

BDOHP Biographical Details and Interview Index

David Allan BURNS (born 20 September 1937)

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David (Allan) Burns CMG, CBE,
interviewed by Malcolm McBain on 15 July 1999.

Education and entry to the Diplomatic Service

MM Can we start, Mr Burns, with a little about your education. Who's Who records that you started your education at Sir Anthony Browne's School, Brentwood, Essex and that you went into HM Forces in 1956. You became a language student and were a 3rd Secretary in the Foreign Office in 1962. There are some gaps there. What happened about your university education?

DB Yes, I think I'm one of the people in the Foreign Office that they are now boasting about, the exceptions. What happened was that as a young man I was at a good school and my education was interrupted at the age of fifteen because my father's health deteriorated. He had been in India and Burma during the Second World War and he had one of the earliest heart valve operations. We had to move from the Thames estuary to a drier climate in Hastings so I moved to Hastings grammar school. I wasn't at all happy there and I persuaded my father, who wasn't in much condition to resist, to let me leave school at sixteen and a half. He said that, if I did then I should try for the Foreign Office because he had enjoyed travelling and had been an officer in India during the war. He thought that I would enjoy that sort of life. So I left school and joined the Foreign Office as what was called a B6 in those days, the lowest form of life, and I worked on accounts for a year before I was called up at, I think, seventeen and a half. I became a National Service officer in the Royal Signals serving in Germany and at the end of my two years, just around the age of twenty, I came back to the Foreign Office dressed in my officer uniform and saluted the personnel department properly and said I was reporting back and what were they going to do with me. I'd been an army officer and I didn't feel I should come back as a B6. They said sorry, the only way you can move up in the Foreign Office is either to go to university and take the examinations thereafter and pass, or rejoin as the lowest form of life as a B6, take examinations up to the next grade, B5 executive officer, and subsequently take an examination a little bit later to bridge, as it was called, from

what was then the Executive branch of the Foreign Office into the Administrative branch, which is now called the Policy branch, which is where you could move up to become Ambassador. So I swallowed my pride, I came back and started off in registry, I worked so well there that a number of the desk officers said I shouldn't be doing that work and they moved me to various other jobs, two main ones being in Research Department and the other in Personnel Department. I sat and passed the examination to the next grade up – to B5, the Executive Grade - and the Office decided I was perhaps the sort of person who should sit in a policy department as the junior in that department. So I was given the UN specialised agencies and UN financing job in UN Department. I began that in, I suppose, something like 1959-60, did it for two years, enjoyed it very much, and learned a great deal. Indeed the Foreign Office became my university.

Language training in Serbo-Croat and posting to Belgrade 1962-65

At the end of my time in UN Department the Foreign Office said that they wanted me to learn a hard language. I looked at the map and decided that it would be good to learn a language which would have longevity, would always be useful to me and also wasn't so far from home. So I chose Serbo-Croat. Unfortunately events have proved me right in that it is a language which has been required and is still required to a great extent. At that point I went to the School of, as it was called then, East European and Slavonic Studies at London University with one other person from the Foreign Office, and a naval officer, and we studied under a tutor there for about a year. I was then sent to Belgrade as a language officer but before taking up my post lived with a Serbian family for six months, which was a very unusual thing in a communist country. The Yugoslavs permitted this while keeping a very careful eye on you, and it was a marvellous way of getting to know the language and the country. To cut a long story short, while I was in Belgrade I sat the bridging examination for entry into the Administrative, or what is now the Policy, branch of the Foreign Office and I passed that, passed the subsequent interviews and at the end of my time in Belgrade I moved from Branch B into Branch A, the Administrative branch – the senior branch from which ambassadors come - and was posted to East European Department in the Foreign Office.

Background to political situation in Yugoslavia in 1962

MM Before we go into that, this may be a little premature, but could you perhaps give a thumb-nail sketch of what the situation was in Yugoslavia when you first went there. Perhaps it would be useful also to go back to the end of the Second World War when so many Yugoslavs were displaced. I suspect their situation was not really well understood in this country.

DB Yes, well putting it as briefly as I can the war in Yugoslavia was as much a war between different groups and social classes in Yugoslavia as it was against the Germans. If you look at the figures you find that more Yugoslavs were killed by other Yugoslavs than were killed by the Germans. This was irritating to the Allied powers during the Second World War. Churchill issued an ultimatum to Mihailovich, the leader of the royalist group meant to be opposing the Germans, and said unless you actually start fighting Germans we are not going to support you any more. At that point there was a group under Tito, a communist led group, which was actually attacking the Germans and doing much more damage than Mihailovich and his "Chetniks" as they were called. Having put the position to Mihailovich, Churchill had to take a decision, nothing much having happened on the Mihailovich side. There was evidence of considerable collaboration between the Germans and the Chetniks against, as it were, the communist usurpers in Yugoslavia and the result was that Churchill decided that the best means of getting support for Allied operations and the Allied war effort was to support Tito and the partisans, as Tito's group were called, which he did. He sent in Sir Fitzroy Maclean and a number of others as liaison officers with Tito and they worked with Tito until the end of the war. Supplies were sent to Tito. Tito was brought out into Italy for various meetings and subsequent operations against the Germans were much more successful and effective than they had ever been up to that point. It was out of this war time collaboration that a close relationship between the British and the Yugoslav governments developed and it was something which continued into the post-war years, even though Yugoslavia remained a communist country. At the end of the war, Yugoslavia as a communist

country was part of the Russian sphere of influence, which became the COMINFORM where countries of Eastern Europe, including Yugoslavia, really had to do what Russia said. The Yugoslavs, being slightly bloody-minded as they have always been, weren't very happy with this situation. While they were happy to pursue communist ideology, they were not prepared to be part of an empire under anyone else, even if it were called the Warsaw pact or COMINFORM or whatever. So in 1948 after various emissaries had been sent to Moscow and Tito had had various arguments with the Russians, Yugoslavia decided that it would go its own way and not be subject to the sway of Moscow. At the same time it remained a convinced communist state and wished to develop communism in its own country but it decided that the communist policy that it followed should be the communist policy of an individual country rather than the communist policy of another country which was trying to create an empire. This divided the Yugoslavs from the Russians politically, but ideologically they were on the same side; and as people who regarded themselves as Slavs they were on the same side; likewise as orthodox Christians, if you can apply that to parts of a communist empire, they were also on the same side in that remnants of the orthodox church remained in their two countries. The languages were different. You cannot understand Russian from Serbo-Croat but you can learn it fairly easily on the basis of Serbo-Croat and vice-versa. The alphabets are similar but not identical. So there were some distinct differences in that regard. I arrived in Yugoslavia in 1962 by which time it had ...

MM That was the second time, of course, wasn't it?

DB No, first time. By 1962, by which time it had tried to separate itself from the tentacles of Moscow and had found great difficulty in doing that because it was subject to economic, political and sometimes military threats. Nonetheless, the Yugoslavs persevered and they had a certain amount of support from Western countries for the independent line they were pursuing. They were able to pursue that line because of NATO. NATO and a strong Western Europe supported by the United States gave them as it were a pillow against which they could rest knowing that with a bit of luck, if the Russians tried anything, the West would find action against Yugoslavia difficult to

swallow even against the background of Czechoslovakia and Poland. There was a feeling that perhaps Yugoslavia was different because it led down into Greece. It would give the Russians access to the Adriatic, to the Mediterranean, in a different way, of course, than from the Black Sea and so on. And so there was a feeling in Yugoslavia that they had a little bit of leeway and they had the West behind them; if not actually supporting them then at least the knowledge that there would all hell to pay if the Russians really did try to do something physically against Yugoslavia. At the same time they developed, and this is the interesting point from the present day viewpoint, they developed a form of military activity which was designed to handle a Russian invasion, a Russian invasion with technological superiority, air superiority, rocket superiority, numerical superiority. The Yugoslavs developed partisan warfare in a way which enabled them to hide weapons all over the place throughout Yugoslavia and trained everybody in resistance. You have seen the outcome of this in Kosovo now where, if the press is to be believed, very few Yugoslav tanks were actually destroyed in the NATO bombing and the Yugoslav army was very little affected by 78 days of that bombing. This is what they had trained for. But they had trained to withstand a Russian invasion, not an invasion from NATO.

MM So it's a long established principle of ...

DB It's a principle of basic self-defence, really, where you rely on hand weapons and ground to air missiles and these were the two strongest things in their particular armoury plus their knowledge of the country.

MM Of course, they were also founder members of the Non-Aligned Movement weren't they, a factor which somewhat separated them from the Russians.

DB Well, this was, in some ways a result of the break with the COMINFORM. They had nowhere to go so they created somewhere to go which was the Non-Aligned Movement. Tito worked with the Egyptians, the Indonesians, the Indians and with my friend Prince Sihanouk of Cambodia to arrange the Bandung Conference, and the establishment of a whole third way, the first third way that has come out since World

War II. There have been many since but the third way was to be a non-aligned movement where essentially by aligning themselves with other like minded people they were able to feel that they had allies in the world who, if there was some military threat against them, wouldn't necessarily lend military help, although that wasn't excluded, but they would create such a stink in the United Nations that the aggressor would be forced to climb down.

MM Oh, it would mean a tremendous loss of face in the propaganda battle wouldn't it, if the Russians or ...

DB Particularly if the Russians were to attack a non-aligned member.

MM Did you get any sense, when you were there, of these internal divisions in Yugoslavia, that have emerged since the collapse of the Soviet empire?

DB You've got to remember that when I went to Yugoslavia in 1962 Tito was still at the height of his powers. He knew what he was handling in the sense that Yugoslavia was a country made up of a number of ethnic groups put together after the Versailles peace treaty and he knew that there were great differences. He is a Croat, he had fought against the Germans with a group which tried to avoid ethnic divisions; they were above all partisans, secondly they were communists, thirdly they were Yugoslavs, and fourthly they might come from a certain republic. The republican divisions, the ethnic divisions, were not allowed to show. While republics existed and he allowed them to develop under strict control (via the party), he tried to make each of them feel that if they weren't equal at least they were given a fair hearing in the Yugoslavia of the day. He regarded the Albanians and the Hungarians as minor ethnic groups and gave them autonomous areas of the Republic of Serbia. They were allowed to have mini-governments and to look after themselves to a certain degree. They were doing so in a period when Yugoslavia had very little contact with the outside world and so what went on in those areas was undeveloped politically and even more under-developed economically. I used to travel widely in Kosovo in those days. There were no roads, not even laterite roads. Dusty

tracks were what passed for roads; you could drive but it took a long time to get from A to B. There was nowhere to stay. I used to stay in monasteries and Decani and elsewhere. You would knock on the door and would ask if the Abbot would allow you to stay the night. At one of the monasteries I went to I remember I was invited in and shown a cell which I was sharing with a monk and told that dinner would be at 7 o'clock. I went to dinner and I was seated beside the abbot and I prattled away in my Serbo-Croat to him and he nodded wisely and so did all the others. It was only at the end of the meal that they told me that the monks in this particular monastery ate in silence! I went back to my cell and during the night the priest in the cell said to me, 'you know, I'd love to go to the Seattle world fair, can you fix it for me with the American Embassy in Belgrade?' I thought, here was a man in the back of beyond who knows about the world fair, who wants to go there, knows enough to ask me to ask the American Embassy if it's possible; quite an incredible situation. But Yugoslavia was very poor in those days, the road system wasn't very well developed, and what Tito tried to do was to make the ethnic divisions disappear. He did this in a number of ways. First of all by a constant barrage of propaganda, that everyone was a Yugoslav. Your republican affiliations weren't so important, they existed but they weren't so important. The second way was by the Communist Party of Yugoslavia, which was the glue that held the country together. If you were a member of the communist party you were first and foremost a member of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia. You might be a member of the Republic of Bosnia league of communists, but you were first and foremost a member of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia and that's where your prime affiliation lay. So you had the glue that held things together. The third thing that he did was to use National Service as a means of mixing people up. You would not do your military service in your own republic, you would do it mixed with others in another republic. In that process you got to know other people, you got to work with them, you got to fight, or to train to fight, with them. You had other organisations with the same sort of ethic, the young pioneers, who would be a politicised equivalent of our scouts or guides, the young students etc. Every year there would be student camps and get-togethers where they would all be mixed together.

MM No differentiation between orthodox and Muslim or ...

DB No, nor Slovene and Macedonian, and yet within the country there existed great differences. Slovenes were much more advanced with links into Austria and Germany. The Macedonians were really still battling their way out of the economic underdevelopment which had resulted from the Balkan wars of 1912 and 1913. It was only in 1913 that the Turks were actually kicked out of that part of Yugoslavia. In the aftermath of the Second World War, from the aftermath of problems in the relationship with Greece also facing claims on their territory from Bulgaria, from Greece, from Albania and so on. Macedonia was a backward country and it opened up in a strange way. There was a great earthquake there in 1963 and I was sent down as the Embassy co-ordinator of British aid. Actually I went down there privately over a weekend before I was sent down there officially. It was about a day's drive South and I was quite interested to see what had happened. As a result, I was the first person from the Embassy to have seen at first hand what was there. The Ambassador sent a team down a day or two after me. I reported on what was going on and the Ambassador said, 'Well, you'd better go down there and act as our man in Macedonia.' So I went down there and acted as the co-ordinating point for British assistance. Organisations like Round Tables in Britain were sending caravans and driving them across Europe and just leaving them in Skopje. They needed someone down there to whom they could report and say where do we leave the caravan or where do we send it to. Also we had decided that we would offer the re-buildings through 'War on Want.' They had a big operation there and we brought in some British Royal Engineers, the first British soldiers to go into Yugoslavia after the Second World War, which was in itself something rather special. We had about thirty Royal Engineers who put up schools and various other buildings. When they first arrived, the commander, a captain, asked if I would take him to meet the mayor and various others. We were taken in front of the town council in a tent, because the buildings had been destroyed, and I introduced him and said how many men he had. They said, well, what equipment have you got? I turned to this officer and he said they each have a pick and two shovels. I translated this into my Serbo-Croat (which was only about a year and a half old at this time) as "they have a pick and two balls each." That brought the house down and broke

the ice. (The word in Serbo-Croat for a shovel is 'lopata' and the word for ball is 'lopta'.) I had got it wrong and there was a scream of laughter from the Yugoslav side, the Macedonian side. I got to know the Macedonians very well. I lived in the back of a Landrover in an orchard for nearly six weeks, or in a tent, and they used to invite me to go walking up in the mountains for weekends to escape the heat, dust and disease when I could get away.

MM Recreation ...

DB Recreational walking, and I would be invited down over the next two years. I spent quite a lot of time there. They gave me a lovely Shar Planina hound, which I had in Belgrade and kept for a year until it got too big and frightened off the postman. I was part of the opening up of Macedonia. From that point on, Macedonia began to realise that there was a whole world out there which wasn't so hostile, was willing to help and so that's how it worked. I've diverted rather from the main trend of course.

MM Before we leave that you mentioned that the partisans were a separate category. What exactly is a partisan?

DB Well, a partisan was someone who was willing to fight under Tito against the Germans for the independence of Yugoslavia.

MM I see, that was the meaning of it, you were subscribing to a ...

DB You subscribed also to a communist ideology, even if you didn't necessarily believe it all. You felt that was the best way for your country to go forward because it pre-supposed, and you had to accept, an equality of individuals. No matter what your background, you were equal whether you were a Montenegrin or a Croatian, whether you were a teacher or a navy.

MM Have you got any comment to make about this long, drawn out, case brought by

Count Tolstoy against Lord Aldington?

DB Not really.

MM It never really crossed your path?

DB It didn't come up in my time.

MM Thank you. You went back to Yugoslavia, or Croatia as an EC monitor later on in your career. What sort of situation did you find when you went back ..?

Return to Belgrade as Head of Chancery 1972-75 and as an EC Monitor in 1991

DB I went back of course once before that from 1972-75 as Head of Chancery. The situation was almost the same as when I had left except that Yugoslavia had done several things; it had become more developed, it had opened up links with other countries to a much greater degree and also it had developed its communist philosophy into a socialism which was based on a system of workers' self management. This stretched from the top of the country to the smallest company. In every company you would have a workers' council, which would largely run the operation. It was an attempt to create equality and communism, or socialism at any rate, from the very top to the bottom. So they tried to develop their own brand of socialism. Yes, I went back then. Not much had changed in the sense that the republics were still permanently part of Yugoslavia. Tito was in control. The party was in control. The secret police, as previously, were very active and very strong and kept an eye on everything. For example friends, both in my first time there and in 1972-75 who came to our house would be called up the next day by the secret police and asked who else was there, what did the Burns talk about, what was it all for, why were you there and so on.

I went back in 1991 for a short time when Yugoslavia was beginning to break up. It was breaking up largely because there was no strong man at the top. After Tito's death there

had been a revolving presidency, an attempt to keep the country together but the republics became stronger and stronger and wished to break away and do their own thing. In particular, they wanted to keep the foreign exchange which they earned instead of putting it into a national pot and helping the less developed areas of Yugoslavia. I was there as an EC monitor, two years after Milosevic had made his infamous speech on Kosovo Polje, the holy place of the Serbs where the Serbs were defeated in 1389 by the Turks. This led to 500 years of Turkish occupation of what is now Yugoslavia. Milosevic had come to power on the back of essentially Serbian nationalism, not just Serbian nationalism from Serbia but Serbian nationalism from the diaspora. Whether you were a Serb in Croatia, in Bosnia, or in Macedonia, you were made to feel that Serbia had suffered over the years; that it was now Serbia's turn. Milosevic came to power on the back of that philosophy and with a strong retention of communist, socialist ideology. His objective was to create a greater Serbia by spreading out from Serbia proper into parts of Croatia where there were Serbs and to make a great circle around the east of Bosnia round to the sea. Once he controlled this sweep of Serbian populations, he would work to control the gaps later on (e.g. Bosnia). The Yugoslav National army was largely Serb and was all over the country. It was supportive of what Milosevic was trying to do. We had decided that we would try to help Slovenia to push out the Yugoslav National army (JNA). The decision wasn't taken in quite those terms but the Slovenians clearly didn't want the JNA there and quite strong pressure was building up in Europe to do something about it. So the European Community, in one of the earliest examples of the European Community actually taking effective action, sent in an observer team. It was supplied with Italian vehicles, led by a Dutchman and it had a British component and a number of other people from EU countries, Germans and Italians, Luxemburgers and I think some French as well. Anyway we were unarmed, we had white vehicles and our job really was to go around and see where the Yugoslav army units were in Slovenia and in Croatia and to encourage them to stick to whatever agreements had been made about a withdrawal. I can't remember exactly what the political agreement was but it was decided, after a small amount of fighting, that they would withdraw from Slovenia. So our job was to look at all the units and make sure the withdrawal took place and also to try to identify what was going on in Croatia and how far the Yugoslav army was suppressing the Croats.

MM So your knowledge of Serbo-Croat became extremely....

DB Extremely useful, yes it was, it was a Godsend. So we did that. We seconded people from the Foreign Office. I led the second six week group and then it developed into a rather larger operation subsequently, but by that time I was in Cambodia.

MM Well, that's very useful. Before we leave Yugoslavia could I just ask you what your opinion is about this problem in general European terms, is it a European problem? What is the UK's national interest in it, then and now?

DB Let's take 'then' first. In the 1960s and 70s I think first of all you have to remember that we were in an extremely delicate cold war situation and Yugoslavia really was more or less the buffer state between the East and the West. That's the first point. Secondly, by its own decisions it had developed a form of political life and activity which separated it from traditional communist regimes and in particular from Russia. It gave its peoples much greater freedom in all sorts of ways. Thus for many, and for us, it was a beacon in a rather dark world of an otherwise Soviet dominated Eastern Europe. It was important to us that Yugoslavia remained that sort of beacon and a bastion of, if you can't say freedom, at least greater freedom than elsewhere. It showed that you could successfully confront the Russian monolith and survive. Now, what were our interests then? We didn't have great economic interests in Yugoslavia, oil or whatever, but it lay between two of our close allies in NATO, between Turkey and Italy. It was to the north of another NATO ally, Greece, and if it had fallen to Russian military action for example it would have given the Russians access to the Adriatic and to the Mediterranean in a way which they had never had before and in a way which could have been very difficult for us. We had a military reason for wanting Yugoslavia to remain as a buffer, a political reason in that it was a beacon and our economic interests were really no more than those perhaps with any other country where we wanted to maximise the opportunities for trade. In maximising those opportunities, we saw the chance of bringing Yugoslavia closer to a Western way of life than to a Soviet way.

Kosovo adds another dimension. We didn't go into Kosovo for any of the reasons which I have just enumerated, we went into Kosovo because the people of Kosovo were being treated in a way which was reminiscent of the Nazis and Pol Pot. In this day and age, I think it is fair to say that we cannot sit in front of our TV screens and accept the treatment of a people in that way so close to our own shores, and so close to the perimeters of the European Union and NATO.

MM So we basically want Yugoslavia to retain its integrity because one never really knows quite what lies in the future?

DB Ideally we want Yugoslavia to retain its integrity. Kosovo must now put a question mark over whether that's practicable or not. In my view I think that the only way forward will be, with time, to have some form of conference to discuss the whole of the Balkan area and to discuss possible changes of borders and changes of maybe even peoples at some point to find a way in which we can create a part of the world which isn't a tinder box.

South East Asia: Thailand, 1966-68, Counsellor in the Embassy in Bangkok from 1979-83 and Ambassador to Cambodia from 1991-94

MM Thank you very much indeed for that. I wonder if we could now turn to your time in South-East Asia dealing with your two periods in Bangkok, from 1966 to 68 and again as Counsellor in the Embassy from 1979 to 83 and then finally your period as Ambassador to Cambodia from 1991 to 1994. Going back to Bangkok in 1966, this was a time when the government in London was I think critical of Thailand. Thai government officials were regarded as pariahs to some extent. Is that your impression? Could you say why you think that is so ...

DB I'm not sure I would agree with you. I went out to Bangkok as the member of the Embassy staff dealing with the South East Asia Treaty Organisation and I was the

Ambassador's representative to SEATO. SEATO at that point included Thailand, the Philippines, Pakistan, the United States, France, Australia, Britain, New Zealand, Malaysia and Singapore. It was designed in short, and this became evident from Dean Rusk's comments, to protect Thailand against a possible incursion, invasion or take-over from Vietnam or from the communist areas to the East.

MM The domino effect ...

DB The domino theory was very prevalent in those days. So we were strongly represented in Bangkok, the headquarters of SEATO. The British interest then was that there shouldn't be a Communist take-over from Indo-China into Thailand because that would have opened up a real threat to our interests in Malaysia and Singapore and to our trade in that part of the world. So not only would our friends be at risk but also our considerable investments in those areas. Therefore we were supportive of SEATO but not necessarily prepared to become deeply engaged in activities which were peripheral. For example, we were not willing to be drawn into Vietnam, although Vietnam had a great impact on everything that SEATO did, as did the war in Laos, as did the events subsequently in Cambodia. My job really was to keep SEATO ticking over until either the threat subsided or it was decided that it could be met in another way - or until Thailand, for example, became strong enough to be able to protect itself. You had to remember that at that point there was the beginning of a Communist insurgency in the North East of Thailand, which threatened to spread throughout the otherwise reasonably healthy body of Thailand. Our interests were to support the Thais in containing that threat and in not letting the events from Vietnam lap over into Thailand or further down the peninsula. My job involved travelling to other countries to report to my Ambassador what was going on, for example to give him sometimes a first hand impression of what was happening in Vietnam, in Cambodia, in Laos. My job also developed latterly to become one of the Embassy's reporting officers on the insurgency in North East Thailand.

MM Did you ever go there?

DB Yes, and not just to North East Thailand but beyond that up into the golden triangle where of course there were opium routes; all sorts of peoples living there which could be used by communist insurgents if they wished to make use of them in one way or another. Thailand in those days was unstable. It was never an entirely satisfactory situation because the military were very strong and there were coups and counter coups, but nonetheless you felt that underneath that there was a very strong national feeling in Thailand and a very strong willingness to defend their country and to develop their country in a way which would make it an example to others in the region. And, in fact, until the recent collapse of the Baht that is largely what has happened.

MM When you went to the North East of Thailand did you actually see any evidence of communist insurgency?

DB Yes, basically the result of some attacks and then we had evidence from a number of the chiefs of certain villages of events which had happened in the vicinity. But in those days it had not reached a very high level of sophistication. There was some support coming in from China and Indo-China but the Thais were very clever in that what they did was to offer all the insurgents scholarships in the United States and other similar places in return for giving up the insurgency. The insurgents were largely bought off in a very clever way.

MM The Thais were pretty good at that. How fascinating. So that was SEATO and that continued for quite a few years after your stint there.

DB When I went back to Thailand in 1979 to 83 the thing that dominated my time then was Cambodia. The Khmer Rouge had had four years of absolute control from 1975 to 79 and eventually they had so alienated the Vietnamese that the Vietnamese had attacked and overrun the country. Within days of arriving in December 1979 we were faced with Khmer Rouge cadres coming out of Cambodia and seeking refuge in Thailand. In some cases they came in and went out, came in one place on the border and went out again into

Cambodia. In some cases they were pushed back by the Thais; in other cases they were allowed to stay by the Thais. But the Thais naturally enough were unwilling to have these people on their territory for any length of time, not knowing what was going to happen to them. The Thais at the same time were of course deeply worried by the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia, which brought the latter for the first time in recent history to the borders of Thailand. It was a fairly tense situation and we began to find different waves of people coming out. The next wave after the Khmer Rouge was ordinary Cambodians who had been subjected to the greatest bestiality by the Khmer Rouge. Those who had survived made their way to the border, came across, and it was a question of trying to persuade the Thais then to let them stay in camps along the border, or in a camp at that point along the border. We were only able to do this by agreeing with the Thais that we would bear all of the costs. Basically the Western community, if you can describe it in that way, would bear all of the costs of accommodating these people for as long as necessary and would undertake a process of sending them to other countries such as the United States, Australia whatever, as soon as possible. The first job was to get a camp established, and we worked with the United Nations to have rudimentary one built. It served the purpose. It provided cover for the refugees from the blistering sun and arrangements were made for food and water, and medical care. More and more refugees came out until we had one camp along the border, one of probably six or seven which had 120,000 Cambodians in it. It became the biggest concentration of Cambodians in the world. Phnom Penh had been cleared by the Khmer Rouge. There were no major concentrations of population within Cambodia because the Khmer Rouge ethic was to return the country to the status of a basic rural economy foregoing all the Western developments which had been a part of the country before. So it was back to basics. It was an attempt to destroy the fabric of the country and to make each of those remaining contribute to the rural economy. They said in their own inimitable words, for the future we only really need 1 million good people and true. There were 7 million at that point in Cambodia so the Khmer Rouge said 'there is no point in us really keeping you if you're not going to contribute to the economy. It is better you be killed and got out of the way than that you should cause us a problem or just hang around'. So, the maximum camp level reached probably 600,000, I can't remember exactly, but I think it must have been

somewhere around 600,000 Cambodians, maybe even more, living in camps along the Thai border. As an Embassy we would be in touch with them, first of all to make sure they were being properly looked after, and secondly to gain whatever intelligence we could about what was going on inside Cambodia because there was no other way to find out. We were also at that point making contact with those who were prepared to fight the Vietnamese, finding out what their strength was while trying at the same time not to get involved with the remnants of the Khmer Rouge who were also trying to fight the Vietnamese. So we were trying to help the good guys, the good Cambodians under people like Prince Sihanouk, Prince Ranarit and so on without getting drawn into accusations that we were supporting the Khmer Rouge who had committed atrocities and horrors for the previous four years. It was my job then to stabilise the refugee situation with food coming in from outside, refugees being resettled outside Thailand and helping those who were left and wanting to go back. Others were not so certain they should go back, but while the situation in Cambodia was unclear we were able to stabilise the situation with this camp life that they had.

MM Did you find that the Americans were playing a full part in all this?

DB Oh yes. A very strong part with money, men, and expertise. American non-governmental organisations were also very active, as were ours. There was one young man called Robert Ashe who was captured by the Vietnamese because he went too far across the border trying to help refugees coming across. He was captured and we had a problem getting him released. He was released eventually and awarded an MBE for his work.

MM I asked about the Americans because my recollection of Thailand, ending in May 1975, was that the Americans left South East Asia with their tails between their legs, having been withdrawn from Vietnam.

DB No. They were quite active and I think they were conscious that, although SEATO didn't really any longer exist, they had a responsibility to ensure that Thailand didn't go

the way of Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. And so they were supportive in many ways in Thailand and particularly supportive also of the refugee situation there. That was not my only job in Thailand. I also had a trade responsibility. We were trying to build up British trade and that was not as rewarding as I would have liked. It seemed always difficult to get contracts in Thailand because the way of negotiating is so alien to many British companies and because there is always the problem of paying some form of retainer to a Thai who is helping you to do it. The costs go up in these ways; there was no straight forward way of getting business. We did our best. We also ran a useful aid programme in Thailand which was particularly helpful in the areas which were under-developed; and we encouraged the Thais with their natural inclination towards education and towards modern day methods of farming and reproductive health.

MM Family planning?

DB Family planning. And they were always very open to this help and these ideas. I left Thailand in 1995 and went to America but then ...

MM 1985?

HM Ambassador to Cambodia 1991-94

DB Sorry, 1985. No, I left in 1983 and went to Boston. Then I came back in 1991 because by then the situation in Cambodia had changed even more. For years we had been trying to persuade the warring factions, the Vietnamese, the Khmer Rouge and the royalist and democratic factions to reach an agreement of some sort. But above all we wanted the Vietnamese out because they were making a confused situation even worse. The key was that the Russians ran out of money. They had been supporting the Vietnamese to the tune of something like 5 million dollars a day. The Russians ran out of cash as they tried to keep up with the Americans in the arms race. The policy of the Reagan administration forced them to empty their coffers. They didn't have money to spend on things like this so the Vietnamese found themselves without the material

support to maintain their stance in Cambodia and they announced a withdrawal. This happened over a period of time. The international community then said to the Cambodians, right, well now, this is this your chance to form a new government. But of course you had Cambodian factions which hated each other, the Khmer Rouge on the one hand and the remnants of democratic parties before them. It was very difficult to get them to reach an agreement and numerous meetings were held, some of them fostered by the Indonesians, others by the French. Suddenly out of the blue in October 1991 they agreed. This took everyone by surprise. They accepted what had been on offer before: namely that the United Nations would go into Cambodia for about a year and essentially run the country and bring it back to a reasonable level of life while the political parties sorted themselves out and while democracy was being re-introduced and elections held. I got a call in September 1991 from the Head of Personnel Department saying would I go to Cambodia? I said I would need to have a word with my wife first but when did I need to be there? He said 'in three weeks because Prince Sihanouk is going to return and it would be good if you were there when he returns.' So I said, 'well, what is there there?' He said, 'nothing. We have nothing there, we don't have a building, we don't have anything. We have had infrequent visits from Bangkok over the preceding period and we will arrange for a Second Secretary from Bangkok to be there for a few days before you get there to organise a hotel room. There is one hotel and a typewriter and things like that and he will also bring in other small items you think necessary.' So I had three weeks to rush around and try to rustle up the wherewithal to run a mission, which included things like satellite communications, with a parabolic reflector which you pointed towards the right point in the heavens and tuned in the box and then you were able to communicate, and a telex machine. I said I needed some transport there. They said, well we understand you can buy cars on the street so we will give you some money and you can do that initially. Then I said if I am going to have four or five people helping me in due course I will need at least three Land rovers, because we won't be able to get transport there for personal use, not safe transport anyway. And I'll need the wherewithal to do the basic things like keeping money. I'll need a safe and so on. I had to organise many, many other things, like stationery and staff etc. The idea was that I would go out there, be supported for the first few days by the Second Secretary from

Bangkok who would then disappear. Soon after that I would have, or before he disappeared I would have, a PA who would help me with telexing. I had to carry in the telex machine myself to Phnom Penh on a very small plane from Bangkok. Anyway it all happened. I went out to Bangkok, saw the Ambassador there for a night, stayed with him with my wife. She came with me.

MM Who was the ambassador?

DB His name was Ramsay Melhuish, and he had been on a visit to Cambodia and knew something about it. I also met there people who had been into Cambodia to look at what building was going on and see if we could find buildings which had been started which could form the base of an Embassy and some staff accommodation. So I had discussions with them and they said they had found a couple of buildings, told me where they were and what they thought we should do and would I give them the go-ahead as soon as I had had a chance to look. So Inger and I flew in a small plane into Phnom Penh to find ourselves travelling at the same time as the American Ambassador designate. At that point we were not ambassadors. We were representatives of the Permanent Five who were asked to be in Phnom Penh to oversee the UN operation. We were accredited to the Supreme National Council of Cambodia. So I was the UK representative to the Supreme National Council of Cambodia. Likewise my American colleague was the head American representative, and the French and so on all arrived. And we got off the 'plane and we were immediately surrounded by press, saying, what's going to happen, what do you think of the situation and so on. We gave replies, basically saying we were going to help the country recover and build itself into a democracy again. We then went to the hotel in the car which had been hired from a member of the Cambodian MFA. (It wasn't really the Cambodian MFA because the MFA was run by one of the factions). Inger and I ended up living for 11 months in a hotel room, which was also my office. On arrival, we had decided that we wanted to do two things immediately, but before we did those things we had to send a message to the FCO, saying that we had arrived. And so we assembled the satellite machinery and the telex and sent off a short message saying 'The Union flag flies once again over Phnom Penh.' Having done that we went to the market

and bought some flowers and went out to the Tower of Skulls. This was an area on the edge of the city where those who had been killed after torture, or during torture, were thrown into pits. Some of the pits still exist and you can see some of the bones sticking out. Mainly there is a glass and stone monument filled with skulls, and you can see where the skulls have been hit. Usually people were killed, not by bullets because bullets were expensive, but by being hit on the head with a pick-shaft or the equivalent or a hoe. We placed flowers on this monument. We went back and were then accosted by the ITN correspondent, Mark Austen, who asked why hadn't we told him we were going out there because he would have liked to have filmed this. We said, it's late now but tomorrow we are going to Toul Sleng, which is the torture place for the Khmer Rouge. It had previously been a primary school later adapted for torture. We again went to the market, bought some flowers and this time with Mark Austen and an ITN in tow we went to Toul Sleng and laid flowers in the middle of what was the sort of playground area where there was somewhere we could sensibly put the flowers. We heard subsequently from around the world that these images of the arrival of the British Ambassador in Phnom Penh after the Khmer Rouge years had been flashed everywhere. So that was in some ways satisfying but it really brought home to us how awful the situation had been because walking through the Toul Sleng facility, to give it that word, there were lots of photographs because the Khmer Rouge had (like many governments that indulge in torture and massacres) been very careful about photographing their victims. So there were photographs of these victims everywhere and one could see the awful conditions in which many of them had been kept. There were pictures of the sort of tortures which had been inflicted. The striking thing was that this was Cambodian torturing Cambodian. It wasn't Cambodian torturing Vietnamese or some other nationality, it was Cambodians doing it to their own kin. This was the thing which made it so difficult for us to understand. The tale of Cambodia doesn't really need to be told again, but no-one can fully understand how people who had been educated in France suddenly came back full of Marxist ideas, presumably from the left bank and so on, and tried to create the absolute perfect communist state. There was a certain element of competition. They were trying to do better than the Chinese had done and they really went to great lengths to destroy the whole fabric of the nation, of the family, of education, of the economy and to start again

from scratch. The phrase 'year zero' comes from the time of the Khmer Rouge. They were going to go back to basics. They emptied the towns. Anyone who wasn't able to keep up in the columns that were force-marched out from Phnom Penh and the other towns was shot or otherwise killed and those who couldn't survive the rigours of working on drainage and irrigation ditches and the very tough agriculture of the Cambodian countryside simply died. And that was in some ways the objective of the Khmer Rouge; to wipe out all those who had any memory of the past and start with a blank sheet, preferably with young people who they would fill with the ideas of 'big brother.' The children would become beholden only to big brother; they would be asked to report on their parents if their parents were talking subversively. As a result, quite often the parents would be killed. The idea was to build a country where there were no memories and where you had a tabula rasa of memory, which you could implant with communist ideas.

MM Utterly chilling.

DB Yes, utterly chilling.

MM Was Pol Pot the ...

DB Pol Pot was the man behind this. He had been educated in France as a radio engineer but had got much more into politics at the left bank. He was accompanied by people like Khieu Samphan and various others and these were the people who decided they would take over the country. They started an insurgency in the very north-east of the country and spread from there. They were helped by the fact that the Americans had bombed Cambodia. You only have to read William Shawcross's books and you will know the rest of the history.

MM Dreadful. Well ...

DB Can I just go on from there? The real work then began. This was to set up a UN

operation which was called UNTAC, the UN Transitory Administration of Cambodia. We literally had to start from scratch. UNTAC brought in people, first of all military people who could hold the security situation. We had sixteen thousand military from probably twenty nations and they were dispersed over the country, the idea being that we would give effect to the agreement reached between the four groups. One of the parts of the agreement was that each of these groups canton and disarm their members under the control of UNTAC. So arrangements were made for this cantonment. Another area of work was to teach people about democracy because many of the memories, as I have said, had been wiped out. So we had a section of the UN working to teach democracy, and to register the population. This was a great success because people rushed to be registered and probably 90% of the population got registered finally, largely because they loved to have their photos taken and hadn't seen photos for as long as they had been under the Khmer Rouge and subsequently. So registration went well and eventually the elections were held. At the same time as this work was going on, the UN was setting up information sections to pass out real news to the population of Cambodia instead of news which was distorted by one or other of the parties. They were also setting up a human rights section which would train people and educate people in human rights. They were also trying to re-develop the country with a huge aid programme to which people gave very generously, in particular the British government. One of the areas of that aid programme was something which Cambodia needed most of all: de-mining. That is the area into which Britain got very deeply involved, of trying to remove something like 30 million mines from the surface of Cambodia. It was very difficult because, whereas you could find anti-tank mines with mine clearance machinery and implements, you could not easily find the ones which the Chinese had developed. These were very small, round anti-personnel mines which were like the small round boxes that you used to get pastilles in, but made of green plastic and only containing one piece of metal about three quarters of an inch long and the size perhaps of the thickness of a two-inch nail. It was virtually impossible to detect these with normal mine detectors for two reasons; first because the metal element was so small, secondly, because in the wet season Cambodia is virtually covered with water and the water moves these small light green bakelite, plastic things and floats them to another place. Children would pick these up and in the process lose a

hand or a foot. Most injuries were to extremities and eyes and we saw many, many examples of people in hospital who had been hurt in this way. British NGOs were also very active in the rehabilitation of people injured by mines. Cambodia Trust, and many others, worked tirelessly to help these injured people, and very effectively too.

MM We are still talking about Cambodia and, you have some additional point to make.

DB Yes; there wasn't very much time. We had about just over a year between the beginning of the UN operation to the elections. We had to resolve numerous points. During this time the sixteen thousand UN troops were being added to by something like six thousand civilian operatives. They were there to take over and work alongside (I say take over because in many ways they ran them) Cambodians who could learn the tricks of the trade and how to run various ministries. This build up of the administrative force was much slower than the military force, as is happening in Kosovo now. One element that was particularly slow was the building up of the police force, again like in Kosovo now. These were all problems which we had to address and they were discussed when they weren't solely the remit of the UN Secretary General's representative, Yasuchi Akashi. They were discussed in what was known as the Supreme National Council of Cambodia, and here Prince Sihanouk would chair a meeting of the four factions and try to resolve these issues. So one found oneself involved in these meetings as observers. Prince Sihanouk wanted us to act as ballast for these meetings. We found ourselves sitting opposite Khmer Rouge representatives like Khieu Samphan and Son Sen (Son Sen was known as the Khmer Rouge butcher of Phnom Penh, because of his brutality) trying to resolve issues. As time went on the Khmer Rouge decided that things were not moving in the way that they felt was right in the sense that the other parties were not giving up the control over the ministries and allowing the Khmer Rouge to have an equal part of that control, or to give the control completely to the UN. The Khmer Rouge's hope was that the strength of the other parties would be largely neutralised by the UN. When that didn't happen, they more or less withdrew from the operation and said that they would not support the holding of the election and they would work to frustrate it, which they did. We decided to go ahead nonetheless. These meetings were interesting because they

took place in the royal palace in Phnom Penh which was a lovely building, very similar to the emerald palace in Bangkok, and we would sit around a table with Prince Sihanouk at one end and the representatives of the parties on one side of the table and the diplomats on the other side. The diplomats were from the five permanent member countries of the Security Council plus Australia and Germany. There were a number of occasions where the diplomats were asked to intervene quite often to try to bring the Khmer Rouge to a position which would enable action to be taken. The election was held in May of the year after the operation really got under way so we had been going for something like fifteen months. There was a tremendous thunderstorm during the night before the election and everyone thought the Khmer Rouge had attacked Phnom Penh. It turned out just to be rain and in the morning the polling booths were absolutely flooded with people as well as water. People were just dying to come and vote. The foreign journalists who were there, some of them old Vietnam hands who had been hoping to have pictures of the Khmer Rouge disrupting the voting and bodies everywhere, were deeply disappointed and one old Vietnam hand said to me, 'where are all the bodies?' The election turned out to be a great success in several ways. First of all the turnout was over 90% and it brought two parties to power. One of them, Prince Ranarit's party, actually won the election. The other, led by Hun Sen, came second. Hun Sen would not accept coming second and we were then faced with a stand-off between these two, while the Khmer Rouge was out in the rice paddy and elsewhere causing problems in the way that they knew very well how to do. Prince Sihanouk resolved the situation by making Prince Ranarit first Prime Minister and Hun Sen second Prime Minister. I think Cambodia is the only country in the world where you have two Prime Ministers, and then duplicate ministers for all of the main ministries which were in contention. We thereby got to some sort of resolution of the problem. It wasn't terribly satisfactory. The members who had been elected then formed a parliament, a national assembly, and had to adopt a constitution, which a lot of us helped them write. The constitution was finally adopted and the country was then said to be approaching democratic standard but still with the Khmer Rouge in the background. As we now know the Khmer Rouge have gradually either been killed off or been sucked in to the government in Phnom Penh, rather in the way that the Thais did with the insurgents in north-east Thailand in the past: made an offer they couldn't refuse. I was

going to say you have an uneasy coalition in Phnom Penh, but in fact it seems to be an increasingly stable situation in Phnom Penh where after the second round of elections the second Prime Minister has taken charge and is now the sole Prime Minister of Cambodia. As a British Ambassador you have in your back pocket a certain amount of money which you can put towards small projects throughout the country and this was one of the things which gave me and my wife the greatest pleasure. We were able to add roofs to schools which had been destroyed, we were able to provide pieces of medical machinery where they were necessary, we were able to build in a temple school an additional school room and to open that with one of the leading monks of Cambodia. It was perhaps one of the most touching things of my time as Ambassador.

MM Thank you very much for that. Could we now turn to your postings to North America? You went first of all as a First Secretary to Washington in 1969, what sort of job were you doing then?

Postings to North America: first to British Embassy, Washington in 1969; then as Consul-General in Boston, 1983-87

DB My job there was really to try to persuade the Americans firstly to write nice things about Britain when they didn't want to write anything about Britain at all and wanted only to focus on Vietnam.

MM This was a press job?

DB Yes, and I had to write occasional speeches for the Ambassador but it was essentially a press job.

MM Who was your Ambassador?

DB My Ambassador initially was John Freeman who had been High Commissioner in India and before that had been editor of the New Statesman. He was a good man to work

for. I asked him on one occasion how he found the job as Ambassador, and he said, 'really it's very much like being an editor except that you don't have to do so much writing. As an Ambassador, you have to do more.' I thought he was quite good. He was followed by Lord Cromer, who I think established himself well in Washington. When I was later back in the United States as Consul-General in Boston, I had two Ambassadors. The first was Oliver Wright who I thought was extremely good at putting across Britain's point of view, and the second was Antony Acland who I only had a short time with but who also I thought was an extremely good appointment.

MM I recall that Oliver Wright had an extremely good line on Northern Ireland and I expect that was a topic that came up pretty often Boston. Did it?

DB Yes it did. I don't think we need focus on that time in Washington previously because that was essentially, as I say, trying to persuade Americans to write about Britain and looking after top level visitors like Prince Charles and Princess Anne on their first visits to the White House, and things like that. I don't think there is anything worth saying about that other than how shocked I was the first time I met Nixon to see how much makeup he had on. But coming back to Boston. We arrived in Boston after the death of Bobby Sands. That had caused great anger in Boston. That anger had been shown by demonstrations outside the house of my predecessor as Consul-General. That antipathy continued. There were bomb threats to my office. Whenever a major British event took place there was a danger of a demonstration, particularly if that event had any military connection.

MM Didn't you have a police guard on your residence?

DB At the time I was there, there was no police guard. But we began to try to get to know the people who were prominent in the Boston-Irish organisations and one of them became mayor. His name was Ray Flynn, and he had established good links with John Hume. When John Hume came I usually accompanied him to meetings with Ray Flynn. We tried to see how we could work constructively together. Eventually John Hume and

Ray Flynn, with help from a number of other people, decided to set up something called the Boston Northern Ireland Compact. This meant that people from Boston would try to help development in Northern Ireland and in some parts of the Republic of Ireland. This seemed to be an extremely good thing because it educated the Boston Irish in what the real situation was on the ground. Previously a lot of people in Boston had not known of Northern Ireland, hadn't really known what actually was going on there, and had no idea about the reality of the situation. This brought more of them into the province and was very helpful. But most helpful was the Anglo-Irish Agreement, which happened while I was in Boston. That transformed the situation and made my life there very rewarding because we were able to take numerous initiatives and develop numerous projects between Boston and Northern Ireland. It got to a situation where quite often those who had previously been demonstrating outside my house would now come across the threshold for a drink and join in parties in my house which were Northern Ireland focussed. There were still problems because NORAID continued to try to raise money for the IRA. There were still a number of extremists in North America who were trying to arrange for arms to go to the IRA and there were a number of others who simply didn't believe that the British had their hearts in the right place when they said they wanted to work for devolved government and eventually the removal of British troops from Northern Ireland. Things didn't change overnight but the whole direction was a much more constructive one for perhaps the last three years of my five years in Boston and enabled us to do quite a lot to help Northern Ireland in its development and exposure in North America. We had Northern Ireland Protestants who would visit Boston and meet Northern Ireland Catholics and Boston-Irish. They could talk one to one whereas back home they couldn't easily meet the other. My job in Boston had a number of important elements to it. The first was the Northern Irish element. The second was getting investment into Britain. At that point New England was the fastest growing area of the United States in information technology, probably at that point a little ahead of Silicon Valley in California. It's debatable, but the two were virtually neck and neck, and a lot of companies were springing up with lots of good ideas and the American businessman saw the advantages of a base in Europe. My job was to try and persuade them that the base in Europe should be a base in the United Kingdom. We were very successful in that, with

lot of large companies, Wang and DEC and various others setting up, particularly in Scotland but also in Wales and to a lesser extent in England itself. That was rewarding.

MM Were you allowed to do that? I seem to remember that there was a group of Northern Irish investment officers in North America from the Northern Ireland Industrial Development Office who more or less took over that inward investment role from the regular commercial Diplomatic Service.

DB In the days when I was there we worked closely together and I had a Northern Ireland Industrial Development Board representative actually in my office as my inward investment officer. I also had a Devon and Cornwall Development Corporation man in my office. There were times when they would do their own provincial thing and other occasions when they would do the bidding of the UK as whole. It wasn't always easy but somehow we managed and fortunately we were quite successful. So that was good. Trade, British exports outwards, didn't increase overmuch but exporters didn't seem to need a great deal of help from a UK office in Boston. Businessmen knew Boston well enough and would come and meet those they needed to see. The other things that we were able to open up after the Anglo-Irish Agreement were things like visits by the QE2 to Boston (which you would never have been able to think of in the days prior to the Anglo-Irish Agreement because of the potential security risk), the visit of Prince Charles to the 350th anniversary of Harvard where he made the main speech, etc, etc. He had a good visit, first of all his speech was particularly good, but in addition to that he wanted to spend sometime looking at how New England, which was in the lead in economic development in the States in those days, had been able to convert old mill towns into potentially useful industrial and artistic areas. We took him to the town of Lowell, which had been a mill town, very much based upon the mill towns in Britain. Indeed American engineers had come across to Britain and done quite a lot of industrial espionage and had copied everything in our mills and had gone back to North America and reproduced them in New England where the streams and flow of water were very similar to what you'd find in the north of England. I took him to Lowell and he saw what they had done. With my help, he developed links with the governor of Massachusetts to send people from

Lowell and from the governor's office to Halifax in the United Kingdom where Prince Charles was trying to revive the economy and to use the old Crosby carpet factory to better effect with the help of a very brilliant entrepreneur there called Ernest Hall. Ernest did a marvellous job and I think there were some useful pointers which Prince Charles was able to take from Lowell to Halifax. That was a good visit which helped to bring New England and Britain closer together than they had been for many years because of the Northern Ireland problem.

MM I can well imagine it was a pretty busy time in Boston.

DB Well, the third element was the fact that across the river from Boston, you had Harvard, MIT, up the road you had Tufts; within twenty miles of my office there were sixty seven top American institutions of higher learning. There was also the marvellous opportunity to keep in touch with those institutions and to build up links with British universities where they didn't exist already and to generally develop that whole area. It isn't often given to a Consul-General or an Ambassador to do work of that sort. But it was marvellous to be able to get close to the President of the Kennedy School of Government and the President of Harvard and people of that ilk.

MM Talking of Kennedy, did you have anything to do with Senator Edward Kennedy?

DB Yes, bringing together the Prince of Wales and the Senator was one, indirectly. In my early days in Washington Ambassador John Freeman had invited Edward Kennedy to come to some event he was giving. I knew Kennedy in the sense that I had met him in Belgrade years before. He had been a junior congressman attending an IPU (International Parliamentary Union) meeting in Belgrade in the early 1960s and I'd met him there. Then I met him again in Washington, and, because I knew him, the Ambassador said to me, would I call Kennedy and just check he's going to be coming because we haven't heard from him. So I just picked up the phone and talked to him and said, you know, the Ambassador just wanted to check that you will be with us tonight, and he said, 'yes of course I'll be there.' Then latterly in Boston my wife and I became

quite friendly with Senator Kennedy's first wife, Joan. I think their marriage had been annulled. She lived in Boston and we saw her on a number of occasions.

Head of North American Department of the FCO, 1988-91

MM From Boston you came back to be Head of North American Department in the FCO.

DB Yes, the reasoning being that there was a better than even chance that governor Michael Dukakis of Massachusetts, whom I been alongside for nearly five years, might well become the President of the United States. It didn't work out that way but there was a chance. Michael Dukakis was a dark horse in that very few people outside America knew him. The feeling in London was that if for no other reason than that I knew Michael Dukakis it might be a good idea if I filled that slot. But even if Michael Dukakis didn't become President I knew enough about America, and was up to date on America, to be able to take over that post, at a time when we would be seeing other Presidential elections.

MM North America Department is a pretty senior department, isn't it?

DB It's a funny Department. It's always been a difficult one because no-one knows quite what to do with it. Its remit is so big and covers such a huge and important area, literally a continent. Moreover, everyone in the Office feels that they know the United States anyway so why do we need a North America Department? British Prime Ministers always had direct links to their opposite numbers in the US, Foreign Secretaries likewise. There is in one sense a feeling that you're squeezed out of the important things but on the other hand there is an awful lot of North America that people don't know and some very important people below the President and Secretary of State whom someone has to know about. Therefore the Department can be a particularly important one in that regard. Then you have a very big American Embassy here and you have, which everyone always forgets, our very good colleagues and allies, the Canadians, with whom we have massive

trade, in both directions, and with whom we have an extremely good relationship. The job is interesting in that you are very much in the centre of everything and you have to know everything that is going on, so you are the recipient of telegrams on every subject under the sun, which of course was one of the reasons one of my predecessors in that Department (Maclean of Burgess/Maclean infamy) liked the job very much.

MM So as the Head of North American Department you were the main point of contact for the American and Canadian missions in London.

DB Yes. That's right, and ...

MM Both of them staffed by senior people chosen with great care by their respective governments.

DB Yes. The Ambassadors of course are not always, and are rarely these days, Foreign Service personnel but they always very strongly supported by good Foreign Service people immediately below them. That was the scope of the job there and in particular making sure that the organisation of visits like that of President Reagan in this direction and Margaret Thatcher in the other direction all went swimmingly.

MM Well, thank you. That's most interesting. Before we get to Finland, I haven't asked you anything about your job as Assistant Head of Arms Control and Disarmament Department in the FCO. Maybe this has really been overtaken but I would like to ask you whether at that stage you had anything to do with the arrangements for the CSCE?

Assistant Head of Arms Control and Disarmament Department FCO, 1976-79

DB No, not that. But it was an interesting time in that we had a change of government and David Owen was the Foreign Secretary for part of the time. He did try to look to see whether there were any possibilities of our making moves forward on the arms control front and was particularly interested in that area. One of the areas where we were able to

work quite hard was chemical weapons. For the first time we developed our own British draft chemical weapons convention, which in some ways was the precursor of the chemical weapons convention which was finally adopted a few years ago and ratified. So that was satisfying in that way. The other thing that was satisfying was a wish on the part of David Owen and other ministers to open up as far as possible our contacts with non-official centres of excellence in the arms control field in the country.

MM In the UK?

DB In the UK. And to start a process, and I don't know if it happened anywhere else in the FCO, but to start a process of having consultative meetings with, for example, Robin Cook, David Steele, representatives of university departments, around the table, telling them the sort of things we were doing and thinking of doing where we could, where it was possible for us to tell them without any security problem, and seeking their views. Indeed, we invited their views on various aspects of arms control. I think that was a useful way of beginning to open up government and to not only open up government but to bring in ideas from outside. I was very pleased to be part of that particular development at that stage.

MM Interesting, because it was so long ago. 1976 to 1979; it's not bad. Well, perhaps we should round off the interview by talking a little about Finland. I wonder whether you could very kindly give us some background to UK-Finnish relations. My first recollection, and this might be a good starting point, was that the Finns fought the Russians in 1939 and were generally speaking quite well thought of in the UK, because of their stubborn and courageous resistance to the Russians. But then of course the Russians came in as our allies and the Finns rather faded from the public eye.

HM Ambassador to Finland, 1995-97

DB You are right to have that memory. Many people do and it is the right memory to have. One needs to go back a little bit further, I think, and just remember that for 600

years or so until the early 1800s Finland was a part of Sweden. Then in 1809 it became a Duchy of Russia and was so for about 100 years. Then we all know what happened in 1917 in the October revolution. While the October revolution was going on the Finns, who had been developing nationalism over the years (and you only have to listen to Finlandia by Sibelius to understand a little bit of the depth of the feeling of that country, a depth of feeling which had been nursed by having their own language and by having a deeply imbued sense of culture), took advantage of the uproar in Russia to put to the Douma the idea that Finland should have its own independence. Surprisingly, the Russians agreed and so Finland was born. It was born in 1917 but it wasn't until a year or two later that Britain actually recognised Finland. We had had representation in St Petersburg covering Finland previously and an honorary Consul in Helsinki but we then sent in Lord Acton as our minister. Over the years our representation grew to Embassy, a full Embassy and thus it remained until the Second World War. What you remember are the pictures of brave Finnish soldiers in white smocks traipsing across snow on skis with their rifles fighting the Russians. What happened was what the Finns now call the winter war where the Russians tried to occupy Finland and essentially got a bloody nose because the Finns were not going to give up their independence. The Russians came in on several fronts and the Finns were able, because of their greater knowledge of the terrain, to simply let them get into a difficult situation, surround them in the forest and wipe them out. So the Russians withdrew at that point and there was a stand-off period and what followed was in Finnish terminology the Continuation War, which ran from 1941 to 1944. Here the Russians kept pressure on Finland and the Finns, anxious to preserve their independence were prepared to accept certain German units on to their territory and to be co-belligerents with the Germans. They were never allies, they were co-belligerents. They tried to use the Germans to stop the Russians attacking them. The German objective, of course, was to take St Petersburg and they, for their part, pushed the Finns to help them do so. The Finns would only go as far as the edge of Finnish territory which the Russians had initially taken in the winter war. They stopped there but they would not take part in the attack and siege of St Petersburg, which lasted for many months. As the Germans were gradually being defeated, the Russians then began to put pressure on Finland to accept an armistice with the Russians. The price of that armistice

was that first of all the Finns should drive out the Germans from Lapland, which they did but only after the Germans had burnt every single building in Lapland and killed many people. It was a bloody operation all round. The second price was that Finland should accept a number of Russian bases in Finland which would give Russia a listening post in the northern part of the Baltic; and, thirdly, very heavy reparations which the Finns would have to pay to the Russians as the price for this armistice. The Finns reluctantly accepted all of this, got down to rebuilding their industry and paying off the Russians. As they paid off the Russians and rebuilt their industry so they built up a very modern economy which enabled them then to hold their own in the world and to be able to sell to the Russians things that the Russians actually wanted, and they built up a very strong trade with Russia. The Russians were never entirely happy at Finland being independent, but while Finland was, quote, prepared to behave itself, unquote, they seemed prepared to tolerate its existence as an independent country provided that it did not go beyond certain parameters. And the Finns became very clever at handling the Russians and maintaining their independence and gradually increasing scope for independent action. This developed into an art form in later years.

I arrived in Finland with my wife in March 1995 after the Finns had done something which gave great pleasure to almost all of them; they had entered the European Union in January of that year after a referendum. The referendum was not entirely cut and dried. Essentially the Finns voted on security grounds to join the EU as much as on economic grounds. For the first time, and you must remember this is 1995, it was 6 years after the fall of the Berlin wall, Finland was able to come out from under the shadow of Russia, under which it had lived for centuries, and take up what it thought was its rightful place in Western Europe. It then succeeded in working to embed itself deeply into that Western Europe so that it could never ever be extricated. This resulted in their adopting a very positive attitude towards the European Union and in particular to the Euro. My time was spent in helping them build their links with Britain, the European Union and to try to build up trade between Britain and Finland.

MM What sort of attitude did you take towards their position on the euro?

DB We regarded their position on the euro as their business, if they decided they would go that way. We made sure they had plenty of chance to talk to experts in Britain about what we saw as the pros and cons of this. They would very much have liked us to join the euro at that point and they still hope that we will do so. They took great comfort from the fact that John Major said at an early stage that even if we were not to join the euro we would try to make a success of it during our presidency of the EU. They were grateful for that. I think they have gone from strength to strength now. The trade between Britain and Finland is one of the marvels of this century. We sell to Finland almost as much as we sell to India. Almost as much as we sell to Malaysia. And this little country of 5.1 million people seems to be able to absorb enormous amounts of British exports. It is a marvellous starter market for any British company wanting to export; everyone speaks English there; they know our way our doing business; they are open to new ideas, and if a product is at the right price and is the right product they are prepared to consider buying it. It's a very good market for us and their investment in Britain is quite extensive. Companies like Nokia, for example, employ over two thousand people in Britain. Other companies, paper companies, their technology companies etc, also have many outlets and branches in this country. The relationship is a very good one. It was particularly apt that soon after they joined the European Union we were able to have President Ahtisaari on a State visit to Britain. They joined the European Union in January 1995 and he came in October 1995, and he had a very nice line in his speech at the State banquet after the Queen had welcomed him, where he said, 'we are now in the European Union and we feel so much at home here perhaps the next step is to join the British Commonwealth.' The other thing that that illustrates is that the Finns and we have a very similar sense of humour and that is one of the things which, I think, unites us, in addition to simply a natural attraction across the North Sea. If you take one example of the contacts between Finland and Britain, there are 70 return flights each week in each direction between Helsinki and Britain. That's a large number of people.

MM Are the relations between Finland and Britain stronger than they are between Finland and other EU countries, would you say?

DB It's difficult to answer that. I would have said in 1995 that they were. But as Finland has now spread its wings in the EU I would have thought its links with Germany probably are, from the trade point of view, and from the political point of view, as great as ours, if not better. And of course you always have to remember that there are close links between the Nordic countries so that Finland would have close links with Sweden anyway and with Denmark and so I think that it's difficult to say whether we have the best relationship. I don't think we do any more. But it's a very strong good one.

MM It's extremely encouraging. It must have been a very great pleasure to you.

DB It was. It was a good posting to have at a time when I could make a difference.

Looking back on the Diplomatic Service career

MM Looking back on your career as a whole, have you got any sort of advice for somebody embarking on a career in the Diplomatic Service today? You might want notice of that question!

DB I think the answer is, 'do it.' I went into it looking at it as doing something which I really wanted to do anyway and would have done voluntarily if I wasn't paid for it. I enjoyed very much almost every aspect of my career. It was fascinating and it gave me a knowledge of the world and of government which I have treasured. I can't think of any other advice. I don't think languages are so important in terms of considering whether you think you should enter for the Foreign Service but I think the ability to learn languages is important and if you can speak reasonable French and a good other language (and the Foreign Office will help you to do this), then I think it adds a great deal to, first of all, your enjoyment of your postings, and secondly the ability to do the job in the country where you have the language facility.

MM And are able to appreciate the other culture.

DB Yes, you can do that without the other language but it's much better if you have the language.

MM Well, thank you very much for that comprehensive and worthwhile interview.