

BDOHP Interview Biographical Details

Douglas Richard HURD (Lord Hurd of Westwell)

Born 8 March 1930, eldest son of Baron Hurd and Stephanie Corner.

Rather than a discussion of his career, the interview consists of Lord Hurd talking generally on such subjects as the impact of his diplomatic career on his work as Foreign Secretary (pp 2-3), the diplomatic service and its reputation (pp 3-6), impartiality of officials (pp 6-8), resignations (p 8 and pp 16-17), the Downing Street foreign affairs adviser (pp 8-9), relations with Europe (pp 10-12), resident clerks (pp 12-13), the Permanent Under-Secretary (pp 14-15), successes and disappointments in his own career (pp 13 -15), the 2003 Iraq War (pp 15-16), different ways Foreign Secretaries operate (pp 17-18) and the tools of diplomacy (pp 18-19).

British Diplomatic Oral History Programme

Interview with The Rt Hon the Lord Hurd of Westwell CH, CBE

Interviewer: Lady Crowe

13 January 2005

Insight of former career diplomat and Foreign Secretary into British diplomacy

VC: Lord Hurd, you are unique amongst Foreign Secretaries, as far as I can see, to have experience both in the Service and as a Minister, and therefore perhaps you can give us some insights that other people could not. I wonder what you think the qualities of a diplomat are, and then explore the qualities of a politician and how much you think they dovetail?

DH: Well they dovetail very closely. A diplomat has to listen, to understand what he's being told, to understand the policy which his government is pursuing and to communicate that policy as far as possible in ways which are acceptable to the people he is talking to. That is not always possible, but he has to do his best. What the professional diplomat does not do is actually create the policy. He advises, under our system, the Ministers who create the policy but it is their decision. Therefore the mindset is slightly different and you do find among diplomats, people (and indeed I became one myself) who, realising that the actual fundamental decisions are not taken in their profession but by Ministers, get a little restless. On the other hand you find diplomats who welcome that, and operate quite clearly and happily under that constraint. So a Minister has to do all the things that a diplomat has to do. He has to listen to a wide range of people, form his own view. He has to work with colleagues, establish a policy and then communicate that persuasively to his constituents, to Parliament and the civil servants. So it is a wider job. Usually not such a detailed one.

VC: More demanding?

DH: It's got a different dimension to it, which I always rather enjoyed – what one might call the constituency and parliamentary dimension, I rather enjoyed that. No, I think being a Minister is more fun.

Possible disadvantage for a Foreign Secretary of a career background

VC: I wondered if there were any disadvantages coming to the Office having had that diplomatic background?

DG: Some of my critics said there were. Some of my critics said that I operated too much in a sort of diplomatic professional mindset and wasn't thinking – as people now say – outside the box. I don't think that's really true. There were several occasions on which I became quite impatient with the traditional mindset. It was a huge advantage to know how the Foreign Office worked. To know what an Embassy was like. To know some of the people – but that was secondary - more how the system worked, how telegrams were composed, how different embassies related to one another and to the Foreign Office. It was certainly a huge advantage to know all that before I started.

Changes in the Diplomatic Service

VC: I wonder what your view is of the Service, having been in it and looking at it, in your time? And your view on how it has changed?

DH: It's hugely changed, in some ways for the better. I think that there's less flimflam than there used to be. I used to find myself doing a fair number of things in my early years, which I simply didn't think were worthwhile. Writing dispatches on let's say Italian regional elections, when I was posted in Rome, which I was pretty sure would only be read by someone my age in the Foreign Office, who would tick them off, quite rightly and they'd go into a file somewhere and no doubt they're still there. But they didn't really add very much to anybody's interest or well-being. And there was also more protocol. There was much more of that when I went to Rome as a young married diplomat; my wife was expected to do things which were perfectly normal at the time – things for the Ambassadors and so on. That simply wouldn't occur, wouldn't arise now. There's much more concern now with the wishes and welfare of the Foreign Service individual. I was simply packed up like a parcel and posted. I was very happy

with the places I was sent to. I was lucky too. I was very lucky. Two spells in the Foreign Office – Peking, New York, Rome – I don't think anyone could complain about that. So I was very lucky, but nobody asked me. Whereas now each post is really for negotiation; the position of the wife, the working wife, the professional wife, the professional partner, becomes very important. I think something's been lost. I think there's a little too much concern now with fashionable jargon – changing people's names and labels, and it's a bit too mechanistic now, I think. So something's been lost. Something's been gained – but that's life.

VC: I remember in your book you said you had not quite enough to do in Rome?

DH: Yes, that's why I started writing novels.

VC: And I remember your wife at the time talking about Ambassadors wives growing dotty under the pressure of the job sometimes.

DH: Sometimes. Yes, I'd better not go further than that. It's a fair point. Running a huge embassy – all the money running through your hands, and you might well be a person to whom those sums of money would be rather daunting. Having to deal with foreign servants, all that kind of thing, and produce an ever-smiling face, and ever well turned out. It was quite hard work. It remains quite hard work.

VC: We talk a lot these days about the duty of care and I'm not sure if the Office accepts that. Do you think the Office had a duty of care in your time? It sounds as if it didn't particularly, and you as a Minister, were you conscious of that duty?

DH: Well it was accepted. The rules were there and you didn't expect to be consulted too much about your own future. You had voluntarily entered a crack service, an élite service; you were proud of that and you accepted what went with that. I think there was very little resentment. I remain in quite close touch with a lot of the people I joined the Foreign Office with in 1952. It was a great opportunity to make friends and I've done that since as well. We were an accepting generation really. But the world has changed. I don't think that you could

now recruit people and treat them peremptorily, perfectly politely, but treat them without consulting their interest in the way that was normal then. That would not work now.

VC: You talked about a crack service, an élite service.

DH: Deliberately.

VC: And you believe that?

DH: Yes – by which I don't mean that it's exclusive or can be exclusive of certain minority groups in our community, of course not. But I do mean that they have to be good. That's what élite is. It's recruiting from everywhere with the right qualities and the qualities are crucial.

British Diplomatic Service's reputation abroad

VC: People sometimes say that Britain has the best Foreign Service. You've been in a position where you've been able to see others at work. Any comment on that?

DH: I think at its best it's superb. And I think that is still true. I think we have people in it who are absolutely first class and working in an atmosphere which encourages them to show that. There's plenty of old fashioned diplomacy in the world today and we have plenty of excellent people doing it. I think you do get a good many humdrum people. A good many people who keep the show on the road, but one can't say a great deal more than that. But I think on the whole, the Foreign Service has kept up the quality. I think it is better actually than any others I've had experience of. Brussels is a good test of that. Obviously I spent, as Foreign Secretary, a good deal of my time at the Council of Ministers in Brussels and elsewhere, and I found from my colleagues – that is to say the other Foreign Ministers – that they had very substantial respect for the people who were advising me, not necessarily me, but my advisers, for the machine, the speed, accuracy, completeness of information, which was available to me and not to them. And thus seeing the Service through their eyes was quite useful and encouraging.

VC: Weaknesses of the Service though?

DH: Weaknesses of the Service. Now or then?

VC: Then.

DH: Well, then there was a certain peremptoriness. I mean I think it could have done with a little more care for the people who worked for it. There was too much concern for protocol. Therefore there was a good deal of wasted time. Not always a clear idea of what was required. All that going alongside the Now, as I said, I think there is a little too much correctness – a little too much concern for whatever the jargon is at the moment. A little, not quite enough willingness to think sharply through to the heart of the problem, forgetting all the surrounding detail. I think I see that – I see that.

Impartiality of officials

VC: That leads me to another area I wanted to discuss with you. It is the impartiality of officials now. You were impartial when you were a young official. There are other people who were trying for the political world – Brian Gould, George Walden. In your experience did you find your colleagues broadly impartial?

DH: Oh yes. I don't think that was ever a problem. This is one of the strongest characteristics of the Service. Some of them are privately fascinated by the party political process and they sometimes put their little toe into it, as it were, and they know this is rather naughty - and there are limits. I mean for example now we're talking probably a month or two away from an election, it's the job of the Civil Service, Foreign Office as well as others, at this stage to look at the policies of the Opposition, the main Opposition, and possibly even to discuss them with them. And Ministers know that and this is permitted. When polling day comes the Foreign Secretary knows perfectly well that in the desk of his main Private Secretary are some papers which would be shown to the new Foreign Secretary if the Government changed. Once it happened to me by mistake. We were re-elected. I continued as Foreign Secretary, but I was

shown by mistake one or two of the papers which had been prepared for the Labour Foreign Secretary had they won. And everybody got slightly red-faced and giggly about that, but I wasn't shocked because I knew that was part of the process. And Foreign Office officials, like Civil Servants as a whole, don't find that difficult. It would be a huge mistake if that changed. I worry a little bit about the Special Advisers – not in the Foreign Office but elsewhere who are paid by the taxpayer and operate in that area where party politics and public policy intertwine. I'm in favour now of having a rather stricter definition in a Civil Service Act as to what these Special Advisers are and what they do, and what they do not do.

VC: How far do you think officials should go when they can see the Government, their Minister, making what they see as a mistake?

DH: They should go quite far. They should be straight in expressing their view and impressing their view. If Ministers decide on something which, in spite of the advice they've had, which is something which you, "X", thinks foolish, wrong, then I think in extreme cases it is right to resign. The case I have very much in mind is the case of my Ambassador at the UN at the time of Suez, Sir Pierson Dixon. He has written about this and I've written about it too. He was holding the fort. I mean he disapproved of the policy, but on the other hand to resign at that stage would really – if the British Ambassador in action day by day in the Security Council decided he would resign, it really would have been a huge blow to the Government. So he decided to soldier on having made his points in private. I think he was probably right to do that. One or two other people at that time resigned, but then they were not in the key operating position day by day. Not at all an easy decision. There comes a time when you feel strongly you should continue to apply a policy.

VC: It sounds as if officials on the whole have their greatest loyalty to the Government of the time, no matter what it is doing?

Resignation on a point of principle and the leaking of information

DH: Not entirely. I think in the recent Iraq War this is a case in point – I don't know of officials who actually resigned on that, although of course retired officials have been, quite

reasonably in my view, vociferous against it. But I imagine there must have been quite a struggle in a good many people's minds.

VC: Whistleblowers? Again whistleblowers have an agony of mind perhaps. I'm not sure if you encountered anybody in your time who had things to say about the Service, or who leaked papers in the way that happens now?

DH: I don't think so really. Of course people have things to say about the Service, and they should say them first of all within the Service and to the Service. Of course people do that all the time. Maybe I'm just old-fashioned – but I'm not temperamentally usually sympathetic to people who leak outside. It's rather an attractive option now if you like to see your name in headlines. It's perhaps too attractive an option. I'm not enthusiastic about that. There are cases where it would be justified certainly. I agree with that, but I don't think it's always admirable.

VC: It is a way of scuppering a policy you don't agree with.

DH: Exactly. It's rather too easy a way; not actually arguing it, just leaking selected bits of a paper. As I say there may be cases where it's justified, but I don't find it sympathetic.

VC: And it didn't happen in your time?

DH: Well I can't really think of a case, really. I don't think I can think of a case.

Position of the Foreign Affairs adviser in 10 Downing Street

VC: Another aspect of officials and their loyalty, as it were, was the position of the Foreign Affairs Private Secretary in Number 10 who was reputed to be batting for the Prime Minister, and not necessarily for the Foreign Office.

DH: Well there was that view. It was wrong. We're talking about Charles Powell, Lord Powell. I thought he did admirably. Margaret Thatcher was a Prime Minister who had strong

views, at least at the latter part of her premiership, about all kinds of foreign policy. Who knew all the foreign potentates of one kind or another and who, when she had strong views, tended to express them. What Charles had to do was to be the filter, the channel, and he toned down her views to a certain extent, but he knew she trusted him wholly. No I think he did a very good job for her. Occasionally there were irritations, but I think it was a mistake to blame him. People look back on those years and compare the present situation where the Prime Minister has instead of one Foreign Office Private Secretary, two big units. The machinery is hugely enlarged. The workload may be slightly greater, but Charles Powell and his predecessors, carried a very great weight. They led very difficult, restricted personal lives because life was consumed by working for the Prime Minister. I think that they were remarkable public servants, particularly Charles Powell because he carried on during the most difficult times.

Position of Britain between Europe and the United States

VC: Thank you. Can I move you to a broader canvas? I heard Timothy Garton Ash the other day talking about the position Britain is in between the United States and Europe, and I think he argues that it hasn't found the role that Dean Acheson was saying we were seeking, and it's veering, he said, between the two. I wonder if you had that dilemma yourself? Whether you observed it as an official or whether you felt it as a Minister? I mean - the Westland affair for example was an example of that. You weren't in the Foreign Office then, but you were a Minister then. Was that something that you were conscious of?

DH: Oh hugely, because I was Home Secretary and I was very much in the centre of it. I never saw Westland as a US/Europe thing. That issue was very secondary. The real issues were those of confidence among colleagues and how Government was carrying on. That's what we all got into a lather about. US/Europe tension was quite strong at times on the Bosnian issue which was quite the most difficult I had to handle. As Europe tends to do all things together, or tries to anyway; sometimes unsuccessfully, sometimes successfully – then this question of proper partnership, EU/US partnership, comes well to the fore, and I think it's actually the most important foreign policy question. It was taking shape in my time and there were examples. But I think it has become much more central since then.

VC: You've always been a pro-European, I think, yourself?

DH: I certainly believe that Ted Heath who was the first politician with whom I worked outside the Foreign Service, was absolutely right to take us in and I believe our membership is crucial to our future. I'm not in favour of joining the Euro straight away. I'm certainly not in favour of increasing the powers of the Commission. I think the new Constitution would strike about the right balance there. It's member states who count and so on. So there are lots of irritations and always will be about Europe. But yes, I'm strongly in favour of our membership.

A European Foreign Minister

VC: And a European Foreign Minister?

DH: Yes, alongside the others. The Constitution is very clear that you have a European foreign policy only when everybody agrees. We have one towards Iran as I speak, with Britain, France and Germany working together; the United States acquiescing to this; Europe as whole agreeing with it. This is what ought to happen. I am very much in favour of that. You need somebody to carry that through. At the moment we have two people: the one inside the Commission has Chris Patten until recently; the other, outside – Solana. The Constitution will bring those two together. I think that's a good idea. You can do it without a Constitution, but where that's a way that Europe can act together, it should do so. But where it can't, it should continue to do its own thing; nation states will do their own thing.

The Common Foreign and Security Policy

VC: Well, you were quite instrumental in your time as Foreign Secretary in contributing to the development of the Common Foreign and Security Policy. Was there any tension in Government about that?

DH: It didn't shape philosophically. It was more a matter for individual cases. But I don't know if there was a great deal of friction. Bosnia was the most difficult, but the problem with Bosnia was not so much that the countries of Europe disagreed with each other, as that we were so united in frustration about how far we could go from outside in picking up the bits of the former Yugoslavia, and preventing Serbs, Croats and Muslims from killing each other, and we were groping in a sort of mist. Gradually the doctrine took shape, but we were right to intervene, sending people to kill and be killed in a good humanitarian cause, in sometimes intolerable situations. But I think that argument is now all up in the air again after our experience of doing that in Iraq and the difficulties we've met there. So this is an ongoing argument.

VC: The role of officials in the decisions about Bosnia – have you got any comment on how influential they were?

DH: Well we all grubbed together – you could put it that way. There were individuals who had particular points of view, but if I think of the central people who advised me at that time, I don't think any of them dissented from what we were trying to do. We were picking our way through a desperate problem, using all means to stop the Bosnian war and bring about peace or being short of actually sending in our armies to change the régime and impose a solution. ...in the end because President Clinton joined in, more forcefully and encouraged us to be more forceful than we had been up till then, and the big question is whether that had that happened a year or two earlier, the war would have ended earlier, or whether it would have simply ended in the sort of troubles we see in Iraq.

VC: I was thinking about the leading role in negotiations such as Dayton, and how much was owed to officials and how much they reported back to base and got the agreement of Ministers along the way. It's an interesting example perhaps of a watershed negotiation fronted by officials. Interesting to see how much they were in touch with Ministers.

DH: Dayton was not in my time so I don't know the specific answers. But they would have been because Bosnia was very high profile by then and so they would have been. Just as in this recent case of Iran where the European agreement with Iran was negotiated in a very

professional, old-fashioned way by French, German and British officials on behalf of Europe, but the Ministers, particularly the British and German Ministers, worked together very closely. That works quite smoothly under our system.

Resident Clerks in the Foreign Office

VC: Let me take you down a small corner of officialdom which is the Resident Clerk. Tell me, did you have any encounters with them?

DH: Of course. Early on I never was a Resident Clerk, but I had friends who were and they thoroughly enjoyed the experience. I used to sit at night in their flat after dinner and watch the process at work.

VC: As an official?

DH: As an official. As Foreign Secretary one was constantly in touch with them. No, it worked very well. The system has grown up; the term has been changed. You can't have Chief Clerks or Resident Clerks – though I don't know why not – very descriptive titles, but that's all been made grander and it's all become more bureaucratised, bigger. Inevitably that's probably right because more British people are now abroad. More things happen at weekends. The weight of that kind of emergency work is greater, but it used to be very informal and very effective. Now it's more formal but it's still effective.

Achievements in an unusually successful career

VC: Your own time as an official and as a Minister – what were the areas that you were most proud of – achievements that you were most proud of in each function?

DH: Well, I've never thought of it as achievements. I think being a Foreign Office official and, I would say being a Minister, is not really matter of climbing mountains and putting little flags on the top and saying this is my achievement. It's more about steering a boat so you don't

hit the rocks. I think most of the time is spent doing that. I think what we did in China in those very early days in my first posting immediately after Mao took over, five years after Mao took over, was keeping a presence there and gradually working our way more into China, being able to travel, being able to..... My time in New York – well keeping the British reputation, keeping our interests afloat in the turbulent world of the UN, was fascinating and I think well worthwhile. Rome, although I enjoyed it, was not really my idea of a full-time job. I enjoyed very much being Private Secretary to the Permanent Under Secretary. There you really didn't have much say in policy. You dealt with all kinds of eccentric oddments and eccentric people, which was huge fun. But you did get a marvellous bird's eye view of the machine, how it worked,

VC: Perhaps it fuelled your ambition to be a Minister yourself?

Relations between the Permanent Under Secretary and the Secretary of State

DH: Well I think it did rather. One could write a whole essay about the relationship between the Permanent Under Secretary and the Minister, and I saw two different Permanent Secretaries doing it in two different ways.

VC: Who were?

DH: Sir Derek Hoyer Millar who became Lord Inchyra. He was my first one in 1960. He regarded himself mainly as a sort of shepherd of the Foreign Service. He took infinite trouble over individuals, particularly senior individuals and where they were posted, and how things were done. He didn't regard himself as in charge of policy. He shoved an oar in every now and then. But Harold Caccia was much more engaged, working much faster, much more intense, an energetic man; he hated having paper on his desk and got rid of it at once. He hated having anything pending. And you learnt these little things. He inserted himself into every main policy discussion and was very sensible and balanced when he did so. Two quite different people, doing different parts of the job.

Disappointments in the course of Lord Hurd's career

VC: If you look back at – and we've talked about not climbing mountains – but were there disappointments? Were there areas that didn't work in the way that you would have liked?

DH: Well Suez was a disaster. I was strongly aware of that disaster and the price we paid.

VC: Would you care to say something about the price we paid? It may be obvious, but perhaps your view of it might be good to put on record?

DH: I think we paid a huge price in terms of our reputation for good sense. It wasn't so much in terms of our physical power, because obviously our physical power was declining and our empire was dissolving as a result of that. Everybody knew that. There was no secret about it. But we had retained up to 1956 a reputation for good sense and integrity in dealing with other countries and with other situations, which we then lost. In a small way we made the same sacrifice in joining the Americans in Iraq. But Suez was more catastrophic because it was a bigger mistake, I think, and we had further to fall. I think we nearly made a big mistake on German reunification, and one of the two things I actually see as an achievement is that we, not just me, but I was Foreign Secretary, managed to pull the Prime Minister back from total opposition to German reunification. It would have been a disaster for us. Maastricht I think was a good treaty. We got into great difficulty domestically. I was pleased – that was mainly John Major's achievement, but I was pleased with my part in that. That was good. Bosnia, I'm not sure. There are question marks in my mind, which I've written about, as to whether we could have done things more quickly. Hong Kong – there were a series of issues there with Chris Patten – intellectually I thoroughly enjoyed that – I enjoyed haggling that out. I'm just thinking aloud over the hillocks as it were – the things that did take up a huge amount of time.

Opinion about the war in Iraq (2003) and its aftermath

VC: Iraq – it's impossible really to talk about foreign policy and not talk about Iraq. I wonder if the broader question I gave you about which way Britain is going is relevant here..... whether Iraq is some kind of a watershed? Have you got a view on that?

DH: I have. I think a big mistake was made in not trying to achieve a European position before the crisis came. When I put this point to people in the Foreign Office they said they didn't try because it wouldn't have been possible. Well –there's an old saying – “You can't be sure of that till you've tried”. I think it is possible that we actually could have ironed out our differences before, and if that had happened, there had been a common European voice, I don't say it would have prevented the war, but it would have prevented some of the damage inside the alliance, inside the Western world which the war has done. But more crucially, whether that's true or not, I think it was just a mistake for the Prime Minister to rally in such an unqualified way, without thinking through the consequences on the basis of arguments which have proved to be false. Immediately adhering to the American view, was, I think, wrong and has been proved to be wrong and I hope will not be repeated. It wasn't necessary.

VC: And where does it leave us as a nation in this tension that I've been suggesting?

DH: Well I think the problem is softening now because I think the Administration – President Bush in his second term – is clearly looking much more seriously at partners because the policy of simply going alone has reached the buffers. None of the crises you can think of now, the continuing crisis in Iraq, in Iran and Korea, in Africa - none of them. You can't conceive of having a simple American solution with a coalition of obedient allies tagging along. They've got to have more serious partnerships than that and that's where Britain comes back again into the game in a serious way. We have an opportunity now, I think that arises, to recover from a lack of balance, a lack of good sense over Iraq. So nothing is fatal, you know. You climb back and I think that's what we shall do.

Resignations of ministers on principle

VC: Thank you for that. May I raise the matter of Ministers resigning on principle? We talked about officials resigning on principle. The last Minister to resign on principle that I can think of is Lord Carrington. I don't know if you've got any views on where the buck stops, and the issues on which Ministers should resign. There are fewer resigning issues these days.

DH: Yes there are two completely different reasons for resigning. One is where you completely disagree with the policy. Actually Nutting did that at Suez and there have been other examples since then. The other is where something has gone wrong on your watch as people say, and although you don't disagree with the policy, you feel that you were actually responsible for something that went badly wrong. It's hard looking back to argue that Carrington was responsible for what went wrong in the Falklands, and I personally, as Minister of State at the time, tried unsuccessfully to dissuade him from resigning. But I think looking back he was right to resign. It was partly because he was in the Lords. Although Lord Home was afterwards a successful Foreign Secretary in the Lords, for a time, I think it is jolly difficult in a moment of crisis to defend yourself when you're not in the Commons. So that was a technical point. So I think he was probably right to go. I think one or two should have resigned over Iraq. I do think that was a major setback for this country, is a major setback for this country, where mistakes that were predictable and predicted were made, and I think that should have been, as it were, noted as far as Government was concerned.

VC: Thank you. As Minister of State, when you look back now from the lofty heights of having been Foreign Secretary – how does it look now? At the time perhaps it was exciting. Now how does it look on the road to glory as it were?

Looking back with reflections on the way some Secretaries of State operate

DH: It was quite a small hillock, but it was a marvellous experience for four years working under Peter Carrington and then Francis Pym with a sector which was the Middle East, which was India, which was the UN with a bit of Europe in it as well. People are too sniffy now about

Ministerial travel, but I think Ministers should be not just allowed, but encouraged to travel to individual countries to spend two or three days, not just half a day, so that they meet people outside Government. We used to try and have a dinner for – we said rather patronisingly – interesting Koreans, interesting Nepalese, people not to do with Ministers but an editor, a businessman, and so on. It was just to get a little bit outside the official circle. Maybe look at some pictures, and maybe climb a mountain, you know, things like that for half a day or a day. This was all good. It should not be discouraged. I think we've got too measly and mean about all that. I enjoyed my time, and of course one had the knowledge with someone like Peter Carrington who was a master of his profession, that you were being encouraged to take as many decisions as you felt you could. He would always be there if it began to go wrong, or if it began to be difficult. He was always there to be consulted, to take the final responsibility. Of my Ministerial career those first four years were certainly the easiest. They certainly weren't the most important. It was a hillock, but I thoroughly enjoyed it.

VC: And did you do the same when you were Minister in allowing your Ministers of State ...?

DH: I hope so; I hope so. I certainly delegated. There are two kinds of Cabinet Minister, two kinds of Foreign Secretary therefore. There are those who gather information to themselves and have a huge capacity for detail – I don't know if you're talking to Geoffrey Howe, you probably are, but he had a reputation – asked for more and more and more. Which wasn't just a means of delaying a decision; he really wanted it. That's how his mind worked. And then he took the decision himself when he – he was rather a centraliser. I don't have the mind that can do that. Leon Brittan was the same as Home Secretary. But neither of the jobs where I followed those two people with legal backgrounds, who had an appetite not just for mastering detail, but for taking decisions on the basis of detail. I did much more delegation and that's a matter of temperament really. I was never let down. I don't think any Ministers of State ever handled things in those days which I really became angry about. But I had good Ministers of State.

VC: And officials making the linking?

DH: Of course that's right too.

The provision of the tools for the job of diplomacy

VC: Now I know we're very pressed for time, so I'm just going to ask you a last question which is – did you feel you had the right tools for the trade? You talked about time to go out to visit places. I know from your book that you enjoyed the Royal Yacht and I suppose what I'm homing in on as an example is the houses of ambassadors, which are much criticised often. Did you have the resources to do what you thought was necessary.

DH: Well I had to fight each year for the money – with the Treasury. I do think actually if you look at usefulness - if you look by any tests of commonsense, the money we spend on the Foreign Service is much more advantageous to British interest than say a single Eurofighter. I think that the balance between the huge sums spent on defence and the relatively small sums going on the Foreign Office and the British Council, the Aid Programme – the imbalance is too great. That is something we should rebalance. But within the money that I got from the Treasury in this annual negotiation I felt we were able to do a good job, yes. The house, the big houses, they had to be fully used. It's silly really to have two palaces in Rome. That's the result of – I'm not talking about the Vatican and the Republic, I'm talking about the Wolkonsky and the Porta Pia – the two palaces we have in dealing with the Republic of Italy. That was a mistake made in the '50s-'60s. We have in most major countries one major house and the thing is not to try to get rid of it but to make full use of it, including charging businesses to make use of it, etc. etc. in a modern way. I'm sure these are assets that should be preserved. There's a different problem over security which affects the houses and I think the Foreign Office has got this balance about right – the balance between protecting your staff and your embassy, but mainly your staff, to the extent that you can, without preventing them doing their job. Going out and about their business and so on. It would be a mistake to turn our embassies into bristling fortresses where no-one could get in and no-one could get out. But I think this is a difficult balance. Istanbul was a tragic example. But I think on the whole from what I can see from outside, that aspect – management gets it about right.

VC: And you're confident now about the – from what you can see – the Office and how it's run, representing our interests...?

DH: Broadly speaking I do keep in touch quite a bit. The present Secretary of State allows me to have access. I see him and I see officials quite often, with his approval. So I do keep an eye and, you know, I get irritated with some modernisms which I think are fashionable rather than effective, but those are minor irritations. I think actually the quality of people and the quality of the job remains very high. And I do actually encourage young people when they come to me to volunteer, to go in for the exams.

VC: Despite the demanding nature of the job and its impact on families?

DH: Yes, absolutely. I mean, recognising that, but I do suggest to them that they should have a go, because it's worth it.

VC: That's a wonderful view of the Service and thank you very much. Most grateful.

Transcribed by Evie Jamieson

3 February 2005

Word count 6,500