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**KBE 2003; CMG 1998**

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**BRITISH DIPLOMATIC ORAL HISTORY PROGRAMME  
RECOLLECTIONS OF SIR BRIAN DONNELLY KBE CMG  
RECORDED AND TRANSCRIBED BY CLARE MORTON**

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CM: It is the 17th of February 2017 and this is Clare Morton in conversation with Sir Brian Donnelly, recording his recollections of his diplomatic career.

CM: Sir Brian, thank you very much for your wonderful and very detailed career summary. Your notes indicate that you'd had several ideas about what you might pursue as a career, what led you to finally decide to join the Diplomatic Service?

BD: Well, it was a very circuitous route. I was born and grew up in Workington which is a small industrial town on the west coast of Cumbria. My background was thoroughly working class. It was a terraced house, my father was a steel worker, my mother was a hairdresser. There was no tradition of university education in the family, let alone thought of the Diplomatic Service. I'm not sure that anyone would've known what the Diplomatic Service was, in my family. The year I went to Workington Grammar School, in the school magazine of that year there was an article by a man called James Smith Rooke, which I dimly remember and it was all about his life in the Consular Service, which was then a separate service from the Diplomatic Service, but he'd eventually moved into the Diplomatic Service and I think he had a quite reasonable career as a Commercial and Trade Officer. And I must have read that because it's well-thumbed but I can't pretend that it was a sort of thing that motivated me to think I must join the Diplomatic Service. It may have had a subliminal effect but it wasn't until I went back and started looking through the magazines that I realised that I must have read this when I was aged 11.

Workington Grammar School was typical of many small grammar schools of the time and certainly, in Cumbria, was a very good school. I was fortunate because it was by going through Workington Grammar that I managed to get a scholarship to The Queen's College, Oxford, and I think clearly that was very useful much later on when I eventually did think about applying for the Diplomatic Service. Having said that, when I was at Oxford, again, I didn't think about the Foreign Office, I wanted to be a journalist. Even when I was in Workington I had had a part-time job as what was called a copy-runner for the local

Workington paper. This meant going to rugby matches and carrying the typed reports of the game back up to the printing offices in the course of the match and the quicker I could do that, the more of the match that I actually saw. And so I did this and then on one Saturday when I turned up, the reporter didn't arrive so I wrote the report myself. I didn't type it but I wrote it in longhand, I think, and took it to the newspaper, and to my amazement they printed it. So that whet my appetite for the whole business of sports journalism and, indeed, they offered me an apprenticeship when I was leaving school, and I think when I chose to go to Oxford instead, the headline on the story was something like "local boy turns down job offer to go to Oxford", which I thought was a nice sense of proportion!

Anyway, when I got to Oxford I joined the university newspaper, initially as a sports reporter, and eventually became sports editor, and then edited the newspaper itself in my second year. This simply convinced me that the whole glamour of journalism seemed to be attractive and I rather liked it. I became, for a time, the university's correspondent on football (soccer) for the London Times which paid me an enormous fee like £3 a time which was a lot of money in those days. As a result of meeting a former editor of Cherwell, which was the university newspaper, I worked on this rather trendy London magazine called Town Magazine. It was produced by this former editor, Clive Labovitch, and his partner, in a business sense, Michael Heseltine, who was just about to embark on his political career. The magazine had aspirations to be rather like Playboy in the sense that it published new fiction with restaurant reviews, book reviews, cartoons but also liked to publish pictures of beautiful women in varying states of clothing. In those days because of the law in Britain, I don't think a British magazine could publish quite as revealing pictures as Playboy did, and I can remember hours were spent going over pictures with a magnifying glass to try and make sure that the photographs of the ladies didn't reveal anything that the Lord Chancellor might take exception to. Well, I have to say that Michael Heseltine didn't actually play much part in this magazine. He ran the other part of the business, which was producing what, we thought, were very dull, boring catalogue books, about things like agricultural machinery. They also produced the guide for employment for would-be university graduates. So Michael did the boring stuff, but it was stuff that made money and Clive ran the magazine which I suppose had the ethos of London in the 60s but probably didn't make any money. Anyway, it was completely eye-opening to me to see that side of London society for the first time.

CM: Coming from Workington!

BD: Coming from Workington, yes, and they must have thought I was a very strange creature, as well.

I also worked briefly on the Sunday Express during this period, on their Saturday desk. Basically, the Sunday Express was largely made up before Saturday and all you did on Saturday was produce the final news stories for the front page and page 3, and they brought in extra reporters to do that. I suppose I then began to have some doubts about my abilities as a reporter because I was sent out to do a job with a very hard-bitten press photographer and we were meant to interview an American dancer who'd come over, and the rumour was (she was a modern dancer) that on stage she was occasionally known to remove her clothes. Again, we're talking about the '60s when this was still something regarded as rather remarkable. So, off we went to interview her and the photographer kept nudging me and saying "get her to take her clothes off", and I was totally out of my depth at this. The woman was explaining all the intricacies of modern dance in a very theoretical way which I knew nothing at all about and I failed completely in the mission of getting her to take anything off. As a result, the photographs were not deemed worthy of use and I think my reputation as a news reporter took a major dive. But still, it was working on Fleet Street and that was in those days when Fleet Street was the centre of the world as far as newspapers were concerned. It was really a great experience.

As far as my academic work at Oxford is concerned, my course was PPE (politics, philosophy & economics). I soon realized that philosophy was not for me; that economics lived up to its reputation as "the dismal science" and that only the politics really interested me. I did specialise in international politics, but as I have said never with any thought of that leading to the Foreign Office.

When it came to leaving Oxford, the jobs I applied for were basically in newspapers with a sort of back-up on advertising, in case I didn't get into a newspaper. I was successful in getting an offer of a traineeship with the Thompson Group, which then ran the Times, and with J Walter Thompson who were then the biggest advertising agency. But, I suppose with the arrogance of youth, I decided instead that, before I started work, I would go off to the United States for a while and I applied for various American universities to study journalism. You couldn't do that in Britain in the 1960s. I was also fairly anti-establishment and decided

I didn't want to do Ivy League universities, they didn't do journalism as it happened, and one of my tutors at Queen's, Oxford, recommended the University of Wisconsin. So, off I went to the University of Wisconsin to do a Masters Degree in journalism. I had a teaching assistantship and I also got married. I married someone that I'd met in Workington. We were absurdly young at the time but there was no way we could have gone to America in those days without being married. So we set off with our total worldly wealth of £500 as a result of savings, working for Wall's bacon factory and wedding presents, and off we went to Wisconsin with one trunk of belongings.

CM: Adventure!

BD: Adventure, yes.

I stayed there for two years; originally it was meant to be one. Both the Thompson Group and J Walter Thompson agreed to keep the job offers open for a year. It was a very exciting time in Wisconsin because the Vietnam War was in full swing. Wisconsin was one of the centres of opposition to it, I suppose and there were regular demonstrations on campus. It was a tumultuous time in America generally. Martin Luther King was assassinated while we were there and, again, we were involved in the marches that were to do with de-segregation. Then, of course, there was the run-up to the 1968 Presidential Election which generated its own political interest. But, as well as that, I became seduced by the idea of an academic career at that point; it just seemed to offer all sorts of attractions. I enjoyed the style of life in American universities and I think if it hadn't been for the problems of changing my visa without incurring the risk of being drafted into the American Forces, I might well have stayed.

This part of my life is clearly a whole series of roads not taken, but while I was at Wisconsin, J Walter Thompson came to Madison to recruit for their New York office and I can remember going along to see them to say "Well, I've got this job offer in London but wouldn't it be nice if I worked in New York for a year before going back?" They agreed to think about it and then they wrote to me and said that they were very happy but I'd have to organise things with the London people. When I wrote to the London people they said "Over our dead body". It was a little introduction to office politics, I suppose, in that they saw New York as poaching their recruit. And, again, with more arrogance of youth, I said "Well, thank

you and goodbye”. So, that was the end of advertising. I’ve thought about this in the last two or three years when this series ‘Mad Men’ has appeared on television, portraying what life would’ve been like if I had joined an advertising agency in New York in the 1960s. I think I would be dead from alcohol poisoning if I’d done that! So I’m rather glad I didn’t go down that road.

I think it’s fair to say my wife was not nearly so enamoured of life in America as I was. She was working in the fashion business and found it very abrasive. She didn’t enjoy it and I think she was glad to come back to Britain. As I say, I was, by that point, really seduced by the idea of an academic career so, in coming back to Britain, what I did was to look for further academic opportunities. I decided since I couldn’t do journalism I would revert to International Relations which had been my special subjects when I was at Queen’s. I got an offer from London School of Economics to join their MPhil programme and so that’s what I did. We moved back to London in June of ‘68. It was a very sad day when we left Wisconsin; it was the morning after Robert Kennedy had been assassinated in California and so it was a very sombre time. But we came back on the Queen Elizabeth; I had a Fulbright travel scholarship which allowed you to do that which was quite a dramatic way to come back into the country. We had flown out but we came back by sea from New York.

CM: How long did that take?

BD: About five to seven days. We did it again later, when I was working in New York and it’s a lovely experience but in both cases most of the journey was in fog because you go north from New York and we didn’t see much at all apart from ocean, until we got into the Channel. But it’s still quite memorable coming into Southampton on one of the Queen’s liners.

Now, LSE, if I’m honest, was a bit of a disaster. After a very close relationship with my academic tutors at Wisconsin, and to some extent at Queen’s, LSE was rather arm’s length. I went to see the person who was meant to be my supervisor and we discussed briefly what my dissertation might be about. There were no courses to attend and she said “Oh, come back in January” and this was in September. I thought “I don’t see anybody between September and January?” But that seemed to be the way it was done. On top of that, this was 1968, LSE was in turmoil because of student demonstrations again mainly linked to the Vietnam War

but also to do with the relations between students and academic staff and so on and so forth. For quite a while it was impossible to get into the LSE building because it was barricaded and so I took myself off to the School of Oriental and African Studies which was much more peaceful because my dissertation subject was going to be on Hong Kong in Anglo-Chinese relations. I started to learn Chinese which proved helpful when I came to the Foreign Office entrance exam but I also realised that as a researcher I had a tendency to see lots of trees but not very much wood - in other words I became too obsessed with detail and had difficulty getting the bigger picture. I also found that I wasn't very good at teaching so it raised doubts in my mind as to whether I really was suited for an academic career after all.

One of the people I met at LSE and became friends with was a man called Peter Hennessy, now Lord Hennessy, and a distinguished historian; we used to play squash together. He and some of his friends decided they were going to apply for the Foreign Office and the Civil Service generally, which I hadn't really thought of until then and I think that prompted me to think "well, why don't I do that? It sounds possible for an alternative career" and then I discovered I had a bonus because having got a Masters degree already, I was exempt from the first round of the Foreign Office examinations. So, I applied for the Foreign Office and the LSE careers officer suggested that I should also apply for GCHQ. Now, I'm not sure he then understood what GCHQ really did because I remember him linking it to my mass communications journalism degree which as it turned out wasn't really relevant at all. But I thought it was sensible to have two strings to my bow so I applied for GCHQ as well, and embarked on this rather long process of competitive examination.

I was fortunate enough to be successful in both and so I had, as it were, competing job offers from the Foreign Office and from GCHQ. Now, at that point my wife, I think partly scarred by the American experience, had doubts about committing us to a lifetime of overseas travel. We were also by then expecting our first child and even though it seems rather banal, GCHQ offered about 50% higher starting salary than the Foreign Office which seemed to be enormously important at that time of life. I was also rather intrigued by GCHQ. Their entrance examination had been more difficult and challenging in some respects than the one for the Foreign Office and when I'd gone for interview there they'd lifted the curtain just a little bit on the kind of work that they did. You have to remember that in 1970, as it was, there was no public avowal that GCHQ was an intelligence organisation. It was described as a Centre for Research and Development in Communications on behalf of Her Majesty's

Government, or words like that, and that was the official story which was just churned out in response to any press or parliamentary interest and, in general, people did not know that GCHQ was an intelligence body. In fact in Cheltenham, where it was based, it was well known but there was almost a sort of conspiracy of silence in that no one talked about it and if you said you worked at GCHQ people would just say “Oh, right” and then the conversation would change. There was just a general acceptance that this was something you didn’t talk about. So, it was only at the final interview when they’d lifted the curtain so that you could understand a bit more about what was involved that I realised it was an intelligence organisation. But it was still fairly obscure as to exactly how it fitted in with the better known intelligence organisations like MI5 and MI6 except that by chance Peter Hennessy had had a school friend whose father had worked there. So he actually was able to fill me in on some things that they hadn’t told me officially, that he had learned from his friend. I suppose that his friend’s father must have mentioned things at home and it gradually filtered down. Those kind of factors plus the prospect that in Cheltenham we could actually afford to live in a house as opposed to, well if we’d stayed in London it would have been a flat, and with the baby and all, it seemed to make sense to go there. I became what I think is probably a fairly rare creature in turning down the Foreign Office when first invited to join and at first I had really no regrets because I found GCHQ fascinating, stimulating ...

CM: They told you what it was about when you arrived?

BD: Oh, of course, when you arrived you then had an induction to explain the broad picture and they had a really good training programme in which new entrants at my graduate entrance level were placed successively in four or five different departments and given particular projects to do which gave you an understanding of the different skills that were needed in the organisation and the whole range of work that was on offer. I have to say that the entry level was equivalent to what in those days was called Assistant Principal in the Home Civil Service and you were clearly destined, if you did well, to move fairly rapidly through the hierarchy to management positions. There was never any thought that I was going to be a cryptographer or what they called departmental specialists at GCHQ. I was recruited as what they called a cadet – which has a slight military connotation but it was always destined to be on the management side of the organisation rather than the code-breaking side. But the feeling was you had to understand the kind of work that was done before you could manage it properly. And so I was immediately thrust into this very varied



work. The place still had a kind of military flavour partly because some of the senior staff had been involved in the code-breaking efforts during the Second World War and they were still there so there were fairly distinguished names and people who were involved in the Enigma story were still working in GCHQ. We worked in what were glorified Nissen huts, it wasn't as lavish as it is now when it is a marvellous modern circular building in Cheltenham, completely high-tech. Back then it was fairly basic. In the course of two years, and I think I can probably safely say this now, so long afterwards, I worked successively on Iraq, Iraqi police networks - why on earth were we doing that in the 1970s? Perhaps we were rather remarkably far-sighted but, more likely, it was simply a relic of the Second World War. I worked on Libya and Libyan-Egyptian issues, Soviet enciphered speech and over the horizon radar. GCHQ then had the biggest and most powerful computers of any organisation in Britain and so you also had an introduction to modern technology and computer coding. One of the jobs I had involved feeding punched cards into this enormous computer and spewing out results the next day.

CM: You did all this work from Cheltenham itself, you didn't travel?

BD: No, it was all done in Cheltenham. There was a little bit of travel to some of the outstations just see what it was actually like at an intercept station. There's not very much to see at an intercept station as it turns out. As a group of cadets we actually lobbied to go to Bletchley Park because we wanted to get a feel for the wartime history of the organisation. In those days Bletchley Park wasn't, as it is now, a publicly accessible museum and so we had a rather privileged visit there for a training session when some radio operators showed us what it was like to sit and listen to Morse code messages and how you'd read teleprinter tapes and all that sort of technical stuff that was the feed that came into GCHQ from these various outstations. It was all rather exciting and we enjoyed it and I think the status we had as cadets, destined for better things, meant that you were treated exceptionally well in the organisation. I remember the very first job I had, I was allocated to an Executive Officer. It was in this Nissen hut which was an L-shape and in the corner of the 'L' there was a Senior Executive Officer who was a retired RAF squadron leader or group captain even, and on the two legs of the 'L', halfway along, there was a Higher Executive Officer so it was all very hierarchical. The Executive Officer I worked for was allowed to talk to the Higher Executive Officer but he wasn't allowed to go and talk to the Senior Executive Officer. Everything had to be channelled, whereas, I as a cadet was free to talk to whoever I wanted, I could by-pass

this hierarchy. We were all treated with remarkable deference at the time because everyone we were working with knew that in five years' time we were quite likely to be their boss. That has its pluses and minuses, that kind of working structure, but when you are on the right side of it, it works quite well.

We settled in Cheltenham but I began to have doubts, I think - you may say I was perpetually having doubts about what I was doing. I think it crystallised when I came to London – GCHQ had an office in London which was necessary in order for their participation in the work particularly of the Joint Intelligence Committee in Whitehall, in which, of course, GCHQ was a regular participant. Again, in those days that was a state secret and now it's public knowledge. Every week the sub-committees of the Joint Intelligence Committee meet to prepare papers which then get submitted to the JIC, and GCHQ are represented. The JIC became very well known, of course, during the Iraq enquiry because it was central to the whole question of the invasion of Iraq in 2003, whether the judgements had been properly reached and so on. But in those days, as I say, it was still a very secret institution. The pattern was that someone from GCHQ, depending on the subject being discussed, would go up to London, spend a night in London, go to the office in the morning and then you would go across to the JIC meeting which used to take place in Cabinet Office in Whitehall. This particular one that I attended was on the Libyan-Egyptian relationship which was slightly fraught at the time. I had been working on this and I'd read quite a lot about it and I thought of myself as quite an expert on the subject but then I realised that the only thing that I was expected to comment on at the meeting was on the technical aspects of the intelligence such as where it had been collected from, how it had been collected, whether we assessed it as reliable or not reliable. I wasn't expected to have any opinions on the implications of the intelligence for policy; that was the job of the Foreign Office representative on the committee and so I would sit there thinking "Well, I know more about it than he does" but I wasn't allowed to comment on it, it wasn't the job of GCHQ to comment on policy, we were just there to provide the inputs for the policy makers and I thought "Well, that's a better job than I've got".

That sowed some doubt and then one of my colleagues at GCHQ, who was a year ahead of me, was a man called David Omand. David had already had these doubts before me and had applied to leave GCHQ and eventually went back to the Ministry of Defence. David subsequently was parachuted back into GCHQ as Director before becoming Permanent

Secretary at the Home Office, and later the Intelligence Coordinator in the Cabinet Office. So, he had a distinguished career, but the fact that he managed successfully to negotiate a return to the Ministry of Defence led me to wonder whether I might do the same with the Foreign Office because the Foreign Office very kindly, after I had turned them down did write and say "If you change your mind, do get in touch". And so I did and slightly to my surprise they wrote back and said "Yes, we are still very willing to consider you but it will have to be negotiated through rather arcane Civil Service procedure" and they had wanted to interview me again. I think by that time my wife and I had also realised that while life in Cheltenham has many attractions, the idea of staying there for thirty or forty years didn't really appeal either. We missed the cosmopolitan nature of London. After being interviewed at the Foreign Office, and overcoming the bureaucratic obstacles - the principal one was that under Civil Service rules if I moved to the Foreign Office, the Foreign Office were supposed to send someone comparable to Cheltenham, in other words it was supposed to be a swap but of course there was no one in the Foreign Office waiting to go to Cheltenham. Fortunately GCHQ waived the right they had to insist on a swap and so we went to London in, I think it was, June 1973. So, I eventually got to the Foreign Office at the ripe old age of 28 which meant that I was seven years older than my contemporaries who'd joined straight from Oxford. I had a lot of catching up to do and I missed out on the sort of camaraderie that comes from having your own entrance group. I mean most people would have joined with fifteen or twenty others whom you'd get to know quite well in the first few weeks and then as your careers developed you would have both a measuring rod to see how well you were doing, compared to Fred or John or whoever it was, but also a little group that you could talk to and discuss how your careers were going. I had none of that so it was quite a dramatic change.

CM: What about the training because they would have all trained?

BD: Well, I'll come to that in a second. The Foreign Office was not good on training in those days. The good news was, though, that I was admitted then as a Second Secretary and again by a quirk of the way in which things develop I actually got a significant salary increase moving from GCHQ back to the Foreign Office. So, although the first time round GCHQ was the better thing financially, second time round it was the Foreign Office. Sorry, this is a very long way of explaining that I came to the Foreign Office by a very indirect route and I was not at any stage fiercely committed to it. It was a question of evolving ideas about

what I wanted to do linked to very prosaic practicalities about how I could best combine my academic interests in foreign policy with supporting my family and so that's how I came to the Foreign Office in 1973.

**Second Secretary, Republic of Ireland Department, Foreign and Commonwealth Office**  
**1973-75**

CM: You start as Second Secretary in the Republic of Ireland Department. Did you have any choice of department?

BD: No, absolutely not. I was told to report to the Personnel Department in what was then called Curtis Green which I did. People associate the Foreign Office with rather the grand building in King Charles Street, well, Curtis Green had a rather scruffy entrance off what is Westminster Bridge Road, right next to the tube station. It's now something entirely different but in those days that's where you went in. You would not be impressed at all if this was your first sight of the Foreign Office. There was a rather rickety lift which discouraged you from using it, it looked so unsafe. I turned up there and I met a rather suave young man who said "Right, you're going to Republic of Ireland Department so, main building, ask for Mr White". I'd never been inside the Foreign Office at that point, so I went back across Whitehall into King Charles Street and into the main entrance. And my memory is that in those days there wasn't even any security at the main entrance at all, you just walked through into the big quadrangle there. In those days, too, the quadrangle was full of cars parked and many of the cars belonged to people who worked in the Foreign Office. There were certain jobs where, if you were likely to work long hours, you were allowed to drive in and park your car in the quadrangle. All of that's gone now, with the security considerations. Anyway, I walked across the quadrangle and entered the building and, there, there was not so much a security guard as a kind of receptionist cum guard, and I asked for Mr White and he directed me up a rather grand spiral staircase in what was called Downing Street East because on the far side it overlooked Downing Street. So, up I went, two floors, and there was a door marked 'Mr White' which I knocked on – I later learned you didn't knock on doors in the Foreign Office, you just went in – and there was a Mr White who was completely baffled as to why I'd arrived. So this wasn't a great start but fortunately it was quickly resolved because it turned out there was another Mr White about two doors along who was expecting me. This Mr White was called Kelvin White and I really couldn't have had a better first boss

in the Foreign Office. In appearance, Kelvin was a classic diplomat in so far as he was quite a tall, imposing figure, bespectacled and in a pin-striped suit and so on but he was absolutely relaxed, informal; he was an iconoclast really. He was concerned with results and not with appearances and he certainly wasn't a stickler for protocol. All I can remember of this first meeting was him saying to me "Well, with a name like Donnelly, you've obviously got Irish connections so in this job you're going to spend half your time cursing the Protestants and half your time cursing the Catholics" and he said "if that's going to cause you any problems I suggest we stop now and we find you something else to do". I said no, I thought I could probably cope with that and so he took me across to the little office that I was going to share with one other, to meet the person I was replacing. This was a man called Roger Bone. Roger is now Sir Roger, I think his final job in his career was as Ambassador in Sweden. He was certainly married to a Swede. I think he was even more a diplomat in appearance than Kelvin was and I still have this picture of him, sitting in his chair, laid back, with his feet on the desk and dictating to a secretary who was sitting there with her notebook and she was absolutely gorgeous. I mean in those slightly, not slightly, probably very sexist days, she was what was generally known as a Sloane Ranger, immaculately dressed, beautifully turned out and eventually she ended up working at Buckingham Palace which, it seemed to me, was entirely appropriate. She was called Margaret.

Now, in GCHQ we'd had typing pools and if you wanted anything typed, you wrote it all out in longhand, sent it off and two or three days later it would come back to you typed. You never saw the typing pool and just had an image of serried ranks of women, because they would have all been women, sitting there, clicking away on their typewriters. Here you were expected to dictate. I didn't know how you dictated, I'd never dictated to anybody! You mentioned training, before, well I hadn't the first idea of what being a Second Secretary in the Foreign Office involved and no one really stopped to tell you, you just had to sort of learn by osmosis really. I didn't know the difference between minutes and letters, I didn't know what a Submission was, how the whole concept of putting up advice to Ministers worked. The Foreign Office has this system which has now obviously all changed because of emails, but in those days the theory was that if a question arose on policy, the Desk Officer would draft the first attempt at a response to this, addressed to the Foreign Secretary saying "This is what we should do". There was a particular form in which this submission should be written. The Desk Officer would then send it to the Head of Department who would perhaps annotate in long hand on the top saying "I agree with Mr Donnelly, he has made a very sensible

proposal” or it could be “I don’t entirely agree with Mr Donnelly, I think we should do this rather than that”. And then it would go to one or maybe even two other people, further up the hierarchy, each of whom would write in longhand on the piece of paper what they thought and eventually it would get back to the Minister who would then have in front of him the original draft plus comments from two or three other people and he would then judge what the decision would be. After he’d agreed on the policy that would then be sent back to the Desk Officer and that would become the definitive policy on that issue. Each of these submissions would have attached to them references so if you were referring to a telegram from Dublin you would have to attach a copy of that telegram behind the submission. If there was some correspondence from somewhere else in Whitehall, that would also have to be attached behind the submission. It all got put into a special folder and there was a whole rulebook about how these things should be done and none of this I knew anything about at all. It was a very steep learning curve.

CM: How did you learn?

BD: Well, you learned by observation, by seeing things that came back and realising “Well, that must be how it’s done, so maybe I’ve got to do it like this”. Well, perhaps I should just say, that Republic of Ireland Department was actually the smallest department in the Foreign Office. It had only recently been created because of the troubles in Northern Ireland and the need to have a department that dealt exclusively with relations with the Republic of Ireland, i.e. the government in Dublin. Previously these issues had been a small part of what was called Western European Department and it had been felt that that wasn’t enough for the size of the problem. Now, obviously, Republic of Ireland Department didn’t deal directly with the issues in Northern Ireland, that was the job of the Northern Ireland Office but an awful lot of those issues were cross-border issues and involved the Irish Government and so there had to be some form of interface there. And there had to be some form of interface with the Ministry of Defence because of the number of issues that were arising because of the Irish Government’s attitude to what the British Army was doing in Northern Ireland. Republic of Ireland Department was at that sort of interface between the problems that concerned the south and the difficulties that were going on in the north. And it was a very sensitive issue because clearly one of the strongly held views in the north was that the Republic of Ireland should not be interfering in Northern Ireland at all whereas, of course, the strong view in the Republic of Ireland was that they had a very strong interest in everything that was going on

the north, not least because a lot of people in the north felt that their true allegiance was to the Republic. We had to tread this very awkward territory here in that as British representatives we were in no doubt that we were not there to represent the interests of the Republic of Ireland but at the same time we had to be the ones who understood what those interests were and therefore anticipated any problems that might arise in the policies we were carrying out in the north and how they would impact on the Irish Republic.

It was a small department but a very sensitive one, politically sensitive one, and very useful for me, learning, in that it had a lot of relations with the Northern Ireland Office, with the Ministry of Defence, with Cabinet Office as well as with the embassy in Dublin. It was a good learning department but it was very much a learning by doing, rather than a learning by any formal process of induction. There was a First Secretary called Adrian Thorpe who basically handled human rights issues and constitutional issues i.e. the shape of any settlement that might arise in Ireland that would involve the north and possibly the south. He was a Japanologist by training and a member of the Playboy Club. I remember him taking me to the Playboy Club for lunch one day and I thought this was incredibly sophisticated and very Foreign Officey. The other man who worked in the room with me was another Adrian, Adrian Hill, and he'd had short service commission in the army before joining the Foreign Office and his previous job had been in Vietnam.

Adrian was a rather swashbuckling character. He ran, on the side, which was probably not strictly allowed in the Foreign Office rules, a parachute-jumping company down in Hastings and at weekends he would take people up in the air and teach them to jump out, on the parachute. His previous job had been in Vietnam as a Third Secretary or something. This was when the war was on and it seemed, from what he said, that he spent most of his time with the American Special Forces, parachuting into places he shouldn't have been and having a whole series of rather exotic girlfriends. All of this was being condensed into a novel and without any sense of modesty he said this was going to replace Graham Greene's 'Silent American' as the definitive novel about Vietnam. He'd bring in extracts from this and insist on reading them out to me and they always seemed to involve some kind of steamy encounter in a not very salubrious Vietnamese establishment. His principal task was dealing with the MOD and he was absolutely first rate at doing it because he didn't have any sense of status or any worry about rank. I remember we once sent him to go to a meeting with some British Airways staff who had security concerns about flying into Belfast and this meeting was

supposed to be one to reassure them that it was safe to do so. Adrian came back to the office and he said “Well, I sorted that lot out”; we said “But you were only supposed to be there to observe, you hadn’t got any ...” and he said “Oh, cowardly lot, I just told them to get their backsides up and fly in and be men”. And we thought “Oh, dear”. But he was excellent to work with and he was a kind of reassuring presence because he’d basically say “Don’t worry, don’t worry, it’ll be all right”, and I think we got on very well.

There was Kelvin, two Adrians and myself and that was the entirety of the Department at the time plus two secretaries and a Registry Clerk. The kind of issues that we had to deal with were very much a mixed bag. I suppose for me the highlights were ... well, I should say that when I first moved into the Department it was still under a Conservative government and Alec Douglas-Home was the Foreign Secretary whom I never saw, never met and Ted Heath was Prime Minister. In the course of my time in Republic of Ireland Department, the Irish Government and the British Government gradually inched their way towards a political settlement which led to a conference at Sunningdale, also called Sunningdale Conference, which Ted Heath chaired. In unprecedented fashion he had the Irish Prime Minister and the leaders of the three or four then principal Northern Ireland parties all at one conference and they hammered out a settlement. I attended for one day, I think. I was mainly there simply watching with wide open eyes at my first witnessing of a British Prime Minister actually working in the flesh, chairing a meeting, trying to reach agreements, and all of these other figures that I only knew about from the newspapers. The only contribution I made to the Sunningdale Agreement was when an issue arose about – the Irish side wanted to be sure that any agreement that was reached would be binding on the British Government and internationally justiciable if there were any disputes. They wanted it therefore registered at the United Nations and no one was quite sure how you did this. I was tasked to go off and speak to the Foreign Office legal adviser about the mechanics of ensuring that any agreement would be registered with the United Nations and become an internationally agreed document, which I did. It turned out to be a very simple and straightforward procedure which I think I must have then had to write down and hand to someone who handed it to someone else who eventually handed it to the Prime Minister, to reassure everyone that the procedures were in place to make sure that the Sunningdale Agreement would stick internationally. So, I had a very tiny role to play and eventually, of course, the Sunningdale Agreement collapsed. Heath lost the next election, Harold Wilson came in and the Protestant workers in Belfast went on strike, opposed to some provisions that were in the Sunningdale Agreement and it’s one of



those ‘what-if’ questions. I suspect that if Heath had remained in power it might have gone further than it did because the Conservatives had more influence with the Unionist parties in Northern Ireland than the Labour Party did. They might have been able to push it further and we might have got a solution to the Northern Ireland problem fifteen years earlier than we eventually did, but that’s a ‘what if’. The Protestant workers struck, the agreement collapsed and everything was set back for a number of years. So it all came to naught but it was still an exciting time and a time when I really felt for the first time, that I was involved in an issue of national importance and that, however small, I was making a little contribution towards it which was why I had wanted to join the Foreign Office. So it was very satisfying.

Another highlight of that time was ... I’d made what was called a Familiarisation Visit to Dublin, since I’d never, up to that point, visited an embassy. It was felt it would be quite useful if I went to Dublin to actually talk to people in the Embassy there and see how the picture looked from their standpoint, which I did. Then I went up to Northern Ireland for a briefing, there, so that I could understand better the problems that the army and the Northern Ireland Office were dealing with in the Six Counties. At the time for security reasons the British Government had taken over what was a five star hotel in Belfast where all visiting civil servants stayed while visiting Northern Ireland, to be secure. That was an eye-opening experience because the hotel was still providing five star services and so you rolled up and you had this magnificent hotel, first class food and beautiful rooms. There were some people living there literally for months who said they were just dying to have just plain scrambled eggs, they didn’t want all these vast three or four course meals in the evenings.

The Foreign Office had what was called a Liaison Officer in Belfast. At the time it was a man called James Allan. He was exactly what you’d want for an Irish situation because he was almost what everyone’s idea of an Irishman would be but he wasn’t; he was chatty, gregarious, loved to sit down and gossip with people and so on. He’d been sent there because Ministers had complained that they were getting lots of telegrams from foreign capitals which gave an atmospheric view of what things were like in Country X or Country Y but there was nothing similar from Northern Ireland because, of course, Northern Ireland was part of the United Kingdom. But, in truth, for most people in London, Northern Ireland could have been a foreign country, how little they understood it. James’s job was to try and provide the kind of reporting from Northern Ireland that an ambassador would do from a foreign country and he did that very well. Eventually he got very involved in the negotiations between the

different parties in Northern Ireland and his job, and his successors in it, became key individuals in the political negotiations that went on.

I joined James and we went down to the army barracks in Omagh for a briefing on the border security problems. We'd gone down by car and we had a briefing by the military - a very typical military briefing, a brigadier standing in front of a map with his stick and pointing to this, that and the other and then being followed by - lunch in the Officers' Mess. The traditions of the British Army are hard to shake so it was a liquid lunch. After the lunch someone had come in and said that the helicopter that was due to take us along the border to a place called Crossmaglen was approaching and we should be ready. Well, James and I then decided that we'd better head to the loo, so off we went. No one had said "You must hurry" or anything, so we ambled back only to find that the Brigadier was purple with rage. The helicopter had come into the barracks and because we weren't there, immediately, had had to take off again. It was only allowed to be on the ground for something like 90 seconds because of the risk of mortar fire from outside. James and I, unwittingly, had put the helicopter and the pilot at risk by our lagardliness in the loo. Suitably chastened, we assembled and the helicopter came in again and we had to dash across and jump in. Of course, by that point, having heard that you might get hit by incoming fire you feel your back's as big as a barn door, and so we leapt into the helicopter. There's a complicated harness and while we were trying to strap ourselves in, up goes the helicopter and away we go and we went along the border to Crossmaglen. As we approached Crossmaglen, the pilot said "Oh, that looks worrying, our APC (*the Armoured Personnel Carrier that we were supposed to get into*) isn't there. I'd better take diversionary moves". He started to move the helicopter in this figure of eight and I still don't know whether this was our punishment for having not been there to get in or whether there was a genuine emergency but he succeeded in making us feel distinctly uncomfortable. When we eventually landed and scrambled into this APC we were feeling very, very queasy. We went and looked at this position where the IRA were sniping from the far side of a river, or the far side of the border I can't remember whether there was a river there now. Anyway, they were sniping across at this army post and they wanted us to understand. There were regular complaints that the Irish weren't doing enough to control their side of the border and they were regularly disputing as to whether these incidents were as bad as the army were claiming they were. We were meant to see the environment and have a better understanding, which we did. Then the helicopter flew us back, completely stable all the way, to Belfast. The next day I went in by car, to

Londonderry. It was a black official car from the Northern Ireland Office. It was an uneventful journey although I did worry a bit about it being such an obvious Northern Ireland Office car. You think “Well, do you really want to be so conspicuous?” Obviously the driver was very confident that it would be recognised, because as we went into Londonderry, where there was a British Army checkpoint, he just gaily went on. I saw from the back seat that the squaddies dropped down onto one knee and got their guns up and I yelled at him “Stop!” Eventually he stopped. The soldiers hadn’t recognised that it was a Northern Ireland Office car; as far as they were concerned it was a black car illegally crossing their checkpoint. So you were damned if you did and damned if you didn’t. It was not an auspicious start to visiting Londonderry but it was probably quite a good start in the sense that it brought home to you just what it was like to live in Northern Ireland.

All that said, obviously I talked to people in Londonderry about what life was like there and the problems they faced, but it was not long after Bloody Sunday had happened in Londonderry and one of my jobs at the time was to draft briefs for Ministers and guidance for overseas posts that reproduced what was then the official verdict on Bloody Sunday which we now know to be completely untrue, or, if not completely untrue, at least substantially inaccurate and misleading. I do still feel a mixture of guilt and annoyance that I became part of what for many people was a cover-up of wrong-doing in which the Foreign Office was pushing out information to overseas posts to say that this was how it was, these allegations were unjustified, untrue. We did believe the official verdict as it was then which has now been substantially changed, as further investigation has revealed a different version of events. That’s not altogether a happy memory now of how one was involved in those affairs. I also remember going back to Belfast and talking to officials there and one of them was an MI5 officer who was talking in terms of how all the experience they gained in Northern Ireland was going to be immensely useful when trouble broke out on the mainland. He didn’t mean trouble in the sense of IRA trouble, he meant civil unrest in Britain and I thought that was really quite chilling as the perspective that some people had which obviously fed into how they were handling the problem. You could say it was simply one individual rather than a system but I think it did reflect a certain cast of mind which wasn’t very helpful.

On a much more cheerful note, in one sense, although perhaps the substance wasn’t, I also got to accompany the then Attorney General, who was a man called Sir Peter Rawlinson, to the Human Rights Court in Strasbourg where the Irish Government had brought a case

against the British Government alleging mistreatment of IRA prisoners and violation of human rights. The matter was due to come before the court and we sent out this really quite strong team of lawyers headed, as I said, by the Attorney General. I was literally the bag-carrier because all the documents that were needed for the trial had to travel in a Diplomatic Bag. If you've never seen a Diplomatic Bag, it is actually a white canvas bag, or at least it can be a white canvas bag, with HMG stamped on it and which is properly sealed so that no one can get any access to it. You carry a diplomatic passport which shows that you are entitled to be carrying the bag which should not be searched by customs officials. You are booked an extra seat on the plane so that you can have the bag next to you on the seat. I remember flying down from Paris to Strasbourg, I think it must have been, and having to defend this seat because people would come along and say "Take the bag off the seat" and I would say "No, I can't take the bag off the seat". I took the bag with all the papers out with me and spent a day or maybe two days in court listening to these rather esoteric arguments. The case was at the stage of whether it fell within the ambit of the court or whether it should be dismissed as being not appropriate for the court so it was a procedural argument rather than the substance of the case. The substance of it wasn't very exciting to listen to. I remember more going out to dinner in Strasbourg where the Attorney General who clearly had a taste for the finer things of life insisted we should all go to a particular restaurant. We all had our subsistence allowance to pay for dinner but it didn't really stretch to the kind of place we went to and I remember the Attorney's private secretary groaning and saying "God, he never takes any money" – he was a bit like Royalty, he never carried money. The meal sticks in my mind because I think it was the first time I had ordered mussels, and, as you know, there came a bowl of mussels and I'd eaten the mussels and then by this time almost everybody had finished their main course and along they came with another bowl of mussels which I subsequently discover is fairly typical in France and Belgium, you always get two bowls. So, I was sitting there rather embarrassedly eating my second. But at the end of the meal, the Attorney said "Well, I suggest we just split the bill equally, don't you think?" We all ended up having to pay our equal share of this meal which most of us wouldn't have bothered to have, had it not been for the Attorney. It was a little lesson in the dangers of travelling with Ministers but all good for learning the various aspects of diplomatic life.

CM: You were talking about prisoners and you mentioned prison visits in your notes.

BD: Yes, this curiously was a little throw back to GCHQ in a way. The Irish Embassy had lodged a complaint that family members visiting either a convicted or a suspected IRA person awaiting trial were being strip-searched before being allowed to see their family member and that this was unnecessary, embarrassing and unacceptable. I was asked to investigate with the prison governor what exactly was happening. So I'd telephoned the prison governor and spoken to him about the procedures and he said "No, no, it's completely untrue. These people, all we ask them to do is take off their top half and then they can put their top half back on and we get them to take off their bottom half". It was almost, you might say, a caricature of an 'Irish Explanation'. I, soberly as I could, reported back and explained to the Irish the position that it wasn't true that people were being stripped naked and made to stand naked before they went in. Clearly there was not much happiness at the Irish end to hear this and a little later I was summoned to ask "was this true that I had reported this?" I said "Yes, it was true" and in a way, there was a sense of relief that at least the Irish weren't making it up, that I confirmed that I'd said it. There were lots of lessons to learn from that in the sense of "had I recorded it properly within the office?" and "should I have spoken to the Embassy?" and so on but I don't remember being chastised or told off about it. It just sticks in my mind, you know, the lovely mind-set that could see a distinction between being stripped naked and being half and half. It also highlights something that you get a lot in diplomatic life. You're dealing with a serious issue and yet there is very often an absurd side to it and it's quite helpful and it does keep you balanced, and you realise that life is not always as bleak as it sometimes appears to be.

It's just worth saying, too, because at the time we'd bought a house and the only way we could buy a house anywhere near London was to go literally miles and miles away and we'd bought one on the Isle of Sheppey of all places; I think I was the only diplomat ever to live on the Isle of Sheppey. The office hours were by today's standards remarkably leisurely. We started at ten o'clock in the morning and finished about six in the evening. These days, people work much longer hours and certainly start much earlier. But I was adding two hours each way on that for commuting and so they were very long days and it was, again, a big change from GCHQ. There was no glamour attached to it in the sense of cocktail parties and dinner parties and so on, I don't think I went to a single social event in those two years because you didn't have time and I didn't know people. One of the big problems about not joining at the same time as others was that you didn't have that networking within the office that I alluded to, that you might otherwise have had. Although I learned, of necessity, a lot

about the mechanics of doing the job and I obviously met certain colleagues in the office through the work I did and who I had to see, it wasn't very good for developing friendships and so there are very few people that I can look back to, from that time, and think of as being colleagues throughout the office.

About two thirds through, Kelvin White left and was replaced by a man called Bill, later Sir William, Harding who was a very different kettle of fish. It was probably just as good that I did experience him. I think he had an Intelligence background but I think, also, he wasn't very happy at being Head of the smallest Foreign Office Department. I think he felt it wasn't quite right so he set about trying to build up the Department which was something that Kelvin was never interested in and he insisted on having an Assistant Head of Department. By that time I felt I didn't want to have an extra layer between me and the Head of the Department, I felt that I knew the job and having someone inserted above me felt almost like a demotion, so I probably wasn't the most cooperative. Bill was a stickler for appearances and I can remember once I sent up to him one of these submissions that I've described to you. The way we did things in those days was that each of the references that you attached to a submission you had to pin to it a little tag that had a letter on it so the first reference would be 'Reference A' and then you had B, C, D, E and so on, and you put these on with a pin in such a way that when turning over the reference you wouldn't stick your finger in the point of the pin. I sent these up and they were organised A, B, C, D, E, F, G or something and he sent it back saying "Your tabs are in the wrong order". There was nothing that was wrong with the substance, it was the way in which I'd organised the references. He said "Look at Diplomatic Service Procedure" and so I dug out this handbook on Diplomatic Service Procedure and at first sight he was absolutely right because it said you should do them this particular way, and then good old Adrian said "Ah, but look at the other book of Diplomatic Service Procedure". There was another edition of Diplomatic Service Procedure in which it said precisely the opposite which really goes to show how ludicrous Diplomatic Service Procedure was, so I think I sent it back to him saying "Look here". He never queried, again, my tabs.

I don't want to disparage him because, again, he was very good to me as a new person in terms of accepting that I was going to have some rough edges and didn't necessarily work the same way as I might have done if I'd been Roger Bone, for example. Apart from little things like that, we got on fine and I really enjoyed time there but one knew, in the way of Foreign Office, that after two years I was going to be thirty and at age thirty most people were

promoted to become First Secretaries. Particularly since I hadn't served overseas, the Personnel Department were quite keen that I should get some overseas experience fairly quickly because I was clearly, as I said, seven years behind in terms of my contemporaries most of whom would have done one if not two overseas tours by the time they were thirty; so I still had a lot of catching up to do. I can't now remember exactly how it was all done but I can remember being summoned by, again, the Personnel Department in Curtis Green and going over there and them saying to me "Right, we've sorted out a next job for you, you'll get promoted and you're going to go to Islamabad as First Secretary Political". There was no "Where would you like to go?" or "Do you have preferences?", it was just this is where you go. I thought "Oh, God, that's going to really go down well at home". And so, going home and explaining that this is what we're going to do, the initial horror began to sink in ... I say horror just because somehow it seemed to be an enormous change to go to Pakistan about which we knew nothing. The Foreign Office have what they call Post Reports which you're given when you're told about these things which explain all the ins and outs of life in the particular place. It's a fairly unvarnished account so you see that shopping means going to markets and having to buy goods in a way that you wouldn't have done in UK – no more packaged goods in supermarkets – and what you need to ship with you and so on and so forth. I think we were just getting over the shock of Islamabad and beginning to persuade ourselves that "this wouldn't be that bad, would it?" when I was summoned again to say "Change of plan, you're going to New York" and I thought "What logic is there between Islamabad and New York?" I don't think there was any logic, I think it was a classic case of finding a hole; one hole was more important than another hole and you simply lift the peg out of one and stick it in another. Fortunately, this time I didn't look a gift-horse in the mouth, I said "Thank you very much, that sounds good".

I was to go to New York to become First Secretary ECOSOC, that's short for Economic and Social Counsel, but it also meant that for the first time I was exposed to another aspect of diplomatic life which I hadn't had before which was the whole question of overseas allowances. I knew or had gathered from talking to people that, of course, one of the delights of going abroad was that you had this whole package of allowances to help you cope with the extra costs, and the travel and the accommodation and all of that and that people generally felt much better off when they were overseas than when they were at home. But before you went, you had something that was called an Outfit Allowance. Because I'd never been overseas before I now got the Outfit Allowance which was at a percentage of your salary or

the salary that you were going to have when you got there. This was, in the cost of the day, quite substantial. It was meant to allow you to buy suitable clothing.

CM: Was that for the whole family?

BD: Principally for you but I think there was also an allowance for spouses as well and things like cutlery and china. It was all called representational china so that you could have a dinner party at which you would reasonably represent the UK and weren't using your tatty, mixed up bits of pottery that you might have at home. You could go to the Wedgwood shop which was the traditional way of doing it and you'd order your dinner service and it would be shipped to the people who were taking your baggage to New York, and you'd order your glasses and your cutlery and I can't think what other things, certainly clothing. I remember Aquascutum used to do a 20% discount on suits and things like that so there were all sorts of little perks that you suddenly became entitled to. In most places you were entitled to an interest-free loan to buy a car but for New York that wasn't the case because no one recommended taking one - you bought a car in America rather than here. So we had that little delightful interlude of stocking ourselves up for this new great adventure in New York. Although, as I say, I had enjoyed Republic of Ireland Department and it had been a great training ground, and I was very lucky in terms of both the colleagues I had and the bosses I had, I think I was probably anxious by that point to find out what it was like to work overseas. What I didn't fully appreciate, of course, until I got there and experienced it, was that UKMIS New York was not at all typical of a British diplomatic posting overseas; I mean very different from an Embassy. Multi-lateral diplomacy is very different from bi-lateral diplomacy and the whole ethos and atmosphere was very different from your average Embassy. But I didn't realise that at the time, I was just looking forward to the change.

CM: It must have been very exciting.

BD: It was, very exciting, yes. I think for my wife it was also reassuring in a sense because there wasn't going to be a great problem of acclimatisation and our daughter would have the chance of going to decent schools and so on. It was all good news.

CM: Before we move on, there are several other people in your notes that you might like to talk about.



BD: Yes, it's just worth saying that at that stage I don't think I ever got to see a Foreign Office Minister. Although these days, I think, Junior Desk Officers do quite often get invited to ministerial meetings; in those days we didn't. But I did have some encounters with a couple of the senior men in the Foreign Office at the time. One was called Sir Geoffrey Arthur and the other was called Sir Donald Maitland and there was also the Ambassador in Dublin, Sir Arthur Galsworthy. They were all, as looked at from my end of the telescope at that time, rather grand figures, very imposing, very self-confident, secure in their own positions. I'm not sure I saw them as role-models that I was aspiring to emulate because they all seemed to be of such a different generation from me that I couldn't quite relate to them. But you just had a sense of men who had reached the peak of their professions and exuded an air of ability and confidence which one couldn't help but admire. I remember attending one meeting with Donald Maitland to discuss what may seem a rather esoteric subject but it was to do with the sovereignty of an island called Rockall which is to the north of Ireland and to the west of Scotland and which had suddenly become important because of the prospect of having oil reserves in the off-shore waters. The Irish also had a claim to sovereignty as did, I think, the Icelanders. We had placed a British flag on Rockall which was otherwise inhabited only by sea birds and we had a meeting in the Foreign Office to discuss the whole issue of how we would maintain our claim to sovereignty which various other Whitehall Departments attended. I can remember Donald Maitland chairing the meeting and telling someone from the Department of Fisheries, very firmly, that while the Department of Fisheries could set out what their objective was, it would be the Foreign Office that decided how we would go about achieving it and would he please not seek to preempt the Foreign Office's prerogative in this regard. It was a magisterial put-down of the other Department which rather summed up why the Foreign Office was not the most popular Department in Whitehall. There was a degree of arrogance really about the way in which relations were conducted in the sense that the Foreign Office, along with the Treasury, clearly regarded itself as one of the superior Departments and believed that other Departments should recognise this. I'm not sure I ever managed to achieve the same level of disdain with other Departments (and probably a good job that I didn't) but certainly it was an impression that stuck with me that the Foreign Office had its own sense of priorities and certainly didn't suffer fools gladly. So, I think that probably covers ...

CM: Roy Hattersley, did you want to mention him?

BD: Oh, yes, as I said, I never got to see or meet a Minister but Roy stuck with me because I first saw some evidence of political machinations, I suppose. In Republic of Ireland Department we used to receive the copies of the Irish newspapers every day and normally it was part of our reading, to make sure we understood what was going on, and they never left the Department. Then, one day we had a request that came from Hattersley's private office - Hattersley was then a Junior Minister in the Foreign Office - asking to see the Irish newspapers. We thought this was rather unusual so we skimmed through the papers to see why on earth he might be interested in reading them only to find there a story suggesting that Hattersley was being lined up to take over as the next Northern Ireland Office Minister which was news to us and, I think, news to almost everyone. So, we sent the papers along and, of course, it led to much speculation about what we might call kite-flying. I think the conclusion we all reached was that someone, as they say these days, 'close to Mr Hattersley', must have briefed an Irish newspaper that this was a possibility, in the hope that it might prove to be a self-fulfilling prophecy. It was the first sight I had of the way in which Ministers might seek to use the Press to further their own careers. But, of course, that may be all a matter of imagination on our part but it was just a strange coincidence that the story should appear and Mr Hattersley was aware of it before it appeared; but there we are.

### **1<sup>st</sup> Secretary, UK Mission to UN, New York, 1975-79**

CM: Sir Brian, we have a complete change of scene now; you're in New York.

BD: Yes, well, if it was a culture shock moving from Cheltenham to London, it was another culture shock moving to New York in 1975, both in terms of living in New York City and working at the UN. I'll deal with the UN first. I think it's fair to say that most countries who are represented in the United Nations send their best and brightest to represent them and I'm conscious, in saying that, it rather sounds as if I'm blowing my own trumpet but let's say other countries do that. I think it's also true of Britain but I didn't realise it at the time until I'd appreciated just what a strong group of colleagues I had joined in New York. Fundamentally, it's a chance to meet and mingle with amazing people from - I think in those days there were 130 different countries represented in New York. It's an experience you can't get anywhere else, I think, and just to see how different cultures worked, different political systems worked, the way in which you could cultivate personal relations with some

people, how much more difficult it was with others, it was a marvellous opportunity for me to widen my horizons and to gain, quite literally, a world view. I don't think you can help but pinch yourself to check for reality when you first walk into the United Nations building as a British delegate with all of the privileges that go with it in terms of your freedom of access. In these days the security is much, much tighter than it was then but, even then, without your UN badge you couldn't go into the main part of the building. You feel both very proud and also rather humble at the same time to be in such a place.

My job in what we called UKMIS, which was short for UK Mission to the United Nations - the job title was First Secretary ECOSOC. ECOSOC is short for the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations which is not as well known or as politically glamorous as the Security Council but we who worked in ECOSOC would argue that it was just as important because, although it didn't deal with the issues of war and peace, it did deal with all the fundamental issues of human development. By far the largest part of UN activity, in terms of financial activity and in terms of human resources, is not spent on the peace and war issues, it's spent on the development issues. In the mid 1970s, development issues had moved to the centre of the political stage as well because among the developing countries at the United Nations, and we were in a kind of post-colonial age, there was enormous pressure to establish what they called a New International Economic Order known, for short, as the NIEO. The 'developing countries' as a group were known as the Group of 77, or the G77 for short. I must confess I've forgotten why that title had emerged but that's how they were known. What they wanted to do was to redress what they perceived as the injustices and inequalities in the international economic system which discriminated against them and worked in favour of the rich countries. Sad to say, Britain was not sympathetic to these aspirations and we were one of the countries that resisted the idea of the NIEO most strongly. In this we were allies of the United States, Germany, Japan, to a lesser extent France, and so, very often in these debates that I was to become involved in, we were in a very small minority, not just in the UN as a whole but also within the European Union which then only had twelve members. We strongly opposed the central G77 demand that all developed countries should provide 0.7% of their GNP in development assistance within an agreed time frame. I'm glad to say that this is something that the British Government have now not only accepted but are one of the few countries that have actually achieved it. But, at the time, notwithstanding the fact that for all of my time there we had a Labour Government, we were actually quite financially

conservative and not as progressive as you might have thought, given the government we had at the time.

In the ECOSOC section there were four First Secretaries - I think that's right, four - each with our own sectors of responsibility which meant basically representing the United Kingdom in one or more UN committees. It's quite scary for the first time when you sit behind the UK nameplate in one of the big UN committee rooms making speeches on behalf of HMG. You are suddenly transformed from being 'Brian Donnelly individual' to Her Majesty's Representative and whereas in the Security Council it was almost invariably the Ambassador who would sit behind the nameplate, in the Economic and Social sectors of the UN it would be people like me who would be sitting behind the UK nameplate. You were, for the time you were there, the personification of the United Kingdom which at times felt a pretty big responsibility. You would get telegrams of instructions from London. They weren't telegrams in the sense that they were in abbreviated language. These days they would be called emails. But they would come by wireless into the UK Mission, addressed to the Mission and they would tell you what London expected you to try and achieve in terms of policy objectives, and we called these 'instructions'. The instructions were sent by a Desk Officer in United Nations Department in London who was both the face that you saw, or the face that you discussed with, and also the face that dealt with Whitehall in terms of achieving a consensus on what your instructions should be. For a long time my Desk Officer in London was a woman called Glynne, now she's Dame Glynne, Evans, who was a very tough and demanding colleague. She was tough and demanding both in terms of what she expected from us at UKMIS but also, as we discovered, of what she expected from people in Whitehall in terms of ensuring that the instructions she sent us were realistic and achievable and not just pious aspirations. From that standpoint, she was an excellent Desk Officer. There was the additional bonus that she had this wonderful husky drawl - her speaking voice on the telephone - and she sounded just like Fenella Fielding who was at the time very prominent on British Television, so it was always a delight if not for the substance but at least for the tone of Glynne's voice on the telephone. She eventually became my successor in the ECOSOC job.

Given that New York is five hours behind the UK, a typical pattern would be that, after a day in a committee, you would send to London a reporting telegram saying what had happened in the committee that day and whether you needed any instructions for the following day. So,

London would get that telegram, the Desk Officer would coordinate a reply within Whitehall and be ready to discuss it with you when you got to the office at 9 o'clock the next day because by then it would be 2 o'clock in London. Sometimes they'd send you written instructions and sometimes it would be verbal instructions on the telephone. So, there you'd be with your instructions, sitting behind the nameplate, and the debate would be going on in the committee and you'd put your name down to speak on particular points, or you'd raise your hand to speak, and then you'd have to intervene and make your points and the debate would continue. But you'd have to turn these instructions into a statement, you couldn't just baldly read them out. You had to, at least, undertake certain pleasantries and you'd try to acknowledge what other people had said so you'd be saying "The distinguished representative of Pakistan has said 'so and so', I regret to say that I couldn't possibly agree with that view because it seems to us that the position is like 'so and so'". So, you were often having to think on your feet.

One of the accidents of alphabet meant that, because the UN organise countries in terms of alphabetical order of their official names, I would often find myself sitting between the USSR and the USA because, as the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, we came before the United States of America but after the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. So, you'd have quite a lot of informal chatter going on between the three of you as to what your instructions were saying and what you really thought about this, that and the other. I remember I had this lugubrious Soviet colleague who once said to me "Aahh, you know Brian, your job is much easier than mine. All you've got to do is read your instructions, I've got to read between the lines of my instructions". That was as close as he got to sort of letting the mask slip as to what it was like being a Soviet diplomat. So, lots of new skills to be learned about how you present yourself and, of course, you don't just sit in the seat all the time, you've got to get up and go out and talk to other delegates and lobby them about why your ideas are better than theirs and try and persuade them to support you. Again, there's no teaching manual for this, you've just got to try and learn it as you go.

So, over the four years, my portfolio included subjects like Science and Technology, Human Settlements, Transnational Corporations, Restructuring the United Nations and Transport of Dangerous Goods. Now, Transport of Dangerous Goods sounds innocuous and rather boring but it was my first exposure to UN politics and a bit of a disaster, really. It fell to the United Kingdom to propose a draft resolution on the subject in ECOSOC because an expert

committee on the subject was chaired by a Brit, and they had produced a text that was proposing some changes to the international rules that govern the specification of lorries that carry dangerous goods and the signs that they have on them. So, when you see a lorry carrying a sign that says 'Hazardous Materials', those signs are all part of a UN system that lays down what the signs should look like and what the specifications of the lorries should be. Now, it's a very worthy thing and I duly tabled this draft resolution, thinking this was innocuous only to find that it was immediately denounced by Brazil, Mexico and Argentina as a devious attempt by the rich countries to deny poor countries their fair share of international trade. The argument was that the poor countries couldn't always afford to introduce the kind of modifications to their transport fleets and put on the signs, and if that meant they would be excluded from international trade it was unfair and that we, the rich countries, should therefore pay for them to make the changes. And, of course the G77 rallied around this argument. I found myself, instead of trying to get the adoption of an innocuous resolution, in the midst of this heated political debate about the whole principle of the New International Economic Order which pervaded all aspects of UN life at the time. So, I learned the hard way that, before any initiative, you have to prepare the ground well. You've got to get to know the likely opposition and you've got to try and anticipate and neutralise their objections. Before I left the UN, four years later, I managed to pilot through another resolution on dangerous goods, not only through ECOSOC but right through the whole system to the General Assembly, getting it adopted by consensus at every stage. So, that was my personal, individual triumph at the UN – to get adopted a resolution on The Transport of Dangerous Goods. Never let it be said it's not important.

I'll just add, as a footnote to that, that in 2015 when I turned 70, and I'd gone back to New York on holiday with my family, it was the fortieth anniversary of my arrival in New York and my first appearance in ECOSOC, and UKMIS kindly agreed to get me a pass to go and sit in ECOSOC for the day. I'd hoped it was going to be the day on which they dealt with dangerous goods but I missed it by one day. But they kindly let me sit in the front seat again and vote on a couple of resolutions that went through. I have to say that apart from the fact that everyone was now using iPads and mobile phones and getting their instructions literally as they sat at the table, not as we used to do, large parts of the agenda were identical to what it had been forty years earlier. It was a lovely experience to re-live it again.

CM: And you were allowed to vote?

BD: I was a delegate for the day, yes, UKMIS managed to register me as an official delegate to the UN for one day and it was really quite a moving experience.

Well, as I've indicated, an important part of the job was to try and have good personal relations with the members of the G77 and I made friends there with people from Pakistan, from Yugoslavia, from India who were the key players very often. Iran also, before the revolution. I always found that being a member of Commonwealth helped in this regard because a lot of the G77 were Commonwealth countries, former British colonies, now of course independent states. We had the commonality of language, for one thing, because although there was interpretation for all UN meetings into French, Russian, Chinese, Arabic, by and large most of the informal discussion was in English so you had a great advantage being an English speaker. A lot of the Commonwealth countries would be happier talking to you than they would be talking to the French or the Germans or whatever. So, you put a lot of time and effort into doing that but at the same time the discussions could still get quite heated and confrontational. One of my committees was the Commission on Transnational Corporations and the Peruvians had invited us to go and meet in Lima which we'd, probably by mistake, agreed to do. Transnational Corporations had this unenviable reputation in Latin America because it was alleged that ITT had been heavily involved in the overthrow of President Allende in Chile in the early '70s and in general in Latin America, the American transnational corporations were perceived basically as extensions of the American system undermining the economic independence of the Latin American countries. So, the G77, and the Latin American countries, who were big drivers of this, wanted a code of conduct which would regulate how transnational corporations should behave. We and the Americans were fiercely opposed to this and the Department of Trade and Industry which was the responsible Department for policy sent out a very formidable lady called Anne Mueller to lead our delegation. Since the American delegation proved rather ineffectual, she ended up basically having to lead the defence against this very concerted and often quite outspoken attack from the developing countries led by the Latin Americans. Slightly to my horror, since I thought it was probably unachievable, she insisted on re-drafting the G77 paper, something that was almost unheard of in New York terms. The convention in New York was that when the G77 put forward a paper, it was accepted as the basis for discussion, you didn't try to challenge it fundamentally. But she was very reluctant to do that. I think she debated every comma and full stop in this text and it went on and on and on and she carried the great brunt of the

negotiating, to the fury of the Peruvians who clearly thought that this was going to be a great victory for them in Lima. At times there was a whole array of press photographers around Anne's desk, taking photographs, because word had got out that there was this English woman who was blocking the whole establishment of the code. It was a bravura performance that in the end basically thwarted the G77. I mean we didn't win the war but we won that particular battle and stopped the evolution of the code until another meeting. But it was an object lesson to me in how her unfailing politeness with humour, and determination, could work more effectively than bombast and threats. She went on to be the Permanent Secretary in the Cabinet Office, I think, I mean she was a very successful civil servant in Britain but that was a particularly magnificent performance, I thought.

We had the additional bonus that at the weekend in the middle of this two week conference, the Peruvians flew us up to Cusco in a rickety air force DC3 and then took us to Machu Picchu to show off their great cultural heritage which was very nice. It was also memorable because in those days I carried a 'man bag' - you know, a little handbag - which was all the vogue in New York. It was slightly frowned upon in London still but in New York a lot of men seemed to carry a little bag. We were in this conference hall in Lima when we were all asked to evacuate because there was a bomb threat. So we all immediately rushed out of the chamber and were hanging around in the grounds outside when I realised that I had left my bag, my man bag, in the conference hall and that it had in it all my money, my passport, everything was there and so very foolishly I started to edge my way back in, to try and retrieve my bag. I got fairly close to the hall and these Peruvian security men stopped me. I had no Spanish worth speaking of, or speaking with, and we had a slightly confused and confusing conversation in which I managed to convey that I had left a bag in the conference room and that I wanted to get it back. So they escorted me in to the conference room and I found my bag and I picked it up and said "Thank you very much" and left. They immediately called off the security alert having mistakenly thought that it was my bag that had caused the alarm. I knew that it wasn't my bag that had caused the alarm but I hadn't got the Spanish to explain this to them so I got back out just as everybody else started going in and I was saying "No, no". Whatever caused the alarm hasn't been found. So, it was total confusion. Anyway, there was no bomb and we escaped unscathed. Well, just about escaped. On the return journey I had a dreadful flight back into New York. We were coming in towards Kennedy and I had just gone to the loo. It was an overnight flight and I had woken up and I was actually in the loo, so this is not very salubrious, but the plane just



dropped like a stone. The message came: “Return to your seats, return to your seats” and there I am not very well placed to return to my seat. I eventually get myself dressed properly and emerge from the loo to go back to my seat and I find that the air stewardesses are lying on the floor, clinging to the bottoms of the seats and no one is doing anything other than scream because the plane is bouncing around so much. It was just an enormous air pocket, it turned out, so I eventually got back to my seat but the effect was that for a couple of years afterwards I became a terrible flier and I still have a problem about going to aircraft loos because you think “My God ...”.

Anyway, I think my next trip was to Vancouver for a UN conference on Human Settlements where the UK was represented by a man called Peter Shore who was I think the Minister for Environment at the time. The G77 tried to introduce into what should have been a very worthy conference document about the importance of human settlements in development some contentious wording about the status of the Palestine Liberation Organisation, the PLO, which we couldn't accept. This was happening across the UN at the time, it was a deliberate attempt to try and push forward the status of the PLO in UN terms and it was being resisted by most of the Western governments. But we got to a point where we needed instructions as to whether we could accept the conference document as a whole on a consensus basis, but then make what we used to call an explanation of vote in which the Minister would say “Well, I've agreed to this on consensus but I need to make it clear that I do not agree with this paragraph that deals with the PLO”. Or whether we had to call for a vote on that particular paragraph and insist on voting against it. We needed to clear that in London but the trouble was that there was no embassy in Vancouver, there was just a consulate, and the communication set-up was primitive to say the least. As the Foreign Office representative it was my job to write the telegram back to London and to get the instructions.

I remember sitting in this tiny box of a communications office in Vancouver and I think my GCHQ skills came in useful because we had to type the telegram on to a machine which turned the typeface into a tape, punched with holes, which you then had to feed into the transmitter which would then encipher it and send it to London. Basically, in typing it you couldn't make any mistakes because you would then get an enciphered mistake and so no one would have a clue what you were talking about at the other end. This punched tape kept breaking and every time it broke, it would invariably break in the middle of a hole and so we had to type and re-type this telegram before feeding it carefully into the machine. I think it

took us hours. Fortunately the time zones being even further apart than New York, it wasn't too critical and eventually we succeeded. I think we accepted the consensus and made an Explanation of Vote. It was just another case of how, even though you were on the economic side, you could get some really heated political issues. Every year in the General Assembly we would have a draft resolution on the New International Economic Order and it always generated an enormous amount of heat, but very little light. Almost every year we'd get a senior official from the Foreign Office, once we even had a Minister, a man called Frank Judd - now called Lord Judd, a lovely man. They would come out for these meetings and almost invariably they would think they'd found a way forward that we in New York had missed. We would be rather cynical about this and we would know that really they were just rediscovering the wheel and wait until they'd gone and then have to sort it all out again. So, it was an exciting time and an empowering time in a way.

One of the particular delights but also an absurdity, really, was that ECOSOC every summer, and I think it still does, would move to Geneva for its summer session. It's a bit like the absurdity of the European Parliament moving from Strasbourg to Brussels and back again. We'd go for six weeks so all the New York delegations for the members of ECOSOC – there were 56 members of ECOSOC, I think – plus all the Secretariat would all move to Geneva for six weeks. For delegates it was marvellous, you had six weeks beside the lake, escaping the heat of the New York summer: lots of filet de perches, lots of raclette, weekends in the Alps and all that sort of stuff, but for families left behind it was much less fun. When you take two or three hundred mainly youngish people and deposit them in a foreign location for six weeks you get lots of parties, lots of relationships and it was pretty corrosive on family life. Although, that said, we did work long hours. A typical day would be you'd come into the office in the morning, have an office meeting, perhaps talk to London, very often you'd have an EU co-ordination meeting to go to and they could be interminable, even with only 12 members they would go on and on and on. Then you'd have a committee meeting in the UN from 10.30am to 1 o'clock. Then you might have a lunch with some colleagues or, in New York, we used to try and sneak off for a game of squash. You'd come back and have another meeting from 3pm till 6pm, then you'd have to go back to the office to write your daily report of what had gone on and send that off and then, very often, you'd have an official cocktail party or a dinner or something to go to. So, it was quite a long and arduous day which became part and parcel of your life.

I was very fortunate at UKMIS in that there was a great team of people there although, as I was to realise later, not at all typical of your average embassy. The Ambassador was a man called Sir Ivor Richard, now Lord Richard, who was a former Labour Party Minister who had lost his parliamentary seat. There aren't very many politicians who become British Ambassadors or UN representatives. But, traditionally, the post of Ambassador to the UN when Labour were in power was filled by a Labour Party politician so it wasn't unusual in that regard but clearly it was exceptional for the diplomatic service as a whole. The risk is of course, that the person who takes the job never really settles into the system but I think it's fair to say that Ivor took to it like a duck to water. He was very sociable, he was a former barrister, a good debater and a very strong personal presence. We thought of him rather like a nuclear deterrent in so far as ideally you never had to use him, but he was very good to be able to use as a threat. There were very few other ambassadors who felt like taking him on, on any kind of occasion. So, it proved to be a useful negotiating tactic to say at a certain point "Well, if you can't agree to this, I'm going to have to raise it to ambassadorial level". A lot of people would then begin to make concessions because they knew that their ambassador would not welcome being put in a room with Ivor Richard to try and sort an issue out. Obviously he didn't know diplomatic procedure and didn't care about it to be honest. I remember him being amazed once when one of my colleagues who wanted to get married approached to ask him for permission; he didn't realise - I'm not even sure it was in Diplomatic Procedure but apparently somewhere it had said that if you were proposing to get married, you should consult your ambassador. He thought that was very strange.

The only problem we had with Ivor was that when he was appointed, the Foreign Secretary at the time was a man called Anthony Crosland. He was one of the stars of the Labour Party but unfortunately he died suddenly and to everyone's surprise, I think, the man named as his successor as Foreign Secretary was David Owen who at the time was amazingly young for a Foreign Secretary. He and Ivor didn't get on at all. I think Ivor probably felt that if life had gone differently and he'd stayed in Parliament or remained a Minister, hadn't lost his seat, he would have got the job rather than David Owen and that he could have done it better than David Owen was doing it. We got to an absurd situation at one point where Ivor was addressing telegrams to the Prime Minister rather than to the Foreign Secretary because he didn't agree with Owen and I think the feeling was mutual. I think most of us so admired Ivor that we would have sided with him. David Owen was not the most popular Foreign Secretary. There was once a suggestion that we should all register our proxy votes in

Plymouth (Owen's Parliamentary seat) so that we could help vote him out. The way in which he treated individual members of staff sometimes caused great offence. He was very rude and off-hand and he wasn't a popular man. I know of other colleagues who admired him for his policy acumen, but in terms of personal relations, notwithstanding him being a doctor, he did not have a good bedside manner. I mean it didn't affect ECOSOC very much except at General Assembly times when David Owen would come to visit and then you'd almost feel the tension because Owen would set up his office in a hotel and never come near to UKMIS. It was very odd.

But because Ivor was a political appointee, it was clear that whenever the next general election was held his term would come to an end and that happened in '79 just when I was due to leave. We had an office party to await the election results come through. As it became increasingly clear that Labour were destined for defeat, Ivor became increasingly despondent and a man called Graham Burton, another who's now Sir Graham, and I were the only two who were prepared to acknowledge that we'd voted Labour and we decided we had better take Ivor out to cheer him up. So we took him off and we were riding round New York in the ambassadorial Rolls. I think we went to an automat on 42<sup>nd</sup> Street and bought some sandwiches to eat in the back of the Rolls Royce. Then we went basically bar-hopping and we ended up in a bar on Second Avenue. I was sitting next to this Irishman and I'm not quite sure how the conversation got round to it, but it became clear that the Irishman was of an extreme Republican character who had fully supported the assassination of Airey Neave that had happened relatively recently. There we were, sitting next to Ivor who'd had a few drinks by then and rather worried that this might lead to an incident. The Rolls Royce was still sitting outside. I think I must have whispered to Graham that we'd better get Ivor out of there fairly quickly but we didn't want to tell him why, in case it led to him starting an argument with this man. Ivor Richard was a very large man and I'm still not sure how we got him out of the bar and into the back of the Rolls Royce. I think we persuaded him it was time to go home. But it was quite a memorable way to round off a tour in New York with one's Ambassador escaping from an IRA man.

Beneath Ivor, I had two excellent but very different bosses. One was called Archie McKenzie who had been a Junior Diplomat at the founding of the United Nations in San Francisco. On the surface he was a rather dour Scot but he was also a very kind, warm and companionable man. He was very supportive to me, again, as a newcomer who knew nothing

at all about how I should behave in these circumstances. He was a member of Moral Re-Armament which is an organisation that isn't much talked about these days and, in fact, it's changed its name, I think, to something more modern and with-it. It had been founded before the War, it was anti-Fascist and it had Christian roots but it had this strong streak of moral absolutism. Archie didn't push this at all. He wasn't a proselytiser about it, but he didn't drink and wouldn't serve drink in his house and so his gatherings were always dry which was somewhat unusual in diplomatic life. He published his memoir some time ago and it appears that his membership of Moral Re-Armament had really hindered his career because in the rather fevered Cold War climate I think there had been doubts about loyalties. Because Moral Re-Armament required such an absolute commitment to the cause it raised the question of where would your first loyalty be: to the cause or to your country? I think he suffered from that very unfairly because, as I was saying, he was very competent at his job but very unassuming. He was succeeded by a man called Peter Marshall, again now Sir Peter, who subsequently became our UN Ambassador in Geneva and then Deputy Secretary-General of the Commonwealth. Peter was a much more on the surface kind of person than Archie. He was a great concepts man, an ideas man, and you never knew from one day to the next what his latest idea would be. He was full of ideas and, like many people of that kind, one idea in twenty might be worth pursuing but it was always difficult to work out which of those ones it was going to be. He certainly kept us on our toes trying to both pursue the good ideas and kill off the bad ones. The junior people would have a little staff meeting, saying "This is Peter's latest idea. Is it workable or do we have to push it to one side?" Again, very instructive to work with, and to see how two people so different could be successful in doing the same job.

Within the UN itself, because we weren't on the Security Council side, we never actually saw much of the Secretary-General who was Kurt Waldheim at the time. In fact one of the big issues throughout my time there was this exercise called 'Re-Structuring the Economic and Social Sectors of the United Nations'. It was a committee headed by a very urbane, quintessentially English Ghanaian, a man called Kenneth Dadzie who subsequently was the Ghanaian Ambassador in London. He always wore dark shirts with white collars, beautifully tailored suits and perfectly knotted ties and he had this remarkable grasp of English in which he could formulate the most elegant of sentences without seeming to think about it. It was just amazing to sit and listen to him in the chair of a meeting, summarising it in his mellifluous tone.

The upshot of this committee, one of the upshots, was that there was agreement to create a new job which would be a Deputy Secretary-General who would be responsible for the economic and social sectors of the UN. The idea was, part of the NIEO, to give the developing countries a more prominent presence at the top of the UN because traditionally the Secretary-General had not really bothered himself with economic issues and there was a feeling that this had meant that they weren't given the importance they deserved. Having created this job, Ken Dadzie became the first occupant of it and since I'd been heavily involved in the negotiation he asked me if I would be prepared to join his private office, effectively. He wanted a British, an American and a French officer – I think he wanted members of the Security Council, people working for him so that he would have the full weight of the permanent members of the UN in support of his job. That led to a lot of correspondence with London about whether I could be seconded for a time, whether if I left I could come back to the Foreign Office, what would be the terms of my re-entry if I came back, all sorts of fairly boring practical details – how much would I be paid? The upshot of which was that, I could sense that particularly since I'd joined the Foreign Office late, there was a reluctance in the Foreign Office to agree to my doing it. Frank Judd, I remember, was very much in favour of it but I knew that he'd be gone soon and my career was not in his hands, it was in the hands of the professionals. There was also the very real constraint that the conditions of service in New York were so good, as a British diplomat, that I'd be worse off. My daughter would have to have left the school she was at, we would have to have left the apartment we had and, most importantly, I would have lost my entertainment allowance! New York which looked fantastic from where we were sitting, in this very privileged position, might not have looked so great if I was much less well off. So, in the end, I didn't take it and so I never learned what it would have been like to be a UN bureaucrat.

The other significant UN figure was a man called Diego Cordovez who was Ecuadorian and he was the Secretary of ECOSOC. In contrast to - well no, I won't say in contrast to Dadzie because Dadzie was very good at doing things but Cordovez was acutely political. The words "slippery" and "eel" come to mind when you think of Diego, I mean he was just sinuous, the way in which he'd work through an issue. He was the ultimate fixer, he was a great man for back-room deals and secret arrangements and things like that. On one hand you have Dadzie who has all the appearance of being a gentleman in the almost literal sense of the term yet could clearly get things done. Then you have Cordovez who was a different

kind of character entirely but who went on to some very senior roles in the UN as a negotiator on a variety of issues, as the Secretary-General's special representative. I think he may have even been a candidate for Secretary-General at one point. He did things differently, and not quite the way one would want necessarily to emulate but you had to know there were people like that, and how they worked. We got on very well together (indeed he also asked me to go and work for him) and he was one of the key contacts I needed to have, to succeed in the job, and I think by being able to establish a good working relationship with him that was a great help for what I wanted to achieve.

I've alluded to life in New York, and this might not make good reading for a British tax payer, but I don't think I've ever felt since as well-off as I felt in New York. It was a curious combination of the state of salaries in the Civil Service at the time, in the '70s, when we had suddenly gone through heavy inflation, and salaries had gone up quite significantly, a very generous housing and overseas allowance package, and, as I mentioned, a generous entertainment package. We judged that it was necessary to live in Manhattan in order to be available to attend meetings at the UN at all hours so we had this 24<sup>th</sup> floor apartment on 65<sup>th</sup> Street within walking distance of the office. We had doormen, concierges, garage attendants who'd bring your car up and meet you at the door. The state schools in New York, the public schools, were not deemed acceptable for British school children so they went to private schools. My daughter went to one of the best schools in Manhattan. I think the teaching ratio was nine pupils to a teacher; it was an amazing education. I had my first American Express card. I bought a silver Ford Mustang car I called my sheep in wolf's clothing: it looked very sporty but it wasn't actually enormously so. In fact, in Manhattan I hardly used it but we shared a weekend cottage in upstate New York with diplomatic colleagues and we'd go up there a couple of weekends a month. In the winter it was marvellous, there was a little lake with skating and we built a kind of Cresta run through the trees for the kids to sled down. So, we had this very privileged life and I don't think we quite appreciated at the time just how privileged it was. It was privileged both in that private sense, in that you could afford to go to the theatre, you could afford to have nice holidays. Freddie Laker introduced his low cost flights during that period so it was actually possible to go back and forth to the UK for a very short visit. But also privileged in that, within the Mission, when I look at the group of people who were there then and what happened to them in their subsequent careers, I realise just what an outstanding group of people it was and so I come back to my original comment about people sending their best and brightest. Almost everybody in that group went on to become a

senior ambassador somewhere. It was just an amazing environment in which to learn and to grow. But it was a very rarefied atmosphere because, apart from places like New York or Brussels, maybe NATO where I was at later, most embassies are too small to have that collection of people at the same age, of that kind of calibre. Most embassies would only have two or three First Secretaries whereas we must have had ten or twelve and so I felt at the end of it - I was probably slightly arrogant about it because I felt, you know, here was I, I'd been at UKMIS, I was one of the select even though I knew nothing at all about what bi-lateral diplomacy was all about. I was just very, very lucky to have had that chance at that time. People often say "What's your favourite job?" and I say "Well, you know, looking back, being in New York in the 1970s could hardly be beaten". I'm not sure going back in the 80s or the 90s it would have felt as good but, at that particular time, there was just a conjunction of things that made it an entirely absorbing and satisfying experience.

### **Singapore (Head of Chancery), 1979-82**

CM: This is Friday, 31<sup>st</sup> March and we are resuming Sir Brian Donnelly's recollections of his diplomatic career. Your next move was to Singapore, Sir Brian, how did that come about?

BD: Well, the system in the office in those days was that you could fill out a Post Preference form showing which places you might like to go to. We wanted to go to somewhere where our daughter could come with us so we wanted it to have reasonably good schools, we didn't want to send her off to boarding school at the age of 9 and that rather narrowed down the field. My preference would have been Nairobi but the only job that I might have done in Nairobi wasn't becoming available and so they popped up with Singapore which seemed to be a perfect fit for what I wanted to do, which was to gain some experience of bilateral diplomacy after four years of multi-lateral diplomacy in New York. People kept saying to me that New York wasn't really what diplomatic life was all about, it was quite different, and that until you'd been to a bilateral post you wouldn't really understand it. And, of course, having joined the Foreign Office relatively late, I'd missed out on the postings that most people did in their early twenties which were usually two bilateral posts. So, Singapore was offered and gratefully accepted. But I think we'd underestimated the culture shock of going back to the UK for the period in between the two jobs, which was about three months.



It sounds very generous but the intention was in those days that you'd spend that time doing training courses and preparing for the new job which might involve language training. In the case of Singapore that wasn't relevant but I think the shock was that I was leaving behind what I thought was a wonderful job, good friends, all the buzz of New York and the United Nations, all the diplomatic privilege that I'd come to take for granted. My daughter was leaving a school that she loved, she was leaving all her good friends. And all of a sudden you return to humdrum domesticity in a house in the suburbs, well it wasn't in the suburbs it was fairly deep into Kent, and I would go up to London two or three days a week for training courses and the rest of the time we seemed to spend on sorting out years of neglect in the garden, trying to do house decorations, all the sort of jobs that diplomatic life rather insulates you from. So, it was pretty much of a culture shock and, while I don't expect any sympathy from people who have to put up with that all the time, it is very dislocating and I think we hadn't really expected that kind of dislocation and certainly I think my daughter found it very difficult to settle because she knew there was, in a sense, no point in trying to make new friends because we were heading off again. So, as I say, I did a variety of preparatory courses on post management, on accounts, on security and on personnel but because there were no big political issues with Singapore, there was not much to do on that side.

When we eventually did go to Singapore, it was about three months later. Well, I think nothing can prepare you for the heat and humidity if you haven't lived in it before. You walk off the plane and all of a sudden you're hit by this wall of humidity. We had rather misguidedly, but I'd promised my daughter, brought with us a dog, it was a beagle, and I think the dog was more trouble than the rest of the journey put together. By the time we had arranged for it to be on the flight, stopped somewhere in the Middle East on the way where we had to get off and check that the dog was all right, and then collected it again at Singapore, got it through all the veterinary arrangements and got to the house I think we were just about exhausted. It was an Embassy house. In Singapore terms they're known as black and whites; these are big colonial era houses. In those days most of it was unglazed because you didn't have air-conditioning and you just relied on ceiling fans and the natural breezes. In a rather secluded estate, not far from the High Commission - the building in Singapore has now caught up with that, it's no longer very secluded but in those days it was basically occupied by diplomats and ex-patriate merchant bankers so it was an enclave of privilege really. For the first time in my life, and indeed my wife and daughter's, we had house servants. They were two elderly Chinese ladies, one of whom was the cook and the principal

baby-sitter and the other of whom was, basically, the cleaner and a sort of secondary baby-sitter. They'd been attached to the house for years and lived in a smaller house just behind the main house with their husband who at one time, apparently, had also been a cook but by the time we got there he did nothing but sit outside his little house while his two wives scurried around and looked after us, and then looked after him. It was a polygamous marriage which I'd never associated with the Chinese, but there we were. There was fairly quickly a realisation that whereas in New York we had been relatively small fish in a very big pond, we were now relatively big fish in quite a small pond both in terms of position within the High Commission and within Singapore society generally because the British High Commission was, because of the colonial connection, more or less the most significant and important High Commission in the island. I mean, I suppose the Americans because of their sheer size and scale would question that but it certainly felt, in terms of political relationship, that we were in the pre-eminent position.

CM: Why is it called the British High Commission in Singapore and not an Embassy, Sir Brian?

BD: Well, basically the distinction is between Commonwealth countries and non-Commonwealth countries. Where a country is a member of the Commonwealth, we only have High Commissions rather than Embassies and the Head of the High Commission is known as the High Commissioner. Otherwise, there's no practical difference between a High Commission and an Embassy, they're structured in the same way, the junior staff have exactly the same titles except the deputy to the High Commissioner is known as the Deputy High Commissioner rather than the Deputy Head of Mission. It's simply the two terms are more or less interchangeable and it's very easy to slip from one to the other, so, for "High Commission" understand "Embassy", for all practical purposes they're the same thing.

I should probably say a few words about the curious job title I had, well, it seems curious to lay readers, which is Head of Chancery. It's a title that no longer exists, it's a victim of management speak. The problem with the Head of Chancery job is that it doesn't make sense in terms of the organograms which are so beloved by management gurus but it used to work very well in practice, much better, in my view, than the system which succeeded it of appointing a Deputy High Commissioner or a Deputy Ambassador. The Head of Chancery was effectively the Chief of Staff to the High Commissioner and his role was to ensure that

all of the constituent parts of the High Commission worked smoothly and left the High Commissioner free to deal with the big issues. I had direct responsibility for the political section, but there were also defence, communications, consular, administration, security sections: all of these different sections of the High Commission reported to the Head of Chancery and it was his job, basically, to make sure that they were all doing what they were supposed to do. But in Singapore I was actually number three in the hierarchy because there was also a Commercial Counsellor who was senior to me in diplomatic service terms. However, he did not supervise my work so I reported directly to the High Commissioner. The Commercial Counsellor ran his own little empire of commercial work and also reported directly to the High Commissioner and if the High Commissioner was away, he acted as the High Commissioner in his place. But, otherwise, the two of us operated in separate worlds. My office was in the main building of the High Commission, right next to the High Commissioner's, whereas the Commercial Counsellor was in a separate building within the same compound but quite apart. Effectively, I had the ear of the High Commissioner and, as they say, proximity is power in organisations.

Now, my first High Commissioner was a man called John Hennings who, for most of his career, had been in the Commonwealth Office when the Commonwealth Office had been separate from the Foreign Office. Of course, by the time I was in Singapore, we were a united Foreign and Commonwealth Office but for many years the Commonwealth Office was a separate entity. John had had most of his career serving in Commonwealth countries so he was an authority on Commonwealth affairs. In personality terms, he was a bit of a bulldozer who didn't suffer fools gladly and he had an even more formidable wife who was very academic in orientation. He'd managed to arrange it so that she would give English lessons to Singapore government ministers which reflected the then Singapore Government's determination that everybody should speak good English. Again, in those days, every embassy and high commission used to have what they called Leading Personality Reports which was a very sensitive file on which sat pen pictures of all of the leading personalities in the country that you were working in. These had to be updated annually and they contained mainly mundane points like what someone would like to eat at dinner and ideally what their background was so that you had some kind of basis for a conversation. But they would also include any peccadilloes that might have been picked up such as whether they were known to be heavy drinkers or prone to have affairs or been disloyal to their party, anything that might provide you with some intimate knowledge of their character and personality that would help

you in doing business with them. And so, for obvious reasons it was a very sensitive file and long before the days of data protection and so on. Well, of course, Mrs Hennings, when she was having these government ministers to do their English lessons would get them to write little essays about different aspects of their life which proved to be an absolute gold mine for the Leading Personality Reports! So, it was a classic example of how an Ambassador's wife can be a great asset.

Fortunately, John Hennings and I hit it off and at the end of the working day, which in Singapore was very early in the afternoon because we used to work straight through without a lunch break, John would come and sit in my office to chat and gossip. I reached the conclusion that he didn't actually relish going home, but he had to fill in time between the end of the working day in the office and evening engagements and diplomatic cocktail parties and so on. The trouble was that I think John felt his qualities had not been properly recognised in the Office. He'd been in Uganda during the expulsion of the Ugandan Asians and had done a very good job there and then he'd gone to Jamaica where he had, by his account at least, organised a visit by the Queen. Even though it was supposed to be the job of the Jamaican Government effectively he'd had to do it all himself. But because Jamaica is one of the countries where the Queen is Head of State, the High Commissioner doesn't qualify for a knighthood as he would have done if he'd done the same job in a so-called foreign country. This is a little known fact of diplomatic life that if the Queen pays a state visit to a country where you're the Ambassador, almost invariably the Ambassador gets a knighthood. But, if she goes to one of the countries where she's also the Head of State, such as Jamaica or Canada or Australia, you don't because in those countries it's not your job to organise the visit, it's the job of the local government to organise the visit. So, he felt a bit hard done by in that he hadn't got his knighthood as many of his contemporaries had and I think that was a pity because it rather coloured his general view of life. His principal job in Singapore was to get on well with the Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, and he seemed to do this very well.

His successor, a man called Peter Moon, was a somewhat perverse character. He was totally cynical about personnel management in the Foreign Office, having gone from a very lowly Counsellor job to suddenly being made Private Secretary to Edward Heath, when he was Prime Minister, for, as Peter said, no discernible reason other than the fact that he was available. He decided, and the reasons were never totally clear but it seemed to be that he

thought that John Hennings had got too close to Lee Kuan Yew and had lost objectivity, that he would go down a different route and keep some distance between himself and Lee Kuan Yew, much to the frustration of the Foreign Office. It was the last thing they wanted; they wanted someone who was close to Lee Kuan Yew. He ended up having a rather prickly relationship with London. I mention this simply because the job of Head of Chancery means you're a kind of filter between the High Commissioner and the outside world and there were all sorts of little differences that you had to try and sort of smooth over. John Hennings was a great believer in air-conditioning and in his residence he had the air-conditioning on full blast all the time, and so you had to warn people who were going to dinner or to receptions that they needed to come with a shawl or a jacket or something, otherwise they'd freeze. Peter Moon refused to use the air-conditioning and so you then had to warn people that they'd better go without and be prepared to be hot and sweaty! Peter was also somewhat vague in his attitude to people. I'd gone to the airport to meet him on his first arrival and brought him back to the High Commission, and settled him in. The next morning I'd gone round to pick him up to escort him to the High Commission, to introduce him to all the staff, and I walked in and he looked up and said "Who are you?", after I'd spent an hour or more with him the previous day! However, we managed to get along fine and he gave me some excellent advice about dealing with the Foreign Office. It just goes to show how the personality of the person that you're working for becomes a vital aspect of managing the job.

My two roles in Singapore, and this was why I wanted to go to a bilateral post, were political analysis on the one hand, both of Singapore and of the region, and staff management. Now, on the political analysis side I was very fortunate, I had some very good junior staff. One, a woman called Mariot Leslie went on to be, in her time, the most senior woman in the Foreign Office – Ambassador to NATO and, before that to Norway, and she'd been a Director General in the Office. Her predecessor had been a man called Peter Ricketts who went on to become Permanent Under-Secretary. So, Singapore had a tradition of having these very good junior staff and I had the benefit of that, but the trouble was that there wasn't actually very much political reporting to be done in Singapore. I was full of enthusiasm and when I arrived I was determined to uncover how the political system in Singapore worked. It seemed to be a relatively benevolent autocracy unless you happened to be an opposition politician or an investigative journalist in which case it could be a rather difficult place to be, and it operated a rather particular kind of what we'd call today state capitalism, I suppose. At the time it seemed a bit like an East European country under the Iron Curtain but one that worked. In

other words, there were lots of controls on the way people could, and should, behave; lots of slogans, banners across the road giving people instructions on how they should live their lives: “One child is enough”, this sort of thing. All redolent of a kind of communist, slightly Orwellian, society, but on the other hand a very successful economy, an economy in which the Government had its finger in almost every pie but, unlike the socialist economies of Eastern Europe, it was a flourishing economy and Singapore was generally just getting richer by the year. In some ways it should have been antithetical to the kind of Thatcherite government we had in Britain at the time, which believed in government staying out of business and so on. But, in reality, Lee Kuan Yew was the golden boy of Third World politics because he was running a successful country, he wasn't dependent on aid, he wasn't ostentatiously autocratic and a lot of governments, including our own, simply turned a blind eye to the ways in which free speech was curtailed, investigative journalists were basically forced out of the country and there were all sorts of small social measures that we in Britain would have thought were excessive. They decided, at one point, that people with long hair would not be allowed into Singapore and people were being turned back at the airport because they had long hair. They were absolutely draconian on people dropping chewing-gum on the street. Now, you may think that's a very good thing! Of course they were very fierce on any kind of drug offences and the death penalty was applied without any compunction.

Lee had a flourishing economy. He was a staunch ally of the West and basically the attitude seemed to be ‘Well, who cares if he is a bit tough on human rights and opposition politicians or indeed if the Government basically controlled the economy even though it gave the impression of it being allowed to operate as a private sector business’. Lee regularly got over 90% of the vote in elections which is unheard of in most truly democratic countries. I can remember being absolutely convinced I'd discovered how he was rigging the results only to discover that the electoral law that I had thought was so outrageous was exactly the same as the one we have in Britain because it had been copied almost word for word from British legislation when Singapore had become independent. It was my job, however, to talk to opposition politicians and to a lot of the journalists that managed to keep their heads just enough below the parapet to operate. Lee kind of tolerated embassies doing this but it also meant that it wouldn't jeopardise the High Commissioner's relationship with Lee if that was left to junior staff. So, I would meet with my American and Australian and other colleagues and we would bemoan the fact that no one seemed to realise that Lee was running this

government that was pretty oppressive because it suited them to have this little island, literally an island, of stability and prosperity as a beacon to other countries as to how you should do things or how you could do things.

I only had one face to face meeting with Lee himself and that was at the airport seeing him off to London where he was due to receive the Freedom of the City. The High Commissioner, John Hennings, had already gone to London to be there to meet him when Lee arrived and then to escort him to his various functions. It was tradition that when the Prime Minister was going to Britain you would go to the airport to wave him goodbye. This was just towards the end of John Hennings's time and we were expecting Peter Moon, and so Lee asked me – it's not easy for a junior diplomat to make conversation with a Prime Minister in an airport departure lounge so he was asking me questions about Peter Moon and this led him into talking about President Nyerere of Tanzania who was a contemporary of Lee Kuan Yew and they had been socialists together, I think at LSE, as young men. But, in Lee's eyes, as he made clear, Nyerere had never learned the shortcomings of socialism and, as a result, his very socialist regime in Tanzania had been an economic disaster. So, Lee was very scathing about Nyerere and this then led him on to be almost equally scathing about the shortcomings of Africans generally, resulting in just a throw away remark: "You wouldn't want to be on a plane piloted by an African, would you?" and I was rather taken aback by it. I mean even in those days before we became so sensitive about matters of race and gender and so on, it was quite clearly a racist remark. Then Lee digressed into how his best decision had been to encourage Europeans to stay in Singapore because they had qualities which you couldn't find in Chinese and Indians and Malays, and then to go on about the different qualities of different ethnic groups within the Chinese community as well as between the Chinese, the Indians and the Malays. In Singapore society, basically the Chinese tended to be predominant in politics and business, the Indians were seen as being the administrative class and the Malays were very much the under-class and it was quite clear that that was exactly how Lee saw the three groups. He clearly had this view of human qualities that would be deemed entirely inappropriate today, or then for that matter. I was left rather shaken by this which was a side of his personality that wasn't often seen or talked about.

Lee, of course, had a relationship with the British going back well before Singapore's independence and that had clearly included a relationship with the intelligence agencies. He still liked to use the intelligence channel from time to time to pass messages and so he would

summon the MI6 man in the High Commission, from time to time, to pass some particular message that he deemed was better sent on intelligence channels than through conventional diplomatic channels. Some British old-timers had known him as 'Harry Lee' in colonial days. I think it was pretty typical then, when you were dealing with Chinese people, to give them an Anglo-Saxon name as well as their Chinese one. By the time I was there 'Harry Lee' was no longer an acceptable form of address but we'd get visitors and you'd have to warn them that he no longer liked to be called that. Apart from domestic politics which, as I said, there wasn't a great market for in Britain, the main political issues that I had to deal with were Vietnamese Boat People.

CM: That must have been a difficult time.

BD: It was a difficult time. The background being, of course, that after the end of the Vietnam War a lot of people who were anti-communist or who had worked with the Americans felt that they had no future in Vietnam and they simply took to small boats and set off across the South China Sea. Some of them ended up in Indonesia, some in Malaysia. Singapore took a very hard line in refusing to allow boats to land; a characteristically Singaporean line with very little compassion. But they had eventually agreed that if refugees were picked up at sea by other merchant ships and those merchant ships docked in Singapore, the refugees could be allowed to land provided the country where the ship was registered gave a guarantee that the refugees would be settled in that country. He had worked out an agreement with Mrs Thatcher with regard to British vessels that gave him that guarantee. So, if we had Vietnamese Boat People picked up by British ships, which then docked in Singapore, they went into refugee camps but they had guaranteed onward transit to Britain. It's an interesting vignette, in light of the great heat that is generated these days about dealing with refugees, and, perhaps, surprising in that you wouldn't have necessarily thought Mrs Thatcher would have agreed to such an arrangement, but she did. So, we had this steady flow of people coming through the island, temporary residents but eventually destined to go to Britain and we organised some charitable efforts to help prepare them for going to Britain. My then wife was involved in English classes for the refugees who were going to England. I must say I was delighted, 20 odd years later, when I was Ambassador in Zimbabwe, a woman came out on temporary duty to work in our communications section and she had been a tiny child on one of those refugee boats. So, in one generation she had gone from Vietnamese refugee to a member of the Foreign Office which was quite a heart-warming story.



The other big event that happened during that time was, of course, the Falklands War. We couldn't have been further from it really, almost geographically and politically, but there was still an immense worldwide effort which the Foreign Office had to lead, of persuading foreign governments to give Britain political support and to deny support, of course, to Argentina. And so, part of the job was making sure that the Singapore Government was fully aware of what we were doing, why we were doing it and why we needed their support in the United Nations and elsewhere. In many ways it was pushing at an open door because it was not an issue in which Singapore had any vested interest and their traditional ties with Britain meant that they were more likely than not to support us. Our conclusion was that Lee, like most other people, thought we were mad to have embarked on the enterprise but was very glad when we came out victorious and he was supportive throughout.

The other thing on which we found ourselves reporting, really second-hand, was on Cambodia. At the time, it was the Cambodia of the Khmer Rouge and it was very difficult to get any information about what was going on there. There were several foreign correspondents based in Singapore who would travel widely in the region and who were reporting on Cambodia, so it was a useful place to pick up information about that. The big difference from New York, and it is a big difference, I think, in bilateral diplomacy generally, was that instead of having a circle of contacts from across the world, in Singapore it was a much smaller group of people. I've mentioned already that the Americans, the Australians, as well, of course, the Singaporean Ministry of Foreign Affairs, who were the group of people with whom we normally had business. The Singaporeans were always efficient and friendly but they weren't inclined to get very close to you. I can't recall any effective European Union co-ordination, even though it had been a regular feature of work in New York. There must have been some EU co-ordination but it wasn't an important factor in our work. It was also my first experience of how the British Council can make a very effective contribution to British diplomacy. We had, there, a very dynamic and active Head of Office, a man called John Munby, who arrived at a very fortuitous moment. As I mentioned, Lee Kuan Yew was determined that Singaporeans should learn to speak proper English, not, what was locally known as Singlish which was a Singapore variant of English - you'll still hear it in Singapore if you visit - which is far removed from, what you might say, received pronunciation, 'Queen's English'. So, he was very keen that the British Council should start up extensive English language teaching programmes and John Munby was just the man to respond to this and he soon had widespread programmes going – I think he may even have supplanted Mrs

Hennings as the principal teacher of English for government ministers. He made a major contribution to having Singapore become Anglophone as well as Anglophile and the British Council became a very important player in the British diplomatic effort in Singapore.

At the end of the day, you couldn't get away from the fact that Singapore was a small island and you can travel the length and breadth of it in the course of an afternoon. There's only so much you can do and see and it does get a bit claustrophobic. You do get a succession of visitors. In those days Concorde used to stop in Singapore en route to Australia and this meant that we would get people in transit. You'd have to go to the airport and meet them and sometimes sit with them for a while, while the plane was refuelled and before it went on its onward journey. I remember we had one night when Mrs Thatcher arrived en route to – I think it was a Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in Australia. There was an economic crisis on-going in Britain at the time and so when she arrived at Singapore it was all hustle and bustle and straight into a VIP suite where she could get on the telephone to London. I left her and the High Commissioner and the Cabinet Secretary and I forget who else now, huddled together trying to decide whether she should immediately return to London, whether that would make the crisis even worse because it would give such a bad signal of panic or whether she should keep on going to Australia. They were all huddled together in that room and I was left to look after Denis Thatcher, who was accompanying her on this visit, along with the Singapore minister, who'd been sent out as a courtesy to see her, but who was slightly bewildered by what was going on. I have to say Denis completely lived up to the Private Eye caricature of him. He just wanted to have a big gin and tonic and to talk about golf, and fortunately the Singapore minister was a golf player so he was a happy man. On another occasion we had Lord Carrington, who was then Foreign Secretary, and he'd been in Malaysia for some meeting and had come back to Singapore and was waiting for Concorde. Concorde was not the most reliable of aircraft and regularly had delays and I remember the British Airways man was in a terrible panic because Lord Carrington was sitting there literally drumming his fingers on the table, waiting, and the plane wasn't ready and wasn't ready. He came to me and said "Look, I've got some champagne but it isn't very cold. I can offer Lord Carrington warm champagne now and cold champagne in about half an hour, what do you think he'd like?" So, I went to Lord Carrington and said "Foreign Secretary, we can offer you either warm champagne now or cold champagne in half an hour, which would you like?" and he said "Both"!

It was my first experience, too, of Royal Visits which is, I suppose, an essential part of diplomatic life but I was very blessed in that I never had another because they are an absolute nightmare. It always seems to me you're on a hiding to nothing really because everything is expected to work like clockwork. You get no particular credit if it does because that's the norm but if it doesn't ... We had the Duke of Edinburgh who came on a non-official visit, which are sometimes worse than official visits, and we had naïvely thought, I think by association of the Duke with the Queen, that he liked horse racing. We'd arranged to take him on this afternoon – he'd been at a carriage racing meeting somewhere in Malaysia, I think – so, we'd arranged to take him horse racing. Singaporeans love horse racing and there's a race track and it's always very crowded with lots of noise and so on. So we took him along and he was clearly most unhappy and muttered, "What have you brought me to this bloody place for?" It turns out he has no interest in horse racing whatsoever. He likes horses, carriages but horse racing, no. So, that was one lesson learned.

Then we had Princess Margaret on an official visit and for official visits you get this immensely long list of requirements and do's and don'ts and personal likes and dislikes, I mean things like what kind of cigarettes she liked to smoke and what kind of whisky she liked to drink, how there should always be someone standing nearby with fresh cigarettes and so on and so forth. The High Commissioner inevitably was in something of a state about organising this but because he'd done the Royal Visit in Jamaica, he was an expert. So we had this big cocktail party organised and my job was to organise people into groups of six. He would bring Princess Margaret in and then they would move around from one group of six to another group of six but there hadn't got to be more than six because that would be too many for her to talk to at any one time. Of course, the High Commissioner thought that he would know everybody who was there but just in case he didn't, I had to be on hand to whisper the name of whoever it was that he was meeting and then there was someone else who had to stand behind her with cigarettes and someone else with the right brand of whisky and so on. It was at the time that she was in what we would call today "a relationship" with Roddy Llewellyn. He, of course, was not accompanying her but there were strict instructions that if any telephone call came through from Mr Llewellyn, it had to be put through to her. Unfortunately one of our security officers hadn't quite grasped this and so she missed a call from Roddy Llewellyn which didn't go down very well. She was then supposed to go on to the Philippines – there may have been somewhere else, she may have gone to Indonesia as well – anyway, I think that was in the days of Mrs Marcos so there were flamboyant parties

in the Philippines. Well, it seemed that she didn't take to the Philippines at all and we ended up getting a rather frantic message from the ambassador in the Philippines saying that she didn't feel well and wanted to come back to Singapore because Singapore had the great virtue of having drinkable water and proper air-conditioning. So, lo and behold just when we thought we had got away, you know, escaped, she came back again and basically stayed by the High Commissioner's swimming pool for an extra couple of days recovering from the diplomatic illness that had forced her to break off her tour of the Philippines. So, I learned that royal visits could be very wearing. She was very demanding and not obviously grateful. In stark contrast, we also had a very brief visit by Harold Macmillan who by that point was getting quite old. I had to accompany him in a car and we went to visit Lee Kuan Yew, and some other people, and he couldn't have been more charming and gracious, making you feel comfortable and at home, just a stark contrast. So, there you are.

I can't leave Singapore without mentioning staff management which was really an eye-opener because you had to deal with a whole host of issues with almost no training and very little guidance. It's amazing how if you take people out of their domestic environment and put them in a foreign environment, they can almost revert to being children with an expectation that the administration of the High Commission will act almost in loco parentis and solve all their problems. People become incapable of doing even the simplest tasks without help or guidance. And to some extent that's understandable because a lot of people do feel very unsure of themselves in a foreign country and different environment but Singapore could hardly have been an easier place to live. When I arrived there was a great crisis because there'd been a spate of burglaries and people were demanding that there should be extra security in their houses and we had no money for it. How you squared that particular circle was a problem. There were complaints about the condition of the tennis court, the catering at the swimming-pool and things like that – all First World problems! I had a case of one youngish man whose BO was so bad that - he certainly hadn't come to terms with the need in Singapore to shower about twice a day and people were refusing to work with him - I had to have him in to have this sort of paternalistic chat about had he heard about deodorants. I thought "is this what I joined the diplomatic service for?"

I also had some problems with a woman diplomat who was accompanied by her husband. That was still fairly rare and although there had been no similar disquiet over Mariot Leslie's husband, there was much stirring among other staff about what was going to happen to this

young man who would be unemployed and would be hanging around the house all day. There was clearly concern that putting a young man among lots of wives who were also hanging around the house all day was a recipe for all sorts of things that were undesirable. There was an assumption somehow that this young man was going to be a great deal of trouble and to some extent he lived up to expectations. He had a passing resemblance to Rod Stewart and he was a hairdresser by trade. So the first thing he did was to offer his services to all of the wives in the High Commission to come round and get their hair done which, of course, generated enormous gossip. Then he got into a rattan furniture business which was of dubious legality and I think we all sighed with relief when his wife announced that she'd shipped him off to Australia. We didn't query how he'd manage to get the visa but since she worked in the consular section, I assumed that she'd done some deal with her Australian opposite number to get rid of him. So he disappeared and never came back.

I once had to authorise breaking into the High Commission because the security officer who was supposedly on duty had fallen ill, inside, and couldn't get to the door. We were literally locked out and the only way in was if he opened the door from inside, and since he couldn't do that we had to break down the door to get in.

CM: Were there any repercussions?

BD: No. Well, if I'm honest, there was some evidence that the illness might have been self-inflicted through excess of alcohol consumption but there wasn't the proof of the appropriate standard, so we had to let that pass but a close eye was kept on him thereafter.

CM: How did you spend your time off and your holidays when you were on an island?

BD: Well, this was really one of the side benefits of Singapore but it meant you had to travel. For a weekend, you couldn't really get that far up into Malaysia to enjoy, you could just about have a good weekend in Malaysia but you really needed a few days longer so you tended to collect time so that you could take a week. But there were islands off the east coast of Malaysia which had marvellous snorkelling and diving opportunities. You could go further north through Kuala Lumpur, up into the Cameron Highlands where you could get a complete change of climate. This was where, in colonial days, a lot of the white settlers had had houses, or cottages. You could also get across to Indonesia. We had one break which

was rather memorable because it happened to coincide with political riots in Djakarta so we saw two sides of Indonesia, both the culture and the rather volatile politics. I took up running seriously and, for a time, became a runner of marathons and that used to occupy me a lot of my spare time in Singapore. I suppose it was inevitably something of an anti-climax after New York and I missed the buzz, and once we'd exhausted the sights and attractions, I found it all too organised and prescriptive but on the other side it was great for families; it was safe to live in.

My daughter, having got her to Singapore so she could go to an English medium school, rapidly decided it wasn't for her. It was almost too English to be true, this school, it was organised very much on English lines. Most of the children there were the children of expatriates working in Singapore, strict uniform and so on and so forth, and she'd been used to a very liberal school in New York with small classes and the kind of teachers who wanted children to express themselves. Now she'd gone into a school where you spoke when you were spoken to and she didn't take to it at all and decided, very early on, that she liked the idea of boarding school because she met some kids who came back from boarding school for holidays and they would tell how marvellous it was "to get away from Mum and Dad and do your own thing". So, half-way through our time in Singapore we arranged for her to go to boarding school and for the last twelve months or more she wasn't in Singapore and she went to school in England. I am still amazed at how unfazed she was. We'd see her off at the airport at Singapore, in the custody of an air-hostess, and off she'd go with her Rupert the Bear under her arm, happy as could be. They'd just started running 747s, with upper decks, and there were so many kids travelling on these flights, at the beginning of school terms, that BA decided that it was far better to put all the kids together. So, they made the upper deck virtually a children only area to keep them apart from the paying customers downstairs. The kids thought this was absolutely marvellous and so she went back and forth.

The other bonus was that, when you went on leave journeys, the Foreign Office had just introduced a system whereby you were given a certain amount of money that would cover you for a direct fare from Singapore to London, return. You were entitled in those days to travel in Club Class because it was such a long journey. But you could actually spend the money however you wanted provided it got you back to London which meant, literally, that you could, by tailoring your route, fly around the world, which is what we did during our mid-tour leave. So we were able to travel back to London via Sri Lanka, Seychelles, Nairobi

and come back the other way via New York, San Francisco, Hawaii, Tokyo, all for the price of the return fare. So, there were compensations for being on a small island and I think, with hindsight, I was too harsh. I mean, I've been back to Singapore a couple of times since and I think I was probably harsh in my assessment of the society because it has continued to grow and to flourish, and you can't deny that the Singaporeans have chosen a kind of society which I might not like to live in but it's been largely their choice and they're happy with it. And, I also think that having missed out, as I mentioned earlier, on the chance to be in an embassy or a high commission in my early twenties it was an absolutely essential part of my training to be able to see how that kind of system worked. But, after three years, I was ready to move on.

**Assistant Head, Personnel Policy Department, FCO, 1982–84**

CM: So, in 1982 you came back to London. What was it like to be back at the Foreign Office?

BD: Well, after two overseas postings, a return to London was inevitable. Once you become used to living overseas with the advantages of overseas allowances and feeling relatively affluent, it's something of a cold shower coming back to London, to have to live on your salary like everyone else, so no one really looks forward to it. But, I knew that in career terms it was unavoidable and my aim was to get a job as what were called, in those days in the Foreign Office, the Assistant Head of a Department or Assistant. This was a necessary and unavoidable step to the next full step up in the hierarchy, to Counsellor grade. Ideally, I wanted to go to what the Foreign Office call a geographical department i.e. a department that looks after the affairs of a country or group of countries and I can remember that, on my post preference form, one of the places was South Asia Department which would have been looking after India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka. But, I'd also included on my post preference form a job in one of the administration departments, the 'administration' being shorthand, in Foreign Office terms, for those bits of the Office that looked after personnel matters. Being conscious that I was a late-comer to the Foreign Office I felt that a job in the administration would give me a good overview of how the Office worked. I got my second preference which was a post in the administration. It was in one of the personnel departments called Personnel Policy Department, which was a department that managed man power numbers and planning which was vital because it underpinned the Foreign Office's finances.

But it didn't deal with individual careers - that was Personnel Operations Department which was our sister department but the two were quite separate. Personnel Policy Department also handled recruitment, conduct and discipline, and the Foreign Office's relations with Whitehall on all sorts of administrative issues. So, it met my hope of giving me a good overview of how the Foreign Office functioned. The only drawback was that it operated from offices in Matthew Parker Street which is about a three minute walk from the main Foreign Office buildings in King Charles Street which is just off Whitehall. So you missed out on the gossip and the contacts that come from operating in the main building where as well as having your own department to work in, you'd meet people in the corridors, in the canteen and so on, whereas in Matthew Parker Street we were rather separate and slightly isolated.

CM: Did you have an interesting Head of Department?

BD: Yes, again, in the course of my three years there, I had two different Heads of Department. One was called Frank Wheeler, the other Keith Morris. They had quite different management styles so there was a lot to learn from both, and they were both very supportive. And, I also had great support staff. The recruitment section of PPD traditionally was seen as a good, fast stream job i.e. fast stream being the people who were expected to rise to the very top and of the three occupants who worked for me, then – David Warren, Ann Grant and Judith McGregor – all three went on to become very senior ambassadors: David in Japan and both Ann and Judith in South Africa. In fact Judith has just retired this week, I think.

I also had the benefit in PPD of a wonderful personal assistant who was, I think it's true to say, the only punk in the Foreign Office. She had pink or green or yellow hair depending on the day of the week or the mood that took her, and would come in to the office in full punk attire so she invariably caused a stir. If ever she went to other parts of the Foreign Office, no one could miss her. But she was extremely efficient, extremely pleasant, although she caused the security people no end of anxiety because they couldn't imagine how someone with her appearance could have the life-style that fitted the security requirements. You also alluded to coming back to London, and it is a shock, you can't get away from it. We moved house and, fortunately, by this point because my daughter was at boarding school it didn't affect her so much but it is a big shock to have to re-adjust and to realise that whereas overseas you have a



kind of social life that's created for you by the circumstances - you have official functions to go to, engagements and so on, and you are introduced to lots of people - of course, when you come back home you've got to start and do all that yourself, and you've got to make friends and make contacts and develop your own social life. So again, not looking for sympathy here but it's the down side of the glamorous and slightly cosseted life you have overseas, that you keep having these abrupt transitions when you come back.

I think traditionally PPD had played second fiddle to POD, in Foreign Office terms; because POD dealt with individual careers. For most people it was far more important than PPD which didn't impinge very much on their lives. But the combination of financial squeeze under the Thatcher Government and the surge of management reform initiatives across Whitehall, really put PPD much more centre stage. Our main task was to fend off Treasury attempts to impose financial cuts on the Foreign Office. We were the part of the Foreign Office, along with Finance Department, which had direct contact with the Treasury and so, as I said, the amount of money that the Treasury allocated to the Foreign Office was directly related to the number of staff that the Foreign Office had and the number of jobs that the Foreign Office said it needed to carry out its functions. The Treasury never believed the estimates that we put forward and were continually looking for job reductions, saying "You must be able to save" - efficiencies, cut jobs here or cut jobs there - and so it was a constant battle between us about what we needed and what they thought we needed.

That was the pressure on the financial side. On the non-financial side, the Civil Service Department which operated out of Cabinet Office then, was the body that was supposed to have the overall management of the Civil Service within its remit. But the Diplomatic Service had been established under a separate piece of legislation from the home Civil Service, they're called "Orders in Council", and the Diplomatic Service had its own Order in Council which gave it, arguably, a degree of independence from the Civil Service Department. The Foreign Office default position was that we weren't automatically covered by any decisions by the Civil Service Department. We were free to interpret those as we wished and to incorporate them into our own rules and regulations, but essentially we were a separate organisation and should be treated differently. Now, this kind of attitude didn't go down well in the rest of Whitehall. The perception was that the Foreign Office was a bit stuck-up, a bit arrogant and needed bringing down a peg or two. So, it was a fairly uncomfortable time and it wasn't helped, in a sense, by the fact that the Foreign Secretary, at

the time, was Geoffrey Howe who had previously been Chancellor of the Exchequer and so, basically, the Treasury were implementing, still, the policies that Geoffrey Howe had introduced when he was Chancellor of the Exchequer. Now he was at the receiving end, in the Foreign Office, of the kind of measures that he'd imposed on other people. Well, he was obviously torn because he felt he couldn't just turn round and say "No, these are all wrong".

So, our problem was first to convince him of what we needed before we could hope to convince the Treasury because, at the end of the day, these arguments about budgets were always settled by Ministers getting together. Often the Chancellor would sit down with individual Ministers and they would have a direct negotiation across the table for a final settlement. And so, unless your own Minister was convinced of the argument, then you couldn't expect to win the argument with the Treasury. One of the things that I had to do which was novel – it was a very amateurish effort by today's standards but we didn't have the computer technology in those days – was to produce a little booklet, which I think had some catchy title like "Facts and figures about the FCO". And this booklet consisted of a series of graphs and pie charts that showed where the staff of the Foreign Office were allocated in the world, what jobs they did, how many they were and what proportion this was of the total national expenditure. Basically it was designed to show how really we were managing to do an amazing number of things with very small resources.

It wasn't as straight forward as it seemed because it wasn't always easy to get the numbers to add up. Now, that sounds as if it's a reflection on my mathematics but it was more complicated than that. So, we could never be too precise about numbers and you had to be very careful in terms of producing totals because the individual items might not add up to those totals. Someone who'd sit down and add up all the people listed in our embassies overseas would arrive at a total number of staff that was greater than the official number of Foreign Office staff. So, there was a certain amount of what we would call smoke and mirrors in these figures and that also led to complications because, over time, it became quite apparent to me that my predecessors in PPD had found all this a bit too complicated, and had rather lost track of which jobs we did have and which jobs we didn't have.

About this time the National Audit Office, which was a relatively new institution then, was starting to enquire into Foreign Office manpower figures and we literally could not be sure whether we were actually giving them the correct figures or not and this was an additional

little nightmare. I think I inherited this figure which was that the Foreign Office had fewer diplomatic staff than people who worked in Harrods which, at one level, was quite a telling point if you were the sort of person who shopped in Harrods but also clearly to those who thought of the Foreign Office as being a slightly elitist, aristocratic and out of touch organisation it played right into their hands. So, I can remember spending a lot of time trying to find some other more democratic organisation such as Marks and Spencer that we could also compare with the Foreign Office to show how efficient we were. But it proved quite hard to find one. I can't remember, now, which one we ended up with.

The meat and drink of the job was basically manpower figures, manpower projections for the future, so we knew how many people we should be recruiting in the different levels. These days, again, because of technology this can all be done fairly easily, but in those days we had very, very primitive technology and our management systems were pretty rudimentary. We didn't, in all honesty, have very accurate knowledge about what our individual embassies were costing us, what we would save by moving resources from here to there. We weren't alone in that. I think that was pretty common across Whitehall in those days, but we were struggling to get our management systems in a state where we could effectively manage them as opposed to simply run along on the basis of how we'd done things in the past. And, certainly there was some double counting that went on. You had nonsenses too, like the fact that we had one officer who was serving in Lagos, which was one of the most expensive posts in the world to keep staff because of the way the currency worked, the food prices and accommodation prices and so and so forth, and this person had seven children at boarding school. So as an individual the total cost envelope of maintaining him in Lagos was absolutely enormous. And so, that inevitably skewed the costs, if you looked at Lagos. But you couldn't save that by moving him to London because a lot of the costs moved with him. You couldn't start saying, well, we can't have people who have more than two children because it's far too expensive. Once you had the boarding school allowance system accepted then that was a cost you had to bear. There were curious quirks like this that you had to try and cope with in trying to match costs to individuals and so you had an average figure for a person in a particular place but even that didn't help us much. I think at one point we closed Florence, which was a consulate, as a cost-saving exercise, only to discover that under Italian law the redundancy terms were so generous that the staff that we made redundant could continue to collect their salaries for about five years. So, we actually saved no money at all from closing Florence. It might have been cheaper to keep Florence open and close

somewhere in a country where the rules and regulations were rather different and you could make immediate savings. There was a view that to some extent you had to demonstrate to the Treasury that you were serious about making efficiency savings and that did mean having to close a few overseas posts to demonstrate the seriousness of your purpose. But, as I say, without having proper management systems, deciding which those posts should be proved to be a thankless task because everybody had their own ideas. I can remember drawing-up league tables of embassies in terms of costs, such as we understood them, and relative assessments trying to work out which were the ones that we might close with the least harm to our foreign policy. But as soon as you put a post in the vulnerable category, all sorts of people would leap out of the cupboard and say “Oh, no, you can’t possibly do that because of this and because of that and because of the other”.

CM: All those who were in these places were unaware that this was . . .

BD: Absolutely, yes.

CM: And they weren’t worried?

BD: Well, they would have been if they had known. But it was all hush hush. In the end, when we eventually got to a list and we included the Dominican Republic – no one could actually produce an argument as to why we needed desperately to have an embassy in the Dominican Republic – so, we announced that we were going to close this post in the Dominican Republic. Only then did Protocol Department, which hadn’t been consulted about this because no one thought that Protocol Department would have any interest in post-closures, suddenly pop up and say “You can’t do that because the Ambassador of the Dominican Republic in London is the Dean of the Diplomatic Corps i.e. the most long-serving diplomat in London. As the Dean of the Diplomatic Corps he’s the person who regularly gets to meet the Queen on ceremonial occasions and so on and everybody loves him in the Diplomatic Corps in London. If you close our embassy then they’ll close theirs in London and we’ll lose him and the next on the list is the representative of the PLO and we can’t have that!” And so we said “Uhhh” and I can’t remember how that horrible imbroglio was resolved but it was a total nightmare. I like to think that we’ve eventually evolved better management systems but at the time we were flying by the seat of our pants and it was not really the Foreign Office’s finest hour, I think, in terms of how to handle things.

We were summoned by the Public Accounts Committee. It was the first time it had ever happened, I think, that the Permanent Under Secretary had to go and be grilled by the Public Accounts Committee about how we ran our affairs. The Permanent Secretary at the time was a man called Antony Acland who was everybody's image of a diplomat. He was tall and slim and rather languid, and a brilliant mind but he'd never really addressed himself to matters of administration, he dealt with foreign policy, he didn't deal with the minutiae of the administration in the Service. I had to brief him and accompany him to this meeting and it was clearly a miserable experience for him and not much better for me because I had to answer the more detailed questions that the committee would throw at us. I remember getting embroiled into an argument with the MP, a Labour MP, who was actually the Member of Parliament for this constituency (Allerdale), a man called Dale Campbell-Savours, who was a slightly - I'm sure he wouldn't mind me saying so - individualistic man. He never aspired to ministerial office, he ploughed his own furrow, he was a very good constituency MP but he had various bees in his bonnet and he was very difficult to dislodge once he got on a particular trail. And, he had a bee in his bonnet about boarding school allowances which he thought were atrocious, notwithstanding the fact that, as I pointed out to him much later when I met him socially, he'd actually been at a boarding school and I hadn't. He asked "So, are you saying that even if a secretary" - and this again just shows how the times have changed - ". . . even if a secretary were to have a child that she could send that child to boarding school?" To which the answer was - I thought a perfectly good and respectable answer - "Well, of course. The secretary is a member of the Diplomatic Service, she's perfectly entitled to do that". Somehow he thought that this was an outrageous extravagance and I thought this was a very odd position for a Labour MP to be coming from. But he was so against boarding school allowances on principle that I think he'd rather lost track of where he was coming from. Of course, Antony Acland had no idea whether secretaries were entitled to boarding school allowances or not.

Because of the separate Order in Council, there was a lot of resistance in the Foreign Office, in the higher echelons, to following the grand management schemes being introduced in Whitehall which were seen as being intrusive and unnecessary. One of them was the introduction, across Whitehall, of a requirement that every department should have an Equal Opportunities Officer. Now, in these days, that would seem unexceptionable, not only unexceptionable but absolutely essential. But, the view in the Foreign Office was "Why on

earth do we want an Equal Opportunities Officer?" I managed to persuade them that this was something that we would have to do. Then the question arose "Well, who will we have as an Equal Opportunities Officer?" After much discussion they decided that since I was promoting this idea, I should become the Equal Opportunities Officer as well. Now, again, today, you would not do this. It was essentially making me judge and jury, because I was responsible for the policy on equal opportunities but then also being made responsible for judging whether we were actually implementing those policies, which was quite wrong. But for a time, I was indeed Equal Opportunities Officer and the first one that the Foreign Office had. The Equal Opportunities Officer then, in Foreign Office terms, was strictly related to the position of women in the office. It was still well beyond the pale to think about homosexuality; in terms of security vetting it was still the case that if you acknowledged homosexuality you wouldn't get a positive vetting. On the other hand, if you concealed it, as obviously many people did, you were always at risk of being exposed and losing your job and everything. So it was a stupid position for the FCO to be in. Quite apart from the moral implications, from a security point of view it was also a counter-productive position. I remember the Australians were making big strides in those days, in terms of genuine equal opportunities, including homosexual rights as well as on gender issues. But there was no appetite at all in the Foreign Office for tackling the issue at the time. And, I'm afraid it just continued, I'm not quite sure when enlightenment eventually arrived but it certainly didn't in the early 1980s.

We were also very uncomfortable with being forced by the Civil Service Department to move into what became called 'contracting out of services'. The idea was that with things like office cleaning, instead of being done by people employed by the Foreign Office, you could ostensibly make manpower savings by contracting out those services to external agencies which, in theory, would do the job cheaper than your employed personnel. In practice, all that happened, really, was that after the poor cleaners were fired by the Foreign Office, they were then re-recruited at lower pay-rates by the outside agencies and came back doing exactly the same job at lower rates, which seemed to me to be immoral and probably counter-productive since you were de-incentivising the people. We had some very uncomfortable negotiations with the trade unions in the Foreign Office about this policy to go down this road. I found myself having to defend what I thought was indefensible but the pressures for really what was a book-keeping adjustment as much as anything, were enormous and

everyone was doing the same across Whitehall. In the end the Foreign Office did it and the trend has been the same in so many other sectors of work ever since.

It was also while I was in PPD that the then government decided to withdraw trade union rights at GCHQ. I think Frank Wheeler dealt with this almost entirely by himself and our role arose because in bureaucratic terms GCHQ fell within the remit of the Foreign Secretary in terms of management. Traditionally you could belong to a trade union and work at GCHQ. But, some of the unions, particularly the ones to which the communications officers belonged, were quite militant and they were threatening to take industrial action which could have caused a loss of intelligence. It was feared this could lead to a breakdown in our relations with the Americans with whom we worked very closely. And so the Government decided to withdraw trade union rights at GCHQ which caused a lot of controversy at the time. People were offered some form of compensation for their trade union rights but it was certainly a denial of rights which I felt was wrong, in principle. Within the Foreign Office I belonged to something called the Diplomatic Service Association which was part of the First Division Association of civil servants which was the trade union for senior civil servants. I remember suggesting to my union representative that perhaps we should all forego a day's pay for the campaign against the de-unionisation of GCHQ but I don't think I got any support for it at all!

Manpower and financial planning were the core of what PPD was about but we also did conduct and discipline. Most of the individual cases were handled by the Head of Department, directly, but one bit that I got, which could be quite amusing, was basically policing the regulation that Diplomatic Service Officers, like all civil servants, are not allowed to accept gifts from people they have contact with beyond a certain monetary value. I think, at the time, it was £50. So, any gift that you were offered, more than £50, you had to refuse or, if it was delivered to you, you had then to hand it in to PPD. Well, the principal group of people that was affected by this were ambassadors in the Middle East who were regularly being given expensive wrist watches or other pieces of jewellery by the rulers of the countries where they were working. I would get these letters from ambassadors, setting out in considerable length and with great intellectual rigour an argument as to why they should be allowed to accept this gift and how it would completely destroy British relations with Country X or Country Y if they had to appear in public and weren't wearing the watch or if it was known that they hadn't kept it and so on and so forth. We usually arrived at a

compromise whereby they were allowed to keep the gift while they were in the country concerned but as soon as they left it they had to hand it in to the Foreign Office, whereupon it was sent down to Customs and Excise and they were auctioned. Customs and Excise regularly auction off goods that have been confiscated from people who haven't paid the duty on them and these presents would end up in that collection, whereupon ambassadors were free to go and bid for them at a suitable price. Some ingenious excuses came up but we took a very Stalinist line on this, there were no exceptions.

Another of the benefits of working in Personnel Policy Department was working alongside Personnel Operations Department and, in fact, I would sit on promotion boards that were judging which other people should go to which jobs. You couldn't sit on a promotion board or a postings board for your contemporaries but you could sit on one for people who were more junior to you. So, you got to know how these promotion boards worked and sometimes you got early warning of jobs that were coming up. This really helped me get my next job because having been Assistant Head of Department obviously you are looking for your promotion to a Head of Department. It was quite rare to go from being Assistant Head of Department to the Head of a Department in London, you usually had to go overseas again. I didn't particularly want to do that, at that particular stage in my domestic life, and so I was looking for a Head of Department job in London and I learned that there was this new job being created in Cabinet Office to be, basically, Deputy to the Chief Scientific Adviser. Again, I just mention in passing that in those days you watched very carefully the age at which you got promoted to Counsellor because whereas, now, competition is much more open and transparent, in those days there was still a strong element of seniority in when you got promoted. You could look at lists and you could see when people of your age were getting promoted and also, being involved in manpower planning, I knew that the average age of promotion to Counsellor was, I think, in those days 41.5 years. Now that obviously, being an average, embraced some people who got promoted very late in their careers and some who were promoted earlier but the earliest ever, at that point, had been 36, I think. I was 39 by then, I suppose, so I was entering the period where you felt that if you didn't get promotion soon you were going to slip behind your peers. I had to acknowledge again because I had a late start that I was playing catch-up in this regard. Along came this new job and I expressed an interest in it. I had to go across to Cabinet Office to be interviewed by the Chief Scientific Adviser. I'm not sure how many people he interviewed but I was offered the job and so, after



I suppose probably not much more than two years in Personnel Policy Department, I was promoted and moved across from the Foreign Office to Cabinet Office.

CM: If you'd gone abroad you'd have missed . . .

BD: Well, if I'd gone abroad I would have hoped to have gone as a Counsellor to somewhere else.

CM: So, it would have been equal . . .

BD: It would have been equal status but it would have been overseas again and after only two years back in London I think we were still settling into a house and we didn't want to have the whole disruption of uprooting the family again.

CM: So, it was no disadvantage?

BD: It was no disadvantage; no, it was rather fortuitous that the opportunity arose when it did because, had it not, I could well have stayed much longer, I suppose, in PPD. So, off I went to Cabinet Office.

### **Deputy to Chief Scientific Officer, Cabinet Office (Counsellor) 1985-88**

CM: So, you moved to the Cabinet Office. What exactly does the Chief Scientific Officer do?

BD: Well, it probably varies very much depending on the individual who is doing the job. Certainly that was my experience of the two ... I worked for two Chief Scientific Officers in my time there. But first of all, I think probably I need to put in context the role of the Cabinet Office which was another quite distinct change of gear from the job I had had in the Foreign Office. The Cabinet Office is headed by the Cabinet Secretary, it was then Sir Robert Armstrong, and it lies at the heart of Government. It's staffed by secondees from other Whitehall Departments, it doesn't have its own permanent staff, well it has some permanent staff but they tend to be support staff. The main policy making staff are seconded from other Government Departments and usually Departments send their best and brightest to work in

the Cabinet Office because it reflects on them and also they want to be able to influence the heart of Government. It's based in an office at Number 70 Whitehall which is the first building as you come out of Downing Street, as you walk towards Trafalgar Square. It's a very anonymous-looking building but inside there are all of these Cabinet Committee Offices and Cabinet Secretariats. There's a kind of rabbit warren of corridors at the back which connect you to Number 10 Downing Street and, if you remember, there was an episode in "Yes, Prime Minister" which hinged upon the fact that the door between the Cabinet Office and Downing Street is locked, and to get through you have first to ring Number 10 Downing Street and someone will open the door and then you can go through. This means that in the Cabinet Office you can get into Number 10 Downing Street without the rest of the world knowing that you've done that. Of course, that's the truth, there is a door and there is a key, and you do have to go through this procedure and I once did it. But it makes you feel very much like you're in the middle of a "Yes, Minister" programme when you're working there.

The different Secretariats in the Cabinet Office, and there's a Home Secretariat, a European Secretariat (which will be very busy at present) and an Overseas and Defence Secretariat, they're the three traditional ones. Basically, they are responsible for preparing all of the papers that go to Cabinet committees and then to Cabinet for consideration and members of the Secretariats will attend the Cabinet meetings, take the minutes, write up the minutes, circulate them and then make sure that the action that's contained in the minutes is carried out. So, it's a very powerful part of the British establishment because basically it dictates what business is dealt with at the very top and it ensures that the decisions taken at the top are implemented. Now, the Science and Technology Secretariat was a new addition and it was still probably at the Ugly Duckling stage, that no one quite knew what it was going to evolve into; it could turn into a swan or it might just stay as an Ugly Duckling. The Chief Scientific Officer was obviously Head of this Secretariat but he had a double role, he was literally the Prime Minister's Scientific Adviser. So, he was the person to whom she would turn for advice on any policy issue that had a scientific element and on which she felt (I say "She" because it was Mrs Thatcher at that time) she needed expert advice. Because she was a scientist herself it was a role to which she attached considerable importance. He also had this more bureaucratic role of both being the leader of the scientific establishments in all of the other Whitehall Departments - because almost all Whitehall Departments will have their own Chief Scientific Officer who deals with any aspects of their work that have to do with science and technology - but he also had this job within the Cabinet Office Secretariat of ensuring

that any policy issues that dealt with science issues were properly presented in Cabinet. For example, we were dealing with the problems of exhaust emissions which at the time was a significant issue in European politics because the Germans were complaining about die-back of their forests as a result of exhaust emissions. There was a move to try and restrict that through catalytic convertors, which would have implications for the motor industry. But, as a Secretariat, we were also involved in preparing papers for those parts of the Cabinet discussion that dealt with science issues.

Now, within the Cabinet Office, there was also something that was called the Cabinet Office Mess i.e. 'mess' in the sense of an Officers' Mess. It was, and I'm sure it isn't the same today, restricted to senior members of the Cabinet Office and the Foreign Office. It was something, I think, that "Yes, Minister" never quite captured but it was where almost all of the senior people dealing with Cabinet Office business would meet at lunchtimes. So you could go into the Cabinet Office Mess and you'd see the Prime Minister's Private Secretary sitting down with the Cabinet Secretary clearly discussing ... well, they could have been discussing cricket for all one knew but one assumed they were discussing issues of high policy ... or the Prime Minister's Political Advisers talking to officials in the Cabinet Office, trying to persuade them that this is the way that papers should be produced. So, an enormous amount of backstairs business was done in the Cabinet Office Mess in a way which would probably horrify students of bureaucracy because it was all informal and without records. But the whole place oozed establishment power. There was no doubt that when you went into the Cabinet Office and you absorbed the ambience, you felt yourself at the centre of power. It was something you had to keep guarding against, because there was a risk of hubris here, that you felt you were in command of all you surveyed.

Now, the reason why my job had been created was because the United Kingdom, unlike many other countries, has no single Minister who speaks for the United Kingdom on science and technology issues in international bodies. There are many individual Ministers who have a scientific aspect to their work, so, if you were a Minister of Agriculture clearly there's the whole science of agronomy and animal welfare and so on, or if you're the Minister for Education you're responsible for universities and the research that universities do and if you're at Transport – every Department has its own little science element to it - but if you go to an international meeting which is discussing general science technology issues, we haven't got a Minister for Science and Technology and a lot of other countries do. And so Whitehall

had had a Cabinet committee that had laboured for a long time to try and decide which Minister should assume that role of responsibility for international science and technology. But it had failed to agree, principally because, under the Whitehall system, each Department had its own budget and if you were going to have a single Minister responsible for science and technology he would need to have either his own budget or some power to call on the budgets of the other Departments and none of them were prepared to relinquish this which was again a “Yes, Minister” type situation. The compromise was that the Chief Scientific Officer who was in Cabinet Office, and therefore perceived to be neutral, could take on this kind of quasi-Ministerial role when overseas, rather in the way that in some Scandinavian countries you can have a senior official who is also, in a way, a Minister. The Chief Scientific Officer wasn’t a Minister in the sense he wasn’t an elected politician and so he couldn’t be a Minister, but for the purposes of representing the British overseas, he was accorded the equivalent of Ministerial rank so that he could deal equally with foreign politicians who were Ministers. The feeling was that if he was going to do that job, he needed this Secretariat to help him and my job, the new job, was to run this Secretariat, basically to ensure that he was properly provided with papers and information and briefing and so on. But, because we didn’t have a budget of our own, in effect we had responsibility but we didn’t have power. It looked as though we had all these levers we could pull to get things done but, in practice, the levers weren’t actually connected to anything. So, the fundamental flaw that led to the failure to provide a Minister in Charge, still afflicted the Chief Scientific Officer.

A couple of Departments had rather grudgingly agreed to provide the finance for jobs in this Secretariat, just as the Foreign Office had done with me, but whereas the Foreign Office had agreed to finance this Deputy to the Chief Scientific Adviser job and provided a body to go in it, the other Departments provided the finance for the job but didn’t provide the bodies. So, I arrived in the job to find I had absolutely no staff. We had to recruit staff from other Whitehall Departments and, because we were a new Secretariat and it was quite difficult to see where it was heading, it proved quite difficult to get good people to volunteer to come and do this. It was like a leap into the unknown. So, it was quite an uncomfortable start, to get going, and I ended up with two – one person from the British Council and one person from the Department of Transport, at a level immediately below me, and then three people from Department of Trade and Industry at the level below that. We had more or less to make

things up as we went along because we were defining our own role almost every day because no one knew what powers we should have or what we shouldn't have.

My first boss, Sir Robin Nicholson, was both an academic and an industrial scientist. He'd been previously with Pilkington Glass and had been involved in glass-making processes as an industrial scientist but he was also an academic and he was very cerebral with a razor sharp brain, and he had a wonderful ability to distil a concept to its essentials. He'd already established a very good working relationship with Mrs Thatcher who seemed to respect and trust his judgement and his forte when a scientific point lay at the heart of some policy issue was to present her with a succinct note, rarely more than half a page in length, which summarised the problem and proposed a solution that she could - and sometimes this was quite literally done - pull from her handbag to sum up a discussion and so close it. Normally when the Prime Minister is chairing a Cabinet meeting, she gets a set of papers provided by the Cabinet Officer Secretariat which will tell her what the problem is, what each Department is likely to say about the arguments, and then it usually concludes with a paragraph which anticipates how the discussion will go and says "The Prime Minister may wish to sum up in the following terms" and then they'll give her a piece of text that she can read, adapting in light of anything that's happened in the discussion. Well, Robin would wait until he'd seen the main Cabinet Office piece then he'd write his little supplementary minute to the Prime Minister and because of his status, he had direct access to her, he could send the minute to her directly, he didn't have to go via Robert Armstrong or anyone else. And so he had this great success rate of when it got to the point at which "You may sum up as follows ..." then out would come the Robin Nicholson piece of paper.

CM: She would have been delighted.

BD: She was delighted to get it. She liked him; she suspected other Civil Servants. But his success in this meant that the many other skilled operators in the Cabinet Office treated him with great respect because it was rather like playing a game of cards where you had someone who could suddenly throw in a trump. So although we were never part of the traditional Cabinet Office mechanism we always had this kind of secret weapon that was Robin Nicholson who could intervene at the last minute. This was excellent because it filtered down and meant that whereas there would have been a risk that, as a new Secretariat, we

would have been ignored by the long-standing ones, in practice we were treated with respect and it proved very easy to work in the machine.

His successor was a man called John Fairclough, also became Sir John Fairclough. He never achieved that easy relationship with the Prime Minister, nor was he ever quite as comfortable with the Whitehall machine. He'd been an engineer with IBM all of his career, and so he tended to focus on structures and the way things worked, and he took it upon himself, as his principal task, to try and knock sense into the ramshackle procedures that existed in Whitehall for allocating funds for research and development across Departments. There was no mechanism at the time for judging, for example, whether spending £50m on science and technology in agriculture was giving better value for the British economy than spending £50m in trade and industry. There was no movement of funds across the Departments, it was just done on historical basis and he felt, with justification, that this had become too rigid and wasn't flexible enough for modern British needs. He thought you had to have some over-riding system that could say "Look, this is crazy. Information technology, biotechnology or this sector or that sector is now where we should be putting our research funds and we need a mechanism for re-allocating the money". This brought him face to face with all of the resistance from Departments about losing their own funding but that was a battle that he took on. It was never a battle he was going to win entirely but he made considerable headway in establishing a mechanism within the Cabinet Office for better allocating funds for science and technology across Whitehall. But he was less interested, I think, in the international side of things and so, to some extent, I had a freer hand under John than I had under Robin. I got on with both men and, indeed, John Fairclough asked me if I'd be interested, when he left Cabinet Office, in joining him to set up a new business and to jump into the private sector with him but I concluded that my entrepreneurial zeal was not strong enough for that so I never did it.

I suppose what, for me, was the best part about the job was the fact that I had to accompany, or stand in for, both Robin and John in a whole variety of international science and technology forums principally the European Union R and D Programme, but also the G7 which became the G8, and various bi-lateral meetings. Since my scientific background was virtually nil I had to become an instant expert on a whole variety of science issues and I was skating on thin ice at times. I still remember the feeling of horror once, at an Anglo-German summit, when I was there notionally as Robin Nicholson's representative. I can't remember

why he wasn't there but I do remember Mrs Thatcher sitting with Helmut Kohl at the top of this table and looking round her side of the table and her piercing eyes resting on me thinking "Who is this, what is he here for?" I was just hoping she wasn't going to ask me. There was a whole series of European science and technology programmes which we participated in and where I had to be the UK representative, some of which involved organising meetings in the UK as well, and it played havoc with domestic life, I travelled a lot, I was away from home a lot.

CM: So was that something you hadn't expected?

BD: Well, there was no way of expecting it because we didn't know what the job was going to involve. There were two sides to every international meeting; one was you had to prepare an agreed position within Whitehall first and this meant summoning people from other Departments to attend in Cabinet Office a meeting which I would have to chair, and what I rapidly discovered was that there was very little collegiate spirit among Whitehall Departments. People who came to meetings in the Cabinet Office regarded their principal role as defending the interests of their Department, not as arriving at a compromise that would suit Her Majesty's Government. The Departmental interest usually over-rode the national interest. This was particularly true if money was involved and I had one near disaster, in Brussels, when I had failed to get officials to agree to a particular proposal and Robin Nicholson who was then sitting in the Minister's seat at the table, had to block a proposal that was otherwise agreeable to all other member states of the EU simply because we hadn't got an agreed position in Whitehall. I can remember being deeply embarrassed by that and that other people were not at all happy that it had happened because it wasn't the done thing to have to block a proposal at the very last minute simply because you hadn't got your own position fully sorted. I also found that relations with the Foreign Office could be quite difficult because senior officials in the Foreign Office, because I was one of them, in a sense expected me to be kind of a fifth column within the Cabinet Office who would be promoting Foreign Office interests as opposed to, again, other Departmental interests. I was always reluctant to do that and that brought some fairly rough words from one senior Foreign Office person suggesting that I should remember where I came from, in the sense that I had to go back to the Foreign Office. So, you saw a kind of rougher side of Whitehall life that I hadn't previously been acquainted with.

I also found I had to do a lot of travelling with a man called Geoffrey Pattie who was the Minister for Technology in the Department of Trade and Industry. I remember one occasion, I went with him to Paris where his job was to try and persuade the French of the virtues of a rather brilliant British idea for what was essentially a horizontal take-off and landing rocket, the acronym was HOTOL. Instead of having the conventional rocket that takes off vertically and shoots up into space, this was an idea that this rocket would take-off rather like an aeroplane and then at a certain point it would switch-in the rocket motors and it would zoom off into space. I remember the French Minister rather sardonically remarking that it was only the British who could develop an aeroplane that took off vertically, i.e. the Harrier, and a rocket that took off horizontally. Unfortunately, HOTOL never took off at all, we never persuaded people.

The main strand of life in Cabinet Office for me was European Research and Development Programme. We had the responsibility of preparing all the briefs and the UK response to the programme. Between July and December '86, the UK had the Presidency of the European Union which meant that you have a curious and double-hatted role in that as Presidency you are expected to push ahead with the European Union programmes for that six months, almost independently of what your national position is. So, you have a UK Presidency role and then a UK National role which may not have exactly the same aims, it's a kind of exercise in schizophrenia. This coincided in 1986 with a proposal from the European Commission to extend the European Research and Development Programme for a further five years, with a very substantial increase in its budget. Most other member states were very keen on this because they saw it as a means of getting access to more money. Unfortunately, under British Treasury rules, if a UK Department was successful in getting money from the European Commission, it lost the same amount of money from its domestic funding. This was all part of Mrs Thatcher's view that European money was our money and that if we were getting it back from the European Union, that was good, but Departments couldn't have their cake and eat it. The effect of this was that British Government Departments preferred to get their money direct from the Treasury because then they could decide exactly how they spent it whereas if they got it from the European pot, they could only spend it in cooperation or collaboration with other European countries. So, for them, there were more strings attached. And so we had this ludicrous position that Britain was unenthusiastic about the European R and D Programme, not on the merits of the programme where collaboration made a lot of



sense and you got better results from it all, but because of its effect on the way in which we structured our budgets.

As Presidency, we had a duty to try and push this programme through or to reach a compromise on it among the member states and, as a result, I found myself travelling the length and breadth of Europe, usually accompanied by a minder from the Department of Trade and Industry and sometimes from other Departments – one from the Treasury for a time – who were concerned that I might give away too much in the negotiation. You are trying to prepare the ground so that when you get to the Ministerial meeting in Brussels there's the makings of a compromise and the Ministers, after a bit of discussion, can rubber stamp the compromise. This programme had twenty or thirty different elements to it and some countries liked some parts, other countries liked other parts, it was like putting together a three-dimensional jigsaw, to try and get a solution. It's become something of a Brussels tradition that you end up in a negotiation that goes on right through the night so it starts at 11 o'clock in the morning, breaks for a lunch, goes on into the evening, breaks for a dinner, comes back again and goes on and on and on. Usually at some stage you stop meeting around the big table and have what are called bi-lateral meetings in which the Presidency goes off into a separate room, and each of the other countries, in turn, sends their Minister in for a private discussion when the Presidency tries to establish, in private, what is the bottom line for France or Germany or The Netherlands and so on, and then come back with a compromise that reflects all of these other positions. The trouble was that the Presidency position was so complex, and the negotiation was so complex, that Geoffrey Pattie who was representing the UK had simply lost it. He couldn't any longer hold in his head all the different elements and so I got the job of explaining, successively, to eleven other Ministers how this compromise might work to see whether it was acceptable. Looking back, it reminds me of Palmerston's saying about the Schleswig-Holstein Question: that there's only three people who ever understood the Schleswig-Holstein Question - one was dead, one was mad and one had completely forgotten what it was all about. We got there in the end albeit only after a second meeting and a last minute, just before Christmas, conclusion.

I can't have done too badly in pretending to be a scientist because I was subsequently head-hunted by the European Commission to join the Science and Technology Bureau in the Commission. For a time, I was quite attracted to that. It offered a much larger salary, prospects of a job for life and very substantial pension but, in the end, it went to a German

because there was a complex trading-off of nationalities among senior jobs in which I fell by the wayside. Again, with hindsight, I'm rather glad I didn't do it but life would certainly have been very different if I'd been a Eurocrat.

CM: You mentioned David Hannay.

BD: Yes, Hannay was Ambassador in Brussels at the time. Again, it's only when you see someone like Hannay in action that you can realise the limitations of your own intelligence, I suppose. We would carefully draft and agree briefs for Ministers for European meetings and then we'd go to Brussels, and Hannay would want to have a meeting with the Minister before the meeting. I don't think he ever read the briefs that we produced but he had the ability to look at a problem, immediately analyse it and decide what the outcome should be. Hannay would say "So, what have they told you to say, Geoffrey?" and Geoffrey would say "Oh ..." and he'd read out his brief. "Oh, no, no, no, no." Hannay would say. "You should do this..." He would tear up the brief and re-write it and I have to say almost invariably he was right. He had a marvellous tactical sense of how to handle a meeting and how to deliver results but he was infuriating to work for.

His opposite number in London was a man called David Williamson, who was a career Civil Servant from the Ministry of Agriculture. He was Head of the European Secretariat at the time and went on to become a senior official in the European Union. Every week, Hannay would come across to London with his team and have a meeting with Williamson and his team, with FCO people present and other people from other Whitehall Departments, to try and thrash out what our policy should be in Brussels for the coming week, what was on the agenda, which Ministerial Councils were meeting, what our policy would be and so on and so forth. We would sit in on those, if there was a Research Council meeting, and this really was a chance to see Whitehall at its best and its worst really, because you had high-flyers and brilliant minds everywhere, lots of ambitious – and they were usually men, not entirely but for the most part – men round the table, all clearly vying for position as well as for the outcome that suited their own Departments. From that standpoint: getting to understand how Whitehall really works, Cabinet Office was unbeatable.

Robert Armstrong would have a weekly meeting just of the Heads of his Secretariats, before Cabinet, to discuss what was coming up in Cabinet and whether there were any major

problems and, if so, how it might be managed and so on. I only got to sit-in on this a couple of times because usually Robin or John would go to it. These were also fascinating because you were looking at four or five of the most senior officials in the UK. I remember once, Robert Armstrong telling, in a very self-deprecating fashion, the story of his adventures in Australia. There's something called The Spy Catcher Affair about an MI5 officer who'd written a book about his role in MI5, which the British Government was trying to suppress. He was being published in Australia, I think, and Robert Armstrong had gone out to give evidence in the case in Australia and his very British Civil Service style hadn't gone down enormously well in Australian courts. He'd made some remark about being economical with the truth as a euphemism for lying, which had caused a certain amount of critical comment. But he just told this story in a very light-hearted and self-deprecating way.

There was obviously a certain amount of gossip went on in these meetings as well, but, as I say, as an introduction and a primer to how decision-making worked in Britain it was an amazing two years. That said, even the best can fail and I think, looking back, we did over Chernobyl. You remember when the atomic reactor in Ukraine blew up and we ended up getting a cloud of radio-active material over Britain. It happened on a Friday afternoon, or it was a Friday afternoon when we first got word that something had happened, and no one in Cabinet Office could agree whose responsibility it was. Was it a matter for Home Affairs because it was affecting the UK domestically, was it a Foreign Affairs issue, was it a Science and Technology issue? In the end I found myself chairing a meeting of people from Whitehall Departments to try to discuss what level of emergency this might constitute, whether we needed to put in place contingency plans for health, for conceivably evacuations. Compared to the systems we have today, when we have this committee called COBRA which now meets for all big emergencies and there's a clear procedure and action lines and so on, there was nothing of that kind around at the time, and I don't remember this committee ever reaching a clear conclusion other than that each Department would have to go back and invoke its own procedures to do what it thought fit, itself. Fortunately, although the cloud had a considerable effect on hill farmers in Wales and in Cumbria, it didn't have any more serious effects on human health. But, looking back, it could have been pretty awful and we didn't cope with it very well. I'm not sure whether it was a combination of it being on a Friday afternoon or the lack of clarity or just the lack of systems in place. It's one of the episodes I shall have to go back and look at the papers to see what eventually happened but I think we were fortunate the consequences weren't worse.

One thing I found was that having created a job you then created interest in it and I found that there were people from the Foreign Office queuing up who wanted to succeed me. Just at that time I began to think it was time that I started looking again for another job. I knew what I wanted, which was to have a job that gave me a second language and also gave me some commercial experience because I hadn't got any experience of working on the commercial side and trade promotion was always seen to be an essential part of career development. Apart from fairly basic French, I hadn't got a second foreign language which, again, was something that you'd usually expect to pick up in your first few years in the Office which I didn't do. Then, having a series of English language jobs - Ireland, New York, Singapore – left me feeling a bit vulnerable so that was what I was looking for. There appeared to be nothing that fitted that description on the horizon but then there appeared the job of Political Counsellor and Consul General in Athens which offered the prospect of Greek language training but not the commercial expertise. The then Ambassador in Athens was a man who had been a colleague in New York, Jeremy Thomas who was by then Sir Jeremy Thomas, who came and talked to me and he said “Ah, but this'll be a great job, you'll be my Deputy and when I'm away you'll get a chance to run the Embassy” and so on. He made it sound very attractive so I put my hat in the ring for that job and duly got it.

### **Counsellor and Consul General, Athens, 1988–91**

CM: You weren't fazed by having to learn Greek?

BD: Well, I should have been fazed by having to learn Greek. I knew that I would get the best part of four or five months training, followed by some immersion training in Greece so I didn't feel put off by that. As I said, I wanted to have a second language. If I'd known then what I know now I would have looked for something a bit easier but I didn't, so there we are. I moved on from Cabinet Office, after about two years, when I clocked up many, many air miles and learned a lot more about how Whitehall works and so I returned not into the Foreign Office, obviously, but into what was more or less full-time language training with a Greek teacher who rapidly discovered she had a problem on her hands.

CM: And that was in London?

BD: And that was in London, yes, at that time.

I should also have mentioned, a constraining factor in terms of overseas posts was that in the mid-80s a book was published which listed the names of British Civil Servants and Diplomats who were suspected by the authors of the book of being Intelligence Officers. It was based on a very close reading of a number of Government publications and looking at people's biographies and trying to deduce from that whether they may or may not have been Intelligence Officers. Because my Foreign Office biography showed that I had worked at GCHQ, I was listed as a suspected Intelligence Officer. This revealed, in a sense, the authors' lack of understanding of how the British Civil Service works because they couldn't clearly imagine that you could make a transfer from GCHQ to the Foreign Office without remaining an Intelligence Officer which, in bureaucratic terms, in fact was very straightforward. It had the consequence that other people reading it might assume that I was an Intelligence Officer, along with lots of other people who were also wrongly identified, and in those Cold War days, that more or less precluded any posting to a Communist country because you would immediately have been suspect and probably treated as if you were an Intelligence Officer and put under surveillance and so on and so forth. Apparently my personnel file had a big yellow dot on it, which meant "Not to be posted to Communist countries". So, other obvious places that I might have gone to might have been somewhere like Hungary or Bulgaria or Romania but they were all out of bounds. I'm not sure that wasn't a good thing in some ways because it saved me having to do a tour of duty in Eastern Europe which, by and large, weren't the most exciting of places to go to.

But why I said that the Greek teacher had problems was because, unfortunately, at the time that I embarked on the Greek language training, the prospect of another foreign posting brought a crisis in my personal life, which had been fairly rocky for some time. My then wife decided that she would not be coming to Greece. She went off to university as a mature student and we decided to separate and go our different ways. It coincided, also, with some health issues which emerged, which proved rather difficult to diagnose. With hindsight one thinks that the two things may have been connected. There might have been some psychosomatic effects there but we didn't know that at the time. Anyway, the result was, whether there was cause and effect is hard to tell, I found the Greek language learning pretty difficult and I struggled with it, to be honest. I'd hoped that going to immersion training, when I would live with a Greek family in Thessaloniki, might provide me with the kind of

breakthrough that I needed but it didn't. It was a slightly odd existence, going back to being a sort of student all on your own again, living in close quarters with a Greek family who were in theory supposed to speak Greek to you all the time. But, in practice, they hadn't been trained to do that and so they tended to revert to French or English whenever they couldn't make me understand. By the time I got to Athens I have to confess that my Greek still wasn't very good. My confidence wasn't helped by the fact that my predecessor had married a Greek who it became fairly evident had provided him with a live-in translation and interpretation service, so he was a hard act to follow. Apparently, Dimitra used to get all the Greek newspapers and basically produce a digest of them which she would give to Christopher, not that Christopher didn't have much better Greek than I did but there was certainly an advantage in having a Greek wife.

Apart from the language, which was a big "apart from", the job was almost too good to be true because it was a mixture of political analysis at a time of turmoil in Greek politics, and supervision of British Consulates, scattered around Greece, which provided me with a requirement to island-hop, from place to place, to check how the Consulates were working and what the problems were in the Greek islands. So, what more could you ask for? In due course, I was able to take a share in an apartment on Aegina, which is the nearest island, which I was able to get to at weekends. So, you had this marvellous environment. My only problem was that I never felt - not the only problem, I'll come to another problem later - but the principal problem I had at the outset really was this difficulty in getting my Greek to a good enough standard to feel really comfortable in the job. In my new-found bachelor status, I inherited an enormous house, slightly crumbling house, in the northern suburbs of Athens, about thirty minutes from the Embassy, complete with a grumpy and not very efficient housekeeper. She spared me most of the chores of domesticity. And, once I'd found a caterer to deal with the official entertaining, my new life as a single man was very comfortable apart, as I said, from the language and also the on-going worries about health which were manifest in periods of acute fatigue when it proved very difficult to cope with. For someone who'd always been pretty energetic I suddenly found that I got very, very tired and found it very hard to concentrate and to focus.

Unlike in Singapore, I didn't have responsibilities for managing the Embassy. There was a Head of Chancery in the Embassy who did all of that sort of stuff, so I was free to concentrate on the political work. One new aspect to life was personal security which I hadn't

experienced at all in New York or Singapore but in Athens there were risks from both international and domestic terrorism. A British Council officer had been murdered in Greece two or three years before I got there, probably by an international terrorist group and it may have been that he was mistaken for an MI6 officer; it was never established whether he was the intended target or not. Just a week before I'd arrived, an American Military Attaché, who lived on the same street that I did, was killed by a car bomb outside his house as he was leaving for work. My predecessor had had a police escort, to and from work, which worked quite well for him because he was fairly regular in his pattern of life but, as a newcomer and as a single person, I didn't have such a regular pattern and the idea of having to have a police escort all the time seemed rather constraining so I decided not to have it.

The advice we were given was to vary the route to and from work, to go different ways to try and avoid being targeted at a particular place. We were given a piece of Kevlar which is a bullet-proof material – it was probably not much larger than a square of A4 paper – and the theory was that you could hold this up against the window of your car if ever you thought someone was going to try and shoot you. This wasn't quite as silly as it sounded because the favourite modus operandi of the Greek domestic terrorists was to come alongside a car, on a motorcycle, and shoot the driver through the window. The Greek domestic terrorists targeted Americans, Greek businessmen, Turks and two or three people had been killed in this way. So, the advice was, on a three lane highway you'd drive right next to the central reservation, as close as you could, so the motorcyclist couldn't get alongside you and if perchance they did, then you'd hold up this piece of Kevlar. Needless to say, none of us were very convinced that this would work but finding alternative routes to the office was more difficult than it sounds because, human nature being what it is, if you can get from A to B in thirty minutes going this way and it's going to take you fifty minutes going round that way, you tend more often than not to take the direct one, because you had this residual belief "It won't happen to me". And, it didn't happen to me, obviously, as I'm here. Twelve years later, a British Defence Attaché was murdered in exactly the way I've described, on that road going into Athens, but the terrorists went down the passenger side of the car and shot him through the passenger window. It gave me cold shivers when I read about it, quite apart from, obviously, sympathy for the man and his family but the thought that we tended to be rather casual about it, and the threat could have been much closer than we thought.

One of the complicating factors was that the registration plates on our cars were Greek diplomatic plates which identified not only the Embassy that you came from but, because they were handed on from one person to another, you could actually learn the job in the Embassy. I think mine were 03 which had always been the number plates of the Political Counsellor in the Embassy. So, it was like driving round with a sign saying "I am the Political Counsellor". We tried to persuade the Greeks to let us abandon these plates and use regular Greek plates. But the Greeks were very resistant to this because they said that it would make it very difficult for their Intelligence people to follow what they described as the bad guys in other Embassies that they needed to carry out surveillance on. We were saying "Well, yes, we see that point but that's not very helpful to us". Eventually, we arrived at a system where we had less identifying number plates but then you got into other sorts of problems because the Greeks have a system whereby only certain cars are allowed to go into the centre on odd and even days - even days you have an even number plate and you can go in on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays and so on - and so we were continually getting tickets for being at the wrong time in the wrong place. We were also given a long stick with a mirror at the end that you could use to check for bombs under your cars which was also rather amateurish. The idea was that in a supermarket car park you'd come out and get your stick out and start going round the car to check for bombs. But this then identified you. There was no ideal answer to the problem but it was one that, as I say, we just lived with. I think at one point of slightly heightened tensions, we started wearing bullet-proof vests as well but they were so hot, and it made you realise the difficulties in any kind of system, human nature being what it is, for providing proper security. And yet, most British people would think of Greece as a place of holidays by the sea and never imagine that there'd be a genuine security problem to deal with.

I always thought that the title Political Counsellor and Consul General had a kind of Gilbert and Sullivan ring to it and, clearly, they were two very different roles. We have an expression in the Foreign Office of having different hats and sometimes you'd be wearing your Political Counsellor hat and sometimes you'd be wearing your Consul General hat. Wearing the Political Counsellor hat, dealing with the Greeks - and this is the second problem I alluded to - I found extremely frustrating. Our political relations with Greece can be very prickly because the Left Wing in Greece have never really forgiven the British for their role immediately after World War II, in which we sided with the Rightists in driving the Communists out of Greece, and all Greeks believe that we could have done more to stop the



Turks from invading Cyprus in 1974. So, there was a certain thinness of skin on the Greeks about dealing with the British. They always suspected the Americans were conspiring to overthrow whichever Government was in. But there was always a sense that the British weren't probably very far behind. What I found infuriating was the Greeks were always looking for scapegoats and very unwilling to accept the consequences of their own decisions. It was very hard to tell the Greeks "Well, that's your own fault". They didn't like to hear that, perhaps no one does. But, I got very frustrated by this constant looking for someone else to blame. The fault lines for the current crisis in Greece were already, it seems to me, visible. There was profligate expenditure, widespread tax-evasion, corruption, patronage, an unsupportable pension scheme and the British Government and other European Governments were fully aware of all of this but basically preferred to tolerate it rather than to rock the boat and risk further instability in the Greek political system. I mean the Greeks had been allowed into the European Union immediately after the dictatorship and the European Union was rightly proud of having saved Greece from dictatorship and re-established democracy. No one really wanted to take the kind of rigorous and tough line on their economic affairs that might have restarted the political instability that had characterised Greece in the '60s and '70s.

While I was there, there were three general elections. Originally there was a left-wing government under Andreas Papandreou, a very left-wing government with uncomfortable links to Arab liberation movements. He was replaced by a curious coalition between Conservatives and Communists which predictably didn't last very long and then there was another election, which led to an all-party coalition which wasn't any more successful. So, in some ways, it was a political analyst's dream to try and explain and interpret all this but I have to say that the interest in London was pretty limited – a slightly weary exasperation that the Greeks were the way they were and unless or until it directly affected British interests, however sophisticated your political analysis was, it wasn't going to generate a lot of interest in London. My main contacts on these things were the Americans with whom, of course, because of our Intelligence sharing, we more often than not had the same information, Germans, French, the Turks (who could be very perceptive despite the hostility of their relations with Greece) and with the British Press Corps. There were some very able British press reporters in Athens, not so much covering Greece as covering the region but with a remit for Athens as well, particularly a man called Mario Modiano who was a veteran Times correspondent who became a very close friend. One learned, very much in Athens, that

diplomats, reporters and intelligence officers are all sort of fishing in the same pond and we get different sorts of information, and then we swap and exchange it. We each have access to our own sources that don't necessarily talk to the others. So, it was that kind of environment, and that was in all very enjoyable but one never felt that one was having a major impact on policy anywhere.

The Consul General hat was in some ways much more unpredictable. You had the running soap-opera of misbehaving tourists in Corfu or Crete or Rhodes and that was the kind of backdrop. At that time, the philosophy was that we should try to establish new honorary Consuls in lots more Greek islands in order to help British citizens that got into trouble. The only trouble about that was, as soon as you created an Honorary Consul, British subjects who had previously sorted their problems themselves immediately expected the Consul to sort it for them, or the tour companies just passed it on so you almost created new work rather than reduced it. However, that was the philosophy at the time and we created Honorary Consuls here and there.

But, there were two major incidents. One was the sinking, after a collision, of a cruise vessel called Jupiter which had on board four hundred British school children and their teachers which was leaving Athens for a Mediterranean cruise, an educational cruise. It struck another vessel and sank very quickly. It was as close as one can get to a miracle that only one child and one teacher died. The rescue was by a sort of flotilla of small Greek vessels that came out to rescue them in the dark. The Ambassador was away at the time so, as Consul General, I had to assume responsibility for the assistance that we could provide, and we set up an Incident Room at the Embassy and sent out a couple of our best Greek speakers down to the harbour to liaise with the port authorities and to try and keep in the picture. We had other consular officers going to hospitals where people were being taken to try and develop lists of who was where. It was a nightmarish several hours before we got a sense of whether there were tens or possibly hundreds missing. Fortunately, in a way, for us, it was the days before real 24 hour news and, again, we didn't have mobile phones so there was no way for example from the Incident Room in the Embassy of contacting our people at the harbour except by either sending a message by hand or if they could get a landline in the office of the ship's agent. But I didn't have television and news people bombarding me with questions all through the night as to what we were doing: "Why weren't we doing this? Why weren't we doing that?" and so on and so forth. And, as I say, amazingly the casualties were so low that

at the end it all subsided fairly quickly. Today, we would have had support teams coming out from London, we would have had special communications systems set up and so on. We had none of that at the time. So, again, we were very fortunate that it was not a much worse disaster than it turned out to be. Obviously, there's a certain amount of work afterwards in helping the relatives wanting to come out and pick up their children and so on and so forth but it was a very close-run thing.

CM: How long was it after you'd gone there?

BD: Oh, difficult to remember now how quickly but it wasn't very soon after, must have been a year or so later.

The other, and this did have a Gilbert and Sullivan element to it, was what became known as the Super Gun Affair. Saddam Hussein who'd been engaged in this long, bitter war with Iran was believed to be attempting to get together the pieces to construct – well, we knew this from Intelligence sources – to construct what was called a Super Gun. This sounded a very improbable project because it was basically enormous pieces of pipe that would be welded together and placed in a deep pit in the ground to give the angle of the pipe, and it would be used to fire a missile an enormous distance. Basically, it would have given him the ability to fire a missile in Iraq that would have reached Israel and which would have been a profound change in the whole strategic balance in the Middle East. The intelligence showed that he was attempting to put together this weapon, which had been designed by a Canadian arms manufacturer, using materials that he was sourcing from lots of different places; he was hoping to avoid people realising what he was trying to do. Our Intelligence Services had concluded that there was this shipment of pieces of pipe - what looked like pipe - which was to come into Greece at the port of Patras and was then going to be driven across Greece, go through Turkey and into Iraq, and these pipes were supposed to be part of the Super Gun. And so we got a telegram from London to us in Athens saying “We have this intelligence, you need to go and talk to the Greeks and get them to stop the lorry, arrest the driver, because he may be involved, and confiscate these pipes which we think are going to be part of a Super Gun”.

I got the job of going down to see the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs to put in this request and they looked at me – you know, “Are you trying to pull our legs? This doesn't make

sense, a Super Gun; never heard of a Super Gun. Are you serious?" and we were assuring them that, of course, we were serious. After a while of discussion the Greeks agreed they would stop the lorry and they duly did and they held the lorry at the port of Patras. We all felt very pleased with ourselves that we'd achieved this objective and the Foreign Office was all very grateful. But then, the British tabloid press got hold of the story and they sent out their reporters to Patras to see this mysterious lorry and its load of pipe. Of course, the driver had been put in jail and Greek jails are not very nice places - well, no jails are nice places but Greek ones are particularly unpleasant. And so the headlines tended to be "British Driver in Greek Hell-Hole Jail." There was a growing campaign in Britain that the driver was the innocent victim in all of this and why was he being held in jail? So, we then got another telegram from London saying "Please tell Greeks to release driver". So, having started this whole thing, I was sent back to the Greeks to persuade them to release the driver and the Greeks quite naturally said "But you told us you wanted him arrested" and I said "Yes, but now we'd like him released". And they said exactly what we would have said in the circumstances. They said "But this is now all part of Greek judicial process and we can't release him, we can't interfere in the legal process". I knew, and they knew, that Greek judicial processes are endless and that the chances were this man would stay in jail for months. But we'd gone as far as we could diplomatically, so, the poor man was languishing in jail. Fortunately, and I think some British newspaper paid for it, someone engaged for him a very expensive but very well connected Greek lawyer who knew which wheels to grease and without too much delay he managed to get the driver out of jail and back to Britain on bail. I think eventually no charges were ever brought because it was determined that he had been simply an innocent driver and hadn't been part of the plot. But, the plot seemed to have been a serious plot and that there was a Super Gun planned and that another consignment was intercepted in Turkey and the plot was foiled. So, it showed up the best and the worst of the Greek system, really.

Then, we had a long-running saga, a Consular case of a man called Francis Noel-Baker, who had been a British MP who had managed to change sides. He'd been a Labour MP to start with and then become a Conservative MP. His brother, Philip Noel-Baker, had been a Minister in the Attlee Government and indeed a Nobel Prize winner, for his work on disarmament. The Noel-Baker family had inherited, well, they'd bought land back in the 1820s (the original family) from the Turks before Greece became independent then held on to this land. But, because they'd bought it from the Turks, there was always a question mark

about the legitimacy of their title to it. And, this had flared up again. The local mayor, in the area where the Noel-Bakers had this land, was a Communist and, with a Left-Wing Government in Athens, there was a concern that the Noel-Bakers might have their land confiscated. So, they sought the intervention of the British Government and because Francis Noel-Baker was very well connected in both the Labour Party and the Conservative Party and he was known to Mrs Thatcher, he was the sort of person that no Ambassador wanted to get on the wrong side of. So, part of my job was to make sure that Francis Noel-Baker was kept happy. Even if we couldn't actually deliver what he wanted, which was guarantees for his land, at least we had to be seen to be doing what we could to help him. It was a Greek Easter weekend when he had invited me to go up for the weekend to stay with the family. It was the kind of summons that I couldn't refuse.

I had by then recently met Julia, who is now my wife, and I invited her to come with me. This was her first experience of diplomatic life, really. So off we went to the Noel-Bakers. It's a lovely drive. Their property is on the island of Euboea which is two or three hours from Athens and I had taken with me to Greece an MGB sports car as I thought befitted my newly returned bachelor status. So we set off in this MGB, top down, beautiful Greek day, it must have been April I suppose if it was Easter, and got to the Noel-Bakers. Francis was married to a Swedish lady who ran a kind of arts and crafts collective on the estates, where they wove and sewed and did all sorts of similar things. It was quite a Bohemian kind of set-up and Julia and I - there were no questions about whether we were married or not married - were just given this little cottage on the estate to stay in.

On the Easter Day, the Noel-Bakers said "Right, we're doing our traditional Greek Easter lamb in which the lamb is barbecued on a spit and lots of guns are shot off in the air, and we're doing it up on the hillside". So, we all got into Noel-Baker cars and some people were actually in sort of wagons behind and off we went up the hillside where earlier in the morning some of the Noel-Baker staff had started to barbecue the lambs. We all took turns to turn the spit and the lambs cooked away and a lot of retsina was drunk, and eventually the lambs were deemed cooked and we ate the lamb. And then, all of a sudden, Mrs Noel-Baker, Barbro she was called, stood up and said "Right, I think it's time now for a swim". I thought "What do you mean, go for a swim?" and I said to her "Well, I didn't really come prepared for that." She said "What do you mean?" I said "Well, we haven't got swimming-costumes" and she said "We don't bother about swimming costumes!" And so we all piled back into the Noel-

Baker wagons, went down to the sea where the whole of the Noel-Baker clan, and they ranged from 70 year olds down to 5 year olds, a great extended family, just took off all their clothes and raced off into the sea and it was clearly something they did regularly. Julia and I were left there thinking – and I was double-thinking “Well, what on earth is Julia going to think of all of this?” and then we decided “Oh, to heck” and took off our clothes and dashed in afterwards. I thought, then, I have really done my stuff for Her Majesty. Diplomacy on a nudist beach! So, there we were. I think the Noel-Bakers are still in Greece, I think their estates are still there. They jumped on the environmental band-wagon. Sadly, Francis and Barbro are now dead, but she wrote a long memoir of the Noel-Bakers in Greece. It showed that there were more sides to diplomatic life than you might think.

The other nerve-racking thing for me was attending the European Council, i.e. the meeting of Prime Ministers and Heads of State which in those days used to move around Europe meeting in different countries every six months. It was the Greek turn, to meet in Greece, and they'd decided that this Council meeting would be held on the Island of Rhodes in the Palace of the Knights. That meant Mrs Thatcher would be flying out to attend the meeting which meant that the Ambassador should go to Rhodes to be in attendance. Now, my Ambassador got the flu whether ‘diplomatic’ or otherwise. He was coming to the end of his career and I always rather suspected that he'd decided that there was no upside to being at a European Community meeting with Mrs Thatcher. It was only likely to be a bad thing and he didn't want to rock the boat at that stage of his career and he decided I could go. So, off I went to Rhodes. We'd brought in a specially armoured Rolls Royce for Mrs Thatcher to use and we were at the hotel. We had a convoy of cars lined up ready to go out to the airport to meet her plane coming in. There is, basically, one road to the airport and, all of a sudden, the Greek police decided to make the road one way from the airport coming in to town in order to allow people to make rapid progress into the city. They hadn't bothered to find out whether all the cars that needed to be at the airport were already there. So we had to engage in some frantic negotiation with the Greek police while I was sitting there thinking “This will be the end of my career if Mrs Thatcher lands and there's no one there to meet her”.

Eventually we got permission and we zoomed off to the airport and got there in the nick of time. We went out on to the tarmac to be beside the plane when it came to a halt. The place was swarming with people and it was very, very hard to distinguish who on earth everybody was. All I knew was that I was supposed to go up the steps on to the plane, welcome the

Prime Minister to Greece and then lead her down the steps, into the official car and back to the hotel. So, I managed to get up into the plane and met Mrs Thatcher. I'd met her briefly before, in the Cabinet Office role, but there was no way she would have known who I was from Adam, apart from being told who to expect. I remember immediately the sense of the strength of the presence when you met her. It was a contradiction. You sensed that you were walking into power but also that she was surprisingly feminine. I know that's probably a slightly politically incorrect thing to say but you couldn't help but notice it. Anyway, she shook hands and said "Lead the way", so I went back down the steps and she followed. I've got a lovely picture of myself coming down these steps looking like a rabbit in headlights with Mrs Thatcher behind me. We almost had to push our way through the crowd to get her into the car, and I got her into the car. I said to the Greeks "What on earth are you doing, who are all these people?" and they said "Don't worry, they're all security people". Anyway, back we went to the hotel and I showed her up to her room. Then I didn't know what to do. Her Private Secretary had gone into the next room and I was pacing up and down in the corridor outside thinking "Should I be inside, should I wait outside?" I could see she was pacing around inside, then she looked out and said "Mr Donnelly, come in, come in". So I went in and then she said "You know, this room's very like the one we had at Brighton" and I thought "Oh, my God, she's going to ask to change". She said "I was sitting over here and Denis was in here, and then the bomb went off" and I was thinking "Oh, my God". And then, the Private Secretary re-emerged and she said "I think it's time for a drink, Charles", so we all sat down and had a drink. And then she said to me "So, Mr Donnelly, what do I need to know about what's going on in Greece?" I said to her "Well, Prime Minister, there's only one thing going on in Greece that's of any relevance to you, and this is the story that all of the Greek press have got hold of, that you are going to refuse to shake hands with Papandreou's mistress, if she turns up with him at the Palace of the Knights".

The background to this was that Papandreou, who was the Greek Prime Minister and in his 60s, had recently abandoned his American wife of many years and taken up with a much younger woman who was a former air-hostess called Dimitra, who was known in the press as Mimi. Mimi was a very statuesque young woman and had already been photographed, topless, on Greek beaches and pictures had appeared in the paper. Among the Greek cultural classes this was a great scandal and a rumour had started, back when I was still in Athens, that Mrs Thatcher was going to refuse to shake Mini's hand if Papandreou turned up with her. I'd checked with Downing Street to see if there was any substance to this story and they'd

said “Not at all, you can deny it”. So, I denied it. But the story just grew and grew and, by the time I got to Rhodes, the story was that Mrs Thatcher was organising all of the EU Heads of State to boycott Mimi. So I explained this to the Prime Minister. I said “All eyes will be on you to see, if she is present with Papandreou, whether you will shake her hand.” And she said “What a load of nonsense! That’s his problem, not my problem. If she’s there, of course I’ll shake her hand.”

That was basically all I had to do, in dealing with her, except that I then saw completely the other side of her because – you know, she was very, very nice to me, she made me feel comfortable, I felt at home and we had this very easy conversation – but then, there was a knock at the door and we opened it and it was the Irish Cabinet Secretary who was waiting to see her. He came in but she didn’t let him sit down. She made him stand. She was planning to have a meeting with the Irish Prime Minister while she was in Rhodes, not to discuss European business but to discuss the extradition of an Irish priest who was wanted in Britain for bomb-related offences and the Irish were refusing to extradite him. She wanted a meeting with the Irish Prime Minister to beat him about the head on this subject. But, the Irish Cabinet Secretary said he was “very sorry, Prime Minister, but Mr Haughey”, that’s the Irish Prime Minister, “has been unwell on the plane”. He’d needed an oxygen mask and he wanted to cancel his meeting with the Prime Minister. She would have none of it: “No, I am going to see Mr Haughey here, one way or the other”. And so the Cabinet Secretary said “Well, at least can we postpone it until he’s feeling a bit better?” She said “You can postpone it but we’re going to have the meeting”. He said “So, can I go out and say that we’ve agreed that the meeting can be postponed?” and she said “No, you cannot. You can go out and say that Mr Haughey is not well and can’t meet me when I wanted to meet him but that I’m going to meet him”. The poor man, she just would not give an inch on this. She was determined to see him and he was left under no illusions. She didn’t care whether Mr Haughey was well or not well, she was going to have that meeting. So, I saw the Iron Lady in person.

And then before the end of the meeting - I didn’t have anything to do with the substance of the meeting at all – there was further evidence of her softer side. The Greeks had decided that because the twelve Heads of Government (at that point there were twelve Member States of the EU) were meeting in the Dodecanese, the twelve islands of Greece, each of the Prime Ministers or Heads of State should be given the Freedom of one of the islands. So, they’d allocated an island to each Prime Minister and there was to be a little ceremony at which the



mayor of that island would come along and present a scroll, giving the Freedom of the island, and inviting the Prime Minister to come and visit the island at a suitable time. It was a nice thought but fraught with diplomatic difficulty because the islands are all of different sizes and it became “Who’s getting the biggest island? Who’s getting the smallest island?” For Mrs Thatcher, they’d chosen the island where the mayor was a woman. I can’t remember which island it was now. I had great difficulty in persuading Mrs Thatcher’s private staff that this was worth her time. They were saying “No, she hasn’t got time for this ...” and I said “Look, this is the one thing that the Greeks will judge her by, you’ve got to do it”. So they reluctantly agreed and we arranged a meeting.

I went down in the lift of the hotel to meet the Greek mayor of the island. We got in the lift to go back up and I realised that she had a little speech to make and I thought “I’ve no idea what she’s going to say, this could be a disaster”. She had an interpreter, fortunately. It would have been even worse if I’d had to translate it! +So, I had no idea what she was going to say. The two women met and shook hands and the Lady Mayoress read out her little speech and it was full of stuff about the importance of women in politics and supporting women’s rights – the sort of thing that you don’t associate with Mrs Thatcher at all – and I was thinking “Uhhhhh ...”. And Mrs Thatcher replied, a very gracious little speech in which she basically said “You’re absolutely right, we women have got to stand together” which was something that she never said publicly, at all. You could see the Lady Mayoress growing in stature and she went out on cloud 9. It was a beautiful piece of diplomacy that, again, showed another side of Mrs Thatcher. You could call it cynical, if you want, but it was a way of dealing with people who, in many ways, didn’t matter to her at all but in a way that made them feel important. So, from the point of view of relations with Greece, I don’t know about the EU side of it, the meeting went very well but I think I aged five years in the process.

Once again, I had two different bosses in Greece. I had Jeremy Thomas who was the first one, that I mentioned that I’d known before, who was a classic diplomatic operator – he was smooth, suave, clever, charming. He charmed me into going to Greece and then (I didn’t mention this) but having got there I discovered that the prospectus that I was the Number Two was a false one because the Commercial Counsellor was actually senior to me, in diplomatic terms, and so he was the natural to replace Jeremy, if Jeremy was away. To be fair to Jeremy, he realised this and he tried to set up a system in which we alternated as Deputy which meant, basically, that neither of us were very happy about it. The second man

was called David Miers who was a more down to earth character. He was personally very kind and considerate but I never felt I got on the same wave-length as him. So, the second part of my time in Athens, the combination of continuing health issues and feeling professionally uncomfortable with my boss, meant that I did not feel I was being as successful as I would have liked.

Then, perhaps fortuitously, we had what used to be a regular feature of diplomatic life which was a staff inspection, in which people come out from London and look at the way the Embassy's organised and make recommendations for changes. As I alluded to earlier, this was at the time when Heads of Chancery were being phased out and it was a decision of policy that every Embassy should have a single Deputy Head of Mission, on an American model. That Deputy Head of Mission would then assume all of the co-ordinating roles that the Head of Chancery had previously done as well as either political or commercial tasks. So, it was getting rid of a layer of management in theory but in practice it tended to create, at least I thought it created, more problems. But they concluded that only 60% of my job was needed to be carried out by a Counsellor rank officer and on the commercial side only 40% of the Commercial Counsellor's job needed someone of that rank. So, they proposed to merge those two jobs and to roll into it, even though it added up to more than 100%, the Head of Chancery duties. Both I and Basil Eastwood, who was the Commercial Counsellor, thought this was madness and both of us declined to take on this new role because the effect of it would have been that we would have never got out of the office. By the time that we had carried out all of the co-ordination tasks we'd never have had time to do the core of our main responsibilities so we both said "Well, thank you but if that's what you're going to do we'd like to leave". And so we both left Athens earlier than would have otherwise been the case and this new structure came into effect after we'd gone.

I thought then, and still think, that it was a fundamental mis-reading of what diplomats should be doing when you're overseas. You've got to assume that you're not doing a full-time desk job. You've got to have time to get out and about to see the country and meet people. You're accumulating knowledge that you never know when it's going to be useful. It may not have a direct application to a particular problem but you've got to become part of the fabric of the country and you can't do that if you're so burdened by bureaucratic tasks that you're tied to the desk, which is what I think was the net effect of this staff inspection. So, I left Athens probably a year earlier than I would have expected to, and, as I said,

professionally I felt that I hadn't for a variety of reasons reached my potential or been able to do all that I wanted to do. The only consoling note, if you like, was that I'd met Julia and although it was a long time before we eventually got married it was the start of the relationship which continues today. So, at a personal level there was an enormous bonus from Athens but at a professional level I felt it was a fairly low point in my career. It meant returning to London because there hadn't been any planning for a new job to go to. The Foreign Office has a number of jobs that they keep in reserve for situations like this, one of which is to send people to the Royal College of Defence Studies which is the senior British military staff college, based in London. It runs a one year course which is basically designed to prepare senior military officers for the very top command positions in the British Forces. The Foreign Office traditionally sent a couple of people on this course every year and the timing of my departure from Athens was perfect for me to fit into that course. And so I went back to London early January in '91 and immediately started on the Royal College of Defence Studies.

### **Royal College of Defence Studies, London, 1991-1992**

CM: This is Tuesday, the 23<sup>rd</sup> of May 2017 and we are resuming Sir Brian Donnelly's recollections of his diplomatic career. Sir Brian, you've come back to London from Athens; how did you feel about going back into full-time study?

BD: I suppose I was a bit ambivalent, not knowing quite whether I would be able to re-adapt to operating in a completely unstructured atmosphere but, as it turned out, I enjoyed it enormously. The Royal College of Defence Studies is the most senior staff college for British military officers and it operates from a rather fine house called Seaford House in Belgrave Square so it's in the heart of the posh part of London. The course, as it stood in 1991, was a year of lectures, visits and independent study intended to prepare senior military officers for the highest command positions. Roughly half the members of the College were from overseas. I think there were probably 80 or 90 of us altogether, half were serving British military officers and in normal years the FCO would send along a couple of diplomats. Although the core of the course is inevitably about defence and international security, the College interprets that widely to include social, political and economic consequences of military action and the implications, for society in general, of security policy. The College attracts very high quality speakers and it has great access to the political

and military establishment both in the UK and overseas because of its many years of activity. I think it's fair to say that in 1991 the RCDS was feeling a bit vulnerable. Mrs Thatcher was known to be sceptical about the idea of grown men taking a year out of their normal work to go and study and there was a joke that the RCDS course was 'a six month course packed into a year'. I think there was, like many jokes, an element of truth in that and there was an image of it being rather laid back and slow, a chance to play golf and socialise, but there were question marks about how valuable the work was. The Foreign Office didn't seem quite to know what to do about it. They couldn't make up their mind whether it was just a convenient parking place for people like me who had unexpectedly become available from their previous jobs, whether to look at it as a springboard for other things or, as is now more fashionable I suppose, a career break to re-charge batteries in the middle of your career. For me, it turned out to be something of all of those things I think. As I've mentioned in our previous talks, Athens for me, in professional terms though not personal terms, was something of a low point and so increasingly I saw RCDS as an opportunity to get away from the day to day pressures, shake off my health problems and, as it turned out, I laid the foundations for the rest of my career.

The first part of the course began in the January of '91, overlapped with the first Gulf War, and that gave immediate relevance to a lot of our discussions, and, of course, there was conflict in the Balkans. So, for the first time for many years, the course was operating at a time when military action was actually of direct relevance at that moment. One of the members of the course, who joined us later in the year, was a man called Patrick Cordingley who commanded the British Armoured Brigade in the Gulf War and in a very distinguished fashion. At the other extreme, another member of the course had been a guerrilla fighter in Zimbabwe's independence struggle and he had relevance later in my life. Another was a participant from Hungary who was the first participant from a former Warsaw Pact country, our enemy for over forty years, and now there he was sitting down with British, American, French, German and other officers. So, it was an amazing opportunity to get to understand how the military mind worked and to measure yourself against a profession with a very different culture from the one I was used to in the Foreign Office. I remember that, when we first met, everyone had to introduce themselves briefly and describe their career. We had a procession of British officers who'd been through Sandhurst and various other military colleges, in a very traditional fashion, and then up got this Zimbabwean who said "Well, I did my training in the bush" and then sat down again. It was a mixed bunch and because it was

run by the Ministry of Defence there was inevitably a certain number of 'Boy's Own' kind of element because we visited Army, Navy and RAF establishments. I got to drive a tank, I got to fly a Tornado Fighter Bomber, second in command in the back seat with the regular pilot in the front but he did hand over controls for a little while, fire a shoulder rocket launcher, use a sniper's rifle. We sat in a bunker on Salisbury Plain while the Army lobbed shells at us so you had some experience of what it was like to be under fire. So, I can't pretend it wasn't fun but the College's reputation is so high that its tours and visits were a means to meet and quiz very senior military officers, chief executives, academics and politicians, right up to Head of State level; on some of our visits we were actually received by Heads of State. It was a genuinely thought-provoking, mind-broadening experience and we did have to produce some evidence of intellectual application. I remember slaving away on a paper on public opinion and foreign policy and this greatly amused my daughter, who was living with me at the time and was at university because, as she was struggling with her essays I was crouched over this battered Amstrad computer trying to get it to produce this thesis. I think I just about exhausted its memory and had the usual crises when the thing crashed and I couldn't retrieve the stuff. I was quite pleased with the paper at the time but I have to confess it completely failed to anticipate the whole Internet social media world so it looks very dated today.

I suppose the other thing that RCDS gave me, which is related to my later career, was that it provides great, I think the expression today is "Street Cred" with the Defence and Military establishments. I found later, particularly if I was dealing, as I was often, with senior military people that if I said I had attended the RCDS course you could almost sense the atmosphere changing and they'd treat you as one of them and not just as a slightly irritating civilian.

Mrs Thatcher notwithstanding, I'm a great fan of the RCDS and what it can do for people. Indeed after retirement I returned twice as a temporary member of the College Staff to lead some of their overseas tours. I found that since 1991 the College had instituted a much more rigorous academic programme; people are now expected to study for a Master's Degree in parallel with the course. But they'd managed to do it in a way which didn't completely close down what I thought was the vital space that it provided to allow individuals the chance to develop and, if necessary, re-orientate their professional lives. Anyway, the effect in Personnel Department at the Foreign Office was that they concluded that after a year at RCDS I must be an authority in all things military, and I was offered the job of Head of Non-Proliferation and Defence Department in the Foreign Office which was not the sort of job I

would have aspired to twelve months earlier. So, from that standpoint, it provided a very useful stepping stone from very much a jack of all trades kind of career, up to that point, to one that became a bit more focused for what turned out to be the remaining years of my professional life.

CM: And that was the way you wanted to go at the time?

BD: I wish I could pretend it was a well considered decision but, looking back, I think I would probably have welcomed any job that I'd been offered that was what, in Foreign Office terms, was called a Head of Department job which was a necessary step on the career path.

### **Non Proliferation Department, FCO (Head of Dept), 1992-95**

In the Foreign Office there are a multitude of Departments of different kinds and qualities and I think there was a kind of unspoken pecking order in Departments so that although no one would ever, or no one did at that point, draw up a league table, it was generally recognised that the Departments dealing with the European Union, the Department dealing with what was then the former Soviet Union, there was a Department called Planning Staff ... there were a number of Departments that were seen to be towards the top of the unspoken league and there were a number of other Departments that were generally recognised as being down towards the bottom: Cultural Relations Department, Commonwealth Co-ordination Department. I suppose at the time, when I joined it, Non-Proliferation and Defence Department would have been in the bottom third of that league table but, after Athens, I wasn't necessarily a contender for one of the top Departments so it wasn't something that I'd aimed for or asked for, but was - I can't quite remember now - probably quite grateful to receive.

It was one of a trio of Defence and Security Departments in the Foreign Office. One of them dealt with NATO and the major security issues - that was up there at the top of the league - and there was another one which dealt with arms control and disarmament and my Department, my new Department, was something of a rag-bag dealing with the bits that didn't fit neatly into the other two. So, I had a range of rather disparate subjects including the Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons and Missiles, Control of Conventional Weapons Sales, i.e.

licensing of sales of weapons, which was not easy when the UK is a major arms exporter and at the same time you are trying to both control the exports and encourage them so there's a slight internal contradiction there.

There was a category of technology called Dual Use Technology which was so called because it could be used for both military and civilian use. These goods were subject to export licence control because of the risk that if they went into the wrong hands they could be used to build weapons or missiles, or generally used for other nefarious purposes by terrorists. The trouble with dual use goods was that it was very hard to find goods that weren't dual use if you carried this thing to extreme lengths: for example a straightforward screw could be used to screw down a piece of furniture or it might be used in making a bomb but clearly you couldn't expect to control the exports of screws. We were just entering a stage when computers were becoming smaller and therefore more easily moved around and there were great difficulties in deciding whether the sale of computers to certain countries, or certain components to certain countries, should be controlled because those computers might allow them to take the technology in the computer and apply it to weapons systems and so on. And so it was almost a below the horizon kind of activity in that not many people were aware of the problem and it was very difficult to control successfully without causing a major blockage to British exports. We were the Department responsible for issuing export licences for goods like that. We were also responsible for what we called Bi-lateral Defence Arrangements. Inevitably the UK would have a whole series of relationships with other countries to discuss security and defence issues, and my Department was responsible for scheduling and preparing for those kinds of meetings. Also we did the selection and posting of Defence Attachés to our embassies overseas which was peculiar, as it was a personnel function. So, as I said, the Department was made up of bits that had been left over from precursor Departments that had been split up and there was no internal logic, and the differences were reflected in the kind of staff that I inherited. The non-proliferation part of the Department, which was of political interest, had seriously good, fast stream officers. For a while, my Deputy on that side was a man called Simon Fraser who went on to become Permanent Secretary of the Foreign Office. But the other parts of the Department tended to be mainstream officers and the quality there was fairly mixed although that changed over time. So I found that there was a fairly big management exercise in trying to keep these bits of the Department which weren't really coherent operating as a coherent body.

There was also the fact that, in defence and security terms, the times were changing. I took over the Department in the wake of the First Gulf War and the Soviet Union was breaking up. There was great concern that the break-up of the Soviet Union might lead to the proliferation of all sorts of weapons technologies that had formerly been heavily protected by the Soviet system but were now in the hands of almost unknown governments in states that hadn't existed independently for years, you know – what would happen in Kazakhstan, what would happen in Turkmenistan, Armenia, Azerbaijan, all parts of the former Soviet Union that were now emerging as independent countries? Bits and pieces of the old Soviet war machine had been left in their countries. We didn't know what there was, how it would be used, what their policies would be. I think looking back now, and it's 25 years ago, it's easy to underestimate both, I think, the sense of opportunity that we felt after the destruction of the Berlin Wall and the break-up of the Eastern Bloc, but also the trepidation that these dangerous technologies that were previously controlled by the Soviet Union might get into the hands of the rogue regimes or terrorists. So, I think it's fair to say that I arrived in the Department at just about the time that proliferation control of technologies was beginning to assume a much greater political significance than it had done during the Cold War years and to some extent I was able to ride the Zeitgeist. And, by the time I left the Department, three years later, I'd managed to produce a fairly radical restructuring of it so that, as well as dealing with nuclear and missile proliferation, I brought into the Department chemical and biological weapons proliferation so that all of the proliferation issues were being dealt with together. I managed to hive off or persuade other colleagues to take on other bits of the Department that I, frankly, was much less interested in – the bilateral defence relations, the management of Defence Attachés, things of that kind – and so I had managed to create a more coherent Department dealing with all aspects of WMD (Weapons of Mass Destruction) Proliferation and control of conventional weapons exports. When I left, it was called, simply, Non-Proliferation Department.

Quite separately, the Foreign Office had been going through one of its regular management reform exercises and part of this exercise had been to try and assess more objectively what weight should be given to different Heads of Department jobs. I mentioned at the beginning a kind of league table but now there was an attempt, in a sense, to quantify jobs – job responsibilities, job weights – and to create such a league table. The assessors used indices like staff numbers, budgets, the degree of independent decision making, the relevance to Ministers and so on and so forth, and to general surprise, I think, the new Non-Proliferation



Department emerged from this in the top four of FCO Departments. It was a combination of factors, I think. I had, by Foreign Office Departments standards, a pretty large budget because one of the activities I oversaw was the deployment of British Inspectors to the UN team who were looking for Weapons of Mass Destruction in Iraq. We tend now to think about all of this in the context of the 2003 war but it goes right back to 1991 or 1992, after the First Gulf War when weapons inspectors were sent into Iraq and the UK contributed a large number of them. They were part of a UN team but the British contribution was managed by my Department because it was a non-proliferation exercise, and I had quite a big budget for that which a lot of other Foreign Officer Departments didn't have. Also, because the whole business of licensing and controlling conventional technologies and so on was very labour intensive, I had a much larger Department in terms of staff numbers than most other Departments. Anyway, the net effect was that, in football terms, I'd risen from near relegation status to being a Champions League contender and, although it was coincidental, it was conveniently coincidental that my office moved from a really scruffy garret on the fourth floor of the Foreign Office building. If you've ever been in the Foreign Office it's hard to imagine what a sort of rabbit warren it is. People see the grand public rooms but they don't often necessarily see some of the office space that's up in the top floors. Anyway, my office was moved from one of these sort of garrets in the top to a prime site with a lovely oval window overlooking Downing Street and it was remarkable how these external signs, the new job index and the new office location, led to you being treated completely differently and regarded differently by colleagues. I found that it was no longer difficult to get really good quality people to come and work in NPD because it was seen to be a key Department and when I came to leave it there was a long queue of people who were just dying to take over. Regardless of what I achieved in policy terms, I felt that I had made a significant achievement in making Non-Proliferation – I think one of my successors changed the title to Counter-Proliferation which sounded more action-oriented – anyway, to put it right in the centre of Foreign Office policy-making.

To come back to your question, I really had no idea where I was going to go after RCDS or what the dimensions of the next job would be, and I think I was just incredibly fortunate that it turned out to be one that proved to be important and also one that suited my particular skill set.

I think the other thing that was interesting about coming back into the Foreign Office, was the Office structure. There was a very clear hierarchy and I had above me an Assistant Under-Secretary and a Deputy Under-Secretary and because Defence Security Policy is such a central aspect of Foreign Policy these were always filled by high-powered people. I was fortunate in that the three AUSs and the DUS I worked for: John Goulden, Paul Lever, David Logan and Timothy Daunt, all gave me a remarkably free hand but were hugely supportive. I think I was helped by the fact that proliferation issues are often technical issues and quite complex, and once I'd shown a degree of competence I was left to get on with things.

The other factor was that I found that most of the proliferation issues were handled in international meetings and I travelled extensively. I was on the road probably 30%-40% of my time and I think, at one point, I was the most travelled FCO officer other than the Queen's Messengers who were carrying Diplomatic Bags around. Because, depending on the subject, either the Ministry of Defence or the Department of Energy, if it was nuclear sometimes both, had a very keen interest in what we were doing. I usually had a minder with me to make sure that I didn't stray too far from the agreed orthodoxy on these subjects. And because on most of the Non-Proliferation international bodies I attended, I was the UK representative. I think I must have spoken, as the UK, in almost every configuration you can think of from P3, which was the three US, UK, Russia, up to the UN General Assembly, through a variety of configurations – we had P5 which were the Security Council members, the G7 which became the G8 when Russia joined, we had EU meetings and a whole variety of others. Really, I felt this was what I joined the Foreign Office to do. I was out there representing the UK, I had a lot of freedom to develop policy when I was back in London, clear it through Ministers and then go out and argue it with other countries, try and reach international agreements and so on. The downside of it all was that the amount of time it consumed. I mean, I think when I was in London I rarely left the office before 9 o'clock at night. I was often in the office at weekends. It was at a time when there was a culture of long hours in the Foreign Office. It was almost felt that if you weren't working long hours, you weren't doing the job properly. Fortunately, more enlightened views have come in since but at the time people seemed to be starting morning meetings earlier and earlier and then they would stay later and later, and it was probably rather fortunate that at the time I was effectively a single man because it would have been immensely corrosive of a normal family life. So I was getting a lot of satisfaction from it but, in terms of it consuming my hours and days, it was full-on.

I suppose I felt that even if I wasn't making policy at the heart of the over-arching strategic debate, in other words I wasn't involved in deciding how we react to Russia in the broadest strategic sense, but I certainly felt that I was in the orbit just outside that. It could be frustrating. I've mentioned the contradictions between the UK's wish to remain a nuclear power state and, at the same time, wishing to ensure that other countries didn't become nuclear powers. Similarly, with the UK's wish to remain one of the biggest arms sellers while taking a leading role in urging other countries not to become major arms sellers, or at least the euphemism was, to 'sell responsibly'. But then you were trying to frame rules that would mean that other people selling responsibly would actually have very little opportunity to sell against your arms companies. So, it was a classic case often of do as I say and not as I do. And, because of the technical nature of the Non-Proliferation issues, detail was important and some Ministers were better than others at doing their homework.

I remember having a very painful appearance before the Foreign Affairs Select Committee when the then Foreign Office Minister of State, Douglas Hogg, overestimated his barrister's ability to master his brief without having properly read it, and he dug himself into a terrible hole and then turned round to me and said "Well Mr Donnelly will explain the detail" and I had to get him out of the hole he'd dug for himself. So, there were ups and downs. For most of the time, nuclear Non-Proliferation was the central issue, the main subject on my desk. The United Kingdom, the United States and Russia, although previously it was the Soviet Union, were what is called The Depositary Powers for the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. We used to call it NPT for short, and this treaty was the corner-stone of the Non-Proliferation Regime. It had been set up to try and ensure that nuclear weapons would not spread beyond initially the three countries who'd first developed them, later of course including China and France. And it was a kind of pact between nuclear states, on the one hand, and non-nuclear states that the non-nuclear states would agree not to develop nuclear power for military purposes, on the understanding that the countries that had developed nuclear weapons would commit themselves to a process of negotiation about eventually disarming themselves. This treaty was coming up to the date in 1995 when a decision had to be taken on whether it should be renewed and the three Depositary Powers had the responsibility, working with the UN, for organising the preparations for this conference. This meant regular and frequent meetings with my US and Russian opposite numbers, the so-called P3 which I mentioned before. Interestingly, my Russian colleague at the time, whom I used to see probably every other month, was a man called Sergei Kislyak, and he has recently become somewhat,

perhaps notorious is not the right word, but certainly prominent because he is at present the Russian Ambassador in Washington and a central figure in the allegations about the Trump Administration being too closely linked to Putin. At the time, Sergei was a refreshing change from the traditional Soviet diplomat. He seemed glad to have cast off the shackles of communist ideology, and he was the first Russian diplomat that I'd dealt with whom you could treat straightforwardly, as with other diplomats, and not be constantly constrained by concerns about communist ideology. So, we would meet regularly to discuss both the organisation of the NPT Conference but also, of course, the policies that we, as nuclear weapon states, would want to see emerge from it.

Now, the UK strongly supported the Non-Proliferation Treaty because it had been largely successful in limiting the spread of nuclear weapons, but as I've said, in return for their self-denying action, the non-nuclear weapons states had high expectations of the nuclear weapon states and felt, with some justification really, that the nuclear weapon states were trying to avoid their commitments to disarm. But of course that was not a position that the UK could officially take. So, the formulation and defence of the UK position on nuclear weapons required a fair degree of intellectual gymnastics really. You had to, while recognising that there was no prospect, certainly under the Governments we had in the 1990s and still today, of the UK unilaterally discarding its nuclear weapons. We needed to have, at the same time, imaginative ideas about how the numbers of weapons and the use of weapons might be managed and controlled in the future, in a way which would at least show a commitment to the principle and the desirability of reducing nuclear weapons even if that was a fair step from the actuality. So, we had to be able to display good will and intent and some progress, without ever being pinned down to firm commitments.

Negotiating our own domestic policy with the Ministry of Defence could be as difficult as then negotiating and agreeing a text with the non-nuclear weapon states in the context of the UN Conference. I'm conscious this all sounds terribly cynical and I think I can only offer what you might call the greater good defence i.e. that the Non-Proliferation Treaty, despite its many weaknesses, had been largely successful in limiting the nuclear threat and it was therefore worth preserving, and to say that I think all sides understood well the realities of the situation. In other words, the non-nuclear weapon states knew basically that the nuclear weapon states were not going to, in any immediate time frame, give up their nuclear weapons. But that didn't stop them wanting to put as much pressure as possible on the

nuclear weapon states in order to win concessions about how the weapons might be used and in what circumstances and so on. I had hoped as my time in the job went on, that I would actually lead the UK delegation to the 1995 Conference but, as it turned out, I was moved on to my next job in NATO just before the Conference in '95. But the Conference did decide to renew the Non-Proliferation Treaty and I took some satisfaction from the fact that the preparations had paid off.

Sergei Kislyak also featured in another highly sensitive negotiation which I became involved in, which concerned Russian biological weapons programmes. We had concerns, based on intelligence we had got from a defector from the Russian Administration, that the Russians were continuing to make biological weapons and that this programme was being carried out in great secrecy in what were still closed cities deep in Siberia, and that this activity was being concealed from the Russian President, who was then Boris Yeltsin. This intelligence was shared between ourselves and the Americans and it was agreed that we would form a joint delegation to discuss this with the Russians and to try and reach an agreement which would bring these secret programmes to an end.

One of the experts in my team was a man called David Kelly who later, very sadly, took his own life in the wake of a controversy concerning the unauthorised disclosure of information to a BBC journalist, in the run-up to the invasion of Iraq in 2003. I knew David as a dedicated and conscientious man. He had an encyclopaedic knowledge of biological warfare and I think his understanding of the dreadful potential of it made him a fierce opponent of those who sought to conceal them. He was like a terrier with a bone, in trying to expose the truth, and it's a great tragedy that his contribution to our security has really been overshadowed by the later events. I remember we'd gone to Moscow and the Russians had assembled a team which included scientists from these, what were still closed, cities who were attempting to justify their activities on the grounds that they were not building weapons but were creating defences against the potential use of biological weapons. And it is one of the problems with biological weapons that you can develop a vaccine and you can use it for both harmful purposes and for defensive purposes. If you think of smallpox, for example, the vaccination is against smallpox but the same vaccine can be used to spread disease. And so a lot of the discussion hinged on the extent to which the two sides would allow inspections of one another's facilities, to reassure themselves that people were doing what they said that were doing. David was interrogating a Russian expert and the man was clearly getting

increasingly discomfited by this. David was getting more and more aggressive and Kislyak who was chairing the proceedings, being on home ground, called a pause to the meeting and he took me aside and said “Brian, you know, you are dealing with people who have yet to come to terms with the end of the USSR, let alone the end of communism. They know that your information comes from a defector. They regard him as a traitor and you can’t expect them to validate his claims, it’s just asking too much of them and you’ve just got to settle for less” which was, I think, an accurate assessment of where we were at the time.

It was interesting that while we felt that we were on the moral high ground in demanding right to access these closed cities and to inspect them, the Russians, for their part, purported to believe that we, too, had covert programmes and that we concealed these within large chemical companies like ICI or Glaxo which they didn’t have the equivalent of. They demanded, therefore, the right for reciprocal inspections of ICI and Glaxo and, of course, we saw this as a pretty blatant attempt at industrial espionage. Our arguments that we couldn’t force ICI to let a team of Russian engineers examine their chemical plants they took with a pinch of salt and said “Well, of course you could. If you wanted to, you would.” And I think that particular phase of negotiations ended up in a stand-off but we eventually concluded it though I confess I can’t now remember the exact detail of how. It was in the margins of a visit to Moscow, just before Christmas, by the then US Vice-President, Al Gore, when I was incorporated in the US delegation, for this purpose, and zoomed around Moscow in the midst of a typically American cavalcade of enormous vehicles. Some deal was hammered out but because the issue was so sensitive I don’t ever recall it being openly referred to in communiqués. My main memory is a panic because the weather, being Moscow in December, was closing in and my flight home was cancelled and I was facing the prospect of a Christmas spent in Moscow until Lufthansa kindly put on an extra plane that managed to get us out at the last minute. It’s an odd kind of event and I’m not sure how much the Foreign Office will allow it to go into print because, as I say, I don’t recall it ever being mentioned or referred to in communiqués or press conferences because of the nature of the information that allowed us to carry out the negotiation and the sensitivity of the subject.

At a somewhat different level but reflecting the same general concern that the fragmentation of the former Soviet Union might lead to WMD related technology passing to rogue states, and again as a result of a UK/US initiative, I was asked to lead a team drawn from all of the G7 countries plus Australia. This sounds a bit odd but Australia had instigated the formation

of an informal group that focused on chemical weapons related technologies, so they were felt to have a special interest in that subject. So it was G7 plus Australia and the idea was that we should, as a group, visit as many as we possibly could of the former Soviet states in order to preach to them the virtues of effective export controls of sensitive technologies. We called it a Road Show and between the seven countries, or the eight countries, we had experts in all of the different weapons technologies and the means for controlling them. So altogether we were roundabout twenty-five people and I was given the task, alongside my American opposite number, of organising and carrying out this visit. I started off rather, naively I think, with hindsight, believing that the RAF might like the chance to fly us to all of these countries given that they'd spent forty years planning to bomb them and that it might be an interesting exercise for them to actually go and see them all. But I had underestimated the new commercial mindset in British Government and the price that the RAF wanted to charge the Foreign Office for providing a plane and a pilot and a crew and so on was quite prohibitive, and it turned out that the American and Canadian Air Forces were equally cost conscious.

So we looked at the prospects of taking twenty-five people around the former Soviet Union on commercial flights and that was a total nightmare. I'd been given a supernumerary officer i.e. one who wasn't normally in the Department, he was an extra, to help organise the visit and he was a cheerful, very resilient character called John Thompson, who had recently been our High Commissioner in one of the Pacific islands. And so, after we'd been rebuffed by the RAF and the US Air Force, he decided since they were operating on Thatcherite principles of 'charge for your services' that he would do something similar from the other end and go to the market place and see what price he could get for chartering an aircraft. He reported back to me that he'd found the perfect aircraft, a 737, that had a British and American crew. It was based in France and he would take us round, I think it was seven or eight countries, for less than it would have cost us all collectively to pay business class air fares to get round. I said this sounded absolutely perfect and he started all the necessary arrangements. He was always rather hazy about the detail but I was too busy trying to work out the policy side of what we were going to do and say, and it wasn't until very late on that he revealed that the plane was actually the Presidential Aircraft of Burkina Faso, which used to be called Upper Volta, and it came complete with a fully stocked bar, proper kitchen facilities, bathrooms with gold-plated faucets and the seating in the plane was not rows of seats, it was organised as if it was in a hotel lounge. The crew included stewardesses who

would cook you fresh food in the kitchen. And so we set off and travelled in some style through eight, I think it was eight we went to, former Soviet Republics. As I said, John didn't reveal to me the provenance of the plane until the last minute. He said "I didn't want to worry you". But it emerged, almost the day before we were due to take off, the one thing he hadn't picked up was that the plane didn't have a licence to collect passengers in London, and we had arranged for all of the other seven countries to come to London so that we could set off from Heathrow on the journey. So we had to get the Department of Aviation, or whatever they were called at the time, who were greatly amused by our predicament, to grant us a special exemption so that this plane could land at Heathrow and pick us all up from the airport.

CM: So, sighs of relief then?

BD: Sighs of relief.

We all met for the first time in the VIP, well there's a special terminal at Heathrow that deals with private flights and they're usually VIP flights so it's effectively a VIP terminal. So we were all there and John gave the assembled team a briefing on the administrative arrangements. He said to them "Well, the bad news is that if you want to go on this flight, you've all got to sign a waiver absolving Her Majesty's Government from any responsibility if anything should happen to the plane". Then he said "But the good news is that I'm going to take the forms on the plane with me so that if the worst happens, no one will know you've ever signed them"! So, on that cheery note we set off and thanks really to the help of British embassies and American embassies in Minsk and Kiev and Moscow and Almata and Baku – and where did we go from Baku – we went to Armenia then on to Georgia then on to Moldova. At every place we did manage to sit down with the right sort of people and explain to them why it was that it was important to have these effective policies for controlling weapons, weapons technologies, the whole importance of dual use technologies and the importance of Customs and Excise operations to control them.

We had a sticky moment in Azerbaijan which was then inevitably duplicated in Armenia because the two countries at the time were in a long-running dispute over part of their territory that overlapped and were accusing each other of using chemical weapons in this conflict. The Azeris wanted us to take what they said were examples of chemical weapons



being used by the Armenians and denounce them publicly and we, of course, were trying to avoid becoming entangled in a bi-lateral dispute. I think it was in one of those countries, though it might have been in Georgia – the format was we would usually sit in a big seminar and each of our experts would give a little presentation on their own specialism – we had an American Customs Officer who gave a rather pious presentation about the importance of customs controls and his local opposite number said words to the effect of “Sir, we had customs controls on the Black Sea before your country was even thought of”. And you think mmm, it’s sometimes easy to forget the historical context! But, certainly in Georgia, we were entertained by - it was the first time for me - we were entertained by Ministers who actually carried guns. They were sitting there with shoulder holsters and guns. In Moldova, which is a very small country, we were actually on television with the President. So, we felt we had discharged our remit even though we didn’t get to Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, I think those were the three that we didn’t get to. (The part the Americans were supposed to organise!)

What I found perhaps most depressing about the visit, was not so much the weapons side. The Soviet system obviously had many, many shortcomings but it had left fairly solid bureaucracies and so there were systems in place, it was just a question of pointing them in the right direction, it wasn’t a question of having to create new structures. But on the economic side, the transformation from communism to free market economies was causing enormous turmoil and there were clear signs everywhere we went that the principal beneficiaries of the demise of economic communism were not democrats but shady, often corrupt, wheeler-dealers, many of whom had criminal connections and some of whom, of course, were going to emerge later as vastly rich oligarchs. There wasn’t a nice transition from one form of economy to another, it was all the worst aspects of tooth and claw capitalism emerging almost everywhere we went, and everywhere so many people were quite obviously just interested in exploiting the chaos to make money.

Another highlight of the job was accompanying John Major to a Budapest meeting at which the Ukraine, Belarus and Kazakhstan agreed to return all of the Soviet nuclear weaponry that had been left on their territory and to join the Non-Proliferation Treaty. This was the end product of months and years of negotiation mainly carried out, I have to say, by the Americans but because we were, as I’ve mentioned, a depositary power of the treaty we were involved in the signing ceremonies. At one point, prior to the ceremony, I was closeted in

really quite a tiny room with Bill Clinton, Boris Yeltsin, John Major and the three other Presidents, each of whom had their one adviser with them. A poor White House Protocol Officer was trying to explain to the great men how the signing ceremony was going to be organised and who should stand where and when and how they would move forward and move backwards. I think he lost their attention after about 30 seconds of his presentation and you realised that when you get world leaders like this, they kind of assume that things will work and that they will instinctively understand how to do it, and they're not really interested in being told what they should do or how they should do it. When we went out on to the stage, and they did take up their positions, the whole event was opened by the Hungarian President making a speech, since it was his country and his territory. But the podium that had been erected was one that the Americans, it seems, take with them on the Presidential aircraft. It's a special bullet-proof podium so that when an American President stands behind it, it minimises the chance of someone shooting him, I suppose. This one was clearly specially constructed for Bill Clinton who's a big man and the Hungarian President was a very small man, and so when he marched up to the podium and stood behind it he could barely be seen. No one had bothered to tell him that within the podium there was a pull-down step – for smaller speakers you could pull down this step and then step up on it and you could become visible. But no one had told him this or if they'd told him, he'd forgotten. So, this man from the State Department was sent out. He went out on his hands and knees to try and pull down this step so that the Hungarian President could stand on top of it. Of course, the audience could see him coming on the stage; the Hungarian couldn't because he was behind him and the audience started to giggle because it looked as though the American was trying to pull the Hungarian off the stage by his ankles. It was quite ludicrous in what was meant to be the most solemn ceremony. In the end he pulled down the step and the poor Hungarian had to stand up on top of it. I was in the wings at this point and looking at all the Presidents wondering what's going to happen next, probably wishing they'd listened to the briefing from the White House Official.

It was an exciting time in many ways. I mentioned having to oversee the British Weapons Inspectors in Iraq. There was a regular series of crises because Saddam Hussein would either deny them access to certain sites or try to restrict their activities so they were regularly getting into confrontations with Iraqi Forces. They were exactly the same problems that would come back again in 2003 in that we kept asking ourselves "Well, if the Iraqis genuinely don't have weapons of mass destruction why are they being so obstructive, why

are they stopping the Inspectors, why won't they be open?" We would keep getting Intelligence reports that suggested that there were weapons here or there and the Inspectors would go off and look and then sometimes they'd find nothing, sometimes they'd find some evidence that there might have been weapons. It was a very difficult and hard to assess process because you never could work out whether Saddam genuinely was trying to conceal weapons that he knew he had or whether he was trying to conceal the fact that he hadn't got weapons because that would have been a great humiliation for him. And then, of course, you are also concerned about the safety of the Inspectors and so on and so forth, so that was a challenging aspect of the job.

I participated in the demise of an organisation called COCOM which was a semi-secretive body that operated in Paris throughout the Cold War years and was the body that managed sanctions against the Warsaw Pact countries that were rarely talked about publicly but covered a vast range of goods. As I've mentioned to you, these were dual-use goods. For forty years we'd been trying to deny to the Soviet Bloc, these advanced technologies that would have helped them to develop their weapons systems. It was a kind of economic embargo that was rarely spoken of and caused great frustration to exporters who needed to have licences for all sorts of things. But with the collapse of communism, with the changes in technology that made it almost impossible any longer to effectively control many of the technologies that we'd controlled in the past, it became clear that COCOM was no longer fit for purpose. We developed, instead, a new body that was called the Wassenaar Arrangement which had as its objective what was called 'responsible and transparent trade in weapons and dual-use technologies'. This was a feeling that if you couldn't block technologies going to certain countries, you should try and bring them into the same organisation and establish common standards among them all, and agreements among us all as to what was dangerous, what wasn't, what could be freely traded and what couldn't. And so the Wassenaar Arrangement which still goes on today was developed out of the ashes, if you like, of COCOM.

Again, a sense of déjà vu – the period '91 to '94 was a period of acute tension with North Korea over their development of nuclear technology and missile systems. I narrowly avoided having to visit North Korea but I did meet North Korean officials in London. It was the first meeting between British and North Korean officials for decades. I mentioned that relations with the Russians were changing, because of the end of communism, but going back to deal

with the North Koreans was like going back twenty years; sterile, difficult exchanges, very little meeting of minds, it was the worst kind of Cold War discussion. But, again, the Americans were very prominent on this at the time and, thanks to the efforts of a man called Bob Gallucci, they did manage to reach a moratorium agreement with North Korea in which the North Koreans agreed to stop developing their nuclear technologies in exchange for the Americans lifting sanctions on them and offering some aid and trade. That was pretty effective for about ten years and then gradually broke down and now we have the situation, again, where the North Koreans are furiously developing their nuclear technologies and missile technologies and there is confrontation with the Americans yet again. I don't know to what extent we're involved now but at the time we were working very closely with the Americans in attempts to try and mitigate the problem. We could do with another Bob Gallucci today, probably.

As I've said, there was a whole range of issues all of which seemed to me to be not just of interest but of importance and you felt you were actually performing a useful service, doing something useful. I was looking forward to going to New York for the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Conference and then out of the blue, really, I was offered the chance of promotion and a rapid transfer to Brussels to become the Deputy Head of the UK Delegation to NATO. Pretty mixed feelings. I'd been bidding for other jobs, not for that particular moment but rather for later, but here was a bird in the hand rather than two in the bush so eventually I seized the chance and I arrived in Brussels literally on my 50<sup>th</sup> birthday.

### **UK Delegation to NATO (Minister and Deputy Permanent Representative), 1995-97**

CM: So, you're still in London.

BD: I'm still in London but just on the point of going to Brussels and it all happened pretty quickly, and I suppose I can't pretend, again, that I'd planned my career to go in this particular way. I remember, I was very concerned, in a very bureaucratic way – the next step from being a Head of Department ideally would be promotion to what was then in Foreign Office terms a new level, a different level, which was the level at which most Ambassadorships were graded and so it was a reasonable ambition after Non-Proliferation Department to be looking for an Ambassador's job. I can remember looking at one or two possibilities, I think I was interested in New Zealand, probably in Singapore because I'd been

there before but I wasn't convinced I really wanted to go overseas again that quickly, and there was a job in Northern Ireland. The Foreign Office had a position there on secondment to the Northern Ireland Office which I was interested in because again of my background in my first job in dealing with Irish affairs. I suppose if I'd got that job I would have become closely involved in what led to the Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland. But the problem with all of these, looking for jobs in the Foreign Office, is that because jobs only become available once every three years or so when people leave them, you can have your ideal job but the timing may be completely different from your timing and so you can't build your hopes up too much. I think the other one I was interested in was at the United Nations in Geneva. A lot of the work that I'd done in New York in the '70s was linked to Geneva and I was quite attracted to that. But I hadn't thought very much about NATO although I should have done I suppose, being in the Defence area, and it came as something of a surprise when the job became vacant. I think it became vacant again as a result of succession of moves which had freed up an Ambassadorship in Ukraine for which the then Deputy in NATO was well qualified. He moved on to become Ambassador in Ukraine and his job had to be filled at short notice, so I sort of parachuted into that.

Now, of course, NATO had been the corner stone of UK Defence throughout the Cold War and with the implosion of the Soviet Union and the realignment of the former Eastern Bloc Countries questions had been raised about what was NATO's future role, what role did it have now that the enemy had gone? But by 1995 it was deeply involved in the Bosnian conflict, and in an outreach programme to Russia and the former Warsaw Pact countries. I was conscious that the Balkan Conflict had produced strains in NATO between those countries, including the UK, who had troops involved in the UN peace-keeping missions on the ground in Bosnia and the United States who had refused to put troops on the ground but who wanted to make more use of NATO air power against the Serbs, which was something that we thought could put the peace-keepers at risk. I was conscious that there was a lot going on at NATO and, in Foreign Office terms, there was no doubt that it was one of our most important posts even though the number of FCO staff there was probably fewer than those from the Ministry of Defence. Our delegation at NATO is a joint civilian and military one. As I said, there were probably, on the civilian side, as many MOD staff as Foreign Office. The Ambassador's post, then occupied by John Goulden, whom I'd worked for in Non-Proliferation Department, would be regarded as one of the top half-dozen jobs in the

Foreign Office so there was no doubt in my mind that I was going to a good job, a worthwhile job.

I had the rather resplendent title of Minister and Deputy Permanent Representative to NATO and the Western European Union, WEU for short. The title of Minister is not at all related to political Ministers, it's a rank that was once given to Heads of Mission in many smaller countries but it's now almost entirely confined to a sort of title for Deputy Heads of Mission in the largest places like Washington or Paris or, in this case, NATO. So it was a slightly old-fashioned title but certainly within the Diplomatic Service it connoted that you were of Ambassadorial rank even if you didn't hold the title of Ambassador. Effectively, I was second in command, deputising if the Ambassador was absent and supervising three Departments within the civilian side of the Delegation – one political, one defence, and budget. Unlike many of the Delegations at NATO, we had a fully integrated civilian military team. The Head of the military side, what we called MilRep, had a lot of autonomy but ultimately was responsible to the Ambassador or, if the Ambassador was absent, to his Deputy. So we worked very closely together as a team and my RCDS experience was of great value. Since the military like to have a sense of order and they're a rank-based structure, I had the notional military rank of Major-General, or as they would say in military parlance "a Two Star" – Brigadier-Generals were one star, Major-Generals were two star and then you had three star and four star and even five star Generals. So I was effectively placed within the military ranks and being a Major-General felt a very odd sort of position to be in, it felt a bit Gilbert & Sullivanish but there we are. It was another added bonus in dealing with the Military because wherever you went, if you were a Two Star that meant the Military knew exactly how to deal with you, what you were entitled to, who saluted you, not necessarily literally, but there was order in the system. I used to say that being Deputy at NATO was like being second in command of a large oil tanker, so when you take over the controls it's very exciting but it's never usually for long enough actually to change the direction of the ship. So, if you navigate the straits successfully no one notices but if you hit a reef then you're the one that's to blame.

Now, this business of the Western European Union, that's again something that twenty years on people have largely forgotten about. We used to describe ourselves as double-hatted, in other words we were both accredited to NATO and to the Western European Union and you'd wear one hat if you were dealing with NATO then you'd take it off and put on a

different hat, not literally of course, if you were dealing with the Western European Union. The WEU was the Defence and Security arm of the European Union. It had existed for decades and had always struggled to find what its actual role should be. It was mainly dealing with peace-keeping and humanitarian tasks and eventually, in 1999, it was subsumed into the European Union Common Security and Defence Policy. It no longer exists but in 1995 it was still there trying to decide what on earth it should be doing. Now, unlike NATO, it had no direct access to military forces and because it was European and the Americans were absent, there were major limitations on the kind of roles it could undertake. Just as a simple example, NATO was very heavily dependent on American Forces in order to transport troops and equipment if ever they were needed for an operation because the Americans had the big planes that could do it; Europeans simply didn't have them. So there were limitations because of equipment capabilities as well as political will because there were clear divisions among the members of the WEU, between those who wanted to see the EU assume a greater role in defence issues and those, like the UK, who thought that the principal role for defence provision was for NATO and we wouldn't agree to the WEU taking on any tasks that might undermine NATO's role. It was a reflection of the UK's position in the EU more generally, we were never at the federalist wing of the European Union, we were always the faction in the European Union that would have favoured maximising the role of the Nation State as opposed to the Collective. But there were always those in the EU who wanted to see this coming-together, this closer union, and for them the WEU had particular significance. I actually found it a bit of a distraction, an unwelcome distraction, from what I thought of as the more real world challenges facing NATO, and I very happily let my very able Head of Political Section, a man called Stewart Eldon, who later became Ambassador to NATO, carry out a lot of the burden of the WEU.

Given our restricted views on WEU's overall mission, we felt a kind of moral obligation to come up with good ideas on how it could complement NATO or, at least, if it was going to carry out some more limited peace keeping missions that it could do these professionally, and John Goulden and Stewart between them were both very good at this. I think they were more patient than I was with what I saw as grandstanding by the EU zealots among the WEU members, who were more concerned at winning ideological points about the role of the EU than they were about actually the success or the professionalism of the missions that they were dealing with. What we found was that some countries staffed their WEU Delegations with people who otherwise worked in their European Union Delegations, so they were

double-hatted between EU and WEU and they had a completely different outlook from those of us who were NATO double-hatted. We prided ourselves on having well co-ordinated policies across Whitehall between what we were doing in the EU, what we were doing in NATO and how it all fitted together and what the WEU should do. But it sometimes seemed to me that some countries' EU Delegations and NATO Delegations were operating on different planets and they just didn't come together. You'd sit in NATO and listen to your French opposite number talk perfectly sensibly about some piece of activity in Bosnia then go down to the WEU and listen to the French representative talk absolute nonsense about the same subject and never the twain seemed to meet. As I say, I found the WEU frustrating and tried to avoid it wherever possible. I think it was symbolic that NATO was located on the outskirts of Brussels in its own contained area. The WEU Headquarters were down in the centre of Brussels near the EU institutions and that really altered the atmosphere of the two organisations.

The other odd thing about working in NATO was that, as I've mentioned, the NATO Headquarters were on the periphery of Brussels and all of the Delegations of NATO, at least they were in 1995, were located in the same building. The building was structured in a way that often you find hospitals are structured, with a central concourse from which were a number of fingers reaching out to the two sides. There were then sixteen members of NATO and each of the Delegations would occupy one or maybe two of these fingers for their offices. This had obvious advantages in terms of being able to contact and meet other Delegations very easily and you were never more than five minutes away from the conference halls or the meeting rooms. It meant that over time you got to know people very, very well but the downside was that there was very little privacy; it was very difficult to have a private meeting with anybody. Everyone knew everyone else's business because you'd see the French Delegation marching down into the Canadian corridor or the Italians marching into the Greek corridor, or something, and you'd think "Mm, what are they going for; what's that all about?" Of course, there were restaurant facilities and shops in the concourse, in the middle, and so you were continually bumping into people, which was good in one way because you could perhaps resolve some issues bothering you. But, as I say, on the other hand, it became a bit claustrophobic.

I also found that the Organisation's timetable had a certain ritualistic flavour. NATO's principal body is called the North Atlantic Council, and the North Atlantic Council could



meet at different political levels. From time to time it would meet at Head of State level, it would meet at Ministerial level twice a year and there'd be meetings at Ministerial level of Foreign Ministers and Ministerial level of Defence Ministers. And then there were also weekly meetings of the North Atlantic Council at Ambassadorial level. They would meet every Wednesday. This really dictated our work pattern so every Wednesday there'd be a meeting of the North Atlantic Council and these weekly meetings would be chaired by the NATO Secretary General. In my time that was either a man called Willy Claes, who's been largely forgotten, or a man called Javier Solana who went on to head the European Union's foreign policy establishment. The Supreme Allied Commander who is the top General in NATO would also attend and in those years it was a man called General George Joulwan. The Supreme Allied Commander was known as Saceur and that was a very distinguished line of senior generals, all of them American that went back as far as Eisenhower as the first Saceur when NATO was set up in 1949. So the North Atlantic Council was where the political and military perspectives came together and you would review ongoing operations, take decisions on how to proceed and commission work from subordinate bodies. I didn't get to know Claes, who was a Belgian, very well. He didn't have a lot of charisma and his term of office was cut short, because he became embroiled in a corruption scandal that dated back to the time when he'd been a Belgian politician, and he had to resign from his NATO job after only about fifteen months.

He was succeeded by Solana who was a Spaniard who'd been Spanish Foreign Minister, or Defence Minister, beforehand and he became a friend and, at a later stage, invited me to go and work for him at the European Union. He was very open, acutely political and adept at forging consensus and we used to joke that one of his advantages was that he was almost unintelligible in either English or French. His accent when he first came was very heavy and because NATO operates in English and French he would try to be even-handed by speaking part of the time in English and part of the time in French, so people used to switch on their interpretation. But he proved to be a very effective Secretary General. Now, Joulwan was a big, bluff man and I think he was close to everyone's image of what an American General should be. There was no doubt, when he entered the room with all his badges and medals and full uniform, and flanked by his staff officers and so on, there was certainly a sort of an impact. We knew him as Clarity George because he would come to the Council and we would have these discussions which, in typical diplomatic fashion, would wander round and veer off the point and on to the point again and then George would take the floor and say

“Gentlemen, I need clarity”. So the Ambassadors were trying to fob him off with fuzzy or ambiguous instructions and: “I want clarity”. He was always very firm but he was never gung-ho. He certainly wasn’t a wild militarist or anything but he was very protective of his troops and he wasn’t going to accept instructions that he felt couldn’t be carried out safely and sensibly.

Preparation for these NAC meetings was meticulous. The Ambassadors would meet privately over lunch the day before the formal meeting to try and resolve the contentious issues in advance or, if it was an occasion when if you had a particular national pre-occupation that you didn’t necessarily want to discuss in the open Council meeting, you could do it in an off the record way. I went to three or four of these sessions when John Goulden was away and I found they were slightly bizarre because one minute you’d be discussing high policy – “How should we deal with President Yeltsin?” “What should we do with the Russians over this or that or the other?” and so on, and then they’d move on to the most mundane social issues like who was leaving and whether they should organise a dinner for them and whose wife would be able to come and who wouldn’t and so on and so forth. So it was a bit like being a member of a secret society. But there’s no doubt this was often where deals were made and what the Council did the next day was simply to formally accept the decisions that had been reached. But it was a part of the ritual that in the formal meetings of the Council you never referred to the informal discussion the day before. What you had to do, though, after you’d been to this lunch, and almost invariably there was drink to be had at the lunch, you then had to go back to the Delegation and prepare a telegram to send to the Foreign Office and to the Ministry of Defence, summarising what had been discussed, saying where people stood on all the key issues and asking for, what in Foreign Office terms were called, Instructions, for the next day.

So back in London you knew that Security Policy Department, who were the Department that dealt with NATO, would be literally waiting for this telegram which they’d then have to co-ordinate with the Ministry of Defence and any other Departments that might have an interest in Whitehall, that might be the Intelligence Agencies or whatever, so that they had an agreed British position to send back for the Ambassador to use the next day in the Council. And, as I said earlier, we used to pride ourselves on our ability to get this done so that we were always in a position at the Council the next day to express a clear view and to take decisions. Unfortunately not all of the Delegations were as well organised and the Americans

and Canadians had an excuse because of the time zone differences but with some of the others, we were never quite sure to what extent they ever told their Headquarters what was going on or, if they did, whether Headquarters ever sent them instructions or didn't send them instructions. But for us it was a point of pride, really, that we got this done and got it done professionally.

The weekly Ambassadorial meetings, the North Atlantic Council, were really the way in which the Alliance managed its week to week activities. The slightly longer term, the Ministerial meetings every six months always ended up with a communiqué, sometimes a very lengthy communiqué, that summed up NATO policy and plans at six monthly intervals so it was an occasion for taking stock of what had been done and looking ahead in the medium term as to what NATO should be looking to do over the coming months. Now, responsibility for drafting these communiqués lay with a body called the Senior Political Committee (SPC) which was made up of the sixteen Deputy Ambassadors and we would meet under the chairmanship of the Deputy to the Secretary General, and there'd be a military representative, and for about a month before these Ministerial meetings we would try to agree on the terms of the communiqué on the basis of a draft that had been prepared by the NATO Secretariat. The man who was responsible for this in our time was a very able German diplomat who was on secondment to NATO, a man called Gebhardt von Moltke, who was subsequently German Ambassador in London. Drafting by committee is never to be recommended, I mean it's a miserable task because everyone thinks they can draft better than the person who's put down the draft and progress was often tortuous. There were some formulations, for example on Greek/Turkish issues, which were hallowed and sacrosanct and not to be trifled with because if you did then, to mix metaphors, it was opening a can of worms because the whole rather fragile relationship between Greece and Turkey that had been established within NATO over the years could be broken asunder. So you tried not to interfere with that one.

But, on all other issues the communiqué was the vehicle for describing NATO policy, evolving it often in very tiny steps and even introducing innovations. So, when we were breaking new ground, we were sometimes drafting until the small hours of the night before Ministers were due to sit down and take decisions on the documents. I suppose, like in every body where you have a relatively small group of people - there were sixteen of us, we were together for long hours often late at night - a kind of Free Masonry developed amongst you

and you became much closer than you would in something like the United Nations where committees literally would have forty, fifty, sixty people in them; this was a small group of people. But you couldn't help reflect that if it was this hard to reach agreement among friends just how difficult it was to reach a negotiated agreement with enemies. One of my predecessors wrote an amusing novella, I suppose you'd call it, which was based on the premise that the Senior Political Committee was kidnapped en masse by a gang of eco-terrorists. I should say that the Committee often had lunches together, rather like the Ambassadors, to try and resolve informally some of the issues that we couldn't resolve in the Committee. Anyway, the premise of the novella was that on one of these lunches the whole Senior Political Committee was kidnapped by eco-terrorists who took them out of Brussels into a remote part of the Ardennes where they were held hostage and forced to draft an eco-friendly communiqué which was then submitted to the Governments and, until the Governments endorsed this communiqué, the Deputy Ambassadors would not be released. I remember the book culminated with the Deputies all being given bicycles to cycle back down into the NATO Headquarters to underline their eco-friendly credentials.

A lot of my time was spent in these sessions drafting, working on communiqués, organising meetings and so on. I have mentioned that there were two issues that were squarely in the public domain, namely Bosnia and relations with the former Soviet Bloc, but there was another one during my time that proved very time-consuming and although it did have real world significance, the detail was really only of interest to what you might call Defence Anoraks, to people who are obsessed with the fine print of military arrangements. Back in the 1960s, France had withdrawn from the military side of the NATO Alliance but had always remained part of its political structures, rather a case of trying to have cake and eat it. President Chirac had announced that he was willing to consider re-joining the military structures in the new circumstances of the post-Cold War world, provided that an acceptable European defence identity within NATO could be agreed. It wasn't entirely clear what this European defence identity would mean but it had at least two elements, the crudest but also the one in some ways most awkward, concerned the distribution of command posts in the major NATO Headquarters. You see, NATO had military Headquarters in different parts of Europe and in North America and the top jobs in these Headquarters were jealously guarded by the countries whose Generals had been given these jobs in the past, and the jobs tended to circulate among certain countries in certain ways. And for many, in the military, it was the pinnacle of a military career, to be a NATO Commander in one of these Headquarters. And

so they were pretty jealously guarded. The French didn't challenge the overall American command at NATO, i.e. the Saceur post, but they did want the Southern Headquarters Command in the Mediterranean which, because it was largely a naval command, had for a long time been occupied by an American admiral and the Americans were quite clear they weren't going to give that up so there was a stalemate over those two jobs and that prevented any kind of solution. There was like a jigsaw here of all the different commands and if you could move one then you could move another piece but it was rather locked in position. We, as Britain, had long held the post of Deputy to Saceur, i.e. the Deputy's overall command post, and we had indicated a willingness that, as part of a compromise, we could agree to that post being rotated among other countries, thinking that this would give the French an opportunity to have their turn as the Deputy within NATO and this might remove their obsession with the Mediterranean.

That was one piece of the argument that was going on and another element concerned the way that NATO Forces might be used under a European Commander but to have the full support of the NATO infrastructure. This would be a way in which you might get an operation in which the Americans did not wish to participate formally, so you'd have a European Commander but that European Commander would be able to use Forces from throughout NATO including, if necessary, American communications and American planes and so on. It involved a concept which was known as Combined Joint Task Forces, CJTF for short, and it was the elaboration of how these CJTFs might work and how the political control of these Forces would be structured that took us into the very small hours of the North Atlantic Council that took place in Berlin in June 1996. I think we agreed about four o'clock in the morning on the final terms and I think the resulting language was probably only understood by a couple of dozen people at the time, it was so convoluted. And I'd wager that all of them have now forgotten it. But at the time it was hailed as a triumph. I can remember, there were we, the sixteen Deputies sitting in the room, and as the night wore on, Ambassadors started creeping in and sometimes people from the Ministerial Delegations were creeping in at the back of the room overseeing what was going on. Tension was rising; people were frantically writing bits of paper and checking whether they were acceptable or not.

The tensions between the Americans and the French were particularly difficult to manage. My French opposite number at the time was a man called Gérard Araud, who is now French

Ambassador in Washington which is interesting, and his boss was a man called Gérard Errera who was later French Ambassador in London. He had been my opposite number on Non-Proliferation issues so I knew him, too, and both of these were classic French diplomats. They'd been through the elite training programmes, highly accomplished, politically sensitive but because of President Chirac's direct interest they were under enormous pressure to come up with a solution that would protect the honour of France. Both of them had an amazing knack of being able to raise American hackles and we found ourselves very often trying to get in the middle. There was an informal grouping of US, UK, France and Germany that took upon itself the task of trying to resolve some of the more sensitive issues and then present them to the rest of the group, as settled. Now, that had positives in that you could do things in a small group that you couldn't do in the big but it also had drawbacks because the bigger group rather resented the idea of being presented with a *fait accompli*. So, although the group of four was known about in NATO, again, it was never publicly referred to but it was often the only means we could actually get for bridging these differences. Anyway, it worked in the end and the French did come back into the NATO military structures, although I'm not sure how it is today, but I don't think it ever ran very smoothly.

Now, on Bosnia, and again twenty-five years on it's already difficult to remember just how horrific it was to us at the time with nightly television pictures of bombings of Sarajevo, of people being forced out of their houses, massacres of Bosniacs by Serbs and so on. And there was a sense, I think, that everyone felt that international institutions were being rather helpless about resolving it all whether it was the UN, whether it was the EU, whether it was NATO, and I think there's no doubt that NATO was stumbling and fumbling its way to a role. I mean, this reflected the uncertainties within the Governments of member States as to how to respond as much as any institutional weaknesses of NATO. But after forty-five years of preparing for the relative certainties of nuclear confrontation, nuclear war but never actually using any of its weapons in anger, NATO was confronted with a completely different kind of conflict for which most of its years of planning were irrelevant or even counter-productive. And so, it was having to start again from scratch almost to build up how a military alliance would work in dealing with a different kind of conflict - not helped because of, as I mentioned earlier, these tension between the Europeans and the Americans. As a result, there was a tendency, there was a perception certainly, that NATO was responding to events rather than having a well worked-out strategy and I think that reflected the reality. You had this great disparity between NATO's overwhelming military strength which, in a

sense, if you'd applied it full-frontally could have just taken complete command of the Balkans without difficulty but with terrible consequences. But how you could tailor that immense strength to dealing with a small conflict where there were such deeply divided communities.

I think eventually we got it to work and it was much more effective over Kosovo two years later, but for me what we were doing was a kind of learning experience about the trade-offs between civilian control of the military and the need to give the military the space to do their job. I suppose people who went through the Second World War would have understood that but we were a different generation and we were having almost to learn that all over again. And because it wasn't a war for survival, the rules couldn't be the same as they were in a conflict like the Second World War. We would spend hours and hours working out rules of engagement for the troops on the ground – “What were the circumstances in which they could shoot? What were the circumstances in which they could do this? What the circumstances in which they could do that?” And very often it was the soldiers in our committees who were more cautious than the civilians, which is not perhaps surprising since they were the ones who'd have to do the shooting or were going to be shot at. But I think from outside it just looked as though we were spending an awful lot of time doing not very much. But trying to get it done in a way that would ensure that we could offer some protection, genuine protection, to civilians while at the same time not exposing our own troops to unreasonable risk was a very difficult balance to strike. In the course of this process I got to visit Bosnia a couple of times to see what the problem looked like to commanders on the ground in places like Sarajevo or Mostar. And when I came to look at the problem when I got to Belgrade later and looked, in a sense, through the other end of a telescope, this experience of both being in NATO Headquarters and in the Bosnian theatre was invaluable. Visits to Bosnia usually involved helicopter rides and, as in Northern Ireland back in 1974, the pilots loved trying to scare the pants of their high-ranking guests. There always seemed to be a risk of incoming fire that necessitated either flying very low or tilting the helicopter sharply from side to side. But it was a very sobering experience to see on the ground the extent of the devastation and the extent to which a society that had closely resembled our own just ten years earlier had completely broken down. You could see that sometimes fighting had been literally neighbour against neighbour across a narrow street. And you realised the television coverage, however graphic, just couldn't convey the full horror of it all. I once stayed in the Sarajevo Holiday Inn and there were still bullet holes and shell holes in the

windows and the walls, and so sadly in some ways that prepared me for what I was going to see in Kosovo later.

Because NATO was important, we had a lot of distinguished visitors. The British Ministers we saw were the Foreign Secretary, Malcolm Rifkind, and Defence Secretary, Michael Portillo. Both were very clever, smooth talkers and able enough, maybe even a bit too clever for their own good sometimes. But neither had, in my view, that hard to define quality that makes other people hang on their words or look to them for leadership. There was no doubt that by 1995-96 the Tory Government was looking tired and being short of ideas, and more impressive, I found, were two men who were deeply involved in the Bosnia conflict. One was Richard Holbrooke, who was the American's chief negotiator, and he would come to brief NATO on the state of his negotiations and how NATO might be able to help by putting pressure on different factions. Dick was a force of nature, he was dynamic, pragmatic, determined, didn't suffer fools, didn't mince his words, brushed doubters aside, full of certainties but he did succeed, in 1996, in negotiating a settlement in Bosnia that is still the basis of the kind of uneasy peace that exists today, twenty years on. I got to know him much better in Belgrade so we'll talk about him later.

Carl Bildt, a Swede, former Swedish Prime Minister was the UN Special Envoy. He would also come to NATO and was equally impressive in his ability to analyse issues and push for solutions. He was more of a rapier to Holbrooke's kind of broad sword but Bildt ultimately lacked the clout that Holbrooke, as the US Envoy, had so it was quite a salutary lesson to the EU about where real power resided when it came to seeing who could actually make change happen and Holbrooke could and Bildt, for all his abilities, couldn't.

The problem of dealing with Russia and the former Eastern Bloc threw up a number of awkward issues. We had a very suspicious Russia which was concerned that NATO was trying to move up to its borders and take over territory, in effect, that the Russians had considered their own. On the other hand, we had a number of former Soviet satellite states queuing up to join NATO thereby reinforcing Russian worries. They were only too glad, having escaped from Soviet Union control, to want to get defended by NATO. But within NATO we had some members who were worried about NATO extending its guarantee of protection to countries that were so close to the Soviet Union and other countries in NATO who were pressing for the admission of new members, though in the early days there wasn't



much agreement on who those new members should be – “Should it be the Baltic States? Should it be Hungary? Should it be Romania?” and so on and so forth. So, the challenge for us was to try and square these various circles and NATO had already established two mechanisms, one called Partnership For Peace (PFP) and the other called the North Atlantic Cooperation Council, which were meant to be means to allow NATO to respond to the aspirations and fears of the former Warsaw Pact. And, I have to say it was rather remarkable and quite encouraging to sit in meetings of these groups bringing together countries that had been sworn enemies for almost fifty years, and eventually we did get to agree on a NATO-Russia charter, almost as a get-well present for President Yeltsin who was ailing by that stage. We eventually reached agreement that NATO would issue invitations to Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic. These invitations would be issued at a Heads of State Council meeting in Madrid in July '97. The French attempted to push the case to add Romania and Bulgaria to that list but they were resisted. And so there was a trade-off between offering Russia assurances and at the same time opening the door for the first time for new members of NATO from the former Warsaw Pact countries.

It was around the time that all this was being decided, around Christmas of '96, that I learned for the first time that the summit meeting in Madrid might be my swan song in NATO because, although I was due to stay there for four years, I was asked around Christmas time if I was willing to put my name forward for the job of Ambassador in Belgrade. It seemed that there wasn't a long queue of volunteers for what was seen as something of a poisoned chalice and it wasn't a straight forward choice for me either. I could see that my NATO background would have both advantages and drawbacks in Belgrade. It would be very helpful to know how NATO worked and what it could do but I could sense it would also make the Serbs, who'd been at the receiving end of NATO bombings and so on, very suspicious of my motivations. But on the other hand, the attraction of becoming an Ambassador in my own right with my own Embassy, however difficult the circumstances, was a strong one. I got to the point where I felt I was well in command of my NATO job. It was satisfying, important and I enjoyed working with John Goulden. Julia by this time had steeled herself to leave Athens and had joined me in Brussels and although we were still adjusting to living together, we had a very nice house and were enjoying life. Brussels was very convenient for access to London. You can get to London quicker from Brussels than you can from West Cumbria! And Julia hadn't been too horrified by her first exposure to diplomatic life so we were feeling quite comfortable in Brussels. I'd taken up running again and had fully recovered my health,

so why jump into the unknown? We agonised about this for a time but the temptation really of being in sole command proved too strong, and well before the NATO Summit I had committed myself and been selected as the next Ambassador. I was able to make another visit to Bosnia on NATO business and at the end, although my appointment was not yet announced, I was met by the then incumbent Ambassador to Serbia, Ivor Roberts, and he drove me down to Belgrade for a first glimpse of what I was letting myself in for.

The Summit itself, when we got there, was a fascinating occasion. It came shortly after the British election that had returned New Labour, so I had my first encounter with Tony Blair, Robin Cook and Alastair Campbell, all of whom I got to know much better over the coming years. There was a strong sense of a generation shift from the older and rather care-worn Tory Ministers we'd been used to, to a much more energetic and modern Administration. Although, as a Civil Servant I had to remain neutral, as an individual I was delighted with the change. But at Summit Meetings even senior diplomats are pretty low on the totem pole and almost my final act as Minister at NATO really brought me down to earth. By alphabetical order at NATO (English alphabetical order), the US and the UK sit next to one another. So Clinton was sitting on the front next to Tony Blair and behind Clinton was sitting the American Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, and behind Blair was Robin Cook and behind Robin Cook was John Goulden, the British Ambassador to NATO, and behind Albright was the American Ambassador to NATO and behind John Goulden was me. Such is the seniority of these things, at normal NATO meetings the Deputy would never keep a note, you'd have someone else keeping the notes for you. But at the Summit Meeting I was the one who was supposed to be keeping the note of what was going on. They were discussing the draft communiqué which I had helped draft and there were all these arcane points about NATO Defence Structures and Bosnian politics, and I was sitting there waiting, in some trepidation in case a question would arise and I would have to try and explain this point to the great men. I saw Blair turn round and say something to Robin Cook, and Robin Cook turn round and say something to John Goulden and I was thinking "Oh my God, what is it, what am I going to be asked?" And, John Goulden turned round to me and said "Brian, could you get a cup of coffee for Bill?" And so I had to trot off and get a cup of coffee for Bill Clinton. In the heat of it, of course, I forgot to ask whether he took milk or sugar. So, I was brought firmly back down to earth.

Anyway, two days after the Madrid meeting, Julia and I were back in England and three days after that we were in Serbia, starting to learn Serbian. We were officially still incognito in that my appointment hadn't been formally notified to the Yugoslav authorities but we lived for four weeks without fuss or fanfare, with our Serbian teacher in a mountainous area called Zlatibor that had once been a holiday resort for workers during Yugoslavia's communist days when different factories were sent off for a holiday once a year. So we had a nice time in the forests. We spent a week down on the coast in Montenegro as well and it was a very nice introduction to Yugoslavia but proved to be one that was almost totally irrelevant to the reality that we faced when we eventually got there three months later. So that was our introduction to Belgrade, or not to Belgrade, to Yugoslavia.

CM: So, were you learning to speak Serbian?

BD: We were trying to learn to speak Serbian. We were learning a lot more, it seemed, about Serbian cuisine and cooking because our teacher was a keen cook, and culture because although she lived in England she kept this little cottage in the woods, in Serbia. When we got back to England, she lived in Manchester. Julia and I moved into the house in Lancaster that had been Julia's mother's house and we commuted to Manchester for a while, continuing our Serbian lessons together. But that's something we can perhaps come onto next time.

### **Ambassador to Belgrade, 1997-1999**

CM: This is Tuesday, 11<sup>th</sup> July 2017 and we are resuming Sir Brian Donnelly's recollections of his diplomatic career.

Sir Brian, you've spent several months preparing and now you are off to Belgrade itself.

BD: Yes, I can't remember how far we discussed last time the problem we had which was nothing to do with policy towards Serbia but all to do with the Foreign Office evolving into a modern organisation. I think we did perhaps talk about it last time but let me go over it again. When the announcement was made of my appointment, the Times chose to run a story under the heading "First Ambassador with Partner" as opposed to wife or husband. I think it was still unheard of at the time for it to be a gay partnership but, anyway. So this prompted my predecessor in Belgrade, Ivor Roberts, to warn that without official diplomatic status

there was a risk that the Serbs would not issue a diplomatic identity card to Julia and that as a result she might suffer visa problems, possible harassment and even threats to her personal security. Now, at the time, the British government policy was that they would not grant, or would not issue, diplomatic passports to partners. Indeed the Foreign Office didn't recognise their status at all in terms of costs – covering the costs of travel or insurance or health insurance and so on. So I wrote formally to the Office to ask them to reconsider the policy or at least waive it to allow Julia to accompany me without her security put at risk i.e. give her a diplomatic passport which would open the door to diplomatic visas and diplomatic identity cards. And I thought, perhaps naively, that since the Foreign Office had just gained a new Minister who herself was unmarried but with a partner, this might be a good time to push for change. But after much minuting and to-ing and fro-ing, in a classic bureaucratic fashion, the Foreign Office concluded that while it was clear that the policy needed to be reviewed they couldn't make an exception in Julia's case until that review had been completed because that would look too much like favouritism and that there might be other people out there who would feel hard done by. As a bureaucrat, I could understand the thought process behind the decision but obviously as an individual it left me very annoyed and frustrated.

Eventually after the review was completed, the policy was changed so I suppose I can take some credit for kick-starting the process, or giving impetus to the process, bringing the Foreign Office's rather archaic social attitudes into the 20<sup>th</sup> century just before the 21<sup>st</sup> century arrived. But that wasn't much consolation at the time and our first reaction was to stick to our principles since neither of us particularly wanted to surrender our independence just to live together as a couple. But then Julia's daughter had a very serious road accident in which she sustained some very bad head injuries and this raised the distinct possibility that she might have to be with us in Belgrade. For a time it wasn't clear that she would be able to live independently so I concluded that Julia had quite enough to worry about without having the additional concerns arising from her relationship with me. And so, as you might say, after a whirlwind courtship that lasted nine years I proposed and she accepted and we got married the day after I had my audience with the Queen which all Ambassadors do before going to their post. And, incidentally, Buckingham Palace had absolutely no problem about accepting Julia as a partner so they were actually ahead of the FCO in terms of social attitudes. And, of course, the lack of flexibility and imagination by the FCO in failing to accept my original proposal which was a low cast proposal because we weren't asking them to pay for a lot of the allowances, cost them quite a lot of money over the years because once we got married

Julia became entitled to all of the benefits that come with married status. So it serves them right in a way.

I just might say a few words – the formal audience with the Queen that you have, prior to going to a new post, marks in a way the formal beginning of the assignment. Obviously they're formal and slightly ceremonial occasions and there's no time for more than a few sentences of conversation. But psychologically it's really quite reassuring because you think that similar occasions have been going on for over four hundred years since the first ambassadors were appointed back in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and so you feel that weight of tradition behind you. It's also a salutary reminder that you're a member of Her Majesty's Diplomatic Service - it's not the Government's Diplomatic Service, it's Her Majesty's Diplomatic Service - and that, should you ever have to choose, your duty is to your country and not to your Government. This is not a distinction that Civil Servants often face but it's not inconceivable that you might get to a point where you think that the Government is so badly wrong that you can't do what they want. And as a member of the Diplomatic Service I think it's a reminder that there are points where you might have to say "Sorry, can't do that". There's also the bonus that the Queen with all her vast experience is quite likely to have met the Head of State of the country you're going to and to have some useful insight to offer. I don't think she'd met Milosevic but, of course, she had met Robert Mugabe and so it's not just a ceremonial occasion.

And so, yes, you're right, after all that we set off for Belgrade in November '97. Again, something that people may not fully appreciate is that when you arrive in a new country as an Ambassador you can't automatically and immediately start your full range of work because there's a certain formality about it all. You have with you a Letter of Credentials which is signed by the Queen and addressed to the Head of State in the country that you're going to, and diplomatic procedure is that until you've actually handed that letter over to the Head of State there's only a limited number of diplomatic functions you can carry out - you can't formally engage with other people in the Government and you're not supposed to make public speeches and statements. You can talk to other diplomatic colleagues but you're not, in a sense, officially there until that Letter of Credentials has been handed over. The Letter is, as you would expect really, couched in rather Olde English and it refers to the Ambassador as "My trusty and well beloved friend" and so on, and it talks of being sent to promote "amity and concord". In fact there wasn't much chance of that in Serbia. But the Credentials

Ceremony when you hand this over is your first meeting with the Head of State of the new country and it's a chance to set out your objectives and to open a dialogue with that country.

Now, these are happening all the time in Britain and no one knows about it. Ambassadors that come to Britain get herded into Buckingham Palace, usually in groups, and meet the Queen and present their credentials and people pay no attention to it but in many countries it's seen as an important occasion and they get quite wide publicity, it's covered on television, the newspapers will be present and this was the case in Serbia. And so for an Ambassador they can be quite nerve-racking occasions because it's your first public appearance in the country and you want to make a good impression. I suppose in countries where the UK has good relations this is fairly straight forward, you can talk about strengthening political ties, expanding trade, building cultural links and so on, but when you're presenting credentials to someone like Slobodan Milosevic it's a bit different. My meeting with Milosevic took place on 18 December so I had about a month in a kind of limbo before it happened. He was then President of the Federation of Serbia and Montenegro which was basically what was left after the other parts of the former Yugoslavia had separated off, following the Bosnian War. But, in terms of perceptions by the International Community, he was still very much someone on probation. The Dayton Agreement in 1995 had brought an end to the horrific violence in Bosnia and in a sense had formalised the break-up of the former Yugoslavia. But since Milosevic was widely believed, rightly, to have been the prime instigator of the violence in Bosnia particularly, there remained very deep suspicion of his commitment to democratic principles within Serbia Montenegro and particularly in the province of Kosovo within Serbia where there was an Albanian minority, a minority within Serbia but a majority within Kosovo, who felt that they were being unfairly treated and oppressed. So I was meeting someone who was generally, if you like, on the fringes of acceptable society, I mean he hadn't been taken back into acceptable society. Obviously he was still in power and we recognised him, we had diplomatic relations but there was this deep suspicion of what he might get up to.

It was also the case that we'd just got the new Labour Government in Britain and Robin Cook, as the Foreign Minister, had announced his wish to have an ethical dimension to British Foreign Policy, and policy towards Milosevic offered a good test case of this ethical Foreign Policy. And so there was a quite marked hardening of attitudes towards the kind of things that Milosevic had got up, or was likely to get up to, and I was conscious of this

change of mood. Now, unfortunately, Robin Cook had decided to abandon the long-standing practice, or long-standing tradition, of Foreign Secretaries always meeting Ambassadors before they went to their posts. You know it seems like a no-brainer that you'd want to do this so that you could convey your thinking but, for whatever reasons, Robin Cook had decided that he didn't want to do this anymore so I hadn't had the chance to meet him personally to hear from him exactly what he thought. Robin Cook was something of a paradox. He was clearly very much admired by his Foreign Minister colleagues, he was very quick-thinking, he was very fluent in terms of drafting, he was excellent at running committees and so on, but with his own staff he always came across as rather aloof and a prickly man and often seemed ungracious. So it was hard to like him even if you respected him, if you see what I mean. So, I hadn't heard it from Robin Cook himself, but the message of the mood seemed clear enough. Basically the message I had to deliver to Milosevic at this Credentials Ceremony was that Britain would be ready to move towards normalising diplomatic relations, we could envisage closer links with the EU, rebuilding our trade, our cultural links and so on, but progress on that would be contingent on Milosevic clearly implementing democratic principles in Serbia Montenegro and on a peaceful resolution of the ongoing dispute in Kosovo. So there was some sugar on the pill, if you like, but it was still one that was likely to leave a fairly nasty taste in Milosevic's mouth. So there I was in the State House in Belgrade, standing a couple of paces away from Milosevic . . .

CM: On your own?

BD: Well, no, you're accompanied then by members of your staff, I think it would be about half a dozen of your senior members of staff, and in this case Julia was there. But you're looking at someone whom you have good reason to believe is responsible for the deaths of thousands of people, I mean it's a very odd situation. There you are in front of the television cameras telling him that he should basically change the habits of a lifetime and introduce policies which, if he did it, could very well lead to him losing power because if he had free elections he might not get re-elected. If he lost power, in the circumstances in Serbia, it's quite likely that he might have ended up in jail or he might have believed that if he lost power he might have ended up dead. So, not surprisingly, he didn't particularly welcome the words that I was saying and the atmosphere was very chilly. I mean he listened in a stony silence but with sort of a look of disdain or contempt really, and in his own public remarks in response he made no reference to what I'd said and just basically trotted out something that

had been written for him by his own civil servants about having a long tradition of links with Britain and building good relations and so on.

CM: Were you speaking through interpreters?

BD: I was speaking in English. It was interpreted and I can't now remember ... Milosevic spoke quite good Americanised English, it wasn't quite as good as he thought it was in the sense that at times his expression was quite clumsy but I don't think he realized that ... but I think on this occasion he would have spoken in Serbian with interpretation. And after the public exchange in front of the television cameras we adjourned to another room, a big room, where we then had a private conversation with just Julia, me and him and this was just as difficult really. It became quite apparent that he had the ability to lie effortlessly and to show absolutely no discomfort if you were able to contradict him on facts. He would say something about British Policy and you'd say "No, that isn't it", and it wouldn't faze him at all. So, he came across as sort of cynical, amoral and devoid of ideology or conscience. He was the ultimate cold fish. And I said to London afterwards that it was a bit like dealing with Del-Boy from 'Only Fools and Horses' but without the charm. He was ducking and dodging but you hadn't got any charm to go with it. And, of course, when I watched television that night about the Credentials Ceremony I found that Yugoslav Television just do a voice-over, they don't let people hear what you said, they tell people what they wanted them to think you said. So, this first encounter didn't augur well for a constructive relationship.

Once you've got that out of the way you can then start doing other things and obviously I had to, as a new Ambassador, get to know my own Embassy team and their capabilities. Often it's the banal things which cause you the biggest difficulty. I mean, in my case in a classical example of manpower planning, my Deputy was replaced before Christmas i.e. within less than two months of my arrival, and my PA left on maternity leave. So the two people that you would rely on for continuity and for sort of really introducing you to the new place just went. Fortunately, I gained an excellent new Deputy, a man called David Landsman who went on to be Ambassador in Albania and then Greece. But then Alastair Campbell, who you may remember was the Head of Tony Blair's Communications Operations, asked the Foreign Office for a bright young officer to join his team at No. 10 and for reasons that seemed almost literally incredible to me they recommended the young man in my Embassy, who was basically our authority on what was going on in Kosovo. There's no doubt he was a very



bright and capable man but he was doing a very important job, however, when offered the chance to go and work in No. 10 of course he took it. So I lost, within a matter of the first few months, three key people. The Foreign Office were proving useless in finding a replacement for the Kosovo man and so I had to ask the man in the Embassy, who was covering our trade relations and was somewhat under-employed in that respect, to take over to cover Kosovo. It turned out to be an inspired choice even if it was a choice of necessity. He was a man called David Slinn and he soon established himself as probably the best informed and best connected Kosovo-watcher in the Belgrade diplomatic corps. He's since gone on to make a career for himself in specializing in difficult assignments really. He's been in North Korea and Afghanistan. But it was just a classic case of finding round peg and round hole.

I was also blessed in having a formidable Defence Attaché. Now Defence Attachés, as I'd learned when I was in Non-Proliferation Department and for a time responsible for them, come in many shapes and sizes and, as someone once said to me, "Some of them are more comfortable on a ballroom than on a battlefield". They're social soldiers rather than fighting soldiers. But John Crosland was very much a soldier's soldier, he had a Military Cross from the Falklands Campaign and he was tough and courageous and totally dependable. He was equally at home dealing with privates or generals and he didn't distinguish between the Serb Military or the Kosovo Liberation Army, and managed the almost impossible task, really, of retaining the confidence and respect of both sides. I thought he was head and shoulders above the rest of the Attaché Corps in Belgrade. He would regularly act as my driver, on visits to Kosovo, because in Belgrade of course we had Serbian drivers and it would have been unfair to ask the Serbian drivers to take us into the Albanian parts of Kosovo where they would have been seen as a threat or being hostile. I had been asked whether, in Belgrade, I'd like to have what in diplomatic terms is called Close Protection, which is when the Foreign Office provide a team of security officers, usually military, who guard your house and your person, 24 hours a day and will follow you around everywhere. I had turned down that offer because I thought it would prevent me from doing a worthwhile job because it obviously inhibits your freedom of action, and once I'd got to know John Crosland I thought, in the circumstances when protection might be useful, that John was capable of providing it. He was not a great respecter of rules and regulations and I often wondered whether, contrary to those rules and regulations, he carried a weapon during our forays in Kosovo but I thought it better not to ask and he never told, so it remains one of the unknowns. So that was basically

my team, the key members of the team that I had in Belgrade, although that rather plays down the importance of other people in the Embassy which isn't fair on them but it was just that, because politics and Kosovo became the defining issue, those are the people that I most relied on.

The other thing that any Ambassador has to do is to work out a satisfactory relationship with the Foreign Office in London. Every Ambassador has a sort of corresponding Department in the Foreign Office who are the ones through whom most of his instructions and communications come and in my case this was The Balkan Department. The Head of that Department was a man called Tom Phillips who, as well as being very able, was incredibly industrious but also very considerate of our position at the sharp end. A lot of tension can arise when the people in London don't seem to show much awareness of the circumstances in which you're working overseas. Tom was not like that at all, he was always very considerate of that because one of the issues we had to grapple with from the very start was what was it reasonable to expect of people operating in Kosovo in what became increasingly like a war zone? Clearly, diplomatic officers are not war correspondents, we're not there to necessarily get to the front line and see the conflict going on but, if you're regularly visiting those areas and you're talking to people who are involved in the conflict, inevitably there are going to be times when you're taking risks or there are times when you have to be very aware of the risk that you might be creating by doing a particular thing whether it's seeing someone or visiting a particular place. And so as an Ambassador, if you're asking people to go to Kosovo to report on the situation on the ground or if you're going yourself, you've got to think about those risks and the responsibilities that go with them. And, similarly, the people in London who are saying to you "It would be nice if we could find out a bit about what's going on in that refugee camp" for example or "There's a report of a mass grave, is it possible that someone could go there?" You need to have an awareness of what that might mean in practice in terms of the risks to the individuals if they do and so on. And it's good if you and London are on the same wavelength on that and Tom was always very clear that it was the safety ... I mean it should go without saying but it's not always the case - that clearly the safety and security of people was the primary consideration. Information might be desirable but if you couldn't get it, you couldn't get it. But it was always a judgement call and that was one of the first sort of things I had to work myself into, to try and understand what was reasonable to expect of people, and I think we managed that very well.

I think there were only two serious fallings out with London. Once much, much later over the timing of a decision to withdraw our non-essential staff from Belgrade, when I thought that London were too concerned with the optics of the decision to do it. They wanted us to wait until we could leave with the French and the Germans. And I took the view at the time that the French and Germans were so disorganised that it wasn't fair on our people to make them wait until the French and Germans had got themselves sorted out, and in any case we were at greater risk than them because of the high profile positions that the Government had taken. To be fair on Tom, I think he would have been on my side but at that point the thinking had got to even higher levels. That was one occasion when we fell out and the other was in the first few months when my predecessor, Ivor Roberts, was appointed as a special envoy of the Foreign Secretary and sent back to Belgrade to talk to Milosevic. Ivor had established a very close relationship with Milosevic during his time as Ambassador. I knew from comments in Belgrade that a lot of people thought he'd become too close to Milosevic and had lost some objectivity because of that, but London clearly hoped that Milosevic would be more responsive to Ivor than he had been to me. I, of course, saw it as a vote of no confidence and a step that would simply undermine my own authority. I also thought that events had moved on, particularly after the Dayton Agreement, and that Milosevic now only really cared what the Americans thought. I think he saw the Americans as, if you like, the organ-grinder and we were just ... well, they weren't much interested in making any concessions to what they saw as the rather irritating monkey sitting on the organ grinder's shoulder. So I thought we were deluding ourselves to think otherwise. Indeed I had a heated conversation when I was standing on the campus of the University in Pristina, down in Kosovo, with the Deputy Political Director on this whole topic, saying that if Ivor was going to become the regular channel of communication with Milosevic then I didn't want to be Ambassador in Belgrade since it would take away a large point of the job. In the event he only came twice, he made no headway and, as he ruefully commented, he was probably the only special envoy who never got to talk to the person he was representing because Robin Cook never actually talked to him. So it was another example of Robin Cook's rather strange approach to man-management. But, as I said, I think for the most part I managed to establish a good relationship with Tom Phillips so that was really the basis for our work in Belgrade.

As I've said, I don't think I should attempt to give a potted history of the Kosovo conflict but what I'll try to do is give some flavour of what an Ambassador's life was like in that kind of conflict situation. I suppose for the first two or three months I attempted to conduct what you

might call a normal diplomacy in Belgrade. I called on Government Ministers in Serbia and in Montenegro. I met opposition leaders, talked to businessmen, went to Kosovo, met the leading Kosovar politicians. I visited lots of different regions of Serbia and attended a lot of ceremonies of particular relevance to Serbian-British relations, and some of these were very moving occasions which the Serbs clearly felt underlined their arguments that, as a staunch ally of Britain in World War I and World War II, we should be more supportive of their position than we were. Now, of course, Lord Palmerston when he was Foreign Secretary in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century had made the remarks, which have carried down, that Britain did not have eternal allies just eternal interests. This was something the Serbs clearly hadn't heard but it was very relevant because we had reached a point where the fact that they had been our allies didn't really count for much anymore. But the Serbs clearly hadn't taken that on board. One example of this kind of thing was that in the First World War a lot of Scottish nurses had volunteered to go and serve in Serbia, and they served with distinction on the front line of the fighting between the Serbian and the - it was probably Austro-Hungarian troops. And many of them, indeed most of them, died not from battle so much as from disease in the course of this. Every year the Serbs hold a commemoration of the contribution that they made and of course the Ambassador gets asked to go and lay a wreath and so on and you can't help but be moved by the occasion.

So, I did that sort of thing and indeed probably throughout my time in Belgrade this kind of parallel universe, really, operated. You had town twinning ceremonies. Norwich, for reasons best known to Norwich, had twinned with Novi Sad in Serbia and, regularly, delegations from Norwich would come to Novi Sad and delegations from Novi Sad would go to Norwich. When they came we would usually host some reception at the Embassy for them. We once gave them what was meant to be a sort of classic English tea with cucumber sandwiches but our Serbian cook thought sandwiches should be proper sandwiches and so they came out like doorstops rather than dainty little pieces. But we had some low-level trade missions for a time. British Aerospace were trying to seal some kind of semi-secretive deal for communications equipment. I remember that they sent a former government minister (Geoffrey Pattie) to come and talk to Milosevic. Another former Foreign Secretary (Malcolm Rifkind) also came out. He got himself involved in oil exploration and wanted help persuading the Montenegrins to give his company rights to explore for oil in the Ionian Sea.

There were cultural activities: Nigel Kennedy came and played to a sellout crowd in Belgrade's biggest hall. He was extremely popular. The British Council sent out a rather outré modern dance group that, frankly, I didn't understand but went down a storm with the gay community in Belgrade; it was a very special niche audience. We went to a Presidential inauguration in Montenegro that could have been scripted by Laurence Durrell, it was so kitsch it just wasn't, you know. . . you had difficulty in keeping a straight face at times. I had a meeting with the Montenegrin Foreign Minister on a nudist beach in Montenegro when he insisted on marching the length of the beach, stepping over the naked bodies, to show me where the Albanians were creeping across the border. He also invited me to join him in a property development venture which I thought would probably be frowned on by the Foreign Office. And you had the usual diplomatic round of National Days. Our own Queen's birthday party had over 900 guests. There were also elections held in Serbia and in Montenegro during my time which were quite tense and hard fought and in a normal posting these would have been the meat and drink of my work and the highlights of the posting. But in one of the Serbian ones I recall we had to turn a blind eye to election fraud because the real winner who was an extreme nationalist was even worse than the Milosevic nominee who supposedly won. So, sometimes you just had to think "Oh, well, I can't go there".

In short, for most of Serbia Montenegro, life went on and as an Embassy we went on. The Consular Section dealt with consular cases and provided visas and the Trade Section kept on looking for opportunities for British trade and so on and so forth. But it was hard to believe that two hundred miles to the south there was this small civil war brewing and that thousands of people were being forced out of their homes. It was as if you were sitting there in London and up in Yorkshire or in Cumbria there was a guerrilla uprising beginning to grow. From quite early in '98 the levels of violence in Kosovo had begun to increase and the Serbian response was very heavy-handed, and effectively I had to move the political side of the Embassy to a crisis footing. It's worth remembering that, in those days, twenty-four hour news - it was there but it wasn't yet setting the agenda. Social media weren't a factor, we didn't have Facebook or Twitter. Mobile telephone coverage was limited and the potential of the internet as a political tool was just beginning to be recognised so it was a very different world from the one we have now, twenty years later. There was a sort of information deficit and I decided that we should provide London with a daily situation report which we called a 'Sit Rep' which would round up security issues, humanitarian concerns, the key developments in Serbian and Montenegrin politics, politics in Kosovo, any subjects being

covered by the local press and any other topical, one-off events. So, we'd provide this daily report and, if necessary, I would add a comment or an assessment as well. Basically the challenge was to add value to what the Foreign Office could learn from British newspapers, British correspondents and so on, and these daily Sit Reps, we would call them a telegram, would go to the Foreign Office, they'd go automatically to all of the key Whitehall Departments and to our Embassies round the world who had an interest in Balkan issues. The Mission to the UN would get one, Washington, EU, all of the European posts, all of the countries around the area. It became the basic reference document for what was going on in Serbia within the British administration and it was a key input for the daily policy meetings that were held in London. And I would supplement the Sit Reps with periodic more analytical reports of major events or comments on emerging policy or suggestions for UK action and perhaps, most importantly, I'd provide first hand assessments of the situation in Kosovo based on visits to the Province.

So, as I say, it's 200 miles away. I had this armoured Range Rover as my official car and a Serbian driver who thought there were only two speeds which were basically full-speed and stop. And he used to wear out the brakes on this armoured Range Rover at frighteningly rapid rates. We'd charge down the motorway, which was deteriorating almost daily, into Kosovo where the motorway would end and the roads would become basic two-way roads. The visits to Kosovo tended to have some fixed elements. You'd call on the Serb administrators, you'd talk to Kosovar political leaders and then usually drive around the Province. It's about one and a half times the size of Cumbria, to give you a sense of scale, but it has five times the population so you see many, many more people than you would driving around Cumbria but the quality of the roads isn't much different, probably worse in Kosovo. And in the course of that drive you'd try to go by or visit a refugee camp to see what the conditions were like or sometimes if there'd been a particularly – if there'd been reports, as I mentioned before, of a particularly bad atrocity you might go to the scene of that to try to assess for yourself what might have happened. Sometimes, as I've said, there were allegations that there were mass graves.

CM: Was it known that you were coming or did you just arrive?

BD: Sometimes it was known because we would tend to liaise with non-governmental bodies who stayed in Kosovo all the time and they were often the best guides to what was happening

and so on. So you might have, you know, Oxfam – I mean very often what would happen would be that David Slinn would be in Kosovo and would arrange with people a programme for me and he'd be in touch with people like Oxfam or Save the Children and they would know that I was coming. The problem was that inevitably there were unpredictabilities. It varied at different times but most of the time there were checkpoints or roadblocks put up either by the Serb Military or sometimes by the Kosovo Liberation Army to try and control who was and who wasn't in different parts of the country, and perhaps needless to say they were always a bit scary because you never quite knew what reaction you'd get when you came to them. The Serbs were usually professionally organized but they saw most diplomats as unfriendly and a nuisance, and they didn't go out of their way to make things easy for you. On one occasion, they kept us waiting for about thirty minutes at this checkpoint. It was actually in a lull in the fighting, or we thought it was during a lull in the fighting, and, probably ill-advisedly, I'd taken Julia with me so that she could see what it was that I was doing in Kosovo because I was away from home a lot of the time. The Defence Attaché and his wife were also there. And so we were sitting there in my Range Rover for half an hour and John would get out and talk to the Serbs and they still won't let us through. Eventually they agreed to let us proceed and John got back in the car shaking his head, and he said "They've just told me that there were snipers shooting at them all morning and having our car sitting there in front of them gave them a chance to have their lunch". So we thought "Mmm". So, off we went.

The KLA were friendlier, basically they were keen for diplomats to come and see the damage that the Serbs had been doing to their properties and so on but they were also unpredictable. Lots of them were not professional fighters, they were young men who had guns and at first were a bit jumpy until they'd established that you weren't Serbs. The big mistake you'd make was if you said "Hello" to them in Serbian, you had to be very careful that you didn't. We made sure that our Land Rovers had the Union Jack on them, fairly prominently. In fact my official car was dark blue but John Crosland got his Land Rover painted red so that it was clearly different from the Serbian police Land Rovers which tended to be white, so there was no mistaken identity. So I used these visits as the basis for providing a kind of comprehensive assessment every two or three weeks of what was going on, what the political currents were and developments.

Inevitably you got a lot people who wanted to visit Kosovo as well, whether they were FCO officials, European Union officials and one occasion - I'll use this really to illustrate both the unpredictabilities and the oddities of diplomatic life - I'd been asked to escort Paddy Ashdown on a visit to Kosovo. At the time, he was Leader of the Lib Dems in the House of Commons and he was in the process of negotiating with Tony Blair about the possibility of the Lib Dems joining the Labour Government. This was the middle of '98 and there was a lot of popular speculation that Paddy had his eye on the Foreign Secretary's job which had made it all rather embarrassing for me because I wasn't sure to what extent Robin Cook was enthusiastic about the Paddy Ashdown visit. But as Leader of the Lib Dems he was perfectly entitled to expect the Embassy to help him find his way around. It turned out he was an excellent companion. As a former soldier, he was very aware of the security implications and also he looked at things through a former soldier's perspective. I'd arranged a programme for him that tried to show him both sides of the picture, the Serb point of view and the Kosovar point of view. So we'd been to one place where allegedly the Serbs had murdered some Albanians and we were taking him to another place where allegedly Albanians had murdered Serbs. As we approached the site, there was a concrete-lined culvert and it was about three or four metres wide with water running down it, about knee deep in a series of steps going down to a pool at the bottom. The Serbian bodies had been found in this pool and we were going to look at the evidence of bullet marks on the walls of the culvert and so on. As we got to the culvert we saw that in the culvert there was a small calf which had clearly fallen in and couldn't get out again. And, before I knew what was going on, Paddy had whipped off his shoes and socks, rolled his trousers up and had jumped into the culvert. He said "We've got to rescue this calf". All I could think about was the risk that he was going to get swept off his feet by the running water and end up down in this pool at the bottom. But fortunately John Crosland ... as I said, he was a man of action and he was a Special Forces man and Paddy, of course, had been in the Special Boat Service and John clearly wasn't going to be outdone so he whipped off his trousers and in his underpants leapt into the culvert. We threw in a rope and they put a lasso round the calf and I stayed on the bank but between us we managed to get the calf out of the water and off it ran happily. So, you know, we were all thinking how ridiculous all this was and why were we doing this. We regained composure, looked at the scene. In fact we found some shell casings which rather corroborated that it had been Albanians shooting; the bullets were not ones that the Serbs would have used.



We continued our tour and, about ten minutes further on, we came round a bend in the road and found we had a grandstand view of shelling of Kosovar villages by Serb artillery and tanks. The Serbs were on one side of the valley and they were shelling the other side of the valley and you could see the plumes of smoke arising as the shells moved along the valley. This was all happening the day after Milosevic had announced publicly that the fighting had stopped in Kosovo. We had a satellite telephone with us and I was able to contact London and, in fact, let them hear on the telephone the sounds of the shelling. It was quite clear that this was indiscriminate. I mean the Serbs always argued that they were only targeting fighters whereas you can't shell villages from 10 kilometres away and not risk killing civilians and this was quite clearly indiscriminate.

This dreadful shelling wasn't extraordinary in Kosovo it was simply the fact that it was the first time I'd seen it in quite such stark reality, and for Paddy it was the first time and he was deeply shocked by it. We'd arranged for him to meet Milosevic, back in Belgrade, and so when we got to Belgrade and saw Milosevic, Paddy was very straight with him and said "I believe that what I saw is in contravention of the Geneva Conventions and amounts to a war crime and whoever was responsible for it deserves to be tried for war crimes". Needless to say, that wasn't what Milosevic wanted to hear at all and first of all he said "No, no, no, we'd stopped. It couldn't have happened." And we said "We've got the photographs, we've got the film, we've got the whole lot" and then he said "Well, it's these military commanders that don't obey their instructions, I'll order an enquiry." And, of course he never did, there was never any enquiry, never any result and I sometimes think today of President Assad in Syria in the same sort of state of denial that there are chemical attacks and he says "No, there aren't chemical attacks" and everyone says "Yes, there are" and he says "No, there aren't". It's a sort of state of mind that I think dictators get into that somehow they can wish away reality. The significance of this was that, of course, Paddy eventually did give evidence to The Hague Tribunal in Milosevic's trial, based on what he saw in Kosovo on that day. So it turned out that what was meant to be a routine visit turned out to be one of the significant elements in Milosevic's eventual trial at The Hague.

The pressure really was unrelenting but the satisfaction of this aspect of the job was enormous. I felt I was making a significant contribution to British policy making. I knew that Ministers including the Prime Minister were reading my reports and I felt that this was why I'd joined the Foreign Office. But I was also conscious that providing the basis for

policy making was just one aspect of the job and the other, arguably more critical role, and I think most Ambassadors would like to be involved in this, is conflict resolution in other words you're not just observing conflict you are actively trying to solve it or resolve it. And this was much more frustrating because as the crisis deepened in the first half of '98, the United Kingdom happened, and it was pure chance of calendar really, to have the Chair of the European Union. They were also the Chair of the G8 and they were Chair of a body called the Contact Group which was an ad hoc group comprising the US, UK, France, Germany, Italy and Russia. This group had taken upon itself the lead role in negotiating Balkan issues and Robin Cook found himself the Chair of these three different bodies, at Foreign Minister level, and he used this very adroitly to ratchet up the pressure on Milosevic. I think I called it at the time Escalator Diplomacy because we seemed to be on a moving staircase and that every time one of these bodies met, it issued a statement on Kosovo and each one had to be tougher than the one that went before it. Sanctions that had been dropped after the Dayton Agreement were reintroduced and new ones were dreamt up to target specific Serbian individuals. And my job, in part, was to deliver these statements to the Serbian Foreign Ministry and to try and get a response from the Serbs as to whether they were going to change their policies or change their actions. The then Minister of State at the Foreign Office, Tony Lloyd, also came twice to reinforce these messages. I remember on one occasion he really caught their attention when, as a Manchester MP, he recalled that Manchester United had played Red Star Belgrade in 1958 on the day before the ill-fated flight that led to the Munich Air Disaster. And, partly because of the way it was translated and partly because it was completely out of the blue that he mentioned this, I think for a moment that the Serbs thought that he was adding to the list of sins for which they were being held responsible. You could see the startled look "Well, what have we got to do with that?"

But the reality was that the more we delivered these messages the less inclined they were to discuss what they saw as an increasingly one-sided point of view, and it put a big strain on Serb-UK relations. As time passed they simply refused to see me. I would ring up and say "I've got a message to deliver, can I make an appointment?" and they said "Oh, just fax it over to us, there's no need for you to come". In their eyes, the Kosovo Liberation Army, who were the fighting wing in Kosovo, were terrorists in just the same way as we saw the IRA and they would say "Why don't you accept that we've got to deal with them?" I would say "Well, we didn't use heavy machine guns against domestic targets in Northern Ireland and we didn't shell villages indiscriminately". And they would say "Ah, well it's different down in Kosovo

and you don't fully understand what it's like" and so on. At one meeting, I remember, Milosevic complained. It was a constant refrain that we had double standards and that we judged the Serbs one way but we behaved differently ourselves. Milosevic complained that we didn't just have double standards, we had multiple standards. Whatever the Serbs did would never be enough, we would always find something to criticise. Robin Cook came out on one occasion to see him and he claimed he had the flu, and Robin was pacing up and down in my residence while we waited to know whether Milosevic would actually agree to see him. It was the very last minute before he eventually agreed and we never knew whether this was diplomatic flu or real flu but, basically, there's no doubt that the prominent role that the UK took in rallying international opinion against Serbia had the downside that it constrained our ability to influence the Serbs bilaterally. While we were undoubtedly a thorn in their side, I think they had persuaded themselves that it was only the Americans that they really had to worry about and that they could effectively brush us aside. That's why I say it was very frustrating from my standpoint in that much as I would like to have been able to get involved in serious discussion and negotiation about how you could resolve the Kosovo conflict, the Serbs really weren't interested in talking to us.

So with this in mind, I made a point of establishing a very close relationship with the American Ambassador and this paid off, really, when a man called Richard Holbrooke, who had been the negotiator of the Dayton Agreement, returned to the fray in the autumn of '98. By this stage, there was a humanitarian crisis in Kosovo with tens of thousands of internally displaced people fleeing from Serb military action and we were increasingly having to liaise with agencies like the United Nations, High Commissioner for Refugees, Oxfam, Save the Children who were all trying to tackle the problem in Kosovo. So it was like an extra layer of problem on top of the political relationship and in the midst of this, a brave and well-meaning English woman called Sally Becker who had earned for herself the title of, at least in the popular press, The Angel of Mostar for her humanitarian work in Bosnia, decided to try and slip into Kosovo to do similar good work in Kosovo only to get picked up by Serbian police and put in jail. And so on top of everything else we had to add prison visits to our agenda and to try and negotiate with the Serbs for her release. And it's curious that when I was thinking about all this on Monday, in preparation for today, there on the Today programme who should appear but Sally Becker who is now in – where would you think she'd be? – Syria. The woman is truly amazing and has devoted her whole life to this sort of work on behalf of refugees. Anyway, we got her out and my first reaction was "Oh, my God, the last

thing I need is this on top of everything else” but when I met her in prison, you couldn’t have met a nicer woman. She may have been misguided in trying to do what she did the way she did it but there was no doubt that her motivation was entirely altruistic. She wasn’t someone who was a publicity seeker, it was just sort of a tunnel vision of focus on what she wanted to do.

In addition, by this time as well, as a result of an agreement that Milosevic had reached with Boris Yeltsin – because the Serbs regard the Russians as potential allies and the Russians always felt that the West was unfair to Serbia. There was a Slav relationship and also a relationship because Yugoslavia had once been a communist country, of course. But, the Russians were always more inclined to give the Serbs the benefit of the doubt and Yeltsin had agreed with Milosevic that, as a confidence-building exercise, we could establish what was called a Diplomatic Observer Mission in Kosovo; it was called KDOM for short. And a number of countries, I think there were French, Germans, Russians, Americans, ourselves, established our own KDOM teams. I forget now exactly how many British personnel we brought in, I think we may have got as many as fifty. These were assorted ex- military men and I suspected probably included some Intelligence Officers, whose job it was to monitor Serb activity and investigate incidents in Kosovo and as part of the deal they were formally attached to the Embassy. So, all of a sudden, I found my staff had increased by however many this was – thirty, forty, fifty extra people - who were down there in Kosovo and although I had nominal responsibility for them, in practice, it was very difficult to control what on earth they were getting up to all the time. That was a supplemental source of reporting on what was going on but part of the deal was that their reports had to be shown to the Serbs as well so that the Serbs could respond to any issues that were raised. So the whole scene was gradually being ratcheted up.

But even with these extra observers in Kosovo, the security situation was deteriorating and probably as early as August ’98 I’d begun discussing with Tom Phillips the possibility that only military involvement would resolve the impasse, because it seemed that the Serbs were quite impervious to argument about the way in which they were trying to control the uprising. I mean, the argument we were using with them was that we accepted that Kosovo was part of Serbia, and that Serbia had every right to try and administer the province which was in international law indisputable. The problem was their use of indiscriminate force and their inability, it seemed, to target that force on specific trouble-makers rather than on the general

population. And also their inability to acknowledge the need to establish in Kosovo some form of local democracy that would allow the Albanian majority to exercise their own culture and language and traditions and so on. The Serb answer was “When in the past we let the Albanians do this, they always then simply discriminated against the Serbs and so we’re not going to let them do that again”. And, our argument was “Well, let’s find a different way of doing it so that you can both feel secure”: lots of echoes of Northern Ireland. I was listening on the radio today to discussion about the commemorations on the 12<sup>th</sup> of July that are coming up and the difficulties that there are in Northern Ireland about respecting the two cultures, and these were the problems that were being wrestled with in Kosovo but the Serb answer was simply to use force to subjugate the Albanians.

So this was the situation that Holbrooke faced when he returned to Serbia to try and help find a solution. Holbrooke was a large man physically and a large man in personality. He was a bit of a bulldozer if truth was told, a bit of a bully really. He was very much a disciple of the Theodore Roosevelt School of Diplomacy. Roosevelt had once said that what you had to do was “Speak softly but carry a big stick” and Holbrooke’s stick was NATO. To strengthen his negotiating arm he had orchestrated the threat of NATO military action against Serbia and he had asked NATO to raise their state of readiness to the point where a military strike against Serbia could have been carried out at very short notice. And, of course, he had in mind the fact that in the Bosnia situation, at a certain stage, NATO had taken military action against Serbian or Bosnian Serbian military formations to stop them shelling, not just shelling Sarajevo but also using their artillery in conflict in Bosnia, and had therefore levelled up the playing field and made it impossible for the Serbs to continue with their aggressive policy. So he felt that he needed to reinstate that kind of threat to hang over Milosevic’s head. But the corollary of that was that if you were to believe that this threat might be a real threat, you couldn’t, in all conscience, keep your staff in Belgrade with the threat of them being bombed. So, as the tension escalated, we decided that we would need to evacuate the Embassy and, again, you can’t evacuate the Embassy without offering to help evacuate any other British citizens in Serbia who might want to leave the country. We had very few as it turned out but – and I’ll say more about evacuations later because we had three in six months and it became quite a defining issue really - at the time this was the situation we were in.

We were in the course of plans to evacuate the Embassy, send all the people to Budapest where they could be safe if NATO action was taken, and it was at that point that, through the

American Ambassador, I arranged to see Holbrooke. And, in just one of those, again, serendipitous things, we hit it off. He invited me to join his negotiating team, but he did it in such a way that it almost backfired. I said to him “Well, I’ll have to discuss this with London to see whether they’re happy” and he said “Oh, I’ll speak to Robin, no problem”. But as we walked out of the hotel after our meeting, he stopped in front of a CNN camera and said “I want to introduce Brian Donnelly as the new member of my team”, so it went out on CNN before I’d had a chance to even speak to London. It turned out that Robin Cook was more than happy that I was part of his team because it meant we were privy to all the US thinking and we could keep fully abreast of what was going on. I had to extract from Holbrooke a promise that if I stayed behind, when the rest of my Embassy had left, that he could take care of my security and he said “Yes, you can move into the American Embassy and when I leave, you can come out with me on my private plane”. So the deal we struck was that the British Embassy would close but I would stay behind, move in with the Americans and join Holbrooke’s team and that’s indeed what happened.

The Serbs were furious because they said this was undiplomatic behaviour, to close an Embassy but for the Ambassador to stay behind. The other Europeans were peeved because we were, in a sense, getting this special treatment. This was the special relationship in practice, and we had a unique opportunity which they were being excluded from. London came up with a communications device linked to a satellite phone that would allow me to keep in touch with London while living in the American Embassy, but it meant having to hang the aerial for the phone out of the window of my room and trying to find a satellite and then to link up. The other thing was I had to carry the encryption discs with me at all times, they said, and so to be certain that I didn’t leave them anywhere, I put them underneath my shirt which was very uncomfortable. They were just like CDs, a box set of them.

So, as I say, working with Holbrooke was a good example of the special relationship in practice but as we were to discover in 2004, when you work with the Americans, you’re always the junior partner and you kid yourself if you think that you can be the organ-grinder rather than the monkey. So I was dependent on the Americans for accommodation, transport, security and, if it had been necessary, eventual evacuation. But it was also undeniably satisfying to be at the centre of things so, again, as time passed I could see why Tony Blair got seduced by the feeling that if you stuck with the Americans you could be at the centre of activity and have this sense of being involved in decision making. I remember one occasion

in the American Embassy when Holbrooke was told he had to take a call from Javier Solana, the NATO Secretary General, and that this had to be taken in the Embassy's secure room. Now, most Embassies have these secure rooms where you can have meetings or take telephone calls that can't be listened to by eaves-dropping devices but this one was about the size of an old red telephone box. As I said before, Holbrooke is a big man and he insisted I squeezed into the box with him. He held the telephone between us and I heard Solana say "Dick, this is strictly between you and me," and I looked at Holbrooke expecting him to usher me out but he just put his finger to his lips and I listened to the whole conversation unbeknownst to Solana. And I thought then about Henry Wotton's classic definition of a diplomat as "a man who's sent abroad to lie for his country," and there we were pretending to be alone. Anyway, I shuttled back and forth with Holbrooke between Belgrade and Pristina as we tried to put together a deal, and it was fascinating to watch him at work. He was known behind his back as "Tricky Dick" and it was for good reason, really. He could mix cajoling and bullying, he could manipulate the press and, rather disconcertingly, he could fall asleep at the drop of a hat and in the most unlikely places. So, typically, we'd go to a meeting and he'd start off with an opening gambit in which he would offer a mixture of inducements and threats, often very forcibly, saying why people had got to do this and got to do that, and then he'd go off and leave the detail to his deputy, Christopher Hill, and me but he'd be lurking somewhere nearby so that he could come back if necessary. But very often while he was lurking he'd just fall asleep.

The key thing he brought to these negotiations was patience and time. Foreign Ministers tended to fly into Belgrade, have an hour's meeting with Milosevic, and then they'd fly out again. And this was like water off a duck's back with Milosevic, he could see off any Foreign Minister for an hour; it was no problem for him. But Holbrooke would basically set down camp and he would see Milosevic and then he'd say "Well, I'll come back tomorrow and I'll come back tomorrow," and he would try to wear people down. His persistence was part of the key to his method. On this occasion it worked and it produced a temporary cease-fire and it started a political process. The agreement he reached expanded the KDOM concept. It was re-christened KVM (Kosovo Verification Mission) and put under the control of the OSCE rather than individual Embassies. The numbers were supposed to reach fifteen hundred. I don't think they ever got to more than a thousand but it was a big team of observers, similar composition as KDOM i.e. largely ex-military, a smattering of Intelligence people and they had this fleet of orange vehicles. I say 'orange vehicles' - all their vehicles

were painted orange so that they were distinctive and so they were known as The Pumpkins. The agreement also involved NATO air surveillance of Kosovo and in this respect my NATO experience proved invaluable because both Solana and the man who was then the Supreme Allied Commander, Wesley Clark, came to Belgrade a couple of times as part of this agreement and, because of my NATO background, on each occasion I was asked to go and talk to them and brief them about what was going on. So I felt very much at the centre of things and for a time involved in conflict resolution although, as I stress, I was very much a minor cog in Holbrooke's wheel.

After the agreement was reached, people came back to Embassies. Chris Hill and I spoke almost every day after that. He had a key role in trying to draft a political agreement that the Serbs and Kosovars could agree to and he continued the shuttle; I didn't. I effectively then dropped out when Holbrooke left. Hill operated largely on his own until, a bit later, the EU provided a second member to work alongside him. But, despite all the efforts over the next four months or so, the deal Holbrooke had reached gradually unravelled and the next attempt at conflict resolution was following a particularly bad incident in Kosovo. Robin Cook and his French opposite number decided to call a conference which was held in France to which both the Serbians and the Kosovars were summoned to attend to try and reach an agreement, face to face. Much to my chagrin, I was not invited to go to this conference. The London view was that I could be of more use in Belgrade than I would be in France. I disagreed but I lost that argument. And, at the very end of that negotiation, Holbrooke came back to Belgrade again. I got involved with him again but this time he couldn't reach a deal and so we evacuated the Embassy for the third and final time, just the day before the Kosovo War began. And that effectively ended my tour of duty in Belgrade after less than eighteen months.

I said I'd say something more about Embassy evacuations because it's not something that most of my colleagues will have been involved in, and it's the sort of thing that's a far cry from the picture of diplomatic life as being one of privilege and comfort. They're emotionally draining experiences for all concerned and, for those who haven't been through it, I think there's always a temptation to think that a decision to evacuate can be part of a negotiating strategy to underline the seriousness of purpose. In other words, you think "Well, if we announce that the Embassy is going to be evacuated it shows that we really intend to do something". But they simply have too much impact on people's welfare and security to be



viewed that way. As I've said, in the first place, if you're going to evacuate the Embassy you have to make the same offer to all British citizens and that, in some places, could be a major challenge. Often, this is all linked to how long airlines will fly into the country and, clearly, once you decide that you're going to evacuate then British Airways will not fly into the country. So it begs the question of how people will leave. Fortunately in Serbia you could go by road but that's not always the case.

Then, there's the issue of timing. Closing an Embassy means that you've either got to ship out or destroy any sensitive communications equipment and papers. Once you've done this, it's hard for the Embassy to function and so you can't do it too soon. On the other hand, it's not something you can simply do overnight. So if you leave it too late you may find that either you haven't finished it or that, by the time you do finish it, your escape routes are cut off. There's also the problem that your plans for leaving the country may depend upon the good will of the country concerned and you can't be sure that this is going to be forthcoming. Do you tell the local authorities the route that you're going to take? You've then got the fact that many of those leaving will be families with children and understandably they're going to be very apprehensive. All sorts of issues like where are they going to live, what financial support will they get? And, while it's easy to draw up on paper the idea that you'll have a big convoy or cars that will leave and go down the motorway and you'll go this way and you'll go that way, travelling in a convoy wasn't actually very easy particularly in pre-mobile phone days because you couldn't keep contact between one car and another. You could only go at the speed of the slowest driver so that if you've got one person that's not happy at driving more than 50 miles an hour, the rest of the convoy is all sort of thinking "Why don't they hurry up, why don't they hurry up?" And once you hit traffic lights the convoys get broken up and then one has to wait for the other half or the two parts get separated, so there's a whole raft of practical issues that you never think about until you are actually confronted with doing it.

You have to find what's called a Protecting Power to look after the Embassy premises in your absence and to act as go-betweens with the local Government once you have left. And it's not easy to find a Protecting Power when most of your allies are leaving, too. We were fortunate in that the Brazilians agreed to act as our Protecting Power and they did a great job for us. Very often in the past one would have chosen, say, a neutral country but in this particular conflict many of the neutral countries also left. There's also the question of what

do you do about local employees who may have served the UK loyally for many years and who might become vulnerable once we left? We found that there was no manual to guide us through all this. Very often we were simply making it up as we went along in parallel with having to deal with the substance of the crisis so that part of my brain was thinking about “What’s the state of the negotiation with the Serbs? What’s happening? What has Christopher Hill done today? What’s happening in Kosovo today?” and the other half of my brain was having to think about “When do I tell people that they have to leave? What can I tell them to expect in Budapest?” and so on and so forth. Fortunately, this is where having a good Deputy was key and, also, having a first class Management Officer who was ready to take upon himself a lot of the responsibility for dealing with the administrative issues. But it still meant that in the first evacuation we didn’t know what to expect. We’d arranged to rendezvous in the outskirts of Belgrade. I think there were fourteen car loads of families ready to go. John Crosland was going to lead the convoy but he was only going as far as the border and then he was coming back. Poor Julia - whether you like it or not in those circumstances the Ambassador’s wife, since all the cars basically carried families, is expected to assume a kind of mother hen responsibility for everybody. And this was not something she’d expected to take on when she came to Belgrade. We arrived at this car park to find that the world press were all there and so the families had to run the gauntlet of CNN and BBC saying “How do you feel?” – you know, all those sort of questions that make you cringe. “How do you think we feel?” I was trying to encourage people that things would be fine and they’d all be safe and so on and so forth.

So, as I say, they’re fraught occasions and we did this three times. There was that time – that must have been in October ’98 – and then the following February, when the negotiations in France were going badly, we had to do it again and that’s when I had the row with London about the timing. And then there was the final evacuation the day before the bombing by which time the Embassy was down to a skeleton staff, and there were only about six of us left. But our final journey was carried out in pitch darkness through the Serbian countryside not knowing whether we would be allowed to leave. It was an experience I had no desire to repeat. The detail of all this may sound rather banal but I think for all those involved it was a real test of character as well as a commitment to public service, and I don’t think that it’s particularly widely seen or appreciated, just what people go through. Of course a lot of people at the end, as we were, were left without their possessions for months because their

possessions, by and large, were left behind in Belgrade. We could only take suitcases with us and a lot of people had to live in temporary accommodation.

CM: Was there security for their property and their houses?

BD: Well, not directly. You had to hope that the Serbs even though they were under NATO bombing would respect the integrity of diplomatic property and wouldn't allow incursions or invasions. The Brazilians, with the help of the UK local staff who'd stayed behind, conducted regular inspections of the properties to make sure they were OK. When, afterwards, people went back to our residence they found that a couple of windows had been - I'm not sure whether they were broken or just cracked, which was due ironically to NATO bombing not to any Serb action. So, perhaps amazingly, I think most people got most of their possessions back again at the end of it all, more or less unscathed which probably we didn't expect when we left. And I have to say, too, that London came good in terms of looking after the local staff financially. We paid all their wages throughout the conflict via the Brazilians, so that I don't think anyone actually asked us for asylum but we did ensure that they continued to be paid and continued to work for us afterwards if they wanted to.

So it wasn't the way I expected to leave Belgrade and of course it meant that I never had any final call on Milosevic; normally an Ambassador would call on the Head of State before leaving. And one left, in a sense, with a slight sense of failure in that, basically, our relations with Yugoslavia had broken down and my job as an Ambassador is, in a sense, to keep them going but that hadn't been possible. As I've said, I never had any major disagreements with London over the way that policy evolved. It was certainly frustrating to have to live the issue, as they say today "twenty-four seven", but only to have an arm's length involvement in the policy decisions. But you can't be an Ambassador in post and in the Foreign Office at the same time, though I suspect that with modern communications that's probably altered the way which things work now and that probably Ambassadors can get more closely involved in policy making. I mean I saw the way in which technology was beginning to change the way diplomacy worked. Even in the eighteen months I was there, there was a significant increase in the coverage of mobile phones in Kosovo and Serbia and this helped immeasurably both in making contacts and keeping them, and gathering information. But it also posed new risks or opportunities if you like, for Signals Intelligence including pinpointing locations, and we have reason to believe that the Serbs used this to target KLA units in the field for their

artillery. I think we saw the internet being used for political ends in a purposeful way more or less for the first time and the Kosovars were far more adept and agile than the Serbs in doing this. They caught on very quickly to the reality that if they got their side of the story out on the internet in English that was the story that would be picked up by the Press, and so they became very good at that and the Serbs never quite managed to do the same.

But the other thing that you can't help but be struck by when you're in that kind of situation when diplomacy moves into military action is that it alters your mindset when military action is possible. I'm getting ahead of myself in a way but when I was in Zimbabwe there was never any question of military action because it was logistically and politically impossible to work out any way in which you could do it however much you might want to, so, in a sense, you put it out of your thinking. But in Yugoslavia, because NATO had already taken some military action in Bosnia, the prospect of military action was always lurking at the back of your mind and it was certainly feasible, not easy but feasible, and I can't help but think that that in some ways reduces the incentive to push the diplomatic option as far as you might have done if the military option wasn't there. In other words, if you've got it there's a greater tendency that you're going to use it even if it might have been possible to avoid it, and I always felt slightly uncomfortable that we hadn't pushed the diplomatic option as far as we could.

You're also conscious that there's a vast discrepancy between the resources available for diplomacy and those for the military. There were literally thousands of people involved through NATO and in the different armed forces in the military planning and the operations that we carried out in Kosovo, but there were probably no more than two hundred diplomats. In other words, you can produce lots of people for military action but when you come to diplomacy you've got a much smaller core of people. I think in the Kosovo War something like five hundred cruise missiles were used and the cost of one cruise missile in those days was about half a million dollars per missile. My annual budget in Belgrade for running the Embassy and all the work we did was less than the cost of one cruise missile, just to give a sense of proportion. And so the money that you spend on diplomacy is far less than the money that you spend on warfare. The BBC estimated that the total military cost of the war, which only lasted for three months, was 2.6 billion and the cost of reconstruction in Kosovo was going to be ten times that. And you can't help but think that if we'd been prepared to commit even half that amount as a kind of marshal aid programme for Serbia and Kosovo,

then the whole basis of negotiation would have been changed. OK, you can say it's bribery and that they don't deserve it but my point is simply that we have seen time and time again in Iraq, in Libya, in Afghanistan that you will always find money for military action but it's never available in the same way for conflict prevention, not in the same scale or the same quantum. And I don't think we've yet found a way in which those two things can be brought into better balance. There's some hindsight in this and I'm not sure I'd thought it through that clearly at the time. It's just something that became increasingly obvious to me afterwards, how much more we might have done in terms of promoting peace if we had had the same quantum of financial resource available to us as the military did when it came to conducting bombing.

It's also worth remembering, in this post Iraq context, that we did not have UN authorisation for the intervention. Our own legal justification was that it was necessary to prevent a humanitarian catastrophe. Now that's an argument that is not universally accepted in international law but at the time it was scarcely challenged in British politics except by people who were immediately dismissed as apologists for Serbia. And also these days, it's sometimes said that our decision to go to war in Kosovo is evidence of our willingness to defend Muslim interests but I have to say that this seems to me to be a post facto rationalisation. I never heard the argument made prior to the conflict and I don't believe that religion was a primary driving force for either the Serbs or the Kosovars, it was all about power not about ideology. So, and I'll touch on this a bit later too, I left Serbia feeling that although I couldn't deny that we had made every effort to get the Serbs to accept a solution, I was still uncomfortable with the way in which it had turned out and a bit disappointed that my own contribution hadn't helped to avoid the kind of conflict that we ended up with. So I left Serbia 23<sup>rd</sup> March 1999 and the next day NATO bombing started. And, of course, I went back in 2001 just basically to say thank you to the local staff who had stood by us but I was never to go back again as Ambassador.

### **FCO: Director for Balkan Crisis, 1999-2001**

BD: Well, returning to London after Belgrade was really difficult. From being at the centre of attention I was suddenly in limbo. I felt a bit like a spare wheel on a car racing down a motorway. People were glad I was around but they hadn't got any immediate use for me. And if the conflict had ended quickly and Milosevic had been removed then the plan was that

I would go back to Belgrade and resume as Ambassador. But for quite a time I was a man without a job and, as I think I've alluded to already, I didn't feel at all in tune with the kind of 'at war' atmosphere I found in London. I'm not sure what it was like elsewhere in the country because I was basically confined in London, but in London and certainly in the Whitehall bubble I felt there was a kind of almost enthusiasm for war which I couldn't entirely share. Although, as I've said, I had no basic policy disagreement with London and I thought the Serbs had been given every chance to accept an agreement that if they'd gone on to implement it, and I suppose that's a big if, then it would have ensured Serbia's territorial integrity and significantly undermined the position of the Kosovar Separatists. It would also have ensured that they regained the backing of many of their neighbouring countries and a lot of countries, like Spain for example, who have their own separatist movements and don't want to encourage them. I mean, I'd had this argument with Serb politicians many times that this was a better deal on offer than they were likely to get if they rejected it. But, in the end, they chose to reject it and I remain unsure whether they acted from a pig-headed sense that they'd rather go down fighting than, as they saw it, be bullied into surrender or whether they believed that the NATO resolve would falter and that they could simply weather the storm and then continue as before. I mean that's something that future historians will have to argue about and I don't think there's any definitive answer.

I hadn't been privy to NATO's bombing strategy and that was quite right. I'd no reason to be, and so I was surprised at how many targets in Serbia itself rather than in Kosovo were struck in the early days. I'd seen for myself, with my local staff, the way in which this had almost forced Serbs who were opposed to Milosevic to rally round their country, and I felt uncomfortable that a whole nation was being punished for the acts of Milosevic and his immediate supporters. Perhaps I was just over-sensitive but I felt that this mood in Britain of a satisfaction that the Serbs were, if you like, getting a taste of their own medicine, in part a delayed reaction to what they'd done in Bosnia as much as in Kosovo, was sort of distorting our views. I was asked at one point, when it became obvious to others that the bombing was having the effect of uniting Serbs around Milosevic rather than isolating him, what we might do to prevent it. And I said, "Well, why don't we target Milosevic personally, his houses, his property, his family businesses so that it's clear that what we're trying to do is to get rid of Milosevic not to implicate the whole Serb nation in what's going on". But I was immediately told that this was unthinkable because it was inconsistent with international law which only allowed you to target military related sites and so on. I have to say that, as the conflict went

on, it seemed that international law could be stretched a bit because they did attack some Milosevic businesses but by then I think it was too late, in the sense of keeping a division between Milosevic and the Serb people.

Particularly at the outset, our Government was also very keen to maintain public support for the bombing campaign and this meant their daily press conferences producing a story or ideally a person that would testify directly to Serbian brutality. And given that immediately after the bombing started the Serbs accelerated their military offensive in Kosovo and began a forcible eviction of Kosovar people from the country - it was ethnic cleansing on a massive scale - it wasn't difficult to find people who had suffered as a result of Serb actions. I was involved in contacting people and arranging for them to either come to Britain or to appear on video links to talk about what they were doing. While there's no doubt that the Serb actions were indefensible and deserving condemnation, I found that I couldn't share in the general enthusiasm for what seemed to me to be an overly simplistic analysis and of stereotyping. I sort of felt that in the media depictions of the conflict it was as if all Serbs had sprouted horns and tails and all Kosovars had sprouted angel wings, and I knew from experience it simply wasn't as clear-cut as that. My Master's thesis at University of Wisconsin had been on cognitive dissonance, when your mind struggles to keep two inconsistent concepts in place, and this was firsthand experience of that. On the one hand, I knew that the Serbs had done terrible things and, on the other hand, I couldn't feel comfortable at the way in which the bombing campaign was going on.

So it wasn't a very comfortable time for me. It probably wasn't helped by the fact that Julia was in hospital and then in convalescence from a major operation. We'd had to take temporary accommodation because my flat was let and we couldn't break the lease. Our possessions were either still in Belgrade or in storage and we didn't know when or if we'd see them again. So we were living for a long time just out of the suitcases that we brought with us. And we probably made a mistake in that for a time we tried to keep in touch with our friends and local staff in Belgrade to check how they were and how they were coping with the situation. But as the bombing intensified, the conversations got more and more difficult. I mean, what could we say to them? It seemed easy at one level to say "Well, it's their own fault, if they'd got rid of Milosevic this wouldn't have happened". But that's not so easy for the people who are living there and who really hadn't any feasible opportunity to get rid of Milosevic. And after a while, when I was saying "Well, we're terribly sorry that you're

suffering this bombing” and so on, it seemed almost insulting and so it gradually petered out, and I think we probably felt guilty about that. I think, in truth, we were probably both rather depressed. They’d call it PTSD now, I think, but the concept didn’t really exist at the time.

CM: How were the people that you were working with, there, treated themselves in Belgrade?

BD: They were fine. As far as we know there was no retaliation. I mean one or two clearly were so horrified by the NATO action that they couldn’t go on any longer working for us. The majority continued. What they really thought is probably very difficult to say. I had no wish to blame anyone because the choices they faced were difficult. They could either stay and take their wages and continue or make the sacrifice which could have plunged their families into complete penury by walking out on principle. I suspect there was a mixture of feelings among them, some who felt strongly and some who didn’t. There’s no doubt that for people living in Belgrade it was a frightening experience, nothing like the kind of destruction that we’ve seen more recently in other subsequent wars, but the uncertainty in not knowing from one night to the next what the targets would be. If you happened to live near a military base which was likely to be a NATO target then obviously it was a major worry, and I think some people moved out of Belgrade and went to live in the countryside. We did go back to Belgrade after Milosevic had been overthrown and just before we went to Zimbabwe, and I was both surprised and reassured at how welcome we were made by the people, the staff. They told us rather touchingly that when I’d said at our final meeting that we would make sure that they got their pay that they hadn’t really believed us, that they thought we were just being nice and how amazing it had been that the money had kept coming, and that had impressed them. So, I felt that we had done as well by them as we could which was not a bad thing.

In bureaucratic terms after a few weeks passed and the likelihood of a quick return to Belgrade was clearly diminishing, the Foreign Office created for me what they called a supernumerary job i.e. one specially created for me - it wasn’t on the organogram beforehand - at Director Level with responsibility for maintaining contacts with Serb, Montenegrin and Kosovar politicians; a kind of roving Ambassador role, and co-ordinating the UK response to something called the Stability Pact. Now, the Stability Pact was an EU initiative and it was an attempt to ensure the loyalty and support for the conflict from Serbia’s neighbours by



holding out the prospect, after the war, of closer association with the EU together with economic assistance and infrastructure development. Put crudely, it was a kind of big bribe to help ensure that people would be loyal. So, the job had two distinct parts and the first proved to be both rewarding and exciting at times. The second turned out to be a bit of a bed of nails as it emerged that, certainly in Britain, the political enthusiasm was never matched by a willingness to cough up hard cash. I spent a lot of time wrestling with other Whitehall Departments about whether they would or would not participate in these post-war ventures to build new roads, new bridges, this, that and the other. There was a strong sense of cynicism in most of Whitehall that these kind of projects, that countries like Bulgaria and Romania and Albania were putting forward for funding, were essentially white elephants, that they hadn't got a proper economic justification, and some scepticism that any funding would actually go to the project and not be diverted into private pockets and so on. In typical British fashion, there was no willingness on the part of the Treasury to create a new fund for this. It had to be paid for out of existing budgets and for most bits of the machinery this wasn't their highest priority so it was as fairly unforgiving kind of role which I didn't much enjoy.

But one thing the new job meant was that I got to go to the morning meetings held every day by the Permanent Under Secretary, i.e. the most senior person in the Foreign Office, senior non-Minister. And these were something of an eye-opener. All Directors and above are able to attend and it's the chance to review all the issues of the day. It's a very short meeting so it's quite a whistle-stop tour of the room to see who has something to say, but it became obvious very quickly that it's the opportunity for individuals to shine or, if they get it wrong, to crash and burn in front of the Permanent Secretary. And so it was very highly competitive, you could almost sense - and it was predominantly men - the testosterone flying at these meetings. And what also became evident was that you could see that the reputation of Ambassadors out in the field, who couldn't be at these meetings, could rise and fall rather like shares on the Stock Exchange, depending on what they'd said in their most recent telegram and whether it was proving to be correct or totally wide of the mark - and, also, and this was important really, whether it was supported or contradicted by their Regional Director. So you might have a telegram from somewhere in Latin America saying, "There's going to be a revolution next month," and the Director for Latin America would say, "Oh, this is just Bloggs again, he's always going on about this, don't take any notice of it". And you'd see Bloggs' reputation sinking but then, if there was a revolution next month, Bloggs' reputation would rise and the Director's would fall. So I thought this was a very valuable

lesson before I went to Harare. I hadn't fully appreciated when I was in Belgrade that I might be being talked about in those terms, in these meetings, but I kept it very much in mind when I was in Harare.

Now, in my Roving Ambassador role, and this is ironic in light of what I said before about Ivor Roberts, I was also given the title of Special Envoy of the Secretary of State. But like Ivor, I never actually talked to Robin Cook myself. It did prove quite useful in getting access to see senior politicians who ideally would have liked to see Robin Cook but, if they couldn't see him, would see me. Because the situation was extraordinary, being that we were on a sort of war footing, I had some assignments which rather departed from the standard diplomatic role. On one occasion, a man called Zoran Dindic who was a Serb opposition leader, had passed a secret message that he would be willing to come out of Serbia to talk to us - he was explicit he wanted to talk to us and not the Americans - if we could guarantee that the meeting would remain secret. So we agreed to this and I went out to Sarajevo to meet him in the British section of the NATO Force Headquarters. To ensure that the Americans wouldn't be aware that this was happening under their noses, we had to smuggle him into the base under a pile of coats in the back of a Land Rover. Basically, he wanted to explain that while the bombing was going on it would be, in political terms, fatal for his party, and it could also have been fatal for him in personal terms, if he was seen to be talking to Britain or in any way supporting the NATO bombing. And so that was why he was remaining quiet and silent but he wanted to reassure us that his fundamental views hadn't changed and that once the conflict was over, he would be willing to work with us in order to help ensure Milosevic's departure and the restarting of democratic processes in Serbia. Unfortunately, as events turned out, he was assassinated not long after the war ended so he was never able to do this. One small interesting point was that when he and I had met in Serbia, when I was still based there, he had insisted in talking in Serbian and had shown little knowledge of English but when we met in Sarajevo he spoke in good English throughout. So he was a Serb Nationalist but one who was a very different character from Milosevic.

A little bit later, we learned that a Serb general, whom I'd also known in Belgrade but who had been sacked by Milosevic, also wanted to talk to us and we thought that he might be thinking about trying to organise some coup or counter-force to Milosevic. We heard this from the Montenegrins who offered to get him to the border of Bosnia if we would then meet him there and guarantee his security. So I went back to Sarajevo, this time with an SAS

group who were meant to provide security for him and for me, at a night-time rendezvous somewhere near the border between Bosnia and Montenegro. It was all a bit uncertain because we couldn't be sure this wasn't a set-up, and we were going to be exposed. I don't think we thought we were likely to be ambushed in the sense of being physically attacked but there might prove to be cameras and photographers to show that we, the British, were trying to launch some operation against Milosevic. We'd had a long briefing in the garden of the Ambassador in Sarajevo as to how they would conduct the meeting; where I would be, and where they'd bring the General to and so on and so forth. But we never found out in the end because just before we were due to set off from Sarajevo to go down to the border, the Montenegrins decided not to go ahead. So I had a mixture of disappointment and relief, really. The meeting did eventually happen.

But, perhaps, the most nerve-racking assignment was actually after the conflict had finished and the Stability Pact held a summit meeting in Sarajevo which most of the Prime Ministers and Presidents of Europe attended. Tony Blair went to represent the UK and I was in his entourage. The Montenegrin President, a man called Dukanovic, was at that meeting. He had been carefully distancing himself from Milosevic for some time and was left in the rather awkward position that he was constitutionally still within the same Federation as Serbia but in practical terms was trying to operate a separate policy but couldn't actually break away from Serbia, because in security terms he wasn't strong enough to do it. So what Dukanovic wanted was to have more economic support from the Western countries as a reward for him taking this independent line. He complained to Blair that we weren't giving him enough attention and the upshot was that Blair said that he wanted a fact-finding visit to Montenegro that would demonstrate our wish to help. The obvious person to send on this fact-finding mission, since I knew Dukanovic and knew Montenegro, was me. So it was agreed that I should go and Dukanovic promised that he could take care of my security. The big problem was that Montenegro at that stage, was still within the Federation, and so the Border Control around Montenegro was through the Federal Customs and Border Police which were under Milosevic's direction. My question was, "Well, how would I cross the border?" because I had no visa to enter Yugoslavia. I had no authority to enter Yugoslavia, and technically I could be arrested as an illegal immigrant, rather like Sally Becker. But Dukanovic assured Blair that this wouldn't be a problem even though it was strictly illegal.

So two days later I arrived at the Montenegrin border, left my car, walked through the Bosnian border control and into the no-man's land, before you reach Montenegro, and it felt a bit like being in a scene from the movie version of a John le Carré novel, at "Checkpoint Charlie" in Berlin when you're about to exchange spies. There must be a hundred yards or more between the two borders and there, sitting at the side of the road, was a big black Audi which I knew was the typical Montenegrin Government car, with blackened windows. I couldn't see who was in it. I went over to it and the driver was clearly expecting me so I got in the car and we shot off, and went straight through the customs and the border control without stopping, just right through. I was taken to a safe house down near the coast in Montenegro where I stayed for a couple of nights, in the course of which I then met Dukanovic, other Montenegrin people as well as some Serb opposition figures. It was quite clear to me that news of the visit would very quickly get back to Milosevic so I wasn't too keen on staying very long. But the need for secrecy didn't seem to have trickled down to all of my guards and they took me out for dinner one evening that I was there, to a restaurant in Budva, and again they assured me that this would be perfectly safe, no problem. But as soon as I arrived I was recognised by the owner of the restaurant. It was the kind of restaurant - and I'm sure you've seen them - where celebrities, if you like, would write their name on a wall and say, 'marvellous place'. The owner was absolutely insistent that I should write my name on the wall and I thought this is hardly an undercover visit anymore! So I've always been tempted, if I could find this restaurant in Budva again, to go back to see if my name has been obliterated or whether it's still there.

Anyway, I did manage to return safely but I hadn't been able to tell Julia where I was, because I couldn't telephone from there or do anything about it. As I say it was rather nerve-racking. Subsequently I visited Montenegro two or three more times, less surreptitiously, and once accompanied by David Landsman. On one occasion I then accompanied Dukanovic, in his private jet, back to London for an official visit. It was all part of the process of trying to build up Montenegrin confidence because, from our standpoint at that time, we were working very hard to try and undermine Milosevic, and the extent to which Dukanovic could be supported was helpful for that. The Montenegrin dimension, if you like, led me as close as I'm likely to get to the heart of power when Robin Cook failed to turn up in time for a meeting of what passed as Tony Blair's war cabinet, and I had to take Robin Cook's seat at the table. At the time, the actual conflict was over but there was still this worry that Milosevic might try to unseat Dukanovic and run Montenegro from Belgrade. Tony Blair

wanted to have a contingency plan because, from his standpoint, it would have been unacceptable after we had basically driven Milosevic out of Kosovo if he was then able to march in and take power in Montenegro. So, he'd gathered the full collection of Ministers with an interest in the issue and the full panoply of military people from the MOD. He kept pressing the Chief of Defence Staff for options - for military options - and CDS was clearly reluctant. He kept citing all the logistical difficulties of trying to take any action in Montenegro and why he didn't think this was a feasible way forward. Blair was very insistent - "We can't just sit and do nothing," - and inevitably again, as you know the world has moved on since then, I sometimes think of him in the Iraq contest having the same kind of conversations with the Military. Eventually what we agreed was to train Dukanovic's own security guard so that in the event of any attempt by Milosevic to overthrow him, we could send in forces to extract Dukanovic, move him to a safe place in Europe and help him establish a Government in exile rather like De Gaulle in World War II. So, that seemed to make Dukanovic feel a little bit more secure anyway.

In this roving capacity, I also got to travel with Tony Blair to Macedonia and Albania and we stopped en route via Romania and Bulgaria. It was fascinating to watch at close quarters the way in which Blair interacted with his closest aides, Alastair Campbell and a woman called Anji Hunter who was nominally his office manager but actually much more powerful. It was also interesting to see his willingness to overthrow established policy and, as he did on the visit when he offered UK support for Romanian and Bulgarian accession to the EU after the conflict, in recognition of the support that they'd given. The Foreign Office had a much more measured approach but Blair just cast it aside and delighted the Romanians and Bulgarians. His reception in Albania, in Tirana, in the capital, was rapturous because he was seen as one of the prime movers in the liberation of Albanians in Kosovo. The same thing happened to Robin Cook when I went with him to Pristina after the conflict had ended. When faced with people chanting, "Tony, Tony" or "Robin, Robin", both men almost visibly glowed and, as politicians tend to do when faced with public adulation, both men independently said, "If only we got this attention back home".

It's interesting when you come to do a memoir. I've got a press cutting of Robin Cook's visit to Kosovo which says that "We also visited the site of a mass grave where British forensic experts were searching for evidence that could be used for two reasons, one to help identify bodies and two, to possibly provide evidence for the trial of perpetrators." And the press

cutting says that there was evidence of forty people having been murdered in this location and it quotes me, directly, as saying that “I’ll never forget the sight of the bodies”. Sadly, I’ve no memory of it. So, perhaps there are some things that I’ve just blotted out and it makes you wonder whether there are other things that you have blotted out, that your mind just couldn’t process.

I suppose in contrast to that sort of thing, probably the most rewarding event during the twelve months or so that I did this job was to revisit Kosovo myself, shortly after the Serbs had agreed to withdraw their forces. It was only a few days after NATO forces had gone in and I was the first senior civilian to return. My former DA, John Crosland, had managed to get himself appointed to the staff of General Sir Mike Jackson, who was the NATO Commander, so he was there to greet me. Because the atmosphere was still a bit febrile, and no one quite knew whether all pockets of resistance had been ended, John had arranged again for a group to escort us. He also managed to get his red Land Rover back after a big fight with the Defence Attaché in Macedonia. So we set off to do the familiar tour of the Province, to see what had changed, and we’d hardly gone more than four or five miles before we were stopped at a French checkpoint and I thought, “Here we go. We’ve had the Serb checkpoints and KLA checkpoints and now we’ve got the bloody French Military here”. They would not let us go through because they said we hadn’t sought appropriate permission in advance, and we hadn’t got passes and we couldn’t go. And I thought to myself “So much for NATO allies”. Well, I said to you that John Crosland wasn’t a great believer in rules and regulations so we turned round, went back where we’d come from for about half a mile then he took off down a side road, and we went round the back roads, circumvented the French, and went round the rest of the tour. Needless to say, the French discovered we had done this and lodged a formal complaint with Mike Jackson. When we got back several hours later, John got a reprimand from an irritated but also very amused Mike Jackson. But, that apart, the tour proceeded smoothly but it was like a mirror image of what had been the position before.

Whereas, previously, it had been the Albanian population that was subdued and apprehensive now, of course, it was the Serbs. I met a terrified group who had taken refuge in a Serb Orthodox monastery in a town called Pec and they were being protected there by Italian troops. Three months earlier, of course, the boot had been on the other foot. What was sad was that neither side seemed to have any sense of magnanimity. When we visited Pec before the conflict, the Serbs were totally dismissive of the concerns or the complaints of the

Albanians, no sympathy for them at all. Now, of course, the thing was reversed and the Albanians had absolutely no sympathy for the Serbs and you just thought, “Oh, my God, this conflict is just going to go on and on and on”. But I was able to provide a fairly comprehensive assessment of the state of the province, the economic priorities and the political currents that were going on and I returned several times over the next few months.

Again, one had mixed feelings. It was heart-warming to see how so many peoples’ lives had been transformed. You could go to a village and meet families who’d been reunited after being split up. You’d meet children who probably didn’t understand the conflict but understood that their lives had changed significantly for the better, and they would now have opportunities they wouldn’t have had before. But as I have hinted, really, it’s also salutary to see that the bombing had not resolved the underlying problem of how Serbs and Albanians could live peacefully together. And, you know, we’re now twenty years on and it’s still a problem. So it underlines the point that military action can solve a problem at one level but it doesn’t solve the underlying issues. You’ve still got to go back to building bridges in a different way. But, by then it was the end of 1999 and it was pretty clear I would not be returning to Belgrade in any circumstances that were foreseeable, and I began to bid for another overseas job.

Julia and I had been attracted to the possibility of an African posting and so when Harare came as a possibility, I put in a bid and was successful. I then rather gratefully withdrew from Balkan affairs and started on a fairly extensive period of preparation because I hadn’t been to Africa before. I did a guided reading course at the School of Oriental and African Studies with Professor David Anderson who was a very good guide, but he later became a scourge of the FCO over FCO policy in Kenya during the Mao Mao uprising, when he was called as an expert witness for the people who claimed that they had been ill-treated. I had time to do some research of my own of the FCO archives of the records of the Lancaster House Agreement which had led to Zimbabwean independence in 1980. And I organised meetings with the principal British politicians involved at the time – Mrs Thatcher, by then Lady Thatcher, and Lord Carrington – which stood me in good stead because I was then able to argue the toss with Zimbabweans who had been involved in the same conference, and for whom this was the major event of their lives. For a lot of them, in 2001 at least, it still seemed to be part of current political discourse even though it had happened twenty years

before. It may be by now Lancaster House has sunk out of sight but at the time it was still a big issue in Zimbabwe. So that was all very valuable.

Then in the faint hope that I might be able to conduct some normal diplomacy in Zimbabwe, I organised a couple of secondments to British businesses - one was with Standard Chartered Bank and the other was with BP - in order to gain insight into how they conducted business in Africa. In the event, the Standard Chartered one didn't really work very well but the BP one was excellent because they wanted me to go to South Africa and join a team that they'd set up that was going to do a study of how black economic empowerment was working in their businesses across Southern Africa. This had been prompted by their experience in South Africa where the post-Mandela Government I suppose it was by then, was introducing policies that would force businesses in South Africa to include, both in the structure of their company and in the way they ran their businesses, more and more black South Africans. BP wanted to, as it were, get ahead of the curve and look at the way in which their businesses were being run in the neighbouring countries including Zimbabwe, to make sure that they wouldn't be caught out in those countries if similar trends were followed. And so I joined this very small group who were working on this subject and we travelled around most of Southern Africa. We went to Namibia, Botswana, Zambia, Mozambique and Tanzania to talk to BP businesses and Governments about what their thinking was about black economic empowerment and how it worked and how it didn't work. It was interesting in all sorts of respects. First, having never worked for a large commercial company, it was interesting to see that in some ways it was even more bureaucratic than the Foreign Office. But, also, it was interesting to see how much impact they had in countries like Mozambique or Zambia in that in some ways they were more likely to be able to get an appointment with a Minister than would an Embassy because they were just such a big contributor to the economy that they had access. So, apart from being very pleasant to live in South Africa, it was indeed a very good introduction to a whole different way of looking at life and it also provided an opportunity because Julia came out to stay with me for part of that three months I spent with BP. We did a side trip to Zimbabwe to look at the house and to meet people in the Embassy, and my predecessor there kindly arranged what the South Africans call a braai, i.e. a barbecue, so we could meet some of the Zimbabweans who later became our friends. So it was like the lull before the storm, really. But, at least it was quite clear from our visit to Zimbabwe that all the stories we'd heard about what a beautiful country it was, the amazing



landscapes, the remarkable climate and the friendliness of the people were all true. And so I think that sort of made us both feel very positive about what was going to be the next step.

CM: And you didn't need to go on a language course?

BD: No, in fact, I asked Peter Longworth about learning Shona, was there any need for that? And he said, "No, why don't you learn golf, it will be much more useful". So, I did.

### **Harare (High Commissioner later Ambassador), 2001-2004**

CM: In your notes you say "Why another crisis post after Belgrade?"

BD: Yes. Well, my appointment to Harare didn't become public until late in 2000 by which time it had become clear that Zimbabwe was also in deep trouble and that my posting there was likely to be every bit as eventful as my time in Serbia. I think 'frying pan into fire' was the thing that came to people's minds and the most frequent question I was asked was, "What did you do to deserve that?" or "Who did you offend?" And the truth was, when I originally put my bid in for Harare, I can't deny that there were storm clouds visible but I think like most people of the time we thought they would blow over. The contrasting stories about what a marvellous country it was were enough to motivate me. I think it wouldn't have been my first choice, I think I'd asked about Kenya for example, but the posting cycles just meant that Kenya wouldn't have been available in anything like a time scale that would work for me. Nigeria was a possibility on the horizon and, in fact, a bit later when I was already in Harare, the Foreign Office called me up and asked whether I'd like to think about going to Lagos and did I want to switch, as it were, at which time I said "No, it was too late, I'd settled in Harare". So, perhaps I was just too optimistic. As I say, when I first put the bid in it wasn't an issue but, by the time the decision was taken, I think it was probably my crisis-handling experience in Belgrade that had tipped the balance in the Selection Committee because it seemed to make me the obvious candidate.

My initial appointment, of course, was as High Commissioner because Zimbabwe was then still a Commonwealth country. In the course of my time there, Zimbabwe withdrew from the Commonwealth so I overnight became Ambassador again but the job content didn't alter. But, unfortunately, I think by the time I got to Harare, my experience in Serbia really came

back to haunt me. By a curious quirk, the man who had been Milosevic's diplomatic adviser when I was in Serbia, and whom I'd got to know quite well, had been appointed as the Serbian Ambassador to Zimbabwe immediately after the Kosovo conflict ended. A lot of Serb diplomats clearly feeling the writing was on the wall had got themselves posted overseas as soon as possible after the Kosovo conflict to try and get out of the turmoil in Serbia. And I suspect that this man - I'd no evidence for it, it just seemed too much of a coincidence - I suspect that this man must have briefed the Zimbabweans about his experience with me in Serbia because almost from the moment I was appointed, I was suspected of what the press called, "Being sent to do a Milosevic on Mugabe," i.e. drive him from power, even though Milosevic hadn't been overthrown until more than a year after I'd left Belgrade and I claimed no personal hand in that at all (by that point I was still working in the area but it was one of my colleagues who was directly involved in the efforts to undermine Milosevic). So, in a way, my reputation had gone before me and it rather prejudiced the way in which I was perceived.

It's also true to say, I think, that the state of British policy in Zimbabwe by 2001 was also a casualty of Kosovo in so far as, in the years from 1998 onwards when the crisis in Zimbabwe had been growing, Robin Cook had been focused on almost exclusively on the Balkans. He hadn't really got involved in African policy. He'd left that to his Deputy, Peter Hain, and in my view Peter Hain got things quite badly wrong. My predecessor, Peter Longworth, in his farewell despatch from Zimbabwe - High Commissioners and Ambassadors would always write a farewell despatch before they left a country in which they would look back over their three years and basically summarise what they'd learned and what they thought they'd done well and what they thought had gone badly - identified three errors in policy, as he saw it, between 1998 and 2001. One had been a reluctance on the part of British politicians to engage with Mugabe at a senior level. The second was a subordination of foreign policy objectives to what he described as Development Theology over land reform, basically, letting DFID run the policy instead of the Foreign Office. And the third thing he identified, and this was where Peter Hain featured largely, was trading insults with Mugabe in public in a way that offended many people in Africa who we needed on our side. And I think, in a way, I reaped the whirlwind of those policies between 2001 and 2004 because I became personally attacked, not literally but in verbal form, in a way which ... well, Peter had a pretty rough time himself but it seemed to move up a whole gear when I got there and I think this was a reflection of mistakes we'd made in the past.

I arrived in Harare six months after Mugabe had suffered a serious setback in Parliamentary elections but his land confiscation programme was in full swing. New Labour had just been re-elected with a massive majority in Britain and Mugabe had sent Tony Blair a message of congratulations which came as a bit of a surprise, but he had. Some thought it was a sign that he was trying to make some overture for peace, if you like, and I persuaded No. 10 Downing Street to get Blair to write a short letter back to Mugabe, thanking him for his congratulations and expressing a readiness to try and mend fences. So, as well as my credentials letter, I had this letter from Tony Blair which I hoped might smooth things out at the beginning.

But, of course, my other instructions for the Credentials Ceremony also required me to spell out that if we were going to have any kind of reconciliation we would expect Mugabe to halt the land appropriation and stop harassing the other political parties, and make it possible to have free and fair elections. The incentive was that, if he could do this, we would help to finance an equitable land reform programme. But I was really under no illusions that Mugabe, any more than Milosevic, would be keen on a plan that might actually hasten his own departure from power. What I found when I got to meet Mugabe really was that although he and Milosevic had in common an extraordinary sense of self-belief, linked or allied if you like to an acute sense of grievance, in other ways they were different.

The Zimbabwean Credentials Ceremony did not include formal speeches in the way that we did in Serbia. Mugabe met me at the steps of State House which had been in the past the home of the Colonial Governors and he took me into the house, showing me where he had met Harold Wilson in 1965, when he'd been brought from prison to meet Wilson at the very start of the Rhodesia crisis. When we sat down for our meeting, he picked up the story expressing his view that Wilson's decision back in 1965 to rule out the use of force against Ian Smith's regime had effectively given Smith the green light to declare the independence of Rhodesia, and had set back majority black rule for many years. He seemed to think that he'd got on well with Mrs Thatcher, which wasn't a view that she shared, but he was quite, really, incensed at the way in which successive Labour Governments had treated him, as he thought, and particularly with New Labour. He felt that he'd been betrayed by the Left, in Britain. And this litany, really, of British sins over generations stretched more than 45 minutes before I could get a word in. When I did speak, like Milosevic, he listened impassively but it was quite clear we were on parallel tracks and there was no convergence of view. But whereas, as I said to you, Milosevic was cold and distant, Mugabe was almost simmering with

resentment. He comes across as a blinkered ideologue, he's trapped in a kind of Marxist and anti-Colonialist time warp. He's a man out of his time, but also, unlike someone like Nelson Mandela who had also been in prison for a long time but came out ready to forgive and forget, Mugabe certainly hadn't forgotten and he wasn't about to forgive either. So, although at the meeting we agreed that we should try and take some small steps to mend the relationship and Mugabe said, "You should talk to my Ministers and if you have any problems you should contact me". But it soon became apparent that I was viewed with deep suspicion. And, whereas in normal diplomatic circumstances the Ministry of Foreign Affairs will arrange for an Ambassador to meet the entire Cabinet one by one over the coming weeks, I think only one, possibly two, Ministers agreed to see me out of the whole of them. And within six weeks I was being accused of having master-minded the looting of a number of white farms in order to create a pretext for international intervention. So, as a newcomer to Africa, I had to learn a lot very, very quickly. Some of the things, perhaps they shouldn't have, but they did take me by surprise.

One of the first things to strike us was the black/white divide because, on our first weekend, we went to an event in Harare that chimed with one of my interests - it was a classic car rally and I have a 1973 MG. So we went along to this anonymously. We didn't go as new Ambassador or whatever, we just went as two people, and were slightly amazed to find that probably 95% of those present were white, there were very few black faces at all. There were some marvellous cars because the climate is such that they don't rust and are kept in beautiful condition. But it was like a cross-section of a British white society and we thought, "Are we really in Africa here?" It was our introduction to the fact that the great majority of white Zimbabweans and there were hundreds of thousands - two hundred thousand more of white Zimbabweans - but tens of thousands of them were either British citizens or were entitled to claim British citizenship. They lived their lives in a bubble that was outside mainstream Zimbabwe or mainstream Zimbabwean life. And while it was true that discrimination in Rhodesia, as it was, had never extended to legalised apartheid as it did in South Africa, there's no doubt that for ninety odd years, while you had what you could call Settler Rule, the indigenous people were, to borrow Martin Luther King's words, judged by the colour of their skin and not the content of their character, and they were treated accordingly. And it seemed to us that, although there were a minority of honourable exceptions, too many of the white people in Zimbabwe still treated their black Zimbabwean fellow citizens with at best a kind of benevolent paternalism and at worst explicit racism. Despite enjoying a wonderful

lifestyle they'd simply failed to build the kind of bridges, whether that's social bridges or economic bridges, with black Zimbabweans that would have lent credence to their claim to be loyal citizens or even if they did it insincerely, it would have been as an insurance policy against the day when they might have wanted help from black Zimbabweans. And as a result of this sort of separateness, I think they became easy targets for Mugabe's attacks and for portraying white Zimbabweans as being somehow uncommitted to the concept of Zimbabwe as a state. One of the more difficult aspects of life for Julia and me was the assumption, among many of the white Zimbabweans, that because we shared the skin colour that we also shared their prejudices. Some of my most difficult meetings were with white Zimbabweans who felt they had an entitlement to British help and assistance but who, in my view, were completely detached from any sharing of the values which modern Britain had. So that was an aspect of life which I hadn't fully anticipated.

I also quickly learned that, unlike Milosevic, Mugabe was a very effective orator. He was able, in speaking publicly, to build up a sense of outrage among ordinary people through his ability to express history in a way which was pretty damning in terms of the British record and in a way which would lead the people to see the problems of the country as being not in him but in us, and that's what he was very effective at. So although, from outside, people would wonder why on earth Mugabe would be re-elected and the automatic assumption was, with justification, that he would be rigging the vote and rigging the electoral rolls but, in reality, he was very good at persuading people as well. And I think we never quite adequately "give him credit" isn't quite the right expression but we didn't adequately recognise that he was good at doing that.

When it came to land seizures, he liked to dress this up in a kind of moral argument that he was only redressing the injustices his people had suffered under Settler Rule and because it was undeniable that there had been injustices - because people had been forced off their land, they'd been treated as second-class citizens, they'd been discriminated against - it was a powerful argument and it was an argument that resonated not just in Zimbabwe but also more widely in Africa. So whenever he stood up and championed what he was doing, in these terms, you could see that a lot of Africans felt a lot of empathy with what he was doing. Now, the truth was that even if he believed in his own rhetoric, his motives had a much darker side and the methods he used were as brutal, in many ways, as those of the colonists that he despised. I used to think that his land confiscations had a lot in common with Henry

VIII's seizure of the riches of the monasteries. It was a desperate attempt to generate wealth which was vital for his political survival. So, like Henry, Mugabe needed to keep his own supporters happy, both his equivalent of Henry's barons who wanted their own land and the foot soldiers who had fought in the liberation struggle and wanted their pensions. Land seizure offered him a way of providing that and by opposing it, as the British Government did and I was the personification of that, this was a threat to his survival. And as much as I tried to argue in a reasoned way that we weren't against land reform, we were in favour of land reform that genuinely helped the poorest people, that argument really never gained traction against the emotional argument that Mugabe so effectively deployed. We wanted to shift the argument to issues of democratic accountability, human rights and press freedoms but the land issue remained an albatross around our necks, throughout the time that I was there.

The third thing I quickly realised was that, unlike in Serbia, Britain really mattered, much more than any other country. If I return to my organ grinder analogy, in Zimbabwe there was no doubt that we were the organ grinder and everything that I said or did was subject to the closest scrutiny. I was accused of being a rabble-rouser, a notorious agitator, consorting Nicodemusly with opposition groups, plotting armed invasions from neighbouring countries, bribing judges, bribing voters, conspiring to divert oil tankers in the Indian Ocean from bringing fuel for Zimbabwe as well, as I've mentioned, of organising the looting of white farms to provide a pretext for intervention. I was told that I would be under twenty-four hour surveillance, that I was not an Ambassador but a spy, that I must "shut up", that I would be expelled, and it was hard to know how much of this nonsense was really believed and how much was the desire of the state newspaper editors, desperate to please their political masters. But it certainly made coming down to breakfast, to read the morning papers, an interesting experience. There were even cartoons and caricatures and I'd regularly appear in the paper in this way. Once, I forget now what the particular diatribe was about but they'd obviously got out of their archive the wrong picture and there was this picture of a bearded man on the front page. It wasn't me! It turned out that he was the pastor of a large, Anglican church in Harare who also, poor man, had the misfortune to have a grey beard and I suppose, to the editor, all bearded white men looked the same. So, there we were.

Mugabe saw Britain, rightly enough, as the principal instigator of international criticism of his regime and he clearly believed that if we would just shut up then the Americans and other Europeans would not be a problem. This wasn't entirely unjustified. I mean I knew from

talking to my European Union colleagues and American colleagues and so on, that many privately thought that we had lost a sense of proportion over Zimbabwe. When we looked at the problems in other parts of Africa, was it really so bad that we should make such a fuss about it? So Mugabe focused his wrath, on us. But it was kind of paradoxical because it was also clear that we were the country he wanted, at some level, to do a deal with. He couldn't live with us and he couldn't really live without us. So it wasn't a straightforward relationship.

It was, the time I was there, of course coloured by his particular loathing for Tony Blair's Government and this had many roots. First, it began with his belief that just before Tony Blair came to power he had reached an agreement with John Major about land reform and that when Labour came to power they had welched on this agreement and refused to implement it. On top of that, he had the war of words with Peter Hain in which both men had exchanged public insults about one another. He felt that Tony Blair had not shown him appropriate respect when they'd met face to face for the first time at a Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting and, although I wasn't present, I can well imagine from what I saw of Blair subsequently, that the prospect of sitting to listen to Mugabe's forty-five minute lecture on what Britain had done wrong was not something that Blair would sit and endure and that he would find an excuse and leave. Whereas, for Mugabe, with his self-image as the most senior African statesmen, he would feel that he was just educating this young politician into the background to the problem and for him, forty-five minutes is neither here nor there. So I can well understand that there would have been a complete mismatch of culture, in terms of preparedness to sit and listen and Tony Blair was not a man who had a deep historical knowledge of British politics. I mean he was very much of the day and not of the past - someone like Harold Macmillan would probably have sat there and listened - but it didn't work. He also deeply resented the attempted citizen's arrest that Peter Tatchell, the Gay Rights promoter, tried to make in London in 1998 when he had approached Mugabe's car and laid hands on Mugabe and tried to make a citizen's arrest, in part because of Mugabe's homophobic policies. Mugabe suspected, even believed, without any evidence, that Peter Hain had tipped off Peter Tatchell as to where Mugabe was going to be and he also believed that Hain and Tatchell were lovers which, again, was completely misplaced. But these things were all grist to his particular mill. And, as I've mentioned, this fed a simmering resentment - I was the lightning rod for this resentment and for a British sins, real and imagined, and I think this kept coming out in his speeches and his talks and his references and so on.

But it wasn't just in Zimbabwe that I had to confront this enormous well of prejudice and resentment. Something I hadn't experienced before was the way in which British domestic politics had such a major impact on my scope for manoeuvre. I mean, today, Zimbabwe has dropped well down the news agenda, but in 2001-2004 it was very different. It seemed to me that we, the British, have a peculiar fixation with Mugabe, much more than any other post-colonial politician. It brings together Left and Right, chattering classes and men and women in the street in a very singular way. You've only got to mention Mugabe and people immediately have an opinion. It's partly rooted in a genuine concern for human rights and democracy and it's partly rooted, it seems to me at least, in feelings of antipathy, traceable right back to Mugabe's success in dismantling white minority rule in Rhodesia. So it's a fairly potent brew and it brings together readers of the Guardian with readers of the Telegraph and the Mail. People who'd never normally think of themselves in the same boat, find themselves in the same boat when it comes to Mugabe. And if you then add in, as there was in 2001, a very effective lobby group in Parliament of people with family or economic connections to Zimbabwe, and the gay lobby as well, there was day in, day out, probably more Press and Parliamentary attention on Zimbabwe than any other country and also quite different perceptions.

So the Press would say it was a disgrace for England to play cricket in Zimbabwe but it wasn't a disgrace for England to play cricket in Pakistan. Yet, if you looked at Human Rights Watch reports of the political and human rights conditions in the two countries you wouldn't spot any significant difference. But people had different attitudes. And I have an uneasy sense that if the British Government had been in a position to use military force to depose Mugabe, regardless of UN legal justification and despite the fact that Mugabe has never posed a serious threat to British interests, it would have won a chorus of approval. People would have thought this was fantastic, in Britain at least. So I was very conscious that whenever Zimbabwe was raised in Parliament, which was very often, what was likely to emerge was the kind of discussion which, looked at from my end of the telescope, was completely counter-productive. You'd get tub-thumping by the Government about all the things they were doing to combat Mugabe's evil ways, in order to head off essentially opportunist criticism from the Opposition who knew very well that it had nothing better to offer but wanted to tap into the popular opinion about Mugabe. So you had two sides almost fighting to be – who could be the toughest and the rudest about Mugabe. There was no



upside in British politics to be anything other than condemnatory about Mugabe. Looked at from Harare, you could see that this created a sort of warm glow in Britain but in Zimbabwe it just reinforced Mugabe's persecution complex, and in a wider world I think it did look to a lot of people as if we were obsessed with Mugabe in a strange and slightly unhealthy way. And it tended to win Mugabe's sympathy in the African region and to give credence to the caricature he liked to present of British neo-imperialist ambitions with his domestic Opposition in Zimbabwe being no more than British stooges. That's how he liked to portray them. And once, Tony Blair said at Question Time that, in regard to his policy to Zimbabwe, he took advice from the opposition parties in Zimbabwe. That was something that made the opposition parties in Zimbabwe groan because it just played back into Mugabe's propaganda that they were simply tools of the British. And it didn't help, either, that the British media looked at Zimbabwe through the prism predominantly of the white farmers so that it looked as though this was a white issue whereas, in fact, the principal victims of Mugabe's policies were black Zimbabweans. Many in Africa saw the way in which the issue was dealt with in British media as adding a racist element in our attitude to Mugabe. And it was quite difficult - not quite difficult, it was very difficult - to persuade people that our policies were motivated genuinely and sincerely by concern for human rights and democratic principles, and that there wasn't a separate and secret agenda of antipathy to Mugabe and a determination to get rid of him that was driving it all along.

It is fair to say that after Jack Straw became Foreign Minister in 2001, we did tone down our war of words but that didn't really affect the way in which the issue emerged in Parliament or indeed even if we didn't take the initiative in criticising Mugabe, whenever politicians were asked to respond, their first reaction was to use very condemnatory language. A lot of people - it came back to this issue of double standards - would say that there are a lot of dictatorial regimes in the world whose concept of democratic rights and freedoms is vastly different from ours, but when you look at our policies, some of them we treat as friends, some we try to ignore, some we engage with in what we call critical dialogue, some we subject to sanctions and some we use force against. As Milosevic observed, "So you operate not just double but a whole variety of standards". And, of course, there may be explanations for having these different standards in different circumstances. I mean we're going through it with Saudi Arabia now - why do we support Saudi Arabia when a lot of the things the Saudis do are completely repugnant to us? So you need to have explanations but it can be pretty challenging for diplomats to explain away why it is that we are so pre-occupied with Mugabe

when next door, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, there were far worse things going on. And so I found a lot of my intellectual energy had to be devoted to combating these kinds of perceptions and trying, basically, to show that we were sincere in what we were doing. But I was caught in a bind. If I didn't speak out robustly against Mugabe's policies I'd be opening myself to potential criticism in the British Press and in Parliament, because anything less than basically condemnatory language wasn't good enough. But if I did speak out, and most of the time I did, I knew that it would only stoke resentment and suspicion among Mugabe's governing party and close down channels for communication and persuasion. So you were constantly trying to balance these two things and probably there's never an ideal balance between them to be found.

Those are all the sort of challenges that I found facing me when I got to Harare and which I had to cope with throughout the time. Much later, in fact it was in 2009, when Barack Obama was receiving his Nobel Peace Prize he said "I know that engagement with repressive regimes lacks the satisfying purity of indignation but I also know that sanctions without outreach, condemnation without discussion can carry forward only a crippling status quo. No repressive regime can move down a new path unless it has the choice of an open door". When I heard that I thought "Goodness, that really sums up so well what was the weakness of our approach to Zimbabwe in the time that I was there". I think at only one point did we effectively engage and offer a credible open door and that was in early September, in fact the 6<sup>th</sup> of September 2001, at a conference of Commonwealth countries organised by the Nigerian Government in Abuja. The UK was represented by Jack Straw who had by then replaced Robin Cook. The conference was at Foreign Minister level and it opened with a blistering denunciation of British policy since Colonial times, by the Zimbabwean Foreign Minister who was man called Stan Mudenge. Jack Straw had already slightly disconcerted Mudenge by going up to him before the meeting and starting to have a friendly chat about Mudenge's days as a student, in Yorkshire I think he was. But when Mudenge started his diatribe, Jack just listened patiently and then he defused the situation completely. I think most people were resigned to hearing a sort of point by point rebuttal of Mudenge's points and that they were going to be subject to a day of toing and froing between the British and Zimbabweans, but Jack took a completely different tack and said basically that he'd gone into politics via the Anti-Apartheid Movement and, as a young politician, he'd been a critic of our own colonial and imperial heritage. He said his views hadn't changed but now, by virtue of being Foreign Secretary, he had a duty to bear the burden of that criticism and he was ready to do that, but

what he really wanted to do was to look ahead not backwards, and he then explained what the UK was prepared to do to offer to resolve the issues. He said - he confessed to us later that he'd not yet squared this with Clare Short - that money was not an issue if the right foundations could be laid. And you could almost sense in the room there was this feeling of relief that there wasn't going to be just a repeat of the old sterile arguments. Basically he just soaked up the criticism, didn't get drawn into it and moved the discussion on. After a hard day's negotiation, at one point the Nigerian President, a man called Obasanjo, came to check on progress and stayed for a couple of hours. He excluded officials from the room, so it was entirely politicians, which is a Civil Servant's nightmare when this happens. We understood from Jack afterwards that Obasanjo basically laid into everybody and said "Right, you're not getting out of here until we've agreed something" and a deal was reached. In many respects it remains, or it remained for many years while I was there certainly, the best thing that was available because it was a package of different elements all of which were interlinked so that you would get political progress, you'd get Press freedoms but you'd also get money for land programmes, all part of a package, the three things being linked in progress and so on. But, unfortunately, the deal included a second meeting which was to be held in Zimbabwe at the end of September to discuss further the exact implementation of it.

So, 6<sup>th</sup> of September 2001 - what happens on the 11<sup>th</sup>? It's the attack in New York. And, of course, that altered everything. Not that it had any relation to Zimbabwe but basically high level political attention just moved elsewhere. Jack Straw was unable to attend the second meeting. His Deputy, Valerie Amos, came instead. And although she was a capable and effective Minister, her meeting with Mugabe did not go well. It seemed to me that the chemistry just didn't work. As I've mentioned, Mugabe was very sensitive about being treated with respect and my feeling was that he didn't appreciate having to argue with someone who, in his eyes, was a junior Minister. I also think the fact that Valerie is a black woman threw him a bit. While to us it was welcome evidence that Britain was actually changing, that you could have a woman from a Caribbean background as a Foreign Office Minister, my sense was that the Zimbabweans seemed to think it was some kind of cunning British plot to undermine their comments about Britons being racists and so on, and that somehow she wasn't a genuine representative of Britain, which was nonsense. But, whatever it was, the meeting that he had with her and with other Ministers didn't go well, and of course the Nigerian President wasn't just round the corner to bring in to beat heads together and get an agreement. The Nigerian Foreign Minister wasn't able to impose himself on the

discussion in the same way as the President would have been able to. The meeting sort of petered out, in a way. It didn't break down acrimoniously but, equally, the oomph seemed to have gone from it and over the following weeks Mugabe gradually resiled from the commitments in the agreement.

And as it became apparent that the agreement was not going to lead anywhere, we moved to a policy of sanctions against Zimbabwe; not broad economic sanctions that might adversely affect ordinary Zimbabweans but an extension of the kind of targeted sanctions that we'd used in Serbia in which individuals who were seen to be closely associated with Mugabe or his policies were identified and singled out and subject to travel bans and confiscation of assets. It was meant to inconvenience and hurt the pocket books of Mugabe's supporters in the hope that this might persuade them either to change their policies or abandon their support for him. I suppose these things go through phases and, at the time, targeted sanctions were the instrument of choice for dealing with repressive regimes. Unfortunately there was no convincing evidence that they actually worked. Well, they worked in a way in that they clearly gave satisfaction to the people who were imposing them because it seemed to show that you were doing something about the problem. It gave a semblance of activity whereas sitting doing nothing subjected you to criticism. But that wasn't the point of them. They could also be said to be providing moral support for the Opposition parties in Zimbabwe who, again, wanted to feel that other people cared about what was going on. So it was a demonstration of caring and of trying to boost opposition parties but in terms of actually influencing and persuading the people who were sanctioned, I never saw any concrete evidence that they mattered a lot. People used to say "Ah, it means that Mrs Mugabe can't go and get her Paris couture dresses anymore because she can't fly to Paris". Well, that's totally naïve, the Paris couturiers would have come to Zimbabwe if necessary. There was also a lot of sexism around because Mugabe was married to this much younger, very attractive woman and it was felt, particularly in the British media, objectionable that she was spending money on designer outfits while the country was starving. I suspect that had Mrs Mugabe been a contemporary of Mugabe, like his first wife, and had still dressed in Paris couture people wouldn't have bothered half as much. It's a bit like with Papandreou and his air hostess girlfriend, the Press gets itself into a great lather when you have this kind of old/young thing going on.

So we moved to sanctions and Mugabe again proved that, in terms of his ability to carry an argument, he was very good at presenting it to the wider world as hurting all Zimbabweans. Many people don't make a distinction, sanctions are sanctions, and when he said it in UN speeches, a lot of people would believe him. I came increasingly to view them as a very poor alternative to a more direct critical engagement and I think I felt this particularly strongly when it emerged that we, we as the British Government, had been in a dialogue with Gaddafi of Libya for many months. He was a man who shared all of Mugabe's worst qualities but one who had done much more direct harm to British interests, for example through arming the IRA, than Mugabe ever did. But we engaged with Gaddafi, we didn't engage with Mugabe. Cynics said, "Ah, well, if Mugabe had had the ability to build nuclear weapons, we would have engaged with him". But it was a sense that he wasn't quite important enough for British politicians to invest any time in it because they knew, in terms of British public opinion, it was likely to be unpopular. What that doesn't take into account, of course, is the interests of the Zimbabwean people and whether they would have been better off if we had engaged more or whether what they really wanted was to sacrifice their economic wellbeing in favour of eventual greater political freedom. And that's a very difficult question to answer.

I also thought at times there was a tendency, almost, to cut off our nose to spite our face. As an illustration, in the run up to the Presidential elections of 2002, we tried to deploy a team of European Union observers in Zimbabwe, to check the validity of the process. Mugabe had agreed to this in principle but hated the idea, and tried to introduce a variety of petty obstacles and restrictions that would limit the ability of the team to do very much in Zimbabwe. Now, to those of us living there, this wasn't unfamiliar but instead of just gritting his teeth and getting on with it, the Head of the EU Delegation took umbrage. He was a rather primadonna-ish Swede, who was a sort of junior Minister who gave the impression he was more interested in embellishing his reputation than in the wellbeing of Zimbabwe. He took a very confrontational approach and when that didn't work he went back to Brussels to recommend that the EU Observers should be withdrawn. All of the EU Ambassadors in Harare thought this was a terrible idea. We, and I think this is almost unprecedented, unanimously agreed to send a message to Brussels saying that he was wrong and that the Observers should remain. To our horror we were over-ruled. I regret to say that the UK was among those who argued for the withdrawal and the result was that, when the results of the election emerged, we had lost all of our credibility in criticising them, because we hadn't

been there to see it for ourselves. We also lost our ability to influence the other observer groups, who did stay – the Commonwealth, there was an African group that stayed and there was a South African group – and we could at that point have made a crucial difference in moulding international opinion about those elections, and it was all as I saw it, for a kind of macho gesture to show that we wouldn't let Mugabe push us around. We just fell completely into his trap, really; he must have been delighted when we pulled out.

So, as you'll sense, I was, for a lot of the time, deeply frustrated by the policies that we followed over Zimbabwe and with hindsight I regret that I didn't fight harder for a different approach. I often felt, and come back to my dissonance I suppose, torn between sympathy and admiration for the opposition parties and journalists and human rights groups who were fighting to get rid of Mugabe and who were often badly treated by his people, and I had a strong wish to see them succeed. Then there was a more hard-nosed part of me that recognised that this was most unlikely to happen. In fact, it was so unlikely to happen that we were in a sense deluding ourselves to think that we were helping the process by focusing our attention almost exclusively on the opposition groups. This more hard-nosed part of me thought that there we should perhaps swallow hard and find a way forward that would, for some time, leave Mugabe in power. But it didn't happen. I made a similar recommendation in my final despatch from Zimbabwe but really there hasn't been, I don't think, I'm not aware of all the details, a significant attempt since then to reach an accommodation although I think that in practice policy now is more relaxed than it was when I was there, partly because Zimbabwe has become less prominent in the media and in the public consciousness.

I should say something just about another aspect of my time in Zimbabwe, an aspect which, in a different era, could have provided a full-time job in itself. 2001-2004 saw Zimbabwe facing a perfect storm of economic and social crises. On the one hand, a combination of Mugabe's disastrous economic policies and a widespread drought, caused really by the movements of El Niño and beyond the control of man, led to a widespread famine in Zimbabwe and a desperate need for food aid. On the other hand, the scourge of HIV/Aids reached a peak and, in reaching a peak, it wreaked havoc on family life in Zimbabwe as more and more people died and the number of orphans grew almost exponentially. We saw the effects within our own Embassy and Residence families, and so we saw firsthand the pain and suffering that came with this terrible disease. I feel proud to say that, notwithstanding our political differences, Britain along with the US became one of the leading providers of

food aid, food aid that saved the lives of thousands. Clare Short, much maligned, and wrongly in my view, for what was perceived as hostility to land reform, never hesitated about funding aid for famine relief. By 2004 it had reached £30m per annum which was remarkable given that, when the crisis had first broken, one of the reasons why our relations broke down was because we refused to pay £5m per annum towards a land reform programme. And you can't help but reflect, or think, in the 'what if' game, how much pain we might have avoided if we'd been prepared to pay that amount of money at that time.

I think, since I left, our aid programme to Zimbabwe has increased even more. But the key point at the time, and Clare's only condition, was that this food aid should go through channels that ensured fair distribution to all sectors of society and precluded any diversion to Mugabe's supporters. You couldn't go round and check people's voting intentions before you gave them food but what we wanted to make sure was that it wasn't distributed as if it was a political gesture by Mugabe's people rather than aid from Britain. The Embassy had to monitor this and it wasn't easy. Normally aid efforts are done with the co-operation of the Government of the host country but we had to work around them, and so we had to work with the United Nations Development Programme, the World Food Programme and NGOs like Oxfam and Save the Children and I spent a lot of time on this with my DFID colleagues. It's an area where there can be quite a lot of tension between the Foreign Office and DFID because the Ambassador has overall responsibility for aid programmes but the money is controlled by DFID, so it can be a bit awkward. So a good working relationship is crucial and I was fortunate to have this with the DFID teams in Harare. DFID also provide Ambassadors with a small fund for disbursement, to lubricate the Embassy's efforts to build contacts and influence people. These would be sums of up to about five thousand pounds with which you could drill wells for schools or build small dams for irrigation or new school buildings. We helped some women's co-operatives. We helped some – there was as programme called 'Send a Cow' in which you donate a cow (this was an inseminated cow) to a family on the understanding that when the cow calved, the calf had to be passed on to another family and so you started a kind of chain reaction. These were projects that DFID considered too small for them to administer but they were immensely helpful in building goodwill, and the welcome I got when launching these schemes, coupled with the discomfiture it would cause to local Mugabe functionaries because I'd always invite the local MP when I was doing one of these projects, led me to muse that with a bigger fund I could probably have successfully run for election in Zimbabwe. That, in the big scheme of things,

is relatively trivial but the food aid was a massive and successful venture and it was very satisfying to know that we could, and did, make a significant difference to many people's lives.

On HIV and Aids it was much harder to feel optimistic. We had instituted, with some enlightened assistance from the FCO, a very generous programme for the provision of anti-retroviral drugs for our local Embassy staff and Residence staff. It was a model of its kind at the time. But the cost of rolling out that kind of programme for the wider population would have been prohibitive and, anyway, there wasn't a medical infrastructure to support it. DFID had programmes that concentrated, at the time, on sex education and prophylaxis through condom distribution. Again they were among the leaders in trying to deal with the consequences through feeding programmes for orphaned children, families that had no adult head of family. And again I felt very proud of what we did and it was satisfying to be able to help in a small way even though it was almost invariably distressing on a visit to a rural area to meet the children who'd been left heading up families. They were old before their time and really innocent victims of a plague they didn't understand. I think, fortunately, since 2004 the incidence of HIV in Zimbabwe has slowly declined as awareness has increased and retrovirals have fallen in cost. I think fifteen per cent of the population are HIV positive and that's the fifth highest in Africa, so it's still a major problem. So, frustration over politics but some more sense of being useful in the food aid and in the aid area.

I'll just say a few final words on the role of an Ambassador in both Serbia/Montenegro and Zimbabwe. In both countries it would be fair to say that during my time our bilateral political relations reached new lows and this is not something Ambassadors normally get credit for. My political masters seemed happy enough with what I'd achieved and here really lies the rub: it's difficult to promote British policies that are fundamentally hostile to the interests of the rulers of the countries where you're serving without also sacrificing the ability to influence and persuade those same people. Now, you can say it's the job of Ambassadors to try and square that circle and if I have regrets it is that I wasn't always able to do that. If I have satisfaction I suppose it's more of a personal satisfaction in that in both countries I felt that the views I had, the ideas I had, the comments I had, I was able to get them heard by Ministers, even Prime Ministers, and occasionally they would be acted on and you could feel that you had achieved something. So while I don't pretend that I was responsible for any



seismic shifts in policy, I like to think that perhaps I was responsible for some footnotes to history, at least, if not anything more than that.

## **Postscript 2005-2006**

### **FCO: Political advisor (SPAD) to Jack Straw**

So, there I was, sort of happily retired. The Foreign Office had offered me the chance to spend an extra six months in Harare which I had declined, having felt that in a way I'd become part of the problem rather than the solution. I'd become so identified with the Blair Government and the Blair policies that I felt that it was probably time for a new face at least, even if the policies wouldn't change they wouldn't have the same excuse to complain about the individual who was implementing them. And, perhaps I should have mentioned this in the Harare section, but obviously when I left Belgrade I didn't go through the usual formalities of departure for an Ambassador. In Harare we were in something of a dilemma because the Government weren't keen on me putting in a special request to see Mugabe at the time because they didn't want to provide a chance for him to refuse to see me. But, at the same time, we didn't feel that I should just leave without making some attempt to re-establish contact. So I delivered a diplomatic note to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to inform them that I would be leaving at the end of my posting and asking them to extend the usual courtesies on that occasion. Now that was really diplomatic speak because the "usual courtesies" would involve an audience with the President, a Government representative present when you left to say a formal goodbye, a VIP suite organised for you and things like this. So, we did this but on the day nothing: no audience with the President, no VIP suite, no Minister to say goodbye. Fortunately BA stepped in and provided me with their VIP suite and I duly left. In the state newspaper the next day the headline was "Donnelly sneaks out" and I was accused of having left without paying my respects to the President and it was all my fault. I think "Donnelly came and saw and sneaked" was the headline. So I didn't escape criticism even after I'd left. I was amused to see that four years later the American Ambassador who'd come after me, so I didn't know him personally, also got into hot water with Mugabe, because he was accused of many of the same things as I was. And there was one article that I was sent that showed him and me together. It showed my reputation was still fresh three years later as being this terrible person who had been sent to get rid of Mugabe and failed.

So I left Zimbabwe and I happily retired but about year afterwards I received a phone call, completely out of the blue, from Jack Straw's Special Advisor - they're known in Whitehall as SPADs. A man called Michael, and he later became Lord, Williams asking if I would be interested in succeeding him on an interim basis while Jack recruited a permanent successor. He explained that his role was largely confined to policy advice and he didn't stray into Party or Press issues which were handled by another SPAD. He said that on the basis of my work in Harare, Jack thought I could do a good job. Now SPADs are political not Civil Service appointments and normally they identify with the political party of the Minister concerned. So I said to Michael that as a Civil Servant I'd never publicly revealed any Party leanings. He sort of chuckled down the line I think and said that reading between the lines he'd concluded it wouldn't be a problem for me which was perfectly right because I'd always been a Labour voter. But, of course, it was one thing being a Labour voter, it was another thing publicly coming out of the closet, as it were.

After talking to Jack Straw, I agreed to take the job and it was a fascinating last six months in the Foreign Office really. I may not have been the first but I couldn't find a precedent of a diplomat who had come out of the political closet in this way, and it was fascinating to see the reactions of some of my former colleagues. Some, it seemed to me, were horrified and thought that I'd done something really improper. Others seemed to be delighted because they just saw it as an opportunity to get their views directly relayed to the Foreign Secretary. Now, what the job meant was that I had access to all the papers that went to the Foreign Secretary, the chance to comment on them and to attend any of the meetings that he held. And it's hard to overstate the advantage that you have in being able to have the last word when you get a policy submission that people have laboured on and then you can scribble on the top "I think this is a poor idea, Minister" or "I think this is a very good idea, Minister". And it was also fascinating to sit in on the meetings that he held with a whole variety of political leaders that I wouldn't otherwise have got the chance to see or meet. It was also a remarkable chance to see the whole range of the Foreign Office's work but perhaps, most of all, to appreciate fully the pressure that there is on Ministers and how political sensitivities affect policy decisions. Now, I'd never had the chance to work as a Private Secretary to a Minister in the Foreign Office and as you know Private Secretaries to Ministers are basically their Chief of Staff. I suppose if I had done, some of this would have been familiar to me but I hadn't, so it was all new. And, of course, you see the Minister as a person and not just as a figurehead when you have this kind of close relationship with them.

I travelled with Jack in this capacity to the UN General Assembly, to Moscow, to Amman and to Baghdad, which was quite an eye-opener really. In 2006 when we went to Iraq, it was already very clear that the follow-up to the invasion had been totally inadequate and trying to fashion some kind of political settlement out of the mess that had been left behind was proving a much bigger task than people had ever anticipated. We flew into Baghdad from Jordan having diverted there because there'd been a terrorist attack in Jordan and Jack wanted to go to express sympathy and solidarity with the Jordanian Government, and we'd had a rather harrowing visit to where this bomb had gone off in a hotel ballroom at a wedding and killed lots of people. Then we flew across the Iraqi desert in a Hercules. The RAF give you a flak jacket and a helmet but you're sitting on sort of canvas seats in the back of this military aircraft and the great risk of course is for fire coming up from below. The very part of your anatomy that's most exposed isn't actually protected so the flak jacket and the helmet are not much consolation. And then when you're approaching Baghdad, and this was reminiscent of the helicopter trips I spoke about in Bosnia, the pilot will say, "Well, there's a risk of incoming fire so we're going to go in very quickly, very low or we're going to spiral" and you think, "Oh, no, not again". In Baghdad we had to decamp into helicopters and then the helicopters did exactly the same thing, they flew us from the airport into what was called the Green Zone in Baghdad, and again we were warned there was going to be a risk of incoming fire and all of this sort of stuff and I thought, "I don't need to do this anymore, I've had enough of it".

And then we had meetings with these Iraqi politicians who – all I could think about was that they would have been perfectly at home sitting down with the worst of Milosevic's people or the worst of Mugabe's people. You know, they were like peas in a pod in their attitudes and their behaviour and I thought, "Oh my God, I've done all this before, I don't need to do it again". So I think the trip to Baghdad persuaded me that, even if Jack wanted, I wasn't prepared to stay on for any longer. But I did also go to a Labour Party Conference with him which had a different kind of fascination for me in that at Party Conferences Ministers aren't allowed to take their Civil Servants. They can take their Special Advisors but not Civil Servants because it's Party business and not Government business. And so all of a sudden you have the Minister having to write his own speech, literally, sitting there at his laptop typing away, "What do you think about this?" and so on, and the speeches get finished at three or four o'clock in the morning before they've got to be delivered the next day. So it's

pretty chaotic. Ministers have a hotel suite, and over the two or three days we were there this suite seemed to accumulate plates of room service food that had been half-eaten and pushed to one side, it was dreadful. And then you'd get foreign dignitaries who were visiting the Conference who'd want to see the Minister and you'd frantically have to - there's no one else to do it - hide all the detritus so that we could make the room look respectable. It was a very odd experience and what was worse was I had to pay for it all myself because, clearly, it didn't fall under Foreign Office expenditure and the Labour Party didn't have any money for it. Anyway, as I say, as the interim period came to an end I decided that I didn't want to commit to the demands the job required. And, also, I think I developed doubts that I really was a political animal rather than a Civil Servant. But it was good to have seen the world from the other side of the fence. After a whole career spent looking at Ministers from the Civil Servant's angle, to look at the Civil Servants from the Minister's angle was really quite refreshing.

It was much easier to see why Ministers are sometimes frustrated by Civil Servants who don't really understand, or don't really appreciate - they may understand but not appreciate - why it is that Ministers can't always do what they'd like them to do. And also to understand that Ministers, even if they sometimes seem very cavalier about Parliament, do really worry about how they'll come across in Parliament and whether they have got the right arguments and the right policy positions to carry the day. For them, Parliament is really the judge of how good a politician they are and that's often the crucial test, and a really bad performance in Parliament can mean political oblivion. So, it does matter to them and therefore the quality of the papers they're given for their Parliamentary performances is particularly important.

But as it turned out - and this is another reason why it was perhaps as well to get out of this world, this political world - Jack Straw lost his job in a re-shuffle barely two months after I left and my job would have ended anyway. The trouble with SPADs jobs is that they only last as long as your Minister lasts and if your Minister goes, you go. So it was a salutary reminder that political life is much less secure than a Civil Servant's life and I think I did the right thing by getting out of it before I was pushed. As I say, I was glad to have had the postscript, glad to have had the opportunity, but in the end glad I'd been a Civil Servant and not a politician. Yes. Right, so that's it, Clare, thank you very much.

CM: Thank you, Sir Brian, for sharing your recollections.

