by telegram to the Foreign Office saying he wasn't sure how much longer the Embassy could stay open. I was reading these reports in London, waiting to take up my appointment and fearing that the job I had coveted for many years was disappearing before my eyes.

MM: Why were you anxious to go to Madagascar?

BD: It was a place that had always fascinated me. When I was in Mauritius, I was also accredited to the Comoros and I used to go via Madagascar to get there. The culture and everything about it really fascinated me, so that was a posting that I particularly wanted.

MM: And you had visited it with Mr Rifkind.

BD: Yes I had. He was the first Minister to visit Madagascar after the British Embassy was re-opened in 1980 after a closure of about five years; a closure that was brought about by financial difficulties.

MM: He was actually the first British Government Minister ever to visit Madagascar.

BD: I didn't know that; interesting.

MM: Anyway, so here you were in this besieged city.

BD: Well I wasn't, because the crisis was resolved before I arrived. I was reading the reports in London and was afraid that the posting was going to be cancelled. But there was a dramatic and unexpected turnabout. Ratsiraka had always been regarded in his latter years as having gone completely mad. He brought about his own downfall by ordering his Defence Minister to send in aircraft to bomb the half a million people who were demonstrating in the centre of Antananarivo. The Minister realised that the game was up, and switched sides from Ratsiraka to Ravalomanana. That was the beginning of the end. Ratsiraka then went into exile in France where he now lives.

MM: Have you seen him?

BD: No I haven't.

MM: Do you know where he is in France?

BD: Yes, he's got a very impressive house near the Bois de Boulogne. Once Ratsiraka had gone into exile, the situation quickly stabilised itself and I was able to take up my appointment in October 2002.

MM: And you were able to fly into the main airport.

BD: Yes.

MM: And the roads were open?

BD: Yes, they were. To all intents and purposes, life got back to normal very quickly.

MM: Were they able to resume the rail service to the coast?

BD: No. The railways had died many years ago. The only railway service operating was between Fianarantsoa and Manakara, and that was operating under difficulty because the line was often washed away or covered in landslides. But thanks to the hard work and dedication of new management it had started it was to do very well, and there were high hopes that the whole network could be resurrected, but on a privatised basis.

MM: So you took up with the new President. Did you get to know him?

BD: Extremely well, yes. He is very approachable; he's the Vice-President of the Anglican church in Madagascar, and he has a soft spot for Britain. His son is actually at prep school in England before going to Eton eventually. He's very keen to get alongside the British and Britain. In his very early days in power, he declared that English should be taught in all primary school in Madagascar and that it was only through breaking out of its isolation that Madagascar could hope to compete in the global context. He was always very accessible and extremely friendly and supportive.

MM: Was there any trade?

BD: Yes, the official figures for British exports to Madagascar are about £6m a year, but the belief is that many millions more come via South Africa and aren't actually recognised as British exports.

MM: I imagine that a lot goes through France as well. Our statisticians are not very accurate on detail on trade, as I remember. All British goods that are exported to Europe count as exports to the EU, because ultimate destinations are often not recorded. I do not think there are any direct UK-Madagascar air or shipping services any longer.

BD: There's no doubt that the official figures did not represent the true extent of trade.

MM: What about our relations with the cultural side of life in Madagascar?

BD: There has been no British Council representative in Madagascar for many years, although the Cultural Attaché in Mauritius was accredited to Madagascar. The problem was that she had no budget for Madagascar. Although I did entice her to visit Madagascar in the hope that she would make some recommendations, the visit had no real result. So we weren't contributing on that side at all; unlike the French who of course had a magnificent cultural centre and also had the Alliance Française operating very successfully – not just in Antananarivo but in places like Nosy Be and Fianarantsoa where they were also cultural centres.

Where we did score very highly was with the Small Grants Scheme which was funded by DFID and which was used to finance small projects all around the island; developmental projects such as building schools or installing clean water systems, or financing small revenue generating projects like honey production or handicrafts production, that kind of thing.

MM: Who administered that?

BD: It was administered by the Embassy. When I first arrived, the budget was quite modest – I think round about £100,000 a year – but it was doing so much good that, over the subsequent years, we were able to increase it. In the end it was the biggest Small Grants Scheme anywhere in the world, with an annual budget of almost £300,000. When I arrived, we were funding about thirty projects a year and, by the time I left, in our last year we funded a hundred and nine projects, including the construction of forty primary schools around the country.

MM: So how on earth could you get around all these projects?

BD: There was a Section in the Embassy comprising two locally engaged women who dealt with the Small Grants Scheme. We were reactive in the way we operated. Our job was basically to advertise the existence of the Small Grants Scheme and encourage people to put forward proposals. Once we'd established that the proposals satisfied our criteria, which were basically education, water, health, revenue generation, that kind of thing, these two women would organise an evaluation visit with a consultant who received an annual honorarium.

MM: A Malagasy consultant?

BD: In fact it was a member of the British community normally. They would visit the site where the school or the bridge or the water system was to be built, and talk to the local authorities and the people who had made the proposal about how they were going to implement it; and how the money was going to be managed and that kind of thing. If they were satisfied that the project was a good one, well thought out and being run by responsible people we could do business with, they would submit a recommendation to me which, more often than not, I approved, perhaps after asking a few additional questions.

MM: Did you go yourself and see the projects?

BD: I did, but only when they were inaugurated. We tried very hard to inaugurate as many as possible; first of all because of the positive publicity they generated but

secondly because it was so much appreciated. Normally these inaugurations had brass bands and speeches galore, possibly Ministers attending. I think one of my greatest publicity coups was when we spent £7,000 installing a water system in a high security prison. The inauguration was attended by the Minister of Justice and I got two thirds of a page of publicity including photographs of this event. The other third of the page was a story about the French Government having agreed to fund the rehabilitation of a port, costing 56m Euros. We got a big bang for our buck on that particular occasion. But our projects always received magnificent publicity from radio, television and the print media.

MM: And you said a short time ago that President Ravalomanana was very keen on English as a medium of instruction and a subject for people to study. How did the French view that?

BD: The French shared the view expressed by President Ravalomanana that Madagascar could not be totally dependent on only one country; it needed to branch out. I didn't sense any resentment whatsoever from the French people I spoke to. Before I took up my appointment, I went to the Quai d'Orsay and I talked to the future French Ambassador to Madagascar and to senior officials such as the Director for Africa, and they all fully supported that point of view. There was a feeling that Madagascar had become much too isolated and that it was time to start seeking and developing new friendships.

MM: What was the size of the French Embassy there?

BD: I can't give you a figure for the number of staff but the actual building was ten times larger than the British Embassy. I would imagine there were more than two hundred French-based staff there. It was a massive operation.

MM: So the French Ambassador would be a very senior man.

BD: The ambassador was a woman for almost all the time I was there.

MM: Did you get on well with her?

BD: Yes, very well. Only the British, the Germans and the French were represented from the European Union in Madagascar.

MM: No Italians?

BD: No Italians; their Embassy had closed down. There was an Italian Consulate General for a while but that's now closed down too.

MM: Spanish?

BD: No Spanish. Nobody else from the European Union at all. France, Britain and Germany, and a European Commission office.

MM: How big was the European Commission delegation?

BD: Again massive; I would guess probably sixty staff with a very large programme.

MM: Brussels based?

BD: Again I'm just guessing, but part Brussels based, part Malagasy. But very substantial offices with a very large budget. On roads alone the European Commission was spending something like 900m Euros on road building over the next three years.

MM: That is quite substantial, isn't it! So the UK's share of that, because we're net contributors to the EU budget, must have been pretty substantial.

BD: It does vary. I think the figure that I was working on when I was there was about 14%. But of course it's indirect aid. It doesn't actually earn brownie points for Britain, but I agree that it represents a substantial contribution to Malagasy development.

MM: So you received a warm welcome.

BD: Yes, certainly; for a number of reasons. There was this policy of openness, opening out to the rest of the world. There were the strong links between the Anglican church in Madagascar and in Britain, and also of course strong historical links dating back to the early 1800s when missionaries from the London Missionary Society first arrived in Madagascar. There was also the firm belief that we would support them in their efforts to bring development to Madagascar and help them to fight poverty and corruption.

MM: How were we able to do that?

BD: Despite my best efforts, I was never ever able to persuade DFID to establish a bilateral aid programme. It was something I thought the circumstances deserved. My feeling was that Madagascar had really turned the corner and that it deserved every possible encouragement and support that Britain could give it. I also firmly believed that Madagascar was setting a good example for the rest of Africa in the way it was tackling its problems, in getting to grips with some of the things that had been major obstacles to social and economic development over the previous thirty years of bad governance and institutionalised corruption.

I did have an opportunity to urge Clare Short at a Heads of Mission conference to give more support for Madagascar. She indicated she was sympathetic, and wanted to give more support to Francophone Africa, but that, although she had funds, she didn't have the expertise and so they would have to go slowly-slowly. This was about the time the British Government was giving substantial support to the Democratic Republic of the Congo, to be extended to other francophone countries when circumstances allowed.

So we weren't actually, as a British Embassy and British Government, able to support the Government to a very great extent except that there are British people involved in the anti-corruption campaign. A particular expert who has an enormous experience of the situation in Hong Kong is a major adviser to the Malagasy Government. But that

was something that the Malagasy Government organised themselves; it wasn't done through official channels.

But if I could come back to the Small Grants Scheme, again, although the projects were minor and they seldom cost more than £5,000 each, we were helping out communities which had given up all hope of ever getting any help at all. These were normally very poor communities, possibly with a mayor who was illiterate, who had no clout, no voice, couldn't really have his voice heard when there were meetings to discuss how massive European Community help was to be given to a region, but who needed desperately to build a school so that their children wouldn't have to walk three hours over the mountains to get to the nearest one; or who needed a bridge to enable goods to be got to market and sold at a fair rate instead of being sold to collectors who would trick them out of the money that was due to them. These small projects had a significant impact on small communities.

MM: You said that you would get somebody from the British community to go out and inspect these.

BD: It was just one single person who acted as consultant on every occasion.

MM: Who was that?

BD: It was actually my predecessor's wife who was looking for opportunities to make a contribution. And my wife took over the role when Mrs Mochan left.

MM: Did she stay on long after your predecessor had gone?

BD: No, they both left together and then, when we arrived, it seemed the natural thing for my wife to take over this role.

MM: So it gave both of them something useful to do.

BD: Certainly. Life for wives in Antananarivo could be very difficult and very lonely.

MM: Was there an American mission there?

BD: There was, quite a sizable one. Again I'm afraid I can't give you figures; it wasn't something that ever came up. But the American mission was very active, and dynamic. Just after the crisis of 2002 was resolved, the Bush Administration created the Millennium Challenge Account which was set up to reward governments who demonstrated a clear interest in resolving the difficulties that their people were experiencing. The Americans started taking a great interest in what was happening in Madagascar and accepted two proposals the Malagasy made which were worth \$100m over three years to reform the banking sector, over which the French had a stranglehold, and the reform of the land registration system, which was a serious impediment to development. Land ownership is constantly in dispute, which means that people aren't willing to invest in their land for fear of losing it.

MM: What about oil exploration?

BD: Oil exploration is gathering momentum. There are currently two major developments. For almost a hundred years there's been a known deposit of tar oil sands, which one expert told me rivals the quantities found in Libya, but it was particularly difficult to extract. The only way of getting it out is to inject steam. While the cost of oil on the international market was low, it didn't make sense but, once oil had gone up to \$70 a barrel, it became economically viable. There is a company called Vuna Energy who have set up Madagascar Oil and are now raising the funds to exploit that particular deposit.

The Malagasy have also established off-shore concessions, two of which have been taken up: Sterling Energy have now gone into partnership with Exxon Mobil and British Gas. British Gas entered the market in the middle of last year. The indications are encouraging.

MM: What was British Gas after?

BD: I suppose the quantities of gas that come with the oil.

MM: I see. They weren't exploring on their own account. Are there any other energy companies that are involved?

BD: I'm not aware of any. The Chinese were interested in oil exploration for a time but the press announced recently that they've withdrawn. The Chinese are very interested generally in Madagascar because of the mineral resources it has. They've also been very generous with their aid to Madagascar at a time when that aid is very much needed and appreciated.

MM: What sort of projects are they involved in?

BD: During my time, they had plans to build a cement factory but they've also been very generous with their aid for road repairs; I think they've donated a very large quantity of tar for road resurfacing.

MM: Did they have contractors in Madagascar?

BD: Not that I'm aware of.

MM: What about the Japanese; are they doing much?

BD: The Japanese have an aid programme and in fact just recently financed construction of a ring road which joins the road from the port of Tamatave to the road to the south of Antananarivo, avoiding the centre of Antananarivo. This is a major project which has brought enormous benefits to Antananarivo, not least of which is relief from traffic congestion. The Japanese Aid Organisation is active in school building and, on at least one occasion, the construction of a bridge that eased the congestion in a difficult part of town.

MM: Are there any other major aid donors?

BD: The French are very active and generous, particularly in training of the armed forces, the police and gendarmerie in France. They are also involved in some big

infrastructure projects as well, like the rehabilitation of the ports. But I think probably the French presence is more important commercially. France also has major commercial interests. There are said to be more than six hundred French companies operating in Madagascar, in all sorts of sectors from construction to the fishing industry.

MM: Are there any other major aspects of development that we should be taking note of?

BD: When President Ravalomanana eventually took power in May 2002, he must have looked around him and asked himself where on earth to begin. For over thirty years just about every sector had been neglected: education, roads, water distribution, electricity generation and distribution. All had suffered from under-investment and were in a run down state. Since 2002, aid donors and the international community have risen to the challenge and been generous with their support, particularly the European Community but also organisations like the African Development Bank. But one of the problems is that Madagascar lacks the capacity to spend the funding available and bring the infrastructure up to a reasonable standard. As a result, a lot of the money that is made available to Madagascar from the international community has not been used. The African Development Bank in particular has been critical of the fact that, of the money that is available on a preferential loan basis, only a small proportion has been spent. So there are constraints; however generous the international community might be, there's a limit to what Madagascar can absorb, and that is quite worrying.

MM: What is the reason for that? Do we know?

BD: One of the reasons is that administrative power and responsibility is pushed upwards rather than downwards, so a very small number of senior officials and Ministers have to be consulted about everything, and that slows the decision making process.

MM: Inadequate delegation.

BD: Yes. It's one of the legacies, I suspect, of the French-type administration and bureaucracy.

MM: It may also be a cultural thing with the Malagasies.

BD: That's quite true, yes. People who don't have grey hair tend to be regarded as not terribly serious. It's like so many places in Africa; it is age and experience that count, even if that age and experience is totally inappropriate for the task in hand.

MM: Do they still worship the ancestors?

BD: Yes they do; that's very much a part of their culture. When someone dies, they're interred in a tomb and after a few years when the family has saved up enough money the body is removed, wrapped in new silk shrouds, and then paraded around and sat or laid down to be told all the news since they last came out of the tomb. I attended one of these ceremonies once and was rather alarmed as the revellers were dancing in front of me carrying a corpse wrapped in a raffia mat when a leg started sliding out and threatened to drop at my feet! But an observant minder who was dancing around watching out for this sort of thing very swiftly shoved it back in where it belonged.

MM: A very strange custom.

Can you tell me something about the way in which your mission there developed?

BD: When I arrived, I realised we didn't have an awful lot to play with and that the best tool for strengthening the relationship was the Small Grants Scheme. Not only did we get very good publicity for what we were doing with a very small amount of money, but the Small Grants Scheme and the inauguration of projects gave me a very useful platform from which to deliver some of the messages that I was trying to deliver in Namibia. This went down extremely well.

The message I had was that Madagascar had suffered enormously; that the people of Madagascar deserved better; that President Ravalomanana and his Government really

cared for them and their welfare: that they were doing their best to defeat poverty and corruption and bring development to the people, but that this was going to take time. The people needed to be patient and bear in mind the fact that the international community and aid donors were giving enormous support and encouragement to the Government, in the belief that they could make a difference. I frequently alluded to the past and the problems that had been created by generations of politicians who really didn't care very much for the people, and contributed to the decline in the infrastructure and the standard of living, and the income levels of the ordinary Malagasy. I don't think it is an exaggeration to say that their's was an attitude of not caring about the ordinary people because they weren't important. That was probably the basis of Ratsiraka's eventual demise. There is no doubt at all in my mind that President Ravalomanana and his Government are truly dedicated and committed people who have seen the suffering of the ordinary people and seriously want to do something about it.

I think people are realising that, but the big danger they face is that people's patience will run out. The Government and the President started off very well, but their plans were scuppered and their objectives were endangered by the increase in the cost of oil on the international market, which contributed enormously to inflation. Prices rose because transport became more expensive, and I've no doubt at all that, for many people who made enormous sacrifices in 2002 during the crisis, life now is probably worse than it was during the days of Ratsiraka. But I think they need to look to the long term. I'm convinced that, now that the President has been re-elected for a further five-year term, there's every chance that his policies will succeed and that people will in due course see an improvement in their standard of living and their ability to educate their children and look after them better when they're sick. So it's a long process and, let's face it, it is hard to undo quickly the harm that was done over a thirty-year period. The Malagasy people thought there was going to be a transformation overnight, but I think they're starting to realise that the Government needs more time.

Decision to close the British Embassy in Madagascar

MM: You were originally going to go out there presumably to fulfil a posting which would take you up to your notional retirement age of sixty.

BD: Yes, I did have an extension until March 2006, but subsequent events meant that I left several months before that in August 2005.

MM: What happened?

BD: The Foreign Office realised early in 2004 that the settlement that they were expecting from the Treasury was going to be insufficient to maintain the network of posts that they had at the time, and the Foreign Office drew up a list of posts for potential closure. The possibility of closing posts was mentioned to Jack Straw as Foreign Secretary, but he rejected it and said that it was completely unacceptable to close any posts at all. But his view seems to have changed over the intervening period. Madagascar, sadly, was added to the list of potential post closures early in November 2004. Another post that had been on the list was suddenly removed for some reason. The nature of that problem has never been explained to me. In early November 2004 I was told there was a possibility Madagascar would have to be added to the list for potential closure; would I advance arguments against?

The arguments, to my mind, were pretty convincing; first of all, after thirty years of neglect and institutionalised corruption, there was a Madagascar government that cared for its people and was tackling poverty, underdevelopment and corruption. The Malagasy government was well disposed towards the West. The President had ordered that primary schools should teach English, and had put in place a policy of openness to develop relations particularly with the English-speaking world. It was a situation that was fast-moving and was presenting opportunities for British companies and organisations. We had established our credentials with the President and the government and were very well placed to benefit from the commercial and other

opportunities that would come along. We were dealing with a Government that was supportive of Britain's attitude towards Zimbabwe and other international issues, and a country that was a bio-diversity hotspot on which the attention of the conservation and environmental lobbies were firmly focussed. Tourism was increasing; all sorts of opportunities were coming along. It was a government and a President that deserved and needed our encouragement and support in a situation that merited our involvement.

All of these arguments were put forward to the Foreign Office. The indications were that the Foreign Office was fighting our corner and there was every possibility that the Foreign Secretary would maintain his line against post closures. I didn't really think that the danger of closure was very great. So I was pretty gob-smacked on 1 December 2004 when I received a telephone call from the Director for Africa to say that the Foreign Secretary had decided that the embassy in Madagascar would close by the end of 2005 to save precisely £250,000 a year, equivalent at the time to the cost of a three-bedroom semi-detached house in Surbiton!

MM: Did they discuss in any way the arguments that you put forward?

BD: No, I was never given any kind of response to the arguments I put forward. There was never any debate; there was never any consultation with the thirty British non-governmental organisations that operate in Madagascar; there was no consultation with the multinational companies such as Imperial Tobacco and Rio Tinto, who are major investors in Madagascar; there was no consultation with anyone who had anything to do with Madagascar. In fact I was sworn to complete secrecy about the decision to close the British Embassy until the day Jack Straw announced the closure to the House of Commons on 15 December 2004. I was not even allowed to tell the President or the Prime Minister in private before my departure for a long-planned Christmas holiday in Australia that the Embassy would be closing and that there would be an announcement to this effect on 15 December. I actually left for Australia and, behind me, I left letters to be delivered by my deputy to the President and the Prime Minister, and to be handed out to the Embassy staff, explaining the situation and the decision to close.

MM: How was all this received?

BD: With total incredulity, by all concerned. You can imagine the reaction of the Malagasy government. Their biggest fear, a fear that wasn't realised fortunately, was that this would be used by the opposition parties to undermine confidence in the President and the government. Their fear was that the opposition would present this as an indication first of all that the British Government had no confidence in the President or his policies and secondly that the British Government disagreed with my statements about the international community having confidence in President Ravolomanana, the Government, its policies and the future of Madagascar.

In the business community, considering that economic growth was increasing and the situation improving, again there was total incredulity; only one month before the decision to close the Embassy was made, the British Embassy had played a vital role in winning a contract for British Geological Surveys in the face of fierce competition from France, who normally dominated that sector, worth, I believe, £4m. We were also working on a project worth £12m with Crown Agents in order to reform the Customs Service, which was losing a sizable proportion of its income from taxes, due to theft and corruption. Rio Tinto were working on the launch of their ilmenite project down in Fort Dauphin and, only a month before the closure took place, announced the biggest ever foreign investment made in Madagascar of around about \$750m. I know they made representations to the Foreign Office and asked if the closure could at least be delayed because the coincidence of announcing this major Anglo-Australian investment and the announcement of the Embassy would be highly embarrassing, but all representations to the Foreign Office, including letters from individuals, from companies, from African Presidents, even from the European Commission, were totally ignored and put to one side.

MM: Extraordinary! So you had to go ahead and announce the closure.

BD: Yes, the closure was announced on 15 December 2004, the same day that Jack Straw announced it to the House of Commons.

MM: And what followed?

BD: As you can imagine, the story got very prominent coverage in the local media; it stimulated a great deal of debate and discontent. The British community in particular was very upset by this decision; they felt that the closure of the Embassy would leave them vulnerable and without support. They could see the improvements that were being made in Madagascar and believed that Britain had a role to play in them. The NGOs were upset because the British Embassy had a long history of supporting their activities with the promotions of film launches at the Residence, exhibitions of the work of Kew Gardens, photographs, films, handouts, receptions, speeches. They too felt that the absence of a British Embassy would undermine their effectiveness and they feared the consequences. I could go on; every way you turned, the reaction was negative and it marked the start of a campaign to prevent the closure of the Embassy. The campaign carried on long after the decision was made. In fact it was still going on on the day of my departure and I thought its intensity might actually persuade the British Government that they had made a mistake.

MM: How big was the British business community?

BD: There were only about three hundred Brits in the whole of Madagascar; we based this on the fact that a British passport has to be renewed every ten years so, in an average year, we would get one tenth of the number of British subjects applying. The business community itself was fairly small but the British commercial presence was significant and growing.

MM: When did you actually leave?

BD: At the end of August 2005. As I said earlier, the original decision was to close the Embassy by the end of 2005. But the campaign to keep the Embassy open was so effective, and gathering momentum, that the Foreign Office appeared to take fright that the campaign might actually work. There had been numerous representations to the Minister for Africa and the Foreign Secretary, and people like the Chairman of Rio Tinto had called on the PUS to seek at least a stay of execution, so the Foreign Office decided that they couldn't really allow this to continue until the end of 2005. In May 2005, they sent me an e-mail to say, "We've reviewed the situation and we

would now ask you to close the Embassy with immediate effect. If for any reason this is not possible, you must aim to close at the end of August at the very latest.” My diary was already well full until the middle/end of July so I argued that the earliest we could close was the middle of August, and that was accepted.

MM: So you didn’t quite take them to the end of the wire, but ...

BD: But pretty close to!

MM: What happened to your Small Grants Scheme?

BD: That’s a really sad tale. At the end of each financial year, we would be invited to put forward a bid for the next financial year and, even though the Embassy was closing at the end of 2005, we believed that we could easily spend our annual allocation before that date. We were constantly identifying projects for future financing even though the financing wasn’t at that time available. So, when the financial year beginning on 1 April 2005 arrived, we already had forty-six projects worth £180,000 lined up in anticipation of getting our allocation for the coming year. We received notification from DFID in April 2005 that our request for funding had been agreed; we then approached the forty-six project organisers to tell them that their projects had been approved for funding. A few weeks later, we were told by DFID that responsibility for the Small Grants Scheme, the money and its management, was to be transferred from DFID to the Foreign Office; which happened. I then e-mailed the Foreign Office and said I was interested to hear about this change and was pleased that our allocation had been agreed for the coming year. The Foreign Office replied that DFID had made a mistake and that, as the Embassy was closing, we would not be given an allocation for new projects in the coming year. When I protested I said that this left us in a very embarrassing situation; there were forty-six projects with people waiting for the money having been told in good faith it was coming. I was told that that didn’t really matter; that the Foreign Office – although they’d received money specifically for Madagascar - intended to spend it elsewhere in Africa, and that, because there was no Embassy to benefit from the goodwill these projects would generate, they did not intend to honour the commitment that we’d given to these projects. There was nothing that could move them. The only money we did get for

2005/2006 was the money that we needed to complete projects that were started in the previous financial year, and that added up to about £15,000. That was as much as they were prepared to give us.

So all in all it was an uncomfortable, embarrassing and quite humiliating experience.

MM: So how did you face up to that?

BD: The thought that the DFID-funded Small Grants Scheme was going to disappear, along with all the expertise that we in the Embassy had developed over a period of about fifteen years, was really quite hard to face up to. I wondered how we could possibly continue with that work, and draw on all that expertise and all those useful contacts that we'd developed around the country. Before I called on the President to say good-bye, I sowed a few seeds in the ears of people around him about possibly setting up a non-governmental organisation to carry on in exactly the same way that the Small Grants Scheme had operated and, to my relief and my delight, he was very receptive. He knew that I was going to be retiring from the Diplomatic Service and he said that he would like me to come back to Madagascar to create a NGO to carry on the financing of small projects. The idea was that, instead of getting money from the British Government to fund projects, we would raise it from British companies operating in Madagascar and Malagasy companies who had a social conscience and a desire to contribute to the development of Madagascar.

So I went back to Madagascar in October 2005. We created The President of Madagascar's Small Grants Scheme; I re-employed three redundant members of the British Embassy to run it, who had previous experience of the Small Grants Scheme. The President gave us offices and the money to furnish and equip it, and then we set about the business of raising funds. The response was very encouraging. In the first year we raised about £250,000, almost the same as our DFID project, from people like Rio Tinto, Imperial Tobacco, British Gas and smaller companies: Rainbow Tours, Sterling Energy who are exploring for oil, and individuals; a friend of mine gave me 1,000 Euros to buy solar ovens for poor communities in Tulear and so it goes on. The President's scheme really gripped people's imagination and we seem to go from strength to strength. In the first year, we financed forty-four projects, including the

construction of twenty-six primary schools around the country; we put six clean water systems into poor communities where cholera and diarrhoeal diseases were a serious problem. It just gets better and better.

MM: So at least something has been saved from the wreckage. What happened to the Embassy buildings?

BD: The office buildings were rented and we broke the lease. My deputy's house was rented and we did the same with that. The residence, which had been the residence since the Embassy re-opened in 1980 was owned by the British Government and was sold for less than we bought it for in 1998.

MM: So not a good deal there!

BD: No, not at all. And the sad thing is, of course, that inevitably – and this was a point I made to the Foreign Office – the Foreign Office's financial difficulties are fairly cyclical and predictable, and there's every possibility that, some time in the future, perhaps when there's a change of Government in Britain, the incoming Government will decide to reopen the Embassy. I'm fairly convinced that they will, because there are significant commercial opportunities in Madagascar and there is also the fact that the Malagasy Government is very supportive of British Government policies. It is possible that we'll reopen and the cost of reopening will be several times the tiny savings that have been made while the Embassy was closed; that's the tragedy of it really. In the meantime, we have destroyed our credibility and are seen as fair weather friends. Will their confidence return? When I arrived in 2002, I was still being reproached for the decision to close the Embassy in 1975. "How could you have abandoned us?" they said. "You were amongst our closest friends. We needed you, and now you're doing it again!"

MM: So you had a very sad farewell.

BD: Yes, not just a sad farewell, but a sad end to a forty-year career in a country with enormous potential that was at last turning the corner and that really deserved our support and every possible encouragement. As we were closing our Embassy,

people like the South Africans, the Norwegians, the Senegalese, the Thais and others were all opening Embassies in Madagascar because they realised that the tide had turned and that they could contribute to the historic changes that were taking place in Madagascar, and also benefit from them, politically and probably commercially.

MM: What about the Foreign Office itself? You came back before you'd reached retirement age.

BD: I did. I had some accrued leave which took me to about 7 November 2005, which is when I officially retired. I was told that, if I could spare the time, it would be nice if I could pop into Africa Department; they would be pleased to see me; but apart from that, nothing really. I was made to believe that I was held responsible for some of the anti-Embassy closure campaign and that I was working behind the scenes with organisations that were against the closure.

MM: Like the Anglo-Malagasy Society.

BD: Yes, trying to undermine the British Government's decisions. For that reason, I think it was fairly clear that I was not the flavour of the month where the Foreign Office was concerned.

Reflections on the Diplomatic Service in 2006

I am sad to say that the Foreign Office is not the organisation that I joined. There were various indications in the lead up to closure that brutality was the new diplomacy; there's a harsh and a very brutal attitude within the Foreign Office that I deplore and find totally alien. There doesn't seem to be any kind of finesse within the Foreign Office as regards the conduct of foreign affairs; there's just brutal determination. And there's also total short-sightedness, in my view, about what the Foreign Office is all about. The Foreign Office now seems focussed on procedural changes, on cost cutting, and on aspects of administration; they seem to have lost sight of the fact that the Foreign Office exists to support the work of our diplomatic missions in promoting and protecting British national interests.

MM: There was an article in the press not very long ago from Denis MacShane, a former Foreign Office Minister, who said that one of the reasons why there were problems in the Foreign Office was that they simply didn't get their fair share of Government funding, that all the expansion of budgets and so on was being directed towards DFID, at the expense of the Foreign Office. Do you feel disposed to comment on that?

BD: Yes I do. And actually I think that the present Government made a terrible mistake when it separated DFID from the Foreign Office. I honestly don't see how one can separate foreign policy from development and aid policies; the two go hand in hand. There has to be a high level of co-ordination between the two organisations and the way in which money is spent. I think DFID does a very good job but they need the guidance and the political input that the Foreign Office can give. Of course we're not just seeing money being diverted from Government coffers to DFID; we're seeing money being used for the war in Iraq and the conflict in Afghanistan to the detriment of our diplomatic coverage worldwide. It's all very well saying that a place like Madagascar is of no importance to Britain but, after all, Madagascar still has a vote in the United Nations; it is a country that is incredibly supportive of western values and western policies and, for £250,000 a year, I would have thought that that relationship was worth maintaining.

After I retired, each time I saw the destruction of British military vehicles or hardware in Iraq, I thought that represents the running costs of the British Embassy in Madagascar for more than ten years. It is a tiny amount of money, and the benefit we could have got from maintaining that modest investment would have repaid us many times over. I think we've damaged British interests and done a great disservice to a country like Madagascar, which is a true friend and a true champion of all the causes that Britain holds dear. We've done a great disservice to the Malagasy people by turning our backs on them at exactly the time when they needed us.

MM: I think on that very sad note, perhaps we should bring this interview to a close. Thank you very much.

Transcribed by Joanna Buckley