

BDOHP Biographical Details and Interview Index

Leslie Fielding, KCMG 1988.

Born 29 July 1932, son of Percy Archer Fielding and of Margaret (*née* Calder Horry). Educated at Queen Elizabeth's School, Barnet; Emmanuel College, Cambridge (First in History; MA; Hon. Fellow 1990); School of Oriental and African Studies, London; St Antony's College, Oxford.

Married 1978, Dr Sally P. J. Harvey, FSA, FRHistS, sometime Fellow of St Hilda's Coll., Oxford; one son, one daughter.

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Whitehall and Europe. Interview n°16**Interview with Sir Leslie Fielding, KCMG by Thomas Raineau (TR), University of Paris-Sorbonne.**

The interview was conducted on Tuesday 24 April 2012. 9.30am at The Traveller's Club, London

TR: Sir Leslie, I would like to thank you again for accepting this interview. I am happy to put on the record that I will not quote a word of this conversation in my works, article or dissertation, before having your explicit approval of the verbatim transcript. Does this arrangement suit you?

LF: Yes it does.

I would like also to thank you for your generosity in sending me the two books you have recently published, Kindly Call me God and Mentioned in Dispatches which I have read with great interest.

Considering that the first book contains a good deal of information about your career, what I suggest is, quite classically, to proceed chronologically through your diplomatic career, and to focus on the periods when you were dealing with Europe. I would also be interested in hearing your opinion about the changes that happened in the Foreign Office during the course of your career.

First of all, would you mind describing briefly your family and cultural and background? Did you have family connections with continental Europe?

LF: Not at all. I come from a lower middle class background. My vivacious and good-looking mother – my father's third wife – had left school aged 14. Father, himself – who had wanted to go up to Cambridge, but was prevented by lack of means – was a minor manufacturing entrepreneur. The long established (and now defunct) family firm, P. Fielding Ltd., was a small time import/export business which also made fashion accessories, children's toys, headgear and so on, with factories in the East End of London and in Luton. We knew hardship before and during the war, and I owed my professional career to my ability to win scholarships to secure a good secondary and tertiary education. So, in that sense, I am a self-made man, coming from a different background from that which a British diplomat would have known until the post-war era. Even in 1956, most of my colleagues, when I joined the Foreign Service, had attended smart and expensive public schools; they often had quite wealthy family

backgrounds; they had travelled extensively and possessed the general *Weltanschauung* of the English upper classes.

But the Service was extremely loyal and closely knit. People saw that somebody was coming from a lower social background than theirs; but they pretended not to notice. We were all part of the same team, as indeed we had to be: when you're going to war, you don't bother whether or not your captain has been received at Court by the Monarch. You're facing the enemy and if you don't work together, you're lost.

Nevertheless, I was received into the Foreign Service in 1956 as rather the exception, not being a toffee-nosed David Cameron-style Englishman.

TR: This brings us back to the attitude of the Foreign Office towards Ernest Bevin in the mid-Forties, which has sometimes been dubbed as "inverted snobbery".

LF: Not at all. We loved him! He was a genuine character and had political clout. He said what he thought and his origins had nothing to do with it. We were all looking together at the same problems.

TR: What was your command of foreign languages when you were a kid or a teenager?

LF: Virtually nil. During the war, during which I was living in North London, I didn't meet any foreigners. Occasionally, an Italian prisoner of war on parole would walk by in the street. Otherwise, the only foreigners I was aware of were those who were piloting bomber aircraft overhead and who nearly killed me in January 1944. Three Luftwaffe bombs just missed our house.

The French and German languages were studied in my school as dead languages like Latin and Ancient Greek. There was no question of actually speaking them, and we couldn't meet a Frenchman or a German to talk to.

After the war, travel was difficult; there was a restriction on how much money you would take, and in any case my parents were hard up; the family business almost bankrupt. I took myself off to Paris and to Italy somehow, as an undergraduate, in the early 1950s, after I came out of the army. So, very largely my spoken languages were self-taught.

What the Foreign Office decided to do, in the great reform of the Service after the war, was to move away from the privileged past. Before the war, if you wanted to join the Diplomatic Service, you had to come to from a certain background. You also had to have at least a small

private income, to demonstrate that you had 'means' – that you were financially independent. And people preparing to join the Diplomatic Service, between the two wars and earlier, would spend a year or so in Berlin and Paris or Rome or somewhere. And they were therefore all, already, when they came in, comfortable speakers of the usual diplomatic languages.

After the war – it was part of the reforms that brought in the welfare state and so on – it was decided: “we are going to start recruiting in a more egalitarian way, that is based solely on merit. It's quite wrong to demand that someone entering should already speak foreign languages, as a function of social privilege. Rather, what we shall do is to test whether someone has *linguistic aptitude*, whether they would be capable of speaking foreign languages well, if taught them”. So, in my last year at Cambridge, I duly took the 'linguistic aptitude test' in, I think, French and German. I was stumbling. But it was obvious to the examiner that I had the ability, if given the opportunity.

So that was alright, and the competitive public entry examination itself was entirely to do with intellectual calibre and with other tests – psychological, how you behaved in a group, whether you could speak convincingly, etc. It was a 3-part examination, designed for students who were about to complete their university education and were predicted to obtain high final honours. A thousand or so bright young things from (mostly) Oxbridge took part. First came two days of written examinations. Over half the applicants were eliminated at that stage. Phase 2 was to go for a weekend somewhere in groups of 30 or 40. Candidates would be interviewed individually by psychologists, senior civil servants, diplomats, business people and so on. The big thing was to see how we worked in discussion groups with other people, argued a case, took the lead, etc. If you were one of the 50 or so candidates who got through that second phase, there came the terrifying final interview, where you knew that only one in three or four would succeed. There would be a circle of people glaring at you, who for an hour or more would fire questions at you from all quarters, some of them serious, some of them provocative, to see if they could throw you, or cause you to lose your nerve. If you got through all that, then you came in. I think 10 or us made it into the Foreign Service, in 1956. I myself came second on the list in the national examination, to my surprise. And in those days, one immediately became an undergraduate hero: here was “the man who broke the bank at Monte Carlo”, strolling nonchalantly along King's Parade, Cambridge, admired by all.

TR: How about your studies at Emmanuel College Cambridge?

LF: I was going up originally to Oxford to read PPE (Philosophy, Politics and Economics); but changed my mind, because I visited Cambridge and thought it was the nicer town! I thought: "What I'll do is take a degree half in Economics and half in History at Cambridge, rather than PPE at Oxford", because I was not much interested in Philosophy or Politics. So I managed to butt my way in. It proved an interesting time. Sadly, I had to give up reading Economics after only 3 weeks, because I kept falling asleep. The Marshall Library of Economics was overheated; I was young and extremely fit, coming out of the army; and I constantly nodded off. Whereas the Seeley History Library was quite unheated – like some of the rooms in this Club – and I could stay awake! Thus the reason for my switch from Economics to History was typically frivolous, I'm afraid.

So I stayed with that. But I was not happy as an undergraduate. I didn't know who I was, what I was trying to do. I became bored with some of the things I was expected to do. So initially I did the minimum amount of work necessary to get through, and spent most of my time doing other things: talking to people, doing amateur dramatics, attending lectures in the theology faculty. I even joined the Psychic Research Society of the University and went and investigated haunted houses up and down the country.

Finally, in the last year of my studies, I buckled to, to get a 'First'. And I said: "This won't do, you have got to pull yourself together, make your mind up who you are; get as far away from England as possible. You must take a job that will take you a long way overseas".

So I applied to 3 potential employers. The first was something called "The Metal Box Company", which manufactured tin cans around the world. They accepted me, offering a management job in South Africa. Next I went to BP. But they said, "You're not our sort. You're too clever. We prefer second-class honours people. Also, you're not athletic enough; you have not represented the University in any kind of sport or even rowed in your college boat". So they said: "No". The Foreign Office was the third employer I applied to. At least they would take me to the utmost ends of the earth! As just explained, somehow I succeeded in getting in. And in those days all new entrants were required to take 2 years off, on full pay, to learn an obscure language, in order to create a wealth of ambassadorial linguistic talent for the future. The idea was: "These self-satisfied young men in their middle twenties must be told to wipe that complacent smile off their self-congratulatory lips and go off and get lost and learn Arabic or Persian or Chinese or Japanese. In the new Foreign Service we're going to have, we will eventually reach the situation where every British ambassador in these countries will speak the local language fluently". That was the idea.

I checked-in a little late for the induction course – because I was doing something social. I told them I wanted to learn Chinese or Japanese. But they said: “No sorry, that’s already ticked off, and all that is left is Persian, Burmese or Arabic”. So I chose Persian, because it tied in with what my PhD thesis would have been about, had I stayed on at Cambridge. Sadly, family money was running out. I did have a scholarship and so on, but still ... my father said: “I think you cannot refuse the Foreign Service. You have to start earning your living”. My PhD would have been about Medieval Christian Heresies, their origins in Manichaeism and Zoroastrianism and so. And it seemed to me that getting good Persian, if I didn’t like the Foreign Office and later came back to academic life with a Cambridge College Fellowship or something like that, would help to give me a new angle on medieval Christianity as seen from Central Asia rather than as seen from Rome or Constantinople.

TR: Do you think that your experience of the war did have an influence on your subsequent opinion and feelings about Europe?

LF: When I joined the Service in 1956 and went off to the Middle East, it didn’t occur to me that anything serious was going on in Western Europe – I was wrong, but at the same time it was true. Anyway, the British government was trying to get its Middle East Policy right. Anthony Eden, when Prime Minister, had made the huge mistake of invading Egypt – against Foreign Office advice, as it happened. So my immediate job was to help HMG to understand Iran better.

But Europe was certainly in my background. As already mentioned, I was nearly killed in the bombing of London in 1944. My father had fought in the First World War as a volunteer. He could speak a little French and he had had a little education. He was passionately in favour of the *Entente Cordiale*, whereas his father was pro-Kaiser, because the family had made money trading with Germany in the 19th Century. So in 1914 my grand-father was saying it was a big mistake going to war alongside France, and my father was saying the *Entente Cordiale* was the important thing, and to Hell with the Germans, and so on.

That was my background, and the great awareness in England of two catastrophic wars in Europe. Everywhere, in towns and villages, you saw the war memorials. At my school, there was a huge board to commemorate all the boys who had died. Their names were read out, regularly, on solemn occasions. One could not but be keenly aware of what had happened, of the huge cost of lives and talent and resources. And against that background, when I first had the opportunity to concern myself with European affairs, the starting point – and I’m sorry

this is a bit infantile – was: “My God, no European civil wars!” I got into trouble with an ambassador once, for describing the First World War as a “European Civil War”. He said: “No, it was a Fight for Freedom” and I replied “No no, it was Europeans, Sir, fighting each other, while the rest of the world was laughing. That’s why, today, we’re all falling behind”. So against a background that was very elementary – not sophisticated, not *agrégation* stuff, but it was built into my genes – my feeling was: “what a shame that we and the Germans, with you, the French, fought those two terrible wars. So let’s not do it again, because we have a lot more in common than divides us”.

TR: Well, that does not sound infantile!

LF: Well, simpliste!

TR: Well, as far as I could judge from previous testimonies, this experience and conviction was one of the most powerful in helping to bring British people closer to Europe, and especially that breed of British diplomats who were doing European business.

LF: I see what you mean. We were all like that, and what a shame that all our political leaders – who had had the same experience as we – just weren’t! We, the professionals, we were pretty well all of us, I think, convinced Europeans. There were different degrees of commitment to the European idea. But that was pretty well the ‘unisono’ of the Service.

TR: So by the end of the Fifties, you did not really pay attention to the creation of the Common Market and so on ...

*LF: No, I was dealing with other things – NATO, national defence policy East of Suez etc. But my intellectual interest in the European idea, as opposed to the visceral dimension I have just described, began in Cambodia, in Phnom-Penh. I was *Chargé d’Affaires* for 3 years, starting at the absurdly young age of 31. And I thought what a mess the Americans were making in Vietnam, and found myself agreeing with what the French around me were saying. Cambodia in those days was still almost a kind of *protectorat de la France*. There was a big French business community; the natives spoke French and so on. I had a lot of French friends and acquaintances. I got on well with the French ambassador. They made my ears prick up!*

And then after that, the FO said: “This chap is unusual, he has talent, he gets on well with the French it seems, he’s managed to speak their language a bit, we’ll give him this job in the Paris

embassy because big things are going to happen there. We want to join the European Economic Community, but the French are proving an obstacle which must be overcome”.

TR: I suggest we skip the time you were in Asia, although you made a fascinating account of it in your book, to head straight to your time back in the Foreign Office between 1960 and 1964.

You were Resident Clerk, working at the same time in the Western Organisations Department.

LF: Yes, I was seated at the Resident Clerk's desk in the evening, once or twice a week. There were four of us, four gentlemen who had served abroad, in their late twenties/early thirties, whose job it was to be on call, each in turn. There were many nights when you slept in your comfortable apartment and were never disturbed, so it was possible to combine being on call with a desk job during the day.

In the Western Organisations Department, I was dealing with the Western European Union, and the political side of NATO.

TR: When you came back from Asia, that was the time of the first application to the EEC. Did you know the FO people in the negotiating team?

LF: Not really. I did meet Harold Macmillan on a couple of occasions, I had a great admiration for him. Here was a Prime Minister who understood things, who was clearly a genuinely committed European – I think for reasons going back to his experience in the World War I, by the way.

Did I know the team? No, I was not involved. Then not. But the second time round, I got to know some of the movers and shakers, grouped around a clever chap called Con O'Neill – a very unfortunate name in French but still ... *quel con!* And another man called John Robinson. And these two people were no friends of mine. I did not agree with them, and they did not approve of me. I will tell you why. But I was not part of the negotiating team at all, I was doing other things. And on the whole, in the negotiation, they played their cards very close to their chest – unusually for the FO in those days. The glory of the FO was that information was widely available, within a loyal and totally watertight organisation. It was what helped make ours a stronger Diplomatic Service than the French at that time. We may not all have been as bright as some of the Quai d'Orsay people – but we had the enormous strength of working as a team and sharing our information and insights! So many of my French colleagues were extremely brilliant, but in rather a narcissistic way, and without much organisational support.

Today, having myself conducted sensitive international negotiations of an economic nature, I understand better the reticence of Con O'Neill and John Robinson. But the FO in those days was a totally secure environment, and the *ambiance* was to share, to invite comments – people might say “rubbish” or “interesting” or whatever, but you were expected to go through this mill of subjecting yourself to the benevolent but professional comments of your colleagues. That was then the strength of the Service. But it didn't apply to the accession team, sadly.

TR: But you met Ted Heath when he was leading the First negotiation?

LF: Yes indeed, but I wasn't part of the team at all. The second time round, Con O'Neill would come out to Paris, and my ambassador, Sir Christopher Soames, would send me to the airport to meet him and travel with him into the Embassy. Con O'Neill would ask me rather technical questions to see whether I was serious and well-informed – which was quite bizarre and unnecessary – and I mostly said: “Honestly I don't know the answer to that, but I think this on this and that on that”, and so on. I could see that the impression I made was not good. And observing O'Neill at close quarters, he seemed to me a cold, owl-like figure. Obviously very clever, which is not a recommendation for the British, although it is much admired in France. He was thought to be an intellectual of the first calibre, but... aloof and cold and rather pessimistic and unconstructive. He didn't seem to give any hint of flesh and blood and warmth to the European enterprise. Because I am basically rather an emotional person, I have had to learn from an early age to keep my emotions under control. But he had no emotions or just pretended to have enough of them to be able to establish contact as a human being.

Robinson, I thought, was devious and pig-headed and convinced that he had privileged back-channels – he would go and see some French Ambassador somewhere who would talk to him freely – I don't know if it was in Copenhagen or where it was – and would claim to know what was really going on in the Elysée and so on. But we in the Embassy, who were *sur place* in Paris, and well-informed about what was going on politically, were not normally allowed to see his reports. So he was a pretentious, difficult and secretive kind of man.

TR: And he was a very difficult person to work with, from other accounts I had.

LF: Frankly. I didn't think that he was of the first calibre. And indeed, after the negotiation was over, he deflated. I think he was ambassador in Tunisia or something like that – Algeria – and that was that. It was no glorious ascension.

TR: Not quite no. His next postings in Tel-Aviv and Washington were not very successful either, and he retired early.

LF: To some extent, I also shared the prejudices of those for whom I was working. In the Paris embassy, Christopher Soames, the ambassador, was a remarkable figure – an unintellectual, rich, Tory toff; but a man of massive presence and political authority. Undoubtedly, *my* kind of Europe was what he believed in, and he and I got on very well together. Also with the Number 2. If the FO make a political figure an ambassador, which is not usual for us, they make sure that the Number 2 is a top-class professional to keep the political apprentice on the straight and narrow. This Number 2 in Paris was Michael Palliser, who had been Prime Minister Wilson's Private Secretary immediately before Paris; and went on to become our first Representative in the COREPER, on UK accession. And then became Head of the Diplomatic Service. Mrs Thatcher didn't like him because ...

TR: But she worked with him!

LF: Of course she respected him. But she was sometimes annoyed by him, because he had this awful habit of saying: "With respect, Prime Minister....." and then correcting or disagreeing with something she had just said.

It must have been unpalatable and very difficult, telling home truths to someone like Mrs Thatcher. And with Tony Blair, it simply wasn't possible at all, because he would just keep you at a distance. Michael was bright and hard working and sound in judgement; he had this wonderful Belgian wife; he had been "mentioned in despatches" fighting with the Coldstream Guards in the liberation of Europe. He was absolutely impeccable in every way. But above all, he had courage and complete integrity.

So Michael Palliser, Christopher Soames and little me, we all mistrusted John Robinson and regarded Con O'Neill, on the whole, as someone so clever it was useful to have him around – but who needed to have some whisky added to his glass of tepid water.

TR: Your job as First Secretary in Paris was mainly to deal with and report on French politics?

LF: No, not at all. The political section, the Chancery as we call it, fell into 2 bits. The smaller part was concerned with domestic politics – for which there was a man called Crispin Tickell,

a nice chap- with one junior. But the main work in the Chancery was treating with France, dealing with French foreign policy, for which there were 2 experienced First Secretaries of whom I was one. But although our job was mainly to talk with the Quai d'Orsay, nevertheless, as in any well-organised professional embassy, we were all interested in everything, we shared each other's reports, we worked as a team and so on. When things happened, as in *les événements*, all the people in the Chancery – and others too – lent a hand in the effort to find out what was really going on. I was normally dealing with “*Vive le Québec libre*” or with underhand French support for Biafra's attempted secession from Nigeria. But I found myself in the Sorbonne, talking to the students. Or in the *défilé* up the Champs Elysées for the General with the *fils-à-papa*. Or present when the students tried to set fire to the Stock Exchange. That apart, however, domestic affairs were not normally my dossier.

TR: You were in Paris when the Soames Affair happened. What's your personal recollection of that episode?

LF: Well, I don't know through which door or window I should enter this room. When Christopher came back from his meeting *entre quatre yeux* with the General, he called in the Head of Chancery (Alan Campbell) and me to tell us what had happened. And *one* question was uppermost in our mind: had Christopher totally understood what the General had said? Because, on his first arrival in Paris, the Ambassador's French was not as good as it became later. And, so very gently, but ineluctably, we went through it all with him. Then Alan Campbell went round to the Elysée to see the *Secrétaire Général* and check out what our ambassador had understood. The man's reaction was reassuring – he said something like: “Yes, that sounds very like the General to me. That's what the General thinks”.

The second question was how to convey this to London. We advised, for starters, that Soames should not immediately spill the beans to the American ambassador – who wanted to rush round at once, saying: “Hey Chris, tell me what the General had to say”. So we said: “Fob him off, because American communications are quicker than ours, and the Prime Minister would hear it all from the American ambassador in London before having heard from you yourself what actually happened with *le Général*”.

And then Alan and I made a serious procedural mistake. Not on substance, but on mechanics of reporting. On substance, we both thought the General's comments were very important. We didn't rush to conclusions as to what it all meant; we were still struggling with it. But our sense was that Soames had been offered some sort of breakthrough. The General was thinking

aloud, saying what I now believe to have been a perfectly reasonable thing for him to have said: "If you're going to come in, it's gonna be a different kind of Europe; but maybe – just maybe – it could work to our mutual advantage". I think the General was straight with Soames. (As he should have been, to a high level political appointee of the P.M.) Later, the General was reported to have said: "*Pauvre Soames, il a été roulé ... tout comme moi*".

So, in accordance with normal Foreign Service practice, we decided to put Soames's written report into a telegram. I should have said: "No, don't put this in a telegram. It will be distributed to every Tom, Dick and Harry in Whitehall, as well as to our ambassadors in Bonn and Rome, and all over Europe. Better restrict full knowledge, in the initial stage, to the P.M. only, through a private letter and sent it by courier direct to No 10". But I didn't say that. Which was a big mistake. Because *then*, it all began to go wrong. The Robinsons of this world said: "How scandalous. The General wants to break up the European Community that we're trying to join, and drag us into something else. We must tell our German allies and rally the Five (the other members of the Community than France) against him". Which they did indeed do, in an intrigue-laden way, whispering: "This is what the General said to our Ambassador in Paris. How shocking". That's the Robinson way of doing it.

TR: Yes. At the end of the London chain, there were John Robinson and also Donald Maitland who was Michael Stewart's PPS. I would like you to comment about him.

LF: Yes, yes! Donald Maitland was there, but he was not ill-intentioned or conspiratorial just unimaginative and naive.

TR: You think so?

LF: Yes. But I don't know, maybe I'm mistaken, maybe my memory is not very good.

TR: On the contrary, your recollection is quite accurate. It is just that from a history book that was recently published about the Soames Affair (Perfide Albion by Claire Sanderson), it is clear from the papers that Donald Maitland played also a major role.

LF: But it is such a shame, because it was then made into something it wasn't, and used against the General. The latter had spoken off the top of his head and with complete candour to an interlocutor – Sir Winston Churchill's son-in-law, no less! – whom he thought he could

trust. Maybe the General had some *arrière-pensée*; maybe not. But he had been thinking aloud and privately, not making public utterance.

TR: But you think that Robinson was more deliberately manoeuvring than Maitland?

LF: I have nothing against Maitland at all. But he was, I think, not a particularly sophisticated operator, being rather 'Boy Scout's Honour', in saying: "Yes of course, we must inform the allies", without asking himself what might happen next. And there was no one around, to say to Wilson: "Hold it. You, Prime Minister – a Labour man – sent this Tory politician to be our ambassador in Paris for one reason only: to overcome de Gaulle's veto. And the first thing you're NOT going to do, with a first very privileged contact, is to tell the whole world! Just calm down. Let's wait and see". Maitland didn't have that "Softlee, softlee catchee monkey" instinct, but rather preferred to "play things by the book".

I think I'm not wrong in saying that Palliser had not yet arrived in the embassy. If Palliser had been in the room with Alan Campbell and Soames and me, he would have said: "Just send a bland, unexciting telegram round the houses. But follow up with a private letter to the P.M. to the effect that "This is an early indication of what may be in the back of de Gaulle's mind. I'll try and find out a bit more. Meanwhile, it's still early stages. "Mum's the word". Hush, hush, etc.". But I didn't have the necessary sophisticated grasp of Whitehall realities; Alan Campbell wasn't focused that way, either. We neither of us reckoned with the wreckers.

Later Soames made a great joke of it, saying one day to English journalists: "Well, you know, if one is to have an 'Affair' in one's life ... ". He rolled with the punch.

TR: The Soames Affair was partly the result of the conflict of the 2 lines in the FCO, one being in favour of keeping the French in the picture and negotiating with them, the other being to gang the "Friendly Five" against the French. And Robinson and Maitland were in favour of that second line.

LF: I don't dissent from that, but it's a complex thing. And it shows that nobody's diplomatic service is perfect. And we certainly all screwed up, on that one.

TR: In Paris, I guess you had a good network of contacts with French Officials from the Quai d'Orsay or the Elysée?

LF: Yes, and from one or two other departments, too. The occasional French official disliked me, because of my appearance. I used to be trendy. Along with my Savile Row suit and my Jermyn Street shirt, I liked to wear 'kipper' ties – the sort the Beatles were wearing, shaped like a kipper with a bright, floral, pattern – something which every fashionable young man in London wore! But, in the *Quai d'Orsay*, it was rather unusual, to call on the *Directeur d'Afrique* or whoever, wearing a 'flower power' tie.

But in the main I was accepted, even adopted, by my contacts. To a handful, I became a *copain*. I've always told the truth – which diplomats can some be economical with. They thought that my heart was in the right place and that I was doing my best. I arranged good parties in my large flat on the *Square Louvois* in front of the *Bibliothèque Nationale*. I became the kind of tame English diplomat that Parisians liked to collect and put on the shelves.

TR: Did you make personal friends?

LF: Yes. Some of them were unusual. For example, there was one chap who was the *Sous-Directeur* for... I can't remember – and was later a top ambassador. His colleagues used to say about him: "*x est très mal élevé*". Bloody-minded, uncooperative, hostile to everyone and everything and so on. But he and I became friends. We haven't seen each other recently, in our old age; but we kept in touch for many years, meeting at my place or his, in London, Brussels and so on. It was considered the most improbable thing, for us to be *copains*.

TR: You wrote in Chapter 23 of Kindly Call me God, a powerful account of Paris night life during your time there, both mundane and sparkling. Did you really have that lifestyle? Did you make the most of your stay in Paris?

LF: I improved my French. I even began to teach myself economics – which, it seemed to me, was an important part of the future, for any diplomat. I was also struggling with a book about Cambodia, *Before the Killing Fields*, which I completed during my spare time in Paris. (It was vetoed by the Foreign Office: they said: "you can't possibly publish this", so I didn't – it did not finally come out till 20 years later.)

I confess to a degree of regret that I didn't really do what scholars and friends back in England rebuked me for not doing: Culture with a capital K, going regularly to the Opera, belonging to some *cercle littéraire*. Rather, I just moved around, mixing widely, trying to understand what really made France tick; what French people were really, really, like. Sometimes, to relax, I

went to crazy bars, and places like that. But I also went to concerts and exhibitions or the ballet (prompted by a friend who was a ballerina with the Ballet Béjart in Brussels). To pander to the pre-conceptions of Anglo-Saxon readers, my autobiography did have a chapter about "Paris by Night". But I had cultural, literary and intellectual pursuits, also. Nevertheless, those amazing bars in the *Deuxième* did sometimes offer me a little *détente*. Coming away from one of the Soames' grand Embassy dinner parties, I would sometimes walk along the rue du Faubourg Saint Honoré in the direction of my flat, in full evening dress. And it seemed natural to drop into the Lesbian night club or to the Gay pub or the Were-wolf Lady's bar or wherever, to have a last drink before bedtime. Very innocent, rather childish, all too *bon enfant*. But it wasn't a major part of my life. It was just how occasionally I relaxed.

TR: I think Michael Palliser arrived at the British Embassy shortly before you left (in 1969). Did you get to know him a bit at that time?

LF: I had a great respect for him, not only for his intellectual qualities and his feel for France, and for Europe, but also, so to say, for his moral qualities, for his integrity and courage.

TR: Was he an inspiring figure in his views on Europe, for colleagues and people in the embassy?

LF: Yes he was one of the movers and shakers, a very great figure.

TR: Did you have conversations with him about Europe?

LF: Yes of course. It was central to the business of the embassy. He, as the Minister, took a particular interest in work of the Chancery, which was not over-concerned with export promotion and notions of, say, selling British bicycles to an eager clientele in Lyon; but was very much concerned with what mattered most to our political Masters in London.

TR: You were then posted back to London to be Deputy Head of Planning Staff in the FO for three years, 1970–73. You wrote that, at the beginning, you were not particularly happy about this assignment. Were you sad to leave Paris?

LF: No it was time to come back to Headquarters, after 4 years in Paris and 3 years in Cambodia, under our system of regular rotation. But I had wanted to be part of the team that

would lead us into the European Community and that was rather what the Personnel Department were thinking of doing with me; but some genius or other said: "No, no, we'll give him something more prestigious than that, but where his Europeanism will make a useful contribution, and we'll put him in the Policy Planning Staff". I was not enthusiastic. But I didn't say no. After all, I'm a soldier. When Sir Foreign Office gives the order, I say: "*Jawohl, Zu Befehl, Herr Oberst!*"

TR: So you had expressed a preference for your next assignment?

LF: I did want to do economic work, for a change. I had a natural flair for what we call 'political' work in the Diplomatic Service. But I was aware that this needed to be rounded out. A little diversification was called for. In anticipation of a change of horizon, I had managed to get away from the Chancery on special leave of absence to attend a French business school in the autumn before I came back to London. I had also completed my A-level in Economics by correspondence on Sunday afternoons. And I wanted to do something economic to fill me out, to give me more profile and enlarge my understanding, although I always knew my eye would be to the political realities beneath the surface. The ideal would be to get into the negotiating team – which was rather what Soames wanted, to get one of his own men inside to keep him *au parfum*. But it didn't work out. Robinson and that lot didn't want me: I was potentially too dangerous, and disloyal or inexpert or whatever.

So there was this flattering job in the Think Tank. Not entirely my cup of tea; but I was not a square peg in a round hole either. We did useful work, related to Europe: we did a big study of national sovereignty to convince Cabinet and our political Masters that all this sovereignty they were talking about was largely illusory: it didn't exist in the shape or to the extent they took for granted. It shouldn't be a constraint on us. Instead, we should ask: "If we go into Europe, what kind of Europe do we want?" The Planning Staff consensus was in favour of a strong united Europe. It was, I think, a touch too integrationist. In the end, this is where I parted intellectual company a tiny bit with my boss, Percy Cradock. Our blue prints were not going to work. The British political class wouldn't accept it then. Anyway, the European Community was not to like that. Cradock was fully as clever as Con O'Neill, but lacked a true feel for European affairs. He was more a great expert on China. (He later negotiated the retrocession of Hong-Kong.) In the Planning Staff, he had this idea that what we needed was a strong, united and centralized Europe. Then the Europeans would have power, because otherwise we were each and all simply losing our grip, year by year. The special relationship

with the Americans was not what it was. Europe generally was going down the tubes. If we didn't hang together, we would hang separately – the old English joke. But it was all too theoretical and I used to prefer: "*Doucement, doucement*".

TR: *Percy Cradock was, as you say, "integrationist"?*

LF: Yes. But for theoretical reasons, not based on realities. And he wouldn't always listen up. He didn't think I was quite clever enough to be in the Think-Tank. There were other 2 people who were very clever: the junior one was Charles Powell – he later became Mrs Thatcher's adviser on Foreign Policy – I will tell you more about him. And above him came a chap who with a brilliant Oxford classics degree, Roger Tomkys, who had since become one of our Arabists. Then there was me. It was not too hierarchical, just the four of us, exchanging ideas with each other all the time. And Cradock used to think: "You're so conventional, Leslie. This is not 'blue sky thinking'. You're too practical and too down to earth. What I want is a new vision". I did in fact achieve this once or twice – e.g. in a big paper about terrorism – "low-level political violence" at it was then called. I re-read it the other day: it's brilliant; it foretells the shape of international terrorism as we now know it.

TR: *The Paper for Heath about France's European policy which is reproduced in Mentioned in Dispatches is very good stuff as well.*

LF: Well that was just routine diplomatic stuff.

If you think about Heath: his heart was in the right place, he wanted Europe. But you could see him thinking: "These French, they are *cocorico* kind of people, top-of-the-pile: I want to be like that. Why can't we? Why is a French diplomat so much more effective than a British one?" There was this idea that the French *apparat* was superior. It was not. It was just different, not better.

But my paper was designed to convey: "Calm down Prime Minister. You see, the French are in reality more like this". It was designed to bring him down to earth a little bit. There was nothing anti-French at all in this. But it was an honest English assessment of "why we *can't* be like the French, and shouldn't *want* to be!"

TR: *What about Charles Powell?*

LF: Charles Powell. Very nice chap, I got on well with him, I liked him, admired him. Prodigious appetite for work, lots of drive and a good member of the team. He was a kind of Secretary, as it were, of the Planning Staff. But something went wrong, later. After long years (8, in all) on the trot at No 10 as Private Secretary, at the elbow of the P.M., it may have gone to his head a tiny bit. He was allowed to stay in that slot for too long. He began to find that he could influence policy in his own right, without too much heed to what the Foreign Secretary thought. In the end, he became sort of an alternative Foreign Secretary in No 10, to the chagrin of Geoffrey Howe and Douglas Hurd. Percy Cradock, too, was sent to No 10 later on, to be Foreign Affairs Adviser to Thatcher. But he couldn't get alongside her as much as he would have wished. Which was sad. Although Cradock and I didn't always see each other eye-to-eye, I remained loyal to him all my life, and I went to see him in his final illness. But I did think Charles a bit disloyal to the Service, and he a little bit too big for his boots. However, he's a talented man. I admired him for saying, once, about the Commonwealth and Rhodesia (when one or two of the former were being difficult or 'holier-than-thou'): "What has the Commonwealth ever done to sort out real problems, anywhere in the world? Absolutely nothing, Prime Minister. Take no notice. Do your own thing".

On France, and the French, I thought Powell unimaginative and too much bobbing in the chauvinistic wake of the then P.M.'s prejudices. Later on, after he had gone into business, he was asked to make a radio programme for the BBC, about Anglo-French relations. He asked me to contribute something about Delors. And I did. But he wasn't really listening. What I was saying didn't fit in. The Jacques Delors I knew was an emotional man under the surface. People said he didn't have guts the ability to "mix it" in political life. Speaking of Delors' decision not to make a bid for the Presidency of the French Republic, which in my view he could and should have done, one French commentator said, *il lui manque les couilles pour ça!* I didn't agree. And he had this long-standing and charming nostalgia, a desire to be closer to the Brits. And he wanted us to be closer to the French. He was alarmed by Mrs Thatcher. But Jacques Delors' underlying thing was his mistrust of the Germans, interestingly – a mistrust I don't have. And I was trying to say to Charles: "Mrs Thatcher, instead of (excuse my obscenity) peeing on Jacques Delors from a great height, which Mrs Thatcher liked to do – in summit meetings where I was serving as a sherpa, I could see what was going on – on the contrary, she should have stroked him a little! Tickled him behind the ear! You might think he is a mad integrationist European. Well maybe he is, maybe not. But he really does feel that he wants the Brits on board. You don't treat people like that with contempt. There's real *bonne volonté* in Jacques Delors". I don't say Delors is incapable of machinations or intrigue and so on. But I

got on well with him, from my position as Director General for External Relations in the Commission, and I could see a man who wanted to be loved a little bit. That anyway was what I was trying to say, on the BBC programme. But Charles was just looking out of the window. Most of the material he didn't use.

However, our personal relations have always been excellent. I think well of him and respect him. And he is now deservedly a very happy man, because he didn't have too much money as a young married diplomat, but today Lord Powell of Bayswater is quite well off. He succeeded in the private sector, because he's extremely dynamic and hard-working, with flair and entrepreneurship.

TR: How would you describe the mood in the Foreign Office in the early Seventies, right after Britain's entry? For people who were the age of Charles Powell for instance.

LF: Charles, in the Planning Staff, dutifully defended the common line "We want a strong Europe", and so on. Where I think Charles – and he's not totally wrong – was sceptical is when Europe comes to be a kind of religion, that "everything that is done in Europe is good, and you can white-wash your teeth in it". A selective judgement is called for. Just because something is 'European', doesn't mean to say "It's a good idea". And he was right there. But he did go too far over the line, later, in drafting that Bruges speech.

TR: We are in 1973, before your great jump on the continent when you were seconded to the European Commission in Brussels. You became Directeur in DGI External Relations where you stayed for 4 years (1973–77). You said you had been earmarked by Sir Christopher (later Lord) Soames to go to Brussels. Did you consider him a good friend, even a mentor?

LF: I don't think that he was entirely my mentor. I don't think that he taught me very much that I didn't already know, about European affairs. But he did lay the foundations of an educated palate for decent French wine. I wasn't too interested in claret when he joined the embassy. But at those small lunch parties he gave – at which, as a member of the inner circle, I would be present – were a revelation to me. He would explain wine in terms I could grasp! I shall forever be in his debt! Seriously, I admired him and liked him and was loyal to him – even if I occasionally made him raise an eyebrow, with some home truth or other. And he was a marvellous *Patron* – both in the usual sense, and in the sense of *parrainage*.

TR: *Do you think there was a network of people who were naturally skilled and willing to go to Brussels? In other words, was there a European milieu in the FCO/Whitehall?*

LF: Yes, there was certainly an informal *cadre* of people who were interested in Europe, just as others could honourably be interested in China or Africa or something. Who were fired with enthusiasm for the project. Who having, at one point and another of their career, been in contact with Europe, considered themselves *en disponibilité de la République* for service in Brussels. This, in turn, aroused a certain counter-reaction. Later in the 1970s – and I don't want to exaggerate this – people started to say: "You know, if you're not one of those damn 'Europeanists', you're not going anywhere in the Service, these days!" That sort of thing. And this built up a certain resentment, of course, against us. There was a suspicion that we were an élite within an elite – which we both were and weren't. People were feeling uneasy, including folk who weren't hostile to the European Community as such. The existence of this European cadre certainly did attract a little bit of jealousy. Not exactly *méfiance*, but a sense of "who do they think they are?" – *ils se prennent pour quoi?*

TR: *I see. And the designation of the people who would be at the forefront in Brussels was very much monitored by the Prime Minister himself, wasn't it?*

LF: Yes. Heath took a great interest in it. If Soames said to me: "come!", Heath also said to me: "go!" And we were all told – and this, coming from Heath, it was quite something, for he could not string 3 words of French together and when he read a French text it was truly *pénible*: "Make sure you speak French all the time. I don't want any suggestion that the first wave of *parachutistes* are coming to proclaim the primacy of the English language. Speak French".

I had spoken a fair amount of French in Paris. But not enormously. Because, inside the embassy, we were all speaking English with each other. In Brussels, on the other hand, I had to speak French from dawn to dusk, draft papers in French ... and of course, to speak a bit of German and Italian too, just to show that I was not totally fixated on relations with Paris. So on my first arrival in the Commission in 1973, and every year thereafter, I got 'French face-ache' during the first week or so back in harness after the summer holidays in England. I had a small country house down in Devonshire. And I took my full measure of leave there, not as a socialist claiming his entitlement, but because I thought: "to do this Brussels job well – and it is a hard work – it is important to take your full measure of leave in order to relax, take your mind off it all, and then come back with redoubled energy". So I would go to Devonshire for 3

or 4 weeks in the summer, and a week or so at Christmas and Easter. But coming back to Brussels after such absences, I always had to pass through a period of genuine facial pain. This was because, for the English, when you speak French and you really *mean* it, you're vigorously throwing your tongue, your face, your whole physiognomy about, in ways to which the mumbling, stiff upper lip Brit is entirely unaccustomed. So 'French face-ache' was a problem. But every September at the *rentrée*, I got stuck in, overcame it after a week or two and then proceeded to give proof of *bonne volonté* to the francophone EC culture!

TR: You have already explained in the interview with Angel Linas about the return ticket, but were you briefed about the pay?

LF: No. And Brussels turned out to be much better paid than we anticipated. None of us knew. But none of us cared, either. We simply weren't interested. And when Soames was saying: "You're not going to be paid the money someone is in the British Embassy in Brussels. But you're coming anyway. It cannot be a matter of money for you", I may have thought to myself: "No mate. It's all right for you – you're rich and I'm poor!" But I replied: "Of course not, of course not, Ambassador". And I meant it.

Based on their first calculations, the Personnel Department of the FO – a very important body, which took a close interest in everyone – told us: "You've got to understand you're not going to be paid as much as you might expect". When a British diplomat was abroad in those days, he'd get not only his basic salary, but also what were called "Foreign Allowances". So he would be given maybe twice his salary, for the *figura*. He would have a swanky apartment paid for by the government; he would also have an expense account. As a first Secretary in the embassy in Paris, I had had a serious expense account. It was, of course, not a perk, to be quietly pocketed. We were all perfect gentlemen. We took careful note of what we spent and how. We were able to account for it. Anyway, in 1973 the Personnel Department worked out that a *Chef de Division* or a *Directeur* or whatever, in the Commission would receive maybe only 1/2 or 2/3 his equal in rank in the UK Permanent Representation.

But when we parachutists had landed, we found that the salaries were better than most of us had imagined, and that it was unnecessary to have allowances to cut a *bella figura*. Indeed, to our embarrassment, we found that we were coining it, by Whitehall standards. But we had had no idea of that, before we went.

TR: Ted Heath and the Personnel Department quite succeeded in sending to Brussels a good handful of high-flyers, but did you hear of the difficulties to send British people in the EEC institutions? In her book *Britons in Brussels*, Virginia Willis said that there were not enough Brits to staff the lower levels. That was obviously not a problem for the top positions.

LF: First, it was difficult to persuade people to apply for the lower grades, because of the tiresome and otiose entry examinations, etc. and because the Home civil servants were not as relaxed as the FO people about speaking foreign languages. For a long time, nobody lower down in Whitehall wanted to apply to join the European Civil Service. We had to institute special schemes, which were then axed, and then were set up again, The 'European Fast-stream', it was called. So that you could say: "You're quite alright, you're safe, you're an established British civil servant in the Treasury, but we're asking you to go to Brussels for 4 or 5 years ; it will be good for your career; if you like it, you can stay; but there's a return ticket". But secondly it became apparent that promotion was arbitrary and slow in the Commission. If you are very clever, in our Civil Service, as in yours, promotion is quite quick. The British Diplomatic Service, in those days, was I admit, an exception to this rule. We were all fairly bright; it was a small organisation; it was over-staffed with talent. We all had to wait "Buggins' Turn" for promotion. In the big ministries in London, you could get up the tree faster. But in Brussels there were stories of able people who had gone there, and were marking time and getting nowhere. There were quotas for different nationalities and so on. There was no proper training on the job. In our Diplomatic Service, for example, we were regularly put through short courses: public television techniques, higher management, speed-reading, evening language classes and the rest. Alas, 'Personnel Policy', in the way we understood it, was very deficient in the Commission. It very quickly came across that you might get stuck under some absolutely clueless Luxembourg or Italian boss or whatever, something like that; and then, just as you qualified for promotion, the job you wanted got given to a Greek, under some quota or other. And so on. It wasn't thought to be *la carrière ouverte aux talents*, but arbitrary and capricious. It's a shame, and it was partly true. Nevertheless, we senior Brits in Brussels tried very hard on personnel policy. As a British *Directeur* and later *Directeur Général*, I set up a policy of proper man-management. I and my British colleagues really were concerned with the *ressources humaines*. Many Brussels officials had never seen it before. Occasionally, people would even come up to me and say: "Thank you". One even said: "Now I know why my father (who had apparently served in the Kaiser's Navy) used to say how good the Royal Navy was – because I have now had the chance to serve under a British officer". Ridiculous. Embarrassing,

too. But the fact was that we Brits were taught these man-management, leadership things at our mother's knee. I had to learn it at school and in the army as well as in embassy management. Everyone in your platoon is important. Of course *Ordnung soll sein* and so on. But you've got to get the best out of these people, for their sakes as well as yours. So I acquired this reputation of being a good leader to work with and under, so my *Direction Générale* (already '*la plus prestigieuse de la Commission Européenne*', as the Belgian Permanent Representative once put it) ended up being totally besieged by people trying to get in – not only because it was an elite department, where the action was, but also in small part because it was run on better lines than the Brussels norm. In many other departments, it wasn't so. The Personnel policy was non-existent, I was shocked. No way to treat people.

TR: From many accounts indeed, it was indeed one of the manifest improvements that Britain's entry brought into the Community: open bureaucratic culture and human resources management.

LF: Team work, training, and genuine concern that people should improve themselves and move up the tree, promotion on merit and all that.

TR: Arriving in Brussels, did you know some fellow Brits (from the FCO or from other Whitehall Departments) that were jumping at the same time, esp. those who were going to staff the Cabinets of the 2 new British Commissioners? Did you keep contact with them?

LF: Yes and no. Two things, here. First, as to UKREP, there were FCO people there and of course I knew them socially. But I didn't want to keep their company too much, because I was being watched very closely by my fellow Eurocrats: "Is this man in the pocket of the Brits? Is he a British secret agent or I don't know what?" And it's true to say that, from start to finish, never ever, in any way, did anyone in UKREP seek to influence what I was doing, saying (whispering): "You know, the P.M. is quite concerned about this ... Do you think you could ...?" It happened to my French colleagues. We Brits were, I'm afraid – boring, I know – 'Holier than Holy', purer than pure. No undue influence was ever applied to me by the Brits. They played the game. But, second, I did see more of Brits *inside* the Commission, because that was safer, for the reasons I've given, and because I wanted to find what it was like in the other Directorates and DG's, and so on.

But what I really wanted was to jump into the Brussels pool and become a proper 'Brussels sprout'. "One of them", so to speak. I saw to it that most of my friends and acquaintances were non-Brits. My house was an open house. As a Director, I gave parties for my European staff – dancing parties, dinner parties, etc. (I cooked the dinner myself, sometimes). And, well I don't think this will be good French, but the female official who applied it to me was Belgian anyway. She said to me once, on my return from home leave: "*Tonton*, we're really glad you're back; did you know that we always call you *Tonton*? *Tonton Leslie*?" [Uncle Leslie]. And that was it, and I was really *dans le bain communautaire* and that was entirely *voulu de ma part*. I knew what I was doing. I knew I couldn't be a good Eurocrat, if I was running around with the Brits all the time.

TR: What about the Brits in the cabinets of Commissioners? Graham Avery, Michael Jenkins, Richard Hay, David Hannay?

LF: Yes, of course, I saw them. But I also saw Brits in *les services* – e.g. in DGVI, (dealing with the CAP), because I had responsibility for external agricultural trade issues in DG1. When Michael Franklin left as Deputy-DG for Agriculture, on his return to a top job in Whitehall, the French DG, Louis Rabot, wanted me, to be persuaded to take Michael's place, on promotion. He said: "I don't want anyone from Whitehall. Fielding is the man". Why, I'll never know. Maybe because I was not only competent, but straight, in handling the dossiers. And not working for London disguised as a European. Rabot anyway was not the arrogant *énarque* kind of person, but something quite different. Anyway, a free spirit, who said: "No, I don't care, I want Fielding". But I was about to clear off to Tokyo. So I replied: "I love you dearly, but I'm now on my way to learn Japanese and sail off to Japan and set our shambolic Delegation there to rights, because that's my real trade as a diplomat". At which, Louis was rather sad.

But back to the British Cabinets. Yes, I saw a lot of my own *Cabinet*, when I had a British commissioner, Soames, naturally. When Jenkins was president, I also saw the Brits in his cabinet for business of all sorts. But when Gaston Thorn and Jacques Delors became Presidents of the Commission, I saw their *cabinets* regularly also. So functionally, you dealt with the *cabinets* when you had to do business with them. If it was a British *cabinet*, very well, *tant pis, tant mieux*. I didn't chase Brits as such.

TR: You knew David Hannay, didn't you?

LF: Yes I had known him for years, before Brussels, and kept in touch with him. Our paths first crossed in 1960, when he was coming out to Tehran as a language student just as I was leaving to return to the FO. Before the UK joined the Community, David was there, negotiating in Brussels, and the 'horse for the course' and so on. Both David and I were candidates to become *chef de cabinet* in Brussels, and they quite rightly gave it to David. David is brighter than I am. But also I didn't know the Commission, and he did. So he ended up being *Chef de Cabinet* to Soames. But the consolation price for me was to be a *Directeur* with Soames and David. David and I are different from each other, but good friends; he's always been very supportive of me. His private confidential report on me as *Directeur* – which I was never told about at the time – was very positive. And we are both Persian speakers. When he was running the Soames *cabinet*, and I was on a rather 'hairy' mission in Montevideo, we exchanged these coded messages in Persian, as I say in my autobiography. I was trying to prevent some ghastly military guy – I call him *Colonel Machismo* in the book – from putting our poor EC local agent into prison. I needed fresh instructions from Soames. But I had no secure means of communication. (And the Colonel had told me, maliciously, that he was listening in to all the phone calls I made from the local EC office). So I got an Italian junior to send a telegram in Persian from the downtown Post Office. The Uruguayans, if they ever spotted the telegram, would have no idea what language it was in, and it would take them at least 48 hours to get the CIA or whoever to tell them what it said. But by that time, I would have got our man out. And it worked very well! *Ende gut, alles gut!*

I see Lord Hannay as the outstanding professional British diplomat of the post-war era. That's my opinion: if he were here, I would say the same to his face.

TR: What about Christopher Audland and Richard Hay?

LF: Both good men. Christopher Audland was Deputy-SG in the Commission. He and I were speaking on the phone last week about climate change. He was older and senior to me. It was a little embarrassing for us both, later on, when I got the top DG. A good man though and very helpful to me personally, both as Deputy Secretary General and as Director General for Energy.

Richard Hay had been the Treasury man in the Soames *cabinet*, and later became DG for Personnel. He did much to improve things and was very helpful too.

TR: When you joined the Commission as Directeur, 2 of the Deputy-DG were Dutch ...

LF: Well 'MOM' Wellenstein, my first DG, was Dutch, and the Deputy DG under whom I came was also a Dutchman, Theo Hijzen. I got on well with both of them, after a period of probation – they were wondering whether I was capable enough, because I really knew nothing about EU Trade policy on first arrival, and I had to learn it fast. And after a bit, Hijzen made me – but I didn't know it at the time – the compliment that I learned about only much later. The great Dutch technocrat Hijzen wrote to Hannay that: "Fielding is the only Director we have who can be given any job in the Directorate General, and, within 6 weeks, will be doing it brilliantly".

TR: Was there a special affinity between the Brits and the Dutch?

LF: There was some, undoubtedly. The Dutch for their part were a bit suspicious of whether we were some chauvinistic national implant into the Commission, because I think they were all genuinely Europeans of the sort that didn't admire Gaullist policies, and were reserved about some German policies, and so on. The Netherlands then was different from now; it has changed since then, for all sorts of reasons, including immigration. But all the Dutch officials were exemplary Europeans, of the *communautaire* kind. Once they had decided that this it was what we too aspired to be, and that we were *bon élève* and so on, it worked very well indeed. But ... a special affinity? Only for cheese, I think.

TR: Yes I asked the question because in the Sixties, some Dutchmen had helped a lot when Britain was applying to join the Community, from 1961 onwards. When John Robinson was operating between London and Brussels, he had important and useful Dutch contacts, such as, for instance, Rob Van Schaik.

LF: Yes that's perfectly true and I think, of all the nationalities represented in the Commission, the Dutch were – this is not a judgement conferring approval or disapproval – closer to the sort of people we were, with similar ways of thinking. When they were clear that we weren't coming to try to "rule the waves", that we were really *communautaire* ..., after that, they saw us as honorary Dutchmen, just like we saw them as *British honoraires*.

TR: You said that you had this strong will to go native. Still, did you keep contacts with the Foreign Office in London, as a matter of precaution in the eventuality of coming back?

LF: No. I avoided doing so. That would have been even worse than pandering to UKREP. Occasionally, I would bump into someone from the FO, in this Club for example. But I was not at all someone who would want to do a creepy-crawly *navette* between London and Brussels.

TR: I asked the question because in the late 1970s, when David Owen became Foreign Secretary, he had bad relationships with his top officials whom he suspected of keeping over-close contacts with other Brits in Brussels, esp. with people around Roy Jenkins.

LF: Dr. Owen was known by us dips as “Dr Death”. He could get things desperately wrong. You would expect the Office to talk to people in the British *cabinets*. It was part of their job; something perfectly normal, in the nature of things. But I took care not be involved. *Les Cabinets* are different from the *les services* – the administration of the Commission. I let them deal with London. I was a Eurocrat. Almost the only occasions on which I met FO ex-colleagues would be on the ferryboat crossing the Channel, with the usual conversation: “What are you doing? You’re still in the embassy in Bonn?” – “Yes, and how about you?” – “I’m still in the Commission” – “Oh, how boring!” And so on. Otherwise, I kept away from them.

TR: When you were appointed Head of the EEC Delegation in Tokyo, were you still on secondment from the FCO?

LF: Yes. It was when I was there that I decided to resign from the FCO, for 2 reasons, one being idealistic and the other being marital.

The marital one was that I had got married, in the end, to everybody’s relief. I had taken to wife a Medieval History Don and University Lecturer at Oxford, from Saint Hilda’s College, who came with me to Tokyo as the wife of the Head of the Delegation. Our first child was born at that time. Dr. Harvey (to use her professional name) mistrusted the Foreign Office and despised diplomatic life. She wasn’t someone who liked to dance beneath the chandeliers, *décolletée*, or appreciated people kissing her hands and offering courtly compliments. She used to say: “How insincere! What a waste of public money! If I had known how ghastly diplomatic life was, darling, I would never have married you”. So it was quite clear to me that there was no point, on marital grounds, in my hanging on, for my “return ticket” to H.M. Diplomatic Service – even if I quite fancied myself as ambassador in Iran. I therefore left the shop.

And the idealistic reason was that the FCO was under pressure to contract. They were keeping a slot for me, a “post” as we called it in Brussels’ terminology, against my return. But, at the time, the Service was trying to lose numbers. So I thought it was the honourable thing, since I had another job and someone was paying me good money, to say: “I commit hara-kiri. I shall never return!”

Thus I had personal and professional reasons for eventually resigning from the Diplomatic Service. I received a charming personal letter from Michael Palliser, as PUS in the F.O., thanking me for my efforts over the years. Despite that, even if there wasn’t a big placard at the entrance of the EEC delegation building in Tokyo saying: “The Head of Delegation is a former member of HM Diplomatic Service”, I was still considered by diplomatic colleagues, British and non-British, as “one of the boys”. That stayed, certainly.

TR: Arriving in Tokyo as Head of the Delegation, you had a sort of pioneering work to do; there wasn't anything in place, was it?

LF: It was quite small, functioning rather ineffectually. Its weakness lay in the personality of the elderly Head of the Delegation, Wolfgang Ernst – “Papa Ernst”, as we called him – a poor quality German official who had been recruited after the war – much of the German Civil Service reconstructed after the war was rather mediocre in ability – who then came on to the Commission. His performance was problematic. He wasn’t up to the job, up to doing it properly. The other people there were working more or less OK. But I reorganised things, focusing on getting not only policy but also office management on the right lines. It had been erratic and all over the place before. “Papa Ernst” used to boast about his “double-eagle approach”, which was: “I give a task to somebody to do, then I find someone else in the team and I give him the same task, and they each come forward with their thing and I take the one I like better!” This was madness. He had also, probably, served in German intelligence in Sweden during the war and possibly concealed a fascist background, just like a certain recent Austrian Chancellor.

TR: Did you enjoy it?

LF: Enormously, and my wife loved it too! We found the food very slimming; we played a lot of squash; it was possible for me to see a lot of her – and of our little daughter, when she came. There was time to devote to the family which, as DG, I didn’t have later. She liked Japan, and –

despite herself – actually became quite attached to diplomatic life in Tokyo. To some extent she found that she could “do her own thing” – set up an Oxford and Cambridge Society (most of whose members were Japs), give lectures as an (unpaid) Visiting Professor at the leading local universities, etc. While she could not foxhunt or play polo, as she had done back home, she was invited to help keep the Emperor’s horses fit – a great honour. It was the happiest time of our life, I think, the 4 years there. The five subsequent years in Brussels were tougher. It was a miracle that I managed to find the time and occasion to help produce a second child in Brussels! I was almost never there, but negotiating in Geneva or trouble-shooting round the world.

TR: In 1982, you came back from Tokyo and took over from Roy Denman as Director-General for External Relations. You already explained about your relationship with him in your book. Would you like to say something else? Did you know him before?

LF: No. I knew him in 2 capacities. One capacity was when he was the British government’s representative on the *Comité 113*. That committee was composed of senior trade policy officials from the Member State capitals, who would meet at intervals in Brussels and give their advice to the Commission. It worked exceptionally well. I liked it very much. I never relished discussing trade policy in the COREPER, because the atmosphere was not conducive and people were over-concerned with national ambitions and extraneous political considerations. But the 113 Committee and the Commission were close: we spoke the same language, knew each other, respected each other. You got common sense out of these people. Of course the Commission proposed, the Member States disposed. But it was we who had the initiative. I knew Roy first in that context.

Later, he became Second PUS in the Cabinet Office, when he moved out of the trade ministry to No 10, and started dealing with European policy as a whole. When I heard, 6 months in advance, that he was going to become the new DG in Brussels, I went over to London to see him: “You may not remember me, I was the guy who put the Canada and Australia policy papers to the *Comité 113*. You are going to be my DG. That’s fine. But there are certain things you need to know in advance”. Later, at his request, I wrote him detailed letters to spell things out – not creeping or ingratiating, but down to earth and nitty gritty. His reputation was a little controversial. He could be arrogant, aggressive, unpleasant, a difficult man. But he said to me, not long before he died: “Those letters you wrote me, Leslie, from Brussels, when I was still in the Cabinet Office, really did open my eyes”. To some extent, we bonded, although

completely different. I'm a Christian and he was not. He was tough, and slightly mad. He hated the FCO. They were his enemies. But I was, in his eyes, an FCO rebel, an outcast who had been pushed out of the FCO to the Commission, and was therefore potentially an ally of Denman in the great fight against all those posh people in the FCO. In practice, we worked together very well. He would have been happy if I had succeeded him as the Head of the Washington delegation; just as he was happy when I took over his job in Brussels, after he had crossed the Atlantic.

That was him; I cannot say I ever loved him, like I loved Delors or Palliser. But I respected him. I defended him when he was Head of the Delegation in Washington and got into scrapes. And I repaid the kindness he had shown me.

He was a commanding figure, a great tower of strength. To the point that, when I took over from him as Director General, all the people in DG1 were saying: "Leslie is not another Roy. He's just one of those diplomats. He's not going to be tough enough". And it took them 6 months to work out that I was every bit as effective as Denman, but in a different way. Morale then rose again and I got carried shoulder-high.

But succeeding Denman was not easy. He was an effective trade negotiator and also a very skilled draftsman. As an FCO man, I would do a first draft and play with it, ask people to comment etc., while he just came straight out onto paper, in final form. He had a brilliant mind. He had weak points to him. But as a trade negotiator, he was highly effective. Everyone respected him, even the French. Incidentally, his German was brilliant. He had read both French and German at University. And he was a great admirer of German culture and literature, and so on. Occasionally I would pull out of the hat some quotation from Schiller or Goethe or whoever, like that – and he would complete it. He had a great admiration for the best of Germany (even if I thought it was slightly aberrant and kinky).

TR: You alluded to the fact that the job of DG was particularly demanding. What was the best part of it?

LF: At the level of *pour la petite histoire*, having some power over people's lives, to empower them and see their career, properly managed – we talked about this earlier – gave me real satisfaction. Professionally and policy-wise, the greatest satisfaction was launching the Uruguay Round negotiation from scratch – it a time of huge international protectionist pressures – rolling back protectionist measures, finding something positive for the GATT to do, bringing in services as well as goods, and getting it all moving again.

I also took a perverse pleasure in my love-hate with the American trade representatives. They talked big about multilateral liberalisation and globalisation and so on; but were sometimes dirty and protectionist in their national trade policies. They never knew how to take me: I had this track record, as a British diplomat, of having worked closely with them. I was thought to be a classic British transatlantic 'special relationship' kind of man. Yet here I was being very tough with them, telling them to bugger off, and confronting them when they were doing the wrong thing. And then, when they tried to block me, I would find some way through to the White House or whatever, going over their heads or behind their backs. So they found me a typically tricky, slippery, European. "How was this possible, because this is the Leslie Fielding whom we've thought highly of, a real British diplomat, convinced by the importance of the transatlantic relationship?" Both things were true. I wasn't going to take any crap, but I started from the fact that basically I was sympathetic and that enabled me to be tougher than a French colleague would have found it, in my place.

What was deeply satisfying was to have the chance to get EEC relations running smoothly with the Old Commonwealth countries – Canada, Australia, New Zealand. Canada was easy because Trudeau wanted a *lien contractuel* with the enlarged EC, once Britain had joined. I negotiated it and it was a great success. Australia was more difficult, because sometimes they wanted to be populist attackers of our European agricultural policy, and at other times they wanted to be friends. The personality of the Australian Prime Minister of the day mattered: some of them hated me, some of them loved me. New Zealand was a rather sad case, initially going nowhere. In the course of the UK accession negotiations, it was agreed that the UK had to phase out duty-free butter and cheese imports. But I was able to keep the New Zealand sheep meat exports going, which the French didn't like too much. Otherwise, I encouraged the Kiwis to develop other markets, so as to stand on their own feet. This sounds paternalistic, and probably was. And it was not easy for me to do, as an English person. I was under surveillance. Canada was alright because of Trudeau, because of the *Québécois* and the rest of it. But some people were nervous: "What is Fielding up to, with these Australians and New Zealanders?"

The main thing was certainly, at a time of growing protectionism, to help the EU play a crucial role in Geneva. We accounted for a higher percentage of world trade then, than the EU does today. We were *persona grata* in the GATT. We were "in" with the Third World, with the Lomé people, Brazil even with the Australians, the Americans. There was Europe – at the middle!

And the Commission at the middle of Europe! We had real power, at the centre. I didn't find that intoxicating. It was hard work. But it gave a great professional satisfaction.

TR: You were back in London in 1987. How did you react to the Bruges speech?

LF: I was dismayed, I thought it was half true and half false. A number of things in it were perfectly reasonable. But it was presented in a way which pandered to Europhobia in the Conservative party. When I was at Sussex University, I remained active in the European movement. But my wife wasn't well and I left them after 5 years, to retire. I became a country gentleman in Shropshire, my wife's county. I became active in the Conservative party there – I'm not normally a party political animal, but I had to confront and come to grips with the Europhobia in grassroots Conservatism; I was horrified by it, because no one ever stood up to these people and corrected their often wilful misrepresentations. And much of this was down to the ambiguities, myopic prejudices and (possibly unconscious) evasions of Margaret Thatcher. The Bruges speech gave the wrong ideas to the wrong people, for the wrong reasons. But I kept my cool, and spoke out persistently in public, to try to get things into better perspective.

TR: Did you keep an eye on how the FO was changing the 1980s, even if you were not part of it anymore?

LF: Yes. After I left the Commission and became Vice-Chancellor at Sussex, I came back more into contact with the FO. Because it was natural: I set up a post-graduate European Studies Institute at Sussex, and I chaired the Sussex Development Institute which brought me into touch with the Department of International Development in London; I had Cabinet Ministers and senior officials come and look at the University to see what I was doing. Above all, Sussex, was a very much Europe-oriented University and this brought me back into contact with FO colleagues.

But in retirement in Shropshire – goodness me it was 20 years ago! – with nothing very much to do, except shoot birds and things like that, I think my contacts with my ex-colleagues blossomed even further. They would come and stay in that rather grand house we then had, (13 bedrooms and a ballroom and so on) and I would find myself in London in return.

And then I became slowly aware of the horrible things that were beginning to happen under Blair: the worst was the Iraq war, in the run up to which I confess that I spoke in public

supporting the case for invading. Because I had been duped by the *dossier*, as it was called, that Blair put before the House of Commons, supposedly with the support of the Joint Intelligence Committee. I thought, and said in public, to church assemblies: "It's all very well, you clergy and bishops sitting there and saying: "Dear, oh dear!" But this is the real world, and if there's a government *dossier* before the House of Commons, you can be sure there is more than that to it, and there are certainly things that they can't say for security reasons, which confirm that Saddam Hussein is up to no good".

Years earlier, I had at one time in my career, served briefly, as a secretary of the Joint Intelligence Committee. The JIC's Chairman was always a detached senior diplomat and its secretaries were detached young diplomats like me, sitting with the spooks, MI5, MI6, GCHQ and the rest, all around the table, drafting things together. Intelligence appraisal was kept entirely separate from policy formation. Policy wasn't allowed to change appraisal, and vice-versa. But, by the time of Iraq, the JIC was on the back foot, spin doctors interfering with its assessments. The Committee was then chaired by a politically inexperienced SIS officer, a very good spy but rather lost in Whitehall and Westminster politics. And, on policy itself, no serious Foreign Office input was allowed. In the case of Iraq (which, you know, used to be ours one time, a protectorate after the Turks left) we would have said: "Look, the inhabitants of Iraq are not crying out for McDonalds and hamburgers and the Westminster parliamentary model and so on. This is a place with Shias and Sunnis and Kurds. And no solid Western democratic traditions or institutions. It is not what you think. It's tricky".

Somebody in this Club was telling me only yesterday that messages were being passed by Saddam Hussein to us – not to the Americans, perhaps because we had this special position in Iraq and were thought to understand it better – saying: "What's the problem? I don't have these nuclear weapons. Come and go anywhere you like. I don't want to go to war". And that was apparently disregarded. And if we were determined to invade, the *last* thing to have done, according to Foreign Office-style thinking, was to disband the Iraqi army and gendarmerie and police completely. The British (ex-imperial) way of doing it would have been: you kick out the top man; you wind down his imperial guard a little, you remove the top 100 nasty people (putting them in prison or something). But you keep everyone else where they are, put salaries up slightly, retain the structure of order and good behaviour and so on, and rule Iraq through the Iraqis. Then get out as soon as you can. The American idiots did it the other way. We did have our man at the side of the benighted American viceroy in Baghdad. But of course he wasn't listened to. Then we would try to get the Foreign Office to

say to No 10: “Look, for God’s sake, this isn’t going anywhere. Get on the line to the White House”. But Blair didn’t want it.

I was taken in at the time, and subsequently I felt duped, by the ‘dossier’. The war should not have been prosecuted in that way. There was no balanced assessment. Professional Foreign Office advice, side-lined, even solicited.

TR: Yes it seems that basic constitutional mechanisms of control didn’t work properly.

LF: Yes, and we haven’t the advantage of an American written Constitution with checks and balances! There were no checks and balances on Blair!

TR: It is better now? Were there lessons learnt from that episode?

LF: Things have improved. William Hague, whom I know slightly, but only very slightly, is doing a good job as Foreign Secretary. I don’t fully agree with him on Europe. But on all other things, he’s a powerful Foreign Secretary of the kind we haven’t had since Douglas Hurd was Foreign Secretary. He can talk eye-to-eye to the P.M. and he’s putting things back on the rails again.

But I don’t think the Service will ever again be what it was in its heyday. So much else has changed, too. Britain’s position in the world, social and other changes, etc. I don’t know that all British diplomats today have the total discipline and commitment that we had. The Service was a legend, in its day.

TR: Yes I remember Sir Stephen Wall saying the same kind of thing when he talked about “not quite like a military career but [...] a thing apart.”

Maybe a last question: do you think that, at some point, religion can have an influence on the views that British diplomats or civil servants have on Europe?

LF: No, not in my opinion. And, in fact, religion never came up for discussion. It was a private matter. For many of my years as a diplomat, I was no longer the practising Christian I had been as an undergraduate and am once more today. While in the Army and at Cambridge I had wanted to enter a religious order, to become a Franciscan in the Church of England. I tested that vocation and it didn’t work. One of the reasons why I was restless and miserable at

Cambridge was that I had come up with a religious idea and it was not working out. In the event, I didn't really come back to being a disciplined practising Christian (going to mass, making regular confession and all that), until I arrived in Brussels in 1973. The two are not connected, I went out of the Church, and then I came back. But my diplomacy was the same throughout.

I don't think in the Foreign Office it mattered, either way. In the Commission things may have been slightly different, however. One day, when Claude Cheysson (one of my two Commissioners when I was Director-General – the other was Willi de Clercq) was making trouble for me behind my back – a Deputy Director-General under me, a Catholic, came to report the fact: "I've got to tell you all this, Leslie because, after all, *Tu es croyant, hein?* You're a fellow believer?" And President Delors said to me once: "*Ah Monsieur Fielding, je crois savoir que vous êtes un Pasteur, n'est ce pas?*" I replied: "*Pas tout à fait, M. le Président. Plutôt une sorte de diacre, dans l'Eglise Anglicane*" – "*Ah, l'Eglise de la Reine. Bien entendu. Bravo!*" He liked that; he was after all himself an ecumenical Roman Catholic. But religion took no part at all in the Foreign Office. Palliser was a serious and disciplined Catholic for example, but it didn't come directly into things at all. The rather romantic background I'm describing, of "the sense of service" and so on, was more the relic of Empire. We laugh at it, today. But in those days, we took pride in it. *La mission civilisatrice de la Grande-Bretagne* was actually part of our heritage (*laugh*).

TR: Thank you very much Sir Leslie.