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PELLEW, Mark Edward (born 28 August 1942)

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Joining the Diplomatic Service

VC When did you join the Foreign Service?

MP In 1965.

VC Straight from college, was it?

MP Straight out of Oxford, yes.

VC How had you been educated up to that point?

MP Pretty strictly in the classics. Years of Latin and Greek at public school and I read what they call Greats at Oxford. A fairly narrow education actually, I hadn't travelled a great deal, so I was a rather traditional English public school and Oxford kind of man I think.

VC Were you particularly strong in languages?

MP I was quite good at languages. I hadn't learnt many at that stage and I didn't actually, in the Diplomatic Service for various reasons, learn a hard language, which we can perhaps come on to. But, yes, languages have always been of interest to me.

VC What gave you the idea of joining the Service?

MP Rather naively I thought it would be a good way to see the world and deal with interesting people, have a career dealing with public policy in an interesting way.

VC Were you wrong?

MP In some respects, yes. I didn't actually see that much of the world. I dealt with some

areas of public policy but not a huge number. It turned out to be quite a difficult sort of career in terms of family and children so I don't think it was an ideal choice. But I don't think I have regrets, no.

Posting to British High Commission Singapore in 1967

VC You started off with an interesting post didn't you? Where did you go first?

MP My first overseas post was Singapore. I went there to do a liaison job between the British government and the British armed services, who were there in force at the time. That was interesting because it was just about the time when the then Labour government, in 1968, were screwing themselves up to make the decision to withdraw from East of Suez.

VC That was after the emergency, I take it?

MP It was at the end of confrontation with Indonesia, yes, considerably after the Malayan emergency. Singapore had fairly recently separated from Malaysia so true independence had come to Singapore two years previously. It was an exciting place because it was full of dynamic young people, ethnically Chinese, some of whom are still friends of ours actually. We made friends there which have lasted. The job particularly was negotiating the hand-over of the bases. It was quite interesting.

Training for the first posting

VC What prepared you for it? Was there any preparation course?

MP Nothing. Typical Foreign Office of those days. One was flung more or less in at the deep end; a man educated at Oxford in Greats could do anything. It wasn't quite like that, but I had no background in international law, except what one picked up along the way. That would have been useful. I do think it might have been sensible to have had at least some sort of basic induction course for new entrants, but we didn't get it. We had a fortnight's so-called familiarisation training or something in the Foreign Office and then onto a desk and away

you went.

VC Was the desk relevant to what you did subsequently?

MP Not really. It was quite interesting. I did United Nations political work and most of the stuff we were dealing with was to do with the problems of decolonisation at the UN, and then the Rhodesian UDI (Unilateral Declaration of Independence) happened while I was in the Department and that kept us busy. It didn't relate particularly to dealing with the armed services in Singapore, but one doesn't expect all jobs to relate specifically.

VC And what did you do after that?

Transfer from Singapore to South Vietnam in 1969

MP And then I went after two and a half years in Singapore on transfer to Saigon which was in 1969, just after the Tet offensive – during the war, quite a difficult time. The Americans were in the middle of their “vietnamisation” policy under Nixon and Kissinger, trying to hand over the whole business of fighting the war to the South Vietnamese, but obviously that wasn't working. A lot of us thought so at the time, and said so, but the British government was committed. The Wilson government had done a deal with President Johnson agreeing that we would not publicly criticise their conduct of the war, though we wouldn't be part of it. What we would do to help was to send out quite a large British medical team to work in a hospital in Saigon. My job as Second Secretary (Aid) was basically to run the medical team.

VC Again, did that take expertise or was it assumed you would learn along the way?

MP There was an assumption that one would learn. Obviously I knew nothing about medical matters. That didn't really matter, but I had begun to acquire a little bit of knowledge about how to get things done in an administrative way, and dealing with the South Vietnamese government over the problems with the medical team was quite tricky. But I only did that job for less than eighteen months, so it was quite a short job.

VC Did you move on inside Vietnam or did you come back?

Return to the Foreign Office in 1970

MP No. We came back to London in 1970, and at that point the Foreign Office was rather keen that I should learn a hard language and offered Chinese, which I rejected. The reason why I rejected the chance to learn Chinese was that Jill, my wife, was very keen to do further academic work which she could only do in London. And it wouldn't have suited us to go off to Hong Kong and then probably Beijing for a number of years just at that stage. So we said, 'No.' It might not have been a good decision for me. I think most people prosper in the Diplomatic Service if they do have a special skill in the way of a hard language like Chinese, but in terms of our joint life it certainly benefited Jill and enabled her to do a Masters degree and then a PhD and get a career of her own going.

VC And she did that in England did she?

MP Yes.

Family life

VC Where were the children born?

MP One was born just before we went to Singapore and was carried out aged 6 weeks in a basket to Singapore. The second one was born in Singapore in 1968.

VC Does he have dual nationality?

MP Well, I think he might have been eligible for service in the Singaporean Army. But no, he doesn't.

VC When you talked to me earlier, you described the DS career as being family unfriendly. It was perhaps the classic situation in your time in the Diplomatic Service, was it not? Were

there other difficulties and how helpful was the Office?

MP I think the Office has tried over the years. It certainly tries now, but I think it did then, to accommodate family problems, and I saw that from the inside because a little later on I worked for 2 or 3 years in Personnel Department. But ultimately the Foreign Office has to say that the interests of the Service come first and you do what you are told. An example of how they did accommodate was in not forcing me to go and learn Chinese although they recommended it, and at a number of other points later in my career I didn't actually do what they wanted in terms of going to posts or whatever, so I probably earned myself a few black marks as a member of the awkward squad.

VC But they accepted it when you said 'No.'

MP They did, yes. They are reasonable people. However, I don't think you benefit your career by saying 'No' too often. I frankly wasn't desperately career minded. It was much more important that I should continue to have a happy family and home life, and I wasn't above all else trying to climb the greasy pole in the Foreign Office.

Foreign Office Trade and Defence Departments

VC So you came back to London after Vietnam and what did they do with you then?

MP I had a long stint in London for reasons which I have just referred to while Jill was doing her academic projects. The first Department I was in was called Trade Policy Department. I had quite an unusual and interesting job as desk officer dealing with COCOM, which was the embargo on technology transfer to Communist countries that we used to operate in those days. That led on to a job which I did for nearly four years in the Defence Department, also cold war related, dealing with nuclear defence policy. This was quite a specialised job; they had relatively few people in London dealing with it. In the Foreign Office, apart from the Under-Secretary who was my boss, there was only me because my Head of Department didn't really get involved in it. That was interesting and I did that for a long time.

VC It sounds intellectually challenging to someone who knows nothing about it. Was this intellectual challenge part of the reward of the Service?

MP Yes, I think it was. Most of the jobs I have had have been challenging, and most of them challenging intellectually. Certainly dealing with nuclear defence is a very demanding and complicated subject. One did occasionally have the feeling that these obscure papers I was writing about anti-ballistic missile systems and the British nuclear deterrent might really matter one day. One hoped against hope that they wouldn't matter, but they might have mattered. So there was always that underlying feeling that this could be important.

VC So it was important to get it right, in your terms. You say that your Head of Department left things to you. Is this common? Did you feel you had a tougher role to play?

MP Well, it was a slightly unusual job in the Foreign Office. Normally a Head of Department will take responsibility for everything that his subordinates do. In this particular case it was agreed that I had to work with the Under-Secretary and because of the famous need-to-know principle my Head of Department didn't have to sign on for various NATO nuclear clearances and things that I did. I can tell you one reason why one of my heads of department didn't want to sign on. This was no secret. I am talking about Alan Davidson, a delightful man who sadly died recently. He was passionate about writing fish cookery books and he knew that if he signed on for some of the things that perhaps he might have done, he would not have been allowed to travel to Yugoslavia, the Baltics and many other places where he might want to go to cook fish, so he was pretty keen that his first secretary in the department should do all the nuclear dirty work in the Ministry of Defence. He didn't know anything about it at all.

VC Very nice to see that the human element can sometimes alter the strict bureaucratic process. Who was your Under-Secretary?

MP Clive Rose at first, and then John Thomson.

VC Both good names.

MP I worked closely with both of them.

VC What did you do next?

Negotiating for a posting in 1976

MP In 1976 the Office said it really is time you went abroad now, so I said OK, but it has got to be somewhere nice...

VC Are you serious? Could you actually say that to them?

MP More or less.

VC So you could negotiate with them in those days?

MP There was an element of negotiation, and there was one particular job that I had my eye on and indeed I was offered it. I don't know whether it is appropriate to go into the details of it but I was turned down by the then ambassador in the place because ambassadors in those days could turn down first secretaries for jobs which they thought were important.

VC Do you know why? Was it a personality thing?

MP I don't think so. He didn't know me. Well, I'll tell you, it was Peter Ramsbotham in Washington and it was to succeed Christopher Makins in the defence and strategic job in the embassy. This was a job I obviously knew well because I had been dealing with it for the previous three or four years in London. Anyway I didn't get that job and I don't have regrets because I went to Washington later. The Personnel Department actually felt I had been put in an uncomfortable position. They felt bad about it. They were sort of on my side, so they said, well, you can have a choice of Paris or Rome instead, which was very decent of them. We got Rome.

VC Very pleasant indeed, I imagine.

Posting to Rome 1976

MP It turned out to be important for my career because since then I have spent over 9 years in Rome, in one way or another. So it worked out very well. I went to Rome to run the information department in the embassy. I did this for two years and then for the second two years in Rome I became the First Secretary in chancery dealing with all the political issues too; so the job actually grew while I was there.

VC Did it grow personally...

MP No, they decided to change the structure and to reduce the overall staffing.

VC I was going to say to you, the jobs don't seem to have much connection, one job is very different from another as you have described it. The Washington one would have been a progression, it would have been linked. Do you want to comment on that?

MP The jobs weren't strictly connected, no. But I think one could say there was a theme. These jobs were all in a sense dealing with the cold war and were the product of that. Dealing with defence and NATO, that was self-evidently part of it. I also dealt with defence in Singapore. When I went to Rome the main issue was the position of the communist party in Italy and how, if they came into power, that might affect NATO, as happened in Portugal later. There was much concern about that. In fact one of the things I was plunged into while heading the information effort in Rome was the Italian election of 1976 which, in a slightly underhand way, the British government sought to influence by replaying in the Italian media anything we could pick up from the world press about the dangers of having communists in a NATO government. It was quite a sensitive thing, that. Of course it didn't happen. Whether our efforts had anything to do with preventing it, I don't know; but the Italian communist party almost overtook the Christian Democrats and were on the threshold of power. I remember Andreotti rather skilfully kept them at arms length.

VC Who was our ambassador?

MP I had three in Rome, Guy Millard to start off with for the first year, then for most of my time Alan Campbell and for my last year or so Ronald Arculus.

VC Any comments on the different ways in which they might have run the embassy? Would their different personalities have an impact on how they ran the embassy?

MP Yes, all ambassadors are different. Guy was very wise, rather, it seemed to me, hands off, but always knew the right person when it was necessary. He was a diplomat who had worked closely with Anthony Eden and had a vast range of experience. Well, they all did, but Guy, one felt, was more a figure from history. Alan Campbell, whom we still see, became a dear friend, my tennis partner, me very tall and him very short. We had an unorthodox style of playing doubles with me up at the net reaching everything I could, him behind getting everything I couldn't reach: it worked quite well. He, half way through his time there, had an unfortunate problem with his eyes which meant that he couldn't really work on papers very effectively all the day for much of the time so I think he became less engaged than he might otherwise have been, but that wasn't his fault. But a very good ambassador and, again a very wise, safe pair of hands, as they say. I didn't know Ronald Arculus so well. He came with no particular Italian credentials except that he spoke some Italian, I think going back to the war. Unlike the other two I have mentioned, he didn't have a lot of experience in dealing with Italy and, to my mind, maybe because it was his early days there, he was less effective as an ambassador.

VC Were there any EU aspects to your job? You were doing NATO, one feels that the danger of a communist government inside the EU must have been something that the embassy and the British government were concerned about as people new to the EU?

MP Yes, of course there was concern. There was a great exercise in the Foreign Office, under David Owen as Foreign Secretary, to write a paper about Eurocommunism and how we should live with it. The thought was that Eurocommunists were somehow different from the real thing and that we could learn to live with them as European partners. This was in 1977-

78, when we were fairly new in what was then the EEC and, yes there was concern about it. But it wasn't anything like the worry that we had in NATO, where there was the whole problem of how you shared sensitive information which was covered with security caveats saying 'not for communist eyes' and that kind of thing.

VC Did you connect with the Americans much in Rome under the NATO umbrella?

MP Quite a lot. The large American embassy to Italy had a desk officer who worked full time on the Italian communist party and another who worked full time on the Christian Democrats, and another on the small parties, so politically they were very well covered. I saw them all a lot.

VC So there was a very close relationship, was there?

MP Yes. I think that my ambassadors maintained fairly close relations with the American ambassador, although there was a problem for part of the time. Some really odd-ball characters tended to come out as American ambassador to Rome, if I am allowed to say that, but Dick Gardner was an exception. He was an excellent and very professional diplomat and it was much easier to deal with him as Carter's ambassador than it was with some of the others.

VC Care to comment on the American system of political appointments in embassies?

MP Yes, I have seen quite a lot of it over the years because most of the latter part of my career was dealing with the United States. I think political appointees as ambassadors have obvious disadvantages in sometimes lacking professionalism, but there are huge advantages in terms of the access that they bring to the White House for example. A political ambassador is almost always a personal friend of the President and can play that card in ways which can be very much to the advantage of the host country. I remember Walter Annenberg, for example, when I was doing the nuclear defence job in London. He didn't really know anything about the subjects, but he didn't need to. What he could do was to call up President Nixon and tell him "This matters; we have got to make sure it happens".

VC You witnessed him doing that, did you?

MP Well, I was holding Alec Douglas-Home's hand while he talked to Annenberg, which meant that it was me talking to the American first secretary. You could see the results, yes. So political ambassadors should not be dismissed as ignoramuses. There are exceptions, but in my experience American political ambassadors, including those I served with later as ambassador to the Holy See, can be very effective and, by definition, are very well connected.

VC By contrast the Americans are said to admire our service, the British service, for its professionalism. Is that an attitude that you have encountered? Did you find that the British Diplomatic Service was respected above others?

MP Well, they say things to flatter us I suppose. Yes, on the whole I think the State Department and the American Foreign Service has a pretty high regard for our own Diplomatic Service. But I don't think we should exaggerate that. They have a high regard also for the Auswärtiges Amt or the Quai d'Orsay.

VC You mentioned something that implied they were cutting back when you were there, they were reducing the

MP I think everywhere I have been they have been cutting back. I can't ever remember doing any job in any post where they have actually been expanding. But yes, there was a reduction in the late 1970s in Rome, we saved one first secretary post.

VC Was there enough to do? I have heard that Douglas Hurd has said that there wasn't enough to do when he was in Rome.

MP I was kept pretty busy. But I was doing a job essentially that had been done by two first secretaries before. The nature of the job had changed because we had joined the EC. It changed then, and much of the work fell to somebody who handled the European

Communities desk. I certainly didn't lack things to do but I am not a glutton for work and I can imagine somebody who was a glutton for work might have felt that it was a fairly easy ride.

VC Where did you move to?

State Visit to Italy in 1980 and observations generally on state visits

MP I stayed on in Rome by myself because they wanted me to do a State Visit with the Queen in October 1980, which I did. Then I came back and I think they weren't quite sure what to do with me but I wanted to be in London which, at that stage of my career, certainly made sense and they put me in Personnel Department. If you can't beat them, join them.

VC An influential place to go to. But tell me about this State Visit. Were state visits worth all the hassle?

MP I think they probably are. As you know, they take a huge amount of embassy time in the planning and then the actual execution seems unbelievably short. But there is some lasting benefit, I think. You can sometimes see it in terms of trade deals actually signed in the immediate aftermath of a state visit. Certainly there is some lasting spin-off in terms of warm feelings. I am not so sure in the case of a close partner country like Italy how important that really is. There is a kind of ritual that a state visit has to happen about every twenty years, and it just does and that's it. But I think, coming on to a later job that I did at the Holy See, where we had a visit which was effectively a state visit in the year 2000, the Christian millennium, that had quite an impact in terms of making the Holy See think a bit more about historic links with Britain. If I may say so, I think it had quite an impact on the Queen too: the Christmas message of that year was very much about her personal Christian faith, and it led to other things which we were able to do with the Vatican in my last two years there which I think we would probably not have been able to do had we not had the Queen visiting in 2000. That is a specialised example, but it can have a very significant impact on bilateral relations. After all the sovereign is your biggest gun in terms of how you manage the bilateral relationship and you have to play your big card carefully. If you do it at the right

time it can be very effective.

VC I hesitate to take us out of sequence but you said that it helped things you had to do after the Visit. Would you like to elaborate on the things that her Visit did influence, the things you were doing at the Vatican?

MP Yes, we are jumping ahead a bit there but one of the things that I was very keen to do in my four and a half years there was to do something to make Anglicanism and the Anglican church better known in Rome. As a means of doing this we devised a huge exhibition and conference which was put on in the year 2002 in the Vatican. It was the first time ever that the Holy See had hosted an exhibition about another Christian denomination. It created quite an impact at the time and has had some lasting impact also. So that was what I spent most of the latter part of my time working on. But as I say, I think the State Visit was significant as a catalyst in making that possible.

Return to London and Personnel Department in 1980

VC Coming back to London and Personnel Department, you must have some interesting reflections on how the Foreign Office ran itself perhaps, and on the role of systems versus the role of personalities in the Office?

MP Yes, I have a few reflections on that. First, Personnel Department in those days was, and I think still is now, extremely unprofessional. We had no outside personnel management skills. We were just serving diplomats put in for a tour and then taken out again. The Foreign Office defended that system on the grounds that only professional diplomats could fully understand the pressures and requirements of the rather unusual job that we were doing in overseas embassies. I am not sure that that argument really holds up and I think we did need more professional personnel management expertise. I still think the Office probably needs more genuine personnel expertise than they have even now, though the system has changed hugely in the last 25 years. But, having said that, we amateurs were on the whole pretty good at picking the right person for the right job. We were less good at making everybody feel happy about it, because nearly everybody threw brickbats at Personnel

Department. I wasn't the Head of Department, but I was the Assistant for my last 18 months there. We instituted just the beginnings of individual bidding for posts. That came in during my time there.

VC That was regarded as a great advance, was it not?

MP Yes, I think it was a step towards making people feel that they were more involved in managing their careers. But the fact that a list of posts becoming vacant was actually circulated, with staff being invited to bid for them, also increased the sum of unhappiness because by definition most staff were not going to get what they wanted.

VC You talked earlier about ambassadors being able to turn people down: was that still the case?

MP No. Just before my time in Personnel, they had introduced a system under which an ambassador was not allowed to reject more junior staff, though he or she was still allowed to reject his or her deputy.

VC Not many 'she's' at that time I think.

MP No, not many. Too few.

VC Was the Office consciously trying for equal opportunities at that time?

MP Yes, we didn't bandy the phrase equal opportunities around as we do now, but we were certainly trying, yes. Another thing we tried to do, of which I was actually in charge in Personnel, was to increase interchange with the private sector. This was something I always believed strongly in. The Foreign Office, and indeed government as a whole, is far too isolated from the outside world. When I joined Personnel Department in 1981, I think we had something like 4 or 5 people in all working in jobs in the private sector outside the Diplomatic Service, a very small total. During my time in charge of interchange we more than doubled, nearly tripled, that to about 15 I think. Still not a large total, but a step in the

right direction. I'm out of touch now, but I think the Foreign Office still needs to do more in that sense so that those who move into top jobs later in their careers have more first hand experience of what it is to work in the private sector.

VC I understand people are reluctant sometimes to go on secondment outside because they feel that they lose opportunities within the Office and out of sight is out of mind. Did you find that?

MP That is a problem, so you have to secure as part of the arrangement a guarantee that you are not going to lose standing in the pecking order for promotion. But a reporting system that ensures equality of appraisal for those who are temporarily outside the Service, that will stand comparison with those who are inside, is of course complicated and fraught with difficulty. It is not easy, but we need to try harder to make it work. That's the problem, to put enough effort into it.

VC What about people coming in on secondments, did you trust them?

MP Well, that's the other side of the coin. The incomers in my experience included some absolutely first rate people, but what everybody always remembered was when it didn't work. That's the way these things go. Again, an effort was needed to accommodate them and make it work. But there is a big potential benefit in terms of the experience of the incomer, which can inform the work of the whole Office. We used them effectively in the Planning Staff, for example, which has a long tradition of taking people from outside.

VC It sounds as if the Office could perhaps be accused of being a bit self satisfied. You say they didn't try hard enough, perhaps they didn't believe in it perhaps at the top levels. Perhaps it was good enough as it was.

MP I think there was a pervasive attitude then that we are a pretty good Service. We know how to do things and we are going to go on doing it our way. Maybe I am exaggerating a bit but that's how it looked in the middle ranks of the administration 25 years ago.

VC In a Service that has always been an elite was there a competitive spirit within it or was there a co-operative spirit? I suppose I am interested in relationships amongst the officers themselves, both vertically and horizontally.

MP It is a very co-operative service in the sense that the sharing of information is hugely impressive and more so than in some other countries' diplomatic services, from what colleagues have told me. I think the Diplomatic Service actually has a good record of collegiality and collective decision-making, and that sort of thing. It struck me very much that that was the case when I myself went as a willing volunteer on a secondment to the private sector a little later in 1989 and 1990 and I went to a merchant bank in the City. I was really quite shocked and surprised (I shouldn't have been: it shows how naive I was) at the culture of secrecy, very little sharing of information, very little of any importance ever written down, you didn't write minutes and circulate them to 15 copy addressees. If you got any good information you kept it strictly to yourself and made the best use of it you could in order to benefit yourself. A very different culture, which made me realise how well the Diplomatic Service managed the collegiality issue.

VC One hears sometimes about ambassadors being shall we say overbearing. Did you ever come across it in Personnel Department? Would you have been in a position to hear reports of that perhaps?

MP Yes, there were just a few in my time. Anyway only a handful of cases, but there were ambassadors who were well known for reducing even quite senior staff to tears. That was the exception I think. I would not say that was a big issue.

VC Was it an enjoyable time there?

MP Personnel? No, not very. I regarded it in a way as a chore. I felt I wasn't dealing with foreign policy much, I wasn't dealing with foreigners and I wasn't doing any of the things I joined the Diplomatic Service to do. And it was also quite demanding, quite worrying. It was one of the few jobs I have had where I sometimes sort of lay awake at night thinking about things because it is about people's lives and was it right to tell so and so he simply had

to go to post X, even though he certainly didn't want to and it would be awkward for his wife and children and that sort of thing. That kind of thing you don't forget about, whereas dealing with nuclear bombs, OK you are at one remove from reality and you can actually sleep, at least I could. So it was quite demanding in that sense but it wasn't a job that I hugely enjoyed. I wouldn't want to spend more time in the administration – though I did actually do a little bit in the administration later in my career on a sort of ad hoc basis.

VC The Pellew report?

MP Yes, I wrote a report, one of those six month things they get fairly senior people to do when they can't think of anything else to do with them. I also acted briefly as an ombudsman for the Chief Clerk. Two or three tricky cases where they needed an objective view from somebody who was prepared to give a few months to look at the problem.

VC What happened to you next?

Posting to Washington to deal with Congress, 1983

MP Well, one of the advantages of working in Personnel was that you had an inside track on what was coming up. And in 1983 a new job was being created as counsellor in Washington dealing with Congress. Up to that time the various bits of the very large embassy in Washington had on the whole each handled its own relationship with Capitol hill and Oliver Wright who had fairly recently taken over as ambassador felt strongly, particularly in the light of the Falklands war experience, that we needed more dedicated effort from the embassy dealing with Capitol Hill. So this job was created and I was a very keen volunteer remembering that I had been thwarted in an earlier plan to go to Washington nearly a decade earlier. So that is what happened.

VC So you got that job.

MP So I got that job. There were other candidates, I think. I'm sure that it was all very properly handled and I was definitely excluded from all the discussions. You had to be out of

the room if your name was coming up.

VC Was Washington as enjoyable as you had expected?

MP Yes. I knew Washington a bit anyway, and my wife is half American. We had family connections in the States, and the job turned out to be an unusual but very interesting one. It was different from virtually every other job in that large embassy because one was not, on the whole, dealing with the Administration. The Administration for most of my time there was the enemy, because they were Reagan Republicans and Capitol Hill was largely run by Democrats.

VC Reagan was the President, wasn't he?

MP Yes. I did a long stint from 1983 to 1989 so I spanned most of the Reagan years, and I think it was true to say that Oliver Wright had been correct in his assessment that we needed an increased commitment to dealing with Capitol Hill. It certainly had some benefit in terms of difficult arguments in the 1980s over Northern Ireland. In 1986, for example, we had to secure Senate ratification of an amendment to our bilateral extradition treaty with the United States in order to allow convicted IRA terrorists to be sent back to serve prison sentences in the UK. There were several well known cases of actually convicted people, not just suspected but convicted, who had escaped and sought refuge in San Francisco or New York or wherever, where the large Irish-American community gave them shelter and we had no means of getting them back. So to get that amended treaty through the Senate was quite a battle. They might have done it without me, but it was something I had to devote a lot of time and energy to, working with friendly Senators and building coalitions and really seeing from the inside how the skulduggery of Capitol Hill actually works. It was also a very interesting job, apart from Northern Ireland, as I did a lot of work that was of direct commercial benefit to the UK in terms of getting appropriations legislation amended in such a way that foreign companies were not excluded from bidding, and the sorts of things your husband (Sir Brian Crowe) was involved with on trade policy. We worked pretty hard with both the House and Senate and managed quite often to change things. Although I say it myself, I think we were one of the first embassies really to focus on using our own influence

to lobby for changes in legislation in our favour. So it was a very unusual diplomatic job. I spent most of my time out of the embassy, going up to Capitol Hill and getting amongst the Congressmen and their staff. Congressional staff members are enormously important and there is a whole administration in waiting sitting up there on Capitol Hill. The rest of the embassy, with some exceptions, didn't on the whole deal with, or get to know them. And so it was useful to have a counsellor to do that. I got quite heavily criticised by one of my bosses in the embassy for never being around. I knew that I was supported by others who said that I was not supposed to be around; it was my job to be on Capitol Hill. It was a difficult role in some respects because I had to balance my time between a whole range of quite different policy issues: dealing with Treasury people, dealing with trade policy people, dealing with the defence community, dealing with foreign policy – and I was a bit of a one man band. Of course there were specialists on all those subjects within the embassy with whom I also had to work.

VC It sounds very demanding.

MP Yes, and at times I probably failed by skating around on the surface of too many things. That is an institutional problem if you impose a counsellor on the structure of an embassy which has a clearly defined departmental structure.

VC And as you were the first to do it, there were no established patterns?

MP There had been a first secretary, Pauline Neville-Jones, who had done it in the 1970s, about 10 years before, and then the thing had sort of lapsed. They had actually appointed a locally engaged person take it on which wasn't entirely satisfactory. And then they reinvented the wheel in the usual way and in fact after I left in 1989 I was succeeded by another counsellor who had Congress as his remit, but only part of his remit. Of course the sad truth was he didn't get out of the office because he was also Head of Chancery. That was a poor way to structure it. I didn't have the Head of Chancery job. I was acting Head of Chancery on a number of occasions because the real Head of Chancery was away...

VC ...in Washington?

MP ...in Washington, but I never was the Head of Chancery.

VC It's a job that doesn't exist any more, does it?

MP That's right.

VC You sound as if you might be a bit remote from that?

MP No. My time in Washington was fascinating but by being, by my own choice in a way, apart from a lot of the mainstream activity of the embassy, which was dealing with the Administration, I did cut myself off to some extent. That was the nature of what I was doing. I don't have regrets about that.

Next posting in 1989 on secondment to private sector

VC What did you do next?

MP The Office said firmly to me that I needed to go and serve abroad and probably be a deputy head of mission or Head of Chancery of a large mission. But this was another point where I'm afraid I rather kicked against authority and said, 'No', I wanted to come home. We had personal reasons mainly to do with our domestic situation and my wife getting her career going as a fundraiser. Our time in Washington had suited us well domestically. Jill had developed her own expertise as an administrator and fundraiser and had set up an office for Chatham House in Washington, and that led to other requests for her to do fundraising work for Oxford University and other things. The long and the short of it was that it would not have been a good idea for me to be posted to be DHC in Kuala Lumpur, which was the post on offer for me in 1989. So I came home. But they didn't really have a job in the Office that suited me, so I said what about a secondment to the private sector, which is something I had always said I believed strongly in. They said if you arrange it you can do it. So I did arrange it and I wanted to work on something European because I had felt very out of European issues in the preceding ten years. I felt this was an important development which I needed to

get more into. So I went to see Michael Butler, who at that point I hardly knew, or only knew very slightly as a senior former colleague. He suggested I might be able to come and join him at Hambros Bank dealing with European mergers and acquisitions and working with Hambros' partners in Europe, particularly in Italy, using my Italian experience. He said he thought he could persuade the chairman of Hambros to accept the idea – which he did. This was potentially a very interesting job, but the timing was unfortunate as it turned out because 1989/90 was a period of turn-around from boom to lean years for the City. All merchant banks, not just the one I was in, were reducing staff quite rapidly. The mergers and acquisitions business did not prosper as it had done in the preceding two or three years. I was all right as I wasn't part of the staff of the bank; I was just on secondment. But it was an unhappy time and that may have contributed to something I said earlier about the very competitive atmosphere in the private sector and about how one treated useful information with very little information-sharing. Even amongst the corporate finance teams working together within the bank one team wouldn't tell another what it was doing for fear that they might steal something useful and run with it. So there was quite an atmosphere of suspicion around. The department collectively was failing to meet its targets because we weren't getting the business we had hoped for, so they were laying off staff. My immediate boss left, I remember, at about 4 hours notice one day. He was told to clear his desk just before the Christmas party. He didn't even get to the party. It was a cruel atmosphere and it was very instructive to see it. I felt I had been cushioned in the public service: I may have been critical of the Personnel Department (of the FCO) but we didn't behave like that. So it was a useful experience, though I think, looking back, it would have been better to have done it 2 years earlier when it was boom time in the City. I learned personally a lot about how to read accounts and talk the language of business and I was given quite a lot of roving responsibility. I was sent out to Italy to go and talk to managing directors of companies and see if I could drum up business, which was a pretty tall order when you think about it. I did bring in a little bit of business. I suppose I just about earned my keep for them because they had to pay my Foreign Office salary. In fact it was a brilliantly cheap deal as far as the merchant bank was concerned, given the differentials in salary. Even with the VAT which the FCO charged the bank on top of my salary, they were still getting a bargain.

VC So the Foreign Office wasn't innocent in the ways of commerce, then?

MP No, it charged a premium.

VC So that must have been a very interesting experience, but did it prepare you for your next job?

Head of North American Department in the FCO, 1990

MP In a funny way it did. I worked quite a lot at Hambros with the United States. Although I started off with European mergers and acquisitions, I spent the whole of my second year there in a little team dealing with the international development of corporate finance projects. We worked with New York and we had an affiliate in Los Angeles too and various other offices in the United States. Of course having previous American experience that made some sense. When the job of Head of North American Department in the Foreign Office came up, slightly unexpectedly, just at the end of 1990, I put in a strong bid for that and I got it. The Foreign Office were sensible to put me into it, I think, because I had all the Washington experience and it fitted well. But for some reason they weren't frightfully keen on putting me into that job. I think they still were thinking they wanted to broaden me out; but I had quite a wide range of experience by that stage. It was a small Department dealing with some interesting things: overall management of the relationship with the United States and Canada. A lot of the more sexy subjects to do with defence, for example, tended to be handled by the Defence Department, and the trade policy issues by trade policy experts, so one was left as a co-ordinating department quite often just putting together the briefs. There was a lot of co-ordination of briefing, so it wasn't all interesting or fun. Some of it was quite difficult. As Head of Department, I had to write all the steering briefs for the Foreign Secretary or the Prime Minister for meetings with the US Secretary of State or the President of the United States. I would go along as a bag carrier on some of the trips and take the records of the meetings. I usually did the record for the British Prime Minister when the President came here. I remember going to Chequers when Clinton met John Major. So there was a certain amount of involvement with the higher level.

VC An amount of glamour, one might say.

MP Not glamorous, but one is flattered to be summoned across to brief the Prime Minister at No. 10. Yes, it used to happen occasionally. It was an interesting job, despite what I say about not having many of the really juicy topics. Of course, then we were into the Balkan wars and Balkan issues were inevitably a bilateral topic with the United States. I didn't lead on that as I was merely putting things together from the point of view of the briefing. We had an East Adriatic Unit, as it used to be called, and a different structure emerged to deal with that. I think it was a good job and I was glad to have it. But as I say the Foreign Office weren't wildly enthusiastic, for reasons which I never really understood.

VC That's extraordinary, so there must have been...

MP ...well, they let me do it and it worked well. I stayed in it. I said I am happy doing this job and I don't want to move. It didn't look as if they were going to promote me at that point, and I didn't want to go abroad so I said, J'y suis, j'y reste. So I did it until late 1996.

VC Yes, it is a noticeable pattern in your career, that you spend longer in most of your jobs than most people do, the average is 3 years.

MP Well, I'm afraid that is how I have always conducted my career and I always begged them not to move me if I was doing something that I liked. Probably very bad in career terms, in fact it was bad in career terms, but it suited me.

VC And then was it the last job that you came to next?

MP Well, after North American Department, they eventually winkled me out in 1996 and said you can't go on doing this any longer, and I had quite a lot of to and fro with the Personnel Department about what overseas job I might go to, probably at that stage it would have been a final job, or whether I would take early retirement which they were definitely willing to give me. To cut a long story short, nothing came up for over a year and during that time I did some projects for the Office to which I have already referred, as ombudsman for the Chief Clerk and writing a report on locally engaged staff in the Service.

The Pellew Report

VC That's the Pellew Report?

MP That's the Pellew Report. That was quite an interesting thing to do because it taught me a lot about the Service which I hadn't previously known and I made some fleeting travels around the world to gather information, mostly from places I had not been to before. I don't know that it had much lasting impact, but the thrust of my report was that we had this wonderful set of 7500 locally engaged people around the world and we were often not using them as well as we could and should. Also we were not being entirely fair in our system of rewarding them. The system of paying our locally engaged staff by a rather secretive method of local markers was outdated and we needed to move on. I recommended moving more towards buying expertise from professional salary setters who deal with international companies who can tell you what the going rate is for a job. And they did. The Service has, I think, moved more in that direction. As a result of my report they tried it out in a few pilot cases, so it had some effect on the way we deal with our locally engaged staff. I am not up to date with how things are now, but a number of people told me subsequently that the locally engaged staff at least had felt somebody was bothering about them, and that helped morale. The conclusions of the report were widely disseminated and read. I would have preferred the whole thing to have been disseminated but that wasn't allowed.

VC But still very satisfying, a nice project, it sounds rather influential.

Ambassador to the Holy See

MP I wouldn't want to exaggerate its influence. There was a need for somebody to look at it. It was the administration's idea, not my own, that I do it. I think it was quite useful. So after that, in fact while it was going on, a job had come up for which I had all along said I was a keen candidate, which was ambassador to the Holy See. I got that, which pleased me. It is a very small post in terms of British diplomatic effort; it's not frightfully senior or prestigious in British terms, but it is actually a well-kept secret that it is an extremely interesting post. I

spent four and a half years in it trying to persuade the Foreign Office that it was actually rather interesting and important but they never really understood how to deal with it. For example, when they organised the whole new structure of commands in the 1990s they had dragooned the Holy See into the Europe Command, because they couldn't really think where else it could go. I always argued that it ought to be in Global Issues, because the topics we dealt with were not to do with Europe but were to do with the big issues of poverty and debt, disease, human rights, and all those issues where there is a global dimension. I think it would have been better if we had been fitted into that command. The Office didn't agree. It's an endemic problem in non-catholic countries. They don't quite appreciate the political significance of the Roman Catholic church as a worldwide political force, and even if we report on what the Pope and his people are saying on these global issues, they don't understand in London how widely influential it is.

VC It is interesting.

MP So they grade the post in a like fashion. It is a very small post with 2 UK-based staff, the rest are local. Splendid local staff, and of course I was in good standing with them having just written the report. In fact, since my time, and my successor will be leaving shortly, the Foreign Office are now going through yet another exercise in downgrading and changing things. Although they say they are not going to cut the post, they are throwing it open to competition for an ambassador to the Holy See from outside the Diplomatic Service. I think in the hope that they will get something on the cheap. I don't want to go into detail but I think it is not a good idea.

VC That is interesting because they probably have a lot of such posts, do they?

MP Yes, but it is all very well for Consul General in Toronto. It makes a lot of sense to appoint a senior businessman to do that kind of job, but I don't think they are very likely to find somebody to take the job of British ambassador to the Holy See who has the kind of background of international diplomatic experience which is the one thing you need for that job. So I am disappointed. But that is the way the government's thinking is going at the moment. We shall see what happens.

As to my time there, I have already referred a little bit earlier to the things we did, including the State Visit. It wasn't actually formally a state visit, because the Vatican refused to have any state visit in the year 2000. Too many heads of state wanted to come and meet the Pope in the millennium. But it had the full panoply. And that was a good project and had lasting benefits, which I mentioned earlier. I think some of the work that we did on debt relief was of lasting benefit and it was rather interesting that the Holy See couldn't believe that a finance minister of a G8 country like the UK could be on the same side of the argument as them. The fact that Gordon Brown as Chancellor was calling for wider, deeper, faster relief to the most heavily indebted poor countries was music to their ears. So I got the Treasury to come out and we organised a seminar between Treasury people and the various Vatican departments involved and it was wonderful: they really chimed, and that was a useful thing to do. There were many foreign policy issues that I got involved with. The Balkans loomed quite large during the first two years that I was there. The Kosovo war in the spring of 1999 was actually the only time during my four and a half years as ambassador that I had No 10 calling me up in the night because they were worried about what the Pope was going to say over Easter about the NATO air bombardment, which was indeed very much in the balance at the time.

VC Could you enlarge on that?

MP Well, No 10 thought 'Oh, just tell the Pope what to say.' Of course it doesn't work quite like that. I ran round early the following morning to the Secretary for Relations with States, which is the title their foreign minister has. He was a very good Frenchman whom I knew well, Archbishop Tauran, and we talked through the matter. In the event, the things the Pope and others said publicly at least did not condemn the NATO air action. If they had, that would have put huge pressure on the Italian government, which at that time was very shaky, the coalition was just teetering on the edge. It would have been very difficult for the Italian government if the Pope had said that the NATO air action was contrary to the principles of a just war, or illegal, or anything like that. The use of bases in Italy was vital to that air action and I think it would not have been possible for the Italian government to permit the continued use of their bases if the Pope had spoken out in this way, so the whole NATO action against

the Serb government would have failed. That was the whole strategy of the Kosovo war, to get Milosevic and company to accept that he could not treat the Kosovar Albanians in the way he was doing. So that was a time when the Pope or the Vatican could have done something, or said something, which would have made our NATO action impossible. At that time, for the first time ever (I don't know if it was a result of my conversation with Tauran, but it might have been), the Vatican summoned all the ambassadors of NATO countries as a group (they had never done that before), to give us a lecture about the just war. They actually handed out chunks of Thomas Aquinas. It was headlines in the Italian newspapers that the NATO ambassadors had been summoned to the Vatican. We gave a pretty good account of ourselves. The Germans had the EU presidency, and we had an excellent German colleague, whom I liked very much, Jurgen Oesterhelt, who had previously been ambassador in London. Jurgen and I primed our NATO colleagues to say all the right things. If you remember, NATO had just expanded to include Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic and they all three came along, rather bemused, finding themselves in a much hotter seat than they had expected. That is one example, but there are others, of how the ambassadors to the Holy See worked in a rather collegial fashion. They were an interesting group of colleagues, mostly senior to me in their respective diplomatic services, some of them very distinguished. Our EU group met regularly, as we were of course in a third country situation vis à vis the Holy See, and we quite often acted together as a group. That was a very interesting experience. The former French ambassador in London was my colleague as French ambassador to the Holy See for much of my time there, and I have mentioned the German. I also had an excellent American colleague, well, two. The Clinton ambassador had been a congresswoman I had known in Washington in a previous life, Lindy Boggs, who was Clinton's second ambassador. His first ambassador was a little before my time, a former Mayor of Boston. And then after George W Bush's election they sent the former chair of the Republican National Committee, Jim Nicholson. As I was saying earlier, there is an advantage in having a political appointee who is well plugged in with the boss because he was able to ring up the President whenever he wanted to. So I had very good colleagues, all of them in fact. And many of the Latin Americans, the Catholic countries, had distinguished people, like former foreign ministers and that sort of thing, sent as ambassador to the Holy See as a reward. There was quite a large Diplomatic Corps numbering about 85 resident ambassadors and about another 70 or 80 who were non-resident. There is a convention, more

than a convention, it is international law, that you cannot have the same ambassador to the Holy See as you have to Italy. So if you need to double-hat for the Holy See it has to be with some other capital, Berlin or Paris or Dublin or London. The Palestinian for example – because the Holy See has good relations with the Arab states and also with the PLO, though a slightly different status obviously – the Palestinian representative was the representative in London, whom I got to know. The Holy See had an interesting position on the Middle East and Jerusalem and Arab/Israeli issues. It was well worth keeping in touch with them on those subjects.

VC A diplomat being able to do that, as you say.

MP Indeed, the job of ambassador to the Holy See was wholly political. I did hardly any commercial work. We did sell a telephone exchange to them. Briefly I think the UK was technically at the top of the export league table because that was measured in terms of the cost of the effort spent promoting British goods versus the quantity sold. It looked very favourable. But, no, I didn't really do commercial work. We did virtually no consular work, and passports and visas was a tiny business, really, passing on people who had Vatican passports. Essentially it was a one hundred percent political job. A one hundred percent diplomatic job, in the sense of dealing with the range of international foreign policy subjects. So not suited for an outsider, very much a Diplomatic Service post.

VC Was it your best job? Is it one you enjoyed most?

MP Yes, I suppose so. It is the most recent in my memory and one's memory is distorted. I really enjoyed the Washington job too, the friendships and the contacts with Americans and the American way of life were very important to me personally. Rome, this was the second time in Rome because I had been in Rome 20 years before and going back the second time is interesting. I didn't have any problems about that but I didn't make the same friendships with Italians during the second stint as I had in the first. In fact I tended to pick up with those I knew from the previous time and didn't expand very much from that base, which was perhaps my failing. We did a huge amount, as all ambassadors do of course, of glad-handing and entertaining visitors, both official and private, and one can mix the two quite effectively as

you know. We measured the numbers of guests, and in the millennium year, 2000, we had something like eighteen hundred people come through the house, noted in the guest book. A pretty large number. That includes those who probably just came to a reception in the garden, but still, there was a lot of that – which I didn't mind. To me, that seemed part of the role. It was one of the things that I was there to do.

VC Overall, Mark, you and Jill your wife, almost managed to have a dual career don't you think? In that Jill was able to pursue not in a coherent and structured way a career, and the fact that you were at the Vatican and within reach of London meant that she was perhaps one of the first commuting diplomatic spouses, wasn't she?

MP Yes, she was. We are a partnership and Jill and I always felt that we chimed and made sense of both our lives and that has meant at least for the last 20 or so years Jill has been able to follow a satisfying career path of her own. And that in turn meant that I told the Office, when considering posts abroad, that I could not go more than 2 hours flying away. And the way that we did it was that, when I went to Rome, for the first two years Jill was still working at Oxford University and we were, as you say, a commuting arrangement. Even with just a 2 hour flight that poses quite a strain on one's life, not only because of the travel but because she had a busy job and life and contacts and things to do, and I did also. The two things inevitably pull you in different directions, and combining the two is quite a problem. After 5 years at Oxford she gave that job up and came to live full time in Rome, where she worked as a consultant. It was good to have the experience of both; but she was certainly glad, and I was too, that she was with me for half at least of my time in Rome.

VC She was pursuing a career in fundraising, wasn't she?

MP Yes, her professional expertise is fundraising though she started academic life as a historian.

Conclusions

VC So, Mark, no regrets for having embarked on this career?

MP Some regrets, but no fundamental regrets for having embarked on it. I think it's a career which did indeed fulfil most of the things that I had hoped it might at the beginning, but I was very naive and I didn't know what to expect.

VC Would you let your sons do it? I know that neither are in it, but would they want to, would you advise them to do it?

MP Had they wanted to, yes. They are both doing rather different things though one of my sons is in international life, but he is a lawyer rather than a diplomat. They probably wouldn't have listened to me anyway. I certainly wouldn't have strongly recommended it to my sons as being a wonderful career because of the difficulties for family and personal life, educating your children, all those things. But it is a very rewarding career, as I saw it, in terms of variety and interest and intellectual content in the jobs that one is faced with.

VC Thank you Mark. Is there anything else that you would like to add, about the Office or about your career?

MP No, I think I'll be discreetly silent about the Office today. Anyway, I'm out of date, and I won't say anything about that.

VC Mark, as we were chatting the whole question of connections with the Office outside work came up. Do tell me what you did.

MP One thing I did that was interesting for me as a keen singer and interested in music was that for 4 years from 1992 until 1996 I conducted the Foreign Office choir. This was rather a good recreational activity which had been invented by John Boyd as the first conductor of the Foreign Office choir, and I took it over from him...

VC ...John Boyd who later became ambassador to Japan...

MP ...later became ambassador to Japan, but at the time he was conducting the choir he was

Chief Clerk. He roped me in to do it, and it turned out to be an interesting way of seeing another side of the Foreign Office. Apart from rehearsing in the Locarno Room each week, and putting on little concerts in the Office and around London, we were able to go on tour to neighbouring capitals in Europe, courtesy of our various ambassadors and embassies as safe houses in which to perform. So at least once a year we used to take the choir on a nice trip, and we had great fun in Paris, The Hague, Brussels and that sort of thing. I think that was a quite interesting little insight: certainly the diplomatic services of those other European countries were always amazed to discover that the Foreign Office had a choir that was able to go on tour. On our trip to the Netherlands, as well as performing in The Hague, we did a marvellous concert in Amsterdam where I was slightly alarmed, actually, to see my own name up on great posters, 'The Foreign Office Choir, dirigent Mark Pellew'. They had done a good publicity job and we did a fine performance in a very lovely church in aid of a fund for their new organ. I think that was a good bit of diplomacy, actually. I have always believed music, which doesn't require great skill to perform to a certain level, is a very good way of getting together with the country in which one is serving. In Singapore I was chairman of the Singapore Chamber Ensemble, and indeed I was actually salaried as First Horn in the Singapore National Orchestra. I'm not sure I declared that to the British government, because I was third secretary in the British High Commission at the time. I think it is very useful to be able to make music with one's host country, and music is, I have always found, a good meeting point and leveller of people.

VC And short of your partnership, Jill also had a part in diplomacy in her activities with the Diplomatic Service Wives Association, is that the case?

MP Yes indeed. I don't think she spent very long on the DSWA committee but she did work quite hard for an intensive period on the committee and wrote a report on wives' employment, which was a subject close to her heart. That kind of Foreign Office extracurricular activity seems to me an important part of the whole ethos of the Foreign Office, and something we have been rather good at, and other foreign services have learned something from us through that.

VC When I spoke of the collegiality ...

MP I think it probably is to do with that, yes. I hope those things will continue, though I must say I fear for some of the more recent developments in our Service. But I am not very well informed.