BDOHP Biographical Details and Interview Index

LAMPORT, Sir Stephen Mark Jeffrey (born 27 November 1951)
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Career (with, on right, relevant pages in interview)

Joined HM Diplomatic Service, 1974 pp 2-4
UK Mission to UN, 1974 pp 4-6
Tehran, 1975–79 pp 6-16
Iran Desk Officer, FCO, 1979-81 pp 16-19
Private Secretary to Minister of State, 1981–84 pp 19-26
(Douglas Hurd and Malcolm Rifkind)
First Secretary, Rome, 1984–88 pp 26-30
Deputy Head of Middle East Department, FCO, 1988–90 pp 30-31
Deputy Head of Personnel Department, FCO, 1990-92 pp 31-36
Deputy Private Secretary to the Prince of Wales, 1993–96 pp 36-39
Private Secretary and Treasurer to the Prince of Wales, 1996–2002 pp 39-43
IH-C: This is Ian Hay-Campbell recording Stephen Lamport on the morning of Monday, 13 January 2020.

Stephen, let’s go back to your entry into the Foreign Office – a diplomatic career. Had you had thoughts of that for some time?

SL: The story really starts with my going up to Cambridge in 1970. I went up to Corpus Christi to read history. It had always been my thought and probably my ambition that I would stay with a university career; if I had a successful undergraduate time at Cambridge, that I would then stay on, do the postgraduate degree in history and then eventually become a lecturer in history. This was the first time that anyone in my family had actually been to university let alone to Cambridge so it was quite an ambitious thought in my mind. That was how I felt for the first year of my three years. But during my first year the then Master of Corpus Christi, Sir Frank Lee – he had been head of the Civil Service – died quite suddenly and by the end of the year there had been appointed a new Master who was Sir Duncan Wilson. Duncan Wilson had been a diplomat; he had ended his career as ambassador in Moscow and he became the new Master with a very un-Cambridge Master’s-like wife called Betty and I got to know them in the remainder of my time in Cambridge quite well. And because of him, I began, I think, to realise that there were other possibilities in the world outside being an academic.

At the same time I began to realise as I looked around Cambridge and, for example, looked at those who dined in hall at Corpus, that the postgraduates who dined with us always looked rather dull and introverted, and I began to wonder whether that was actually going to be the right thing for me. At the same time, getting to know Duncan Wilson quite well as I said, I began to take the view that actually there was a much more interesting world outside and that was the world of the Foreign Office and of diplomacy. He was encouraging of this thought and so in 1973 in Spring I took that limited exam, that three part exam and, as it turned out, got through the first part and the second part (the second part was for two days and was in Northumberland Avenue where you were subjected to all kinds of group tests and
so on and so forth). The third interview was in Admiralty Arch which was then used for these purposes. I remember being taken to a room where there must have been about eight extremely fierce looking men on a raised dais and I was put onto a chair in the middle of the room with this great space between the chair and the dais and I was subjected to about 40 minutes of questions and I thought it had gone completely appallingly. Anyway, I was then told that I had passed and that I would be joining the Foreign Office in September 1973.

Of course, I was delighted by that and frankly surprised but in the meantime I had decided what I wanted to do was to defer for a year before it began. I wanted to do a further degree, an MA, in International Relations at the University of Sussex.

IH-C: How was this received?

SP: This wasn’t received very well at all was the answer but it so happened, I think by serendipity, that Duncan Wilson was giving a small dinner party a few weeks after that which included Sir Denis Greenhill, who was at that time the PUS in the Foreign Office. This was in 1973. Duncan and Betty invited me to the dinner which was very kind of them and after dinner he sat me down with Denis Greenhill and said, “Look, Denis, I think you ought to have a conversation with this man because he’s got something to ask you”. So I told Denis Greenhill what I wanted to do and he said: “I’m sure that’ll be absolutely fine. Leave it with me”. So I left it with him and lo and behold I was deferred for a year so I didn’t join the Foreign Office until 1974.

The argument, to a degree, in terms of why this was actually not just indulging my own whim was that I was doing a degree in international relations and that meant that for the third of my three terms at Sussex I wrote a small dissertation. I had chosen as a subject the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. So there was, if you like, a genuine foreign policy dimension to what I was wanting to do. I had a very nice time in Sussex; I enjoyed it for all kinds of reasons and then began life in the Foreign Office in September 1974, a year after I should otherwise have joined.

IH-C: How rude a start was that in terms of awakening to a desk job etc etc?
SL: It was a very dramatic start because (I don’t know whether this still happens) but at that time two members of the new entry each year would be sent off to the UN General Assembly in New York as reporting officers. It so happened that I was chosen to go alongside Peter Ricketts, who later of course became PUS in the 2000s. Peter and I went off to New York literally 10 days after we started in the Foreign Office, which was terrific fun.

I must just say a word about how I found the Office in those first few days because my memory of that time is of an institution which I think is probably quite different now. Of course I can’t know precisely what the FCO is like now but I recall when I started there was a very, very strong sense of collegiate identity in the Office. There was a very strong sense that one was joining a very extraordinary institution with a long history and a place in public life and indeed a place in Whitehall which was unique. It was in a sense (we all thought, anyway) the premier government department alongside (because they thought the same thing) those people in the Treasury. Those were the two most important and most powerful institutions of government at the time. One had that sense of it being a very, very special place. Today it would be looked upon as being something which was operating in an atmosphere and an environment and a culture which was part of the early 20th century rather than the 21st century. It was very powerful. I remember that all the new entrants, and there were 12 of us, were wheeled along to the office of Tom Brimelow who at that time was the PUS who gave us a little pep talk. It was both stirring and intimidating. “We expect this of you. We expect this behaviour, this contribution”. It wasn’t unnerving but it was quite demanding and you thought: “Gosh, if I am part of this, this is quite something”. There were lots of figures around who I remember from those early years of great eminence. People like Julian Bullard, for example, who had the aura of somebody who was not only immensely able, immensely wise, but who was also somehow a god amongst civil servants. One was part of something which really was exceptional and one felt it to be very exceptional.

UK Mission to UN, 1974

Anyway, as I said, after ten days I’m sent off with Peter to New York and we’re put into a hotel a couple of streets away from the UK Mission to the UN in Third Avenue. I was allocated to be the reporting officer for the Fourth Committee which was the Decolonisation Committee at the time. That was quite interesting and I enjoyed the whole excitement of being in the UN building and being part of the UN system and being there when
extraordinary people came. All the world leaders came and addressed the Assembly and one was usually enabled to sit in on that. It was a lot of fun.

I have two vivid recollections of my time in New York and, by the way, I should say that I shared an office with Tom Richardson who looked after the Fourth Committee who was then a First Secretary. I came across Tom later in my career too. Two things stand out in my time there. One is that part of my job, which I shared with Peter, was always to go along and take a note of key ‘second division’ speeches if you like by the foreign minister of this and the foreign minister of that and I remember going along late one afternoon – it must have been in November, it was probably raining at the time and pretty unpleasant – and I remember having to sit in and listen to a speech by the Foreign Minister of Upper Volta, as it then was, which went on for an hour and three quarters and was so full of substance that I remember that my reporting telegram to London that night I think dealt with his speech in one line.

The second memory I have of that time is of being asked to take down some papers on Rhodesia to the office in the UN building. For reasons that I now don’t recall (they were in a sealed envelope), I put them into the UN internal postal system rather than giving it to the person concerned because I think that person wasn’t there. These papers were lost. They were quite sensitive and I remember the Mission going almost apoplectic about this and I was thinking: “Well, this is the end of my career. This is Lamport’s career ending before it had started”. In fact they did eventually turn up in the office a day later and the envelope hadn’t been opened. But gosh – I can’t tell you - the atmosphere in the Mission offices in Third Avenue was not very good for 24 hours.

But it was a great time and I enjoyed it hugely. One felt that, again, one was part of something really extraordinary and that I could be doing this in my first few months in the FCO and feeling that one was actually part of something which was, as I’ve said to you, very unlike anything one could possibly have imagined, unlike any other government department. Thank heavens one wasn’t part of the home civil service but part of something which really was involved in things that mattered, that were helping to have an influence on how the world functioned. I mean, that was quite a heady mixture. Ivor Richard was our ambassador to the UN at the time (he died about five years ago). He was a Labour Party appointment. We would have daily meetings at half past eight in the secure room in which everyone
would speak in terms of what they were doing and what was happening. And just sitting in
on that made one feel one was part of something very special. So that was my introduction
to the FCO.

**IH-C:** On decolonisation of course, something that Britain has had considerable experience
of, were there any uncomfortable moments for the British representative?

**SL:** I don’t recall anything of that sort partly because when people violently disagreed with
what you were saying or doing in the UN at that time - there wasn’t quite the same degree of
intolerant and narrow minded invective in which people debate in public these days. There
was a degree of gentlemanly behaviour even in those days. So, although there were those
who felt Britain wasn’t doing enough or had taken the wrong attitude, the fact of the matter
was that one could actually have a debate about it rather than a slanging match. That was a
part of the culture of the time in international diplomacy which I think has probably changed
over these years.

**IH-C:** So you came back and you were then Desk Officer in UN Department?

**SL:** I was put into the UN Department as Desk Officer for what I considered to be the most
boring committee of the UN which was the UN’s Fifth Committee, which was the Budget
and Administration Committee, dealing with subjects about which I found it very difficult to
get my mind around because they were so dry, so esoteric, they were so apart from what, to
me, was what diplomacy was all about. The point of going into the Foreign Office was from
my perspective from Cambridge as I’ve explained – this was an organisation that dealt with
an aspect of the nation’s life and the nation’s future which really, really mattered to get right,
so the reason for going into it (the FCO) was the fact that one could make a difference over
things which were of real importance to this country’s interests and future. That was the
great attraction of it. If you then put that alongside the UN Fifth Committee, the two didn’t
really match up very well.

**Tehran, 1975–79**

I took over this Desk Officer’s job from John Macgregor and I found it pretty dull and pretty
uninspiring and a struggle to try and make sense of in terms of Britain’s interests in these
rather esoteric and administrative subjects. Fortunately, that didn’t last that long – we are
now in 1975 – and I was posted that autumn to Tehran. My route there began earlier than
that because I began to be given lessons in Persian from about June of that year so that
within a few months of returning to London I knew where my direction of travel was going
to be. I was not a Persian language student because I was going to a new job in Tehran as
Third Secretary (Commercial) but I did have some Persian language lessons with the most
intimidating person you can imagine in that world of the Persian language who was Nancy
Lambton. Professor Lambton was the great Persian scholar of the 1970s and she was very
fierce and very demanding but it was a privilege to be taught Persian, as a complete novice,
by her. My Persian didn’t get all that far by the time I got to Tehran in October of that year
but I do recall vividly that the kind of Persian that I was being taught by Professor Lambton
was the kind of Persian which would have gone down very well in the late 19th or early 20th
centuries. So when you get to Mehrabad Airport, as it then was, in Tehran, you realise that
the way to ask a taxi driver for directions is not to say: “Hail my good man, would you have
the kindness to show me the way to …”.

I was delighted to go out to Tehran. Why was I sent to Tehran? I don’t think I ever really
knew the answer to that except that in my gap year between school and university – this is
now going back to the beginning of 1970 – I had got a job with a mining company called
Selection Trust which at that time had a lot of big mining interests in East Africa, Zambia
and also in Iran. They sent me out to a very remote copper mine in the Zagros mountains in
western Iran, about 200 miles west of Kerman, called Sarcheshmeh. I was there for a couple
of months in the winter, bitterly cold, utterly remote, doing a job which could have been
done by anybody. In the end, the Persian Government decided that this was not good
enough and that people in this mine doing jobs that could be done by local people should not
be there any more, so I was sent back. But I therefore had a fleeting experience of Iran in
that way. Whether that had any bearing on my posting in 1974, I’ve no idea. But at least
there was a kind of connection between the two.

So I’m sent out to do a job as Third Secretary (Commercial). I have to say I loved the
thought of going to Iran; I didn’t like the thought of doing commercial work which I didn’t
think, again, I had joined the Foreign Office to do, for the reasons that I was describing
earlier on. But I did this for two of my four years there and in my first tour doing
commercial work the Ambassador was Tony Parsons. The Embassy was huge: we had 72
UK-based people. It was regarded as the most important British mission in the Middle East,
a mission to a country whose rulers were regarded as being a bastion of stability and security in the Middle East. We had very close relations with them – political, military (not least) and, indeed increasingly commercial and it was as part of our mission to improve the help we were giving to commercial ties that my post had been created.

It was interesting and I did some quite interesting work, not least in terms of writing large reports on opportunities in the oil and gas industry and so on but, as I say, it was not what I had joined the Foreign Office to do. I pleaded that for my second tour, because the person doing the Second Secretary (Political) job was about to be posted back to London – that was Peter Westmacott – that when I came back I might take on that role. And in fact that was what happened. So I came back from mid-tour leave in 1977 and returned to take up the Second Secretary (Political) job.

IH-C: Promotion, in other words.

SL: Promotion if you like both in terms of the status as well as content of the work. I was replaced on the commercial side by David Reddaway. Of course, my last two years were very different from my first two years. The last two years from 1977 to 1979 saw the transition from the most stable (or so people thought), most powerful régime in the Middle East to one that had been completely turned upside down by a revolution whose impact the world is still living with.

IH-C: How obvious was it that that was happening? It obviously developed over a period of time?

SL: People ask this question all the time and my own view is this. You can read back into those years lots of reasons why the Shah’s régime was not sustainable, had papered over, obscured, and in a sense fuelled, increasing degrees of resentment. This was over the fact that the Shah and his wife were too Western in their interests and that the Shah’s relationship with the religious in Iran, the ulema and so on, was extremely bad. He didn’t like, respect or get on with what was represented by the Shia Islam in Iran and was in turn resented by them. He had provided things that were of extraordinary benefit to people, electricity, for example, across the country, economic development, huge income from oil and gas, development of a lot of heavy and other industries. So there was employment, there was growth and
prosperity but of course, at the same time, one can see alongside that, to an increasing
degree, resentment about the way in which it was done, the lack of respect towards
traditional religion, the fact that communities were bulldozed.

One particular example is that there was a huge development in the north east in the holy
town of Mashhad involving the bazaar. You should remember that the bazaar was
historically the place where a lot of local politics happened and was the centre of the
political life of a town or city. The bazaar in Mashhad, which went back centuries, was
bulldozed and replaced by a new Western style shopping precinct. It had electricity, it had
cooling, it had all the things you would expect to find in a shopping mall in the United
States. But of course it meant that all those communities and links and fraternities which
had been part of the old Mashhad Bazaar were swept aside. No one could afford to pay the
rents in the new places, there was a lot of graft going on and it was hugely resented. And
that resentment showed itself in all kinds of ways and in ways which were terrific breeding
grounds for others to come in and exploit.

Having said all that, and this is not meant to be self justification, I also do believe that one of
the interesting things about the Iranian Revolution was that it was at the time difficult to see
it coming in the way that it did, for a number of reasons. People had forgotten the degree to
which when Mosaddegh came to power in 1952-53, the Shah had fled the country, didn’t
show a lot of spine under pressure, was holed up (I think) in Switzerland and was brought
back because of the coup engineered, as the history books tell us, not least by Britain and the
United States. So there was a false sense about the Shah’s strength of character as a ruler.
He seemed to have become a man of great authority, a man of great wisdom, a man of real
resilience and vision and a man of unchallenged power. At the same time, people did not
know how sick he was with cancer. That’s one thing. Secondly, Iran is a country where it’s
quite difficult to get below the surface of people’s feelings, it’s a country where people will
give no indication that their feelings of loyalty or self interest are changing courses. I recall
vividly that in 1978-79, if you’d asked most Iranians even by the early summer of 1978
when the demonstrations had started and there were real difficulties in different parts of the
country: “Does this mean that the Shah is going to go?” People would have said “Are you
mad?” I mean, the fact is that he had built up a huge army, SAVAK had penetrated society
in a way that made it extremely well informed and some would say – probably rightly –
fairly repressive regarding divergent opinion. All the levers of authority were such that no
one could conceive of the fact that this all would suddenly fall apart. As I say, most Iranians at that time - with some exceptions, obviously - if you’d asked them: “Are you for this or for that?” would certainly have spoken up – at least to those who were not family or close friends - for the existing régime rather than for dramatic change. And yet suddenly, the nation turns from one set of loyalties to a new set over the course of 1978. Certainly, by the autumn of that year it was clear that this was a process which was deep seated, very powerful, was not going to go away. So, is the Shah and are the army and the air force and so on sufficiently solid and determined to crush opposition? And it turned out that they weren’t.

There are lots of examples where this either went wrong because of over compensation by the army shooting vast numbers of people at demonstrations, or an inability to take a decision of real, determined authority when it was required. I’m not saying that they should have done one or the other; I’m just saying that this was how it was at the time. So when you get to the end of 1978 and those huge demonstrations not least in Tehran which I attended under the idea that I was a Scandinavian journalist, you didn’t want to be a Brit – I’ll come back to this in a moment. The fact of the matter is that Britain was not in a good place in terms of these changes. The scale of opposition by the end of the year was of a kind that one could not possibly have imagined 12 months before.

My point is that the tipping point from ‘somehow the régime will survive’ to ‘the whole country is actually against you’ was quite quick and not easy to have predicted a long way in advance. There are a lot of people who say we should have realised a) that this was happening and b) that the undercurrents were as powerful as they were; that the influence of Khomeini amongst people in Iran was much greater than we had realised; that the power of the ulema – Shia Islamic teachers, the ayotollahs - was much more deep seated than we had imagined. It’s true that we didn’t have contact with them and therefore didn’t really understand this power or this part of Iranian society, and I take all that as being part of the picture but it’s not the whole picture.

IH-C: There must have been within the Embassy, possibly, diverse opinions as to what was going on?
SL: That’s an interesting question. I think there were divergences of degree rather than of principle – put it that way. And you have to remember that Britain was operating from a Janus-like position which ought, in a sense, to have given us a good insight as to what was happening in the country but at the same time meant it was partly cut off. After the United States, Britain was the most closely involved country in the Shah’s régime. Our links to him were very close. As I’ve said before, our defence links were extremely close. Chieftain tanks for example – a huge contract. A lot of military hardware was sold to the Shah in the 1970s. After the Americans, the British Ambassador had the best, most frequent and closest access to the Shah of any ambassador. So our links to the régime were very good and of course the trouble with that is that if they are that close, it means that you may not be able to see the things that you can if you are not that close, and while it opens up access to those who are at the centre of the régime, it can easily close you off to its critics or enemies.

Britain was Public Enemy Number Two to the new thinking and to those who wanted to topple the Shah. We were part of the Shah problem for many people by 1978. We were not people who would be turned to in order to give advice on what was going on or to be consulted.

IH-C: And that found expression eventually, did it not, in the attack on the British Embassy? What was your experience of that?

SL: Vivid, I think, would be the answer. This was the 5th November, by an ironical coincidence, in 1978. By this time, law and order in Tehran was really breaking down. There were demonstrations on the streets every day, big demonstrations. All kinds of people marching, wanting the Shah out, ‘Death to the Shah’ and so on.

IH-C: And to observe that, I think you said earlier, you disguised yourself as somebody else?

ST: I would go and observe these demonstrations and get the temperature and the atmosphere and so on. Because of Britain’s sensitive place in a regime which was being very violently protested against by that time, to say: “I’m from the British Embassy” to anyone who asked: “Who are you?” would not have been the right answer. So the answer was: “I’m a journalist from Scandinavia just here to see what’s going on in your wonderful country”.

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IH-C: And to observe that, I think you said earlier, you disguised yourself as somebody else?
Although it never got to the point where it was a real issue, the fact of the matter was that one knew that one’s identity was not a very good calling card in Iran on the streets by that time.

Just to backtrack for a moment, I was earlier saying that I wasn’t a Persian student, and I wasn’t, in the sense of having a year of Persian language training before I began a job in the Embassy. But towards the end of my first tour in Tehran I was given a month to go and live with a family in Kerman to improve my Persian. It was very helpful and instructive but I had never been a full time language student whereas people like David Reddaway who, as I said, replaced me in the Commercial Section, had been. So when it came to those crucial years, the language ability of the Embassy was more in other people than in me, given the job that I was doing. Of course, I was able to read the papers, I was able to converse although not to the degree that other people were.

The attack on the Embassy came at a time when there had been, as I’ve said, a crescendo of demonstrations on the streets in Tehran. Usually you’d have crowds marching past the Embassy on Avenue Ferdowsi. When they got to the Embassy, apart from shouting: “Death to the Shah, Death to the Americans”, they’d be shouting: “Death to the British” and so on and so forth. One would watch those from the Embassy building.

The Embassy in Tehran sits in a compound behind high metal railings giving on to a very busy main street. There is a gatehouse which was manned by Pakistani gate guards. The Embassy building had been built in the 1960s and rather an absurd building looking back on it now. A building on stilts, cars parked underneath the building with one access point up to the building which was the main staircase and then three floors of offices, the Political Section and the Ambassador being on the top floor.

On this day, about half past two in the afternoon, a crowd appears outside the Embassy gates and decides to storm the gates at which point the Pakistani gate guards disappear, not surprisingly. People charge into the Embassy, into the reception on the ground floor where the access to the staircase is. Everyone is pushed up onto the top floor and they light fires on the ground floor around the staircase. Tony Parsons wasn’t in the Embassy at the time, David Miers, the Head of Chancery wasn’t either, both were in other parts of the country. George Chalmers, the No 2, the Minister, was therefore in charge. The worrying thing was
that we didn’t know what the people attacking the Embassy really wanted. The police wouldn’t respond to all our calls for help; the fire brigade wouldn’t respond to come and help put out the fires. There was no help for us of any sort. This went on for about two hours. There were obviously conversations with the people as far as we could who had come to attack us but they wouldn’t get anywhere. The worrying thing was that there was no way out of the Embassy but for the part that they’d set on fire.

In the end, for whatever reason, it became clear that the people were attacking the building rather than wanting to attack the people in the building. In the end they withdrew and let everybody out. Eventually the fire brigade turned up. Although the building was intact, the first floor was pretty much wrecked, the second and third floors were not and we could go on working there, certainly on the third floor on the next day and thereafter. But it was a pretty scary moment in which it was not clear what the outcome might be.

You have to remember that there were a number of things about this revolution which are quite difficult to put one’s mind around now. The first one is communication. The fact of the matter was that this was 1978. There was no mobile telephony; the telephones out of Iran that year began to fail very quickly. I can remember during the troubles trying to ring my parents from time to time back here in the UK and you’d sit at your phone dialling the number for about an hour and a half. You might in the end get through for a few minutes. So all our communications were through a secure radio link and the only other link to the outside world was the BBC Persian Service which of course was regarded by those wanting to topple the régime as the mouthpiece of Britain and therefore completely suspect. So you are, in a sense, very much on your own compared to anything that would be conceivable today where anyone can communicate with anybody across the world in an instant in all kinds of ways. That wasn’t the case at that time. So when you had something like that there was nothing you could do apart from call on your own resources.

The other thing I’d say about the revolution which, as I’ve said before, was of a dramatic kind which was going to change the world for a very long time to come. What I remember vividly about it was the fact that suddenly, in terms of what it’s like to live inside that sort of change in society, dramatic and violent – suddenly all the things that you take for granted in your daily life, all the things which in a sense are part of what daily life is all about – you can walk down the street, the shops are open, traffic flows, life is normal – all that normality
disappears. The shops might open for an hour if they thought it safe to do so, otherwise they didn’t; you couldn’t get anywhere because the traffic was completely blocked or the streets were full of protestors. You yourself as part of the country, in a sense, were a latent target. All of those things create a very different atmosphere of life from anything one had experienced before. It could be quite disturbing and quite unnerving at times because you can’t take anything any longer for granted. You can drive in the UK and know what to expect and how to get home. None of those things any longer applied.

I was living at the time in a house in the north of Tehran. The Embassy in Tehran has two compounds: the one in the middle of the city in the Avenue Ferdowsi is where the offices are, where the Ambassador has his house and quite a number of the staff live; and there’s a northern compound at Gholhak where the Ambassador had a summer residence (he doesn’t now) and where a lot of staff lived. I myself had a house in the north of the city. You can imagine that once the uncertainty and the protests became greater and greater, getting into the office was harder and harder. When it became very difficult, David Reddaway, who as I had mentioned before had taken over from me as Third Secretary (Commercial), had a flat in what was then called Avenue Churchill (not called Avenue Churchill any more, for obvious reasons) which was literally a block away from the compound in Ferdowsi and I moved in with David for quite a long time and we shared that flat together. We could usually get in to the Embassy but when there were times when we couldn’t, we would have to spend the night in the Embassy, often in the house of the Head of Chancery.

IH-C: At least you didn’t have a family to worry about.

SL: I didn’t at the time – no, exactly. That was another aspect of life too. When the Embassy had been put on fire and - not on the same date but around that time - people had come into the compound and tried to occupy people’s houses. They then did withdraw quite quickly. As I mentioned earlier, when I went out to Tehran the size of the Embassy was enormous. The decision was taken after the attack that things were getting very uncertain, things could not go on as they were, our presence was something that couldn’t be justified or sustained so from that number of UK-based people (72), the Embassy was slimmed down by the end of the year to 12 people of which I was one, Reddaway was another and also Angela, my future wife, who had been posted to the Embassy that December in 1978. We were a very small group of people suddenly and so you can imagine that that made for a rather
closely bound group of people in a very particular place at a very particular time doing a job which at that time had become quite tricky.

I remember vividly that by the beginning of 1979 we had slimmed down all the records we had in the Embassy drastically and we destroyed a huge amount and basically the sensitive papers that we had in the Embassy were in a number of what we called IDBs – Incendiary Destruction Boxes which were like a minister’s red box only smaller. If the worst came to the worst, you could pull a tab and the whole thing would go up in smoke in seconds. So the Embassy slimmed down hugely during that time. Then what happened was that in early 1979 the Shah fled, he left the country and went to Cairo. He was very sick by that time and Tony Parsons’ time had come to an end and he returned to the UK. Johnny Graham replaced him as Ambassador, and I remember that there was a great debate about when Johnny should actually arrive in the country. I recall that Johnny got in between the Shah’s departure and just before Khomeini came back about three weeks later.

So we were a very small Embassy by that point. We had quite good contacts with the moderates, people like Bazargan and so on, so it wasn’t as though the Embassy did not have access to information. We did. But we didn’t have access to the close people around Khomeini. We didn’t have access to the more extreme political players who didn’t like the relative moderates like Bakhtiar and Bazargan who led these kinds of governments that became increasingly outflanked by the more extreme views of those around Khomeini.

IH-C: There wasn’t a feeling of isolation?

SL: To a degree there was. And there was a moment when that feeling became quite powerful and this was in the spring of 1979 when the Shah, who clearly had advanced cancer, needed to go for treatment in Europe and his people asked if he could come to London. Now by this time we had Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister and there was a concern that she might say ‘yes’. And we knew that if she were to say ‘yes’, the next day the Embassy would be burned to the ground and God knows what would have happened to any of us. I remember Johnny Graham making the case powerfully as to why this would not be in the UK’s interests from any point of view. If we wanted to salvage any relationship with the future, this would be the last thing you should do. I remember that it was a sunny, spring morning in Tehran and there had been rain the day before so everything was very
fresh and vivid. The news came through the secure communications line and then through
the World Service that the government had decided it was not going to allow the Shah into
the UK for treatment and there was a palpable sense of relief that we’d been given a passport
to a future. That was a moment of real tension.

What I do remember vividly was what was extraordinary about this time was that because
we were a small number of people who had been chosen to stay, there was a very powerful,
collegiate sense of togetherness, the kind of spirit that would have been the hallmark of the
Second World War but that powerful, collective unanimity of purpose and action is actually
very strong in those circumstances. It’s one of the things I take away most from those
turbulent times. It creates something between people which is more potent, more real than
anything one can otherwise experience in normal life. And that was certainly Tehran in
1979.

Ian H-C: Your time there then came to an end?

SL: Yes, I take some kind of bizarre pride in the fact that I was probably the last person in
the Embassy who actually did a full tour. I did just over four years and I came back towards
the end of October 1979 with Angela, to whom I was by that time engaged. Angela - who as
I said had been posted the previous December - I had first met by a wonderful coincidence
when I was a reporting officer in New York when I first joined the Foreign Office. We
hadn’t stayed in touch at all but then she was posted to Tehran in that last year and by the
time we left – we left together because she cut short her tour in October 1979 – we were
engaged to be married, and in fact we were married five weeks after we got back. Of course,
in that period things had got a lot worse because a week after we left the American Embassy
was stormed and the Americans, 92 of them, were taken prisoner. Some of them, obviously,
we knew quite well and life in the Embassy in Tehran became infinitely more difficult.

Iran Desk Officer, FCO, 1979-81

When I got back I didn’t know what I was going to be doing but soon after I returned I found
that I was going to be assigned as the Iran Desk Officer in Middle East Department as soon
as I came back to the Office in January 1980. And that indeed is what happened. Why did
that happen? Well, I think because Iran had changed so utterly, because this was not the
world anybody in the Office knew about because they knew of an Iran that no longer existed,
I was clearly thought to be a suitable person to do the job. Alongside that, David Miers who had been Head of Chancery in Tehran also came back in early 1980 and he was made Head of Middle East Department so the Office had these two people who had had experience of the new Iran.

**IH-C:** Had you not had enough of Iran at that stage?

**SL:** Well this comes on to the issue of personnel policy. You were told what you were going to do next.

**IH-C:** But you could still have your own feelings about it.

**SL:** I accepted the fact that there was a lot of logic and good sense in having someone like me doing that job. And the drama continues because early on in 1980 we close the British Embassy which becomes unsustainable. We leave a small number of people in the Swedish Embassy in a British Interests Section and they look after our interests. They’re really no more than just caretakers. By this time, obviously, during 1978/79 the British community in Tehran which had been huge – I can’t remember how many thousands of people it was – had almost all disappeared for obvious reasons. People had withdrawn, had fled or whatever with a few exceptions. And those few exceptions then involved my time as Iran Desk Officer. You were part of a continuing turmoil of activity in which, where Britain’s interests best lay, was always very difficult to ascertain. It became a matter of just keeping some sort of toehold in Iran if one possibly could.

**IH-C:** Normally as a Desk Officer you’d be going out to visit the place but in this case you presumably didn’t or couldn’t.

**SL:** Couldn’t, didn’t and wouldn’t! The fact is that nobody went out. One or two people were posted out there to look after our interests, as I say, but everybody else was brought back. The Embassy was half mothballed but it did survive intact – bizarrely because you could imagine that this would have been two places ripe for people to surge into but in fact neither Gholhak or Ferdowsi did suffer that although after we left in October the Embassy was invaded briefly a second time by Revolutionary Guards.
So what dominated my life as the Iran Desk Officer? Well, one of the most interesting aspects of it which gave one perhaps the most sense of satisfaction was that amongst those British people who remained were some Anglican individuals who became hostages – Jean Waddell, the Colemans. They were missionaries and because they were Christian missionaries obviously they were regarded with intense suspicion, they were almost certainly spies according to the mindset of those who by that time were in charge. Because they were missionaries, the Church of England had an obvious sense of responsibility for them, trying to help them get out. That brought me into very close contact with a number of people at Lambeth Palace – Terry Waite, Richard Chartres who was then chaplain to the Archbishop and the Archbishop, Robert Runcie. For six months I worked very closely with them to help secure their release which in the end did happen. Terry Waite went out to Iran and brought them back. It was very interesting to find oneself working alongside people of a kind who I otherwise wouldn’t have had any dealings with. It was a real success and I remember going out to Heathrow with the Archbishop when they came back to London, to welcome them home and that was a real sense one had actually done something worthwhile.

Other things I would mention at that time? Well, sanctions against Iran (which we imposed in ’80 or ’81, I can’t quite remember), and that was interesting because the person who led for that in Parliament was Christopher Soames and so I found myself working quite closely with him and his then Private Secretary, Edward Chaplin who later went on in his Foreign Office career to become, again by an interesting coincidence, Head of Chancery in Tehran and much later Ambassador in Baghdad.

The other thing that had an influence on my future career in the Office in the spring of 1981 was the Iran Embassy siege at Prince’s Gate when for five days the Iran Embassy was taken over by insurgents. There were meetings of COBRA in the Whitehall Cabinet Office which were chaired, I think from memory, by William Whitelaw. I was required to go there as the Iran Desk Officer, and the Foreign Officer Minister responsible at the time was Douglas Hurd.

Just to go back for a moment to the culture in the Foreign Office in those days: you are a Desk Officer so you are at the bottom of the process pile and at the top there are Deputy Under Secretaries and so on and of course the Ministers are like gods. If you went to a meeting your job was to sit there silently if you possibly could, hoping no one would ask you
a question you couldn’t answer. And I remember being part of these COBRA meetings where Douglas was there as the Minister. It was like having the Prime Minister sitting next to you. So I did meet him for the first time and Douglas was a minister of great ability. Quite distant in personal terms: not someone you would instinctively have a joshing conversation with or share a joke with. Very effective, very good, very impressive and I remember thinking to myself at the time: thank heavens we’ve got Ministers like this at the top of the Office.

Private Secretary to Minister of State, 1981–84
It was about two months after the Iran Embassy siege that Douglas was looking for a new Private Secretary to replace his then Secretary who was Charles Humphrey and I was asked if I would go and see him – out of the blue. I went to see him with some trepidation and we had a conversation and he asked me to become his Private Secretary which I was delighted with and hugely awed at.

IH-C: How did this system work? After all, presumably Personnel Operations Department (POD) directed where you were going to go. Where did FCO Ministers get involved in that process?

SL: POD would have said to him: it’s time for Charles Humphrey to move on and we need to find you a new Private Secretary, Minister. We’ll put up some candidates for you but is there anyone you’d like to be on that list? And I think Douglas said: I met this chap. He seems quite good and I’d like to see him. And that’s how it came about. So in June 1981 I found myself beginning to work for him, which was a huge step change in one’s FCO professional life because suddenly, having been part of a department – you’d write submissions and they’d go to the head of department and they’d go on to the AUS and they might go on to the DUS and if they’re that important they might end up in the Minister’s box. You felt very much at the bottom of the process. And moving from that to a place where you were actually part of the top of the structure was quite heady stuff.

IH-C: It’s interesting you should say that because I’m going to come back to you on that score. In a way, for those in departments, I got the impression that very often Private Secretaries took on some of the lustre and distantness of their Ministers and they could be
quite demanding, difficult figures. Were you conscious of that sort of role and the dangers of it?

**SL:** Yes, very much so. When a Private Secretary was in touch you thought: ‘crikey, what’s gone wrong now? I’m going to get an earful about something that’s not satisfactory’. There certainly was then, and probably still is, a real sense that if you were a Private Secretary you could order anybody about and you could be pretty bloody minded, pretty intolerable.

**IH-C:** Some were!

**SL:** Some were. And you could make everyone’s life pretty awful. One was very conscious of that. I had the view that, because of that, if you were that kind of Private Secretary you were actually doing a great disservice to your Minister and, indeed, to the Office around you because that’s not the best way to get the best out of people at all. It seemed to me that the role of Private Secretary was to be completely other than that – was to be helpful, enabling, to be understanding and to get the best out of people rather than the worst out of people. But that wasn’t always the Private Secretary culture I have to say.

I suppose I was also helped by the fact that although I found Douglas, when I didn’t know him, rather intimidating, I quickly began to realise Douglas is, and still is (though not well now at all) the nicest possible individual. We quickly developed a real friendship and working for him was a huge delight and pleasure. As I said a moment ago, he was a Minister of extraordinary ability, very clear thinking, very able to express himself cogently and succinctly, wrote beautifully and was a very powerful and effective Minister.

I remember so many meetings at which you have a table full of everybody in the Office from the DUS down to a Desk Officer, with an intractable problem. I can remember two particular examples in my time, both involving Saudi Arabia. There was a programme called ‘Death of a Princess’, and there was an issue about a nurse called Helen Smith who died in rather suspicious circumstances at a party and whose father was very, very difficult to deal with. These were at the time big, difficult issues for us with serious potential to damage our relations with the Saudis, and Douglas would always cut through to the chase of what the problem was, what we had to deal with today. He was very, very clear thinking and
I think earned great respect in the Office for that. He was a model Minister of State and it was a real pleasure to work with him. We travelled a lot overseas and had a very interesting and enjoyable time together.

The time I remember first realising that this was a shy man but an exceptionally kind and loving man was when I had been with him about two months. We were going off to some meeting in the car in London and it was a Friday. I remember him saying to me: “what are you up to this weekend?” I said that we were not doing very much. He said: “so does that mean you’re quite free over the weekend?” And I said, “yes, and what are you doing, Minister?” “Well, I’ve got nothing on this weekend at all. I don’t know what I’m going to do.” Then there was a silence, and he said, “I couldn’t come and have lunch with you on Sunday, could I?” So Douglas Hurd comes down and has lunch with us. I remember thinking crikey – what on earth are we going to have for lunch? And we became, and are, very close friends. I’m the godfather to his fourth son and he’s the godfather to our eldest son. It was two years of very intense and enjoyable co-operation together.

I saw him in all kinds of contexts. As I’ve said, he was an extraordinarily effective Foreign Minister. We travelled a lot together, a lot in the Middle East, the Gulf States, Oman, Iraq. We travelled to the Sudan: I remember a vivid meeting between President Nimeiry and Douglas and having to write a long telegram immediately afterwards to the Office about some fascinating content. We travelled in North Africa, we travelled to India, Nepal, Pakistan, we had a meeting with General Zia. In 1983 we went to Sri Lanka, we went to the Maldives. I remember Sri Lanka vividly because we stayed with the High Commissioner in Colombo and we went by helicopter round much of Sri Lanka, to beautiful Kandy, for example, – as much as one could at the time, given what was happening up in the North East. The Maldives was a tin pot country and I remember that there was no international airport at the time: you could only fly in quite small planes from India or Sri Lanka. We landed and you had to get on a boat to go to the main island which is Mahe where the government was. And the government, the whole government – Prime Minister, Foreign Minister, Home Minister – they were all together working in two portacabins. That was the nature of the place. We had some very vivid trips, I have to say.

**IIC-C:** Was Douglas Hurd good at picking up a brief and working to it?
SL: He was very good at doing so, very quick. He would see the issues immediately. This was apparent also in another part of his responsibilities, the European Union. A big intractable subject. When you are on the inner track the experts could very quickly make things impossible to understand for anyone outside that inner track. I remember often going with him to Brussels to meetings which would involve David Hannay who was the AUS at the time and the Ambassador to the EU who was Michael Butler. We would get there for a Monday meeting arriving on the Sunday evening and have a briefing dinner together. There would be a conversation among the four of us in which I didn’t play much part, as you can imagine, about all the intricacies of what was going on at the Council of Ministers the next day. It was almost impossible to get your mind around because it was so complicated. But Douglas could always see the issue, he was very expert at that and he would get on well with other Ministers, senior officials because they would quickly come to respect the quality of his mind.

Three little stories, if I may: I’d been working with him only for a short time when we flew down to Strasbourg for a meeting of the Council of Europe. We were coming back on a flight that afternoon with quite a lot of MPs. The plane was chartered and it had a very violent pink interior. And as we flew across northern France we came into a terrific thunderstorm and it was very bumpy for a long time. Getting down into Heathrow was extremely unpleasant. Douglas sat there working on a speech all the way through this. I felt I was going to throw up at any moment now and here he was working on his papers. We did get down without mishap but I thought this was going to be the end of my time with this Minister because I should disgrace myself and that would be that. Similarly I have this picture of Douglas working in a car – working for two hours in a car without a hint of carsickness, on his papers. That was one early, vivid memory.

Secondly, I remember going with him and with Angela to take Mrs Gandhi to see a performance of *Cats* which, while on an official visit to London, she was very keen to do. So Douglas got the job of taking her and that was quite remarkable and memorable. Thirdly, he is an author and he had written quite a lot of thrillers with Andrew Osmond and I remember on one occasion – this would have been in 1982 – we were on a train from Brussels to Strasbourg and he was reading through the proofs of the last book he wrote with Andrew Osmond, *War Without Frontiers*. This had been quite a difficult collaboration, the last one between the two of them. He was rather fed up and said: ‘this is the last one I am
going to do with Andrew but I do want to write more. Why don’t we write a book together?” And we did indeed write a book together over the next two and a half years called *Palace of Enchantments*. That was great fun. It’s a story, not a thriller, about a government minister, a Foreign Office Minister who takes up a cause which backfires and he ends up losing his job as a minister, his wife and eventually his parliamentary seat. It’s a story of failure, basically.

**IH-C:** I hope this wasn’t written during office hours!

**SL:** Much was written on flights during overseas visits. I remember vividly one of our great planning moments for the book. The outlines of the plot had come to me while I was walking the dog during the Christmas holiday. About two weeks later we were off to India and Sri Lanka and the Maldives and we sat on a beach outside Colombo at the Mount Lavinia Hotel fleshing out the structure of this plot. It was a lot of work but it was fun and basically done in our free time. Occasionally I would go down for a writing weekend to his house in Oxfordshire. It was a great collaboration. People say to me: ‘how do you write a book with somebody else?’ and the answer is that you have to know the way that person’s mind works very well, otherwise obviously you can’t do it, it could become a piece of very ill constructed patchwork. The fact of the matter is that if I look at the book now, there are parts where I don’t know who wrote which bit. As I said a moment ago, Douglas thinks and writes very fluently and very clearly and he would write a chapter and there’d be two or three crossings out and that was it; I would write a chapter with balloons and crossings out and excisions and poor Angela would type up the whole manuscript. My bit was a nightmare for her and his bit was a pleasure. It was a very interesting and fun thing to do, I have to say, and it did sell quite well for a bit.

**IH-C:** Did this make you feel that you could have embarked on a career as an author?

**ST:** I don’t have a big, fulltime job any more so I’m going to do some more writing. I haven’t put aside that. The fact of the matter is that writing clearly and succinctly has been a key part of my life with the Foreign Office, The Prince of Wales and at Westminster Abbey. So it comes quite easily to me.
IH-C: One aspect of your time with Douglas Hurd, presumably, was involved with the invasion of the Falkland Islands?

SL: Yes. Of course, Douglas at that time was not the No 2 Minister of State. And the Falkland Islands was not a part of the world he was involved in. It was actually Richard Luce who was the Minister of State for South America. Of course we all know the story of the Falkland Islands and the suddenness with which it happened and so on and so forth. I remember going to the Office that morning after the Islands had been invaded and Douglas was in about half an hour late and there was a great air of frenzy in the Office. I remember David Trefgarne, who was the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the time, coming into my office: “Where’s Douglas, where’s Douglas?” “He’s not here.” “Oh, I don’t know what to do. Should I resign? Should I go now?” It was a day of huge turmoil and of course Peter Carrington resigned that day and the Office gave him that evening a farewell drink in his rooms to which we all went. I remember this vividly because Peter Carrington was a Foreign Secretary who commanded huge respect from the Office and was deeply loved. I remember senior members of the Office, DUSs in tears at his departure. It was a very, very emotional day.

The Office was then rearranged. Francis Pym came in as Foreign Secretary, Douglas became the No 2 Minister, quite rightly because he had this extraordinary ability. But although we were very much part of the paper train and discussions within the Office, he wasn’t himself the Minister responsible for that part of the world. It was a very dramatic moment. But it didn’t affect our direct work a lot except insofar that he was part of the Ministerial discussions about policy. And of course it was basically run from No 10. The FCO was part of it but it wasn’t in an operational sense leading it during the actual fighting. But it was an interesting time.

Then, of course, Douglas, in the 1983 election, gets moved on, to my great sadness, to become Minister of State in the Home Office. And he’s replaced by Malcolm Rifkind who is another extraordinary, able individual who I have remained good friends with over all these years. I was with Malcolm for a year, Malcolm having been the Junior Minister in the Office until that time. He was an extraordinary man. He would have a speech to deliver in the House and he would get the text a few days before. He would take the speech home the night before he had to get up on his feet in the Commons and when he got up onto his feet to
deliver it on quite a complex subject, where the words matter, he would give it without a note, without his speech. He had that ability.

Malcolm was always full of great stories and fun to work with. We did some great trips together. I suppose the most interesting one we made was in the spring of ’84 when we went to West Africa. Among other places we went to Ghana and we went up country to visit the King of the Ashanti. His name was Otumfuo. This was one of those bizarre occasions. You’re up country in Ghana in the middle of nowhere. You are calling, with great ceremony, on a King who is, in the traditional sense of the word, a king of high authority. The Ashanti people’s wealth is based on gold, there’s a huge source of gold in Ghana. And you have this extraordinary combination of Africa with all that entails in terms of being unexpectedly organised and things going wrong and things not being quite what they should be, and yet at the same time, great wealth.

We called on the King, Malcolm and I, in his royal bungalow and we were given an audience surrounded by all his tribal chiefs with great African pomp. The thing to remember is that the King of the Ashanti only speaks to his people through his interpreter, who’s called his ‘linguist’ because, if the King speaks though his linguist, anything the linguist says on behalf of the King can always be denied as having come from the King. So the King can always stand back, if you like, from direct responsibility for what is being said. For the same reason, in order to do due honour to the King at these occasions, the person calling on the King has to have his linguist too. Malcolm and I agreed that I would be his linguist and so I had this rather bizarre requirement having to interpret everything Malcolm said in English – in different English to the King. I have to say it was quite testing for all kinds of reasons.

IH-C: Could the King hear both …?

SL: The irony is that the King was educated in England, he had been called to the Bar. This man knew England and spoke English better than anybody in the whole of Ghana probably. But the ceremonial ritual required that this was how it had to be done to do him due honour.

IH-C: So he would hear Malcolm Rifkind telling you something in English and then he would hear your version of it, also in English.
SL: Exactly! And this went on for about half an hour. In this bungalow you are surrounded by all the colour and pomp and gold, peacocks in the garden shouting and screeching, a glass of champagne in your hand – it was a bizarre, colourful, memorable moment. And one which I wrote an article about for *The Spectator* that year which was published and which Malcolm still remembers with huge mirth because it was so utterly bizarre.

IHC: So let’s go on from Malcolm Rifkind. So - after that?

**First Secretary, Rome, 1984–88**

SL: After that it was the Embassy in Rome as Head of the Political Section. It’s interesting just thinking back to how that came about. I think at the time – this may not be the case any more in the Foreign Office – there was a sense that if you had done a stint as a Private Secretary which was quite demanding and was always a job which was much, much more than a job from 9.00am to 6.00pm (it was a job for every day of the week and any time of the day) – there was a sense that having done that, you deserved something quite nice, or something you wanted, afterwards. The job of Head of the Political Section in Rome was coming up and I was very keen to do it and was lucky enough to be given that opportunity.

I did do proper language training for that. I was put on a course in London while I was still in the Office with Malcolm and then I was given a month out in Florence because I was starting my Italian from scratch, I had no Italian at all. That was great. I lived with a contessa in her apartment in Florence.

IHC: This could only happen in the Foreign Office!

SL: Yes, exactly. There were two things about the contessa that were memorable. One was the fact that she was a great devotee of Mussolini, and all around the apartment there were photographs of Mussolini. From her perspective, he was a man who actually made Italy work; made the trains run on time; it was all a great tragedy when it all fell apart and so on. That was an interesting cultural and historical aspect of my time with her. Secondly, we did actually speak Italian all the time and most evenings she would prepare supper and alongside supper there would be a great flagon of chianti and supper wouldn’t end until the chianti was finished. So it was very good for one’s Italian but I don’t think it was very good for her
because by the time supper ended she didn’t quite know where the kitchen was any more! It was great fun and I learned a lot.

I was out there with two ambassadors: first of all with Tom Bridges and then with Derek Thomas. Tom Bridges I had known a bit in the Office as he was the DUS in charge of financial matters so I came across him during my time with both Douglas and Malcolm Rifkind.

My job in Rome as Head of the Political Section was to try and make sense to us and then to London, of Italian politics and Italian foreign policy. Given the difficulty for Italians themselves to understand their domestic policy, it was actually quite a challenge. Even more so was the fact that although one could try and make sense of it in terms of life in Italy, I think the interest back in London for it was pretty limited. It was so convoluted and so contradictory that usually it made no sense at all. But it was fun and because I had quite good Italian, it meant that I dealt with a lot of Italian political figures and it was very interesting.

One got to know a wonderful country – I travelled a lot in the country. We went out with one very young baby, only six months old, and when we came back we had two sons. It was a remarkable and rather wonderful time. The Italians being a people of extraordinary talent and flair – a country that combines a terrific material prosperity despite the fact they’ve had no decent government for decades. The country is full of wonderful scenery and beautiful buildings, art and culture alongside a deep material sense of wanting to get on and make money. A wonderful sense of the importance of the spiritual and of the things that are non-material, and a wonderful place to be for four years. But, as I say, not easy in terms of trying to understand how politics works.

**IH-C:** It’s often thought by outsiders that this absence of a government lasting very long means that the place is basically run by the civil service. Is there any reflection you have on that?

**SL:** I would say that the country almost runs itself despite the government and the civil service. The fact is that Italy is a place where bureaucracy goes mad, where the red tape is appalling and every embassy, including the British Embassy has to have its “fixer” to get
things done. Otherwise you’d spend all your time trying to get things done. But if you know the right people - and it’s a place where you have to know the right people and the system - if you know the right people, you’ll get things done. If you don’t know the system you’ll never get things done. The Embassy was quite well geared into knowing the right people.

I suppose two things stick out in my mind most in my four years there. One was the fact that in my first tour there the Prince and Princess of Wales made a big visit to Italy. They spent about ten days in Italy going around a lot of the country. I wasn’t involved in the planning. The person who worked for me, Richard Northern, who went on in his career to be Ambassador in Libya, was designated to look after it from the Embassy’s point of view. But the Prince and Princess did come to the Embassy in Rome and we had a chance to meet them in the garden of the Embassy at Porta Pia. It was interesting in terms of what happened to my career later on that I actually met the Prince for the first time in my life at that point. It was a very successful visit, I have to say, and one in which a lot of links were made between the Prince and Italy which have continued since that time. It was my first exposure, in that very, very limited way, to the Royal Household.

I should tell you one story about my arrival in Rome which has always been a source of great amusement to me. As I said, Tom Bridges was the Ambassador at the time with his wife, Rachel, and they were quite traditional in their approach to life and to diplomatic life. I drove out with a chum - Angela and our baby came out afterwards – and it was August and it was very, very hot. The Ambassador in Rome lives in a place called the Villa Volkonsky which is a grand house set in its own extensive gardens. There is a small amount of staff accommodation in the villa’s grounds, one of which was a transit flat which I had been assigned to for my first few weeks in the Embassy.

When we got there that day, there was a note from Tom Bridges saying ‘welcome’ and Rachel and I would be delighted if you would come and have dinner with us this evening in the Villa so we can welcome you properly, and bring your chum with you. Well, my chum had no jacket, no tie, no sensible trousers, no black shoes. I was able to kit him out to a degree and we went across to the Villa for dinner and it was infernally hot and we were in a jacket and tie. This was casual wear. We went up on the roof for drinks and then went down and had dinner in the dining room. It was unbelievably hot and there was no air
conditioning. And we sat there in our jackets, sweltering. I remember as we sat down Tom said to Rachel: “It’s quite warm this evening, dear. Do you think we might take our jackets off?” Rachel thought for a moment and then she said: “I suppose that’s all right, Tom but I think perhaps - after the first course”.

Professionally, the thing that sticks most in my mind are the two Anglo-Italian Summits that took place while I was there – with Margaret Thatcher – one in London and the second in Italy in the northern lakes. To my consternation I was asked to go and interpret for the Prime Minister. On the first occasion I came back to London and the Italian Prime Minister was a socialist called Bettino Craxi and my job was to interpret from Italian into English. This is quite an art. My Italian was quite good but I’m not bilingual. There I am sitting so close to the Prime Minister as to be almost on her lap on the sofa translating simultaneously from Bettino Craxi into English for her which I have to say was quite intimidating although she was charming and delightful.

What was much worse for me was the second Anglo-Italian Summit out in Stresa in the northern Italian lakes. The Italian Prime Minister had changed and it was a man called Ciriaco De Mita, head of the Christian Democrats. De Mita came from Naples and Neapolitan Italian is not like Florentine Italian. He would use all kinds of very bizarre vocabulary but, more than that, he would first of all only ever talk in paragraphs, not sentences, and worse than that, halfway through the paragraph he would change his thought and subject completely so you hadn’t got a clue as to what was going on. It was an utter nightmare until I realised that early on in the conversation as far as Mrs Thatcher was concerned, she was only on ‘send’ rather than ‘receive’ so it didn’t matter what De Mita was saying. All she wanted to do was to get across her points and what he said was not part of the conversation at all. So it actually made the conversation quite easy but, my gosh, it was worrying until that moment I have to say.

**IH-C:** Mrs Thatcher was quite good to work with in that respect?

**SL:** In that sense, yes, provided she thought you were doing the job properly. If you didn’t, then I’m sure the demeanour would change utterly. But she was charming, she was charming – but still intimidating.
They were four good years and we look upon them with much affection and go back from time to time when we can. The joy of having learned a wonderful language like Italian is something one lives with, with great pleasure, ever after.

**Deputy Head of Middle East Department, FCO, 1988–90**

**IH-C:** Then back to the Middle East?

**SL:** Yes, back to the Middle East. Rob Young was Head of Middle East Department when I came back in 1988. I knew Rob slightly and he’d said he wanted me, when he knew I was coming back, to come back as Deputy Head of MED, which I duly did. Before, in my time in MED, I had just been doing Iran. But MED dealt with Iran, Iraq, the Gulf and so on so it was a much, much bigger brief. It was fascinating. It wasn’t easy. We’re now in the late ‘80s. Our relations with Iraq were quite difficult. I’d been to Iraq with Douglas in the early ‘80s and I remember at that time that Iraq was a very different sort of place. You could travel easily and although it had its moments of difficulty, it was one in which we had a relationship with the government which was reasonably positive. I remember that when I went out with Douglas, he was able to call on Saddam Hussein although only a Minister of State rather than Foreign Minister. That was an indication of the fact that our relations were quite good. That wasn’t the case in the late ‘80s and I remember that one of the things that caused most distress in Anglo-Iraqi relations at the time – this must have been in 1989 – was a journalist by the name of Farzad Bazoft. He was half Iranian and half British but as a British passport holder, we were responsible for him. He was in Iraq doing what journalists do and was arrested and was put on trial for treason because he’d been talking to the ‘wrong’ people about the ‘wrong’ things and so on – one can understand exactly what that means. He was tried for treason pretty summarily and was condemned to death.

We worked hard to change the sentence. The Ambassador at the time had access to him and he would go and see Bazoft on a regular basis and there came a weekend when all our efforts hitherto had been without any effect to change the sentence. It was on a Saturday morning when it was then made known that Bazoft was going to be executed in the next couple of days. I was in the office all weekend and we drafted and got a message up to the Prime Minister to Saddam Hussein to plead for clemency which the Ambassador delivered to Saddam Hussein that day. The sentence wasn’t changed and Bazoft was executed the next day. It was one of those occasions where of course you knew what the right thing to do was
and we moved heaven and earth to try and achieve it. It was just impossible and it was pretty distressing that that was the outcome.

Rob Young was a great man to work with. He was a very good Head of MED and we had a very happy eighteen months together. One of the ironies of my time there was that by that time Douglas Hurd was Home Secretary and Douglas was going to pay a visit to the Gulf as Home Secretary. I went with him and it was very interesting visiting the region again wearing a slightly different hat. I enjoyed my two years in MED because, again, in the Office system, as an Assistant Head of Department you were able to wield that much more influence on the way things happened. Obviously as a Private Secretary it was a different matter entirely but before that I had been a Desk Officer and there you feel very much at the bottom of the pile. As Assistant Head you go to all the meetings, DUSs consult you, you have access to everybody and it’s much more professionally interesting.

**Deputy Head of Personnel Department, FCO, 1990-92**

Then I was put up for another home posting on promotion as Counsellor. I suppose I would have been 38 at the time, something like that, and the job came up as Deputy Head of Personnel Department to replace a man called Howard Pearce. I was duly appointed to this job, but in the meantime the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait happened - this was August, 1990 - and I found myself as the Deputy Crisis Manager doing long hours in the crisis centre set up in the bowels of King Charles Street. It was an exciting moment: being part of policy-making in real time, grappling with problems which needed immediate right answers, talking to the beleaguered Embassy in Kuwait when the only reliable means of contact was the secure radio link. Sadly, half way through this episode I had to move to my new job in POD. Stuart Eldon replaced me and I swapped a twelve hour day - often more - for an eight hour day.

**IH-C:** How did you feel about the Personnel job at the time?

**SL:** Mixed feelings, I think, because again, this was not what I had joined the Foreign Office to do but it was promotion and it was a department that mattered to people within the Office, obviously. And one could perhaps make a real difference to people’s lives. Alongside that was the fact that the Office was in the process of discussing how it might change the personnel system under Personnel Operations Department (POD) as it had been for many years, to something new which was to be called Personnel Management.
Department (PMD). The big issue here was that, hitherto, one’s career had been managed by Personnel Department. They would say: “Well, the right thing for you to do next is to do this. This is will be very good for your career. You are the right person for it; you have the right skills; it will develop this and that in you; it will be a tremendous opportunity for you; perhaps it will be a challenge for you; but this is what you are going to do next”. That’s how the system had been.

The system worked, but it meant that you, the individual officer, had no control over your career and your destiny. It was felt right to give people, and this was the wish and the intention, to give people a bigger say in planning their own careers. So, from a system under which you were told what your next job was, you were given the chance to bid for what your next job might be. The job of the Personnel Department would be to match the needs of the Office with consultation with the individual in terms of what they could bid for, which reflected their ability to compete effectively for a job because they had the skills required and so on. So you would be asked as an individual to be expressing your preferences about three or four particular jobs which would be advertised (which they hadn’t been before) so you would know what was coming up and you’d be given a chance therefore to put yourself forward. You would be advised and helped by PMD in terms of what the sensible preferences would be for you.

Now, remember that at different levels of the Office there were different selection boards which would allocate individuals and make recommendations about which individuals would be particularly good for the jobs. So if you were at the level whose jobs were decided by the No 3 Selection Board, you would be put forward to that board with your various choices and that board would take a view as to whether you were the right person. So, each of these selection boards were at different levels which, depending on the level at which they were, would be chaired by someone from the Personnel Department with help from people from other departments around the Office. They would take a view and they would say: “X ought to go to Tunis because he/she is the right kind of person because …” Unless there was a reason why that would be challenged from higher up, that would be what happened.

I think this was much welcomed by the Office but of course the trouble with it was that it created an expectation that if I want to go to country ‘X’, then that is where I should end up. I’m talking now about the early days of the system. How it later evolved I don’t know. But
as Deputy Head of PMD, as it became, my role was basically to look after Grade 4s – Counsellors – and people in Grade 4 coming up for promotion to the Senior Grade. Alongside that, I was the Secretary of No 1 Board which dealt with all the most senior appointments in the Office. My job would be to prepare the agendas for the candidates for the No 1 Board and act as Secretary at the meetings. So I was very much involved in appointing people at the top of the Office. And you can imagine that the more senior you become in the Office, the more embedded your expectations might become.

IH-C: And possibly more demanding?

SL: Yes, the more demanding they become, too and the more upset they’ll become if they don’t get what they want. It was quite a testing and emotionally charged role although it did mean that you didn’t get disturbed at weekends. A lot of my time in the office would be spent seeing members of the Service to talk about their careers, their choices, their expectations and so on and so forth and to give them often rather bad news rather than good news. “You really won’t get that kind of job. There’s no point in trying to put yourself forward for it because ….” “But why? I’ve been in the Service for 30 years, I have all this experience. Why don’t people understand the value of what I can contribute? This is outrageous! This is unacceptable. I really don’t accept that judgment.” etc. This was the worst end of it.

It was interesting because of the way the system had changed. You would now get senior people bidding for jobs that in theory you knew were the kind of jobs they ought to be able to bid for but which you knew they’d never get. The other thing was that if people at that level are not going to get jobs, then actually the answer is: perhaps you ought to go early. That’s another difficult conversation to have too. There were individuals - I remember some of them vividly - for whom one would try in board after board after board to get a posting for and you knew they’d never get it. The No 1 Board was chaired by the Chief Clerk who at that time was Andrew Wood who was a very nice man. I had a lot to do with Andrew on all of this and it was very interesting to do it because of course you see the Service from a different point of view completely. You see the Service in terms of talent rather than in terms of output, so to speak. One got to know a lot of the people at the top of the Office at that time. But equally, a lot of the time, you were trying to defend the Office and what the new structure was trying to achieve and that sometimes wasn’t easy because disappointment
doesn’t breed contentment or, sometimes, respect. POD/PMD was full of talented people. It was one of those service departments into which were posted talented people to try to get these things right. Edward Clay, who was Head of Department, was an excellent man to work with. Edward cared deeply about people and about getting their careers right and the fact was, although it may not have seemed like that sometimes to individuals, PMD tried very hard to match people, against the Office’s requirements, in the best possible way. But there were some people you knew you couldn’t be helpful to because they weren’t good enough in terms of what they thought they were and in terms of what the Service required.

**IH-C:** Managing expectations is quite difficult …

**SL:** Quite difficult but again sometimes you would find after two or three conversations with an individual, where you were having to diminish their expectations, in the end reality would break through and you would get them a job and actually they’d be quite happy with it. Sometimes not!

There’s a related point also about the new system which involved the structure of one’s career in the Foreign Office. This was always an issue which applied to the Senior Grade. When you are 55 and looking at your last job, the organisation wants to draw on your accumulated wisdom and experience in the best possible way and obviously, therefore, if you end up as ambassador in Washington or Paris or Berlin or New York, that’s a point at which you can do that. One of the issues, and one of the conundra that we faced, was the fact that if you begin to appoint people to senior jobs too quickly, too early or earlier than was normal – let’s put it that way – you then begin to distort the structure and so affect the people who are coming up in their 50s to those most senior positions. One of the things we always wrestled with was that if you appoint people too early to jobs you are distorting the structure which in a way, in the long term, gives you some real problems. If you get appointed to Ambassador in Paris at the age of 43, to take a hypothetical example, do you have the experience when it really comes to it, the degree of expertise which it requires to deal with the job properly? There are all kinds of good reasons for promoting people early and, as I say, we did begin to struggle with that but there is a downside to it which you have to bear in mind. Certainly, in my time in PMD, one was always having to look at if you appoint a person at that point, what are you doing five or ten years on for the rest of the Service in terms of what jobs are going to be available to people? Getting those
appointments right is more like a game of chess than a game of draughts. It’s quite tricky to make sure you’ve actually thought of the implications of doing ‘X’ today and ‘Y’ in ten years’ time.

One of the things I also found myself doing in PMD was what you might call compassionate tours to posts to see how people were and I remember one particular tour in Africa where I started off in South Africa and went north up to Zambia, Kenya, Mozambique and so on. These were interesting occasions because part of what one was going there to do was to talk to everybody in the embassy to find out what was going wrong, what was going right and so on. You get a very good impression of these places by doing that, sometimes reassuring, often exposing things that you wouldn’t otherwise have known about – people’s problems, resentments, a feeling of being abandoned by the Office, that sort of thing. One would come back with lots of things you knew had to be got better than they were when you were there. It was also interesting to talk to heads of posts, ambassadors, high commissioners in the field because again you would get a very different feeling for the place from what they might tell you when they came back to London. That was a very interesting part of being in PMD.

IH-C: You were present really at quite a momentous change.

SL: Yes, it was a big change and of course there’s another point I didn’t mention earlier which is that when I joined in 1974, one joined the Service expecting that that was going to be your sole career until you retired. Your commitment to the FCO, the Diplomatic Service, was life long. A lot of the people that I dealt with in PMD had come into the Office with that expectation so conversations about early retirement and so on were quite difficult. Of course, that’s changed a lot now. Some people come in as a late entrant and that kind of short service entry is much, much more common now than it ever was in my time. That certainly must have changed something of the atmosphere of the Office as an institution alongside the fact that when I joined it, the Diplomatic Service, the FCO was one of the two most powerful and respected government departments. I don’t think that’s the case any more. I don’t think the FCO has that leverage in Whitehall that it did in those days and I think that must have changed the internal atmosphere. And issues over which, in a sense, it hasn’t been in control like leaving the European Union, probably only feed that, I suspect.
IH-C: Are you certain about that? When I joined I had exactly that earlier impression of yours. The Treasury thought they were great and possibly they were at the top but as far as the Civil Service was concerned, the only other department worth thinking of was the FCO.

SL: And The Treasury, I think, often rather resented the FCO.

IH-C: Yes, there was rather a tension there, wasn’t there?

SL: A respect and a tension, certainly.

IH-C: So you think the Foreign Office has really lost influence in Whitehall?

SL: I think it has, partly because a lot of foreign policy gets decided now in No 10 rather than in the FCO and I think, without being unkind to individuals, often, with one or two exceptions (and there have been one or two exceptions) the quality of foreign secretaries has become less of “that’s the one job the best people ought to have”. There have been some fairly mediocre foreign secretaries and that doesn’t help the Office’s impact and footprint in Whitehall. A lot of policy is now decided elsewhere than in the FCO. I mentioned Brexit as one example but there are others too. I think its impact is now much less and its standing is much less in Whitehall than it used to be and I’d have thought that would have an impact on the inherent nature of the Office. The Office still gets a high standard of people to come forward as candidates but I think in terms of what that means for satisfaction professionally and morale – well, I think it’s a different place now from what it was 20 or 30 years ago.

Deputy Private Secretary to The Prince of Wales, 1993–96
I’d been in PMD for a couple of years and I then was due for an overseas posting. As it happened, one of my jobs towards the latter part of my time in the department was to find a replacement to a post that had been a counsellor’s role in the Office for some years which was a secondment to the household of The Prince of Wales. The Office would supply the Deputy Private Secretary to The Prince of Wales on secondment for a couple of years whose job was principally to look after the Prince’s overseas life. Because it was a Grade 4 job, it was part of my responsibilities to organise it so I went along one day to have lunch with Peter Westmacott, who was then the incumbent, and his boss, the Private Secretary to The Prince of Wales who was Richard Aylard. We had lunch, I remember, in Green’s, just off
Jermyn Street to talk about the job so that I had a sense of what was required in terms of putting together a list of candidates to be looked at. We spent a couple of hours talking about the job and I remember coming home that evening and saying to Angela, my wife, this is a really interesting job which I had no idea about. I’m up to be moved and I’m wondering whether perhaps I should apply too. Anyway, the next day I talked to Edward Clay, the Head of Department, about it and he agreed that it was certainly something which I ought to be interested in.

So I handed over management of this appointment, put my name forward amongst others, and found myself in the field. There were three shortlisted candidates that the Prince wanted to see. He saw two of them and so I was the last. I went to see him at Sandringham because in those days he would spend a week at Sandringham in earlyish November. I went up to Peterborough on the train and was then taken by car up to Sandringham. It was a very dank, rather dark November afternoon. I’d never been to Sandringham before. I was put into the big drawing room in the front of the house, the Saloon, and the butler came and lit the fire and I was there on my own as darkness descended outside. The Prince was out for a walk with his dogs.

**IH-C:** You were feeling slightly apprehensive?

**SL:** Very apprehensive. I think the interview started half an hour late because the Prince was late back. I was taken off to his study for a cup of tea and a piece of cake – with his dogs - and a conversation. We had a very interesting conversation mainly on his side because he spent most of the time talking about things that were on his mind, about life in general, and a bit about me. It was all very agreeable and at the end: “thank you very much” and I was shown out, put into a car and driven back to Peterborough Station. I remember thinking as I left Sandringham: “I probably won’t get this job but gosh – what an extraordinary occasion this has been, to have had tea on my own with The Prince of Wales.” So I got into the car and off we drove to Peterborough and we’d been going about a quarter of an hour when the chauffeur’s pager went (this was in the days when we all had pagers): Would I ring Richard Aylard, the Private Secretary when I got to Peterborough Station because he wanted a word. So, I got to the station and rang him from a call box – to be offered the job! This was completely unexpected and I remember in the hour on the train
back from Peterborough to King’s Cross being unable to control myself from smiling at this extraordinary offer that had just been made to me.

**IH-C:** Did you accept on the spot?

**SL:** Oh, absolutely. Of course I did, absolutely!

**IH-C:** What about your wife?!

**SL:** She was behind my candidature, so she was thrilled too. I remember that it wasn’t an easy time because it was a time when relations between the Prince and the Princess were at a very difficult moment. This was in November 1992. I remember David Gillmore (then PUS) asking to see me and saying that this job was not going to be easy. “We don’t know what’s going to happen but you have my full support in what you’re doing and you must bear that in mind.” He was a good man, David Gillmore, who died very young.

It was a difficult period because in between the time when I had been asked to do the job and taking it up in February 1993, the Prince and Princess of Wales separated and that was big, big news. I wondered how that was going to affect my job because the fact of the matter was that the Household was there for both the Prince and the Princess. In fact, she then went off and acquired her own household.

At the beginning of 1993 I went off for a month to Lille to polish up my French and live with a family just outside Lille and I began the job in February 1993.

**IH-C:** This hadn’t anything to do with your pending appointment, presumably?

**SL:** Yes, it was for that. I wanted to brush up my French so that I could do the job even better. And the Office agreed for me to do that. I remember that my first week, which was the week of my handover with Peter Westmacott, we went out to Poland to do a recce for a visit which I then took The Prince of Wales on a couple of months later which was my first overseas tour with him. I was to be in St James’s Palace for two years, that was the plan, on secondment. I did a lot of touring with the Prince to all kinds of parts of the world – in Europe, east and west; a lot to the Middle East; Central Asia; Canada; the States; the
Philippines; to Brunei and so on. One of the great moments overseas with him was being present at the Hong Kong handover in 1997.

By that time my job had shifted. After about two and a half years Richard Aylard left as Private Secretary and the Prince asked me to succeed him as the Private Secretary. So I found myself committed to the Prince for a lot longer than I had expected and was delighted to do so, but came to the conclusion quite early on from that moment that if I was going to do ten years with The Prince of Wales I would be better out of the Office. I knew how the system worked having been in PMD. To be back before the No 1 Board after that length of time, competing for jobs when people would actually know precious little about what I had done and what it meant and what it entailed in terms of ability, compared to people who had been under the microscope of performing in the FCO all that time, I wasn’t going to be in a very good position to compete for senior jobs.

So I decided, as I was still on secondment, that I would leave the FCO. I haven’t regretted it since for all kinds of reasons. I would just say that one of the interesting things about my time with the Prince while I was still part of the FCO was this interesting challenge in terms of arranging overseas tours, of reconciling what the Prince wanted to do with what the Ambassador or the Post or the FCO wanted to do. These overseas trips are decided by the Royal Visits Committee which is chaired by the Head of the Civil Service. Where you went was obviously agreed and asked for by government.

**IH-C:** and paid for by them.

**SL:** And paid for by them. But when you do the recce itself, you then find that as a Private Secretary getting the visit to work properly is far from straightforward. Getting the visit to work properly does not mean doing everything the FCO wanted you to do or the Ambassador wanted you to do. The fact of the matter is that of course there are things the Prince ought to do and must do. Equally there are things that aren’t going to work for him to do and equally, there are things that he would like to do because of his own personal interests and responsibilities. Getting that equation in balance and right was often quite tricky with Ambassadors. I remember once we were doing a visit to Los Angeles and I had some quite interesting conversations with the then Head of Post. The visit was fine but my gosh – I was then shown, between the recce and the visit, some of the correspondence which
the Head of Post had with the Foreign Office about how appallingly he thought this visit was
going to go and how appallingly S. Lamport had behaved and so on and so forth. But the
visit was fine!

The other thing that was interesting and something that may come as a surprise is that, the
first time I went with The Prince of Wales to Canada, a Realm, he has a different
relationship to what he is there from other parts of the world. He is Canada’s Prince of
Wales. Organising a big visit there with Canadian Protocol, dealing with people for whom
this was their Prince of Wales and not ours, is an interesting call on one’s diplomatic
abilities. Getting that right, getting right the presentation: ‘this is nice but it isn’t quite going
to work for the visit. We’ll do this rather than that’ - and why - is quite a difficult challenge
sometimes. The fact of the matter is that the Canadians are paying so it’s very much on their
terms, at their invitation – that’s very much not a straightforward balance to strike.

My admiration for The Prince of Wales is enormous. Here’s a man who I saw having great
impact overseas. The visits that he makes matter to the people overseas, they (the Royal
Family) get fantastic overseas coverage. They have a real ability to represent Britain in a
way that nobody else can, powerfully and very personally, and that does a huge amount of
good for Britain in these countries. The coverage he gets back here is minimal and it’s
usually about something that goes wrong – he wears a silly hat or he’s given an
extraordinary present. It’s not about the substance of what the visit actually achieves or
represents and that was always a great challenge and disappointment. The coverage you
would get from the accompanying British press group would often not reflect the real impact
of what that visit meant in the country concerned.

IH-C: And there’s nothing really you can do about that.

SL: No, very limited is the answer. Being alongside the British press and helping them to
understand and be sympathetic to what he is doing and why, is an important part of the job.
But at the end of the day, the coverage you see is the coverage you get. Sometimes it is fine
but it never really reflects, as I say, the real good for Britain that these tours do, which is
huge.
IH-C: These visits do occasionally go wrong. Unexpected things happen. The principal person must be pretty understanding of that and accommodating of that when it goes wrong and picks up the pieces and goes on.

SL: It depends a bit upon what’s going wrong and how dramatic is. When things go wrong within an arranged visit, it’s usually a source of mirth rather than anything else. And that’s often what makes the visit for the Prince and his team. When things go wrong in terms of the overall arrangements, that’s another matter. One of the jobs is to make sure the overall arrangements don’t go wrong but sometimes they’re out of your control.

But I come back to the fact that I think these visits do a huge amount of good and an amount of good that it’s very difficult to understand and appreciate in this country. Related to that is one other thing, if I may, and that’s the Royal Yacht Britannia. The Royal Yacht was a huge privilege to be on and it was another wonderful world in which one found oneself. I think it was a source of real regret when the Royal Yacht was decommissioned in December 1997.

We used the Royal Yacht when we went out for the Hong Kong handover and then sailed on to the Philippines and did a tour there and that was the last big royal visit that the Royal Yacht did. The influence of the Royal Yacht in terms of its ability to command the interest and involvement of people of all kinds at the very top of a country was always huge. I remember being in the Yacht with him going down the Gulf, for example. We got to Saudi Arabia where we were moored off Dammam, I think. He gave a dinner for the Saudi Royal Family and every single one came, and there were lots of them. They all came because they all wanted to be there. You’d never do that in an Ambassador’s residence; you’d never do that in a smart, swanky hotel. The Royal Yacht had huge pulling power. On a commercial tour, its ability to get the most senior politicians, people from the most important businesses and industries in any country to come together, to be there, to feel that there was someone special and to be looked after, that impact was massive. It’s immeasurably beyond anything in terms of the cost of the Yacht coming into the equation or whether we would get our money’s worth or not. It was a huge national asset and when the decision was taken by the government that it wasn’t to be paid for any more, I think the world thought we were completely bonkers because we’d actually turned our back on something which nobody else had and which Britain really, really benefited from. It was a decision which was I think misconceived. Politically perhaps, quite difficult to have done otherwise but in terms of the
impact on Britain’s interests, it was a really harmful thing to do rather than a useful thing to do. That was a great sadness, and obviously for the family it was truly grim, but for Britain, it was I think, the wrong thing to have done.

**IH-C:** A last question on this. Working for a Royal Household where things have been perhaps done the same way for a long, long time. Was it a flexible organisation or was it run on very, very strict protocol lines?

**SL:** It’s different working for The Prince of Wales than working, say, for The Queen. The things that we would do, the visits that we would do in the UK and overseas, would be very much in his style, a very different style from that of Buckingham Palace for all the right reasons. That’s no comment on how they do things in Buckingham Palace at all. The Queen has to be and is different obviously from The Prince of Wales. One had to understand how he worked and how to get the best out of him. Within that, you could do all kinds of imaginative things and you would often do things that no one else in a Royal Household would do and that made it very interesting. One was able to experiment and try things which otherwise wouldn’t have been possible. You have to understand the culture and the way of getting things right for The Prince of Wales and that takes time. You can’t walk into it and think it’s going to be like working in the Foreign Office. It’s not at all, but the skills you had in the Foreign Office were often very helpful in getting it right in terms of dealing with people both overseas and in this country too. You’re working in a different culture. You understand and get that culture right and you can do a lot of things and be much less hamstrung than you otherwise might imagine. But you’ve got to do it with the grain of what he is and how he works, otherwise it doesn’t work. If you don’t do that, you won’t win his confidence; you won’t win his trust and without that the job cannot be done.

I did almost ten years with The Prince of Wales. I decided after nine years that you can’t do this sort of job for ever and we agreed I would go after ten. One of my problems was that I knew that having had a job whose bandwidth was massive, working for the Prince in terms of the subjects that one dealt with and in terms of the people that one dealt with – any day you could be dealing with kings and queens on the one hand and people living without a home, on the streets at another – one felt one could achieve real things that would have a real impact on people’s lives. The Prince’s Trust is one example but there are many, many others. I knew therefore that stopping working for him meant that I was going to be doing
something that was going to be of much less interest and impact than I’d had the privilege of doing with him.

So I wanted to do something totally different for a bit and I decided what I’d like to do was to work in the City because I didn’t really understand how that part of life functioned.

**IH-C:** Can I ask you what age you were at that stage?

**SL:** I was 51, I think. What happened was that I had been on the Council of The Prince’s Trust as part of my job and one of the people also on the Council was Fred Goodwin, who at that time ran the Royal Bank of Scotland and when Fred knew I was going to be leaving a year afterwards, he spent a year persuading me to join the Royal Bank of Scotland, which I eventually did. I spent five years there and actually left in a planned way, as it happened serendipitously, just before the great crash came. I learned a lot. Not a world that I particularly enjoyed working in, but I learned a lot about how that world functions.

**IH-C:** Because at an earlier stage you said you weren’t actually looking forward to a commercial posting that much!

**SL:** Well, I didn’t intend to spend five years in the Royal Bank. I was going to do a couple of years but I agreed to stay on a bit. I left the Royal Bank in December 2007, not knowing what I was going to do afterwards but wanting to get back into some kind of public service and I was then head hunted about four months later to apply for the job of Receiver General at Westminster Abbey, a job of which I knew absolutely nothing. I had been to the Abbey with the Prince a number of times on big formal occasions but I didn’t know the Abbey.

**IH-C:** What does the Receiver General do?

**SL:** The Receiver General is a combination of Chief Executive and Permanent Secretary and is responsible for everything that is non-liturgical in the Abbey’s life. The Abbey is a big, complicated organisation so my job, which I began in August 2008, meant I was responsible for finance, for people, for fabric, for security, for communication, for reputation, for fundraising – for everything that is not actually to do with laying on services although obviously, I was involved in that too. I was appointed by the Dean; I was
responsible to the Dean and Chapter and basically the Dean and the Receiver General between themselves make the Abbey work. It was fascinating and we did a lot in all kinds of ways and were able not least to change the nature of how the Abbey works and the people who work in it from a 1980s organisation to a 2010s organisation. And we built the Queen’s Diamond Jubilee Galleries and raised £23 million to do that. It was a very constructive and rather wonderful and special time of my career which I had not planned.

The only part of my career which I have ever planned was my decision to apply to join the FCO. Thereafter things have just come my way and that includes The Prince of Wales’s Household, includes the City and includes the Abbey. So, I have been fortunate. And you’ll remember the lines: “What makes God laugh? People making plans.”

IH-C: Thank you.