

**BDOHP Biographical Details and Interview Index**

**SUTHERLAND, Veronica Evelyn (born 25 April 1939)**

CMG (1988), DBE (1998)

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**DAME VERONICA SUTHERLAND, DBE, CMG****President of Lucy Cavendish College, Cambridge****interviewed by Malcolm McBain on Tuesday 19<sup>th</sup> April 2005 at Cavendish College  
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**Early life and education**

MM: Can you start off by telling me something about your parents, Dame Veronica?

VS: My father was in the Army and he met my mother out in India in the mid-thirties; they married in 1936, and I think it was a couple of years before that that they met. It was in some ways a curious marriage in a rather English way because my father's background was more modest than my mother's and I'm not sure that it was a marriage that was greatly approved of by her family, although I think my father was eventually accepted into the fold. So they married then and I was born in 1939 just before the War, and my sister in 1941. Of course I scarcely saw my father in those years; I have the dimmest of memories of him. He came back in 1946 and decided to leave the Army. He then got a job as Diocesan Secretary in Sheffield, whereupon he died of a heart attack in the days when those who were heavy smokers didn't really realize quite what dangers they were letting themselves into. So in 1949 the three of us, my mother, my sister and I, were left to fend for ourselves.

MM: You were in England.

VS: We were in England, yes. At that stage in my life I hadn't been abroad. We'd lived during the War without a permanent home and my mother had taken my sister and me from place to place, about once a year probably; we changed digs, basically. They were all quite nice; some of them were with friends and some of them were little flats attached to large houses and so on. Once we lived for a year in a Rectory in Northamptonshire with a Rector and his wife. So it was all very pleasant but, looking back, it must have been quite a business for my mother packing up with these two tiny children and traveling in war time trains. I've no idea quite how she coped. I must really ask her about how it was. I think it must have been a pretty difficult sort of life. And then of course to be widowed directly after the War was pretty tough.

MM: How old was she at that time?

VS: She was thirty-nine and the Army awarded her the princely pension of £220 a year for herself and £18 for each child. I suppose the £220 was perhaps not such a miserly sum as that sounds now, but £18 for each child, I think it would scarcely keep them in bread. An extraordinary sum!

MM: Anyhow, where did you go to school?

VS: My main school was in Bath and was an Army boarding school. It had been set up for Indian Army people, but by the time I was there it took people from all regiments in the Army. It was a small school. And I went there, partly because I think my father had liked it as a school and partly because I was educated free. I got a scholarship, which meant that I paid no fees, so my mother, who was very short of cash, obviously couldn't reject that. The alternative would have been for me to go to a local Grammar School, I suppose, which actually were very good schools, as we all know, but my mother thought her daughters should go to a Public School.

MM: So, following school, university?

VS: Oh yes, I suffered from being labelled – we were always labelled at school - and I was labelled as clever. I was not allowed to be good at games, which indeed I wasn't, but I wasn't allowed also to be good at art, which actually is now my favourite hobby. I was destined to do the Oxbridge entrance exams which, in those days, were a very large mountain to climb because you had to do a lot of extra papers for each of the Colleges. Plus, I can't speak for Oxford, but at Cambridge there was a cap on the number of women they took. So it really was a very tough competition and one in which I was not successful, so I didn't go to either Oxford or Cambridge; I went to London, which is an excellent university.

MM: Which bit of London?

VS: It was called Westfield College; it was out in Hampstead and it's now part of Queen Mary's College down in the Mile End Road. There are not very many things in my life that I would change - but I think that choice of college was not ideal. It was very small; there were only about 250 students, all women, all doing Arts, out there on the Finchley Road in Hampstead; lovely in lots of ways, with Hampstead Heath behind you, but it was a very small society and, because it was slightly away from the main University, it was too easy to spend time with the other girls or women in the college and not

actually go out and have a student's social life. Because one thing I regret that I haven't had in my life is that undergraduate experience - you know, that sort of free and easy undergraduate experience that you certainly get in the campus universities. And Oxbridge, of course, you get something slightly different but nevertheless you get the easy interchange of subjects and boys and girls together, which I didn't really have, which is a pity.

### **Entry to the Foreign Office, 1965**

MM: So how did you get from there into the Foreign Office.

VS: Well, I left London University. I didn't know what to do, like so many girls, so I did a secretarial course, like so many girls, and then I got a job as, I suppose you might call it the diary secretary to Airey Neave, of whom I'm sure you've heard. I was with him for eighteen months. I was an absolutely lousy secretary; I used to send him off to the wrong address and he would come in looking like a clap of thunder the next morning. "I went off to the wrong party in the wrong dress!" So, after eighteen months, for various reasons, I thought that this wasn't really for me, but I didn't honestly know what was for me. Another of the very few things I think I might change if I could go back is the subject I'd done. I'd done German and I just don't think I'm a natural linguist. I found it very frustrating in many ways, studying literature in another language knowing that I could never really fully understand every last nuance, nor ever really fully master all the intricacies of the language.

Nevertheless, I decided to do a further degree. I went down to Southampton - my mother was living in Winchester at the time so it was convenient to save living expenses if nothing else. And I did an MA Thesis. Nowadays you don't really do MA Theses; you do an MA course for a year, but in those days there were no such courses and, if you wanted an MA, you did a mini PhD. So I spent two years writing a thesis on Bertolt Brecht - you know the dramatist. I actually enjoyed that and I got a lot out of it. And I was set to become an academic lecturer of some sort. It's really a very good thing that that didn't happen because, being in the wrong subject, I think I would not have been very happy. I would have spent all my time researching things that didn't really excite me, although this particular thesis did excite me at the time.

Anyway, I had tried the Foreign Office once before and failed, but I thought I'd give it another go, almost for fun. So I did and, when I got in, I thought, "Well, this sounds really good." So that's what I did in 1965; I went into the Foreign Office. I was actually quite astonished and taken aback to get in; I

didn't really expect to. It is also worth mentioning that, unlike many employers at that time, the Civil Service offered equal pay to men and women.

MM: This was in Branch A.

VS: In Branch A, yes, the so-called fast-stream.

MM: What did they ask you to do? What was your first acquaintance with things?

VS: Germany! I went into the large German room, which was, I think I'm right, W67; it's probably still W67. It's on the main floor where the Secretary of State is, and Western Department and Western Organizations and Co-ordination Department were down the bit of that corridor which overlooks Downing Street. In fact the windows of the room I was in directly overlooked Downing Street. It was a large room; it had very high ceilings and it was freezing cold; that's my main memory of that room. There was no central heating; there'd be coal fires and, when you ran out of coal, you summoned a messenger who brought - in those days bent double because they were all elderly or war-wounded - and he brought the coal scuttle in and stirred the embers to make it marginally less cold than it had been before.

And I was working on East Germany. There were three of us in that room: there was James Bennett who did Berlin, because Berlin was - this was 1965 after all - was still a critical separate issue. He did Berlin. He was actually a Russian specialist but with German. James sadly died very young of a heart attack - he died not long after that, in fact; about five years later. David Goodall was the third person and he's very much still alive and I still see him because he too has Irish connections, which is interesting. And he did West Germany and I did East Germany, and a good deal of my task was organizing travel documents for people from East Germany who wanted to come to the UK. Because we didn't recognize East Germany, we didn't recognize their passports so that they all had to have things called temporary travel documents, and I had quite a lot to do with organizing this in various ways, and deciding whether people should or shouldn't have them. The decision didn't rest finally with me but I did a good deal of the ground work, and then town twinning and the usual range of things including for example Parliamentary questions.

MM: What, town twinning with East Germany?

VS: Yes, there were towns which wanted to twin with East German towns and this was not smiled upon particularly, but it did happen. There was no way you could actually stop people twinning towns. Again, this is recollection of a long time ago and, if the papers show me something different, then I will stand corrected.

I don't know how anecdotal you want things to be but one of the Fellows here in this College, was watching some rather unusual TV channel, and suddenly up on the screen she recognized my handwriting (and I had a different name in those days - it was Beckett), and she suddenly saw my signature, 'Veronica Beckett', coming up on the screen on the bottom of a piece of paper about whether the Koreans should be allowed in to join some games that we were having in the UK. And I'd been asked to give advice on the Korean angle because North Korea was a parallel to East Germany in terms of non-recognition. So these things come and catch up with you!

MM: How extraordinary! Anyhow, that was your introduction to the Foreign Office.

VS: It was indeed.

MM: And what happened next? What was your next move?

### **Posting to Copenhagen, 1967**

VS: When I joined the Foreign Office in 1965, I was determined to see the world. I had, by that stage in my life, seen a good deal of Europe, France and Germany particularly.

MM: What, officially?

VS: No, not at all. I'd been abroad for language studies and on holidays. I'd travelled a good deal all over Western Europe; apart from Spain and Portugal, I'd visited all the other main countries in Western Europe, on holidays or language exchanges. And that was fine, but I wanted to see the world; I wanted to go to Asia and India above all and what seemed to be exotic places. And I made this very plain. Indeed, I wanted to be put on a 'hard language'. I was not put on a hard language because there'd been a woman shortly before me, one who'd actually been at Westfield with me, who had joined in Branch B. She'd been put on Thai language training and promptly got married, so they were not prepared to risk another woman at that stage. (This was before the marriage bar was lifted in

1972.) So I wasn't able to do a hard language and I was a bit put out when Anne Warburton (one of my predecessors here at Lucy Cavendish) told me that my first posting was to be Copenhagen, because it had never entered my consciousness that Scandinavia might be a posting that I should have.

However, one didn't argue about it; you were just told in those days. Copenhagen was my assignment, so off I went. And, once I got used to the idea, I actually had a great three years in Copenhagen. It was my first overseas posting, which is always full of new things and new experiences. The Danes are lovely people, and I made some friends with people I'm still in touch with now all these years later. And there were a lot of interesting things to do, lot of interesting things to see, travelling around in Sweden and Norway too, (I never managed to get to Finland). I also went up to the Faroe Islands, so I travelled around. And getting to know the workings of an embassy, it was all - I think 'fun' is as good a word as any; it was interesting of course but I had a lot of fun, a lot of excursions, picnics, parties of various sorts - with Danish people, it wasn't just diplomatic people. I was also lucky in the two Ambassadors I worked for, Oliver Wright and Murray MacLehose. I learnt a great deal from both of them.

MM: Speaking ...?

VS: Ah yes! Well, I'd done some Danish language training before I went out, enough literally to ask for something in a shop, which was not very much. And, when I got there, I thought, "Well, actually I really would like to speak Danish better." Because, although every Dane that I ever met could speak almost flawless English, it was nevertheless the case that they would talk amongst themselves in Danish and switch to English when I came along. So I made a terrific effort, I really did. I worked tremendously hard, and got there in the end. I was not ever quite taken as Danish but I would certainly be taken for a Scandinavian person. There was a lot of hard work involved because I used to address Danes in Danish and they would reply to me in English because they could tell that my Danish wasn't very good, and they of course spoke much better English than I Danish. And I used actually to take them to task about that, explaining that it was rather rude. They were taken aback by this, but I got there in the end.

MM: What was your job in the Embassy?

VS: I was the Chancery Second Secretary and left as a First Secretary. And I did the Chancery political reporting which involved, because it was a smallish place, keeping abreast of all Danish

internal politics, which is like a sort of big jigsaw puzzle of tiny parties. Today I scarcely even remember the names of all the parties; but at the time I was fascinated by the intricacies of it all.

And then I did some of the international work, and was also involved in various bilateral negotiations often on economic issues – fish quotas, or the butter mountain. This was way before the EU but there were economic issues to be discussed and I worked on these, together with the Agricultural Attaché from MAFF in Scotland. I wasn't the economic person.

MM: What was their position with regard to the EEC at that stage?

VS: Well, the Danes would join if we joined and, when we did join, they joined. At that stage, they were toying with the idea, however, of a thing called NORDEK which was going to be the five Nordic countries - would it have included Iceland? Or was it just Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Finland? Do you know, I can't remember that now. But they were thinking of some sort of economic union amongst themselves which didn't work out. But our economies, the British and the Danish economies, were, and I assume still are, so tightly intertwined. They had this huge export of bacon to the UK, for example. Twice as many pigs as people in Denmark was my favourite statistic!

So all that bacon came over, so they knew that they would have to join if we joined. And there were three of us joining in '72 - us, the Danes and Ireland.

### **Return to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in 1970**

MM: Anyhow, after Copenhagen, back to the Foreign Office in 1970.

VS: 1970 - that's right. I have had a slightly unusual career pattern over the whole of my thirty-four years in that I never did two consecutive overseas postings. I don't quite know what the reasons were. I don't think there was any plan behind that; it just so worked out. I was very keen to do something which existed at that stage but I think no longer does, a six months' economics course. Six months or was it six weeks? A longish economics course anyway. And, knowing my ignorance of things economic, I really did want to go on that and badgered away, but in the end I was told, no, I was more important somewhere else. And I went into a room to deal with an issue which I think is the one and only job where I haven't felt comfortable. And that was dealing with the Arab/Israel dispute.

MM: Ah, so you were Middle East Department.

VS: It wasn't even called that - it was called Near East Department; this is the early 1970s. It changed in 1972 to Near East and North Africa Department. In 1970 it was Near East Department and it covered the main countries involved in the Arab/Israeli dispute including Israel, Egypt and Jordan. There was also North Africa Department, and Arabian Department which dealt with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf.

I was to be landed with the Arab/Israel desk. There were two of us on this desk; the other official was Christopher Makins who was, if he wasn't a Fellow of All Souls then, he was later. He was one of those highly cerebral people, who treated the Arab/Israel dispute, as you would expect, in a highly intellectual manner. And I respected that. I actually very much liked Christopher, but I didn't find that his approach quite fitted in with the way that I was used to working, which was much more practical. When people asked what did I think of the future of this or that in the Arab/Israel conflict, my answer was, "I haven't the foggiest idea! I don't know of anybody who does." Christopher would write ten beautifully lucid pages about all the possible options.

So I wasn't easy with that particular position and I don't think I did it particularly well either. In fact I'm quite sure I didn't do it at all well. However, as you obviously recollect yourself, there was a reshuffle in 1972 of all those Departments and the Near East and North Africa Department amalgamated the Department I was in with the one doing the North African countries, and I was given Iraq, Syria and Lebanon to deal with, which was more to my liking even though this was not an area with which I had any affinity at all. By coincidence, I had just visited the Middle East in 1970 when I left Denmark. Because Denmark had been such a calm, peaceful and gentle sort of place, I thought I'd like some excitement in my life, so I took myself off to the Middle East on holiday to stay with my various friends who'd been through MECAS and were posted around the Arab world. There were about half a dozen of them, so I visited Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, Abu Dhabi, and other Gulf States. But having visited these places didn't really help me with the Arab/Israel dispute, nor did it help much with the countries which I was given in NENAD as I knew very little about the Middle East and its culture.

And, as you know, as a Desk Officer in those days, you dealt with the bilateral relationships, and would be in charge of visits and that kind of thing. It was a period of comparative calm in the area. Saddam Hussein was just emerging as a leader. I suppose Assad was there in Syria. And Lebanon

was still held up as a paragon of electoral wonders because they had this amazing system of the delegates to their Parliament being elected in a proportional way on the basis of religions, and that had worked very well for a number of years. We all now know it didn't work for much longer. But, in those days, I seem to remember there were enquiries about whether the Lebanese system might hold any lessons for Northern Ireland.

But I did not stay long in NENAD, so I can't say I ever got enormously familiar with any of the places I was dealing with. After only a few months I was asked to join Personnel Department. That was considered a good thing to do, actually. As one of the Area Officers and I was to arrange postings to the Middle East and Africa. There were four or five Area Officers. Funnily enough I was talking to somebody about this just the other day who was lamenting how personnel management was run nowadays, and I said that the Area Officers - whatever their faults, and the system may have had all sorts of faults - actually really did care. OK, you couldn't give everybody what they wanted and sometimes you had to deliver bad news, and sometimes you had to tell somebody that he or she was doing so appallingly that perhaps he or she ought to resign. Well, I never actually had to do that, but that sort of thing. But we really did care and we really did try, and we took a great pride in trying. I remember very clearly all of us who were working in that group, and it was a matter of your own personal integrity to do your best for your clients. I found that very much to my liking; I felt that it was a good niche for me in many ways and I hope I did it reasonably well.

MM: Well, you wouldn't be able to judge that anyway. It would be for the people who were posted.

VS: Yes. I know that there are certain people still in existence round the world who still blame me for one or two things which happened to them, and I am sorry for that, but an awful lot of people subsequently said, "You know, it wasn't an easy job but you did it well." We all of us, not just me but we all of us really did what we possibly could. After all, if you didn't, the show wouldn't stay on the road any longer!

MM: It sounds fascinating. Anyway, that was five years in London and then ...

### **Posting to British High Commission in India as First Secretary Development, 1975**

VS: Well, then I went to India. Now there, you see, one of the advantages of being in the Personnel Department was that you could look at the world and decide where you would like to go, and it wasn't

automatic that you'd get it but, if you chose wisely, you would. Now I like to think I chose extremely wisely, although Development work was considered unfashionable. I knew I wanted to go to India - I'd always wanted to go to India, that had been my dream - and so yes, I could fix that. Or it could be fixed, put it that way. Question was which job? The obvious thing for me to have done would have been Chancery/Political Officer - quite a prestigious job. But I thought the one I'd really like to do was the Aid job, which was highly unfashionable. I'd posted a lot of people to do Aid jobs and they'd all looked at me rather dolefully and said, "What have I done wrong, to be asked to do aid work?" And I said to myself, "This is rubbish! This is actually fascinating work because it gets you right into the country and you see what it is that makes the country tick." So I put in for that job and, of course, there were certain disadvantages in that I didn't have an economics or development background at that time. This was a disadvantage, and I would have done the job better if I'd been on an economics course, but it was a fascinating job. When I left, the Overseas Development Ministry – or was it Administration?

MM: Ministry. Well, it was DTC (Department of Technical Co-operation) to begin with, then ODM, then it became ODA.

VS: It varies with the Government. It was a Labour Government, so it was Ministry, that's right. And, when I came to leave, the ODM wanted the job; they put one of their own in, which was no less than Michael Jay, so he came with all the right background. He, funnily enough, after he'd done a few years, transferred into the Foreign Office and the rest is history. So I'm afraid I never kept up with his dizzy career trajectory!

MM: Was there an Aid Counsellor?

VS: There was. There was an Aid and Trade Counsellor.

MM: Oh, that's how they did it!

VS: Yes, and generally that person took far more interest in the trade than in the aid.

MM: He'd be a Board of Trade man presumably.

VS: Well, it varied again. Colin McGurk was the first one in my time and he was from the Foreign Office. Then there was Terence Wood, then I think the Trade person, the Board of Trade or DTI or whatever it was in those days, was a First Secretary and was my opposite number as the First Secretary Trade. So there was a trade specialist. But of course trade promotion in those days, at a time when the Indian economy was completely closed, must have been a pretty soul-destroying business actually. I don't think British exports to India were easy at all. And a lot of the trade work, I wouldn't say it came under the Aid heading, but there was a certain level of Aid/Trade business going on as well.

So for me all this was new and was absolutely fascinating. I stayed there for just under three years. We were a little group in the Aid section: there was myself, there was a Second Secretary who came from the ODA. There were two in my time and the second was the one I'm now married to! But that's quite another story. And then there were two Third Secretaries. We dealt with capital aid, which was to a large degree what I was doing. The ODA Second Secretary did what was called technical assistance, and the two Third Secretaries supported us both. One of the reasons why I had been interested in this job was that I knew that you could travel all over the country, and I really wanted to travel round India to get to know the country better, and I did; I did not see everywhere I would like to have seen, indeed I still think sometime I should go back and see all those places I didn't see, but I saw an awful lot of places. My travels obviously were related to our aid projects which were diverse – fertilizer plants, mining, electricity generating and so on. Although India, as you well know, has many difficulties and faults, and some of the poverty is abject, it was nevertheless a remarkable place and, as we all know, some of the most clever people in the world can be found in India, so it was a very stimulating time. Not always easy! I wasn't always happy there; sometimes I was really quite lonely, but it was very stimulating for somebody who hadn't much been out of the European arena. It was my first real exposure to a completely different culture.

MM: How did you find, as a woman diplomat, that you got along with Indian officials?

VS: Oh, that simply wasn't a problem. I have often been asked questions about women in the Foreign Office and been told how difficult it must have been for me. I haven't found it so. When I joined, in the 1960s, it was very unusual for women to be appointed to the fast stream. There were very few of us. I wasn't the first by a long way - I could mention quite a number of others - but it was unusual. But you were treated, or I was treated, with absolute courtesy.

MM: Oh, yes by the Foreign Office.

VS: By the Foreign Office. I'm talking about London. I'll come to abroad. In Scandinavia, there simply wasn't a problem; they scarcely noticed and you were there to do a job. Back in London, all these people who go around saying they've been harassed and can't do this, can't do that, I think they go round looking for trouble, to be honest; to a considerable degree anyway.

And so, when I went to India, again I had thought to myself that, if they can have an Indian Prime Minister as a woman - Indira Gandhi at the time - they can surely manage with a woman First Secretary in the High Commission. I never had what I would call a problem. Occasionally, out in the depths of the country, you would know that you were not quite what they were expecting, but I was never made to feel anything less than welcome and I was never made to feel that I couldn't do my job because I was a woman; it wasn't that sort of society. I wouldn't have wanted to go to the Middle East where it would have been quite different. Again, through my whole career, I've always found that, if you knew what it was you had to talk about, and if the person you were going to see knew that you had come to talk about this issue on behalf of your Government, being a woman wouldn't make any difference. They didn't have an option but to deal with you. And then, after five minutes as soon as they saw you knew what you were talking about, there wasn't a problem.

MM: Who was the High Commissioner?

VS: It was first of all Michael Walker, who had come from the Commonwealth Office, and had been Permanent Secretary at ODA or ODM or whatever it was, and then came out as his last post. And he was very much in the mould of the old colonial civil servant: he looked the part: he was tall and carried all before him. John Thompson then came out; he was quite a different sort of person - much younger, sparkier, still with a career to make, and much more of an intellectual. And they both did an extremely good job in their very different ways. I never kept up with Michael Walker after Delhi, but John Thompson I have seen now and again. He came up to Dublin funnily enough. He was somebody that I certainly had a very warm feeling about.

MM: I think that probably covers India.

## **Return to the Foreign Office and Financial Relation Department in 1978.**

VS: I came back to the Foreign Office. That was quite an interesting little interlude. I think I alluded earlier to the fact that I sometimes felt quite lonely out there in Delhi. I concluded that, while I really enjoyed the Foreign Office and enjoyed the work, the prospect - I was just pushing forty at that stage - of another twenty years around the world on my own was not what I thought would make me happy. Maybe that was a rather crude and selfish thought process, but I thought, "I actually will get increasingly lonely as time goes on and I don't think I want to do this any more."

So I went to the then Head of Personnel who was one of my own entry and a personal friend, David Logan, and I said I thought I'd like to transfer to the Home Civil Service. And he said, Well, OK, but just get promoted first because, if you go in as a Grade 5 equivalent, you'll stay there. You'll never get promotion because you're from the outside. If you go in as a Grade 4 equivalent, maybe you'll never be promoted above Grade 4 but at least that's a reasonable grade to have got to. If I were you, I would do one more overseas posting and then get around to transferring. Meanwhile do a couple of years in London. I was then assigned to what was then called the Financial Relations Department and there I was the Foreign Office link person with the ODM. There was a lot of business to be done between the two bits of the same government machine. I was the Foreign Office voice as to what the FO thought of their various aid projects and where we felt the priorities should be. A lot of my work was actually going round Foreign Office Departments trying to find out what they thought about things that were going on at the ODM and then going back to the various people I already knew quite well in the ODM and saying, "Look, you want to do this, and that's fine, but why don't you think about the other?" And that went on, I suppose, for about a year until Mrs Thatcher arrived in charge.

Mrs Thatcher wanted things done differently; the ODA came into existence and, I think to cut a long story short, my job was actually abolished and given to somebody more senior - they wanted a more senior oversight of what ODA were doing. I had another six months before I needed to be posted abroad and I was posted, curiously, as Assistant Head of Middle East Department handling Iran and Iraq. And I did that for six months, during which the Shah died. I was also involved in the Iran/Iraq War which was going on that time. I remember writing very lengthy minutes for submission about arms sales to Iraq and questioning whether the UK should supply arms to Iraq. My Head of Department, David Miers, did a counter submission saying that I was wrong. Mrs Thatcher of course agreed with him, as you would expect, and I've always been eternally grateful that the Scott Enquiry

started its proceedings in 1980 after I had gone! Because otherwise I would have been up there with the rest of them, which would not have been a joke, by the sound of things, at all.

So that was six months and I have rather hazy memories of all that because six months is too short a time to make a significant mark.

### **Counsellor and Permanent UK Delegate to UNESCO, Paris, 1981**

After that, posting time came round again. I went off to Paris. That suited me extremely well because I didn't really want to go very far away this time; I thought I would like somewhere I felt familiar with. And I was sent as UK Delegate to UNESCO, which was actually a lovely posting. I was my own boss, with one assistant, and one locally-engaged secretary. We were left pretty much to our own devices for a lot of the time, although ODA kept a watch on funding. The FCO was only interested in the so-called New World Information and Communications Order (NWICO) - horrible acronym! This was an instrument which the Soviet Bloc wanted to push through UNESCO so that it would be binding on all member states and thus have the result of embedding censorship of the press worldwide. This would have meant that the Soviets could have challenged any article anywhere in the world about what was going on in their countries. And my task, from the Paris end, was to back up the London end to prevent this Order being agreed, which we did. It was a lot of hard work but we got there.

But, for the rest, I've got to say there was not a huge interest, certainly in the Foreign Office, in UNESCO. It was actually an ODA-run operation. UNESCO works by each country having a large number of committees for each of their areas of operation - education, science, culture. Some of the people on those committees were extremely eminent people. Occasionally I bump into one of them nowadays. And they were all very interesting in their own fields and I have had some very good evenings with certain individuals amongst them talking about everything under the sun.

MM: So not lonely!

VS: No, not lonely at all. No, absolutely not lonely. And my sister lived in Paris too so I had friends in Paris. So it was a good place to be and indeed, after one year there, I then married the colleague whom I'd met in Delhi. We married in 1981. He had a job in the ODA in London and I lived in Paris, so we commuted for two years, alternate weekends. So, no I wasn't lonely at all. It was actually rather a fun three years. When I look back on those three years, they were a good three years

in lots of ways, but I also felt that on the NWICO I'd done all that I had been asked to do when I set out - with a lot of input from others, not least Nicholas Gordon-Lennox, then the Under-Secretary in London in charge of the press and information departments of the FO. So UNESCO was his responsibility on the FCO side. And he of course was a delightful person who sadly died recently. Many others were involved in the NWICO saga including the journalist Rosemary Righter, who now writes editorials for 'The Times'. Thanks to all these efforts, the principle of freedom of the press was upheld.

So that was an interesting and unusual three years. I mean, that's not your average Foreign Office posting at all. And indeed, if you look at my series of postings, they've nearly all been, in one way or another, been slightly unusual. Not many Branch A people really wanted to do these things. UNESCO was a one-off. I think I was succeeded by a Foreign Office person and then he'd only been there a year or two, if that, when we withdrew from UNESCO, and I think now that we have rejoined it again, it's reverted to the ODA or DFID as it now is.

### **Return to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office as Head of Security Department, 1984**

So I then came back to London and, expecting to be a Head of Department, which indeed I became, but I did not expect to be made Head of the Security Department, about which I knew absolutely nothing. Most of my friends fell about laughing when they heard! However, in a way it was one of my areas of greatest success. I think one thing I would say about myself is I've proved myself quite good at organizing things over the years. I have a fairly systematic mind - perhaps over systematic in some ways - which likes to see things done in an orderly way. And, for whatever reason, this appeared not to have been done in the Security Department; there were bits of it that were reasonably orderly in terms of the positive vetting system. Ever since Philby and MacLean, that work had been deemed to be important, and we had almost twenty former policemen and military people who went around doing the interviewing. We had a good system - there was a retired person there looking at their interviews, and then I used to have to look at all of this and agree generally with what they'd concluded. So that all ran pretty smoothly.

But what nobody had ever really wanted to set their mind to, partly because it's so difficult and partly because it wasn't what fast stream officers joined the Foreign Office to do, was the whole business of physical security in embassies. And it was in my view - maybe somebody will tell me I'm wrong - but in my view it was a complete shambles. There was nobody anywhere who would try to see that

decisions taken throughout the world were in any sense consistent. There was nobody really, other than the people in the embassies themselves, who weren't security experts on the whole, thinking about what they might need to do. And of course part of that was because, happily, there hadn't been too much in the way of serious physical threats as there are nowadays, although there had been some attacks of course. When I arrived I wasn't sure I could sort out what seemed to me a fairly chaotic situation, but I thought I would have a go. And I took a whole lot of initiatives. Sadly my hand was strengthened in all this by two tragic deaths: one a Defence Attaché who was killed in Athens, and then poor Percy Norris who was killed in Bombay. And both happened in 1984, I think it was. And then the cry went up, you know, "Why is all this happening? We must strengthen our defences". I think neither of those deaths could really have been prevented. Maybe if they'd had armoured cars; maybe, I don't know. The Defence Attaché in Athens of course was to some degree covered by the Ministry of Defence side rather than the Foreign Office side. But anyway, there was no doubt there was an extreme lack of any sort of planning in all of this area. And a lack of advice! I don't know where you were at this sort of time in your career - what your view of embassies in the late 1970s/early 1980s would have been, but it seemed, from what I was looking at, not much had been done. We had two advisers in the Security Department who advised embassies on physical security. They did their best I am sure, but they had had very little supervision.

And so I introduced a system of roving security advisers. There were six of them, and I gave each an area of the world and told them they must think about the defences in these particular areas. I gave them the task of looking at embassies around the world, making recommendations as to how their physical security might be improved. That took a lot of doing. It was not an easy task, getting agreement within the Department; it wasn't an easy task attracting the interest of others who sat on the purse strings. But it worked.

That was my greatest challenge. I had less difficulty in the vetting area. There were just individual cases which would cause me a lot of angst. The issue that really caused me distress was the homosexual issue because, as you know, times were changing in the mid to late 1980s. There was a much greater tolerance of homosexuality in British society. This was not reflected in the security services - for good reason, in the sense that the Russians could still use blackmail and there obviously was a vulnerability. I felt very uneasy, however, at times when I had to tell some poor young man that, I'm sorry, we couldn't continue his employment, which I didn't like doing. There was no other justification generally, except that he had been less than totally frank in his application. But it was a nasty business and I was very pleased that, very shortly after I left, John Boyd in fact, now the Master

of Churchill, was instrumental in bringing that to an end and strictures on homosexuals were abolished in the early 1990s, (after the collapse of the Soviet Bloc) which was absolutely right in my view.

I had a lot of liaison with the Security Services and had to deal with a whole lot of finicky issues like what sort of particular bags you could or could not carry particular papers in, classification of documents. Not really very exciting problems, and I would often feel torn between the Security Services, who wanted everything tied up so tightly that nothing could possibly go wrong, and my colleagues in the Foreign Office who would say, "What on earth do you think you're doing, tying us up in knots like this?" And I had one or two tricky moments in those respects, but basically it was four years when I really felt that I was improving an area which I saw was sorely in need of improvement.

MM: Exciting, really, in a way!

VS: It was, quite exciting!

### **Appointment as Ambassador and Consul-General, Abidjan, 1987**

And then I went to Africa. Now that was of course quite a saga in itself, in Africa because, by that time, I'd been married for five years or so, and Alex was working in the ODA. And we thought we could get a joint posting. Geoffrey Howe was Foreign Secretary and his wife, Elspeth, as you know, is a very positive figure in the whole business of equal opportunities - I think she even chaired the Equal Opportunities Commission at one stage - and so it was very much something that people wanted to support, the idea of a joint posting of a woman officer and her husband. It was something which was rather popular. And so Alex rang me up one day and said, "How do you fancy Abidjan?" And I didn't quite say, "Where's that?" but I didn't know much about it. But again, West Africa was not somewhere I had actually thought much about. But he said, "Look, there's this very good job which is going that I can apply for in the African Development Bank and you could surely get something in the Embassy." In fact, the only thing in the Embassy which I would be any good for was the Ambassadorship and I was quite young to be an Ambassador. Nor would it have been a normal career move for me at that stage of things; you know, a more normal move for me would have been something like a Head of Chancery in a larger mission. But we thought about it a lot and said, "Yes, well why not!" We agreed that Alex would go for his job, which was very well paid, I have to say. If he got it, good - we'd go. And, if necessary, I would go as an accompanying spouse but, hopefully, I

would get a job - and of course, with Geoffrey Howe so keen to see this double posting going ahead it worked. I remember very well when I went to say good-bye to Geoffrey Howe, he said to me - Alex and I thought we'd fixed this posting for ourselves - he said, "We," (meaning Elspeth and him), "We were very pleased to fix this posting for you!" Lots of other people took credit for it too. So I became the first married woman Ambassador in the British Diplomatic Service, and Alex the first male Ambassadress.

And it worked extremely well. I can't say that I was overworked in Abidjan. I had enough work to do and I did a lot of travelling around the country. It was fascinating in a way because francophone Africa is so different from anglophone Africa; Madagascar is a bit of both, isn't it?

MM: No, it's francophone.

VS: It is purely, it's *francophonie*.

MM: It's a former French colony.

VS: Which one am I thinking of then? There's Madagascar and .....

MM: Mauritius!

VS: Mauritius! I'm thinking of Mauritius, which is in the Commonwealth isn't it. But it's also French speaking.

MM: Well yes. They would insist on speaking a kind of Creole. Insist on it! Even though they speak perfectly good English, they prefer to speak this patois (which sounds like perfectly good French to my ear).

VS: But Madagascar is purely French. Right?

MM: Well, they speak Malagasy of course, but we dealt with people who only spoke French to foreigners.

VS: Yes, they don't speak much English, as in the Ivory Coast. I always had the impression that the Francophone Africans think they've drawn the short straw because English would be more useful. But you're absolutely familiar with the difference between the francophone and the anglophone approach to the Empire, as it was, and the fact that the French tried to make black Frenchmen out of their colonials, where we honestly never tried to make Englishmen out of our colonial people. On the contrary, we really rather encouraged them to promote their own cultures. So what we found, in Africa - and Alex had lived in Ghana for a year or so and knew much more about Africa than I did - was that, to begin with, Africans would treat us as they would treat a French visitor - in other words, give us all the French courtesies of speeches and flags and all these things, but actually, when you got them to see that you were not French and you didn't particularly care about any of this, that we'd much rather see them as Africans, they would relax and we had some very jolly times with various African individuals. And I have many fond memories of all kinds of events that I sat through, not always in anything like comfort, I have to say: being served up warm champagne in the middle of the desert can be a problem! The *per capita* consumption of champagne in the Ivory Coast in those days was second only to France in the world. I'm afraid it's rather different now.

MM: Of course it was under ...

VS: Houphouët-Boigny. He died in 1993 and we left in 1990. Before I went out there and did my briefing visits, I was told it was a largely commercial task, and indeed there was a certain level of commercial work to be done and there were a number of British firms there - not very many, I have to say. It was very difficult to operate in the francophone world. But I can't say I did a huge amount in the way of export promotion. Pharmaceuticals were a big export, as you might expect - pills of various sorts. But there was very little investment. The big firms like Unilever with interests in palm oil had been there for many years but, when people were looking to invest and they used to come to the Embassy and ask my advice, I'd say, "Whatever you do, make sure you can get your money away quickly." In other words, don't sink a lot of money into this country because who knows what may happen - which, with hindsight, was quite good advice, looking at the sad state of the country now.

But yes, I did try to welcome people who wanted to export, and take them around to see the right people and so on, but the cards were stacked against them. I think it was de la Rue who probably had one of the best identity card arrangements in the world and wanted to sell their wares, and they were blocked at every turn by some French competitor. That was a fairly regular happening.

I think, apart from travelling around, what I spent a lot of time doing - sadly, in the end, not to long-term effect - was to set up a little British Council operation there. Of course, English language was a subject of lasting interest, and I did manage to do that with the very excellent British Council person there. But, unfortunately, only a couple of years later, it was cut in some cutback and I actually felt rather sore about that. I thought it was unnecessary and silly, because it was doing good work.

What else did we do? There were some VIP visitors - Mrs Linda Chalker, who was the Minister for Africa came. We had a great visit and we went to call on President Houphouët-Boigny; there was Linda Chalker, there was her Private Secretary who was a woman, there was the Head of African Department who was a woman, and there was me. And he gave the four of us lunch! I think he rather enjoyed it. He was a bit of an old rogue.

I also covered Burkina Faso and Niger and of course they're very fascinating countries. And I didn't really use the opportunity to travel enough - I should have travelled more, particularly in Niger and the deserts. I didn't actually visit frequently because all the Government officials ever wanted was money and I knew they weren't going to get any, so I went up, I don't know, three or four times a year. We had TCOs in both places.

MM: Technical ...

VS: Yes, Technical Co-operation Officers - and they were very welcoming; indeed one of them just wrote to me the other day. I stayed with such people and they entertained me and so on, so that was good, but we didn't really have much in the way of interests at all, and to go up there and speak to the Ministers and so on - yes, you got a sort of insight into what was going on, but all they really wanted was, "Can you help us?" and the answer was always No. So I didn't see any point in going up very regularly to send them that message.

MM: It can be very embarrassing when you can't offer anything.

VS: Yes, absolutely! So those were good years and they were different too. Alex had a very interesting job at the African Development Bank promoting development projects throughout the continent. He used to travel a lot all over Africa and one year I went up with him to Abuja which was just opening up as the Nigerian capital. That must have been in 1989 when the African Development Bank held their annual meeting for the first time in Abuja. So we drove in our rather nice BMW car,

all the way from Abidjan to Abuja, which is quite a long journey, and stayed - Abuja at that stage consisted of one mosque and two hotels, and we stayed in one of the two hotels.

MM: You were getting to know Africa.

VS: Absolutely, yes. But I was the accompanying spouse on that occasion, which I rather enjoyed. So that worked extremely well.

MM: Was Alex busy?

VS: He was very busy. He had a much more taxing job in terms of hours put in and decisions to take and so on than I did. People used to ask, "Do you really need an Ambassador in Abidjan?" Marginally yes. There wasn't a huge amount to do but yes. I found enough things to do to fill my day; I wasn't bored or anything like that. But I was never under any sort of work stress at all, whereas he was at times. He had a lot to do; it was a very heavy job. And he was the Executive Director representing the Federal Republic of Germany, as it still then was, Portugal, the Netherlands and the UK - so four countries, not all of whom agreed with what should be done and the Germans, being the largest shareholders, feeling that they should dictate affairs. I think that was all quite difficult to deal with.

MM: While you were there, did you have much to do with the EU colleagues?

VS: Oh yes. We had monthly meetings as far as I remember, and it was all run by the French of course. There was a French EU representative, and I will tell you, purely factually to draw whatever conclusions you wish, that he spent the three years telling us he would take us to the north of the country to show us his cattle project. We never went to the north of the country, and we never saw his cattle project.

MM: Was there an EC delegation?

VS: This was the man. He was the delegate, yes. I think the previous delegate had been British but the French then clearly wanted their man in place.

MM: Oh well, so much for West Africa.

### Assistant Under Secretary of State in the FCO,1990-95

VS: Yes. Then Alex and I weren't quite sure what we wanted to do, let alone what London thought we ought to do. Alex was quite keen to stay on another year because he did have a very good job, but I think the Germans felt they wanted their man there; having a British person there hadn't altogether suited them. I don't think Alex had ever gone against them or anything like that, but I think they just felt they would feel more comfortable with a German. So after three years he was definitely going to be replaced by a German.

And then the question was should we try at that stage for another overseas posting, when out of the blue - not completely out of the blue, but unexpectedly at any rate - I had a telegram saying would I like to run for the position of Deputy Chief Clerk, which is what it was called in those days. So we thought about that and decided well yes, going back to London was perhaps not such a bad idea. And if one's offered something like that, well why not say yes. It's probably better to say yes than to say no. So we said yes and then I got it, so we came back to London in August. I think I started that job in August 1990 and there was one thing I was convinced I was going to do, which was to abolish the title Deputy Chief Clerk. I thought a whole lot of things wanted kind of tidying up there from my earlier experiences, and here is one answer to the reason why I never had two overseas postings consecutively, because I kept being brought back into the Administration, which I didn't object to. A lot of people wouldn't have been at all happy with that, but actually I enjoyed all my three stints in the Administration. I'd done things in London which weren't in the Administration, but the three stints I had - Personnel Department in the '70s, Security Department in the '80s and the so-called Deputy Chief Clerk in the '90s - I enjoyed them all. I just felt they played to my strengths in a lot of ways.

Now, one of the reasons why I thought the title of Deputy Chief Clerk should go was that it was actually misleading. The Chief Clerk at the time was John Boyd and there were three Under Secretaries: there was one doing personnel, there was one doing finance, and there was one doing IT and, what was it called? Not 'utilities' but office services and transport. To call one of them 'Deputy' implied that that person was in some way more senior than the other two, which was actually completely misleading; we were all equal doing different things, and there was no way that I felt that I could take over the finance work at all; I mean act as a proper deputy. And that is how it has now turned out. I think the Chief Clerk title has still probably not completely vanished, but everybody now has a more up-to-date title; not necessarily more attractive but up-to-date. I think 'Director Personnel'

or something like that reflected what I was doing; 'Director Finance' reflected what the finance person was doing. When I arrived there the work wasn't split up like that and I did some of what should really have been financial work, and I was for instance responsible for Personnel Services Department. But what I didn't do, curiously, and felt that my position ought to encompass, was manage my peers; that was done by the person below me as the Head of Personnel Department. And I thought all of that seemed rather odd to me.

MM: By 'peers' you mean other Under Secretaries?

VS: Yes. If you are doing it by grades, I was a Grade 3 at this stage and it seemed to me that I should be managing, or helping to manage, those people in that grade rather than its falling to the Grade 4 person; and that was something I also wanted to put right, which eventually I did, with some difficulty.

But a much more difficult problem was the organization of the main Personnel Department. I still wonder whether I did the right thing on this one. When I arrived, the very first day that I arrived, I was greeted with a really fat submission, you know, about two inches thick - and I don't think I'm exaggerating - about the reorganization of POD (Personnel Operations Department), a Department in which I had been way back in the 1970s so I knew a good deal about how it had operated then, and I had my own ideas about what improvements you might make. This fat submission had been written on the basis of a consultancy done by one of these big firms, I forget which the firm was - which is perhaps just as well! It had recommended doing away with the old Area Officers and setting up two separate groups, one of which would be responsible for the posts and the other for individual people. Well, I looked at this and I thought, "I'm not sure about this, I'm really not. And surely it will be very expensive in terms of additional man or woman power to staff all this." But there I was on my very first day, knowing that many people had been working on this for years; who was I to come along and say 'stop!' So I'm afraid I sent the submission on its way, rather against my better judgement. There was then a huge upheaval while the new system was put in place. And it did bring some improvements but there were also side-effects which I think were not an improvement. The new boarding system had a perverse effect whereby certain people kept being turned down for posts because nobody was doing what the Area Officer had done. This was to ensure that if Bloggs did not get Paris, at least he'd be placed somewhere, whereas under the new scheme poor Bloggs just never got anything because nobody was looking after Bloggs personally. And the argument was that, in this brave new world, we must all look after our careers ourselves and individuals must decide what they want to do, and must

be 'empowered', as the word is, to put themselves forward for posts, and so manage their own careers. It's absolutely fine in theory but the practice worked out just very differently, and I think not always very kindly. For example, there was somebody who came here the other day to see me, to ask for advice on whether to study here. I obviously couldn't judge her academic abilities, but I talked to her. She is working in the Foreign Office and, after fourteen years, she's still a Grade 10. There are all kinds of reasons for this and I wouldn't want to judge the case because I don't know the details - she may have severe deficiencies, I don't know. But, given the job she's currently doing, it seemed she must have some competence. And now she feels she has no-one to support her case for better treatment.

So I had severe doubts about the new arrangements for POD, but nevertheless I had to sit on top of the effort and try and help manage it. And it wasn't easy. I did enjoy this particular four-year posting, but this particular episode was difficult and messy, and somewhat bad-tempered at times too. Well, because it wasn't working quite right, and those of us involved had slightly different ideas about how matters might be improved, there was tension between those who thought we must obey the absolute letter of that original submission and do exactly what it said because that's what had been approved, and others like me who said, "Well look, you've got to make the wretched thing work, and let's not worry about sub-paragraph (ii) of paragraph 31(c) - let's just do it and make it work!" And that occasionally got quite, well, tense; it did indeed. However, it sort of righted itself after a couple of years, when John Boyd and Edward Clay were replaced by Andrew Wood and Peter Torry respectively. Andrew I'd worked with before when we had both been Area Officers and Peter Torry, who is now in Berlin, who was not considered to be a natural personnel operator but had a broad vision and an effective way of organizing things. And the three of us worked extremely well together. We had to manage with the system we had been left with; I don't think any of the three of us would actually have selected this particular system, but we did our best to make it work. My worry is that, since then - it's now ten years since I've been gone - it's actually unravelled rather. You know, the seeds of the unravelling were there from the very beginning and it's gone on and unravelled. But I would say that, wouldn't I, so you'd have to take a more careful look to see if I am right or not.

Another task in my portfolio when I arrived was the Foreign Office Estate. I was not happy about that, as I felt entirely unqualified to make any effective contribution. And I said really I didn't think that the person doing the personnel work there should be left to supervise the Estate and, in the end, Mark Bertram, who was Head of Overseas Estate Department, was promoted and put in direct charge responsible to the Chief Clerk on that side.

MM: And he was a professional?

VS: He is a professional. Not everybody in the old Property Services Agency was competent, as we know sadly. But Mark Bertram, a trained architect, was absolutely excellent. Curiously - I mean, it's curious how life catches up with you - he's the son of my predecessor but three here, Kate Bertram who was the second President of this College. So I still see him; he comes here to the College. He's a lovely person and he did a much better job on the Estate than I could have ever done.

I was left, however, with all kinds of things that I didn't know much about but actually quite enjoyed. The staffing of Hanslope Park occupied me for a while. That was of course fairly familiar ground from my time in Security Department in the 1980s, but the problem in the early 1990s was trying to manage all those people who had been taken on in the past to run the communications side in an age when communications were changing so fast. We just didn't need all these people - but the problem was how to wind them down and make sure that everything operated in a proper fashion. That was a challenge, as well.

But I quite enjoyed that. By the time I'd finished those five years, it was a mixed picture; I'd certainly improved, in my own way, some of the things that I wanted to improve. In particular, I think the division of labour between the three people working to the Chief Clerk was clearer with one person in charge of finance, one in charge of human resources (a term I don't like!), and one in charge of services.

I also tackled a whole range of things to do with the IT systems in Personnel; knowing how many people we had on our books is not a question any employer can ever easily answer. But we needed to have a much clearer idea of the numbers. In my time a programme of IT projects was introduced which worked, in the end, tolerably well. It worked much better than a whole lot of other IT systems anyway, and gave us a clearer picture for manpower planning.

I remember one of my great successes was that nothing was being done about sick-leave, so I said, "Right! On Monday every department will send me a sick-leave return ...". Sick-leave problem vanished! Or not vanished - but it diminished. A lot more people came in on Monday mornings than had been doing so before.

MM: How interesting!

VS: Yes, I used to sit on these inter-Whitehall committees of personnel people - Principal Establishment Officers really - and this was one of the topics. If you are an employer, one of your yardsticks of success or failure is your sick-leave. It should not really be more than about six or seven percent, and ours was ten or eleven, so I said, we had better do something about it. I'm not sure whether I've got my figures exactly, but it was in that sort of order.

But I enjoyed that and I enjoyed the work involved in posting people, because eventually I took over the management of my Grade 3 peers. It bears out what I was saying about the old Area Officer system. Working with Andrew Wood, who'd also been an Area Officer meant we had a similar approach to problems and tried our hardest to do the best for people. And OK, I had to do some quite unkind things, because there weren't enough senior posts to go round, but I still have people coming up to me in the street and saying, "Oh we're so grateful that you did this, that or the other." It's a nice feeling. And literally coming up in the street happened to me not so very long ago. Somebody had got the post of his dreams through something I'd done. So that was great.

MM: Pleasing!

VS: Yes, it was pleasing; it was indeed.

### **Ambassador in Dublin, 1995**

MM: And then how did you get your posting to Dublin?

VS: Well, I was lucky. There is no question but that I was lucky, because that was actually a promotion position and I'd only done the one job in Grade 3.

MM: So Dublin's a Grade 2?

VS: Dublin's a Grade 2 job, yes (using the old Grades). And actually, having done it, I would say rightly so. You know, it may sound a small country and a small place, but the pressures on you were just enormous.

MM: That's exactly what I would have imagined.

VS: Yes, well I was lucky. Andrew Wood went through the list of possible posts with me. He was almost for sure going to Moscow; he was a Russian speaker. We suddenly spotted Dublin, which is not a post that as a Diplomatic Service office you would think of particularly. It's small; it's particular. And, if you have been seconded to the NIO in Belfast or if you have actually already served in Dublin, maybe it's something which comes to mind but, for most of us who dealt with all kinds of other posts, it just isn't somewhere that comes to mind. Rather like going to Scandinavia originally, it wasn't somewhere I'd actually thought of.

But Andrew said, "Well, think about Dublin. Isn't it the sort of thing you could do?" So I said I simply hadn't thought about it and I'd go away and think about it, because I knew that, over the years, it had not been an easy post job. Christopher Ewart-Biggs had been murdered there for instance. One of the problems which worried me was that it was a rather, as I perceived it, or had been a rather male-oriented society. Funnily enough, this was the one place where, when I started to think about it, I wasn't quite sure how a woman would fare. However, I thought, "Well, if they've got Mary Robinson there, they can have me there" which was actually a perfectly reasonable analysis. So I said to Andrew after a few days, "Alex and I have thought about it and yes, we'd like to put in for it," which I did - and I got it. I think, in the circumstances I was lucky. If I hadn't got Dublin, I might perhaps have got Nairobi or somewhere like that, which would have been fine, but I'm glad it was Dublin in the end.

Anyway, so I was lucky and I was delighted, if daunted, because my knowledge of things Irish at that stage - it was almost exactly ten years ago now - was very small indeed. I knew there were troubles in the North and I knew that there were problems, and I knew that Mrs Thatcher and Charlie Haughey had not been the best of friends, and I knew that Ewart-Biggs had been murdered - but of the ins and outs, and the intricacies I knew very little indeed. And so I started learning and learned extremely fast - you had to survive.

MM: How did you do it?

VS: Well, there was a very good briefing - I had three months of briefing, or certainly two - where I saw everybody in Britain who could conceivably have a bearing on any of this, and I went over to Northern Ireland and spent a week over there. Basically, however, as you know, you learn on the job too. In a situation where a wrong word can be very dangerous, that was daunting, I have to say. When

I went to Dublin, I knew that I had to be terribly careful what I did and said, and actually I took the policy decision - I think it's one that not many Ambassadors would take - but I thought to myself, "Whatever the pressures, I'm really not going to say very much to the Press. I'm not going to court the Press and I'm not going to do very much with them unless I really have to," because it seemed to me that the risks of being tripped up and saying too much and having a wrong word attributed could brand one as indiscreet and was a far greater danger than not saying anything and having a reputation for being rather reserved, which is what I got with the press, though not I think with Irish colleagues.

Although I may have been rather quiet in the public arena in that sense, I certainly had the reputation for going out and about and meeting a lot of people, which obviously, as an Ambassador, I should have done, but somehow I seemed to have done it in a way that had caught some sort of imagination - it may have been to do with the fact that Mary Robinson was there, or the fact that Jean Kennedy Smith was my American opposite number. It's worth recording that at the end of my 4-year stint both Jean and I were awarded Honorary Degrees by Trinity College Dublin, which was certainly unprecedented for a British Ambassador.

MM: She was the ...

VS: The sister, the youngest sister of Jack and Bobby Kennedy. And the Irish very much liked to portray these two ambassadorial women as sort of joint characters. And they used actually to try to stir things up between us too, because it was very well known that Jean Kennedy Smith would be the first to say she was completely against terrorism. She would be, where she'd come from. But her way of dealing with that was to try and get close to Adams and McGuinness, when it was known that this was not British Government policy. I arrived shortly after Adams had been granted his visa to the States. So the press used to try and stir things up between us and, of course, Jean Kennedy Smith and I are extremely different people. But we got on perfectly well together; I wouldn't say we were close friends but we could any business we needed to do together. She was always quite kind to me and, when they used to stir things up, we used to have a bit of a laugh about it sometimes and agree that, if that's what they wanted to say, let them say it but it simply wasn't true.

So I arrived out there with the words of Douglas Hurd clear in my mind: "do what you can to make the bilateral relationship more normal." And so I worked very hard on the Dublin/London relationship. There was the Dublin/London, Dublin/Belfast and Belfast/London eternal triangle; and then the inter-community problems in Belfast. And I thought the British Ambassador in Dublin, should above all be

dealing with the Dublin/London relationship and, in terms of going about the country and getting to know people, and I should be demonstrating that not everything which comes out of Britain is wicked. There was then, ten years ago, a number of people who still believed that. There is now still a number of people who believe something like that – the sort of people that vote for Sinn Fein, many of them still hold grudges against the British and tell you about them, but the number of such people is diminishing all the time.

So I used to go round to all kinds of community projects in the South. I took a leaf out of Mary Robinson's book there; I remember her telling me not long after my arrival that, when she arrived as President, her staff had been astonished at the level of the projects that she would go and look at and the level of festivities that she would attend, and she said that they simply had to get used to the fact that nothing was too small to escape the President's attention. So I took my line from that and I used to meet her at some of these occasions too. One of the early things I went to was a seminar for carers of sick people - not nurses but the long-term carers of sick people; not somewhere you would expect either the President or an Ambassador to be. Ireland is a small community, and news got round that I was prepared to do these things. I did them - and I enjoyed doing them too. Obviously, I was doing a whole lot of other activities at the same time and much of my work was the Dublin role in helping to edge towards the Good Friday Agreement. We still don't know whether that lives or dies, sadly, but it's still just alive, seems to just survive. But trying to get people round the table to agree some better future for Northern Ireland (and of course the Dublin element there) wasn't that easy at that stage of things. Attitudes have changed since December (2004) and the bank heist. But in the 1990s people working in Dublin thought that the best way of dealing with the Sinn Fein side of things and trying to make an inclusive settlement was to give them pretty well what they wanted. Irish officials would try to drag the British side along in this line of approach. In the end, the Good Friday Agreement may have gone further in that direction than we, the British, would really have liked but, by 1998, we were so eager to get an agreement that we made the compromises.

MM: Did you by any chance read an article in the Financial Times magazine the other day by Ruth Dudley-Edwards?

VS: Yes I did. Well now, she's a ...

MM: She's a Protestant, isn't she?

VS: Well, I think you'll find that she is not, that her original background is Irish Catholic. I think so. And the reason why she's so vociferous in support of the Orangemen and so on is that she feels what she describes as her tribe has let her down and that she's seen through them and she thinks it's about time that the London Governments saw through them too.

MM: And the Americans!

VS: The Americans. I have to say that after Canary Wharf, one of my worst moments in Ireland was dealing with these Irish- Americans who didn't understand anything about anything. They were so ignorant and so certain they were right, and so certain that the British were a wicked lot of colonialists. I used to say to them, "Well look, you don't admit it but you're supporting people who are blowing up our citizens. How would you feel if I came along to your country and supported that McVeigh person who blew up Oklahoma ...". And they would give you such a funny look; they wouldn't understand what you were saying. The analogy is not exact, but it's parallel.

MM: You mentioned earlier in passing that Jean Kennedy Smith made contact with Adams and McGuinness. How on earth did she do that?

VS: She just did it. That was not a problem. I believe they used to come to her house ...

MM: Come down from Belfast.

VS: Those two were in Dublin a lot. Yes, they go to and fro. Sinn Fein is an all-Ireland party and in the North we need to worry because the polarisation between Sinn Fein and DUP actually is most unhelpful. But what Bertie Ahern is worried about now down in the South is that, next time round, during his next General Election, they won't have seven or six Sinn Fein members in their Dail but a dozen or more. They are very plausible electioneers and they have an awful lot of money. And the Irish are beginning, I think - I still have quite a lot to do with it through the British Irish Association, which is a group of people who run an annual seminar trying to bring everybody together to talk about mutual problems - and the impression I get at the present is that the murder of McCartney and the bank heist among other things have really brought home to people in the South the level of criminality that is going on; and that, to people in the South, is extremely dangerous; I mean, *really* extremely dangerous.

So, why don't you ask me some more questions?

MM: When I was on holiday in Ireland recently, we went to a little place on the west coast and I was talking to the people there, and they said that they were living in a kind of paradise; they'd got no police there at all, there was also no crime. And I said to them, "What if there was crime? What if some drug dealers came here?" And they said, "Oh! That's easy! One 'phone call, we close the road; and then we deal with them!"

VS: All that's true.

MM: And this is so utterly foreign to the way of doing things in this country. If you tried anything like that here, the police would be down on you like a ton of bricks.

VS: What, closing the road?

MM: Taking the law into your own hands.

VS: Oh, I see what you mean. Yes, I thought you meant that the Garda would come and do that, which they can do. The people themselves were doing that! Yes, well you see, on the west coast of Ireland, things operate differently. Everybody knows everybody else. I don't know whether your friends - were they friends? - whether it would really quite work like that. But yes, things do work quite differently in Ireland.

MM: And that's obviously embedded in the North and presumably in the South as well.

VS: Taking the law into your own hands? It's a very difficult one to answer that. Yes, it happens. But quite often the Garda will know about it and a blind eye is turned, that sort of thing.

One of the questions that perplexes me is to what extent do the Garda know about it and turn a blind eye, and to what extent shouldn't they be doing very much more, because the people at the top of the Garda that I used to deal with were vehemently opposed to IRA activity. But in the countryside I used to wonder whether the attitudes were different. However when I was there from 1995 to 1999, it was an especially good time. I think I was lucky because, when I arrived in 1995, the two ceasefires had just been prepared and it was two years after the Downing Street Declaration, so there was a great

wave of goodwill; there was even a great wave of goodwill for things British. And, on the back of that, there were a number of high-profile visits which kind of sealed all this. The first one, very shortly after my arrival, was quite a challenge to organize given how little I knew about Dublin at the time. This was the visit of the Prince of Wales, which was the first time a senior member of the Royal Family had been on anything like even a semi-official visit. We weren't allowed to call it an official visit, so it was just called 'a visit'. But in fact he undertook a number of official engagements and it was, to all intents and purposes, an official visit with a great big dinner at Dublin Castle. And those of us organizing it had no idea whether he would be booed all the way through or cheered. Of course he was cheered everywhere he went. You know, the Royal Family is something the Irish are extremely schizophrenic about; they want nothing to do with the idea of the Royal Family having any jurisdiction over them, but they love individual members of the Royal Family. Sadly, at that stage, they particularly loved Princess Diana, but also loved Prince Charles; I mean he went down extremely well, and it was a highly successful visit. He seemed to enjoy himself.

MM: What year was that?

VS: This was 1995; it was May/June '95, and I'd arrived in March, so I did have two months, but I didn't even know all the people I was dealing with; it takes a bit longer to learn.

So he came. Then President Bill Clinton came; that wasn't my visit, that was Jean's visit, but all the same it was a big high profile occasion. And then John Major paid a visit at the end of the year too, and he was very much cheered and given a very warm welcome; he said rather sadly that they liked him better in Ireland than they did at home. He is a really lovely man.

Anyway, so that first year, 1995, was a year when we were all on a high; you know; we thought we were going places, we were going to crack the northern problem. And then, in February 1996 was Canary Wharf and we all took a deep breath. That was a very bad moment, because I realized what we were working for was not there; it was a long way away. Cutting the story short, it actually proved impossible to do anything very significant between Canary Wharf and the election of 1997 although, in that period, one thing we did do - and I'm so glad we did it - was that Mary Robinson paid an official visit to the UK as a guest of the Government. It wasn't a State Visit so it didn't have the panoply of the coach ride down the Mall but it had almost everything besides. We had dinners here and dinners there, lunch with the Queen and all this sort of thing; it was a lovely visit actually, and Mary Robinson and the Queen got on extremely well. I'm just so glad that did go ahead in the way it did.

MM: Why wasn't it a State Visit?

VS: Because Canary Wharf had just happened and the view was taken that a State Visit at a time when the situation could deteriorate much more would have been inappropriate, and I think that was on the advice of senior people in the Foreign Office; and I think that was sound advice too. And a State Visit still hasn't happened, and the Queen has still not been to Dublin, although the question I was asked when I was in Dublin was nothing to do with the Euro or NATO or any of these things, but always, "When is the Queen coming?" To which I had to say I didn't know.

MM: Would it be constitutionally possible? Because Ireland, the Republic, is still in this rather strange relationship with the UK, isn't it. Going back to the Partition in 1922 and then its status as part of the United Kingdom before that, and so on and so forth - and the passport agreements, and the common immigration status ...

VS: Isn't what possible?

MM: A State Visit.

VS: Oh, a State Visit! Yes, because they are a sovereign country. A State Visit is possible ...

MM: Would be ...

VS: Yes, would be possible - and will happen, I hope, one day. Yes it would. Nothing in the British/Irish relationship is normal from that point of view, but they are a sovereign country, and that wouldn't be an impediment. And in fact some of that legislation you mention - and I'm sorry I'm not going to give chapter and verse because I haven't got it in front of me - has actually been overtaken under the Good Friday Agreement and the Irish Constitution was altered as part of that Good Friday Agreement and all that overrode some of the 1920s' legislation, so I don't think anybody's in any doubt that Ireland is a sovereign foreign country. And I hope there will one day be a State Visit in both directions.

MM: Did the Irish make any representations about the European common currency, the Euro?

VS: Oh yes, they would much prefer it if we went in.

MM: They made that quite clear?

VS: Oh absolutely, yes. They wanted us in. And, if you look at their economy, it would make much more sense for them were we to do so. But we were not at all influenced, we the British, were not at all influenced by that. We followed what our Government thought was in our own best interests. As far as the Irish are concerned, that's their decision. I do think the Dublin/London relationship now is a pretty healthy one - touch wood. I came in on a good wave and I think I was the happy person who could build on that, and my impression is that the relationship continues to be very close. The two Governments may take different decisions on different things, but basically on the North at least the aim is the same and the relationship, as I say, is a healthy relationship between two mature countries. I don't think either side is patronising the other now. There will always be a problem in that the UK is bigger than Ireland and all that brings, but on the other hand the Irish economy is now doing actually better than the British economy, so that also puts a different perspective.

MM: It does indeed!

VS: I'm often asked these sorts of questions and I say, "Well, I don't know what's going to happen in the North; really, none of us know at all. But one thing that will surprise me is if ever Dublin and London go back to the real enmity - I don't think it's too strong a word - certainly hostility that existed not so long ago." After all, just remember that in living memory a senior Irish Minister was gun-running against the British. That's not ever been admitted openly but it is so. If you look at the papers, it is so. And again our hands are not clean at all. I mean Bloody Sunday in January 1971 was an absolute disaster. All right, Sinn Fein should never have done all the dreadful things they've done, but the story would have been very different if we hadn't killed thirteen people in 1971. We were the best recruiting sergeants for the IRA you could possibly imagine. So nobody's hands are clean. And I think people more and more are prepared to begin to admit that sort of thing. Tony Blair set up the Saville Enquiry, although it's been so very expensive, it was an admission that we knew that something wasn't right. Goodness knows what's going to come out of it; maybe more dangerous than what went in.

MM: Tell me some more about the Saville Enquiry.

VS: That was on Bloody Sunday. I don't know what's coming out of it because they saw all these hundreds of witnesses and, you know, everybody was saying it was somebody else's fault, but it seems pretty clear that the Paras shot in circumstances where they absolutely shouldn't have done. And, even if they had provocation, it was nevertheless an absolutely disastrous outcome.

MM: Very sad.

VS: To go back to 1996. From Canary wharf until the UK General Election of 1997 there was virtual stalemate in all the talks that had been going on to try and edge towards some kind of a resolution in the North. They started up again in earnest after Tony Blair came in with Mo Mowlam as Secretary of State. Tony Blair hit it off immediately with Bertie Ahern, which was extremely good news; I think they're still good friends as far as I understand. And Senator George Mitchell was appointed to chair all party talks. He deserved every accolade he got for that. He was an absolutely saintly man sitting listening to endless interventions which were more often about blame for the past than ideas for the future. I sat in on some of the sessions - not many because they were mostly in Belfast and I was down in Dublin. It's interesting, if you look at the way the Good Friday Agreement was drawn up, nobody from the North was actually directly involved. The Ministers were all from the South and from Britain, as were the officials and, although of course the Northern Ireland politicians were consulted and made their views known and so on, none of them were actually in there writing the thing. It helps to explain why implementing it has been so difficult.

What I now keep trying to work out about the Agreement is this: I don't believe that any of us at the time - and I wasn't actually in the middle of it but I was certainly involved - really understood that what we were doing was setting up a system which would inevitably further polarise the situation. It certainly didn't occur to me at the time. I think we perhaps underestimated the depth of feeling on the part of the extremists. We had the idea that, if there was an agreement, they would be prepared to compromise. And that is why the article you refer to, the Ruth Dudley-Edwards' article, is so sure that the two Governments were duped by - how was it put? - criminal gangs.

MM: On both sides of course.

VS: Oh, on both sides, absolutely! And she believes the Agreement is dead. Well, she may be right - I hope not - but it's not dead yet anyway. And again this current General Election means there can be

no further progress until we have a new Government. I believe the next Government, whichever it is, will try to make the Agreement stick, but it's not easy.

MM: Immensely difficult. Did you ever get up to Belfast while you were Ambassador in Dublin?

VS: Oh regularly, yes. Quite regularly I would go up there for meetings in Stormont or Hillsborough Castle. I'd occasionally go up there for social occasions. I'd go up three or four times a year at least. But it wasn't my main area of operation. There were regular talks with the Irish Government which had been going on for some time, and then there was the detailed negotiation of the Good Friday Agreement, and these were generally based in Belfast. Sometimes such talks could get tense, because obviously we were often coming at things from a different angle. But, as I said earlier, in spite of those tensions, it nevertheless, I think, was a healthy relationship between the two Governments; you know we got cross with each other and frustrated, but I think there was mutual respect. That is how I would see it.

MM: Do you think that the participation of Senator George Mitchell in those talks towards the Good Friday Agreement was helpful in informing the Americans of the complexities?

VS: Ah, that's an interesting question; I thought you were going to say in informing British and perhaps the Unionists in the North, which is a different question. I rather doubt it. My impression of the Americans is that they learned very little until very recently when they've been brought up short by apparently the McCartney murder and the Northern Bank raid; but even then I suspect there are a lot of Irish Americans who simply don't want to know all that, and who've got this vision of, you know the romantic idea ... You know, they went away ...

MM: The corruption of the colonialist British.

VS: Yes exactly - they went away in the 1840s with all the grievances of the famine, and they've come back all these years later with exactly the same grievances still in place.

MM: Probably magnified.

VS: Probably magnified. And it's extremely tedious to deal with it because it's so completely irrational. And what's so frustrating is that, actually, I won't say it's none of their business – because

they are Irish Americans - but those sorts of attitudes I could deal with much more easily in Ireland, where you could actually say, “Look, come on! It’s not actually quite like that,” than to the Americans who wouldn’t believe anything other than what they wanted to believe. And in fact I think a lot of them are considerably more extreme in their views than most of the Irish people I talked to.

MM: I would guess so.

VS: Of course, I wouldn’t talk to the very extreme Republicans in Ireland - I wouldn’t meet them very much. But I obviously talked to a lot of middle-of-the-road Irish. A regular conversation would be with somebody who would challenge me about a united Ireland, probably wanting to wind me up; British Ambassador, she must be adamantly opposed to this. So I used to say, “Well, frankly I have no problem with a united Ireland and I don’t think most people in the UK have got a problem with it either, but what are you actually doing about it? And when did you last meet a Unionist?” And these were questions which they hadn’t asked themselves. They hadn’t grasped that there was a real problem there, not an imaginary problem but a real problem. And that there were a million people, mainly Protestants, mainly Unionists, for whom government from Dublin was complete anathema. They couldn’t actually understand it. I hope some realism is dawning, but I’m not sure.

MM: Any prospect, do you think, of an all-Ireland rugby team?

VS: Well that already exists, as with various other sports – though not I think soccer. It's curious, that in spite of all the problems, there are a number of sports which have all-Ireland teams.

What more can I tell you? In that last year, 1998, the Good Friday Agreement was signed in April and then we had a hugely successful visit by Blair in November that year and, he was cheered to the rafters. He spoke in the Dail which no British Prime Minister had never done before, and that was the most phenomenally successful visit, because he was perceived as one of the architects of this Agreement, and rightly so. The amount of time that both John Major and Tony Blair put into Irish issues is actually something that is beyond anything, really; beyond what you would expect, and that’s why it’s so desperately sad that the Good Friday Agreement is not prospering. Given the amount of time that’s been spent on it, and the energy and goodwill and so on, really it’s a pretty poor way to repay that sort of dedication. And I think Tony Blair must feel very frustrated by it.

MM: As about many other things.

VS: That too!

MM: Do you think it's possible that one of the unspoken reasons why he immediately leapt to the support of George Bush over Iraq was that he wanted to cement the Americans into anti-terrorism?

VS: I don't know. I really don't know.

MM: I think that was really a bit of a long shot on my part.

VS: I suspect his motives were extremely mixed, and there may have been an element of that there. But I just don't know. I find the whole business of the Iraq War so difficult to understand. Why anybody should have thought it was the right thing to do at that time and in those circumstances. I really don't know what the thought processes were.

MM: He hasn't told us yet.

VS: No, I'm sure there were a lot of mixed motives, one of which would have been the wish to cement the special relationship, which of course was fairly laudable, but the trouble is the Americans will probably do whatever they want to do, irrespective of what our friend Mr. Blair has done for them. Not my area of expertise! My knowledge of the Americans is the Irish Americans who, as I say, I found extremely tedious!

Now, what else can I tell you? As far as I was concerned, it was a wonderful last post. It was so, what's the word I want? It's more than 'encouraging' to be involved in something where you actually felt that it was central to your own country's interests. I mean, you travel around the world and have an interesting time, as I've had, doing all these things and, you know, I was fascinated by India and so on, and enjoyed the work in Africa too, but I couldn't say that it was absolutely central to what went on in London; whereas in Ireland I felt that, if only we could sort this out, we would be so much better off. It is for so many reasons so shaming, at one level, that, in our own back garden, we've got this dreadful mixture of terrorism and criminality; it is deeply shaming. It's murderous, a waste of good lives, absolutely a waste of money, and it is something that, if only we could right, our country would be so much better off. And at the margins, I felt - I'm sure that my predecessors and successors feel the same - at the margins you feel you're helping to do something about it. My husband Alex and I

enjoyed Ireland at an entirely personal level too. We're interested in the Arts and theatre and so on, and we found a lot of kindred spirits. We travelled around a lot. I of course had a bit of a problem with travelling around because I was guarded all the time, which meant that nothing could ever be spontaneous, and there are great swathes of Ireland, including the bit that you were describing over on the west coast there, which I must go back to and explore properly sometime without policemen, because you can't get the feel of the place with a lot of policemen around.

MM: I think this has been a really very useful interview. Thank you very much.