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**Paul LEVER** (born 31 March 1944)

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**SIR PAUL LEVER, KCMG**

**interviewed at home in London on Monday, 7 November, 2011**

**by Malcolm McBain**

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**Education and decision to join the Diplomatic Service in 1966**

MM: Sir Paul, could you tell us very briefly where you went to school and what your family background was?

PL: I went to school in London, initially to a preparatory school and then to St Paul's. My father was a pathologist who worked at a hospital in Wimbledon; my mother didn't work after they were married.

MM: So what persuaded you to join the Diplomatic Service?

PL: I was at Queen's College Oxford from 1962 to 1966 and, at that time, unemployment was an unknown concept. The default option for a lot of people was to stay in the academic world. I decided towards the middle of my last year that I didn't really think that that was for me. I was interested in the world of public policy and applied for the Foreign Office and to the BBC, and I decided to go to the Foreign Office.

MM: Which you did in the administrative class of the Diplomatic Service.

PL: I joined as something called a Grade 8.

MM: What was your first posting?

### **Posting to South Asia Department of the FCO, 1966**

PL: I did a year in London working in the South Asia Department. My head of department was Tony Duff who had a very distinguished career thereafter. He became Director General of the Security Service. After a year, as was the rule in those days, most of us in my intake were sent off to learn a language. In my case, slightly to my surprise, I was sent to learn Finnish. I spent about nine months at a university in central Finland.

MM: And did you stay long at Helsinki?

PL: About three years. I was the junior member of Chancery. There was a Head of Chancery and me, so I did political work. I was the only member of the Foreign Office staff who spoke Finnish.

MM: Did you have to read the newspapers and listen to the radio?

PL: Yes. I did general political reporting as part of the job of a young Chancery secretary as I was then.

MM: And after that?

### **Posting to UKDEL NATO Brussels, 1971**

PL: From there I was posted to the UK Delegation to NATO in Brussels where I was from 1971 to 1973. This was my first involvement in politico-military work which occupied a fair bit of my subsequent career. While I was in the NATO Delegation, I was also seconded to be part of the British team at the preparatory talks for the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe, which as it

happened was taking place in Helsinki. I also attended the beginning of the talks on what at the time was called MBFR (Mutual and Balanced Force Reductions) in Vienna. This was a process which led, many years later, to the negotiation of the Treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe. I was head of the delegation that initialled that treaty.

MM: That was a pretty swift progress through the ranks ...

PL: No, that was in 1990. It took seventeen years to achieve a result.

MM: But it laid a good foundation. It was your speciality really.

PL: Yes, some people specialise in a language, a country or a region; I ended up specialising in European affairs both politico-military and European Union. I was never posted outside Europe, which is slightly unusual.

MM: It's generally taken to be a good sign.

PL: Yes, although it did mean that quite important areas of British foreign policy interest – China, India, the Middle East – were worlds of which I had no direct personal experience.

MM: Did you do a job in North America?

PL: No, I never served outside Europe. I obviously have been to America many times on work and I had a lot to do with officials from various US administrations, but I've never lived there, which I also rather regret.

MM: Well you can't fit in everything!

PL: True.

MM: After NATO in Brussels, you then came back to the FCO.

### **First Secretary in Western Organisations Department of the FCO, 1973**

PL: I came back and I worked in the department that dealt with NATO affairs and arms control affairs. It was then called the Western Organisations Department but its name changed later to Defence Department. I was there from 1973 to about 1978 at which point I was moved to the Secretary of State's Office, first of all in a little planning cell specialising in politico-military issues which David Owen, who was Foreign Secretary, established, and then after a bit as one of his Private Secretaries.

### **Appointment as Assistant Private Secretary to Secretary of State, 1978**

MM: That must have been quite interesting.

PL: Yes. A job in the Private Office obviously means that you see a huge amount of what is going on and you are close to where the big decisions are being taken. It was indeed a very enjoyable job. I worked for two Foreign Secretaries, the first David Owen and then, later on, Peter Carrington (Lord Carrington). It's a source of almost disbelief to some of my colleagues in other countries that the Private Office staff of the British Foreign Secretary do not move when he moves. We stay as part of the furniture, at least that has been the position up to now. I much enjoyed working for both of them. Although their styles and personalities were different, their policy views and instincts were quite close really.

Being in the Private Office means that you see a lot of the work of the Government at a very senior level. I think it's a job where you need to be careful, particularly when you're young, not to let it go to your head. It always seemed to me that a good Private Secretary recognises that he or she has responsibilities that

go in two directions: you have of course responsibility to your Minister or Secretary of State to ensure that his wishes are carried out, his instructions followed, but you also have a responsibility to the Department to ensure that their advice is presented in what you think would be the most promising way. That doesn't mean that you have to try to force your Secretary of State, even if you were capable of such a thing, to accept the advice, but it does mean that you have an obligation to the Department to say to them, "If you want to persuade him to go in this direction, I wouldn't use this argument; I would use a different argument." You need to help them deal with the Minister as well as help the Minister deal with them.

MM: It can be very tricky.

PL: Well yes, but that's what you're paid to do.

MM: Did you find David Owen prickly?

PL: Well, they were his last years as Foreign Secretary because the election came in 1979 when I was still working for him. He sometimes has that reputation. I always found him to be extraordinarily stimulating. He had a huge grasp of detail but also he was someone with ideas who wanted to get things done. You did need to be prepared to be reasonably robust in arguing with him. In my experience, he always respected a valid argument. He would sometimes advance a proposition which clearly wasn't going to work and, if you explained why it wouldn't work, he would listen. If officials got tongue-tied and said, "Yes, Secretary of State, fine!" and then went away, and it didn't happen but they had not explained why it wasn't going to happen, he could get impatient, it's true. But I must say I enjoyed working for him; he was extremely good to me and we have kept in touch for over thirty years. I think he's still an extraordinarily impressive political figure. He's sometimes described as the nearly-man of British politics, as in a sense he was.

Looking back over the things that he tried to do, but didn't in the end really succeed - of course there was the Social Democrat party - but he also tried to get a solution on Rhodesia, or Zimbabwe, which would have involved Joshua Nkomo taking the lead. It would have been a deal between him and Ian Smith's party with Nkomo in charge. In the end it didn't work because Nkomo was not prepared to make a break with Mugabe. With the benefit of hindsight, you could say that Nkomo made a fatal error in committing himself to the Patriotic Front. Would Zimbabwe have been a better place without Mugabe in charge? Most people would say that yes, it would.

Later on, he was involved in trying to find a solution in the Balkans, in Bosnia as EU negotiator. He and Cyrus Vance, the US Secretary of State when David Owen was Foreign Secretary, put together a plan which didn't involve splitting Bosnia into three but into an admittedly complicated cantonal structure in which the units would be at the village/commune level and where the hope was that it would be possible to keep the three communities - Serb, Croat and Bosniac - together because the geographical entities would be small enough to accommodate where people actually lived. The plan was allegedly endorsed by Karadic but maybe that was just tactics, who knows! It was disowned by the Americans. Again, if you look at Bosnia today and ask, "Has the Dayton Agreement really delivered a stable, well-governed country?", it hasn't. Would the Vance/Owen plan have worked? Who knows? But, again with the benefit of hindsight, it seems that perhaps it might have had something going for it. But there you are!

MM: When David Owen came into the Foreign Office on appointment at a young age, and perhaps slightly surprisingly, by James Callaghan, Callaghan let it be known through the PUS, Sir Michael Palliser, that he would appreciate it if every effort could be made by senior officials in the Foreign Office to ease Owen's induction to his new responsibilities for foreign affairs. Have you any idea how Owen managed to emerge so quickly as the holder of this very senior appointment?

He'd been a medical doctor by training. He'd been into Labour party politics with obvious success. He seemed to come into office with a set of well argued ideas about all kinds of problems. What was the basis for his views?

PL: He had been a junior minister in the Ministry of Defence, the Minister for the Navy, and of course, when he was appointed Foreign Secretary, he was already a Minister of State in the Foreign Office. He had always been interested in the wider world, particularly in certain security policy issues. He had well-developed views on the future of the nuclear deterrent, for example. If you mean where did he get his interest in that sort of thing, given that being a neurologist is quite time-consuming, one of the most extraordinary things about him was the way he was able to organise his time. Mostly we forgot, but occasionally when we were working for him something happened which reminded us that, in addition to being Foreign Secretary, he had a very marginal constituency in Plymouth which he had to go to often. He had two sons whom he drove to school every day, one of whom suffered quite badly from leukaemia and at one stage the prognosis was not great, and he also had a wife who was expecting their third child. That was all while he was Foreign Secretary. So his ability to fit it all into the day, and his capacity for work, was remarkable.

But he did indeed have quite well thought out views, not all of which had been previously tested in the Whitehall cockpit, as it were. So part of the job that officials had was not to tell him his views were misguided – they weren't; quite the contrary. It was to try to help him advance those views in a way that was likely to bring round the Ministry of Defence or other parts of Whitehall or, in the international context, the other governments whom he needed to bring along. Although he could sometimes be impatient with officials, he could also be an extremely patient negotiator. He was prepared to sit down at tables and get a result. Conducting EEC, as it then was, fisheries negotiations is not a task for somebody with a short fuse. He had the patience to do it.

MM: That wasn't a notably successful negotiation from the British point of view.

PL: Well by then we were in; the damage had been done. What we've always suffered from is that, when we were negotiating entry to the EEC in 1971/72, the EU put together a common fisheries policy at the last minute, just to screw the British who had lots of sea with lots of fish.

MM: That's true, and that negotiation had nothing to do with him. David Owen always struck me as being a very remarkable man.

PL: Yes he was; still is.

MM: Particularly his recent book where he talks about people's personalities, their conditions of health and the effect that had on their decision making.

PL: *In Sickness and in Power*, yes. It is a remarkable book.

### **Secondment to EC Brussels 1981**

MM: Anyway, after that you went over to the Commission in Brussels.

PL: Yes, I spent about three years in the Private Office and then I was asked if I would be interested in working for one of the two British Commissioners, Christopher Tugendhat. I went first as his deputy chef de cabinet with the expectation that I would take over as chef de cabinet in due course. So I was there for the life of the Commission presided over by Gaston Thorn of Luxemburg. And Tugendhat then became the Commissioner in charge of budget and financial institutions. The Budget especially was quite a central issue in those days.

Still is!

MM: And is becoming even more crucial.

PL: Yes. There will be other negotiations about it in a year or two, I suppose.

MM: What was your impression of the Brussels set up?

PL: Remarkably positive. The Commission, at least in those days – I don't know whether it's still the case, but I have no reason to believe it isn't – was staffed by a relatively small number of highly intelligent, highly motivated people of different nationalities. It was quite a shock to realise just how clever, clever French officials are, and others too. When I worked there, the main working language was French; that would not be the case any more. Of course in our cabinet we used to use English. But for wider meetings, you had to use French. My French was OK, but I had to improve it fairly dramatically, as we all did.

The dominant issue during the time I was with the Commission was the so-called British budget problem, Mrs Thatcher's determination to secure a better deal on the amount of our budget contribution. I think I attended all European Council meetings from February 1979 when Mr Callaghan represented the United Kingdom right up until 1985 when I left the Commission. I attended some negotiations as a member of the Commission delegation and others as a member of the British official delegation, so I saw it from both sides. It was interesting to realise that, good though the British Civil Service is, it isn't perfect and other Civil Services have their own ways of doing things. I think that, of all the Civil Servants that I worked for in my career, the two who I would have said were in a class of their own, were Robin Butler whom I worked for when he was Cabinet Secretary, but also Emile Noël who was the French Secretary General of the Commission for years. He had a quite extraordinary grasp of even the smallest detail. The underlying economic realities or factors inherent in an issue were addressed much more directly, I found, in the Commission than they are in Whitehall. Most Commission officials in the bit of the house I was in would have

had an understanding of what the economics of a problem were; but also, because this was their job, of how to put together a package that would be likely to satisfy, if not everyone, at least as many people as possible.

I think when I was at the Commission, I first developed some negotiating abilities and I learned a little bit of what I came to view as the fruitful way to negotiate and the less fruitful ways to negotiate. I certainly thought that the way British negotiators performed over, for example, the budget deal was poor. Not Mrs Thatcher herself; she had identified her objectives and made sure that she got them. But I felt that too many official level British negotiators in those days thought that either they could copy her and just bang the table, or that a way to achieve the result that they wanted was to try to demonstrate that the counter-arguments were lacking in logic, were flawed and could be shown to be deficient by clever British officials who had been to Winchester. In my experience you don't necessarily get your way by needlessly irritating or humiliating the people you're negotiating with. You are more likely to get your way if you can find an outcome which you can represent as satisfactory from their point of view as well.

That's not the same as compromising your objectives, it's the method of how you achieve them. Of course, in the Commission, because it has the responsibility of having to put together a package that allows everyone to feel that they're getting something out of a deal, that's second nature to many officials. And that seems to me to be a skill which was worth developing and which, at that time, some British leaders and officials thought they didn't really care about.

MM: That's a bit depressing, but I'm sure it's true.

PL: Ultimately, for a country like Britain, if we feel strongly enough about something and we bang on about it for a long time, we will get a result, as Mrs Thatcher did. But even Mrs Thatcher sometimes misjudged events. There is a point in a negotiating session where that particular meeting has reached its limit; there isn't

any more give. That doesn't mean that you've got to settle for what's on offer, but it does mean that you need to bring that particular meeting to as friendly a close as you can and then fight the battle another day or try to find a different approach. Whatever. Mrs Thatcher had many many virtues as a negotiator but her weakness was that she was bad at recognising when on a particular night, day, whatever it was, there wasn't going to be an improved offer and she had to decide whether what was on the table was adequate, or if not, well then, you needed to come back to it some other time. Keeping everyone in a room for another two or three hours making the same points and going over the same arguments just wouldn't work. Sometimes she did that and, on one occasion, I remember, there was a deal on offer which most of her advisors thought broadly satisfied British requirements but she herself didn't see it that way so she kept the meeting going without a result. Three weeks later she signed up to pretty much exactly the same deal. Without her willingness to act tough, though, we wouldn't have got the deal we have. Essentially what she was seeking was reasonable.

MM: Now does that cover your time in Brussels, or is there anything you would like to add?

PL: I think that about covers it. I was sounded out at the end of my time in Brussels about whether I would like to stay in the Commission and on the whole, looking back, I think I would have found a permanent career in the Commission less satisfying than the one I was lucky enough subsequently to get. A good many of my friends, though, former members of the Diplomatic Service, did stay there and, if you've got interesting work to do, say in a foreign trade area, it does offer you fantastic opportunities. It obviously gets a bad press today but, in my experience, the things that have gone wrong with the European Union – like, for example, the Common Agricultural Policy – have gone wrong because of the need to try to find a compromise acceptable to the now twenty-seven states. If you look back over the years at the annual price fixing exercise for agriculture, and you work out what would have been the consequences if the Commission's

original proposals had been accepted, as opposed to the deal eventually reached, you would find that, on the basis of the Commission's original proposals, we would today have a quite different and vastly cheaper agricultural policy than the one that we have. But the Commission is never given credit for that. It isn't the Commission that puts the prices up all the time but the member states.

MM: To protect their own interests.

PL: Of course. I can remember an occasion when the Commission had been given a mandate to review all Commission policies, particularly the Common Agricultural Policy, to see whether better value for money could be obtained – and this was partly in relation to the problem of the British budget. Because the CAP was being discussed we were having to talk to various states about the amounts of money that were being spent on it. And we came to London. We called on the then Agriculture Minister, Michael Jopling, and he had his senior staff there, the Permanent Secretary and so on. We said we were reviewing some ideas for improving the CAP and of achieving greater value for the money spent. “Wonderful!” they said. “We’ve got a number of ideas. We think that there are big changes that could and should be made. For example, take the regime on olive oil.” They were full of the iniquities of the money that was being wasted on olive oil. Quite correctly! “And there’s tobacco. Wine, another scandal!” Well, we started getting into various regimes like the subsidy for silkworms and so on. We listened to all this and then one of my colleagues said, “Well that’s very interesting, Minister. So far you’ve mentioned ways in which money could be saved in product areas which, on the face of it, account for slightly less than 5% of expenditure under the Common Agricultural Policy. What do you feel about milk?” Great sucking of teeth by Michael Jopling. “Oh Christopher, don’t touch anything to do with milk. Terribly sensitive, milk, you know. We’ve got farmers in my constituency in Yorkshire that are really on the brink of bankruptcy and, if they lose these subsidies, it’ll be extraordinarily damaging politically.” “Cereals?” we said. “Any chance at all?” No no; cereals were also completely

off limits. Lamb, sheepmeat? No no, don't touch them! The British Ministry of Agriculture was just as hypocritical, and had got its snout just as deep in the Common Agricultural Policy trough, as anyone.

That's the way it was, but we used to pretend that we were on the side of the angels. We weren't. You hear stories about big land-owners getting all these subsidies. The Queen is one of them. But one of the reasons is that over the years, right up to the time I was in Germany, the British Government vehemently opposed any suggestion that Common Agricultural Policy spending could be targeted on small farms who, arguably, do need some protection and support. The British government wouldn't hear of it. Why? Because other countries have more small farmers than we do and therefore, proportionately, we might get less out of the Common Agricultural Policy if big farms didn't get the same level of subsidy, regardless of the fact that we get a two-thirds rebate from expenditure through the EU budget; regardless of the fact that, if you want to save money on agriculture, most people would say that you need to target where the money goes. But no, over the years we wouldn't hear of it. We want our big barley barons in East Anglia to continue getting their money.

MM: That's international negotiation for you; that's the reality.

PL: Yes but we don't really put our negotiating money where our mouth is. We sound off about how terrible the result of the Common Agricultural Policy is. We've never made any serious attempt to change it. We say we have but, when I have seen the ways in which the United Kingdom has tried to change the Common Agricultural Policy, as I indicated earlier, we are full of ideas about how you can save money on crops and products which Britain doesn't produce itself, but for the rest, no thank you.

MM: How did you find working for Christopher Tugendhat?

PL: Well I enjoyed working for him. He was a very young Commissioner. He was previously a journalist on *The Financial Times* specialising in the oil and energy sector. He had one characteristic which I had never seen equalled in any other politician. When, at a press conference or dinner interview or conversation, he was asked a question which was completely unexpected and for which he was utterly unprepared – and about which he'd probably not given any previous thought – whereas most human beings would display some kind of pause or shock, or need to collect their thoughts, Christopher would lean automatically forward as if this was just the question he'd been wanting to talk about, and launch straight away into an answer. When you'd seen him do this a few times, you realised that the first two or three minutes of his answer was him speaking and thinking at the same time. What he was saying was – I won't say 'contentless' – but fairly uncontroversial because it gave him enough time to collect his thoughts and then address the question. It was this ability always to seem to be in control of the subject matter, even when actually he wasn't and was having to think about it, which I've never seen equalled.

MM: He went on to become the man in charge of the Civil Aviation Authority, among others, Chatham House, oil companies, and so on.

PL: He did, yes. I think it's a shame that he didn't come back into mainstream British politics, not of course because he has not had a very successful career in the City – he has – but I think it's a pity that the Conservative Party at that time got itself into a position where, if you'd served in Brussels, you were somehow considered to be a bit suspect. I think at one stage he had a hope that he might be able to come back into politics but I think it became clear fairly soon that that wasn't going to happen. He was still young enough to have made a further career and that is what he did. Apart from Roy Jenkins who did come back into the House of Commons after he had been the President of the Commission – albeit not with the same proximity to power as when he left it – I can't think of any British Commissioner who has come back and been a major force in British politics. Of

course Lord Kinnock is there in the Lords; Lord Patten is there. And some, like Lord Richard, who were Commissioners subsequently served in Government in the House of Lords, but none of them has been at the centre of power in their parties and that, I think, is perhaps a loss to British public life. It's the sense that, "Oh well, if you go to Brussels, that's it! You've abandoned British politics. Your heart isn't somehow 'in' in the Westminster system."

MM: There seems to be a strange feeling among Home civil servants of an ambitious bent, that if you go to the Commission, the chances of getting back into the system are somehow reduced.

PL: I think that may well be the case now. It wasn't always the case in the past. Some British civil servants did come back and took quite senior jobs for instance, John Mogg, David Williamson. They are few and far between. Michael Jenkins who lives up the road – he came back. Pauline Neville-Jones, my boss when I first went to work for Christopher Tugendhat came back. But they were people who were on temporary secondment. There isn't the tradition of people working as established civil servants in the Commission and then coming back and working at a senior level in Whitehall. I think now it's got worse. I think the reality is that, if you go and work in the Commission, it's pointless to expect that you will get a senior job in Whitehall. If you look at the Foreign Office now, it's losing its influence on European policy. We have now someone as Permanent Representative to the EU who for the first time does not come from the FCO and hasn't served in any EU institution. He has a Treasury background. Until Simon Fraser took over as PUS, there wasn't really anyone who you could say has played a senior role in national EU policy who has also known the EU from the inside. I think that is a weakness.

MM: It certainly seems to be a failure to recognise the importance of a job in Brussels.

PL: It's not that so much. It's also a failure to recognise that a civil servant's

expertise is something to be valued as well as – I won't say 'instead of' – all those other general qualities that the Foreign Office is so enthusiastic about now, like diversity training. I think it's part of a wider malaise that has affected the Foreign Office in which that institution doesn't value professionalism in the way that it used to; the way in which language skills have been allowed to erode and aren't valued as they once were. Similarly there's an unwillingness to recognise that there is such a thing as being a good negotiator and that there is such a thing as knowing how the EU works; that these are skills that have value and don't mean that, if you speak a foreign language, you've 'gone native' or, if you're a good negotiator you might give too much away, or if you know how the EU works, you must be some raving europhile. These are qualities and assets which are useful. There is a reluctance on the part of the Foreign Office now to acknowledge this because it has spent so much of its time gazing at its own navel and worrying about its own internal procedures. Pity, but there you are.

MM: Let's move on. We've got to where in your career you came back to London.

### **Appointment as Head of a Department in the FCO, 1985**

PL: I came from the Commission to be Head of the United Nations Department for a time, and I then went to be the Head of the Department that I'd previously been a member of, which changed its name yet again from Defence Department to Security Policy Department.

### **Appointment as Head of Delegation of UKDEL CFE/CSBM Vienna, 1990**

I moved from there in 1990 to spend two years as the Head of the Delegation (with personal rank of ambassador) in Vienna that negotiated the Treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe, and then produced the agreement on changing the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe into the Organisation of Security and Economic Development in Europe.

### **Appointment as AUSS (Defence) in the FCO, 1992**

I came back from Vienna in 1992 to be AUS – ‘Director’ in office speak, again in charge of defence and security.

### **Appointment as DUSS (Economic and EU Director), FCO 1996**

I went in 1994 from there to the Cabinet Office to be Head of the Defence and Overseas Secretariat and Chairman of the Joint Intelligence Committee. I moved back to the Foreign Office for about a year and a half as EU Economic Director and then, slightly to my surprise, was made Ambassador to Germany until retirement in 2003.

MM: What about security? What sort of angles of security were you dealing with?

PL: Essentially, during the Cold War, up until 1989/1990, it was defence in the very traditional sense, and much of it organised through NATO. I can’t count the number of NATO meetings I went to at that period. After 1990, of course ...

MM: That’s defence against the supposed military threat?

PL: Well it wasn’t a supposed threat, it was a real threat. For a long time during the Cold War all sorts of people who were thought to be in a position to know were telling us that NATO estimates were in fact all exaggerated. They didn’t really have anything like as many tanks or as many aircraft or personnel carriers. When we negotiated the CFE (Conventional Forces in Europe) Treaty, as part of that, all the parties had to declare their holdings and have them verified. We discovered that actually the Soviet Union had slightly more tanks than even NATO estimates had thought. Admittedly some of them were pretty old but the numbers were remarkably similar to what the NATO intelligence estimate had suggested.

People forget, because there have been so many failures in intelligence, that this was one area in which the Western NATO intelligence analysts got it pretty much spot on.

MM: That was that side of things rather than ...

PL: Yes, for most of my career I was a traditional cold war warrior. The Cold War dominated everybody's thinking, particularly security people, and nobody ever contemplated seriously a situation in which that essentially antagonistic relationship between NATO and the Warsaw Pact would cease. There were hopes that, at the human level, things might improve. There were hopes that it might be possible to have a more constructive relationship with the Soviet Union, but the idea that the Warsaw Pact would collapse and the Soviet Union would disappear never occurred as a serious possibility to anyone. As a result of that collapse there was no military threat such as we faced before. So for most of my professional career I was operating on the basis of assumptions that turned out to be incorrect.

MM: And were you getting briefing from our diplomatic posts from service advisers or from the Ministry of Defence, Defence Attachés?

PL: Well they provided reporting. But the lesson from 1989/1990 is that there are certain kinds of socio-political upheaval which it is not possible to predict. Intelligence agencies are often criticised for not having predicted the fall of the Shah in 1979, not having predicted the collapse of communism, not having predicted the Arab uprising, whatever it may be. I don't think that these are fair criticisms. There was no intelligence which, if it had been acquired in good time, would have enabled us to know what was going to happen. There was no plan for the collapse of communism which, if we'd managed to steal the paper, we would have known about in advance. Even if we'd had an agent sitting in Ayatollah

Khomeini's drawing room in Paris in the years up to 1979, the fall of the Shah was not predictable in that way.

That doesn't mean that it is not possible to understand these countries better and I think that there are criticisms that can be made of our, and others', unwillingness to think a little bit 'outside the box', to use the jargon, on some of these issues. I remember one of the things that David Owen did just in his last days as Foreign Secretary, was to ask for a report to be done looking at how we had analysed Iran under the Shah, and whether we could have been better prepared for what happened, and whether there were any lessons to be learnt for the future. He wasn't blaming anyone, but thought it would be a good idea to look at what had gone on. The report was commissioned to be done by some young, middle-ranking officials. By the time the report appeared the election had come and gone and there was a new government. The officials produced their report that suggested that, amongst other things, although nobody could have predicted what was going to happen, nonetheless the fact that the embassy in Teheran had been dominated by commercial work meant that fewer resources had been placed on political reporting. It also noted that, at the more junior levels at the embassy, there were people who reported things which suggested that the public mood was more hostile to the Shah than it might seem and that in the so-called bazaar there was more discontent than appeared on the surface. The further this information got up the embassy chain, however, the more it was watered down and what eventually went under the Ambassador's signature was pretty reassuring, whereas what the Ambassador was receiving from his more junior staff was much less reassuring. I think that some suggestions were made for how in future there should be more refocussing of resources and more willingness to send divergent news to London. It was rather a good report, I thought, but it was suppressed.

MM: What, by officials?

PL: When the report appeared in September 1979 the Permanent Under Secretary of

the day ensured that it was not initially shown to Ministers in the new Conservative government. Those of us in the Private Office who were aware of it were ordered not to reveal its existence. For over a year it was effectively pigeonholed. Only in late 1980 were Ministers told about it; and it was not until 1981 that the Secretary of State, Lord Carrington, had the opportunity to read it. By then Sir Anthony Parsons, whose judgement as ambassador in Tehran the report called into question, had been posted from London to New York."

MM: That is a great pity. It was quite far-reaching I think.

PL: Well, potentially yes. I think that the Foreign Office has in the past benefited by having people around who have been willing to challenge some of the assumptions on which policies have been based. On the other hand, you could say, "Well, look at Saudi Arabia. People have been asking for decades how long the al Saud regime can last?" God knows how many British Ambassadors in Riyadh have written dispatches, because they were allowed to, on the subject and the family's still there, the place is as unreconstructed as ever, the oil keeps gushing out and contracts keep rolling in. There no doubt have been various junior officers at the embassy over the years who have said, "It's not going to last and here are the reasons why." They too were wrong, so there isn't an inexorable road to wisdom when it comes to the analysis of internal affairs of countries which potentially are quite volatile.

I do think that the importance to us of what may happen in some of these countries is such that it is worth investing in a certain capability to understand them. We haven't done that. I don't know what the situation is now but my understanding is that, when we started getting militarily involved in Afghanistan and when Kabul became for a time the biggest British embassy in the world, the Foreign Office had no Pushtu speakers at all. What do you think we're going to achieve in a bloody great embassy in Kabul if we don't have anyone who speaks Pushtu and we've only got a few people who speak Farsi? We've recently, as I

understand it, sent an Ambassador to Ankara who doesn't speak Turkish, and we have one in Teheran who doesn't speak Farsi. I read an interview somewhere with a lady who was our Consul General in Basra who said that she was learning Arabic. What's the point of sending anyone there who doesn't already speak the language?

The service that I joined was one in which, for all its faults, there was a certain pride in professionalism and in feeling that we do languages, countries, cultures as well as anyone, if not better than many. I think that that was one of the reasons why the British Diplomatic Service was quite highly regarded, for its professionalism. I'm not sure that we're as highly regarded to-day and one of the reasons is that we have lost respect for professional knowledge and professional spirit.

MM: There was a speech by the present Secretary of State on the FCOA website recently which touched on the management of the Diplomatic Service which was actually quite encouraging (for a change).

PL: Yes, I agree it was a good speech. After I retired -- and while my wife was still a member of the Diplomatic Service -- she was present when David Miliband became Foreign Secretary and, on his first day virtually, or during his first week, he had a very good staff meeting during which he took questions. A lot of the questions were on the subject of the pending closure of the Diplomatic Service language laboratory. Many people asked him if he was aware of this and why we were closing this down. To the discomfort of the members of the Foreign Office Board sitting on the dais next to him, he said that no, he wasn't aware, that it sounded strange to him and he would look into it. Sadly nothing happened. Now, I understand, under William Hague I don't think the language laboratory as such is going to be reinstated but certainly we are told that language training will be taken much more seriously -- and so it should.

But there's still a reluctance to give operational effect to aspirations like improving language ability. If you really want to take language knowledge seriously, an excellent way of doing it would be to have a requirement that, in order to get promoted to the senior management structure, that is the higher echelons of the Office, you would have to be currently qualified at extensive level in one language or at intermediate level in two languages, or whatever he thought to be the appropriate threshold. But that's always been rejected because too many of the Bugginses can't speak anything except bad French.

MM: One hopes they at least speak reasonably good English!

### **Appointment as HM Ambassador, Bonn, 1997**

MM: Anyhow, when the time came for you to go to Bonn in 1997, did you speak German?

PL: By the time I got to Bonn, I did. When I was appointed I spoke 'O' Level German and I had had those two years in Vienna, but I certainly did not have German that was operationally effective enough to do my job. I had to spend three or four months improving it, and I spent part of it living for a month with a family in Weimar in East Germany. By the time I got to Bonn, my German was OK but by the time I left I could then do television German. That's the standard you need for things you're expected to do as British Ambassador. It's no good just being able to read the newspaper; you have to be able to transmit as well as to receive, and do it at quite a high level of comprehension. My American colleague for part of my time in Germany didn't speak any German. He was a former Senator so he brought to the job qualities, authority, knowledge of quite a different kind, but if you're the British Ambassador in Germany, you've got to expect to do business in German, even with the German officials all of whom speak absolutely perfect English, some of whom, in my case, I'd known personally for years and to whom I had never spoken a word of German. As soon

as I was in their office, it was German, and quite right too; so it should be.

MM: Whereabouts is Weimar?

PL: It's in Thuringia, what was East Germany, formerly the German Democratic Republic.

MM: It was in 1997 before reunification.

PL: No, reunification was in 1990.

MM: Yes, I was wondering how you got there. But it was before we went back to Berlin.

PL: Yes, reunification was 1990, the Bundestag voted in 1992 to make Berlin the capital but the actual move took place early in the summer of 1999. So when I went to Germany which was at the end of 1997 the capital was still Bonn. So we had about a year and a half in Bonn and then we moved to Berlin and had about four years there.

MM: That must have been a pretty interesting time to be in Berlin.

PL: Yes, it wasn't a job that I was in any way expecting. I only got it when Christopher Meyer, who had been Ambassador in Bonn, after six months was moved to be Ambassador in Washington because Jonathan Powell, who was Tony Blair's Chief of Staff, vetoed the appointment to Washington of the candidate who had been recommended. Therefore, having failed to find an outside person to do the job, they were looking for somebody for Washington who was very media-friendly and Christopher Meyer was the natural choice. But that left a vacancy in Bonn and there was nobody very obvious to take it who had served in Germany or had a knowledge of Germany. Most previous Ambassadors to

Germany would have been people who were on their second or third tour in a country, who knew by heart all the details of the quadripartite agreement and so on. But a lot of that expertise was no longer relevant following the end of the Cold War so, although I couldn't possibly have done the job in Germany in the 1980s because I just didn't have the knowledge, by 1997 I did know something about the subject, as it were. I was very aware that I didn't know that much about Germany itself.

MM: What would you need to know about Germany?

PL: Well, you do need to speak the language well. It obviously helps if you know the people. And it helps if you understand how a federal structure works. It helps if you understand the way the German political system works; if you understand already who are the people who are important, and why.

Now all these things you could learn pretty quickly, and I did, but I certainly would have done my job better in the first six months if I'd had that body of understanding already.

I found that most British ministers, when they came to Germany, or even senior officials, often didn't understand how Germany functioned. I would often be asked how do you get elected to the Bundesrat, which is one of the bodies of the German parliament. You don't get elected to it; it's not an elected body but is a kind of council of the Länder, so if you're a Land Minister President, you're automatically a member of the Bundesrat. It's things like that.

There was one occasion when we all received an instruction to make an attempt to secure the lifting of the ban on exports of British beef which had been a result of the outbreak of BSE in the UK. Most of my colleagues in other EU countries had no difficulty in fulfilling the instructions. It was for them a fairly straightforward matter. They only needed to call on their local Minister of Agriculture or the

Minister Health, in order to lobby. Well, maybe some needed to call on senior officials in the department involved. In Germany I went to the Ministry of Health to tell them but explained that I already knew that actually this was a decision that had to be taken by the Bundesrat. All the Länder have a voice and I had to go and call on each individual Land Government to talk to either the Minister President or Agriculture or Health Minister of that government because it was they who would be voting on the proposed change of legislation. I don't think that the folk in London appreciated that was how the system worked.

MM: No, they wouldn't. So you had to set about studying the Federal German constitution, basically, the way it operates and who the personalities were.

PL: Yes. Had I served in Germany before, I would have known that. I should mention here that's the sort of basic knowledge that is absolutely vital for an ambassador. I found it strange in my career that I was never sent back to the one country, Finland, that I knew better than any other.

I did go back to Finland once in the middle 1990s. I went back because I had kept up with some of my friends over the years, and the guy I probably knew best from my time in Finland in the late 1960s/early 1970s was the Prime Minister from 1995 to 2003, which is just after Finland joined the EU. He invited me back to tell him about how the EU did things. He wanted to have a chat about how European Councils functioned and so on. I don't think it would have occurred to the Foreign Office that they had somebody on their books who probably knew more Finnish politicians personally than anyone else.

MM: You got yourself into Germany, the most important country in Europe by a long way, and had to start to get to know the personalities at a very rapid rate. How did you do it?

PL: Well fortunately Germany is a very open society and if you're the British

Ambassador and you ask to go and call on people, they'll receive you. You get other extraordinary privileges in Germany. I was invited to various national cultural events – I was invited every year to the Bayreuth Opera Festival, and to the Oberammergau Passion Play. So you do run into politicians at events like these, and they will see you. So you can get to know them to the extent that they'll happily have a chat with you. As an Ambassador, you don't make personal friends; you wouldn't expect to. But they are happy to talk.

I saw Angela Merkel from time to time. Initially, she was Minister of the Environment and later on she became the Secretary of the Christian Democrat party and later its Chairman. I don't think she's somebody that anyone expected to become Chancellor, but she did so for the same reason that Margaret Thatcher became Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. She chose to challenge for the leadership of her Party at a time and in circumstances where the people who regarded themselves as the natural successors to the incumbent held back. By challenging early in both cases, she got the momentum going and left a lot of middle-aged men wondering where this young upstart had come up from!

She would come to lunch at the Embassy – in Berlin we had a sort of executive dining room which was partly screened off. I remember we also had breakfast in Bonn once. She was in opposition, obviously, at that time and she would come and talk and I would try to quiz her on things. But she was quite adept at asking me things herself and, after a bit, I realised that she was somebody who, having been an Ossi (she was brought up in the East), hadn't travelled much. Yes, when she'd been Minister of the Environment, she had travelled and had met British ministers. I remember she had met John Gummer, our Environment Minister. But she didn't really know anything about Britain. She wanted to understand more about how the British system worked, what Blair was like. Of course she knew the basics of our system as any educated person would, but she wasn't somebody who, all her political life, had been used to dealing with parliamentarians from the House of Commons and so on. This wasn't her

background. So just what the pressures were upon a British Minister or, for that matter, a Member of Parliament; why it was that taxation was such a sensitive issue, among the top political class. It was things like that she wanted to talk about. I thought it was highly intelligent of her to be willing to use lunchtime to broaden her understanding of a country that had some importance for Germany. Yes, she was also rather fun to talk to. She was not exactly self-deprecating, but at that time she could talk about the difficulties of being Chairman of her Party when she described herself as a woman, divorced, 'Evangelisch' ie Protestant - all previous Chairmen of her Party had been Catholic. And she could have added that she was a scientist by training. These are characteristics which apply just as well to Mrs Thatcher – a woman, married a divorced husband, was she a Methodist? I've forgotten, and a chemist whereas Angela Merkel was a physicist. She wasn't somebody who had natural authority over her party from the moment she took over. She had to build it up.

She would talk quite openly about the difficulties of imposing herself on a Party which hadn't expected to have her as Chairman and where there were many regional barons who needed to be placated. In German politics, regional barons play a part in a way that simply doesn't apply in Britain.

MM: I suppose the heritage of the Länder ...

PL: In any German Government, the governing Party needs to be sure that all its main baronies are represented in the Federal Government – I don't mean every single Land; it doesn't matter if you don't have someone from Saarland or even Thuringia, but you probably need somebody from Bavaria and somebody from North Rhine Westphalia and Lower Saxony. And Chairmen of the local party organisations in the big Länder – these would be important political figures. The one thing that it was hard for some visiting (British) politicians to understand was that when I was in Germany for the Federal Election of 2002 and Gerhard Schroeder was the Chancellor, Edmund Stoiber was the Provincial President of

Bavaria. If Stoiber, who was the opposition candidate for the Chancellorship, had won, he would have become Chancellor of Germany on his first day in the National Parliament. To anyone who is used to the British political system, it's unthinkable. You make your political reputation in the House of Commons, you become a Minister and then, if your colleagues so vote, you get to be the leader of your Party and then Prime Minister. In Germany you don't make your political reputation in the Bundestag, or at least that would be the exception rather than the rule. Almost all German Chancellors have made their name as a Minister President in one of the Länder or as a senior Minister in one, and have used that as the stepping stone to power. If you look back, Schroeder was the Minister President of Lower Saxony; Kohl was Minister President of Rhineland Palatinate; Schmidt wasn't Minister President but he was a Minister in the provincial government of Hamburg; Adenauer was the Mayor of Bonn; Kiesinger was Baden-Württemberg. They all had a regional base. At one stage, when Schroeder was Chancellor, if you looked at his Cabinet, there were four or five former Minister Presidents sitting there as the Finance Minister, as the Transport Minister, Defence Minister, I forget where the others were. These are the people who constitute the élite of German politics; not necessarily people who have spent twenty years as parliamentarians.

MM: May I ask about that extraordinary episode in your time in Germany? I'm really not quite sure what the background is. But there was a letter, or you made some kind of speech criticising the British press for its negative attitudes towards the EU and that stimulated Conrad Black into making all kinds of threats to sue the Office ...

PL: It wasn't a speech. I had given an interview, as we were encouraged to do to the German press. The interview in question was with an actually rather obscure bit of *Die Welt* online. *Die Welt* asked me why the British press was so consistently hostile to Germany and indeed to the European Union. This was something that you would be asked almost any time you exposed yourself to the German media,

and I had forgotten I'd said it. I think I made some reference to the fact that significant parts of the British press were actually foreign owned.

MM: And he threatened to sue the Foreign Office.

PL: No no, he sued me!

MM: Did he actually issue papers? What was the outcome?

PL: Yes. By all accounts he was in a real state about it and I was instructed by the Foreign Secretary of the day to write a letter in which I acknowledged that Lord Black was British. I had always seen him referred to as Canadian. I didn't know he had British citizenship, although his newspapers were registered in the United States. I was instructed to write and say what a wonderful chap he was. He withdrew his suit ...

MM: That was Robin Cook.

PL: Yes.

MM: And did the Foreign Office dictate the terms of your letter?

PL: Yes. Robin Cook was very nice about it. He rang me up and said that everything that I had said corresponded exactly to his views, but you can't upset the press. The truth of it is that British Ministers at that time were scared of the press so, if somebody said something and the press didn't like it, their instinct was to say, "How can we calm them down?" rather than, "Is this correct or not?"

MM: It's absolutely disgraceful.

PL: But Lord Black is now in jail and I'm enjoying my retirement!

MM: So it all worked out in the end.

PL: I thought it was a bit sad that even somebody like Robin Cook felt he had to grovel to a man like Conrad Black. It's a shame.

MM: Did that persuade you to leave the Foreign Service early?

PL: No, not at all. I left slightly early but only because I was – I won't say 'pressured' but I was sounded out as to whether I would like to go and work in the Council of the European Union as the Director General for Foreign Affairs. A job that Brian Crowe and later Robert Cooper did and that would have meant leaving Germany. I decided that I preferred to stay in Germany as long as I could and in the end I stayed there for five and a half years, which I think was the longest that a British Ambassador had served in that post. I left I think six months before my retirement age. I'd had an exceptionally long run in Germany, which was my choice. I could have left Germany earlier and added to my pension, but after Germany there really aren't many other jobs worth doing. So they kept me in Germany longer than I had any right to expect.

MM: Did you get a great formal send off?

PL: From whom?

MM: From our military presence?

PL: No. The military presence was in the west of the country. There was no military presence in Berlin. There wasn't any specific event that I remember to say good-bye to me, but I think I did go and have dinner with the people at Rheindahlen before I left. I actually had remarkably little to do with them professionally because they live in their NATO world. I did go and see them a lot; I would be

invited to military events. They were keen for me to come if they were doing something for a local mayor. When the Embassy was in Bonn, they were very nearby; in Berlin they are that much further away. Although I went there, there wasn't very much business that I needed to undertake on their behalf – only very occasionally, for instance, an argument about whether they were using too many radio frequencies in their local area. But other than that, they were very well established; they had their own contacts with the local communities which they were extremely good at maintaining, to the point that, when a unit would be deployed, say, to Bosnia or to Kosovo, they would often invite the mayor of the local garrison town, plus numerous reporters, to go and visit them so that the mayor could appear as visiting 'my boys'! The British appeared as his troops in 'a far-flung foreign field', and of course this rather flattered the mayors and made them feel that the unit was part of the local community. I thought the British Army was extremely good at that. The Americans couldn't be bothered; they stayed in their base areas with their PX and cinema. British garrisons were much more linked into their local communities and quite big numbers of British military, both officers and other ranks, married German girls, some of them even staying in Germany. Most of our security guards, for instance at the Embassy in Berlin, were ex-Army with a German wife and who had stayed in Germany. Some of our embassy drivers are ex-army as well. They were absolutely ideal people to recruit for that sort of job.

But the Army loomed much less large in my life in Germany than it would have for most of my predecessors.

MM: Did the Germans still pay?

PL: No, they stopped paying so-called occupation costs in the 1970s, I think. There were Berlin costs which were paid up until 1989/1990 but they'd long gone by the time I was there.

MM: That must have been part of the Four Power Agreement.

PL: Exactly.

MM: What are the numbers now in round terms?

PL: If you go back to 1955, then the original commitment was a field Army and a tactical Air Force. By the time I left in 2003, the Air Force had gone completely and I think the military were down to under 20,000 whereas, when I started in the Foreign Office, there were 50,000 Army and an Air Force commitment. Of course they're now going completely by – I've forgotten the timetable.

Even by the time I was Ambassador in Germany there was no strategic reason why the British Army needed to be in Germany. It was there because it had excellent training facilities and barracks accommodation, and there wouldn't really have been anywhere to put them back in the UK. So it made sense to keep it there.

MM: And they enjoyed duty free privileges as well.

PL: They had facilities, that sort of thing. Germany was a very popular posting. Families were well cared for and it wasn't just the accommodation; they had schools, sports and so on. Germany was a pleasant place to be, easy enough to get home when you needed to. So it wasn't like being sent to Afghanistan. The Army will miss it. It won't be so much fun in Warminster or Catterick.

MM: Have you any general reflections on your time in the Diplomatic Service?

PL: I think it's interesting to ask people who have been civil servants, particularly in the case of an organisation like the Foreign Office, "Have you done anything in your career, or been involved in anything in your career, that you're really

ashamed of?” On the whole, if you work for the British Government, unless you have very strong personal political views of your own – and if you do have those, you shouldn’t have gone into the Civil Service in the first place – on the whole there may be times when you feel your Government is being unwise, but ultimately it’s for Ministers to choose and, provided they’ve read the briefing and looked at the recommendation, if they choose to disagree with it, that’s their privilege and civil servants get on and implement whatever they’ve decided. If we feel it utterly wicked we can of course resign. But normally it’s just a case of getting on with it. Maybe I personally might have decided the other way, but they took the decision they took.

There were only two occasions when I thought a really bad decision had been made. Once I thought it was morally wrong. Once I thought the decision was just so stupid that I wished I wasn’t involved in it. The occasion I thought was wrong was our policy on Bosnia in the early 1990s and, in particular, our insistence that we were going to continue with a UN peace-keeping operation which would be neutral, impartial and would simply protect the delivery of convoys of humanitarian aid, but not take sides in the war. That was a perfectly decent objective to have when we went in in 1992, something like that, but it became quickly pretty apparent that there was a civil war going on and our insistence of “Oh, they’re all as bad as each other and all we can do is try to save people’s lives by delivering aid, but we mustn’t get involved militarily,” when the Serbs were bombing Sarajevo day after day, month after month became indefensible. Srebrenica and things like that were known to be happening. I thought that this was just morally wrong. The American policy, which in itself was a bit of a cop-out – namely, we won’t get involved on the ground but we will give the Bosniacs arms and will use our air power to fight the air war. I’m not sure that was a hugely creditable policy, but at least it had some merit to it. I think history will judge British Ministers unkindly over that.

I hope they’ll judge some civil servants slightly less unkindly because a couple of

us did actually put on paper a recommendation that we should stop all this and the Secretary of State turned it down. Douglas Hurd was a thoroughly nice and decent man, but I think that will be a stain on his record. It was interesting that, almost as soon as Malcolm Rifkind became Foreign Secretary, he tried to pull out and then John Major wouldn't have it. Fortunately things developed on the ground. When we sent General Rupert Smith to be the commander of the operation, he more or less forced the hands of Ministers in London by demanding artillery. And he made quite clear that he was prepared to take the Serbs on - admittedly, in relation to the delivery of aid. Once he started getting involved, the character of change became quite clear. I thought that the way we sort of pussy-footed around trying to pretend that there was a war going on but we were neutral reminded me a little bit of the Spanish Civil War. We don't take sides. I thought that was wrong.

The one that I thought utterly stupid – it was the same Government – was their decision on Mad Cow Disease in about 1996. Having said for many years that BSE was a disease limited entirely to cattle and couldn't be transmitted in any way to humans, this committee produced a report saying that actually they thought it might be transmittable in certain circumstances, or they couldn't exclude the possibility, and Ministers utterly panicked. There was a most surreal Cabinet meeting in which they hadn't a clue what to do and some of them even said, "Well, perhaps the answer is we'll just have to kill every cow in Britain and start again with a new herd." Anyway, they were then surprised that their European partners put a ban on imports of British beef and took other measures that hit the British agricultural trade. After a bit they turned their irritation into petulance, and introduced a policy of non-cooperation. Because our exports were being banned under terms which we thought too stringent, we were going to say 'no' to every proposal that came up in the EU on any subject. Utter, utter infantile petulance on the part of people who really should have known better. This was a Cabinet with Michael Heseltine, Kenneth Clarke, Malcolm Rifkind as members – and even they went along with this crap because they were all so split on Europe that even people like that felt that they had to do something to appease

the Eurosceptics. What on earth did they think the situation would have been if it had been announced that this disease, if it occurred in France, was transmittable to humans? Did they think that we would have still gone on buying French beef? What did they think *The Sun* newspaper would have had to say! It was so childish that I really felt, “OK, this is a Government at the end of its life; everyone knew that it was split, it was paralysed, it was going to lose the next election by a mile. But even they, in that situation, should have known better.” It didn’t last, but I just felt that I really would rather not be working with these people.

But there you are. Those are the only two occasions when I felt that my Government was doing something that was either wrong or very very stupid. Other times they took decisions that might have been merely short-sighted but that’s their privilege.

MM: What do you think was your most notable achievement?

PL: I think it’s very difficult as a civil servant to say that you’ve got some personal achievement. You do your job but you’re not responsible for policy.

MM: But you were left to build up good relations with Germany, and that is a pretty important responsibility.

PL: Yes, but how much as an Ambassador are you doing for which you’re really personally responsible? I had a slightly unusual career in that I only served in two bilateral embassies: in Helsinki up until 1971 and then in Germany so, between 1971 and 1997, I never served in an embassy. I was in delegations or international organisations.

MM: It’s difficult, I can see, to claim anything much for work in some international bodies. But look at Richard Holbrooke’s book about Dayton.

PL: I think that, of the things with which I was involved professionally, the eventual treaty limiting conventional forces in Europe was probably the most important, and surprisingly it’s proved the most durable. It is still in force to-day. Getting

that done when towards the end when the Warsaw Pact was disappearing, the whole basis of the treaty had to be rejigged to take account of the fact that these countries were now, as they saw it, no longer part of the Warsaw Pact and didn't want to be treated in that way. Getting that agreed was quite an achievement. As in any multi-lateral negotiation no individual can say, "I brought that about," but I like to think that I and the team I was working with were quite competent at keeping the negotiation going, and finding technical fixes. We weren't responsible for the political decisions. But quite often, in order to translate these decisions, you need to have quite clever negotiating skills.

I certainly enjoyed my time in Germany but I was conscious of the fact that, under the Labour Government, what Ambassadors were expected to do was at one remove from the big issues of the day – and I spent my time essentially doing public relations.

MM: It's a pretty important job even in terms of public relations.

PL: That's right. Public relations is important and trying to get your country liked or at least understood by a wider audience is something, in my view, worth doing. I thoroughly enjoyed doing it, but I didn't kid myself that I was playing any role in the conduct of high-level government business. I wasn't involved in it; I wasn't present. Some of my colleagues would be surprised – I think when I was Ambassador in Germany, probably the British Prime Minister and the German Chancellor met four or five times a year so, over the five years, there would have been twenty/twenty-five meetings. I was not present at a single one. It didn't bother me! It did mean, though, that the conduct of business at that level had to be left to the people in No 10. I'm not sure that they were well equipped to do it, and I think that probably the quality of our foreign policy may have suffered as a result.

I remember that, during the time from, let's say, the autumn of 2002 to March 2003 there was a period during which there was a lot of negotiating in the UN on Iraq, and there was the first resolution and the famous second resolution about

going to war that was never adopted. David Manning, who was in No 10 at the time, was probably on the telephone two or three times a week, sometimes even two or three times a day, to the National Security Advisor in Washington. I saw no evidence that during this period he ever met or spoke to his German equivalent. If he did, no record of it was shown to me.

MM: And were you kept informed about the meetings between the Prime Minister and the Chancellor?

PL: I saw written records afterwards, yes. There's no reason why an Ambassador should be present at that sort of meeting, provided that there is a mechanism for ensuring follow-up and ensuring that contact is made where necessary to check that, if it was agreed that something would happen, it has indeed happened. If this is all going to be left to No 10 to do – nobody from the Foreign Office was present either – then No 10 needs to have a structure capable of doing it, which I don't think it had. I mean, maybe now it does with the creation of the National Security Adviser. I sometimes thought, though, that this was not necessarily the most efficient way of getting things done.

MM: Is Peter Ricketts still the National Security Adviser?

PL: I think he is but I think he's due to go to Paris or something. I think he's been replaced by Kim Darroch.

MM: You became Chairman of the Royal United Services Institute.

PL: Yes, I did that for five years and finally managed to find someone to hand over to; John Hutton.

MM: John Hutton, the politician?

PL: Yes, the former Defence Secretary. So, other than that, I worked as an adviser to a water company for three years. I currently sit on the board of Sellafield and I do a bit of book reviewing. I recently undertook to review a rather long book in Finnish with a view to saying whether it should be translated into English.

Unfortunately, I don't think the case for that can be made. It's 620 pages and contains a vast amount of stuff about the intricacies of Finnish political life. I don't think English readers will find that much information useful.

MM: Are you reading it in Finnish?

PL: Yes. I wouldn't have started if I'd known it was quite as thick as that, but I've agreed to do it now.

What else can I recall from my career? I think that's about it really. I did enjoy chairing the Joint Intelligence Committee.

MM: Did you do that for very long?

PL: Two years. It's strange that, of all the things that I did in my professional time, that is the only one in relation to which I now still get requests to do media interviews. Less so as I get older; I'm long out of it now.

MM: Yes, unfortunately one can become out of date with these subjects all too rapidly.

PL: Yes, and there's nobody as out of date as last year's expert.

MM: Thank you very much.

Transcribed by Joanna Buckley. December 2011.