

BDOHP Biographical Details and Interview Index

Fenn, Sir Nicholas Maxted GCMG (born 19 February 1936)

Career (with, on right, relevant pages in interview)

Pilot Officer, RAF, 1954–56	-
Entry to Foreign Office, 1959	pp 2-3
Third Secretary, British Embassy, Rangoon, 1959–63	pp 3-6
Assistant Private Secretary to Foreign Secretary, 1963–67	pp 6-10
First Secretary, British Interests Sect., Swiss Embassy, Algiers, 1967–69	pp 10-14
First Secretary, Public Relations, UK Mission to UN, NY, 1969–72	pp 14-19
Deputy Head, Energy Department, FCO, 1972–75	pp 19-21
Counsellor, Peking, 1975–77	pp 21-31
Royal College of Defence Studies, 1978	pp 31-32
Head of News Department and FCO Spokesman, 1979–82	pp 32-42
Spokesman to last Governor of Rhodesia, 1979–80	pp 33-36
Ambassador to Rangoon, 1982–86	pp 42-49
Ambassador to Dublin, 1986–91	pp 49-60
High Commissioner in New Delhi, 1991–February 1996	pp 60-71
Reflections on 37 years in the Diplomatic Service	pp 72-76

Sir Nicholas (Maxted) Fenn GCMG

interviewed by Jimmy Jamieson on Tuesday 16 February 2010 at Marden, Kent

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Education and early life

NF I was born in 1936 within the sound of Bow bells, so I suppose I'm a cockney. We were bombed out three times in the War in London, Bristol and Exeter. My parents bought a cottage on the northern edge of Dartmoor where nobody could possibly want to drop a bomb, so I am a city kid dragged up in the wilderness -- not a bad combination. Then a Quaker preparatory school; Methodist public school; Anglican college. National Service in the RAF; lucky enough to be a pilot; lucky enough to be trained in Canada, and to then to fly for Transport Command in the months immediately preceding Suez, on the "milk run" to Australia and back.

In the autumn of 1956 I went up to Peterhouse, Cambridge where I had an active student life. I was President of the "Sex Club" – don't misunderstand me – that was the Sex-Centennial Celebratory Club (the Junior Common Room), President of the Cambridge University UNA; Chairman of the Cambridge University Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament; Chairman of Jaguar – Joint Action Group for Understanding among Races, and an active member of the college rugby team. I also worked hard. I studied Cistercian Monasticism, because I wanted to work for Dom David Knowles and one doesn't very often get a chance to work for a saint.

Entry to the Foreign Office as a Third Secretary, 1959

I joined the Foreign Office in 1959. After three weeks' induction I was sent to SOAS to learn Burmese. Why Burmese? Well, on my first day in the Service I had a form to fill in and I must have filled in 20 for the process of getting in, and it said "married or single" and I proudly ticked "married" because we'd got married ten days earlier. Within an hour I was summoned by the Head of Personnel, who said without looking up from his papers: "Who's this woman?" I said: "You mean my wife, Sir?" And he said: "Of course I mean your wife. Come here and sit down and tell me about her". So we discussed Susan, and I got nervous, and I said: "Excuse me Sir, is there some objection to new entrants being married?" He stood up and revealed himself to be a

very tall man. He looked at me down his long nose and said: “A wife, like a foreign language, is a normal professional requirement, which brings me to the point: you speak no known language. Which language would you like to learn? We’d like you to learn Burmese”. All in one breath like that. So I said: “I’d like to learn Chinese, if I’m being given a choice”. “You’re not”, he said. So that’s how we learned Burmese, and we never regretted it.

Language training in Burma, 1960

In 1960 I was posted as “Vice Consul” in Mandalay. Of course there wasn’t a consulate in Mandalay: my job was to continue to learn the Burmese language. We lived on the university estate. We taught spoken English in the University and learned Burmese primarily from our students. When we arrived, the house we were to live in was surrounded by two feet of water. There was no access road and no boat. The university watchman was camping in the house. He had a sheep in the bathroom and chickens in the bedroom. It wasn’t really acceptable as a residence, so we went back to stay with the only real British official in Mandalay, who was John Slimming, the Information Officer. I got a stuffy letter from Personnel Services Department who reminded me that officers were required to move into their permanent accommodation within six weeks otherwise their allowance would cease, “except in very exceptional circumstances.” So I described the circumstances of the house and said that I was new to the Service and couldn’t say whether these circumstances were “very exceptional” or not. I am pleased to say that I got a reply which said: “Not only is your claim approved, but your circumstances will be the standard against which all future applications will be judged”. So I didn’t think I was going to be very popular after that.

We became friendly with the editor of the local English language Communist newspaper, LuDu U Hla, and I conducted a public open correspondence with him in his paper until the Ambassador in Rangoon found out, and forbade it. We stayed with a Burmese family in a village called Amarapura outside Mandalay – a family which spoke no English, so we learned Burmese or starved. We stayed with students of ours in a town called Pakkoku on the Chindwin – notoriously the hottest place in Burma.

We acquired not just a fluent knowledge of the Burmese language, but some sort of understanding of how you think if you think in Burmese.

Work in the Embassy in Rangoon 1961

In 1961 I was transferred to Rangoon to do a real job for a change. Burma – fabulous endowment: tropical agriculture in the plains; temperate agriculture in the mountains; self-sufficient in oil – the Burma Oil Company, you remember?, precious stones – almost every mineral known to man had trace elements in Burma; 85% of the world’s rubies; 85% of the world’s jade. Its waters teemed with fish. Its teak is famous. It should be the richest country in Asia, and yet it is the sixth poorest nation on earth. And that’s an act of genius by the thugs who rule it.

JJ But why?

NF Because they’re so incompetent, greedy, and corrupt. So it’s a poor country in spite of its rich endowment. Secondly, it’s a Buddhist country. Very Buddhist. Overwhelmingly Buddhist, and it’s Hinayana Buddhism – that’s the lesser vehicle, as opposed to Mahayana in the Himalayas. The Buddhist doctrine of karma, of fortune and reincarnation of souls: your status in this life is the product of your conduct in previous existences. This means that there is nothing you can do to change the lot in life into which you are born, except by great piety, hoping for better luck next time round. That leads to acquiescence in things in which the western mind would not acquiesce. And thirdly, Burma is a natural loner. The arc of mountains and the sea – it’s almost an island – and it shares with China the self-conceit that its throne in Beijing or Mandalay was the centre of the universe, and all foreigners were equally barbarians. When the Burmese looked out over the parapet they saw China and then India, and then they saw us. So it’s better not to look over the parapet. An enclosed society. When we arrived there U Nu was still Prime Minister. Burma was still a parliamentary democracy; an engagingly inefficient parliamentary democracy, led by this pious and temporising man who, when he had a difficult decision to take would retreat to Mount Popa for six weeks, and when he came back, lo and behold the problem had gone away. Separatist rebellions: in 1950 – several years earlier – the tribal rebels were at the gates of Rangoon. When we were there, there were 21

separate rebellions in the field, which I think is a world record. Two of them were Communist; three of them were narcotics warlords and there were 16 ethnic separatists. And so there really was a threat of the union breaking up. U Nu summoned his Chief of Staff, General Ne Win, and asked him whether this problem was soluble by military means alone? The general said: “No, Sir”. So very sensibly U Nu looked for a political solution, whereupon he was overthrown by General Ne Win for endangering the territorial integrity of the Union. We will say a word about that in a moment.

An Australian agronomist came to the delta in 1961 and taught the peasants how to double the yield of their paddy, and they did what he told them. When he came back he found that they had indeed doubled the yield, but instead of doubling the harvest, they halved the acreage, because they got the same amount of paddy for half as much work, and they had twice as much time to sit under the palm tree and discuss the universe, which is what they did best. We had an aid programme – a modest aid programme which I administered. That was my job in the Embassy as the junior in Chancery. I administered it also on behalf of Canada and New Zealand and Malaysia and Singapore, who weren't separately represented in Rangoon.

JJ That must have been quite a job?

NF Well, particularly the Canadians. The Canadians had a capital aid programme. We didn't have a capital aid programme. We did training and things like that, and experts, and that was just administering. That was easy. But the Canadians had a capital aid programme and they were building a bridge outside Rangoon which unfortunately turned turtle; mercifully in the coffee break, so no-one was hurt. I was summoned to the Foreign Ministry and they demanded that I should undertake on behalf of the Government of Canada, to rebuild the bridge. I telegraphed the Canadian Ambassador in Kuala Lumpur, who was also accredited to Rangoon, and he said: “Permission refused”. They built it in the end, but I had to temporise.

Princess Alexandra came to Burma in 1961. It was part of her first solo royal visit. She was a beautiful Royal Princess and General Ne Win conveniently fell in love with her. She fell in love with Burma also, and still is very fond of it, and talks about it

when we meet. Ne Win looked after her programme in upper Burma, personally, and we had some memorable occasions there. I was attached to her party as Equerry Extraordinary, which meant dogsbody, and translator in time of need, and we went on to the Shwe Pagoda – one of the great religious buildings in the world, and the chairman of the Pagoda trustees came out in his best silk clothes and he addressed the Princess in a language I'd never heard before in my life. It turned out to be royal Burmese, which had died out with the Burmese monarchy in 1885, and once I realised this, I said to him in ordinary Burmese: “The Princess is a very democratic princess, and if you talk to her in ordinary Burmese, I promise to translate it into royal English”. He laughed, and addressed her in fluent English!

On the 2nd March 1962, my wife was in the Prome Road Nursing Home having given birth to our eldest son, and she glanced out of the window as she was feeding him at 2.30 in the morning and saw guns in the bushes, and she said to the night nurse that there had been a revolution. Then the front door bell rang and these two young girls came downstairs and there were twelve rifles pointing through the grille. They weren't looking for Sue. The only other patient in the nursing home was the Sawbwa of Kengtung – the feudal prince from the far-eastern corner of Burma, who was on the wanted list of the new regime. They came storming in and they met this fair-haired girl with a babe suckling at her breast and on a impulse she said: “Would you like to hold the baby?” And they stacked the guns in the corner and queued up to hold the baby. Of course they took the Sawbwa away in the end.

When we came to leave Burma, my Ambassador, Gordon Whitteridge, asked me to write a valedictory minute describing Ne Win. Of course, I wrote frankly, because protected by confidentiality, secure in the knowledge that it could not be published for 50 years. Now the 30-year rule means that things can be published when the person who wrote them is still in Service. If that memo had been noticed while I was subsequently Ambassador in Rangoon, I would have been destroyed. Why do we inflict such absurd constraints upon ourselves in the name of open government?

Appointment as Assistant Private Secretary to Secretary of State, 1963

In 1963 to my great astonishment I was appointed Assistant Private Secretary to the Secretary of State. I was appointed by Alec Douglas-Home, but by the time I'd got there he'd gone across the road to No 10, and my first boss was Rab Butler. I was delighted to come half way round the world to serve this famously liberal Tory, author of the 1944 Education Act. A man of immense experience, having held every major office in Whitehall except one, twice turned down for No 10, not apparently resentful about it, but tired. His wife, Molly, was a bit resentful. But he was tired. What I remember about him was that he was a master of evasion, famous for his Rabbisms. He was a great man. But he didn't, to my knowledge, take any significant decision for the whole of the year which I served him. They either went across the road to No 10, or they were taken by the PUS. I was impatient – a young man impatient. Now I think he was astute. Very often decisions are not ripe to be taken, and if you kick them into the long grass, at which he was an absolute master, you find that when they come back they're rather different decisions. Things have changed. And if you had decided them three months earlier, you'd have got it wrong. There was some wisdom on his side. He was also a man of legendary indiscretion. I actually made for him the appointment with George Gale of *The Daily Express* in which he said the Tories were going to lose the election, and that Alec Douglas-Home was a nice enough guy, but not quite up to the job, and that the President of the Board of Trade, one Edward Heath, was a bit of a bore. In the morning when I went into the office the telephone was ringing: it was the President of the Board of Trade.

After the election, which of course the Tories lost by a whisker, we had Patrick Gordon-Walker, who you may remember was the only Foreign Secretary in our lifetime who was a member of neither House, because he was defeated at Smethwick on an openly racist ticket. The Tories were so embarrassed about it that they allowed him to serve as Foreign Secretary, as long as he fought an early by-election. So Transport House, Labour headquarters, arranged for Fred Sorensen, a greatly loved local MP in Leytonstone, to be ennobled. Gordon-Walker fought a by-election, but as he was busy being Foreign Secretary, (and he was a good Foreign Secretary, but not a very good parliamentary candidate), he lost that seat as well. We couldn't believe it. He had to resign. Then we had Michael Stewart who claimed that he'd never been out of the country in his life. I don't think that was quite true. He is among the most under-rated Foreign Secretaries of our time. He wasn't a great man, but he was a

lovely man. I became extremely fond of him. On his first day in office, I had to go in and ask him what device he wanted on his seal, to seal treaties, and he replied: "Revelations, Chapter XXII, verse 2", and I had to go scurrying around looking for a Bible, and it said: "And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations". He wanted a tree, and that's why he wanted it. And a few weeks later he was invited to go to Oxford for a Teach-In on Vietnam. The British Labour government were being pilloried for supporting the American intervention in Vietnam, or for not disengaging from it; for not denouncing it. And we all advised Michael Stewart not to go. We said: "You'll be crucified. The house will be stacked against you and you won't get a hearing". And he said: "You forget I was President of that Union. Write me a speech". I commissioned a speech from South-East Asia Department. A perfectly good Foreign Office draft went into his Box and it came out entirely untouched. Then I knew he was a goner. I took it into him and said: "Shall I cancel your engagements?" "No", he said. "It's perfectly all right". And he went to Oxford. Cabot Lodge had come across from the States to represent the Americans, and lost control entirely. The house was baying for his blood. And the new Foreign Secretary, largely unknown in the country, rose for the first time in front of the television cameras to face a baying mob. And within ten minutes he had them eating out of his hand. Not because of anything particular he said. The speech he delivered was recognisably the official draft. It was the way he delivered it. It was obvious, even to the baying mob, that for Michael Stewart, Vietnam was not a matter of the domino theory; the balance of power and all that; it was peasants dying in paddy fields. He cared, and that got across. He was also, I have to say, slightly donnish. There came a time again a few months later when the British government wanted to give independence to British Guyana. Unfortunately two-thirds of the territory was claimed by Venezuela, so we had to get this claim put on ice, so that we could give independence responsibly to Guyana. The British Foreign Secretary went to Geneva where he met his Venezuelan colleague, Dr Irribarren, who made speeches lasting an hour to twelve people in a hotel room, and Michael Stewart would reply quietly for ten minutes and then they would adjourn for coffee, and the whole thing would happen again. For a week this went on, and my colleague who was there with him, leaned over his shoulder because he suddenly saw that apparently Michael Stewart was taking notes. Were we going to have some new initiative? He was translating his briefs into Greek sonnets.

Then HMG devalued the pound. It did so without consulting the First Secretary of State and Secretary of State of Economic Affairs, one George Brown, who was hopping mad, and threatened to resign. The only way Harold Wilson could keep him on board was to give him the Foreign Office; so he and Michael Stewart swapped. Now this happened on, as I recall, 12 August 1966 – I don't vouch for the date – but it was a Saturday, and high-holiday time, and all self-respecting mandarins were on holiday. By then the Principal Private Secretary was Murray MacLehose, later Governor of Hong Kong, and he wasn't about to come from his Scottish fastness for a small matter of changing Secretaries of State, so it fell to me on a Saturday morning to receive the new master on the steps of the Foreign Office, and show him his office. And everything was wrong. For generations the big picture over the fireplace had been a picture of George III, and George Brown said: "He was the least successful of my predecessors. Bring me Palmerston". And we went on from there. He'd arranged to take a holiday in Ireland in a villa owned by Jack Lynch, then the Taoiseach of Ireland, and so for three ghastly weeks I commuted from Heathrow to Cork, carrying the first offerings of the Office to the new boss, and again everything was wrong, and I was the only thing in sight, and I had, I must say, a very rough time. He was a workaholic. He worked late at night, and he would telephone his staff as if they were always on duty. One Saturday night I got home very late and went straight to bed because I was completely exhausted, and an hour later the telephone rang and Susan answered it and it was the Foreign Office messenger in those days, on the switchboard, who said the Secretary of State would like to speak to Mr Fenn, and Susan gave the messenger a piece of her mind. "Does that man not realise what he's doing to his staff?" She didn't know George was listening. And when I arrived to the telephone he said: "Nick. It's George. I'm so sorry to trouble you". And after that Susan had him eating out of her hand. George was of course – famously - he had a fatal flaw. Not that he was a great drinker, but that he was one of those unfortunate people whose judgment is affected by one sherry, and one of our duties was to ensure that he took no decisions after lunch. How can you function in that way? A great man; intuitive; instinctive politician, with a fatal flaw. I suffered, and on the basis of that suffering, I claim the right to be pro-George for two reasons. One is that the Foreign Office is the kind of institution that needs to be picked up and shaken from time to time, and my God did he shake us. We'd had a series of chiefs since Bevin

who were rather like us; very congenial masters. George was different and you could see the mandarins falling off their perches, and occasionally that does us some good. The second more important reason was that on the fundamental issue of British foreign policy, namely out from east of Suez and into Europe, he was 100% right. Only George could have picked us up and thrust us into Europe. So those were my four masters.

JJ That is very interesting. I didn't realise that.

NF The Private Office is of course the fulcrum of the Foreign Office. The place where politics, diplomacy and government meet. It was a privilege to be there, to work for four such different Secretaries of State, to meet the kind of senior people that they met, be in on the meetings. The Private Secretary, of course, has to be loyal, both to the Office and to its master, and when a decision has been taken, it's his duty to defend that decision, and indeed impose it on very senior officials, much senior to me. When you leave the Private Office, you have to unlearn the trappings of power very swiftly, otherwise you get clobbered.

Posting as Head of Chancery, Algiers, 1967

I was posted to Algiers and was sent to Tours, where they speak Oxford French, to hone, as they kindly put it, my schoolboy French, and I stayed with a *Gaulliste* in his château, north of the Loire. I think he was mad, but he certainly had a very good cellar. At that time you may recall, General de Gaulle went to Canada and proposed a toast: "*Vive le Québec Libre*". Even Janelle, my host, thought the old man had gone too far this time, and for a couple of days there was amity in the château. Then de Gaulle came home and addressed the French nation on television: "*La France, c'est moi!*" I thought it was funny and I laughed. But Janelle fell on his knees before the television set demanding pardon from the master for having doubted him. So there was no longer amity in the château. That night he got out his finest claret and he poured a little for me and a little for himself, and he rose unsteadily to his feet and he lifted his glass and he said: "*Vive le Québec Libre*". What does a British diplomat do then in order to get a glass of that superb claret? So I rose to my feet and I said "*Vive le Québec*". And he looked at me and I looked at him and very slowly he extended

his hand and we clinked glasses, and every night for six weeks, that absurd charade was repeated.

JJ But that was a very subtle response that you gave in the circumstance.

NF As I say, I did want that claret. I was then summoned to London suddenly because Moise Tshombe, former President of the Congo, had been hijacked over the Mediterranean in a British aircraft with British pilots, and delivered to – wait for it – Algiers. And George was very angry, and he mobilised Marshal Tito and he mobilised the Pope. Then he suddenly thought I've got my own man who's going to Algiers.

JJ Lucky you.

NF So I was summoned back and given a small, scruffy piece of paper in George's inimitable scrawl, and instructed to deliver it personally into the hands of President Houari Boumedienne when I arrived. That is a most implausible diplomatic scenario. There is no way that could have happened. I and the family were on the train on the way across France, with the letter burning a hole in my pocket, when the Algerians for their own good reasons, let the pilots out, so they were gone before I arrived. I think George went to his grave believing that I did it.

In 1967, Algiers. Algeria had been independent since 1962 after the bloodiest colonial war in history against the French. Sharp hostility to Europe, contrast Burma, where they were indulgent and charming and welcoming and assumed that the British would go on being interested in Burma. The Algerians were very anti-European. Anti-French, but also anti the rest of us.

JJ May I just ask a question. Was this the native Algerians or were they the French Algerians?

NF These were native Algerians. The French Algerians were almost all gone. The *pieds-noirs* had, when de Gaulle withdrew from Algeria about a million of them, as I remember, came to France and were a problem. There was a big French Embassy, but

very few French Algerians. But the native Algerians, the culture of Algerian politics, was anti-European, including anti-British. Their language was the *patois* of the Maghreb which you will know from Rabat, and when their President Boumedienne, who had been educated in Cairo, addressed them on television as he sometimes did for hours at a time, he spoke in a language which the Algerians called Egyptian, which we would call Arabic, and they had to go to the French language newspaper next morning to find out what he said. Now, the Algerian hostility to Europe had suddenly become specifically anti-British in 1965 – that’s two years before we arrived – because of UDI in Rhodesia. The Organisation of African Unity formally decided that all African nations should break relations with Britain, and the Algerians actually did, and four others; but most of them didn’t of course. So we were under Swiss protection, and the Ambassador, Sir Thomas Bromley, was sent packing. We still had our own Embassy, but we had the Swiss flag over it. (The Algerians for different reasons broke relations also with the United States and Germany, and they too chose Swiss protection. So there were four Swiss Embassies. We called it *l’Empire Suisse* in Algiers.) It was an unpleasant atmosphere in which to work. But of course Algeria has immense compensations. The city is fabulous – you remember it, and the beaches are fabulous. The desert is absolutely intoxicating. So we weren’t miserable in Algeria, we just didn’t like Algiers. Doing business was complicated. We drove to Djanet with Dutch and German colleagues to look at the cave paintings, and the Tassili mountains, and fell in love with the Sahara. In 1968 Simon Dawbarn, who was the Counsellor and the Head of the British Interests Section, was posted to Greece without replacement and I found myself, quite contrary to any conceivable expectation, Head of the British Interests Section in the Swiss Embassy in Algiers. My boss was the Swiss Ambassador. The day after Simon left I was summoned to the Foreign Ministry and instructed, the way the Algerians do, to conduct two sets of parallel negotiations. One in the Foreign Ministry in my collar and tie, leading towards the resumption of diplomatic relations, and the other in the souk in disguise with a representative of the President’s office, for the release of the aircraft. They had let the pilots out, but the aeroplane was still detained. Now for Britain we couldn’t resume relations while a British aeroplane was still detained. For the Algerians, they couldn’t release the ‘plane until it could be seen as a consequence of resumption of relations. It was a classic diplomatic chicken and egg. And they also said: “Please for

starters, to kick this off, arrange for a special representative of your Secretary of State to arrive in Algiers at noon tomorrow”.

JJ Just like that.

NF So I swallowed and said: “I’ll do my best”. I rang up the Foreign Office and they said: “Oh, that’s very convenient. The Iraqis have just broken relations so Richard Beaumont, a very senior Arabist is on his way home. We’ll divert him”. And he arrived at five past twelve. My stock went up. Whereupon he was incarcerated in a State guesthouse in the hills above Algiers for a week. Dick Beaumont was an extremely tolerant and gentle man, but he got a bit exasperated by this. The situation was eventually explained: the Foreign Minister, one Abdelazziz Bouteflika, now President, I think, of Algeria.

JJ Became President.

NF He had had his tonsils out and couldn’t speak.

JJ Very helpful

NF We were eventually allowed to call on him in his hospital bed and Bouteflika said: “I’ve been forbidden by my doctors to speak so I prefer to listen”. And Beaumont who had expected at least to hear something about: “I’m sorry we locked you up for a week” – rallied to the occasion and made a most eloquent little statement of five or ten minutes about: “We have no hostility to the Algerian people. The breaking of relations was none of our doing and so on. And we for our part would like.... And there was the little matter of the aeroplane.” And Bouteflika, whose doctors had forbidden him to speak then spoke for forty minutes without drawing breath, and he talked about Algeria’s threefold destiny, which was its Arab destiny, its African destiny and its Mediterranean destiny, of which by extension we were an honorary member, it appeared. And then the interview was closed. As we left, I said to the Head of the European Department of the Foreign Ministry: “Have we resumed relations?” He said: “Yes. Noon tomorrow”. “What about the aeroplane?” “Ten days”. So my parallel negotiations turned out to be irrelevant. In the end we had to

trust them, to trust them, we didn't really have an option. So Dick Beaumont and I decided that we would trust them, and we told the Office that we were going to trust them. By the time they had a chance to consider it, relations had been resumed and the Union flag flew over the Embassy again. Unfortunately it had been in store for too long and it had holes in it. So we had to get another one out, which was too small. Anyway, we resumed relations. Then eight days later, two British pilots flew out from the UK to take the aeroplane. I was by then Chargé d'Affaires, and the Union flag on my car fluttered along the row of MIGs and there at the end was this toy aeroplane – all this fuss. The pilots tested it, ran it up. Fine. It asked for take off clearance, which was refused. The aircraft could not be authorised to take off because it had never arrived. The only way this authority could happen was by the decision of the Controller of Civil Aviation, who lived in Maison Blanche, the other side of town. So we beetled across town. It took us an hour, but we got permission. We beetled back again and the British pilot said: "It's too late. It's dusk. We're not going to fly this aeroplane in the dark". So we took them home and gave them dinner and they went to bed and at 06.30 hours the following morning GA-SNU -- Golf Alpha Sierra November Uniform – I shall never forget that call sign – took off, and I telegraphed the Office. "GA-SNU left Algerian soil at 06.30 GMT – *Laus Deo*" – thanks be to God. I got a manuscript note from the PUS reproaching me for using Latin in official communications. But the resumption of relations rendered Fenn redundant. Sir Martin Le Quesne came to take charge of the Embassy and I was sent to New York. Twenty years later we came back and drove across the Sahara – from Dublin to Lagos, but that's another story.

First Secretary (Public Affairs), UK Mission to UN, New York, 1969

JJ So after that you went to UKMIS New York.

NF I was abruptly transferred because superfluous to requirements in Algiers on 1st May 1969. I was sent to New York to be Press Secretary to Lord Caradon, Sir Hugh Foot as was, who was the Permanent Representative and Minister of State in Harold Wilson's government. I was the spokesman for the mission. First Secretary Public Affairs it was called. The United Nations of course had disappointed all the hopes of its founding fathers long since as an ineffective talking shop, but it still expressed the

aspirations of mankind in a way that no other organisation on earth could do. The main issues that were before the UN in our time were the Middle East, development, Southern Africa, anti-colonialism of course, the 25th Anniversary of the UN itself and the question of the Chinese seat in the UN. The Cold War, which was the most important question of all, was not on the agenda at all. Of course it hamstrung the UN with the veto, but the veto was essential, because it was only thus that the UN could reflect the whole world. When it didn't reflect the whole world it was useless. The point of the veto, which is often not understood, is to ensure that the UN never goes to war with anyone whom it can't beat. It actually is a very important element of realism in the UN but, of course, it makes it difficult. The Secretary-General was U Thant, a Burmese. The Foreign Office when it sent me there was kind enough to say that I could speak to the Secretary-General in his own language. Of course I never got the chance to do any such thing, except wishing him good morning in the corridor about three times in the course of my three years. My job was to promote British policy on UN questions to the international press corps, which was, I suppose, about half American, but almost every nation member of the UN had an accredited correspondent at the UN building. The formal vehicle for this was the daily press conference as you said in your question; 12.15pm every day on the record. The UN had a press conference at noon, the Brits at 12.15 and the Americans at 12.30.

JJ Short and sharp then?

NF Oh yes. The facility was open to anybody. We were the only two member states that took advantage of it. I've never understood that. Quite extraordinary.

JJ That's because we Brits and Americans are very open to say what we want to say.

NF Open societies. But there are other open societies I suspect as well who didn't bother and I found that odd. Because it meant that our versions tended to be accepted, which was not what everybody wanted. And then often followed by lunch with a key journalist and the afternoon walking the press floor, either peddling some key issue or simply being seen and open for questions. On the press floor always unattributable; at the press conference always on the record. So inevitably (and the same repeated in News Department ten years later), the morning was intake: learning what was going

on and reading the telegrams and taking the Minister's mind – I mean Caradon – and the afternoon was giving it out, and putting the British line out to the public. You've been a press officer. You know that the relationship between a government press officer and a journalist is always ambivalent. Our interests are not identical. But if the press officer tells a lie he will be found out, and will never be trusted again. If the journalist betrays a confidence, he will never be given another. So we were in each other's pockets, and in a strange way we are colleagues in the business new every morning of rendering intelligible to the public, what goes on in that glass building on the East River. I mean, it's a fascinating and extraordinary relationship, which I learned to value. After a few weeks, I learned to discriminate between journalists I could trust and journalists I couldn't, and the ones I could trust I started showing confidential telegrams – bootleg copies – I never gave them to them of course - so that they could understand the problem that we were dealing with, and *then* we would discuss how that could be presented in the press. They never let me down. Never once. Ten years later I tried the same trick in London, and was turned down flat by the press.

JJ What were their arguments?

NF We'll come to that when we get to News Department. Better handle it there than now. In 1969, early 1970, it was still possible to have this colleguey relationship.

A number of things that stick in the mind – I just use these as illustrations – the UK Mission to the UN was the target for a good many demonstrations: anti-colonial or development or pro-Israel, or pro-Irish, and on this particular morning we had a new Ambassador, Sir Fred Warner, who was deputy to Caradon, and was coming to the Mission for the first time. I looked out of my window and I was horrified to see him apparently walking behind a big placard saying Brits out of Ireland. Fortunately, even his highly recognisable countenance had not been seen in New York before and wasn't recognised by anybody.

Among my closest colleagues, as a fellow press officer, was the Press Officer of Argentina, who gloried in the name of Billy McGough. In those days it was an agreed position of the two governments that our dispute over the Falklands, Islas Malvinas,

was a matter for decision by two sovereign governments and the UN should keep its nose out. Every year the Committee of 24 tried to inscribe it on the agenda, whereupon both missions would protest, and Billy and I would meet for a good lunch, and then we would go to the press floor and we would walk in step down the entire floor, and we would place our identical press releases on the rack. Bit of theatre, but it made its point.

Another bit of theatre was when the Committee of 24 passed a resolution demanding instant independence for the island of Pitcairn, which in those days had a population of 86, and I devised a press release without the UK Mission logo on the top, of course, purporting to come from the newly independent government of Pitcairn, announcing the appointment of all 86 of its inhabitants to the Cabinet, including a two year old child. [laughter] I would never acknowledge the provenance of that paper.

Chinese Representation – this is more serious. For all these years, as you will recall, the Chinese seat at the UN had been held by Taiwan, which was kind of absurd really, because a quarter of the human race was excluded from the UN, and their veto power was wielded by an offshore island. Now I make no judgment about the internal affairs of Taiwan, but from the UN perspective, this was an unrealistic posture, but of course, there was extremely strong support for Taiwan, or antagonism to Communist China, particularly in the United States. Every year there was a resolution proposing that the Chinese seat should be given to Peking. The obvious solution was two Chinas. You give Peking the veto, and you admit Taiwan as a member. Neither China would accept that solution, because each claimed to be the government of China as a whole, and every year there was this resolution proposing a change and the number of people voting in favour got more each year, but it didn't carry. More in favour of Peking, but less than 50%. There's a complication because each year a procedural resolution was proposed that the seating or the non-seating of a quarter of the human race was an important question, which it manifestly was. But if it was an important question, it required a two-thirds majority and not a simple majority to change the status quo. So those who wanted change had to pretend that the question was not important, so that a simple majority would do. Every year the United Kingdom voted for the seating of the real China. We had recognised Communist China in 1950. We held no brief for China. But we believed in reality. But we also

voted for the proposition that this was an important question, both out of loyalty to the Americans and because the question was manifestly important. At the General Assembly of 1971 we changed our position on the “important question”, voting through gritted teeth for a self-evident absurdity on the ground that the exclusion of China was an even greater absurdity. I started receiving hate mail from Americans – How could their wartime ally betray them in this way? I think I had between one and two thousand letters addressed to Caradon, but I always replied to them. I always quoted Winston Churchill – still then a name to conjure with – who said that the purpose of diplomatic relations was not to confer a compliment but to secure a convenience – that was said about China in 1950, when he as the Leader of the Opposition was supporting Attlee in recognising Communist China. Now, that cut no ice at all, and I got replies consigning me to outer darkness. It was a real window on the American mind. I think it was in 1971 when the important question resolution failed, and the simple majority was secured. It was perhaps the only debate, certainly one of very few debates in the General Assembly, when the outcome was genuinely in doubt, and as the vote of each country came up on the electronic scoreboard above the President’s chair, everybody gasped. It was really exciting, and I think the switch was carried by two votes, and the Chinese, that is to say the Taiwanese Ambassador, made a dignified exit, and the next day the Communist Chinese were in their place. The leader of the movement to prevent this happening was the Head of the US Delegation, one George Bush Senior, and he was then appointed the US Representative in Beijing: an act of genius you might think. I mean very, very special.

When Caradon was asked what on earth would happen if Harold Wilson lost the general election – would he have to go – he would always begin by explaining the tribal customs of the English to explain that his name was not Caradon, but Foot, and then he would quote Psalm 121, verse 3 – He shall not suffer thy foot to be moved. [laughter] But moved he was. Quite against the run of play, I think, Heath won the General Election and Caradon had to pack his bags and leave, and Sir Colin Crowe arrived as the new Ambassador at the UN. Interesting time.

We did not find bringing up small children in Manhattan particularly easy. We found New York very foreign. Quite surprisingly foreign. Once in an unguarded moment I said at a press conference that I felt more at home in Paris, than I did in New York,

and there was some, you know, shuffling about until a very nice soft-spoken journalist from California said: “I feel more at home in Paris that I do in New York too”.

JJ That could have been an awkward moment otherwise.

NF It was not wisely said. Our release from the pressures of the UN, which were quite intense – pressure cooker – was sailing. We had ordered a boat; a mini-yacht, in Algiers to sail in the Mediterranean, and then we were transferred and so we cancelled the order, and when we got to New York we found that almost all our colleagues, because the New York summer is so insufferable, had at least a part-share in what they called a shack. Some little country cottage in the hills – upstate, and we figured out that for 18 months of renting one of these shacks we could buy a yacht. So we did, and we would sail outbound on Saturday and inbound on Sunday, and if the world had gone to war on the Saturday afternoon we wouldn't have known, and that was a tremendous release. I could go on about that.

JJ Some real fresh air.

Assistant Head of Science and Technology Department, FCO, 1972

NF Enough on New York. Since I boasted a degree in mediaeval history, it was perhaps inevitable that the Foreign Office in due course should appoint me Assistant in Science and Technology Department. My predecessor, Michael Newington was a nuclear physicist by training, and had sort of slipped into giving technical advice in Whitehall. I had to make clear there was a change in style. My job was peaceful atoms, the Non Proliferation Treaty, the International Atomic Energy Agency, safeguards, nuclear trade, the centrifuge collaboration with Germany and the Netherlands, and fending off Irish complaints about Sellafield; all highly political but highly technical and STD was, I suppose, regarded in the Office as a bit of a backwater.

Then disaster struck in the form of the first international energy crisis of 1972-73. The Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and its Middle Eastern sister the Organisation of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries (OAPEC) began to

turn down the tap for political reasons and to discriminate between their customers, withholding oil supplies from certain importing nations, notably Israel, the United States and the Netherlands. The FCO moved swiftly to merge STD with Oil Department to create the first Energy Department in Whitehall (since national energy policy was still directed from the DTI). The technical backwater became the fulcrum within the Office for the economic interests of the western world, for relations with the Middle East, for the viability of British oil companies overseas and for solidarity with our American allies and our European partners. Life became more exciting.

Oil rationing struck at the heart of relations amongst consumer nations. There were calls to share what oil there was in defiance of the Arab boycott of the US and Netherlands. The French were reluctant. A memorable letter to *The Times* read:

Sharing oil to help the Dutch

Does not seem to please us much.

But playing fair was Britain's wont,

If Pompidou or Pompidon't.

The maddening thing was that oil sharing was already happening under arrangements made by the oil companies and privately approved by governments. But we could not acknowledge this lest it should provoke retaliation by the suppliers and leave us all with less oil to share.

The International Energy Agency was invented as a club for oil importers to balance (or confront?) OPEC. There was endless argument on the policy appropriate for nations which were at the same time powerful and helpless. In parallel, the North-South dialogue sought to identify common interests between producers and consumers of oil, and between donors and receivers of aid. It was heady stuff – crucial and prolonged negotiations amongst officials of disparate governments whose common interest was that they were all short of sleep.

I'll stop on energy there unless you have questions?

JJ A small one. I believe David Hannay actually ran Energy Department for a while?

NF Not in my time. I worked for Ronald Arculus in STD and then Jock Taylor was Head of Energy Department. I don't know what happened afterwards. I know David well from different things. But not in this context.

Posting as Head of Chancery and Consul-General, Peking, 1975

NF 1975 – Peking. The starting point must be the size of China. It is a continent, and its culture has immense power. I mentioned in the context of Burma that the Chinese had the self-conceit that the throne in Beijing was the centre of the universe, and all foreigners equally were barbarians. By the time you've served in Beijing for a number of years you begin to believe it. It was that powerful an influence on foreigners. Culture; extraordinary language; Communist government; unpredictable dictatorship of Mao Tse Tung, and a population living in manifest fear. Quite a difficult environment in which to work. In 1966, nine years earlier, the British Embassy had of course been burned to the ground by a mob. Mao Tse Tung was in his dotage, but the governance of China was still conducted in his name, and he was still undisputed master as he lay in the Zhong Nan Hai – waiting to die. I saw him as a political visionary, and a tyrant. He is now said to have been personally responsible for the death of 70 million people. 38 million in The Great Leap Forward in 1958 followed by the great famine, followed by the Sino-Soviet dispute, followed by the Cultural Revolution, of which the British Embassy was a casualty, because of Hong Kong. So the Chinese officially were anti-British because of Hong Kong, but they were pro-the European Union, because we weren't the Soviet Union, because they were at daggers drawn with the Soviet Union. And so in a sense, the United Kingdom as part of the European Union was top of the pops, but the United Kingdom as a national embassy was right at the bottom of the pecking order, because we were the colonial masters of Hong Kong. Peking was then, and I think maybe still is, our most expert Embassy in the world.

JJ But just going back to what you've just said. How did Anglo-Chinese relations develop or did they not develop?

NF They did when Mao died. It changed during my time. I'll come to it.

[Interjection here – weren't we lucky? Extremely important changes happened in our

time in Burma; happened in our time in China; happened in our time in India at the end. We feel that we've had a most fortunate diplomatic career because of the exciting things which we've been paid to witness. What good fortune is that?] Most expert embassy in the world. I was the only one of the ten senior members of the Embassy staff who was not a specialist Sinologist. Our Ambassador Sir Edward Youde used to say kindly that my job was to make wise remarks at office meetings, like "remember the Soviet Union". Teddy Youde understood China more than most of us do. He had almost an instinctive – he worked on it all of his life, and he had an almost instinctive understanding for what made these extraordinary people tick. In our time we were accused by the Office of alarmism. Now we know that what we reported was not a tithe of it – it was ten times worse than we reported. Six weeks after I arrived Sir Edward went on leave, leaving N Fenn responsible, knowing nothing about anything, for our relations with a quarter of the human race.

A few days later there broke upon an astonished world the Water Margin campaign. "The Water Margin" was a 14th century book which had been translated into English by Pearl Buck under the title "The Water Margin". There appeared in the *People's Daily* in Peking, a literary criticism of a 14th century novel. Only in China could this have been political dynamite, but it was. The story is of a Chinese Robin Hood who robbed from the rich and gave to the poor, and then in the end of the novel, he integrated his forces in the Imperial Army, and the question was – who was the Emperor? Who was Mao? Was Mao the Emperor or was he Robin Hood? And the English language official translation coined for me a new English word "capitulationism" which was what Robin Hood had been guilty of in the end of the novel. I invited my nine colleagues to gather round and tell me what it meant. They all knew what it meant, but they all thought it meant something different. We had the mother and father of all office meetings, and I sent them away to draft a telegram and consult all the other embassies, and the whole thing was seething. They submitted to me a draft telegram which was 19 pages long, and I knew I couldn't send it, so I cut it down to two and a half pages, and I sent it with a jejune novice's comment at the end, and was reproached by the PUS because it was too long: it might have been interesting to the specialist, but to the general distribution etc. You should have seen the original is all I can say.

JJ You should have then sent the 19 pages.

NF I told the Ambassador when he came back and showed him both versions of the telegram.

JJ I'm not quite sure I've grasped the essence of the Water Margin campaign?

NF Nobody has! It's very opaque. In the end it turned out that it was actually a campaign launched by Mao as an attack upon the revisionists, the capitulationists, who were Deng Xiao-Ping and the other moderates among the Chinese leadership. Mao holding out with Jiang Qing, his wife, and other extremist leaders at the radical extremes of the Cultural Revolution, crucifying China in the name of the purity of Communist doctrine.

The Diplomatic Service Bureau in Peking is the monopoly supplier of Chinese staff to embassies and diplomats. Just before I arrived, the DSB had circulated to embassies a contract governing the relations between foreign employers and their Chinese staff which had pages and pages of the obligation of the employer, and one sentence on the obligations of the employee. I took one look at this and knew that I couldn't sign it, but on the other hand if I didn't sign it? I found to my distress that half the embassies in Peking had signed it without reading it, because they knew that they had no bargaining power. The Chinese would go on ruling it anyway. So I understood what they were doing, but I knew I couldn't sell it to the Foreign Office, let alone to the Ambassador, who was on leave by now, and so I declined. A couple of weeks later, without really thinking, I paid my first official call on the Director of the DSB, and he received me courteously, and gave me the statutory cup of tea and pushed the contract across his table, and said: "You will sign this document". I said: "I'm sorry, sir, I cannot sign this document, because it isn't precisely balanced, and I think I need to find some alternative words, and can I make an appointment to come and negotiate with you"? And he said: "It is very hot in Peking in August. I'm sure that Mrs Fenn would like to have some help in the house. But you understand we can't let her have help in the house when her husband is defying the will of the Chinese people". It was very hot in August and Susan *would* have liked help in the house. "Not only," he said "are you refusing to sign. You are inciting other embassies". I was – other EU

embassies. I was trying to rally the EU against this monstrous document. I was so naïve; so innocent, in Chinese terms. But in the end ...

JJ But on the other hand you were playing a tough role because you're the British government.

NF That's what I liked to think. In the end I managed to negotiate with the People's Insurance Company, an insurance policy at a very cheap premium which precisely covered the obligations of the employer as set out in this document, and I persuaded Personnel Services Department to pay the premium, then I could sign. That became the standard practice for other embassies in Beijing.

JJ But presumably the text had been changed?

NF The text was the same.

JJ Exactly the same?

NF I made sure it was. It was all in Chinese of course, and I had colleagues who had to help me with this, but the point was that we had textually identical cover for the obligations which we were undertaking. And if we failed to honour them the insurance company would pay.

JJ Presumably the obligations were not onerous?

NF They were not onerous. They were just extensive and fussy, and not sensible.

Foreign diplomats lived in diplomatic ghettos. There were three of them. High rise apartment blocks, built in the heyday of Sino-Soviet friendship; Russian-style building and not very attractive places to live, with Chinese guards on the gate. Whether they were to keep the Chinese out, or the foreigners in, was not quite clear. They had similar guards at every ambassadorial residence, which were outside the ghettos. When the Australian Ambassador's residence had a fire, the fire brigade was summoned, and came very swiftly, stopped at the gates and wouldn't come in.

There was a stand-off. The house was burning and the Ambassador was fuming, and eventually he jumped in the fire engine and drove it across the line himself and then they manned the pumps. Extraordinary; quite extraordinary.

Hong Kong – This of course is pre-1997. You will appreciate that Ambassador Youde and Governor MacLehose had institutionally divergent priorities. They were friends. They knew each other well, and respected each other greatly, but they disagreed. They were almost bound to disagree. So Fenn found himself shuttling quite often to Hong Kong to try to oil the wheels of diplomacy, within the British system. In order to get to Hong Kong you had to fly by Chinese internal airways, CAAC, to Guangzhou, formerly Canton, and then spend a night in the Friendship Hotel, and then take the train to Shum-chun, the Chinese border post, which had a great marble railway station with the brazen headline “We have friends all over the world”, and then you carried your own luggage across the little bridge to Lo Wu on the Hong Kong side, which was a black creosote painted shack with the Union flag on it, and before you got there, there were three notices, and the first one said “Do not spit” and the second one said “Drink Coca Cola” and the third one said “Welcome to Hong Kong”. I seemed to be the only one who found it funny. I was often there.

One other frequent visitor to Hong Kong, for rather different reasons, was the distinguished Ambassador of Ghana. He discovered that the Friendship Hotel made black diplomats pay their bill in advance, while all others paid on departure, as usual. And the Ambassador, having discovered this, was enraged, quite rightly, and decided to test the system. So having checked in they asked him to pay the bill. They gave him the bill. He saw the keys. He grabbed the keys and ran to the room and locked himself in. Increasingly senior members of the hotel staff came and demanded payment, and eventually the manager himself came and said: “If you do not open the door I will break it down”, so the Ambassador said: “They think I’m a savage. I will behave like a savage”. He took all his clothes off and squatted just inside the door. When they broke the door down he said: “Ahhhhhhh” – and they fled from the room and he paid his bill on departure thereafter.

State Visits: many of them; Great Hall of the People banquets; all foreign embassies invited. Excellent food. One thing that Communism didn’t cure in China is their

taste for good food; long speeches in the language of the host and in Chinese, but always distributed to the diplomatic corps in English, and always ending with the words Gam-bei – which means literally “Bottoms Up” – not a very elegant ending to a diplomatic speech. Until one year, the ladies of the diplomatic corps were invited by the senior woman in China, Soong Ching-ling, who was the widow of Sun Yat-sen. There was an excellent banquet, and at the end of it, the speech ended in its English translation, “Ladies, Bottoms-Up”. Somebody told them, and it never happened again. Enough of all this frivolity.

1976 was the Year of the Dragon. According to Chinese mythology, the Year of the Dragon is when dynasties change. It began in January with the death of Chou En-lai, the Prime Minister, and all China wept. What ever you make of Chou, he was undoubtedly popular in China. I have a huge admiration for Chou En-lai. He had worked with Mao for a long time, always one step behind. Never challenging for the leadership, and then Mao was prepared to break, and break, and break again, in order to preserve the purity of Communist doctrine, there was Chou behind him patiently sticking it all together again. He died and China wept. February [? 8 February], the second fall of Deng Xiao-Ping, the leader of the moderate wing of the Chinese Communist Party. As soon as Chou was out of the way, Mao sacked Deng. We also had the visit of Richard Nixon. Strange visit. Not the first visit, when he was President. This was long after when he came by invitation of Mao to talk with him about the fall of great men. Very embarrassing to the US Mission. April – Festival of the Ancestors, when by tradition they sweep the graves of their ancestors and leave wreaths. People of China and Peking, brought wreaths in their thousands and their hundreds of thousands into Tiananmen Square – the great Square of Heavenly Peace in the centre of the city, dedicated to Chou, with subversive poems in Chinese, and after three days, the great portrait of Mao at the Gate of Heavenly Peace, looked out over this forest of wreaths dedicated to another man. Too much. Overnight the militia swept them away, and when the people came with more wreaths in the morning, they were turned back, and they overturned and burned a police jeep, which was perhaps the first expression of public opinion in China since 1949, and my two young sons and I sat on a stone lion and watched it happening. And when Charlie went back to his prep school he was asked to write an essay on what he did in the holidays, and his essay began; “I watched history in the making ...”. You can write

like that when you're nine years old. But it *was* history in the making. May – the sudden appearance as the successor to Chou of Hua Kuo-Feng, Hua Kuo-who? Nobody remembered his name, and he appeared on an oil painting in every town in China, of Mao in his dotage and young fresh-faced Hua, and Mao was handing him a scroll on which was written: “With you in charge I am at ease”. He must be the only person in the world ever to have been appointed to supreme power on the basis of an oil painting. Quite an astonishing thing to happen. June – death of Marshal Zhu Deh, who had been with Mao on the long march in 1935. July – the Tang Shan earthquake. We thought that 800,000 people died, and the Chinese said not a word. It turns out only to have been a quarter of a million – still quite a lot of casualties, and all the embassies in Peking went to the Foreign Ministry to offer help and it was all politely declined. It was a Chinese problem which would be solved in a Chinese way. 9th September – death of Mao, and all China held its breath, because everybody knew that there was a titanic struggle going on between the extremists and the moderates. Exactly a month later, 10th October, at 2 o'clock in the morning outside our flat, which was right on the main drag, cymbals and trumpets and dancing and waving. We'd seen so many routine demonstrations, dutiful demonstrations, going past and here they were rejoicing, quite plainly spontaneously, and in the middle of the night because the Gang of Four had fallen. Picked out in black letters on their banners – “Down with the Gang of Four” – that was Jiang Qing, Mao's widow, and her three henchmen whose names I will not trouble you with. The extremists had failed and the moderates had prevailed, and China rejoiced. And then you come to Christmas Day, the end of 1976, when Hua Kuo Feng climbed on to the Gate of Heavenly Peace where Mao had stood in 1949 to proclaim the Chinese Revolution, and the speech he delivered might have been written by Deng Xiao Ping, and probably was. Wheel full circle. It was magnificent political theatre, and we were paid to sit in the front row of the stalls and were extremely grateful for that opportunity.

JJ This was 1976.

NF Yes, 1976. One of my jobs was to negotiate the annual cultural exchange programme with the Director of Cultural Affairs in the Chinese Foreign Ministry, and after this, when the moderates had prevailed, we thought that our relations with China were getting just a little bit better. Now for some years - all through my time anyway

– we’d had 15 Chinese studying English in England, and 15 English studying Chinese in China, and I thought we might double it, so I got approval for this and put it into the draft memorandum which I gave him. When he got to this stage in the memorandum his face fell, and when he finished he said: “I see that Mr Counsellor proposes to double the number of students under our cultural exchange”. I said: “Yes I do. I hope that this will be acceptable to the Chinese authorities?” He said: “I wonder if you would think again? We were thinking of a thousand.” Something had changed. Imagine a thousand Chinese landing on British universities. It wasn’t on. But it showed the way the wind was blowing.

One engaging habit of the Chinese was to give to departing diplomats a present in the form of permission to travel to some part of China which was normally out of bounds. I haven’t mentioned this before, but my wife was born in China (well she was born in Hong Kong physically, in the hospital). Her father was a medical missionary in China and they lived at a place called Pak-hoi, on the south coast of China, which was 65 miles from the Vietnam border and had become a naval base, and was now out of bounds for foreigners, because the Chinese and the Vietnamese were practically at war. They had very bad relations. So when I called on the Deputy Director of Protocol on other business I mentioned casually at the end that I was very sorry to tell him that we would be leaving China in about six weeks and who my successor would be, and he said at once: “Where would you like to go?” It was very open that this is what they did. So I explained that my wife was born in China and she would love to visit her childhood home, and he did know that. He said: “Where was she born?” I said: “Pak-hoi”. His face fell. “Oh, that will be difficult, but I will try” he said. A couple of weeks later at the Afghan National Day I stepped out of the Ambassador’s drawing room into the garden where the reception was being held, and there was Mr Liu waiting for me, and he took me behind the bushes. Now I can’t tell you how uncharacteristic this is, in the normal Chinese conduct, and he said: “I have already referred your request to the responsible comrade in the department concerned”. They talk like that. “And I’m very sorry to tell you that it is not possible for security reasons.” Well I fended for a bit, but in the end I had to accept it, and so I said: “Can we go to GueLin?” This was a tourist place. And he said: “Oh yes. Yes. That will be easy to arrange.” And then even more uncharacteristically he took both my hands in both of his and he looked at me in the eyes and said: “Mr Fenn will you do

something for me? Will you tell your wife when you're alone [with a sob] and will you tell her I understand how she feels". And he disappeared into the bushes. I felt a heel because I had been exploiting for our gratification what in Chinese terms was an imperative, because what I've failed to mention so far is, that Susan's elder sister lies buried in Pak-hoi, and for a Chinese that was an absolute imperative that we should visit her sister's grave, and he had to deny me. I can't tell you how guilty I felt at having done this. Of course we would have loved to have gone, but it wasn't for us quite the compulsory thing it would have been for a Chinese.

JJ But he did know then that your wife's sister had died?

NF He did know. I told him. I'd told him earlier when I first mentioned it.

JJ Could I just ask to what extent it is possible for the British Embassy to have serious political discussion with members of the Chinese government?

NF We dealt only with the Foreign Ministry. With the Foreign Ministry we could make formal representations, and did. We would write a third person note; we would deliver it; we would discuss it with the official concerned, and then we'd go away.

JJ That's a normal sort of diplomatic practice?

NF Yes, but it was not so much a dialogue as a monologue. I mean, the Chinese didn't normally react very much. There were two exceptions. One was if we had a senior visitor, and we had lots of visitors. They were actively interested in discussing why the visitor was coming, and what the visitor wanted to do, and what could they show him or her, and discussing the programme, of course. That was perfectly straightforward. There was no side about that. The other exception was Hong Kong. Hong Kong we talked about in depth, in substance, all the time, and we got nowhere, yet Sir Percy Cradock did this later. Sir Geoffrey Howe's Joint Declaration on the Future of Hong Kong was a superb achievement of Howe's and of Cradock's. In our day we were fencing. Everybody knew that the treaty would expire, well not quite the whole treaty. Hong Kong Island was sovereign, but it was unsustainable on its own. Stonecutter's Island was also sovereign, but that was equally useless on its own. 1997

was a terminal date and it cast its shadow in advance because of confidence. Hong Kong lived on its commercial confidence. So we reckoned that we had until about the late-1970s and there was I at the beginning of the late-1970s, trying to get some visible progress. It happened in the 1980s – 1984 I think – can't remember exactly. This was a subject in which the Chinese were keenly interested. They wanted to hear what we had to say. They repeated their line that Hong Kong was part of China, and Hong Kong was part of China and Hong Kong was part of China.

JJ And you had the Treaty?

NF Yes, they accepted the Treaty. China will honour the letter of a treaty. The spirit is something else again. That's why the Cradock-Howe agreement has so many letters, is so long, and is so detailed. They will respect every detail. The spirit is up for grabs, and that's one thing you learn in dealing with the Chinese. We had a visit from the Chairman of Rolls Royce, Sir Kenneth Keith, who came to China to sign an agreement which was an inch and a half thick. It was a great big agreement about the sale of the RB211 engine to China. It had been under negotiation for two years and it was all wrapped up and tied in pink ribbon. When Kenneth Keith was in Peking, the Chinese re-opened the argument on three key clauses where they had lost in the earlier discussion. They knew that Kenneth Keith couldn't afford not to sign once he was in Peking. They just turned the screw one more time. They were brilliant at it, and Kenneth Keith had to lose two out of those three points. They are very tough negotiators. I learned to respect them in this, but it was quite unscrupulous. That's the way they are; after all they are the centre of the universe and we are barbarians, so we'd better jolly well knuckle down. That's it. That's talking seriously to the Chinese.

We did meet Mao and Chou on occasional formal occasions – Chinese State occasions, and when we had a senior visitor. When we had Ted Heath or Margaret Thatcher, Mao would receive them, and the Ambassador would go with him or her, and Foreign Ministers would be received by the Foreign Minister. But that's about all. We dealt with officials, the Mandarins, because they ruled China as they had done for two thousand years. It's just a very different place. You asked about travel. It is very strictly controlled. We could only leave Peking with written permission

from the Foreign Ministry, which was freely given if we were going to eastern China, but the great western China – Urumchi and all of that, was completely out of bounds.

JJ And that hasn't changed, I don't suppose.

NF: I don't know. I think it's maybe loosened up a bit. I nearly got to Urumchi. They were taking a party – every year they took diplomats on an organised tour. We were to go to Urumchi in Xinjiang, but then Mao died and the tour was cancelled.

Royal College of Defence Studies, 1978

NF: I was a student at the Royal College of Studies in Belgrave Square. In a sense a sabbatical. It's the college which teaches brigadiers and colonels how to be generals, and the equivalent ranks from other Services. They are kind enough to accept a few civilian students in order to help in that process. It was indeed very instructive for the three of us from the Foreign Office there that year. (Alas there are no longer Foreign Office students at the RCDS). We talked about NATO strategy and the defence of the realm, and nuclear power and the alliances and all that. We talked about the United Kingdom, and by the end of the course we were asking whether the United Kingdom was worth defending anyway. It became from being rather rigid at the beginning to much freer in the end. Students come from all three Services; two thirds military and one third civilian; two thirds British and one third from the rest of the world. We had a Saudi major-general for example, on our course. And what was most interesting really was not so much the formal studies, or even the tours; we toured both within the country and outside it, but learning from each other. We had an Indian and a Pakistani colonel who had commanded formations opposed to each other on the Siachen glacier. We had an Egyptian and an Israeli brigadier who had fought each other in the Six Day War. But for most of us it was on the whole an opportunity not to get to the Office at 9 o'clock in the morning, and be able to take life a little bit easier. When I finished at the RCDS, nothing happened and the Foreign Office sent me on what they called "a programme of intensive preparation for an unidentified assignment." This turned out to be because David Owen, the Foreign Secretary at the time, knew that he was about to lose the General Election and therefore was not about to appoint a new press secretary because it was a personal appointment for the

Secretary of State; very sensibly. So I had to mark time. I did suspect that this was what they had in mind, but I did an economics course, and I wrote the scenario for an anti-terrorist exercise in Whitehall – things of that kind. Eventually when the Tories won the General Election in 1979 and Mrs Thatcher came to Downing Street with that extraordinary quotation from St Francis of Assisi – in due course I was summoned by the Lord Carrington to the Foreign Office and offered the job of Head of News Department.

Head of News Department at the FCO, 1979

The Head of News Department is the administrative head of a department like any other head of department. It's a collegiate enterprise and each member of the department has a bailiwick, has a part of the world, who briefs journalists and so on, and who is the first port of call for any enquiry there is. The Head of Department is also the Foreign Office Spokesman, responsible to the PUS, then Sir Michael Palliser, for the output and the media presentation as a whole. He conducts – if he doesn't conduct personally he's always present at – the 12.15 news conference. In the afternoons he spends time with individual journalists for unattributable briefing, and so on. But thirdly, the Head of News Department is the Press Secretary to the Secretary of State, and is responsible for the Secretary of State's personal media arrangements. He makes the appointments; monitors the meetings and in this sense he is responsible directly to the boss, and he has to ensure that the press is given not only the view of the Office, but also the mind of its master. That's his personal role. Carrington was an early riser, and he told me when he appointed me that he would expect me to come to see him every morning at 08.40, having read every newspaper in the land. If I came to see him at 08.40 having read every newspaper in the land, I would have to leave Marden before the newspapers were available, so I couldn't even read them on the train. Manifestly absurd. So we had to have a pied-à-terre in London, and I became a weekend commuter. The lifestyle was barbarous. But it was the only really serious drawback of the job. It was otherwise a fascinating job.

I told you when I was talking about being Press Officer in New York that I had established a relationship of confidence with trusties. I tried after a few weeks to do the same thing with the senior diplomatic correspondents of major British papers in

London. I offered them my thesis, which I have explained to you, that we were in each other's pockets, that we were colleagues – in the enterprise of presenting – and they said: “Not in your pocket”.

JJ I was going to say they'd never take that one on.

NF Absolutely not. Turned me down flat. They said they could not afford to be seen as Foreign Office poodles and anything I told them, they would be free to write. If I told them unattributably, they would respect that, and they'd find it out from somebody else and quote them. But they wouldn't keep confidence. So I said: “In that case I'll tell you rather little”. It was a bad start. I felt rebuffed, no doubt rightly.

But fortunately within weeks, all this was overtaken by the major diplomatic event of the first year of Lord Carrington's time in the Foreign Office, namely the Rhodesia Constitutional Conference, and the establishment of Zimbabwe. As you know, David Owen had toured Africa unremittingly, looking for a solution to this insoluble problem. There was a civil war which neither side could win. There were amputees on street corners in Harare, but it was not possible to reconcile the notion that the whites cherished that the civilised governance of Rhodesia depended upon their control, and the views of the Patriotic Front. The Patriotic Front was a marriage of convenience between Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU), and Joshua Nkomo's, Zimbabwe African Patriotic Union (ZAPU). They came together for the purpose of the negotiation, but split up afterwards. Their view was that governance in Zimbabwe required black majority rule. Carrington's genius was to ignore all that; to pretend that there wasn't a civil war; to pretend that there hadn't been a unilateral declaration of independence and to summon the parties to a constitutional conference at Lancaster House, as if it were any other British colony approaching independence. There was to be a press office. The conference was to be at Lancaster House. The press office was in Little St James's, just across the road. I handed over the management of News Department to my Deputy, Nick Elam, and went across the road to Lancaster House as a full time press officer to the conference. I was the British representative to the press. I was also the Conference Spokesman. We offered facilities equally to the press officers of all delegations. Following every session of the conference there was an on the record report which I delivered as

Conference Spokesman and the others watched me on close circuit television like hawks, and had the right of reply. Only once did they exercise it when unintentionally I turned over two pages of my notes and omitted a whole speech by Joshua Nkomo. I got into trouble for that, but only for a short time. In the afternoons I would give unattributable briefings which were rather more partisan and rather more difficult, and also rather more effective. We were the only show in town. Every newspaper had to publish what was there, and it was amazing how easy it was to tell them what had gone on. I told them on the record accurately what had happened at the conference, and unattributably tried to give them some insight into those things that militated to disagreement, and those things that militated against it. Together at Lancaster House we wrote a fairytale. It was not imaginable that the huge gulf which separated these delegations could be bridged. We started with the constitution of an independent Zimbabwe, which was to be a constitutional republic with a Prime Minister, responsible to parliament, and a figurehead President. We talked about the interim arrangements. This included the anachronistic reaffirmation of colonial authority in Africa, with a British Governor and his cocked hat. And we talked about a ceasefire, which meant that the white Rhodesian security forces would be confined to barracks and the black guerrillas would have to come to assembly points and hand in their weapons, which looked like defeat. I don't quite see how it came to be successful, but it did. Carrington had certain advantages over David Owen. He was a peer and didn't have to defend the marginal constituency of Devonport, so he could give it his wholehearted attention. He was also extremely skilful at conducting the negotiations themselves, in the sense that he would have an open discussion at the beginning. He would table a paper, which purported to be a record or a distillation of the discussion, and both sides hated it. Then he would conduct negotiations separately with each side and would shade the paper to take account of the various things that were said to him, and then he would table it formally as the Chairman's proposal – take it or leave it. This is the proposal which will be the constitution of independent Zimbabwe, or whatever. For the delegations these proposals were always awful, frightful, unimaginable, but the alternative was always worse. And so little by little, chapter by patient chapter, the fairytale was written and in the end we had an agreement. The press couldn't believe it. They were sure it would fail. They knew it would fail. And honestly we thought it would fail too, privately. Even Carrington thought it would fail. He had one other advantage over David Owen

which I think I can now talk about. He was a Tory. That is to say, within the centre of gravity of his Party, he could have withdrawn from the constitutional conference and settled with Smith. Many Conservative backbenchers expected and would have welcomed that, and then taken the international flak, which would have been considerable. David Owen, of course, couldn't possibly have done that, and so, half way through the conference, I was authorised to start talking about Carrington's determination to secure a first class solution, thereby implying the existence of a second class alternative. It worked like a dream. The fairytale was written and we all adjourned to Harare. In Harare, for three or four months, I worked for Governor Soames – Christopher Soames – the last British Governor of Rhodesia. My job of course was to make the fairytale come true, in terms of the international press. By the time we ended, there were 1,002 journalists accredited to the press centre in Harare. It would have been disappointing if it had been 998. It was tough. An on the record press conference for a minimum of 45 minutes every night at 5.15, or thereabouts, and constant unattributable briefing all the time with a whole series of minefields around us you could trip over. And the journalists – it would not be true to say that they wanted it to fail, but it would have made much better copy if it had. They expected it to fail, and they were trying to trip me up all the time, so they could have something that would cause it to be more likely to fail. I must say I have never worked harder than I did in those four months; unaccompanied; alone in the Monomatapa Motel for four months – not fun.

JJ You had no colleague there?

NF I had a deputy. I was still Head of News Department in theory and after Lancaster House, my intention had been that I would go back to being Head of News Department and somebody else would be appointed to lead the press effort in Harare. Unfortunately on day two, the General commanding the Commonwealth Monitoring Force who was a warrior, rather than a diplomat, misspoke himself, and Soames demanded my presence. I had to fly out to Harare. I was relaxing at a dinner party across the way with friends in Chainhurst. The telephone rang. I knew what it would be. I was in Harare the next day – just like that, and was the spokesman for a country which I'd never set foot in. They asked me at my first press conference about the state of the roads in Bulawayo and I had to say: "Where's Bulawayo?" It was a sort

of Gilbertian situation – Alice in Wonderland. But the assembly of the guerrillas, British subalterns standing to attention under palm trees, Marxist guerrillas coming out of the bush, stacking their guns against the trees – British election monitors fanning out all over the country to set up the arrangements for the election. British bobbies in their helmets standing to attention beside the polling booths to see fair play. Without question the fairest election Zimbabwe has ever had. Mugabe won by a landslide, as we knew he would. It was perfectly obvious that he would. In the outcome, the whites of course secured their 20% reserved seats. Nkomo won his tribal entitlement, which was also 20% and not one more. The Shona got the other 60% of which Bishop Muzarewa, the representatives of the whites, got 3, and Mugabe got 57, and was the uncrowned king of Zimbabwe thereafter. It was of course a diplomatic triumph for Lord Carrington. Look at it now. Diplomats should never count chickens. But it was an unforgettable experience.

Back to London, and ordinary work at News Department. ‘Death of a Princess.’ I think ITV wanted to show a film about a member of the Saudi royal house, who, according to the film had misbehaved herself and consequently been done away with. To us it was fairly tame television. To the Saudis it was an assault upon the principle of Saudi monarchy and the question arose in the Foreign Office – what do we do about it? To the Head of News Department it seemed obvious that it was an issue of the freedom of the press. To the Head of Middle East Department it seemed equally obvious that we had to protect our interests in Saudi Arabia. So it was quite a difficult argument.

JJ How did it resolve itself?

NF The Lord Privy Seal was Sir Ian Gilmour, the senior Foreign Office Minister in the Commons, and a former editor of *The Spectator*. He took on the negotiation with ITV, and he got the thing put off for a week, but then ITV said: “No. I’m sorry Ian, we’re going to do it”. And we couldn’t stop them. The measures we would have to take to stop them would have been so obtrusive, and heavy handed ...

JJ And against the whole British system?

NF Indeed. So we had to shut up and the sky did not fall in. The Saudis did not break diplomatic relations. It was altogether a storm in a teacup. But it was a dominating issue for a while.

The Embassy in El Salvador disappeared, but left a note on the door saying – “Gone away. Back soon”. It was like Winnie the Pooh. “Bakson.” The press discovered that they’d disappeared. Of course, in reality, there was a terrorist threat and they had been told to disappear. But I couldn’t admit that. I had to pretend they were all on leave, and by administrative mischance they’d all gone on leave together. An absurd story. Every morning at the PUS’s meeting I said; “This can’t run any longer”, and Michael Palliser said: “Shut up”. We limped along for a week, and then eventually, thank God, the Embassy reappeared and the story went away.

A colleague, alas, committed suicide by jumping out of a second floor window at the Foreign Office.

JJ Did you ever know what the motives were?

NF We did, but I didn’t. I didn’t need to know. The Press Association got hold of the story, and rang me up and asked whether it was true, and I said: “I can’t say anything about this at all. I will ring you if and when I can”. I then stood in the newsroom and watched while he telephoned each of my colleagues in turn to try to get behind what I had told him, and eventually I rang him up again and said: “You have broken every code in the book. It’s absolutely intolerable. I promised to ring you when I was ready, and I repeat that now, but you will never get another story out of me.” The problem was that the man’s wife had gone shopping, and it is a cardinal rule that you don’t tell the press until you’ve told the next of kin. I was not about to break that rule for the sake of the Press Association. He got his scoop in the end, but he never did get another.

There was a public sector strike – you well remember this. We were told that anyone who absented themselves from work on that day was to be reported to Personnel Department.

JJ Just regarding the FCO?

NF No, the whole of Whitehall. Strike called by – I can't remember which of the public sector unions it was, but it was pay and conditions etc. To me a public sector strike is a contradiction of terms. We don't take a position different from the elected government of the day, and I called my colleagues together and I said: "There is a strike being called by the unions. I will not strike. If you choose to strike, I've been told to report anyone who does".

JJ What was the motivation for this public service strike?

NF It was pay and conditions. I can't remember the detail I'm afraid, Jimmy. I really can't. I said: "I know that I'm paid more than you are. And I know that some of you are in financial difficulties with mortgages and so on, school fees and whatever it may be, but I will have to do as I am told. If you don't turn up, I will if necessary run News Department single handed that day, and afterwards I will do my best to stand between you and the wrath of your bosses". Nobody struck in News Department. I don't know about the rest of the Office. But for me that was a memorable moment.

JJ I was abroad in Brussels at that time and as for the civil servants in Whitehall they were furious of course about the poor pay that they got, and one other chap, whose name I forget, and I, both in Brussels, were the only two who decided not to go to work on that day. The Head of Chancery called me in and said: "Well, you shouldn't be doing this". And I said: "Well, you know, I and my colleague across the way, feel that it was an appropriate thing to do". He said: "Well, I'll have to tell Michael Palliser", and so Palliser called me up and I explained to him, and he didn't say yes, he didn't say no. He had a smile on his face, and I lost one day's pay – that was it, and my colleague did. And after that nothing.

NF It was an unhappy moment, and I think really almost a turning point, because the public service was so badly treated at that time. I took the opposite view from you that whatever they did, we'd taken their shilling, and public service is a service and not a business.

The Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs – that relationship is always a bit special, and Mrs Thatcher and Lord Carrington famously didn't see eye to eye on every issue. Carrington was what Mrs Thatcher would call a "wet", and Carrington, although he had immense authority in the Cabinet, had to choose the ground on which to fight the Prime Minister, and he did choose with some care. But they went of course together to meetings of the European Council, and that was the time when the Press Secretary at No 10, and Head of News Department at the Foreign Office, worked together. Press Secretary at No 10, was Bernard Ingham, and we got on all right. He was the tough cop and I was the soft cop, and I did my diplomatic smoothness and he did his tough northern gritty stuff. But there were occasions when our respective bosses were not in line, and then it was extremely difficult to hold the line together, and we had to do our best about that.

The key issue was the Falklands, over which Lord Carrington resigned. It was a famously honourable resignation. The last minister, it seems, ever to resign on an issue of principle. They compared him with Sir Thomas Dugdale. If you recall, parliament met in extraordinary session on Saturday. It was John Nott, Secretary of State for Defence, who lost control of the House of Commons. Lord Carrington mastered their Lordships' House with his usual consummate ease. I was watching Carrington. My deputy, Roger Westbrook, was watching Nott, and when we met in the Foreign Office courtyard he thought the government was about to fall, and I thought it was all over bar the shouting. It just goes to show. If you ask yourself why do ministers resign? They resign because they lose the confidence of Parliament? Not so. Carrington mastered his House. They resign because they lose the confidence of Cabinet? Not so, as the white Paper subsequently showed twice in the previous year. Carrington's Latin American policies had actually been approved by Cabinet, which is quite unusual. They resign because they lose the confidence of the Prime Minister? Not so. Mrs Thatcher spent the weekend, at least ostensibly, trying to persuade him to stay. But the press on Sunday, after the Saturday debate, were calling for the blood of John Nott. The press on Monday were calling for the blood of Peter Carrington. Why? I know because I sat in my office all that terrible weekend and watched it happen. Twice I rang up my boss and said: "It's going against you Sir. Would you talk to *The Times*?" "Keep out of it, Nick" he said. "This is a political

matter". Of course it was. Of course he was right. But I couldn't see him rubbished, and on Monday the press was even worse than I'd forecast, and he took one look at it and went to see his closest political friend, who was Willie Whitelaw. He came back and resigned.

JJ I'm sorry. I may have lost the thread a bit. On what particular issue was Carrington having to go?

NF Formally he resigned because you don't lose a colony by mistake. He was the responsible Secretary of State, and therefore he had to resign. There had to be a sacrifice. Actually he resigned, because on the basis of the press on Monday morning he had concluded that he was a liability to Mrs Thatcher's government. No doubt that was true on Monday. But it would have ceased to be true come Thursday. But never mind. He went. The interesting thing is that the Sunday press was different from the Monday press because of briefing from No 10. I make no complaint about that: you don't sacrifice your Secretary of State for Defence on the eve of a war.

JJ I wouldn't have thought so.

NF One last point on News Department and then we must move on. You may remember that the spokesman for the Ministry of Defence during the Falklands War was one Brian McDonald; he of the sepulchral voice. Brian said very little. Journalists began to contrast my style over Rhodesia with his discretion on the Falklands – quite unfairly. War is different. Everything you say puts servicemen's lives at risk, and secondly his sepulchral voice, which said so little, became very quickly recognised as the voice of truth, because the Argentines were caught lying on day three.

JJ Which lie was that?

NF I don't remember what the lie was, but they did tell a lie, and the press immediately recognised it, and they listened to Brian and he said very little, but what he said was true. He had been told that if he said anything that hadn't been approved in advance by the Secretary of State, or the Joint Chiefs of Staff, he would be sacked.

So he read out very slowly what he was authorised to say and wouldn't answer questions. John Nott instructed him. Carrington had sent for me before Rhodesia and said: "Nick, I want you to know that anything you say to the press, I will defend in the House of Lords". Not many ministers would say something like that. That's just the difference. I was given licence to think on my feet, not just to repeat the party line but to consider what Carrington would say if he was sitting there. It meant that we able to be fleeter of foot. But I just want to reject for the record the accusation made against Brian.

JJ But Carrington, with all due respect, was taking a slight risk.

NF He certainly was. Absolutely he was. That's the way it is.

JJ There you are.

NF I tried to resign in the middle of the Lancaster House conference because Chris Smith, who was the Opposition spokesman on information matters, tabled a question in the House of Commons complaining about British policy being declared by faceless officials at Lancaster House, which should be declared first by ministers in this House. And it seemed to me that he had a point. So I offered to resign, and suggested that Richard Luce, then Parliamentary Under Secretary of State, might take my place. Carrington said: "nonsense." So I soldiered on.

JJ That's fascinating. I have nothing to say really. You've brought back to me the memories of what was going on at that time.

NF Very instructive time.

JJ It was fantastic.

NF Exhilarating and sometimes quite frightening.

JJ You never knew from one day to another what really was going to happen.

NF: Carrington sent for me before the Falklands and said: “Nick, it says here that you actually want to go back to Burma. Can that be true?” And I said: “Yes, Secretary of State. It is. I’d love to go back to Burma”. “Okay”; he said, and administered his famous red “C”. “On two conditions. One that you don’t stay there more than three years – seductive little post like that is the graveyard of promising careers and the second condition is that I hope Iona and I can come and stay with you”. Which in due course they did.

JJ Wonderful.

HM Ambassador Rangoon, 1982-86

NF So Burma again. We’d been nineteen years away and it had been twenty years under military rule. There was superficial continuity. The same whitewashed pagodas on every mountain top. Even the same old general brooding in his mansion near the lake – it was just the same. But it wasn’t because twenty years of military rule had sapped the Burmese of their sense of fun. They were poorer; much poorer. They were still self-sufficient, because of the lower level of consumption. Their unrivalled endowment which I spoke about before, enabled them to be self-sufficient. Eleven of the 21 rebellions had been quashed. Only ten were left. They were still not particularly interested in abroad for the same reasons as before. The policy of HMG at that time was to maintain minimal relations with the thugs against the day when politics would permit a more lively and active relationship. I crusaded for Burma in Whitehall, declaring that its unrivalled endowment made it bound to be a valued trading partner in the end, and of course I was mistaken, because in 1988 all those hopes were extinguished and they murdered several thousand students with machine guns in the streets and nothing was ever the same again.

But when we came back in 1982 the relationship between 1982 and 1986 when we were there was, I would say, correct, stilted, constrained. Sir Richard Allen, when I had worked for him in the early 1960s, had a UK based staff of 50. I can’t imagine what they all did. I had a UK based staff of eight. The present ambassador I think has a staff of three; it’s just a measure of the thing. There were 32 embassies; four of them EU, including us – the Germans, the French and the Italians. Diplomats were an

embarrassment to the Burmese, because they didn't quite know what to do with us, and particularly ambassadors who spoke the language were a positive danger because they might hear things they shouldn't hear. So it was a sweet sorrow. We were delighted to be back. We loved the country. We had many friends. In some ways it was great and in some ways it was just awful, because it was so different.

A few anecdotes. I told you that I was a sailor and I used to sail on the lake twenty years before. In dinghies; Raters and Sharpies. After two or three weeks I went along to the sailing club to rejoin. The guy in charge there was the same guy who said: "I'm sorry sir. That will not be possible". It seemed that things were even worse in Burma than I had thought they were. He said: "Would you come this way sir?" He led me along the deck into the commodore's office where the membership book was open at my entry in joining in 1960. There was my signature. Beside it he'd written – "on leave for 19 years." I couldn't join because I was already a member.

JJ What a relief.

NF There was a terrible fire in Mandalay, the second city of Burma, and a third of the town was burnt to the ground. The EU decided that we should give some help to rebuild the city. But there was a snag. The EU never gives aid unless it's asked for, and the Burmese government never asks for aid. I happened to be in the presidency in the rotation and I thrashed around looking for some way round this. I asked for a call on the Foreign Minister who was a nice Admiral called U Chit Hlaing. I said to him: "Frankly, Minister, this is absurd. A terrible disaster has befallen Burma. The European Union wants to help, and somehow we don't seem to be able to do it. Can you help me?" We sparred about this for a while. He got up and turned his back on me and looked out of the window and said in rapid Burmese "A terrible disaster has befallen Burma. It was not the fault of the Revolutionary Government. The Revolutionary Government never asks for aid. If the European Union in its wisdom wishes to help the Union of Burma in its distress, that will be well received, and I personally would be delighted". And then he turned round and said to me in English: "Will that do?" I said it would do very well and we delivered the aid.

JJ How much did that cost?

NF I don't know. It wasn't very much, but it was in Burmese terms a lot; peanuts in EU terms.

This principle that they never ask for aid was honoured in the breach as well as in the observance, because as it happens, quite soon afterwards we received a request from the Ministry of Health for the gift of a hundred wheelchairs, probably for wounded soldiers, but they didn't say so, and we thought about this and mulled it over with London. Eventually we decided to agree. So we sent a hundred wheelchairs and then we got a bill for 180% customs duty! I said: "These wheelchairs are a gift from the people of the United Kingdom to the people of Burma. 100 times 0 is 0." The wheelchairs may still be in customs for all I know. They didn't ask again.

You were asking earlier about protection and security. During our time in Burma, Percy Norris, the British Deputy High Commissioner in Bombay was assassinated for Middle-Eastern reasons – nothing to do with Burma. But the Burmese authorities were disturbed about this event, and decided to place me under police protection. What could I say, except – thank you, sir. And the next morning there arrived outside the Residence a marked police jeep, with three constables in the back with Second World War rifles, and a keen young lieutenant in the front, brandishing a pistol. The gates opened and the Daimler slid out into the traffic, and the jeep didn't move. So my driver and I got out and walked back and push-started the jeep. This absurd charade went on. I was much more at risk push-starting the jeep than I would have been otherwise. So next time I met U Chit Hlaing on a social occasion I said to him: "Excuse me sir, do you think ..." and he said: "Yes", and the jeep was never seen again.

There were a few commercial contracts. Constructors John Brown Engineering were building small power stations. A power distribution company landed a small contract after nineteen visits to Burma by its Chief Executive. And we sold a few secondhand ships. It was quite small stuff, but it was just worth keeping at it.

There was an annual golf match. They invited the entire diplomatic corps to an annual golf match against the army. Well now – I don't play golf, but I could come

for the 19th hole, and it was a golden opportunity. Burmese generals and colonels – they play golf. They’re good Buddhists, but they drink whisky, and at 9.30 in the morning, the match having started at 6.00 or something, we were sitting on the golf course drinking whisky, and you had to drink a whisky as the price for asking the minister a question. I am making this sound too formal. It wasn’t that formal, but you had to be convivial with them, and then you could ask the Minister of Agriculture what he thought of the harvest. You could ask the Minister of Economics, you know, very general sort of questions, but it was some sort of contact with the masters of Burma.

JJ And after a few drams of whisky ...

NF They might have said something. They might.

Lord Romsey – Lord Brabourne as he now is – but as Lord Romsey he came with his wife as the personal guests of General Ne Win, because Ne Win had been friends with Mountbatten, and Mountbatten was Brabourne’s grandfather. They had been invited to celebrate their honeymoon in Burma, and they’d accepted, but then Mountbatten was assassinated and they hadn’t been able to come. So they came now. This for us was good because it gave us an opportunity to hobnob for a few days with General Ne Win. Ne Win was reclusive. You never could see him, and I thought of him then, as I had thought of him twenty years before when Princess Alexandra came to Burma – I’m reading now because I wrote it at the time – “charming and amusing, vain and eccentric, superstitious and ignorant, cunning and useless.”

The President of South Korea came to Burma on a State Visit. The day before he arrived my South Korean colleague rang me up and said: “Nick. I’m told that you are the expert in Rangoon on cleaning carpets”. I said: “Really”. I discovered that we did indeed have a carpet cleaner in the embassy staff, with a machine to do it, so I sent him round to the Korean Embassy because his President was coming and he did want to have the stain removed from his drawing room carpet before he entertained him. And we cleaned the carpet. When the whole diplomatic corps goes to the airport and sees the visiting Head of State, and we were standing to attention in a row and Ambassador Lee came across to thank me. He was busy out of his mind with his

President arriving – took the courtesy to come and say thank you. The next day we were sailing on the Inya Lake and there was an explosion, and it was a North Korean assassination squad who had tried to assassinate the President of South Korea in Burma, and failed because the President of South Korea was late, because as he subsequently explained, his wife had gone shopping. But they mistook the Ambassador's flag for the President's flag, and our friend Ambassador Lee was dead.

We travelled. We were able to travel. We needed permission, but it was quite readily given, within Burma proper – not the hill country, but within the plains. We went to Monywa which is a town on the Chindwin River, north-west of Mandalay, and as we were driving along, suddenly a police sergeant jumped out of a bush and flagged us down and saluted smartly and said: "Sir, you are the Ambassador of Bangladesh". I said: "I'm a friend of the Ambassador of Bangladesh, but I'm afraid I don't have the honour to be the Ambassador". "Oh", he said "Sir, are you sure you're not the Ambassador of Bangladesh. You see, I've been waiting for the Ambassador of Bangladesh in this bush for three days". So we went on into Monywa and we found Mr Keramat Ali in the Circuit House. I said: "For God's sake, Keramat, go back to that bush and let the sergeant out of his misery".

We went with the Commonwealth Ambassadors in Burma, every year to Thanbyuzayat which is the Burmese end of the death railway, where there is a superb Commonwealth War Graves cemetery to lay wreaths to commemorate the dead of the death railway, and one year I saw on the mountain looking at us through binoculars, a man. I said to the Burmese major in charge of us: "Major, who's that?" "Oh" he said "He's my KNDO opposite number. The Commander of the local Karen insurgents". And he said: "He's watching you, because he normally occupies this territory, but this morning by arrangement between us he withdrew so that we could secure the cemetery so that you could do what you have to do. When we go home tonight he will come back and re-occupy it. Because" he said, "the only thing that he and I agree about is that what you do here is fit to be done".

The French Ambassador, and I, went to Bhamo, which is a town on the Irrawaddy River where it flows closest to the Chinese border, and we went to ask questions about China and the border, and all that, and we were met by the local Chairman of

the People's Committee, who was of course a major in the Burmese army. He met us at the aircraft steps and he said: "Your Excellencies, this afternoon you are going to play golf". I said: "Major, if we play golf this afternoon it will be the first game of golf I have ever played in my life". "Excellent," he said, "then I shall win". Which in due course he did. Simply to stop us asking questions, no doubt.

JJ Quite subtle really. I have ways to shut you up.

NF Yes. Exactly so. They weren't very subtle. The French Ambassador, Yves Rodrigues, and I went to look at the Christian cemetery in Bhamo, and I was looking at the graves of British soldiers who had died, usually of malaria, in the year immediately following the British conquest of upper Burma in 1885. Yves was looking at the graves of French bishops who died in upper Burma a hundred years earlier. That's why we had to occupy Burma – to keep the French out!

On our valedictory tour of Burma we went west of the Irrawaddy where few foreigners go, and among other things we went to find the Australian road. Ne Win had said a couple of years earlier that he wanted a four-lane highway built to connect Bassein in the delta in the extreme south with Monywa in the north-west, and the Australians agreed to build it under the Colombo Plan, and the Australians wanted to start in the south and the Burmese wanted to start in the north, so they started in the middle and they built 72 kilometres, and then fell out over something and the road was still there, 72 kilometres of first class highway from nowhere to nowhere. And we found the road, and it was spanking new. It was marvellous and never used. We met U Chit Hlaing, the same Minister, on tour, and we met twelve elephants, and that was all.

Later that evening we came to the Irrawaddy to catch a ferry across to the other side, and the ferry, because there were no passengers, had gone an hour early. It was the last ferry of the day. So we were stuck. Well we knew about this by now, so we got out our books and leant against a palm tree and just composed ourselves and waited for something to happen. The villagers gathered and started discussing what they could do with us – we were stuck – well perhaps I could put them up – I could feed them. We could understand them. They didn't know we could understand them.

Burmese families in all their poverty always cook an evening meal for one more than they need, in case a stranger comes by. And if you walk down a village street at 6.30 in the evening you will be invited into every other house. They'd never met you before – it's just absolutely charming. But in due course, there appeared a zed-craft, which was the private boat belonging to the managing director of the local fertiliser factory, and the villagers immediately mobbed him and said: "You must take them across the river". He came up to us and introduced himself and said: "I'm sorry I can't take you personally, but please use my boat". So we got across the river after all – again something always turns up in Burma.

On the same tour we drove into a village in our Range Rover with the flag, a village west of the Chindwin where foreigners seldom went, and in the village square we stopped and got out, and the children crowded round the car the way children do anywhere in the world. A Burmese conversation begins with the words Beka Lathelay? Where do you come from? which means: from which village are you walking, of course. Just for fun I decided to ask them where they thought I came from and pointed at the flag. Consternation – Japan? Germany? There was an old man leaning on a stick listening to this conversation and he came stumping across the square, shaking his stick at the kids and he said: "You don't know that flag? You should know that flag. That's the British flag. We'll be all right now. They're back". What does the British Ambassador say then?

JJ Nice little story.

NF: We left sadly in 1986. Beautiful country; charming people, distinctive language; unique unreality. Burma is not real. It's off some other planet. Buddhism, karma and reincarnation, gentleness, courtesy, patience, and now we have Aung San Suu Kyi, the only Burmese whose name anybody knows.

JJ Still under house arrest.

NF They have a new constitution under which there are to be elections this year. In 1990 there were elections which the generals were too incompetent to rig, which were won by a landslide by Aung San Suu Kyi. She's not just the leader of the Democratic

Union, she's the elected Prime Minister, and she's under house arrest. Two years ago there were demonstrations in the streets of Rangoon led by monks, remember? And commentators who should have known better were saying that this was the turning of the tide and the beginning of the end, because it was provoked by economic desperation, which it certainly was; because they won't fire on monks – but they did fire on the monks; because you can't suppress a democracy movement in secret any more because of modern communications. All quite true. But it ignores the fundamental fact – the power equation. The generals are as much in control of Burma now as they ever were. I have to say I'm a pessimist on this subject. I cannot detect any mechanism under which we can get from here to there, except a split in the army. I'm afraid things are going to get worse before they get better. End of Burma.

HM Ambassador, Dublin 1986-91

We were delighted to be appointed to Dublin. Ireland which we remembered from our honeymoon was a country of great poverty by European standards, but by 1986 had already established new prosperity and self-confidence, which stemmed from the European Union. The Celtic tiger cub was coming of age. The East-West relationship between the UK on the one hand and the Republic on the other was already quite good in spite of the travails of the past. We own each other's companies, we buy each other's products, we share two cultures – the English and the Gaelic -- and we laugh at the same jokes. There are a lot of things going for this relationship. It's huge fun serving in Ireland, whatever else it is, it's huge fun. We're never truly foreigners to each other. We are condemned to partnership by geography. We must share these islands, and our history: all that history which famously no Irishman forgets and no Englishman remembers. And it is serious history. Then there's also the disparity in size and therefore the disparity in attention. Irish attention to Anglo-Irish relations was obsessive and constant. British attention was fitful and occasional: we tended only to notice them when they got up and hit us, which is maybe why they hit us so often.

The new Ambassador finds himself the custodian of a relationship so ancient and so intimate, so elusive and so volatile, that no-one outside these islands can possibly understand it. The need was to make this relationship more ordinary, because it

wasn't ordinary. Three weeks after we arrived I was pinned to the wall by a distressingly nubile young lady, who lectured me for five minutes about the iniquities of my government, and it took me five minutes to discover that the government in question was the government of Oliver Cromwell. She wasn't joking. It is the Irish question. The relationship with England, Britain, and now of course the political identity and constitutional future of Northern Ireland, which many Irishmen, quite moderate minded Irishmen, believe was gerrymandered by the British to produce an artificial, permanent, protestant unionist majority. Hence the troubles. And so this constructive East-West relationship lives in the shadow of history all the time. My job was obvious to me from the beginning. It was so to build on the East-West relationship, that the two governments could address the shadows left over from history *together*. That's what was beginning to happen then and has happened of course much more now. As I recorded at the time, we have to nurture our neighbourliness in order to address our ancient antagonism.

The year before we arrived in 1985, Margaret Thatcher and Garret Fitzgerald had signed the Anglo-Irish Agreement. It is a complicated document, but the key of it is that for the first time Ireland recognised that the future of Northern Ireland was a matter for decision by the people of Northern Ireland; and that for the first time we recognised that the Irish, the Southern Irish, had a legitimate interest in the outcome. There was a lot more than that and it was complicated in the administration, but that was the heart of it. That's why I was as often in Belfast as I was in London, and why I spent as much time with Tom King and Peter Brooke, the Secretaries of State for Northern Ireland, as I did with Geoffrey Howe, the Foreign Secretary of the time. On arrival, of course, I asked for a meeting with the Taoiseach, the Prime Minister, who was still Garret Fitzgerald, the author and signatory of the Anglo-Irish Agreement. I paid a formal call, but he insisted that that wasn't enough: Sue and I should come to dinner. He didn't say this, but the purpose of the invitation was so that he could brainwash me. He was determined that the new British Ambassador's perception of Ireland should derive from the Fine Gael and not from the Fianna Fail view of this. He was a marvellous man. A great man. And he talked in his characteristic, staccato delivery, for three hours. It was pure gold, for me. I didn't have to agree with all of it, but at least it was good to hear it said.

We arrived in November, I think – late in the year anyway – and on 17 February 1987, after the election Charles J Haughey was elected Taoiseach by 82 votes to 82 on the casting vote of the Speaker. Haughey was a different proposition altogether. (He was subsequently shown to be a crook). More important to the purpose he was an instinctive republican. He disliked the Anglo-Irish Agreement and campaigned against it at the election, because it required an Irish constitutional amendment to remove their claim to sovereignty over the North; because it required cooperation with the United Kingdom on security; because it required devolution, which meant Irish Nationalists in Northern Ireland sharing power with Unionists, Protestants; and because it meant the extradition of Irish citizens to face British justice, which he didn't trust.

JJ I do understand it.

NF So do I. The Justice Minister, Gerry Collins, told me at the time, “innocent until proved Irish” – which is quite a telling phrase.

A short time afterwards I was denounced publicly by the Irish government spokesman on the instructions of Charles Haughey for exceeding diplomatic norms because I had talked to the leader of the opposition about extradition. Well I *had* talked to the leader of the opposition about extradition.

JJ That's what ambassadors do!

NF Indeed. As it happened that very morning – this was on the front page of *The Irish Times* – that very morning there was a meeting of the EU Twelve, chaired by the Dane, and Ireland was represented by the Secretary for Foreign Affairs, one Noel Dorr, who was a good friend of mine. And the Dane began the meeting by saying: “We diplomats are used to serving in two kinds of country: totalitarian countries where we cannot speak to the opposition, and democratic countries where we can. Mr Secretary, which is the Republic of Ireland?” Noel knew the question would be asked, he had a marvellous philosophical answer which went on and on and on – the point was well made, and taken. I was then summoned to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Deputy Prime Minister, Brian Lenihan. He didn't apologise, but he said I

shouldn't take it seriously. It was, and I heard a new Hibernianism: "codology". The underlying truth was the Anglo-Irish Agreement had secured the future with half the Irish nation, and now we had to make it stick with the other half – Haughey's half, and it would be much more difficult.

JJ What was the solution, basically?

NF The eventual solution was the Good Friday Agreement, which we will come to later. Haughey too, made three early decisions which were very important. He did it for pragmatic reasons to secure his majority in the Dail. The spendthrift became an apostle of fiscal rectitude. He adopted the economic policies of the opposition, so they couldn't disagree with it. He enthusiastically endorsed Irish membership of the European Union, which he had hitherto criticised. And he approved the Anglo-Irish Agreement. He didn't approve it, but he said he did. But there remained his ambiguity about terrorism, and his unwillingness to allow the Irish security forces to collaborate with ours in securing terrorism on the border. This was briefly obscured by Enniskillen – remember the bomb on Remembrance Day. And the astonishing forgiveness of Gordon Wilson. His daughter lay dying beside him in the rubble and he forgave. I can't tell you what an impact that made in Ireland. And lots of towns, including Dublin, opened condolence books, and the Lord Mayor of Dublin took it personally to Enniskillen to present to the Mayor of Enniskillen. And Haughey himself said emollient things about Britain, and Pádraig Flynn, who was the Minister of the Environment, as green a Republican as any in the Irish government, quoted Arthur Miller: "This is a sharp time now, a precise time. We no longer live in the dusty afternoon when evil mixed itself with good and befuddled the world."

And then within months – cast your mind back to the early months of 1988 – a whole series of things happened. The Stalker-Samson affair – no prosecution although evidence of a miscarriage of justice; the rejection of the second appeal of the Birmingham Six – they were subsequently let out, but before that; extradition – the Irish accused us of not respecting Irish extradition laws; the Prevention of Terrorism Act was rendered permanent in Britain; Aughnacloy – a British Guardsman, without the safety catch on, unintentionally killed a young Irishman crossing the border to play a game of Gaelic football; a British private, convicted in the British court for

murdering an Irishman was reinstated in the British Army; and then of course Gibraltar – the three undoubted IRA terrorists who were shot dead by the security forces in Gibraltar and turned out to have no weapons on them. They were certainly going to wreak havoc in Gibraltar, but didn't go down well in Ireland. The Taoiseach summoned me and asked if Mrs Thatcher was trying to destabilise his administration. We'd come from the relative harmony of Enniskillen to full crisis in the space of a few weeks in Dublin; and London hadn't noticed. That was what was serious.

JJ What were you doing about that problem?

NF I was reporting it of course – all of it. But if British Ambassadors in Dublin want to be heard, they need to shout, because the British government is always too busy fighting a war in the Balkans or wherever it may be.

JJ Ireland not being serious?

NF They don't take it seriously until something really serious happens. So, I wrote a dispatch, which was the thing you did in those days when it was really serious, called "Litany of Horror." I spelled out each of these things one after the other, and I made a series of recommendations – not that we should accept the Irish point of view, but that we should notice it. We should pay attention to it, and we should try so to present our decisions, that the Irish could find them acceptable. That's partly a matter of presentation, partly a matter of using the mechanism of the Anglo-Irish Agreement, which we had ignored all through this time. I knew it would be received ambivalently, and within a few weeks I was summoned to No 10, and had an unpleasant hour with the Prime Minister, Mrs Thatcher, who regarded Haughey with utter contempt. And because I had defended him, she regarded me with contempt. She didn't use those words, but she was very angry. And I tried to make the case – What's an ambassador for? Don't I have to ensure you understand how things look to the Irish? When I'm talking to the Irish, I talk like you, Prime Minister. When I'm talking to you I'm trying to explain Mr Haughey.

JJ It didn't cut much ice?

NF Not much. She was icily civil. She acknowledged that I should go on telling the truth, but she said I should tell Mr Haughey in the language that she had just used to me, what she thought of him. And then she got up and the interview was clearly at an end, and she hissed in my ear as I left the room: “Go back to Ireland where you belong”. I thought I would be sacked, but I think she meant it kindly, and she was always very kind to me after that. Six weeks later I was offered a knighthood. I can’t tell you whether that was coincidence.

I didn’t enjoy it much, and I enjoyed even less the subsequent interview with Mr Haughey, where, after some hesitation, I carried out the Prime Minister’s instructions. Haughey was visibly shocked. I told him what she thought of him. I shan’t repeat it. And he said: “The Prime Minister has lost confidence in me”. I said: “Yes, Taoiseach.” “Confidence once lost cannot be restored”. “That’s a counsel of despair.” “The Irish have lived with despair for 800 years.” That was the flavour of this difficult passage in our relations with the Irish in 1988. We took some measures afterwards to try to set up early warning systems so that we would at least notice when things were going wrong, and so on. But it was a rough old time.

We lived in a house in Ireland. I don’t know if you’ve ever been to Glencairn. I used to say I was the only ambassador in the world who lived in a medieval castle built by an American gangster in 1905, because it was the house of Boss Croker, a Tamany Hall chief who retired with his ill-gotten gains in 1905, and built this house to re-establish his reputation in Edwardian Dublin, and failed, so he built stables and bred race horses and won the English and the Irish Derby in the same year, 1907, and instantly re-established his reputation on both sides of the water. It was a castle with battlements and a tower, and an intriguing and beautiful mahogany staircase rising from the hall, with stained glass, and stained glass on the ceiling also, and paintings of every bird that is known to exist in Japan. A really striking house. The name again is Glencairn, in Sandyford just outside Dublin. We only had one piece of furniture that had belonged to Boss Croker, and that was a grandfather clock which stood in the hall, which struck every hour, precisely on the hour, any hour it pleased. It never struck the right time. The story behind it was this, that the Croker family had fallen on ill times after the death of the Boss and had sold the house to the O’Briens. The Boss had meanwhile been embalmed and interred in a mausoleum outside their front

door, and the O'Briens didn't want him there so they dug him up and moved him to Kilgobbin Churchyard, just up the hill behind the house in the direct line of sight and when the moon rides high – at least that's the story we told to guests who wouldn't leave. We'd gather them round the clock at 1 o'clock in the morning, or whenever it was, and the clock never let us down. They were laughing so much that before they knew it they were out looking for their cars.

We went to Cork to pay our first official visit to the second city of the Republic, the notoriously Republican southern Irish city. We were there for three or four days and we called on the mayor, the chairman of the Chamber of Commerce, the President of the University and various factories and technical colleges and what have you, and then we gave a little dinner party to thank all the people who'd been so nice to us. Our chief guest at the dinner party was Peter Barry, who had been Garret Fitzgerald's Foreign Minister, and he made a graceful little speech in which he happened to refer to Ireland's appointment with destiny the following day. This was the referendum on the Single European Act, not a terribly deep European commitment, but anathema to the little Irishman, like little Englanders. But another of our guests was Senator John A Murphy, who was very much opposed to the Irish participation in Europe. He interrupted Barry, and banged on the table and said it was a disgrace, appealing to me: it was a disgrace that the former Foreign Minister should introduce such a divisive subject on an occasion of this kind. He was very angry. And the President of University College Cork, who was a delightful man, said: "Mr Ambassador. This is the time when we sing Irish songs", and his wife then sang a most enchanting melody, and we all sang songs, and before we knew it John A Murphy was singing songs, and it was all a great success. We thought it was going to be a disaster, and it was all a great success.

I have to say a word about security. Because of the assassination of Christopher Ewart Biggs, because of the assassination of Lord Mountbatten, Susan and I lived under, well I lived under intensive Irish police protection. In five years in Dublin we were never alone except in bed, which is pretty exhausting. It's not agreeable, but it's necessary. We accepted that it was necessary and so we tried to come to terms with the impact this had to have on what we could and couldn't do, and then ignore it.

They came with us wherever we went, with their machineguns, which did kind of spoil the atmosphere while picnicking on the Wicklow hills.

We went to Sneem in County Kerry, west Ireland; beautiful village; an Irish lawyer friend invited us. The night before we were due to go, the Deputy Commissioner of the Garda Síochána, the Irish Police Force, asked to see me urgently, and he explained to me that unhappily my travel plans had fallen into the hands of “subversives”. He was embarrassed because it was a disaffected police sergeant who had leaked our plans to the IRA. And after some discussion I said: “Commissioner, are you advising us not to go?” “Oh no, sir. Oh, no sir. If you go it’s our business to keep you safe, sir”. So like an idiot I said we would go. And when we arrived the entire mountain was covered with policemen. I’ve never seen so many policemen. The next morning the chief superintendent, no less, who was in charge of this operation, came to see me and said: “Will you please stay at home this morning?” I said: “What’s the matter?” He said: “It’s like this, sir. There’s a bus load of young men at the end of this lane” – it was a *cul de sac* – “to check the forest at the other end of the lane, but sir, there’s no forest at the other end of the lane”. “Okay” I said. “Check”. Half an hour later he came back and said: “It’s okay sir you can go out now. They were real foresters, but they were in the wrong county”. But then we went back to Dublin and the front page of *An Phoblacht*, which was the Irish Republic newspaper, had a banner headline with a photograph of me seen through telescopic sights, undoubtedly in Sneem, and the headline was “We let Fenn go”. So it’s a joke, but it isn’t a joke. And then of course I was besieged by journalists asking me whether I had confidence in Irish security. Of course, I had the fullest confidence in Irish security.

An American friend told us – who had lived in Ireland for many years – she didn’t think she actually knew anybody who’d actually murder me, but she didn’t know anyone who wouldn’t harbour my murderer. That again I found quite telling as an indication.

One of the nice things about being British Ambassador in Dublin is that one is invited by the Commissioners of Irish Lights (Trinity House in Ireland). They are responsible for the lighthouses. Every year the commissioners make a tour of inspection of all the lighthouses in the island of Ireland, and the commissioners are drawn from north and

south of the border to see that they're okay. In the 18th century, they explained, they were given the choice of a free uniform or a free lunch. They chose the free lunch, and they've been eating it ever since. They lived like kings on that boat – the flagship *Granuaille*, but when they came to a lighthouse they were suddenly professional. They put on their caps and they went down to the dinghy and we were plucked out of the dinghy by all sorts of hazardous – it seemed to me hazardous -- ways of getting ashore – inspected the lighthouse; talked to the lighthouse keeper – in those days most of the lighthouses were still manned. We were witnessing the end of a noble profession because to the next generation there were none of them manned. Some of them had been sons and grandsons of lighthouse keepers. And the nice thing about it was that after dinner, which was a very convivial occasion, the admiral would ask the captain for the position of the vessel. The captain wouldn't have a clue so he sent for the bo'sun who knew precisely, so that the admiral would know which head of state to toast. When he came off Northern Ireland he toasted the Queen.

I went on a cruise – I'm a sailor, I told you that – and my cousin brought his yacht to Ireland; circumnavigated Ireland, and we were able to join him around Connemara in the northern part of Southern Ireland on the west coast – beautiful country. I negotiated with the police that they need not put an officer on board, but they would follow us by car. We put in overnight to Inishbofin, which is a tiny island with a horseshoe harbour and a ruined Oliver Cromwell fort at the end of the harbour, and a white painted village straggling up the hillside, and nobody had a clue who we were. We coasted into this harbour on a dying wind, and we furled the sails and we dropped our anchor, and we had our first gin and tonic of the evening, and nobody knew who I was. And then there put out from the quay a red painted dinghy rowed by two gentlemen in city suits who'd plainly never been in a boat before in their lives, and they made their erratic way across the harbour. One of them stood up and saluted, and everybody in Inishbofin knew who I was. And then we went into the pub: “Good evening, Your Excellency”. Security can be very counter-productive.

A good deal of public diplomacy; a lot of speeches; and lot of talking in public, in circumstances sometimes where relations were very tense, and I had to try to be an emollient English voice, bringing some calm into a situation. And other times when it

was more relaxed, I could just be myself and show that I hadn't got horns and a tail, and that sort of thing. Television, radio – quite a lot of that.

President Hillery, Paddy Hillery, came to the end of his term. There were elections for the new President of Ireland, and the leading candidate from Fianna Fail, the same one who told me it was “codology”, Brian Lenihan, should have won. He was the natural shoo-in candidate. I met him on a social occasion ten days before the poll and asked him how it was going. He said: “You know Nick, I'm home and dry as long as I can keep my fat mouth shut”. The next day on television he was caught out telling lies full frontal, and he lost on the second ballot, and they elected, this deeply conservative male-chauvinist society elected a militant liberal and a woman – Mary Robinson.

JJ Brilliant woman.

NF Absolutely marvellous woman, and she brought something new to Irish politics. “Come dance with me in Ireland”, she said. “I am of Ireland. Come dance with me in Ireland “. I can't tell you how – the President has no power, but she transformed the atmosphere within which even Charles J Haughey had to conduct his business.

The British Ambassador – I've nearly finished Ireland – is inescapably a kind of Irish grandee. It's a strange contradiction. Because of our long association and in spite of our ancient animosity, the British Ambassador is welcome in the homes of the decaying mansions of the Irish aristocracy; in the modern homes of smart, successful businessmen and the cottages of ordinary folk in the countryside. Wherever you go in Ireland you're welcome. And so, the British Ambassador has countless opportunities to say and do healing things, but he never has instructions, because it all arises at short notice. You can't get instructions, and the diplomatic instinct is to say and do nothing, in which case you're grade one useless. So you make it up as you go along. And you take your whisky and soda and you climb on to your high wire and you walk it with gritted teeth, knowing that if you get it wrong, people die. And if you get it right, fewer people die. That's what it means being the Ambassador in Dublin. It is a high pressure, but rewarding job, because its results are seen in the lives of ordinary

folk, particularly north of the border, where of course I had no jurisdiction although I was often there.

Since we left, there was the Good Friday Agreement. And there have been alarms and excursions since. There will go on being murders by recalcitrant Republican groups. There will go on being difficulties over things like the current policing and parades difficulties. But they will not go back to war. I'm persuaded that the people of Northern Ireland would not follow their leaders if they tried to go back to war because they've seen how much nicer it is to be at peace; and because the fundamental issues, whatever the extremists of either side may say, have been resolved. So there is a contrast with Burma. I am in matters Irish an optimist, and I think it will work.

JJ That's cheerful. That's really good. Wonderful description of what's going on in Ireland.

NF Well what was going on.

JJ Where is Mary Robinson now?

NF She's in New York running a think tank. She went to be UN Commissioner for Human Rights. I think she stopped doing that. I think she's now running her own commission for human rights of some kind.

JJ My wife and I went to see her in London and she made the most brilliant speech. I've still got the text at home.

NF She's fabulous. She's a great lady. We were under her spell, and thought she was healing for Ireland. She was the President of all the Irish, including the Irish diaspora, she said. The American Ambassador looked a bit boot faced at that point.

JJ He was there?

NF At her inauguration.

JJ Right, he had to be there?

NF In the front row. Great lady.

British High Commissioner, New Delhi, 1991-96

As in China the first thing to remember is the scale of the enterprise. It's an enormous country. Larger than the European Union and three times its population. From the Himalayan ramparts to the palm-fringed shores of Kerala; from the salt-flat deserts of the Rann of Kutch to the mountains of the neglected north-east, the Indian-ness of India is easy to recognise, but difficult to define. And it has problems built to scale: notoriously: poverty. According to UN statistics there were 250 million people in a state of absolute poverty, 350 million in my time -- more than in the whole of Africa and the whole of Latin America combined; and a larger middle class than the United States of America. Population: too many Indians – 932 million when we left India, according to the population clock outside the All India Institute of Medical Science. During the time we were there, the population of India added into it the equivalent of the population of Britain. It's now of course over a billion and will overtake China by 2025, because of the low age profile of the population. Illiteracy – 50% illiterate. Disease – 5% crippled or blind: that's 50 million people on crutches. And according to President Shankar Dayal Sharma at his Republic Day address, the four great evils of India were communalism, castism, criminalisation and corruption. You can make a case for the awfulness of India.

But you can also make a case for the glories of India. The Supreme Court, for example is uncorrupt and really determined to try to see the right thing done. In the end it takes years to get there, but it does work. The Indian Commission for Human Rights. The contempt of the public for corrupt politicians. The army abhors politics and stands aside from it, isolated in its cantonments, taking every caste and tribe into its ranks. (It recruits a disproportionate number of Sikhs to be sure.) There will not be a *coup d'état* in India. The Indian army wouldn't know how to stage a *coup d'état*, and they wouldn't do it because they simply don't – their job is not that. They promise to defend India, which they do with great courage, and great professionalism.

They have not got very modern equipment most of the time, but it is an impressive army. The crowning grace – the really important thing about India – is Indian society, which is tolerant, secular and exuberantly free. Every Indian has a notion from which every other Indian dissents. They are all speaking at once in 15 official languages, and 532 tribal dialects. It's just a wonder to behold. You cannot avoid the clash of opinions, the free press, the boiling up of ideas and so on. That is the reason for my confidence for the future of India.

Britain has enjoyed an ambiguous relationship with India. When we arrived, there was still the 'Raj' – nostalgia on our part, and resentment on the Indian part. A lousy basis for a bilateral relationship. And then three things happened. The end of the Cold War and the disappearance of the Soviet Union, cast India adrift from its moorings. Uneasy in the presence of a single super power, they identified the European Union as a possible element of balance, and within the European Union they found they could make more sense of the Brits than of any of the rest. Secondly, Indian economic reform made India more interesting to Britain. And British economic recovery made Britain more interesting to India. So there seemed to us, as we arrived, an opportunity. Of course our long association had given us all the time, habits of thought and action, which we valued and held in common -- parliamentary democracy, the rule of law and all of that. I called it culture, cricket and the Commonwealth. They were real enough, but they were compatible with radically different views of the world in NATO and the Non-Aligned Movement, and a bilateral relationship which was frankly scratchy. My predecessors were summoned to the south block of the Foreign Ministry to be spanked. I was summoned to be consulted, and it's different.

Now why? Not my doing, it was just the luck of the draw – the way things happened. We arrived at a time of turbulence. India had had a first rate economic crisis and had nearly gone bankrupt, unable to pay its debts, only a few months before, and the Bank of England had been unobtrusively helpful, and that was not forgotten. Narasimha Rao, the Indian Prime Minister, the world's most implausible revolutionary, a cautious man and wrinkled, an old man, had the courage to break with forty years of Nehruvian socialism, and open the economy to the outside world. That was what gave the opportunity that I'm talking about, and it was Indian doing. It was the effect

of the crisis. It was quite clear what my job was. My job was to get out of the politics and into the economics, because, if you're making enough money out of each other, and before long we were making a lot of money out of each other, it's possible to talk to each other about quite sensitive things, hence the point about being summoned to be consulted. Kashmir, human rights, nuclear weapons and all the things – Punjab, at the time – all the things that it's difficult to talk to India about, had suddenly become naturally part of the agenda because we were economic partners. Douglas Hurd told me before I went that my job was to “understand India.”

JJ Just like that.

NF Just like that. Not only that, but I should do it quickly because he was coming in six weeks and I'd have to find out the answer. He was coming to make his own assessment of the Indian economic reform; was the new India real? So I was plunged immediately into a frenetic round of consultation and question, travel and trying to get to the bottom of this. Of course I didn't. But he came and he concluded after talks with the Indian Foreign Minister, the Prime Minister, that it was real enough to be getting on with. They reviewed our existing relationship and pronounced it inadequate, and they established a structured dialogue, under which we've been consulting each other ever since. Hurd said at his concluding press conference a seminal phrase: “Our instincts and our interests begin to run together”. Not at the time quite true, but I suppose a kind of objective for his new High Commissioner. Under the structured dialogue, (and here I'm going to read them because they're complicated), we have a partnership against terrorism, and an extradition treaty and a confiscation of assets agreement to prove it. We have joint initiatives on environment and forestry. We have a defence consultative group, particularly on equipment and such – defence, with the Indians! We have of course the British Council, continuing its work on education, culture and development. We have a Development Cooperation Office and the largest British aid programme in the world. We have research, industrial development and technology transfer agreements which were signed in my last few weeks in India. All this was on the back of the Indo-British partnership initiative launched by the two Prime Ministers in January 1993, under which visible trade increased by 70% in three years in both directions, to £3 billion in 1996. British investment in India was multiplied by 15 in three years, and there were

523 new joint ventures in the first 1,000 days. Now that's the kind of thing that doesn't happen very often in bilateral relationships. John Major in Mumbai in 1996, talking about his talks with Narasimha Rao: "We have banished the ghosts of an empire that nobody mourns, rejecting both nostalgia and resentment, and building a modern partnership between sovereign democracies". That had transformed India and transformed our bilateral relationship, and weren't we lucky to be there at a time when so many things became possible, that had not been possible before? That was what I was doing for five years in India.

JJ Presumably you weren't doing this single-handed?

NF Good Lord no.

JJ You must have had a very good team?

NF Extremely good. Quite exceptionally good. Staff of 1,000, including Indians of course. UK based staff of 100, including Peter Fowler, initially, and then Sir Hilary Synnott, Deputy, Sir John Holmes, Lyn Parker – a very distinguished team, and Deputy High Commissions in Mumbai, in Chennai and Kolkata, and a Trade Development Office in Bangalore.

I forecast before I left India that 1997, which was the 50th anniversary of Indian independence, when Her Majesty the Queen was coming to pay a State Visit, would be a triumph. I suggested that we should lose our inhibitions and we should actually celebrate with India the achievements of the first 50 years, and I was wrong. Because it was a disaster. And it was a disaster and I speak no ill of the dead – because Robin Cook made a speech in Islamabad denouncing the Indians – in Islamabad – for their policy on Kashmir, and the Queen came to India with that sour taste. Leaving aside the rights and wrongs of what Robin Cook said, and he was a very clever man, it wasn't a smart move to say that in Islamabad just before the Queen came to India. And it took a decade to recover from that – it's okay now, but it was a bad, bad moment. Cook didn't understand India. I called on him when he was still opposition spokesman, and I commended to him the astonishing success with the Conservative policy towards India, and he said: "You don't understand, High Commissioner, there

is going to be a change. Relations with India are a matter of human rights". Well of course human rights are important, but as I said to him, "What matters, Mr Cook, is whether you want actually to improve human rights, or whether you want to strike a posture, because if you want to improve human rights, you start with economics, and you get to the human rights ..." "No, no, no" he said. "I can't play that game. Straightforward stuff, me", and of course this was all part of this, (what was it he called it?), "ethical foreign policy", which in my view was a disaster, at least as applied in India.

JJ What does that mean?

NF Within three weeks he was selling arms to Indonesia. I don't have party politics, but from the point of view of the former High Commissioner in India, this was bad news. So I was wrong in my forecast. I hadn't imagined that anyone would do anything quite so mistaken.

But there is so much else. Susan and I took Douglas Hurd's injunction to understand India as a licence to travel. I claim to be the only person of any nationality who has ever made a public speech in the English language in every one of India's 25 states. (There are now 28, but there were 25 then.) And that's because no Indian politician had bothered. They'd make a speech in their own state and Delhi. But not in the seven sisters hiding behind Bangladesh in the north-east corner. We greatly enjoyed travelling in India. We did a lot of public speaking. Of course we visited the Deputy High Commissions I've talked about. All the legendary diversity of India is true, and indeed, although I talk about discontinuity about the Raj and getting out from under it, there's some continuity as well, I have to say. Indian stage management on presentation of credentials is straight out of the Raj and brilliantly done, and the same is true of their Republic Day. Beating the retreat, when they play on the bells of government buildings "Abide with me", if you please. Ayodhya— you may have heard of Ayodhya, a place in Uttar Pradesh (which is no longer a state, but was then), where there was a temple to the god Ram upon which the Moguls built a mosque. Hindu nationalists wanted the mosque torn down, and the temple restored. Explosive stuff. We went to Ayodhya in May 1992 to assess the situation for ourselves. The government in Uttar Pradesh in those days was a BJP government – the Hindu

Nationalist Party government and Kalyam Singh, the chief Minister, readily agreed that we should go to Ayodhya and he arranged for one of his MPs to take us there to brainwash us with the Hindu nationalist view. We asked the Muslim leadership what they would do if the Supreme Court found against them and they said: “The Supreme Court won’t find against us, because we are right. But if they do, we are in the end citizens of a secular state and we will obey”. I asked the Hindu leadership the same question and they said: “The Supreme Court will not find against us because we are right.” Full stop. And then a few months later in December 1992 a Hindu mob stormed the temple. It was a very unhappy day for India because there were then communal riots all over the country and a lot of people lost their lives. It was very bloody – including some of our staff in Mumbai.

JJ I recall that instance.

NF Bad, bad news.

We went to Kohima, the capital of Nagaland, in the extreme north-east corner of India, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Battle of Kohima, which you may remember was a turning point in the Second World War. The might of Imperial Japan had confronted the might of Imperial India, across the Deputy Commissioner’s tennis court, and slaughtered each other in their tens of thousands. And Japan did not invade India. It was an extraordinarily bloody battle, and there is one of the most fabulous Commonwealth War Graves in the world there, stretching up the hillside. The Deputy Commissioner’s bungalow is, of course, on top of the hill, and the tennis court was also on top of the hill, and all stretching down is this War Graves, rank upon rank of graves, and at the bottom the famous inscription “Tell them of us, and say for your tomorrow we gave our today”. It’s a moving place. On this anniversary the Ministry of Defence in their wisdom shipped out two ‘plane loads of veterans of the battle, including five widows of the battle, two of whom had never been in an aeroplane before in their lives. They flew them half round the world and confronted them with their husbands’ graves after 50 years. Pretty emotive stuff. And on the way up the hill, very slow, because every stone and every palm tree told a story, and the veterans had to tell the story. And we got to the top and then the Naga veterans with their

British Campaign Medals on their chests came down from the hillside and embraced their comrades in arms after 50 years, and then we stood to attention for the last post.

JJ Very moving.

NF Extraordinary occasion. Very, very moving. The following year we went back to Kohima for a sort of ordinary visit, but they knew us because we'd been there on this other occasion, and they gave a party for us in Old Kohima, Kohima village, which was kind of – we had tea and buns and friendly conversation, then suddenly a gentleman with feathers in his hair got up and made a speech denouncing my government for betraying the Nagas to the Indians in 1947. And another gentleman got up and denounced me for not denouncing my government for betraying the Nagas to the Indians, and then I had to reply. It was another memorable occasion. And of course I had to report to the Indian authorities what had happened and I did. I went to the Foreign Ministry and told them. And they said: “Yes, yes. Well we knew they were going to do that”. I said: “Well you might have warned me”.

Remembrance Day outside Delhi – the Indians for reasons which I discovered chose to leave it in the hands of the British in 1947, so the British High Commission (I think still, certainly in my day), organised Remembrance Day. The arrangement I inherited was that we invited to the ceremony the war time allies and Commonwealth High Commissioners. So the Russians came, and the Chinese came, but the Germans, the Italians and the Spaniards and the Portuguese didn't. I thought that this was a bit counter-intuitive after all this time, so I approached my Dutch colleague and asked whether he thought we could modify it. He said: “If you invite the German, I won't come”. And I approached my Australian colleague and he said: “If you invite the Japanese I won't be allowed by my government to come, because one of my colleagues was sacked last year for doing just that”. So I said nothing and the thing went ahead, but my last year, when I knew it was my last year, I changed it without consulting anybody, because the two people I had consulted had gone and after a long debate, nobody would advise me. It was too sensitive. I invited the entire diplomatic corps and the Dean who was His Excellency the Ambassador of Senegal in all his fine robes, presented a wreath with great *élan*, and everybody went home happy. 50 years

is long enough to nurse a grievance. You can't go on for ever. But it was sensitive stuff and not easy to do.

Orissa – I made a speech. I was always making speeches as I told you – to a crowd of around 110,000 people because a British Indian businessman, Swraj Paul – The Lord Paul – was going to build a steel factory. It never happened, but we were inaugurating this factory before it happened, and the Chief Minister, no less, Biju Patnaik, offered his services as interpreter, and by the wild acclamation of my speech I think he was making some quite different speech.

JJ Tell me, where did these 110,000 people come from? That's enormous.

NF They were bussed in.

JJ How could they hear? How far away were they?

NF There were microphones and things all over. They'd been bussed in to serve Biju Patnaik's political interests, because Swraj Paul was going to invest in his state. Swraj Paul was a fellow national – he was a Brit. I wanted to demonstrate the British-Indian role in developing India, but what I didn't want to do was to be seen to serve Biju Patnaik's special pleading, but I'm afraid I fell into that trap.

Andaman and Nicobar Islands, which are very close to Malaysia, but are nonetheless part of India. We went to them very late on because it took us quite a long time to get round to them; and they're tiny. Port Blair is the capital of Andaman, and just off shore is Ross Island, which was the British Military Naval headquarters at the beginning of the Second World War, and was abandoned in the face of the advancing Japanese. And when the British came back they never bothered with the Andaman and Nicobar islands, so the jungle took over the military headquarters, and they lifted the mess and the Presbyterian church yards off the ground, and then they crumbled, and so the roots of the plants are the shape of a church, or the shape of the mess, or whatever it may be – amazing place. Kalapani – the colonial jail. We had the cellular jail, which was one person standing in the middle could look down all the spikes of the corridor, and we used it as a political prisoners' jail, and we were shown

the horrendously partisan *son et lumière*. It was quite good for the High Commissioner to come to terms also with that part of our inheritance. Then I discovered that the last governor of this jail had been an Irishman, so I was home and dry! Two of the islands are still inhabited by negroid stone age savages who do not know how to make fire.

JJ What?

NF – They have fire, but they can't make it, and they're citizens of the Republic of India. And they see the 747s going overhead. How do you deal with them? If you land on their beach they shoot you with poison arrows. So on the whole people don't land on their beaches. Once a year the local Department of Archaeology and Anthropology (or whatever it is) comes in a very fast speedboat and leaps on to the beach and leaves a great box of goodies and jumps back into the boat again. An insoluble problem.

Voluntary organisations supporting street children in Calcutta; the happy home for blind children in Bombay – a lot of such voluntary work in India, as in Britain. Funded partly by foreigners. Very often by rich Indians, and do amounts of very good work among the very poor.

Cauvery water dispute. The Cauvery River flows from Karnataka through Tamil Nadu to the sea at Madras, and as in many other parts of the world, there are ferocious arguments about the division of the waters, and we were briefed by Ms Jayalalitha, who was the chief Minister of Tamil Nadu in the morning, and in the afternoon we flew to Bangalore and were briefed by the Chief Minister of Karnataka, Mr Bangarappa, and the vividness of this - they were hammer and tongs at it, and this is a simple but profound problem which exists, as I say, all over the world, and there it is in India.

On a public speech occasion in Bangalore, I met for the first time the new Chief Minister, Deve Gowda, who became subsequently the Prime Minister of India briefly – Janata Dal – socialist – and I was making my very, routine ordinary economic-trade pitch and he suddenly said: “High Commissioner, do not screw me”. I said: “I beg

your pardon, Chief Minister?” It turned out that he saw this as an example of the interference of Delhi in the affairs of his state of Karnataka. Delhi, under the influence of America, was opening the economy to the outside, was making economic reforms to the detriment of the poor, and I was the mouthpiece of Delhi. It was not me, but Delhi that was screwing the Chief Minister.

Bombs in Bombay 1993 – in 1993 the Stock Exchange in Bombay was bombed on the Friday – bombed out of its mind. Some people killed - I can't remember how many. And the Stock Exchange opened as usual on Monday morning and the price of shares went up. That's the way to deal with terrorists all the time.

The Rann of Kutch in the extreme west corner of India, not far from Pakistan – salt flat desert most of the time. When we were there they were rescuing people from floods, because of flash flooding, and the delightful Collector said: “Last Thursday I was organising drought relief measures. Yesterday I was calling for helicopters to rescue them from floods. That is the life of the Collector of Bhuj.”

Punjab – very violent in those days. Sikh insurrection. Very tough Sikh Chief Minister, Beant Singh. Even tougher Police Commander, K P S Gill. They briefed me and it occurred to me that they talked about economic development, and they talked, of course, about security. Not a word about reconciliation. Not a word. Two years later I called on them again, and had to congratulate them on the signal success of their policy. Who thinks of the Punjab as a problem now? It's gone away. They won.

Wagga border with Pakistan – impeccable competitive military drill, as the two armies, two guard posts, march towards each other, and then when they get face to face within a foot of each others' faces, they about turn and march away again, on the occasion when they're hoisting or lowering the flag, at dawn or dusk. And I discovered that only 42 people a day cross that border. These two great Asian neighbours standing with their backs to each other.

Baramulla, Kashmir – latterly, I went to Kashmir on instructions, to try to help see a way of implementing Douglas Hurd's three points on the future of Kashmir, and I

made a speech. Baramulla was a place of a lot of insurgent activity, and I couldn't get a fair hearing, but I did my best. And as I left, a guy who appeared to be a peasant took me by the arm and said – and the interpreter explained what he was saying, and I know it was accurate because of the gestures. He said: “High Commissioner, we are simple folk. We don't understand about India. We don't understand about Pakistan. But we are being ground between the upper and the nether millstones. Would the High Commissioner please ask them to stop?”

Princess Royal in Ladakh – Princess Anne came to visit as President of Save the Children Fund, and she knew more about Save the Children Fund project in Ladakh than the Ladakhis knew. When we fly into Leh, the capital of Ladakh, you are supposed to spend 24 hours flat on your back to adjust to the altitude. You try telling that to the Princess Royal. She's not that kind of gal. She went straight into her programme with the High Commissioner panting in her wake, and we had a marvellous few days. We spent the night at 14,000 feet at a village called Gya, I think. We had little tents. Princess Royal had a field of the cloth of gold with a kind of terrific, splendid palace tent, with a boudoir and a reception room and a bathroom with hot and cold running water.

JJ With ladies to help her dress?

NF Yes, and half way up the hill there was a guy with an oil drum full of water with a fire underneath which he stoked all night, in case Her Royal Highness should want to wash her hands. Hospitality. And we went on to a higher place, 17,000 feet, to visit a nomad encampment which Save the Children Fund was helping, and as we turned off the highway; off the track, a hundred horseman emerged from behind the stones with white scarves of welcome in their hands and smiles from ear to ear.

JJ That's all right then.

NF Precisely. There was a moment of doubt. A royal welcome. These little things just build up the kaleidoscopic picture of what it was like in India.

I have to end on an acknowledgement of my last great failure in the diplomatic service, which was if you remember, that two Brits, a German, an American and a Norwegian were kidnapped in Kashmir with four of their wives. They had all checked with their respective consulates and they had been told not to go. But they had gone to Kashmir. They were trekking in the beautiful mountains of the legendarily beautiful Kashmir. They were taken but their wives were immediately released and sent back to Delhi, and the four of them lived in our High Commission compound for nine months. And on the first day they were there I assured them that we would do everything we possibly could to secure their husbands' release, but I had to warn them that the British government would not pay ransom. And in the whole of that nine months they never once asked me to pay. I think that's astonishing. I was the last person to talk to the insurgent leader on the telephone and having fenced with him for days I eventually had to say, no, we weren't going to pay, and they were killed. That's on my conscience. I couldn't have said anything else, but it was, I have to believe, what precipitated their murder.

Economic reform in conclusion, is a reality. Indian economic reform. They began to say as we were leaving in 1996 that there was an ideological consensus, and the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Ken Clarke, came to India in pursuit of this elusive ideological consensus. He talked to the Congress government in the centre, to the BJP government in Rajasthan, to the Communist government in West Bengal, and the Shiv Sena government in Maharashtra, and the Janata Dal government in Karnataka. This indicates the diversity of Indian politics. He discovered that there was no consensus, but there was something better; there was a common economic imperative. They all needed the reforms, and they could not help the poor unless they first generated the resources. That became the common ground on which Indian economic reform was based, and it has continued, and it will continue, because there is no viable alternative. That's India.

JJ Have we finished now, or ..?

NF Unless you want me to say anything about my years in the Diplomatic Service.

JJ Yes, that would be a very useful way to round off this interview.

Reflections on 37 years in the Diplomatic Service

The role

Sir Henry Wotton, a British Ambassador in the seventeenth century, famously wrote, "An Ambassador is an honest man sent to lie abroad for his country." This saddled his profession with the reputation for mendacity from which it has suffered ever since. Diplomats do sometimes need to be economical with the truth. But in my experience the essence of diplomacy is the precise opposite of its popular image. An Ambassador must "tell it like it is." Unwelcome messages must be delivered without fear or gloss. He must never mislead governments into thinking that things are better than they are. They must be told the truth.

An Ambassador is, first, a representative of his country, fulfilling a public role in (say) Ruritania. He must fulfil this role with dignity and discretion. He must be seen to enjoy Ruritania, its people, culture, food and drink. He is secondly an advocate, commending in public and in private the views of his government and the virtues of his society. He is, thirdly, a spy, interpreting Ruritania to his authorities. He must report the views of the government of the day, but also other currents of opinion. If he is doing his job, his government will never be taken by surprise, and its decisions about Ruritania will be taken on the basis of accurate and not inaccurate information. But Ambassadors are members of the most self-important profession in the world: they must remember that they are of no importance in themselves. They have value only if they speak for governments: the governments of India and Ireland were not interested in the opinions of Nick Fenn: only in the views of HMG.

Much has been written about the qualities needed for this task. Top of my list would be integrity – an ambassador must be trusted by both sides; second, loyalty – both sides must know without ambiguity whom he serves; third imagination – to see the fleeting opportunity as it passes by; fourth clarity of thought and expression – to assess developments and convince his audience; fifth courage – diplomacy is an increasingly dangerous business and the ambassador must not be deflected or influenced by fear. Finally a capacity for hard work and the unflinching acceptance of long hours.

Diplomatic families

One of the greatest attractions of the Diplomatic Service – and one of its most intractable problems – is the nomadic lifestyle and its impact upon families. We were lucky. When we

were posted to Mandalay in 1960, it did not occur to either of us that my wife should not give up her fascinating research project at Birkbeck College and come as my consort to my modest appointment as Vice-Consul in Mandalay. We have done the job together ever since. Some colleagues have been less fortunate – and our changing culture has made it more difficult. Both partners in a marriage now expect to pursue their separate careers, which cannot easily be combined with the imperatives of a nomadic profession. The Office has made great efforts to respond, but the issues are intractable and cannot be eliminated.

The education of children is another thorny issue. Some parents cannot accept the separation, or they prize the international experience for their children, accepting the price-tag of a different education system in a different language every few years. For our part we wanted a coherent education for our children and sent them to boarding school in England. We were lucky: they thrived. The joyful re-unions at the end of every term made up for the awfulness of parting at the end of every holiday. Separation drove the family together. Not all diplomatic families have this fortunate experience. And similar problems can arise with the care of elderly parents.

British diplomats and their families get more support from their government than their colleagues in most comparable services. On first arrival in post the family will be met at the airport, accommodated and introduced. A French colleague will take a taxi from the airport to his hotel and then start looking for a flat.

The Service

The Service we joined in 1959 may have been stuffy, overdressed and punctilious. It had time for scholarship and eccentricity. It was also dedicated, confident and loyal. The service we left in 1996 was still dedicated and loyal; but it was overstretched, under-resourced and uncertain. Harold Wilson's government in the 1960s did not trust the civil service after thirteen years of conservative rule. They sought to cut it down to size. Successive administrations have continued the process, partly to contain expenditure and partly because of the politics of envy. The CPRS Review of the early 1970s even recommended that we should choose to have a second-rate diplomatic service appropriate to a second class power. Mercifully the government of the day saw that a second class power had more need of its diplomats, not less.

Like other branches of government, the Diplomatic Service is subject to an endless series of reviews. As we left India we were caught between the rival jurisdictions of the Under-Secretary's Command, the Top Management Round and the Inspectorate. There was a Fundamental Expenditure Review, a Senior Management Review, a Private Finance Initiative, Resource Accounting, a review of allowances, the Harris Scrutiny, the future of the Estate and much else besides. No doubt each of these will have served some purpose useful in some part of the public service. But we were in danger of spending so much time examining how we did things we had no time left to do them.

For me the abomination was the drive to privatise the public service, encouraging bright youngsters to opt out in mid career and opt in again, having acquired the star-dust of the City. The avowed purpose was to make the service more like a business and therefore, it was assumed, more efficient. But there is more to efficiency than profit, and the Service is not a business. We now pay unnecessary bonuses to competent staff, instead of paying them properly for what they do. We seem to be bent on destroying the public service, with its distinctive ethos and career structure, its own disciplines and rewards. If we do not want the second class service envisaged by the CPRS, I hope that we shall defend the first class one we have, while we still have it.

Open Government

Another destructive element is the popular enthusiasm for open government. Diplomacy demands discretion. Premature publicity arouses populist pressures which all too often destroy the possibility of progress. Confidentiality is indispensable to good governance and also to democracy. Far from being a bastion of our liberties, the Freedom of Information Act was a disaster for democracy. Time was when policy was declared by elected Ministers in Parliament and scrutinised by elected MPs – not aired in advance on the *Today* programme. The advice tendered by unelected officials was not a legitimate matter for enquiry. Open that advice to public scrutiny and you turn first class public servants into second class politicians: we are not good at it. The danger is obvious: officials no longer tender exclusively the advice they believe to be in the public interest; they have to consider the likelihood of leak or publication. And this corrodes democracy. Advice can be exploited for electoral advantage. Intelligence reports can be used to influence public opinion on the eve of a war. A Prime Minister can ask about a candidate for senior office, "Is he one of us?"

All these in different ways undermine the integrity of the public service and diminish the trust on which our system rests. In the 1980s a middle ranking official in the Ministry of Defence made himself briefly the darling of the chattering classes by shopping his minister and sending to *The Guardian* a secret memorandum on the sinking of *The Belgrano* in the Falklands War. Whistle blowing or disloyalty? Who elected Clive Ponting? By what right did he overrule his elected Minister? I mentioned at the beginning a confidential memorandum about the dictator of Burma that I had written for my Ambassador under the protection of the fifty year rule. Why make it public? Officials must be allowed to tender dispassionate advice in confidence. The alternative is to drive confidential discussion off the public record and behind the arras – and that is not sensible either.

There are two corollaries of this view. First retired Ambassadors should shut up. The mobilisation of former Excellencies to take partisan positions on current issues does nothing to improve policy: it serves only to diminish the confidence of current ministers in our successors. That is why I have taken so long to record these views for the Oral History Programme. Secondly, democratic governments must tell their people the truth. We no longer believe our governments. It can be done: in my own small way I have done it myself. In six years as a government press officer I never told a lie. I rarely told the whole truth either. But journalists understand reticence in the national interest, or to protect the lives of agents or the grief of widows. Reticence in public is a dying art - and democracy is the poorer for it.

Peace is possible

A more peaceful world is possible. There is no clash of interests – over water, territory, resources, hegemony – that is not rationally capable of peaceful and humane solution. But it is difficult for all of us consistently to behave rationally. Dictators need diplomatic victories to keep their people sweet. Democrats are vulnerable to populist pressures. Professionals are busy with detail and may miss the wood for the trees. Peace often seems out of reach. We lived on the edge of disaster in Burma, in Zimbabwe, in Ireland, in Kashmir – and in many other places beyond my personal experience. Most dangerous of all is the Middle East, because composed of two colossal historic injustices, perpetrated both on the Jews and on the Palestinians. There is no easy way, but progress can be made – as in our time in Rhodesia, in Northern Ireland, in the Indo-British Partnership Initiative. Everyone knows the outline of eventual settlement in Kashmir and the Middle East. And in Ireland it is happening before our eyes. Let no one

pretend that any issue is beyond the imagination of man to resolve. It is a great privilege to have been paid to try!

Diplomacy is fun

Diplomacy is fun. Few other professions would have enabled us to travel the world in the service of our country, not just to visit but to live in foreign cultures and begin to understand them, to do so many different jobs in diverse circumstances, to work with so many interesting people. We are very lucky.

Transcribed by Evie Jamieson